The Syrian War: A Conflict Analysis and Resolution Perspective

Identifying incompatibilities and the prospects for mediation and negotiation

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Terminology

A concerted attempt has been made to use neutral terminology in this report as the parties to the conflict generally use terminology that defines their opponents in a negative light. Here 'Syrian government' or 'the government' is used generically to refer to the Assad regime, Syrian government and military as a whole, except where explicit reference is made to the Assad regime. The 'opposition' is used generically to refer to rebel groups fighting the government and its allies, which the Assad regime and its supporters has consistently referred to as 'terrorists', a label that renders any use of the term 'terrorism' useless in an analytical context, and which the US and EU uses to define some opposition groups, but not the Free Syrian Army (FSA) who were initially defectors in a rebellion. The opposition is also subdivided into 'moderates', 'Islamists' and 'jihadists', which is the minimum required to understand the many groups within it. ISIS, despite being a jihadist organisation, is treated separately due to its territorial reach, transnational scope, and its rivalry with (literally) anyone else. The Kurds are also treated as separate from the opposition, with whom they have fought for territory. Spellings of groups such as Al-Qaeda are anglicised and consistent throughout the paper, as are any names cited. For simplicity, ISIS (Islamic State in Syria and Iraq) is used instead of Daesh, Islamic State, IS, or ISIL. Finally, the conflict in Syria is referred to as 'The Syrian War', encompassing the uprising, the revolution, the civil war and the current internationalised conflict.

CONTENTS

Executive Summary

The Syrian War has lasted for over seven years and has undergone significant change in terms of the actors involved and the nature of the conflict. It has also defied attempts at mediation aimed towards resolving the central incompatibility of the government versus the opposition and has been described as being complex and intractable. This report addresses this complexity and analyses attempts at mediation and negotiation.

An analysis based on regional conflict complex theory (RCCT) identifies five distinct incompatibilities that are present and overlap with each other. These are: the government versus the opposition, and their respective allies at the national, regional and global levels of analysis; intra-opposition rivalries; Israel versus Hezbollah/Iran; Turkey versus the Kurds; and, the 'terror wars' against ISIS. Such incompatibilities are not static and will change over time, but were present as of the close of 2017. These incompatibilities, of which the core one between the government and opposition is the most pervasive, ensure that the conflict is present at all levels of analysis and has become internationalised, with foreign actors at the regional and global levels contributing to the violence.

In its current state the Syrian War is one that is intractable and has resisted attempts towards achieving a transition to non-violence through mediation with major changes in the status of the participants decided on the battlefield. There is currently no indication that this situation will change. This conclusion is reached through a summary of literature on civil war and Syria and an analysis of attempts at mediation and negotiation. While there has been notable work towards this at the local level, there have been substantial obstacles to effective mediation and negotiation at the regional and global levels. A major obstacle for the intra-Syrian talks has been that mediators have had their hands tied by an assumption of a predetermined outcome and the influence of external actors and this has meant that the parties to the talks have adopted fixed and intransigent positions. This report argues for mediation and negotiation to be returned to auspices of the UN and address the incompatibilities through dialogue and without a predetermined outcome.

Prologue

The Syrian War has lasted for over seven years, from the initial protests against the regime to the internationalised conflict today, and has been subject to significant change in terms of who the actors involved are and how they envisage the governance of a future Syrian nation-state. Within this the important principle that the future governance of Syria should be decided by the people of Syria, and the people of Syria alone, has been forgotten. This simple guiding criterion becomes all the more important when we consider the catastrophe that has befallen them. The report that follows is concerned with the situation in Syria at the end of 2017 and is academic in its analysis, focusing on the specific aims of understanding the nature of the conflict at the time of writing and assessing the prospects for mediation and negotiation. As such, it does not convey the brutality of the war, nor does it provide a history of the Syrian War to date as this covered elsewhere and it is not an aim of the report to provide a political or military history of events. The consequences of the fighting in Syria do, however, need to be introduced in order to provide a context to what follows.

Estimating the number of people who have been killed in Syria is difficult, but there is a general understanding that it has approached nearly half a million. I Am Syria have cited that there have been over 500,000 deaths.[1] The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) records 346,612 deaths up to the 10th December 2017, of which 103,490 were civilians[2] but estimated on the 10th March 2018 that the toll was nearer 500,000 in total.[3] The upper estimate of half a million includes combatants (domestic and foreign) and civilians, including direct and indirect deaths.[4] These figures do not include people who have been injured or the psychological impact of the violence.

There has been a major impact on infrastructure and the economy. A 2017 report by the World Bank gave stark estimates of the consequences of the conflict. Twenty-seven percent of the housing in ten cities had been destroyed, half of the medical facilities had been damaged and sixteen percent destroyed. The cumulative losses to the economy were estimated at $226 billion as a result of damage and disruption to the economic system and in the first four years of the conflict 538,000 jobs were destroyed, leaving 6.1 million people unemployed.[5] These figures were released before the battles for Raqqa and Eastern Ghouta, both of which have involved an intensive use of airpower, meaning that the current impact will be higher.

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[1] I Am Syria http://www.iamsyria.org/death-tolls.html.

[2] Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=80436.

[3] Reuters 12.03.18 'Syrian Observatory says war has killed more than half a million'. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-syrian-observatory-says-war-has-killed-more-than-half-a-million-idUSKCN1GO13M.

[4] The Violations Documentation Centre (VDC) records a total of 185,984 deaths, of which 119,244 were civilians, between March 2011 and January 2018. Violations Documentation Centre in Syria 'Monthly Statistical Report on Casualties in Syria – February 2018' http://vdc-sy.net/monthly-statistical-report-casualties-syria-february-2018/.

[5] The World Bank 10.07.17 'The Toll of War: Economic and Social Impact Analysis (ESIA) of the Conflict in Syria-Key Facts' http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/brief/the-toll-of-war-economic-and-social-impact-analysis-esia-of-the-conflict-in-syria-key-facts.

The violence has also resulted in a major refugee crisis. According to the UNHCR there were 5,615,147 registered refugees from Syria in the MENA region as of the 15th March 2018.[6] There were also over 6,100,000 people displaced internally and an estimated 2,980,000 of these are in areas that are either besieged of hard to reach as of the 7th December 2017.[7]

Human rights organisations have documented serious human rights violations throughout the conflict. The volume of reports collated by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the United Nations alone is both staggering in scope and condemning in its catalogue of brutality. This does not apply to the Assad regime alone but to the opposition groups and ISIS also and includes: deliberate and indiscriminate attacks against civilians, abduction and arbitrary detention, rape, torture, the use of human shields and forced displacement. The abuses of human rights and war crimes are so severe that the police and prosecutors in some European countries have begun investigations against the individuals involved under the principle of universal jurisdiction.[8] Yet, aside from the activities of the 'Islamic State', the most grievous systematic and systemic human rights violations have been attributed to the Assad regime, and these cannot be cast aside as the evidence collected points to deliberate violations of human rights and dignity. One that is damning in its scope is the notorious Saydnaya Military Prison where it is estimated that between 5,000 and 13,000 people have been tried and hanged between 2011 and 2015. There are also documented cases of extensive torture and rape of detainees and the deliberate starvation of prisoners.[9] A second is the use of chemical weapons, outlawed under international law as their use is indiscriminate and leads to unnecessary suffering. While there has been an intense debate over who has used chemical weapons, such as the cases of Ghouta (2013) and Khan Skeikhoun (2016), the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and United Nations (UN) have concluded in numerous cases that the Assad regime was responsible.[10] We should be clear that the regime is not the only user of chemical weapons but has held chemical weapons stocks and has a greater potential ability for their use. All participants in the conflict are accountable for their actions, whether they realise it or not, and a crucial part of any future settlement will be that violators of human rights are held to account, regardless of who they were fighting for or against.

The conflict itself is dynamic and has been subject to changes in the participants involved and their relationships with each other. It has defied predictions about its outcome (i.e. Assad will lose) and

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[6] UNHCR Operational Portal Refugee Situations https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria.

[7] UNHCR Syria Emergency http://www.unhcr.org/uk/syria-emergency.html.

[8] Human Rights Watch World Report '*Syria: Events of 2017*' https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/syria. The countries that have begun investigations include: France, Germany and Sweden.

[9] Amnesty International USA 'Human Slaughterhouse: Mass hangings and extermination at Saydnaya Prison, Syria https://www.amnestyusa.org/reports/human-slaughterhouse-mass-hangings-and-extermination-at-saydnaya-prison-syria/ ; BBC News 15.05.17 'Syria's Saydnaya prison crematorium hid killings, says US' http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-39926914. For a more detailed account see the full Amnesty International report: Amnesty International USA 'Human Slaughterhouse: Mass hangings and extermination at Saydnaya Prison, Syria https://www.amnestyusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/human_slaughterhouse.pdf.

[10] Arms Control Association 'Timeline of Syrian Chemical Weapons Activity, 2012-2018' https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Timeline-of-Syrian-Chemical-Weapons-Activity. For the Ghouta attacks see: Human Rights Watch 10.09.13 'Attacks on Ghouta: Analysis of Alleged Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria.' https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/09/10/attacks-ghouta/analysis-alleged-use-chemical-weapons-syria. For the Khan Sheikoun attack see: BBC News 26.04.17 'Syria chemical 'attack': What we know.' http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-39500947.

may well defy current and future predictions (i.e. Assad will win). Since the first draft of this paper was prepared government forces have all but recovered the area known as Eastern Ghouta from rebel control and Turkey has launched another incursion into Syria and taken the city of Afrin from the Kurds. The latter involved opposition groups fighting against the western backed Kurds and Syrian Arab Army (SAA) units moving into the area and coming into contact with Turkish backed forces. In a further development Israel directly attacked Syrian air defences after an Israeli jet was shot down returning from a mission against Iranian targets (due to an Iranian drone allegedly entering Israeli airspace). While the incompatibilities identified in this report account for such behaviour, of interest is the allegiances and rivalries involved as these demonstrate that the Syrian War has been internationalised while at the same time retaining the core government versus opposition incompatibility discussed in the report.

This leads us to an impending concern, perhaps more accurately an impending catastrophe, in northern Syria. It is not the purpose of this paper to make predictions, as it is focused on understanding the conflict as it is and analysing the prospects for mediation and negotiation, and accurately predicting the course of a complex conflict is a near impossible task, particularly if there are multiple actors involved, all making their own assessments and decisions. With this said a cursory analysis of the behaviour of the actors involved and ongoing events point towards a major escalation of the battle taking place in Idlib province. The timing of such an offensive is dependent on the success of government offensives elsewhere and the freeing up of ground forces to take part in what might be the largest offensive the government has attempted. Idlib is where many opposition fighters and civilians have been relocated as a result of government victories and population transfers such as those agreed after the government offensive into Eastern Ghouta. Nor is it inconceivable that Idlib factors into the strategic thinking in Ankara, whose incursion into Afrin has meant that there is now a larger opposition territory reaching from the Turkish border into Idlib. We should not forget that Ankara is in bitter opposition to the regime in Damascus and has backed the opposition since it first emerged in 2011. The future of the Kurdish held areas (Rojava) is also a concern for the future as Turkey's President, Recep Teyyap Erdogan, has been clear on his opposition to the Kurdish areas on Turkey's borders and the Arabs and Kurds of the temporary anti-ISIS alliance have a fractious relationship at best. The Syrian government and the Kurds have a more pragmatic relationship, largely due to the regime needing to focus on the opposition, but further Turkish advances into the areas held by the Kurds would radically change the strategic scenario and potentially elicit a response on behalf of the Kurds. The potential for a further escalation in Syria, whether in Idlib or Rojava (or both), is very real and the potential humanitarian consequences cannot be underestimated.

The above indicates that the Syrian War is far from over and has the potential for a severe escalation, even without the input of the other regional powers or the global powers considered. It is also possible that the above extrapolation of current events could be wrong, which would of course be preferable. This would require a focus on rapprochement and dialogue at the national, regional and global levels, which are interlinked, hence the recommendations made towards mediation and negotiation at the end of this report, which in turn are preliminary to further investigation of how the violence of the Syrian War can be brought to an end. As such, due to the potential of a catastrophe in Idlib province, the report has been released early and is based on the research done covering the period up to the end of 2017 and on the sources utilised up to that time.

In closing, for conflict resolution, it is not the question of which of the sides fighting in Syria wins that is important, or what we want as a preferable outcome, but the ending of violence in Syria in order to stop the killing and to allow the search for a sustainable peace based on representative civil society to begin.

Carl P Turner, 31st March 2018.

INTRODUCTION

This report introduces the conflict resolution concept of 'regional conflict complexes' to the understanding of the ongoing Syrian War and explores what this can tell us about how a state of armed conflict can be brought to one of non-violence. The report is in seven parts. The first introduces the concept of the 'regional conflict complex', the second looks at how civil wars end, the third mediation and negotiation, the fourth Syria and the national, regional and global complexes, the fifth incompatibilities within the conflict, the sixth the prospects for resolution and, in the seventh part, makes recommendations for mediation and negotiation. From the outset, what has been termed the 'Syrian War' is understood as multiple interlocking conflicts, which have changed over time to include additional actors, and as an internationalised conflict, in which regional and global interests and rivalries impact on the situation within Syria.

The report takes a theoretical approach based on the concept of conflict complexes and is an adaptation of the concept of regional conflict complexes conceived by Wallensteen and Sollenberg in 1998 and developed further to incorporate other levels of analysis in later work by Wallensteen. As such, any derivation made in this report is the authors own and derives from theoretical work towards the development of what has been termed here Regional Conflict Complex Theory (RCCT). It stands that any errors in the application of the theory are also the authors own. The analysis covers the period up to the end of 2017 and so does not refer to events since that time, which have not changed the conclusions reached. Due to the theory driven academic approach this means that the consequences of the war on the people of Syria is lost and it is these consequences that are the motivation for the report. Put succinctly, the Syrian nation and the people within it have been subjected to a brutal war that has raged since 2011 and has been accompanied by documented human rights abuses for which the perpetrators remain unaccountable. At one point this tragedy could have been accurately called a civil war but it has become a wider war of overlapping interests where foreign actors are heavily involved in the fighting or the support of the protagonists involved. It has also been described as hideously complex and it is the purpose of this paper to break down this complexity and identify the incompatibilities so as to understand the prospects for mediation and negotiation.

The contents of this report are drawn from three separate working papers which have been used to form a consistent narrative and draw conclusions based on it. The subjects of the three working papers are conflict theory and Syria, civil war and Syria, and mediation and negotiation in the Syrian War. While all three are distinctive in their approach they have been merged in this report and additional material included. Some material from the working papers has been left out.

Due to the intractable and complex nature of the Syrian War and the failure to achieve a negotiated settlement at high level talks it will be no surprise that this report concludes that in the near future the Syrian War will continue and defy attempts at its resolution. This is primarily due to the current dominance of the government on the battlefield and the entrenched positions of the negotiating teams as regards the future of the Assad regime. The conditions for a settlement are not in place and any successful negotiations are likely to take place at the local level and amount to concessions on the basis of the military situation. There are also far too many foreign actors either participating

in the war or supporting those doing the fighting and with this the concomitant interests in the outcome of the war due to the investment they have made in it. While the government-opposition incompatibility is continually addressed in high level talks and conferences the interests of the foreign actors are neither discussed nor challenged. This is a major omission as if the additional incompatibilities (here referred to as supplementary incompatibilities) are not addressed the interests of foreign actors will continue to undermine efforts at achieving a mediated end to the Syrian War. This report does, however, set out recommendations for mediation and negotiation deriving from the analysis carried out, which are ambitious but pragmatic and call for a commitment to de-escalation and resolution at the local, national, regional and global levels in order to reduce and then end armed conflict.

ONE: THEORY

Regional Conflict Complex Theory (RCCT) is the theoretical approach that links the themes in this report and allows for an understanding of the Syrian War at the national, regional and global levels of analysis. It also allows for the incompatibilities discussed in section five to be identified.

Regional Conflict Complex Theory (RCCT)

Our understanding of regional conflict complexes is as a conflict resolution concept. We begin with the formulation by Wallensteen & Sollenberg[11], which built on the early work of the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). Here, conflict situations in neighbouring countries have demonstrable linkages and changes in one can affect the other. The authors cite two such linkages: the first a trans-border incompatibility where an ethnic group straddles an international border; the second interaction and cooperation towards a government or group in another state. This has a distinct utility to the analysis of contemporary armed conflict, in particular Syria, as it already includes a trans-state perspective. As Wallensteen & Sollenberg specify that only two armed conflicts be required to make up a regional conflict complex it is no surprise that in their period of study dating from 1989 to 1997 fifteen regional conflict complexes were identified, accounting for 55% of 103 armed conflicts taking place in that period.[12] Wallensteen, in 2015, gives three regional conflict complexes linked to Syria: Palestine, the Gulf region, and the Syrian and Kurdish complex. The third relates directly to the Syrian war, but all three of these are relevant to the Syria Crisis and they contain all of the regional actors involved in the Syria conflict.[13] It should be noted that a conflict complex is not a static phenomena and its nature changes with events as conflict complexes are dynamic and so subject to change.

The usage of the description 'regional conflict complex' requires clarification as while it refers to the idea of a regional relationship of separate conflict situations that impact on each other the idea of a cluster of interrelated conflicts in a given region that influence each other is not new and has been addressed from the perspectives of international relations and peace and conflict studies.[14] The international relations literature leans towards a nation-state perspective with an emphasis on security, although the national, regional and international levels are considered. This is a top-down approach, whereas the contributions from peace and conflict studies have a contrasting bottom-up approach better suited to understanding the dynamics of conflict at the transnational level.[15] The alternative perspective would be the international relations orientated 'regional security complexes'

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[11] Peter Wallensteen & Margareta Sollenberg 'Armed Conflict and Regional Conflict Complexes, 1989-97.' *Journal of Peace Research* Vol 35, No 5 (1998) pp 621-634.

[12] UCDP guidelines require that there be a minimum of 25 battle-related deaths in a year for it to be included in the dataset.

[13] Peter Wallensteen *Understanding Conflict Resolution 4th Edn* (Sage Publications Ltd: London: 2015).

[14] Nadine Ansorg 'How does militant violence diffuse in regions? Regional conflict systems in international relations and peace and conflict studies' *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* Vol 5, No 1 (2011) pp 173-187. There is a tendency in literature outside of Peace Studies and Conflict Analysis and Resolution to group the two together under 'Peace and Conflict Studies'.

[15] Ibid.

(RSCs), as conceived by Buzan, which is more concerned with security in an anarchic environment and are part of a comprehensive framework working at the domestic, regional, inter-regional and global levels.[16] In later work the security complexes still worked at all levels as a 'security constellation' but were centred on the RSCs and remained security based with every state being involved in an RSC, but with RSCs being mutually exclusive and contingent on the security practices of the state actors.[17] RSCs have two key components. The first is the patterns of amity and enmity within it, with indifference and/or neutrality in between. The second is the distribution of power amongst the principal states, changes in which would mean that the RSC would need a redefinition.[18]

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) is a clearly defined theory that explains and predicts RSCs in the state security context, but is less suited to understanding the dynamics of armed conflict, which a regional conflict complex (RCC) does. RSCT is concerned with security, from conflict formation through to the development of a security community, while a RCC perspective looks at the linkages in the clustering of armed conflicts in a geographical space and how these can be resolved to the point where there is no armed conflict and a state of peace. The two perspectives are not completely exclusive to one another and can be described as complementary but they cannot be treated as the same, as they are analysing two different things, the methods are different, and the answers that they produce will differ.[19] Where RSCT theory works towards the development of security communities that will improve security and so reduce fear and enmity, conflict resolution seeks to dismantle RCCs as a source of perpetuating conflict. A key difference is that RCCs can (and will) overlap as they are dependent on the linkages between conflicts.

The outline of RSCs given above does, however, allow us to consider the incorporation of additional levels of analysis in order to explain RCCs as part of a more comprehensive framework. In a conceptual move Wallensteen has moved towards the consideration of the impact of global conflict complexes on regional conflict complexes, giving as examples the Cold War and the 'Global War on Terrorism' (GWOT), which invariably brings the global powers into regional conflict complexes.[20] It is a natural step to then consider the levels below, which we will term the national, and is in line with the idea that conflict resolution works at multiple levels.[21] This is not a new theory but the development and application of an existing one, and while there are now three levels, it is the regional level that remains the source of interest. The incorporation of new levels of analysis also changes how the analysis is done as the actors at the global level will have a major influence on states at the national and regional levels, but will generally not border them, so not have trans-border incompatibilities. Also, by assessing conflict complexes at the national level a move has been made towards intra-state violence (something which RSCT would miss).

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[16] Barry Buzan *People, States and Fear* (Harvester Wheatsheaf: London: 1991). A more accurate attribution would be Security Studies.

[17] Barry Buzan and Ole Waever *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2003).

[18] Buzan, op cit.

[19] Acknowledged by both Buzan and Wallensteen.

[20] Wallensteen, op cit.

[21] It would also be productive to explore the amity and enmity between actors, which impact on how actors in a regional conflict complex perceive and act towards each other, but is outside the boundaries of the current paper.

Before continuing we need to consider what constitutes a conflict complex at the three levels of analysis in a conceptual framework.

National Conflict Complexes (NCCs)

A *national conflict complex* (NCC) can be described as a core ongoing conflict of an intra-state nature where there is a contradiction in terms of governance and/or territory. The most common type of conflict since the end of the Cold War is intra-state conflict where a challenger group or groups is vying for more representation, autonomy, or independence.[22] Examples of this are India and Myanmar, two very different countries that have historically faced numerous insurgencies, with many still ongoing, and all related to the relationship between the region and the state.[23] These occur because of a specific discontent between the local population and state, whether they be political, ethnic, religious or otherwise, and while there may be links to neighbouring countries this does not become a regional conflict complex unless there is a trans-border incompatibility or a regional actor is involved. NCCs are the most difficult of the levels of analysis to gain data on, analyse, and explain, as will be seen below.

Regional Conflict Complexes (RCCs)

A *regional conflict complex* (RCC) is closer to the concept of the regional conflict complex as conceived by Wallensteen and Sollenberg but expanded beyond trans-border incompatibilities, which remain the primary source, when there is an ethnic or religious connection between the actors at the national level and regional powers.[24] This does not reject the findings from UCDP data, but it does allow for the 'regional narratives' that inform the geographical region they are located in and where they act as the drivers of conflict. Here we will focus on two regional conflict complexes that have impacted directly on Syria and the Middle East. The first is the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the gulf region, manifested in differences over governance and the politicisation of the Sunni-Shia divide. Other states and sub-state actors in the region identify with either of the two parties who are able to deploy military assets and national finances in pursuit of their aims and goals. Saudi Arabia and Iran are the major players in a regional cold war in which they do not directly confront one another but pursue their aims and interests abroad, supporting rival factions in other countries or intervening militarily.[25] The second is what has been described as the 'Arab Spring', followed by the 'Arab Winter' but what may be more accurately described as the 'Arab Awakening'.

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[22] James D Fearon & David D. Laitin 'Ethnicity, insurgency, and civil war.' *American Political Science Review* Vol 97, No 1 (2003) pp 75-90.

[23] For India see: Namarata Goswani "Insurgencies in India", in: PB Rich & I Duyvesteyn (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency* (Routledge: New York: 2014); for Myanmar see: Timo Kivimäki & Paul Pasch *The Dynamics of Conflict in the Multiethnic Union of Myanmar: PCIA - Country Conflict-Analysis Study* (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Division for International Cooperation: Berlin: 2009).

[24] RCST Theory (Buzan and Waever) assumes the presence of regional powers as part of a regional security system. Here the regional powers and/or narratives are relevant only if they are contributing to conflict.

[25] Curtis Ryan 'The New Arab Cold War and the Struggle for Syria' *Middle East Report* Vol 42, No 262 (2012); F. Gregory Gause III *Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War* Brookings Doha Analysis Paper No 11 (July 2014).

The outcome has been a combination of reform, governmental change and conflict and this major transformation has not finished and may prove to be a transition of the highest order in the long term. It has seen the departure of secular dictators, yet the Arab monarchies have survived, but have had to make concessions. It is the breakdown of the ruling bargain where personal freedom was exchanged for prosperity and security and an addressing of the question of equal representation and opportunity and how it can be achieved, what the nature of the state should be and the role of Islam in this. Driven by social media, it is a compressing of the timescale of social revolution in countries whose governments are ill-equipped to embrace change.[26]

Global Conflict Complexes (GSCs)

A *global conflict complex* (GCC) is essentially a grand narrative, a meta-narrative even, which is dominated by the interests of the more powerful states with global reach, which are primarily, though not exclusively, the five countries with permanent UN Security Council membership.[27] The key strength of the permanent UNSC members is that they all have the power to veto UN Security Council resolutions and are the only countries that are able to do this. Of these, the US is the superpower and generally aligned with France and the UK, with Russia and China as challengers. Here two grand narratives are presented. The first is what I will refer to as a new Cold War Dynamic. This is the effective end of US dominance as China has become the major power it has been predicted to be and is asserting itself as the regional power in South-East Asia, bringing it into competition with the US and its allies.[28] Russia has become increasing assertive, intervening in Georgia and Ukraine in reaction to EU and NATO expansion and in Syria to support Assad. While Russia and China cannot be described as allies they are able to work together in pursuit of their interests, use their veto power in the UN Security Council, form temporary alliances, and pursue their interests abroad. This has led to a US-Russia/China axis and is essentially a reinvigoration of an unresolved Cold War, which never truly went away[29]: they will avoid direct military confrontation, but work through proxies and provide military, diplomatic and financial support. The second is the 'terror wars', which, for the West, began after the 9/11 attacks and set the US and its allies on the path of major interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq in pursuit of the threat posed by Al-Qaeda.[30] The ongoing war against ISIS is the latest stage of these ongoing wars, to which any country can participate in the global cause of fighting terrorism.[31] Commonly understood as the Global War on Terror (GWOT), as envisaged by the Bush administration, the terror wars have dominated US foreign

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[26] Marc Lynch 'The big think behind the Arab Spring' *Foreign Policy* No 190 (2011) pp 46; Martin Beck & Simone Hüser *Political Change in the Middle East: An Attempt to Analyze the 'Arab Spring'* GIGA Working Papers, No. 203 (2012).

[27] The United States, United Kingdom, France, Russia and China (The 'victor states' from the Second World War). The EU and Japan also have considerable influence due to their 'soft' power (socio-economic).

[28] Paul Kennedy *Preparing for the Twenty-First Century* (Harper Collins Publishers: London: 1993); James Kynge *China Shakes the World: The Rise of a Hungry Nation* (Phoenix: London: 2007).

[29] Colin S Gray *Another Bloody Century* (Phoenix: London: 2006).

[30] From an extensive literature see: Paul Berman *Terror and Liberalism* (W.W.Norton: New York: 2004); Fawaz A Gerges *The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda* (Oxford University Press: Oxford: 2011). Commonly referred to as the Global War on Terror (GWOT), which is misleading and does not adequately convey when it began or the actors involved due to being US-centric.

[31] Wallensteen includes the GWOT at the global level.

policy and military deployments. As a consequence, the impact has been global, and while the West has suffered terrorist attacks and military casualties, it is unmistakable that the majority of the damage has occurred in the Middle East, Asia and Africa.[32]

In concluding the first part of this report, we have introduced conflict complexes from a conflict resolution perspective and distinguished between three levels: the national, regional and global. It should be noted that the separation of local, regional and global complexes is an analytical tool and they will overlap and be present across all of the timeline of a given conflict. The analysis of conflict complexes using a multi-level framework allows for the vertical and horizontal linkages in a conflict to be understood holistically and the analyst to identify the incompatibilities present in the conflict, allowing for mediation and negotiation towards the peaceful ending of an armed conflict.

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[32] The concepts of both the GWOT and Terror Wars are Western. The actual scope of the violence and its drivers are global.

TWO: CIVIL WAR

The analysis of the Syrian War below is based on the contributions of scholars writing on civil war who have generally concluded that what we know of civil wars indicates that the war in Syria is intractable. Their findings are used to assess the Syrian War as it stood at the end of 2017 in order to produce up to date conclusions regarding the termination of the conflict in Syria.

On Civil War

Since 1945 civil wars, defined as intrastate wars, have been the most common type of conflict and while interstate wars are more lethal civil wars are more numerous and more difficult to settle and have had substantial direct and indirect costs. They have a propensity to be transnational in nature and can lead to other forms of conflict, including interstate conflict and terrorism. The transnational aspect of civil wars is demonstrated by the clustering of civil war outbreaks, with examples being the Great Lakes region of Africa in the 1990s and Central America in the 1980s. Conflict due to civil war can spread due to transnational ethnic linkages, alliances and rivalries between governments, and the inspiring of actors within one country by the actions of those in a neighbouring country.[33] One myth that has pervaded the discussion of armed conflict is that civil wars increased after the end of the Cold War, it is in fact more accurate to say that there was a temporary increase in the 1990s after the break-up of the Soviet Union, which declined by the end of the decade.[34] This period also includes the break-up of the former Yugoslavia and the misperception can be attributed to end of a focus on a Cold War dynamic. While armed conflict has been in overall decline since 1946 due to a decrease in international conflict there has been an increase in intra-state violence in the Middle-East and North Africa (MENA) region. This has been attributed to the role of Islam in the state and how the state should be organised, radicalisation due to the Global War on Terror (GWOT) and the rise of liberal popular movements that have been usurped by militant Islamism.[35] When the perspective is changed from the presence of conflict to the absence of peace the five bottom performing countries in terms of positive peace are Yemen, South Sudan, Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria and the worst performing region is the Middle-East and North Africa (MENA) region.[36]

How Civil Wars End

Our understanding of how civil wars end is not encouraging and the findings of scholars on civil war demonstrate the barriers to diplomatic solutions. Firstly, the average length of civil wars since 1945 has been ten years, although with a decline since the Cold War ended. Secondly, the greater the number of parties (factions) involved, the longer the conflict. Thirdly, datasets indicate that most

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[33] Kristian Skrede Gleditsch "The Spread of Civil War" in: J Berkovitch, V Kremenyuk & IW Zartman (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Conflict Resolution* (SAGE publications Ltd: London: 2009) pp 595-612.

[34] Fearon & Laitin, op cit.

[35] Havard Strand & Halvard Buhaug "Armed Conflict, 1946-2014" in: DA Backer, R Bhavnani & PK Huth *Peace and Conflict 2016* (Routledge: New York: 2016) pp 19-24.

[36] Global Peace Index IEP Report 2016

civil wars end in negotiated agreements only 30% of the time, with the majority split between decisive victories by the government (40%) and rebels (30%). In the 30% of cases where there has been a successfully negotiated settlement, there has been a third party willing to deploy peacekeepers and a division of political power amongst the combatants based on their position on the battlefield.[37]

Governments enjoy a short lived advantage in civil wars, which diminishes after the first year, giving the rebels a short time window of opportunity, which diminishes after the third year. As to third party interventions into ongoing civil wars, these fare worse than either governments or rebels with only six counterinsurgency campaigns won overseas between 1945 and 2003.[38] From this limited number, it is democracies that had the advantage, and even with the potential interveners in the Syrian war in 2013 being Iran and Russia, the prospects of a successful military intervention were still low.[39] International peacebuilding efforts are much more successful when there are only two veto players than those with more. While there has been an increase in negotiated settlements since the close of the Cold War civil wars are more resistant as they generally contain a larger number of veto players whom can derail negotiations. The more veto players, the smaller the number of agreements to which they will agree, and the addition of external veto players compound the existing problems as they may not directly bear the costs of the conflict and can undermine a negotiated settlement to which they disagree. For a negotiated settlement to happen requires that either all the actors able to continue the conflict unilaterally agree to a settlement and stop fighting, or one is imposed by a willing external actor.[40]

The 'critical barrier' to the settlement of a civil war is the risks and uncertainties of cooperation as the adversaries in a civil war cannot retain separate armed forces if negotiations lead to a settlement. Without an external guarantor there is no guarantee that the sides will remain secure or that one side will not renege on a settlement. Settlement, in civil war, means demobilising and giving up any means of enforcing the peace. Without a credible commitment from all sides, the risk of demobilisation, particularly for rebel groups, is too high when both sides can see the potential benefits to the other party of exploiting demobilisation. This problem with 'credible commitment' is reflected by the fact that 80% of civil wars between 1940 and 1990 were solved militarily. The crucial enabler for negotiated settlements is third party enforcement, which provides security and allows for a transition from violence to nonviolence[41].

As regards a negotiated settlement to the Syrian War, it is not surprising that opinions from scholars on civil war are not optimistic. Barbara Walter concluded that the chances of a negotiated settlement in Syria were close to zero as the Syrian civil war, even in 2013, was nowhere near ten years in length, there were multiple parties involved in the conflict, neither the Assad government or the Islamists were likely to negotiate, there was no indication that anyone would win, and no

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[37] Barbara F Walter "The four things we know about how civil wars end" in: POMEPS Briefings 22 *The Political Science of Syria's War* (POMEPS: 2013) pp 28-29.

[38] Erin Simpson "Conflict Outcomes" in: POMEPS Briefings 22 *The Political Science of Syria's War* (POMEPS: 2013) pp 30-32.

[39] Ibid.

[40] David E Cunningham "Veto players and the civil war in Syria" in: POMEPS Briefings 22 *The Political Science of Syria's War* (POMEPS: 2013) pp 26-28.

[41] Barbara F Walter 'The critical barrier to civil war settlement.' *International Organization* Vol 51, No 3 (1997) pp 335-364.

prospect of peacekeepers[42] Cunningham concluded that the extremely high number of veto players in Syria and lack of international commitment to impose a peace deal was lacking, meaning that the prospects for a negotiated solution were low.[43]

The short review above has demonstrated four points that can be identified with regard to ending the Syrian War:

1. On average civil wars last ten years and only 30% end in a negotiated settlement, which in past cases has been attributable to an intervention by a third party.
2. The advantage in a civil war is initially with the government for a year, after which there is a short period of opportunity for three years for opposing groups.
3. Larger numbers of veto players in a civil war directly affect the prospects of a successful negotiated end to violence as the potential for negotiated agreements is lower than if there are only two parties and there are also more parties to undermine peace settlements. For a peaceful settlement to occur all the parties need to agree unilaterally or have the settlement imposed by an outside actor.
4. There is a 'critical barrier' in terms of the parties to a civil war making a credible commitment to agree a settlement and demobilise their forces, with a crucial enabler being third party enforcement.

A cursory assessment of the Syrian War in 2017 based on the four points goes a long way to explaining its chronic intractability. Firstly, the Syrian war has yet to hit the ten year mark, and this is an average, meaning that it could conceivably last longer even without the addition of the complexity of the war taken into consideration. Nor does the greater chance of the war being resolved militarily by one side or the other than a negotiated outcome dependent on the intervention of a third party hold much reassurance. As regards the second point, we are well past the four year point where either side is expected to have the advantage, and the government has survived and seems to hold the advantage, albeit with help from other parties. Third, the number of veto players has actually increased since 2013 as the war followed an unexpected trajectory and the disparity with the opposition alone has meant that it has been incredibly difficult to get a representative opposition negotiating team to talks, with some Islamist groups not attending and the Jihadists not invited. This is before the additional regional actors with a stake in the war and its outcome are considered, bearing in mind that the war was seen as complex in 2013, never mind the complexity four years later. The third point goes some way to explaining the fourth: it is hard to see how the 'critical barrier' of credible commitment can be breached when there are too many veto players to make it reasonably possible and some of these have little or no intention of compromising (even excluding ISIS). Finally, we have barely mentioned intervention yet, on which three of the four points depend in order for there to be a negotiated settlement. There has been intervention, by Russia and Iran, one that ensured the survival of the Syrian government, and which means that two potential contributors to peacekeeping are on the government side and so not impartial or acceptable to other parties. While, at the end of 2017, there was a move towards 'de-escalation' zones, these constituted at best a negotiated surrender not settlement, and the ceasefires were

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[42] Walter (2013), op cit.
[43] Cunningham, (2013), op cit.

fragile even as everyone was focused on taking territory from ISIS. Nor were the western powers and the Arab League viable as impartial peacekeepers, having backed the opposition from the beginning.

The above gives us three conclusions from the perspective of ending civil wars regarding the Syrian War:

1. In terms of the literature on ending civil war, the Syrian War has passed the point where either side would be expected to have an advantage, it has yet to run its full course, and foreign military intervention has altered the dynamic, reducing the chances of a negotiated settlement, which at best were 30%.
2. The large number of veto players in the Syrian war lowers the chance of a negotiated settlement further and raises the possibility of spoilers to any agreement. The number of parties involved in the conflict has increased over time and the opposition is divided and includes groups unlikely to reach a peaceful settlement.
3. There is no impartial outside actor willing to impose a peace settlement or provide the security required for either side, particularly the moderate opposition, to make a credible commitment towards a negotiated settlement.

Based on the above, the chances of a negotiated solution are effectively zero, due to the nature of the conflict, outside military intervention, and the lack of an impartial actor able and willing to impose or police a settlement. These conclusions will be discussed further below when the barriers to a negotiated settlement and potential solutions are discussed.

THREE: MEDIATION AND NEGOTIATION

Attempts at resolving the Syrian war will now be discussed, beginning with the UN sponsored and Astana talks, through regional attempts at mediation, then mediation and negotiation at the national level, which includes the local. These are then subjected to a critique with conflict factors taken into account and conclusions drawn regarding the failures and successes of peacemaking initiatives at the regional and global levels.

UN Sponsored Mediation

With the UN Security Council deadlocked between France, the UK, and the US on one side and China and Russia on the other, the UN appointed Kofi Annan as its envoy to Syria in 2012. He was also representing the Arab League and after consulting with Assad, the opposition, and Middle-East states he drew up a six point plan. A ceasefire was agreed on the 12th April 2012 and a UN observation mission deployed until a string of atrocities caused the violence to escalate again.[44] The six point plan called for a commitment to a Syrian-led political process, a UN supervised ending of armed violence to stabilise the country, effective coordination of humanitarian assistance, the release of arbitrarily detained persons to be speeded up, ensure freedom of movement for journalists, and respect the peaceful right to demonstrate and freedom of association.[45] The Geneva I conference held by the Action Group for Syria on the 30th June 2012 issued what has since been referred to as the 'Geneva Communiqué'. This increased the demands on the Syrian government by calling for a regime change and mapping out the nature of the future Syrian state. The issue of the status of Assad divided the UNSC further and after a Russian and Chinese veto in the UNSC Annan resigned. [46]

Lakhdar Brahimi was appointed the UN-LAS envoy to Syria under the same UN mandate as Annan and defined by the Geneva Communiqué, which he treated as advisory. He tried to convince the warring parties of the futility of violence and pursued three consecutive strategies: the *inner circle* working on building trust between the warring parties; a *second circle* dealing with regional actors, bringing Iran into negotiations due to their influence on Assad, but outraging the Arab powers; and, an *outer* circle, by focusing on leverage from the 'powers' of Russia and the US.[47] Brahimi's approach was consultative and it took over a year to get the warring parties to the negotiating table at the Geneva II conference, aided by a rapprochement between Russia and the US. It was the first time that the opposition and the regime had negotiated directly. They proved to be inflexible and the

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[44] Magnus Lundgren 'Mediation in Syria: Initiatives, strategies, and obstacles, 2011-2016' *Contemporary Security Policy* May 2016; Magnus Lundgren 'Peacemaking in Syria: Barriers and opportunities' UI Brief 2015 No 1.

[45] UNSC Meetings Coverage 21.03.12 'Calls on Government, Opposition to Work in Good Faith to Implement 'Fully and Immediately' Six-Point Proposal Presented to Syrian Authorities' http://www.un.org/press/en/2012/sc10583.doc.htm

[46] Raymond Hinnebusch & I.William Zartman et al *UN Mediation in the Syrian Crisis: From Kofi Annan to Lakhdar Brahimi* International Peace Institute (2016); Action Group for Syria Final Communiqué 30.06.2012. http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Syria/FinalCommuniqueActionGroupforSyria.pdf

[47] Hinnebusch & Zartman et al, op cit.

conference ended with no progress between two sides, both of whom had been pushed into attending by the two powers.[48] Despite the lack of progress, due to conditions on the ground and the intransigence of the warring parties, Geneva II was notable for actually bring the government and the opposition together.

Staffan de Mistura was appointed the UN envoy to Syria on 10th July 2014 and initially set aside the top down approach to resolving Syria's war, opting for confidence building on the ground through limited truces. The test case for this was Aleppo but this was unsuccessful. Talks in Geneva early in 2015 and battlefield developments, notably the consolidation of ISIS in Syria, and Russian military intervention, led to a revival in diplomatic efforts.[49] The Vienna peace talks were begun on 14th November 2015 and involved twenty states and international organisations under the title of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) although Syria was absent.[50] Based on the Geneva Communiqué the result was a new peace plan, formalised in UN Resolution 2254, which was to form the basis of future mediation. The following Geneva III talks in February 2016 had to be abandoned due to the intransigence of the parties involved, but had included an Islamist organisation. The ISSG met again in Munich, resulting in UN Resolution 2268, and the government and more than forty opposition groups signed an agreement agreeing to a ceasefire, participation in political negotiations, and the granting of humanitarian access. This came into effect on the 27th February 2016, although jihadist groups, including ISIS, were not included. A further ISSG meeting in May came up against the long term problem of the future of Assad.[51] The fourth round of talks (Geneva IV) between the government and the opposition took place between 23rd February and 3rd March 2017 but little was achieved except for agreeing an agenda. This was complicated by the changing environment on the ground, including ceasefire violations and engagements between Turkish forces and the Arab-Kurd alliance advancing on Raqqa.[52] UN Resolution 2254 remained a priority and de Mistura announced an agreement on 'three baskets': accountable governance, a new constitution and UN-supervised elections within 18 months. A fourth, focused on 'anti-terrorism' was put forward by the government but rejected by the opposition.[53] Between the 23rd and 31st March 2017 the Geneva V talks took place, discussing the four baskets endorsed by the Geneva Communiqué, but little political progress was made amid accusations of Government atrocities.[54] The Geneva VI

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[48] Lundgren (2016), op cit; Lundgren (2015), op cit.

[49] Lundgren (2016), op cit.

[50] China, Egypt, France, Germany, Iran, Iraq,Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, the United States, the Arab League, the European Union, and the United Nations. See: European Union Website 14.11.15 Statement of the International Syria Support Group https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/3088_en

[51] Lundgren (2016), op cit.

[52] al Jazeera 11.07.17 'Geneva 4 and the shifting shape of Syria diplomacy' http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/03/geneva-4-shifting-shape-syria-diplomacy-170311081959353.html

[53] al Jazeera 03.03.17 'De Mistura: Syria talks in Geneva end with clear agenda' http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/03/de-mistura-syria-talks-geneva-clear-agenda-170303202045570.html

[54] The United Nations Office at Geneva Intra-Syrian talks - Key dates of the peace process http://www.unog.ch/unog/website/news_media.nsf/(httpPages)/E409A03F0D7CFB4AC1257F480045876E?OpenDocument ; BBC News 16.05.17 'Syria war: Peace talks restart in Geneva' http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-39934868; RUDAW 31.03.17 'Geneva V ends with UN mediator pleading for ceasefire in Syria' http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/310320171

talks of 16th-19th May 2017 ended with no definable progress.[55] The Geneva VII talks of 10th-15th July 2017 convened after the agreement at Astana to establish de-escalation zones in Syria and a separate truce in the south of the country negotiated by Jordan, Russia and the US. This ended with no further significant breakthrough between the High Negotiations Committee and the Syrian government or face to face talks.[56] The Geneva VIII talks produced little change and by the end of 2017 the positions of the government and opposition negotiators remained deadlocked.[57]

The Astana Talks

The peace talks between Turkey and Russia in the Kazakhstan capital Astana were complementary to the UN brokered talks and have been reported by the media but there has been little analysis when compared to UN brokered talks. Astana had been used earlier by opposition groups whom had agreed on the 'Astana Declaration for a Political Solution in Syria', which backed the Geneva I principles, the need for a gradual transition of power, and aspiring for Syria to remain a nation-state with fair and equal rights for all citizens.[58] A 'nationwide' ceasefire was brokered between the government and opposition groups beginning on 30th December 2016 but this did not include ISIS, the Al-Nusra Front or the Kurdish YPG, meaning that violence still continued in parts of the country.[59] The talks continued in January 2017, by which time Aleppo had fallen to government forces, and introduced opposition military commanders from major rebel military groups into the talks.[60] There was a trilateral agreement by Russia, Turkey, and Iran to monitor the ongoing but fragile ceasefire, although opposition groups objected to Iran's involvement.[61] Further meetings on the 14th and 15th March officially confirmed Iran as a guarantor of the ceasefire and reiterated that the Astana talks were part of the wider UN process.[62] A fourth meeting for talks on the 4th May led to the announcement of 'de-escalation zones' by three guarantors and despite support from the UN

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[55] Mediators Summary: Round Six of Un-facilitated Intra-Syrian Talks 16-19 May 2017 http://ccsdsyria.org/wp-content/uploads/MEDIATOR%C2%B4S-SUMMARY-May-22nd-2017.pdf; Anadolou Agency 19.05.17 'Syria Talks in Geneva End in Failure' http://aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/syria-talks-in-geneva-end-in-failure/822013

[56] al Jazeera 15.07.17 'Syria talks conclude in Geneva with no breakthrough' http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/07/ends-syria-breakthrough-170715133937590.html; VOA News 15.07.17 'Latest Round of Syrian Peace Talks End With 'Incremental Progress' https://www.voanews.com/a/round-of-syrian-peace-talks-end-with-incremental-progress/3945356.html

[57] This analysis covers the period up to the end of 2017.

[58] The Astana Times 29.05.17 'Syrian Opposition Meeting in Astana Makes Tentative Headway in Finding Way Forward for Peace Process' http://astanatimes.com/2015/05/syrian-opposition-meeting-in-astana-makes-tentative-headway-in-finding-way-forward-for-peace-process/. All forms of violence against civilians were condemned and there was a call for accountability for war crimes.

[59] BBC News 30.12.16 'Syria conflict: Clashes reported despite truce' http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-38463021

[60] BBC News 23.01.17 'Syria peace talks: Armed groups come in from the cold' http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-38712444

[61] The Guardian (Patrick Wintour) 24.01.17 'Sponsors of Syria talks in Astana strike deal to protect fragile ceasefire' https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/24/syria-talks-astana-russia-turkey-iran-ceasefire

[62] The Astana Times 17.03.17 'Kazakhstan welcomes results of Syria meeting in Astana, as Russia, Iran and Turkey issue joint statement' http://astanatimes.com/2017/03/kazakhstan-welcomes-results-of-syria-meeting-in-astana-as-russia-iran-and-turkey-issue-joint-statement/

there were objections from opposition groups and the PYD.[63] Despite the objections to the de-escalation zones the PYD has been involved in the assault on Raqqa as part of an Arab-Kurdish alliance and considerable attention has been directed by the media at the Jihadist groups, including ISIS. The war continues however, including the ill fated opposition Daraa offensive, which has been countered by government forces, and the government offensive in Southern Syria that has taken it to the border with Iraq and involved fighting with ISIS and opposition forces backed by the US coalition.[64] The UN envoy Staffan De Mistura has been present at the Astana talks, but the timing of the next round of talks coincided with the UN sponsored talks planned for July 10th in Geneva.[65] This casts into doubt claims by Russia that the talks in Astana are complementary to those in Geneva. The Astana V talks took place on 12th-15th July 2017, with De Mistura noting the contribution of the Astana talks towards resolving the Syrian War and the importance of the de-escalation agreement to the Geneva VII talks.[66] There was no reported progress and the opposition was critical of the de-escalation zones, claiming they freed up government forces for fighting elsewhere.[67] Further talks in July, September and October produced little change but did affirm the commitment to UNSC resolution 2254.[68]

Regional Mediation and Negotiation

Regional efforts at mediation and negotiation are rarer than the international conferences and local efforts but they began before those of the UN. Reporting of these may be affected by the secrecy of the talks, which can take years, and often have a specific goal in mind. They are also conducted by countries that have a stake in the Syrian war different to that of the US and Russia and have a greater interest in the outcome of the conflict. The most comprehensive was during the uprising in 2011, before the evolution of the crisis into a civil war. The Arab League moved quickly in response to the crisis in Syria in 2011, treating it as a domestic political crisis, then adopting an interventionist position, applying sanctions and suspending Syria from the Arab League. The Arab League envoy, Nabil al-Arabi, consulted with Assad, the opposition, and countries in the region, working on the platform of an 'Arab Action Plan'. This called for a cessation of violence, withdrawal of military equipment, and the initiation of a national dialogue. The Syrian government was wary of the Arab

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[63] New York Times (Anne Barnard & Rick Gladstone) 04.05.17 'Russia Reaches Deal for Syria Safe Zones, but Some Rebels Scoff' https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/04/world/middleeast/russia-iran-turkey-syria-de-escalation-zones.html?smpr&_r=1; Reuters 05.05.17 'Syrian Kurdish PYD denounces Syria deal for 'de-escalation zones' http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-pyd-idUSKBN1811PZ

[64] The Syrian Observer 14.06.17 'Drums of War Sound at Their Strongest in Daraa' http://syrianobserver.com/EN/Features/32891/Drums_War_Sound_Their_Strongest_Daraa; AL Monitor 09.06.17 'Syrian Army reaches Iraq border after US Tensions' http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/afp/2017/06/syria-conflict-iraq-us-is-border.html. The Syrian government has attributed the Daraa offensive to Jihadists.

[65] al Jazeera 19.06.17 'Fresh Syria talks set for July 10 in Astana' http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/06/fresh-syria-talks-set-july-10-astana-170619113205827.html

[66] The United Nations 05.07.17 Note to Correspondents: Transcript of the press conference by the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/note-correspondents/2017-07-05/note-correspondents-transcript-press-conference-un-special

[67] The Independent (Bethan McKernon) 04.07.17 'Syrian army pauses for Astana peace talks after skirmishes with Israel on southern border' http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-peace-talks-astan-kazakhstan-israel-south-border-rebels-bashar-al-assad-regime-skirmish-a7823121.html

[68] This analysis covers the period up to the end of 2017.

League initiative, seeing it as a proxy intervention by Qatar and Saudi Arabia, which used coercive measures to get Syrian consent and the opposition Syrian National Council also denounced the plan. The intensification of violence in Syria and international pressure led to the government accepting the plan and an observation mission was deployed at the end of 2011. When this failed to produce a ceasefire it was withdrawn and the Arab League then called for Assad's departure.[69]

On 10th September 2015 Saudi Arabia hosted a conference for the opposition with the purpose of unifying the opposition and setting up a delegation called the High Negotiations Committee (HTC) to attend intra-Syria peace talks, although Kurdish groups did not attend and the Jihadist groups were excluded.[70] While there were criticisms of the conference from Iran and Russia concerning the inclusion of Islamist groups and it being 'Saudi orchestrated' the conference did deliver an agreement by opposition groups about a negotiating platform and a commitment to the Geneva Communiqué.[71]

Regional powers have also been involved in brokering controversial population transfers between the government and opposition groups. These involve the movement of civilians from besieged areas and have been criticised for being forced relocations as people who are starving and under siege are willing to relocate but this comes at the cost of losing their homes and amounts to a division of the country along sectarian lines.[72] Here we will include one example of many that demonstrates the interests behind such deals. The predominantly Shia residents of Foah and Kefraya had been encircled by rebels and jihadists since early in 2015, while the predominantly Sunni residents of Madaya and Zabadani had been besieged by the Syrian army and Hezbollah since the summer of 2015. It took over two years of negotiations between regional and local actors to set out a plan that had a timescale of months. The key players in the deal reflect the complexity of the Syrian tragedy: it was brokered by Iran and Qatar with the involvement of Hezbollah and Ahrar al-Sham. The component linking them and driving the conclusion of the deal were members of the Qatari royal family, whom had been held by an Iranian proxy since they were captured after crossing from Saudi Arabi to Iraq in error in 2015 while hunting.[73]

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[69] Lundgren (2016), op cit; Lundgren (2015), op cit.

[70] BBC News 08.12.15 'Syrian opposition seeks unified front at Riyadh conference' http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-35035232

[71] Newsweek (Daniel R Depetris) 22.12.15 'Did the Riyadh conference move Syria towards Peace?' http://www.newsweek.com/did-riyadh-conference-move-syria-towards-peace-408229; France Diplomatie Final Statement of the Conference of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces Riyadh (December 10, 2015) http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/syria/events/article/final-statement-of-the-conference-of-syrian-revolution-and-opposition-forces

[72] Syria Justice and Accountability Centre 26.08.15 'Population transfers: The wrong path to peace' https://syriaaccountability.org/updates/2015/08/26/population-transfers-the-wrong-path-to-peace/

[73] The Guardian (Martin Chulov) 14.04.17 'Qatari royal family members used as leverage in Syrian population swap' https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/14/besieged-syria-towns-evacuated-as-regime-and-rebels-begin-huge-people-swap ; BBC News 16.02.17 'Syria war: Huge bomb kills dozens of evacuees in Syria' http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-39609288

Local and National Mediation and Negotiation

Despite the overwhelmingly hostile environment for local mediation and negotiation there have been substantial efforts to cooperate at the local level during the Syrian war. These have been generally unsung with attention focused on the developments at international conferences. The outcomes have been mixed and have been based strongly on the establishment of trust at the local level but have been at the whim of fluctuating battlefield developments. There have also been concerted efforts at building civil society in both government and opposition areas in order to provide essential services and facilitate cooperation.[74] This is important as the existence of a civil society and large numbers of civilians enables the development of bottom-up peacemaking and figures from within civil society as well as religious and tribal figures have been important to the negotiation of local ceasefire attempts.[75]

Local peacebuilding initiatives tend to be islands of stability within the wider conflict space and remain in need of recognition and support from international initiatives in order to be able to network more effectively. While ending the violence and foreign military intervention are priorities the stated needs of local mediators and negotiators are financial, logistical and organizational.[76] A 2016 Swiss Peace report identified six distinct groups involved in peacebuilding: community leaders, women initiatives, youth initiatives, civil society organizations (CSOs), local councils and the Ministry of Reconciliation (MOR) and its committees. Actual involvement is varied and dependent on local conditions, with mediation and negotiation falling to the community leaders, CSOs, MOR and other leaders, and women and youth involved in creating and supporting peaceful conditions.[77] It should be noted that involvement in peacebuilding measures, civil society, and mediation and negotiation, does not guarantee that individuals and groups haven't been involved in other activities, including violence and/or the promotion of violence.[78] The MOR, being a government ministry, is controversial simply by being linked to the Assad regime, although it has a clear organisational structure and goals from being so. In 2016 the Minister for Reconciliation claimed that that there were reconciliation initiatives in 70 cities, towns and villages involving 4.5 million citizens but their strategy is contingent on removing opposition fighters from the area.[79] The major difficulty for the disparate groups of local mediators, peacebuilders, and human rights monitors is personal security, whether through armed conflict or direct assassination. The actions of the government and its allies have been well documented by human rights groups, as has that of the disparate opposition groups, with the

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[74] For an analysis see: Zaidoun Al-Zoua'bi (2017) Syrian Civil Society Organizations: Reality and Challenges (Citizens for Syria) http://citizensforsyria.org/OrgLiterature/Syrian_CSOs_Reality_and_challenges_2017-CfS_EN.pdf

[75] Rim Turkmani, Mary Kaldor M, Wisam Elhamwi, Joan Ayo & Nael Hariri (2014) *Hungry for Peace: positives and pitfalls of local truces and ceasefires in Syria* (Security in Transition,LSE,Madani) http://www.lse.ac.uk/internationalDevelopment/research/CSHS/pdfs/Home-Grown-Peace-in-Syria-report-final.pdf.

[76] Swiss Peace (2016) *Inside Syria: What Local Actors Are Doing for Peace* (Swiss Peace Report) http://www.swisspeace.ch/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf/Mediation/Inside_Syria_en.pdf

[77] Swiss Peace (2016), op cit.

[78] Hence disclaimers in the reports cited. This is a common problem when analysing and researching Syria as cooperation is needed with military elements from both sides when negotiating and violent actors take part in the negotiations. Information from ISIS held areas remains difficult to collect.

[79] 'A Visit to Syria by an Independent Group: 31 August to 7th September 2016.

increasing dominance of jihadist groups within the opposition being a factor.[80] The mediators role can become fatal simply by a change in hands of who holds an opposition area, with moderate opposition warning of the entry of more dangerous actors into a local area.[81]

Outcomes

Attempts at mediation and negotiation in Syria's crisis have taken place at three levels: the international, the regional, and the national-local. All have contributed towards the search for a peaceful solution but no comprehensive and national solution is in sight and the conflict has proved to be intractable. This is despite the involvement of highly qualified UN envoys with substantial resources and a visible, if ill-defined, UN led peace process that have involved the government and opposition in direct intra-Syria talks and a second process led by Turkey, Iran, and Russia. There has been progress, if only in dubious and/or short-lasting ceasefires, consistency in the approach towards a peaceful solution, and keeping the opposing parties at the table. Regional actors have also been involved in mediation and negotiation, if clearly defined by their own interests, but have delivered results in the form of a more cohesive opposition negotiating group. Local mediation and negotiation is largely unsung, aside from the Ministry of Reconciliation, and is linked to attempts at providing some form of civil society in all areas of the country in a very hostile environment. The contribution at all three levels has at times reduced violence and saved lives. These achievements must be acknowledged before we look at the reasons for the general failure to achieve a peaceful end to the Syrian war.

The literature on mediation in the Syria crisis is focused on the Arab League and UN led efforts, so these will be addressed in order to understand why a comprehensive peace settlement between the government and the opposition has not been achieved.

Raymond Hinnebusch and I.William Zartman address the mediation by Annan and Brahimi in terms of the challenges that they faced. Firstly, in terms of *Mission and Mandate*, the mandate was based on the Arab League plan and thus restrictive with the end result of Assad's departure treated as a precondition, and there was insufficient support for the mediators due to the UN Security Council split. Secondly, in terms of *Impartiality and Inclusivity* the focus on regime change meant that Assad did not see the mediation as impartial and inclusivity in negotiations proved to be an ideal not met due to uneven invitation of parties and veto players to participate in talks. Third, a critical problem in terms of *Entry and Consent* was the lack of perception by the parties involved of a hurting stalemate, the precondition by which a conflict is 'ripe' for resolution, and thus the view by the parties that negotiation was potentially more costly than violence. Fourth, in terms of *Strategy*, there was a focus on using ceasefires as conflict mitigation but with no parallel move to conflict resolution. A

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[80] This includes Human Rights Watch https://www.hrw.org/middle-east/n-africa/syria and Amnesty International https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/syria/; see also: Swiss Peace (2016) *Inside Syria: What Local Actors Are Doing for Peace* (Swiss Peace Report) http://www.swisspeace.ch/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf/Mediation/Inside_Syria_en.pdf

[81] Cited in conversation with the author. Details are withheld while permission is sought. In this instance the mediator was warned to abandon their efforts due to the arrival of a more dangerous group in an area but chose to continue and was killed. See also: 'A Visit to Syria by an Independent Group: 31 August to 7th September 2016.

focus on the 'third circle' due to the intractability of the 'first' and 'second' circles, resulted in a difficulty in separating the US and Russia from their Syrian clients. The intractability of the first level (local) and the second (regional) severely limited the options of the mediators. Finally, the mediators had limited *Leverage* and could not threaten or promise, being able only to make warnings and predictions.[82]

In a comparison of mediation attempts of al Arabi, Annan, Brahimi and de Mistura, Magnus Lundgren argues that there were problems with the perception of mediator impartiality and conflict factors played a significant role in the failure to achieve a peaceful solution. All four mediators were tied to mandates that required them to negotiate the removal of Assad, strongly influenced by an 'Arab Spring' narrative, which undermined their effectiveness as impartial mediators. They were also undermined by international disunity over the Syria crisis, particularly the US and Russia. It is the conflict factors, however, that had the most substantive effect. The conflict had never been 'ripe' for settlement, a necessary precondition for a future settlement, as both sides perceived that a military victory was possible and their prospects for victory have varied over the course of the conflict. There is also the matter of 'trust', without which there cannot be a negotiated settlement, as the parties to the conflict cannot be sure that a settlement will be implemented or that there will not be reprisals. A major problem was the splintered nature of the opposition, militarily and politically, and the subsequent problems in making credible commitments to a negotiated solution. A final conflict factor is the religious dimension to the conflict and arrival of foreign fighters who saw the war in terms of an existentialist Sunni-Shia split, making them less amenable to negotiations.[83]

An earlier third contribution by J.Michael Greig discusses the number of parties, the intensity and duration of violence, and the geography of the battlefield, factors that affect the potential for mediation before the mediators arrive. The *Number of Parties* involved in a conflict has a detrimental effect on the chances of a successful mediation and the Syrian War has multiple parties involved in the fighting. Communication becomes more difficult and with increased communication there is a greater chance of miscommunication. There is an increased risk of 'spoilers' as an increase in the number of warring parties with a stake in a given conflict also increases the number of veto players and chances of parties opposed to a settlement derailing the peace process. The possibility of commitment problems is also a concern as it is harder to enforce an agreement and a greater likelihood of spoilers. The *Intensity and Duration of Violence* affects prospects for mediation as battlefield events and the progress of the conflict shape the incentives for warring parties to accept mediation and make concessions. As a civil conflict progresses and the level of violence increases hostility increases and there is more potential for violence in the future, closing off communication, increasing the sense of victimhood, and the framing of goals in terms of punishing the other side. Greig, writing in 2013, observed that the conflict had yet to progress to the point of a 'hurting stalemate' where the warring parties perceive that they cannot win the conflict. The *Geography of the Battlefield* concerns where the fighting is taking place and this also affects the willingness of the parties to negotiate as the rebels need to demonstrate they can impose significant costs on the government. The impact of the opposition on cities is a key factor. The ability to threaten cities, and in particular the capital, decreases the chances for mediation as the rebels become more confident and make increased demands and the government is unlikely to accept the demands and will seek to

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[82] Hinnebusch & Zartman et al (2016), op cit.
[83] Lundgren (2016), op cit.

push the rebels away from the capital. In Syria, the government became increasingly aggressive as attacks on Damascus by the opposition increased.[84]

From the above, eight distinct conclusions can be drawn that explain the failure to achieve a general negotiated settlement in the Syrian war. These can be divided in two sets: the nature of the conflict itself and the flaws inherent in the mediation attempts as a consequence, and they are present in one or more of the analyses above.

The nature of the conflict:

1. The lack of a hurting stalemate meant that the conflict has never been ripe for resolution.
2. The changing number and complexity of parties with a stake in the outcome of the conflict and the consequential changes in demands and expectations.
3. The changing battlefield situation in terms of the territory held, the relative strength of the actors involved, and the location of the fighting, and length of the violence.
4. A lack of consensus amongst the regional powers, major powers and the UNSC and consequential lack of leverage for the mediators.

Flaws in the mediation process:

5. An overemphasis on mediating the consequences of the conflict over addressing the incompatibilities between parties.
6. Absence of representatives of all affected parties at the talks.
7. Assumption of the outcome at the beginning of the peace process, which was carried through all the mediation attempts and affected the impartiality of the mediators.
8. Over-reliance on the 'third circle' due to the inability to achieve a resolution at the national and regional level, reliance on top down mediation and lack of investment in the first and second circles.

These eight conclusions also affect the talks at Astana, which will be addressed below. It should be noted that while there has been a failure to achieve a general ceasefire in Syria there has been successes at the local and national levels that are largely unsung yet demonstrate that agreements can be made. A fruitful area of research would be to explore these further and understand how and why these have been achieved.[85]

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[84] J.Michael Greig (2013) 'Intractable Syria? Insights from the scholarly literature on the failure of mediation' *Penn State Journal of Law & International Affairs* Vol 2, No 1, 2013
[85] This report is explicitly focused on the national, regional and global levels.

FOUR: SYRIA AND THE CONFLICT COMPLEXES

The Syria Crisis has had a dramatic and tragic effect on Syria and neighbouring countries, but with the violence centred on Syria itself and regional and global actors contributing to its development and continuation. These include those that have trans-border linkages (e.g: Palestine and the Gulf) and those presented above where there are regional trends, but without trans-border linkages. A multi-level analysis allows for the RCCs to be understood better, but will also point the analyst to the national and global levels, as the possibility that one of these is the primary driver of conflict and the regional level the secondary or even tertiary driver of conflict cannot be discounted.[86] An analysis of the Syrian War using RCCT theory allows us to address the overall failure of international attempts at mediation and points towards the incompatibilities that need to be addressed in order to mediate between the protagonists.

Conflict in Syria at the National Level

There are currently four distinct internal actors who hold territory in Syria and are active in fighting on the ground with other internal and external actors who have a military presence due to their support for a faction(s) or opposition to them. The internal actors are outlined here as the Syrian government, the opposition, the Syrian Kurds, and ISIS. These are the minimum number of actors that can be defined while at the same time accounting for the incompatibilities of the actors within the Syrian war. While the Kurds and ISIS are opposed to the government, they are distinctive actors in their own right, unique as an identity group, and have long term goals separate to that of the 'opposition'.

The internal actors on the government side are the Syrian Armed Forces, the part-time National Defence Forces (NDF) formed in November 2012, the predominantly Alawite Shabiba who were present during the uprising, and Christian militias that formed locally at the outset of the conflict. These reflect the diversity of confessional faiths within Syria and the predominantly Sunni confessional Opposition groups.[87] There is a fear of the Sunni dominated opposition amongst the other confessional groups in the country as the conflict has evolved into one which is distinctly sectarian in nature and where the Islamists and jihadists in particular are feared. This explains the support for the government in the government held areas of the country who fear reprisal if the territory is lost to the Islamists and jihadists, whom may seek revenge on sectarian grounds. The

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[86] A complete conflict analysis would include a historical account of the conflict in Syria. The following sources have been used in the author's research on Syria and inform the analysis: David W Lesch *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad* (Yale University Press: New Haven: 2013); John McHugo *Syria: A Recent History* (Saqi Books: London: 2015); Reese Erlich *Inside Syria: The Backstory Of Their Civil War And What The World Can Expect* (Prometheus Books: New York: 2016); The Independent *Syria: Descent into the Abyss 2011-2014* (Independent Print Limited: London: 2014). Any inaccuracies are the authors own.

[87] This a generalisation that should be interpreted carefully, as there are a number of confessional groups allied with the groups in the north of the country and there are also Christian militias allied with the FSA.

government has external support on the ground from Lebanese Hezbollah, Iranian forces and Iranian backed militias of the Shia denomination, and Russia.[88]

The nature of the 'opposition' is complicated as even with ISIS excluded they include what has been broadly categorised as moderate, Islamist and jihadist groups, whose alliances have fluctuated pragmatically over the course of the war.[89] 'Moderates' we can treat as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which has contained a number of locally based brigades. The 'Islamists' seek the defeat of the Assad regime and the establishment of an Islamic state in Syria, but have little ambitions outside of Syria. The 'jihadists' see the Syrian War as part of a larger struggle, one that does not end with the defeat of the Assad regime.[90] These are a far from unified opposition given that they have at times fought or allied with each other and there has been movement of fighters between groups. This has affected external support, in particular from the US, UK, and France, as they don't want arms and supplies to fall in the hands of proscribed terrorist organisations. The FSA, the sole opposition at the beginning of the conflict was backed by Turkey, the US, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. This number has gradually reduced as the Islamist and jihadist groups came to dominance. While the opposition is predominantly Sunni, there are a small number of other faiths, including Christian militias, present but there is an increasing consensus amongst observers of the Syrian war that the opposition is dominated by Islamist and jihadist factions and groups, who have had better external support.

The Kurds in the north of the country have had a limited amount of fighting with government forces at the beginning of the war until the government withdrew to focus on its battles elsewhere. Since then Northern Syria has seen its own distinct battles involving the Kurdish YPG and the Islamists and jihadists, before entering into a brutal battle with ISIS. Their relationship with the FSA has seen them allied with some brigades and battling others. Since October 2015 the YPG have been part of the Arab-Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which also includes other confessional faiths and ethnic groups. While there have been small battles with other opposition groups and Turkish forces, the primary focus of the SDF has been the advance on Raqqa. They have received air support from the US led coalition against ISIS. The Kurds seek to retain their territory as an autonomous region within Syria.[91]

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[88] Actors outside of the remit of the Syrian Government's armed forces who support the Assad regime are numerous and changeable. Sources used are: Oytun Orhan *The Shiite Militias in Syria and Political Solution* Orsam Review of International Affairs No 26 (Orsam: Ankara: 2015); Cody Roche *Assad Regime Militias and Shi'ite Jihadis in the Syrian Civil War* (Bellingcat: 2016).
https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2016/11/30/assad-regime-militias-and-shiite-jihadis-in-the-syrian-civil-war/ ; Uncredited 2# List of armed groups in the Syrian Civil War (World in War: 2016)
http://www.worldinwar.eu/list-of-armed-groups-in-the-syrian-civil-war/.
[89] Opposition actors are also numerous and changeable. Sources used are: Uncredited, op cit; Fabrice Balanche 'Status of the Syrian Rebellion: Numbers, Ideologies, and Prospects' PolicyWatch 2727 The Washington Institute for Near-East Policy (2016) http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/status-of-the-syrian-rebellion-numbers-ideologies-and-prospects.
[90] Guido Steinberg *The New 'Lions of Syria'* (SWP Comments: Berlin: 2014). Steinberg treats ISIS as one of the Jihadist groups.
[91] The Guardian (Martin Chulov) 24.06.17 'Kurds see chance to advance their cause in ruins of Islamic State' https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/24/kurds-see-historic-chance-advance-cause-ruins-islamic-state ; For two different perspectives on the Syrian Kurds see: Stephen Gowans (2017) 'The Myth of the Kurds in Syria YPG's Moral Excellence' Global Research https://www.globalresearch.ca/the-myth-of-the-kurds-in-syria-ypgs-moral-excellence/5598751; Till F. Paasche 'Syrian and Iraqi Kurds: Conflict and Cooperation' Middle East Policy Vol 22, No 1 (2015) http://www.mepc.org/syrian-and-iraqi-kurds-conflict-and-cooperation

The status of ISIS is the one thing that almost every other actor, internal and external, in the Syrian war can agree on, although the attention that they have received has distorted how other countries view the war. Prior to their spectacular advance across Iraq in 2014 and their dominance in eastern and northern Syria they were mainly known for their presence in the Iraqi west and having an affiliate in Syria.[92] This changed from 2014 onwards as the group took swathes of territory and threatened the security of both countries and the ethnic groups within them. Akin to other jihadist groups, there is little (if any) room for negotiation as their aims and goals are not linked to the nature of a future Syrian government but in the establishment and expansion of a caliphate. Along with their practices in the areas they rule, utter disregard for minorities, and the collision of their extreme Salafi-Jihadist interpretation of Sunni Islam with other religious groupings, this aversion to any form of compromise marks ISIS out as a group excluded from negotiations over the future of Syria.

The four groups of actors at the national level have linkages to each other and to the regional conflict complexes outlined below. This can be understood as horizontal relationships at the national level and a vertical relationship with the regional level. Here we are concerned with the former. The four have been involved in a battle for territory, with waxing and waning allegiances and rivalries, but all four have fought all of the others at some point. Success or threat between one pair has an impact on the others in a complicated and changing battle space. For example, the Syrian government had fought the Kurds in the early stages of the war, but then became focused on the threat from the opposition, who in turn had their own battles with the Kurds, who would later become involved in a bitter battle with ISIS for Kobane. It is unmistakable that all four groups have incompatible aims and goals, which bring them into conflict with each other, and would do so even without the contribution of external supporters.[93] What the war became was a multifaceted competition for territory and survival. No one is going to give up anything that has earned at great cost, whether it is the Syrian government's battle to reclaim territory, the myriad groups of the opposition and their ideas of what a future Syria will be, the Kurdish need for the security of an autonomous region, or ISIS and their Caliphate.

Syria and the Regional Conflict Complexes

To understand the linkages at the regional level requires the inclusion of every state neighbouring Syria and the addition of non-neighbouring Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf States. In terms of Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Turkey and Syria itself, the key linkage of a trans-border incompatibility where an ethnic group straddles an international border is present in all. Sunni Muslims are present, as would be expected, in significant numbers in all six countries; Shia Muslims are present in significant numbers in Lebanon, Iraq, and Turkey; and the Kurds are present in significant numbers in Iraq, Syria and Turkey (and Iran). Bar Israel, every state has a plethora of ethnicities and minorities, some such as the Alawites mainly present in Syria and others such as Christian denominations across the region.

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[92] The material available on ISIS is substantial. For their origins see: David Kilcullen *Blood Year: Islamic State and the Failures of the War on Terror* (Hurst & Company: London: 2016); For works on the group: Patrick Cockburn *The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution* (Verso: London: 2015); Michael Weiss & Hassan Hassan *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (Regan Arts: New York: 2015).

[93] Without whom the conflict would not be as it is today.

While none of the countries could be described as having only one ethnicity or identity group, there are three countries that can be described as being multi-ethnic in that they have three or more ethnicities or identity groups in significant numbers within their borders, and these are Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. All three have survived as nation-states despite having experienced periods of major sectarian violence and the loss of central government control. There has been an overspill of violence out of Syria, limited for Israel and Jordan, but more so for Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey, and transiting of fighters and materials into Syria from every neighbouring country with the exception of Israel. The border between Iraq and Syria had been merely a line on a map prior to the rise of ISIS, whose establishment of a self-declared Islamic State effectively eliminated it as a boundary between the Sunni's of Iraq and Syria. Turkey's border has proved to be largely ineffectual with the transiting of foreign fighters and materials into Syria in support of the opposition and ISIS, and Turkey's own military incursion. Finally, it is notable that there has been a flow of refugees from Syria into Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Turkey.

As regards the interaction and cooperation towards a government or group in another state, a wider perspective that includes Iran, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf States is required as while these are not subjected to the consequences of a trans-border relationship with Syria, they have a substantial influence in providing resources to competing actors within Syria. This has affected the military fortunes of the government, the opposition, and also ISIS. While the UCDP Palestinian and Syrian-Kurdish RCCs illustrate the linkages between Syria and neighbouring conflicts well, the broader Saudi Arabia v Iran and Muslim Awakening RCCs provide a wider explanation within the context of the Middle East.

Here we move to the first of the RCCs proposed earlier: the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran for regional dominance in the gulf region. This is one where the rivals do not engage each other directly but act against or support regional proxies, fuelling local conflicts in the process, as they jockey for dominance against each other. This rivalry can be seen in the Yemen civil war and the Qatari crisis as well as in the Syrian war. The clearest picture per Syria is the support from both sides that supports their own interests in the outcome. Iran is a major supporter of the Syrian government and has been instrumental in providing funding for the security forces, Hezbollah and the raising and support of Shia militias. Saudi Arabia has openly supported the opposition, to the extent of attempting the thankless task of uniting them as a negotiating group for the intra-Syrian talks. Iran's interest in the region extends to establishing its influence over Shia areas, including Shia-majority Iraq, and creating a land link from Iran to the Mediterranean. The country has invested heavily in the battle in Iraq against ISIS and in supporting the Syrian government.

The second of the RCCs presented earlier is one of non-state actors and their influence across the entire MENA region in the form of the 'Arab Awakening'. For Syria the Arab Spring had a definitive impact as the uprising arose from local events that impacted nationally and the Syrian government's response was inadequate and repressive, enabling the transition to a civil war. The 'Arab Spring' became the 'Arab Winter' due to Libya, Egypt and Syria descending into violence and political instability, but what is notable is the rise of radical-Islamists (and jihadists) after the initial events in all three countries. The ruling bargain of exchanging freedom for security and prosperity broke down long before the Arab Spring triggered in Tunisia, and it is the non-state actors whom have benefited in the long term. The mobility of political and religious ideas across the borders of the MENA countries in the wake of technological change is matched by the ability of foreign fighters to be

recruited and move between battle zones. For Syria, who once allowed foreign fighters to transit to Iraq and released its own jailed Islamists and troublemakers into the opposition ranks, the consequences of years of repression and the failure to reform at a pace matching revolutionary change has meant that the socio-political question of governance in Syria has also become a religious and political one.

Syria and the Global Conflict Complexes

Earlier two global conflict complexes were introduced: the new 'Cold War Dynamic' and the 'terror wars', which are grand narratives impacting on local and regional affairs, and which involve major powers. Both of these have had an impact on the Syrian war. Again, there are no direct trans-border issues, unless states neighbour each other.

The new Cold War Dynamic was introduced above and is characterised by a major power split along the lines of a US/France/UK v China/Russia division in the UNSC, but not forgetting the socio-economic powerhouses that are the EU and China. In the Syrian context, Russia is a long term partner of Syria and has two bases in the country, and together with China was suspicious of the motives of the Western powers in the UNSC, leading to a failure to authorise intervention in Syria against the Assad regime. This was in light of a UN resolution over implementing a no-fly zone over Libya becoming de facto NATO air support for the enemies of the Kaddafi regime and altering the course of the first Libyan civil war.[94] Subsequently, Russian support for Assad and Chinese non-interventionism resulted in the veto against intervention in Syria. This did not prevent support from the US, France, UK, the EU, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar for the Syrian opposition. Notably, this included US allies in the region, including Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, although Turkey, a NATO member opposed to the Assad regime and concerned about the Syrian Kurds, has since trod its own unique path. The primary US opponent in the region, including before the fall of Saddam Hussein, was and is Iran, a close Assad ally and opponent of the Arab states.[95] These linkages therefore define the interests of the global powers in the Syrian war: on the one hand there is the US, EU, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, who have at times supported differing parts of the opposition; on the other there was Russia (interventionist) committed to its interests in Syria in alliance with Iran and with support in the UN from China (non-interventionist). Turkey, which is opposed to Assad and hosts the mainstream Syrian opposition, has become an actor which is in conflict with the US interest in supporting the Kurds, who have been supported in their battles by coalition airpower and seen as important in the battle against ISIS.

The grand narrative of the terror wars is that civilisation is in a battle with Islamist and jihadist militants and thus any country which hosts or supports them is an enemy. Conversely, declaring against the Islamist and jihadist groups means that a country or sub-state actor is on 'the right side' in the terror wars, despite there being no consensus on which groups or states are 'terrorist(s)' or on

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[94] Yun Sun 'Syria: What China Has Learned From its Libya Experience' Asia Pacific Bulletin No 152 (2012)
[95] Despite having a severely adversarial relationship the US and Iran have had to work towards the same goal of defeating ISIS, particularly in Iraq.

when the terror wars actually began.[96] The wars against ISIS in Syria and Iraq by competing but unallied alliances (Syria/Russia/Hezbollah v ISIS and Arab-Kurd alliance/US Coalition v ISIS; Iraq/Iran/Kurds /US Coalition v ISIS) are a major part of this. The recruitment and transiting of Islamist and jihadist volunteers is another major part, swelling the ranks of opposition groups in Syria and bringing with them a militancy and ideology at odds with locals. Groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS are able to appeal and recruit globally, including experienced fighters from previous wars, particularly if either the US or Russia is present in a conflict. While the global powers are currently focused on ISIS in Syria, there has been confusion regarding the Islamist and Jihadists elements of the opposition, some of whom would clearly qualify as 'terrorist' according to the understanding of the US and EU, yet are locked in battle with the Syrian Arab Army and its allies. The Assad regime has a very different and much simpler view: all its opponents are 'terrorists' and there is no need for a prevarication over where its enemies lay on the opposition spectrum. The opposite could be said of the western viewpoint of Hezbollah and Iranian raised foreign militias.

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[96] One critical mistake is to adopt a western viewpoint and assume that the battle against Jihadists (and to some degree Islamists) began with the ongoing terror wars initiated by the US after 9/11. This belies an already existing conflict within the Islamic world over the nature and role of Islam and its place with regards to the nation-state, or even if the such borders mattered in the context of Islamic governance and jurisprudence. On this see: Dilip Hiro *War Without End: The Rise of Islamist Terrorism and the Global Response* (Routledge: London: 2002); Shiraz Mayer *Salifi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea* (Penguin Books: London: 2017).

FIVE: INCOMPATIBILITIES

Understanding the relationships of the conflict complexes through RCCT theory allows us to understand the factors currently driving the Syrian war at all levels and the linkages between them. This then allows for the potential for effective mediation and negotiation to be addressed realistically in section six.

National, Regional and Global factors

There has been a substantial change in the nature of actors fighting on the ground in Syria while attitudes of the regional and global actors have remained comparatively static in terms of who they want to rule Syria.[97] What has happened in the years since the uprising of 2011 has many authors, with Syria being both a victim of outside actors and an exporter of violence to its neighbours. What is unmistakable from the outline of national, regional and global conflict complexes given above is that there are rivalries and alliances with incompatibilities at all three levels and these are linked.

At the national level the Syrian government's forces and allied militias are in a protracted conflict with two of the major territory holders in Syria: the opposition (moderate, Islamist and jihadist) and ISIS (jihadist's whom are transnational and a distinct territorial entity). Conflict with the Kurds is minimal, probably due to the battles with the opposition and ISIS, and while the general state of war exists there seems to be an acceptance of the Kurdish wish for autonomy.

At the regional level the government is supported by Iran, Hezbollah and other Shia militias, some Iraqi, with the connection between Syria and Iran being a long standing one and part of Iran's strategy for the region. Countries in the region that are neutral to Syria are Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq, although factions within Lebanon and Iraq do support either the Syrian Government or its enemies and Jordan is a US ally, but what all three governments have in common is an earnest wish not to have Syria's war become their war. Opposed to the Syrian regime are Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and Sunni militias, whom have provided varying degrees of support to opposition groups, but have not actively committed themselves militarily against the Syrian regime. This places the Syrian war into the context of one of our two RCCs, the regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which manifests along the Sunni-Shia divide and affects alliances within the region. Israel, whom draws the ire of everyone else, we will discuss below.

At the global level, Russia has thrown itself into the Syrian war politically and militarily on the side of the Assad regime (and not simply the Syrian government), a regional ally and provider of military bases to Russia. The UK, US, France, and the EU, (the three western UNSC powers and a major 'soft power'), have been politically opposed to the Syrian government and have collectively provided training, support and arms to the moderate opposition, with some of this making its way to the Islamists and jihadists. China, the remaining UNSC member, has remained staunchly non-interventionist and has allied itself with Russia in the UNSC to prevent UN resolutions authorising

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[97] The recent acknowledgment that Assad may remain in power in the short term is a pragmatic realisation on the part of the Western bloc, but is far from what they actually want.

western military intervention. This reflects the 'New Cold War' rivalry between the 'West' and Russia/China, exemplified by Russia's response to NATO/EU expansion and China's challenge to US dominance in the Pacific region.[98] This is one of the GCCs (the New Cold War Dynamic), permeating down to the regional level, with the western bloc having positive relations with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, and Russia/China having positive relations with Iran, and through it, to the national level, affecting both the battle space and attempts to mediate between the actors involved. The emergence of ISIS as a quasi-state and its impact in Syria and Iraq has ensured that the US led coalition has become involved in countering ISIS, meaning that the second GCC (the 'Terror Wars') is also applicable to Syria, exemplified by the separate support for forces in Iraq and Syria. The outright termination of ISIS is the one thing that every other actor in the Syrian battle space agrees on, hence the panoply of bitter rivals working separately towards a common goal.[99]

Incompatibilities

We can, however, within the apparent complexity of the Syrian War, see two distinct tracks of relationships, which have impacted on the course of the war:

The Syrian Government and its militia allies (National); Iran, Hezbollah and other Shia militias (Regional); and, Russian political and military support, Chinese political support in the UNSC (Global).

versus:

The Opposition and the Kurds (National); Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Sunni militias (Regional); and, the US, UK, France and EU (Global).

This is the absolute minimum that the core incompatibility over the governance of Syria, between the Syrian government, and the opposition and the Kurds, can be reduced to, although it does also demonstrate a clear link between actors at all three levels who are divided over what the future government of Syria would look like and favour either the Assad regime or a transitional government. The intractability of the Syrian war stems from this basic incompatibility over governance, originating at the national level, but guided in its development by the interests of regional actors and their backers. While the fortunes of the government, the opposition, and the Kurds, has ebbed and flowed, and additional actors (including ISIS) have joined the fray, the question of who rules what and who is seen as legitimate and illegitimate by a divided international community remains. There are, however, four distinct factors that take the Syrian war beyond its central incompatibility over the governance of Syria. These supplementary incompatibilities make the Syrian War, which is no longer strictly a civil war, what it is today and point to what it will be in the future.

The first is the differences in the opposition that opposes the Assad regime. On the maps of the Syrian war presented in the media there are generally four territorial groupings: areas of

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[98] On this, see: Gray, op cit.

[99] The war against ISIS falls neatly into the 'terror wars' alongside the US war against Al-Qaeda but is a major global conflict of its own. Unlike Russia and the Western bloc China has not become involved but may do so if there is an exporting of jihadist or Islamist ideology to its Xinjiang region due to ISIS influence.

government control, Kurdish territory, opposition held areas, and ISIS territory. The areas attributed to the opposition are contested by groups who to varying degrees are moderate, Islamist or jihadist, have fought each other, launched allied campaigns for territory, and whose fighters will transit between groups, changing allegiance as they go, joining groups whose affiliations and names change.[100] The balance of power between moderates, Islamists, and jihadists has changed significantly, and while the nominally moderate and Islamist groups hold territory and are still in combat with the Syrian government and their allies, local agreements resulting in the movement of fighters and civilians and opposition infighting has left most of Idlib province under the control of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).[101] Formerly known as the Al-Nusra Front, the group was an Al-Qaeda affiliate, and once the Syrian government has finished its business with ISIS there is a strong possibility that its war with HTS will escalate.[102] On the spectrum of opposition the FSA and HTS represent two poles, there is much in between, and the maps are misleading in this respect.[103]

The second is the country that we set aside for now. Israel is unique in the Middle East in that it has an adversarial with neighbouring Arab states and Iran. Both Syria and Israel have previously occupied Lebanon and a dispute over the Golan Heights remains as a reminder that the countries have fought wars against each other. The Shia Hezbollah were formed with Iranian backing during Israel's 1980's occupation of Lebanon and they have been in conflict with Israel ever since. The presence of Hezbollah and their supplies in Syria is anathema to Israel, who has launched numerous airstrikes into Syria as a consequence. The US is a staunch Israeli ally, while the UK and France are broadly sympathetic to Israel but critical of the plight of the Palestinians.[104]

The third is the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. Turkey has undergone considerable political change since the beginning of the Syrian war but remains opposed to the Assad regime and while allowing opposition fighters to traverse its borders and taking in refugees has blocked the movement of Kurdish Peshmerga. The success of the Syrian Kurds in consolidating their territory against ISIS and maintaining a working relationship with the Syrian government has caused alarm in Ankara. Turkey's own war in its south- east with the Kurdish PKK has re-escalated, arguably as a consequence of ISIS and PKK actions within Turkey, and Ankara does not distinguish between the PKK and the PYG publically. The prospect of a contiguous Kurdish area on Turkey's southern border prompted a Turkish military incursion in 2016-17, which confronted ISIS but also ensured that territory did not fall under Kurdish control. The Turkish-Kurdish conflict is a major incompatibility that exists separately to the Syrian war but due to territorial changes and lack of government control in Syria has become part of it.[105]

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[100] For an idea of the sheer number of groups see: Uncredited, op cit. A more analytical account is given by Balanche, op cit.

[101] Al-Monitor 07.08.17 'Hayat Tahrir al-Sham plots its next move in northern Syria' http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/08/syria-idlib-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-agreements.html

[102] This is based on analysis in 2017 prior to the escalation of violence in Idlib and Hama Provinces in early 2018 and Turkey's incursion into Afrin.

[103] This is despite excellent work done in mapping the war. An example is the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) who provide weekly updates on the course of the war: http://www.understandingwar.org/.

[104] Peter Mansfield *A History of the Middle East 2nd edn* (Penguin Books: London: 2003); Donna J Stewart *The Middle East Today: Political, Geographical and Cultural Perspectives* (Routledge: New York: 2009).

[105] The Turkish-Kurd conflict in Turkey's south-east had reached a ceasefire after decades of fighting but underwent a severe re-escalation in 2015. For the origins of the conflict see: Dogu Ergil "PKK: Partiya Karkaren

The fourth supplementary incompatibility within the Syrian battlefield is ISIS, whose rise has many authors and whose demise has many more. This includes the two countries to which it has done the most harm, Iraq and Syria. The US and its coalition allies have put considerable resources into ensuring that ISIS is defeated in both Iraq and Syria while at the same time avoiding putting their own troops on the ground (excepting the usual advisors and Special Forces) until it was deemed necessary for the US to deploy forces to prevent fighting within the SDF and between the Kurds and the Turks and also to provide more robust ground support in the battle against ISIS. This can be understood as a continuation of the US-led 'terror wars'. Russia has also used its airpower against ISIS, but only in the context of supporting the Assad regime in its advance into ISIS territory. This accidental convergence of interests at the global level permeates down through the regional to the national levels, with the commitment in terms of ground forces fighting to defeat ISIS increasing as the national level of analysis is reached.

This gives us four supplementary incompatibilities within the Syrian battlefield:

1. Factional fighting within the opposition with the incompatibilities falling on a spectrum that ranges from 'moderate', through 'Islamist', to 'jihadist' and addresses the role of Islam within the territory that is nominally Syrian.
2. Israel's strategic war with Hezbollah and rivalry with Iran and consequential incursions into Syrian airspace.
3. The conflict between Turkey and the Kurds, which is linked to the intra-state Turkish-Kurdish conflict and the development of clearly defined quasi-autonomous Kurdish regions in Syria and Iraq.
4. The 'terror war' against ISIS, a trans-state entity, conducted in two distinct but overlapping battlefields and supported by a US led coalition in both cases.

All four of these additional incompatibilities, separate from the central Government versus Opposition incompatibility, have added to the complexity and intractability of the Syrian war, which has resisted the attempts by the UN to reach a mediated national solution.

Kurdistan" in: M Heiberg, B O'Leary & J Tirman (eds) *Terror, Insurgency and the State: Ending Protracted Conflicts* (University of Pennsylvania Press: Pennsylvania: 2007) pp 322-356.

SIX: PROSPECTS FOR RESOLUTION

In its current state the Syrian War is one that is intractable and has resisted attempts towards achieving a transition to non-violence through mediation with major changes in the status of the participants decided on the battlefield. There is currently no indication that this situation will change. This report is committed to understanding the nature of the war in order to make recommendations as to how the possibilities for improving the prospects of mediated solution can be explored. We now return to the conclusions from the sections on civil war and mediation and negotiation and address them in terms of the incompatibilities identified above that exist within the boundaries of the Syrian War.

The Syrian War

While the Syrian War is commonly understood as a civil war and would be categorised as such within typologies of armed conflict the analysis above, which treated the conflict in terms of conflict complexes, demonstrates that it is in fact one that is internationalised to a high degree and has at least five distinct incompatibilities overlapping within the borders of the Syrian state. The core incompatibility between the Syrian government and the opposition is one that transcends the national, regional and global levels of analysis and is highly likely to work at the local level, which was not under analysis here. The core incompatibility, which has been addressed in the conferences at Geneva and Astana, is the one that drives the conflict and ensures that foreign actors are heavily involved in the prosecution of the war in Syria. The four supplementary incompatibilities are a consequence of the involvement of foreign actors in the war: without the initial transition to civil war between the government and the opposition from one of protest against the Assad regime, they would not have become involved in the conflict militarily, yet their involvement now fuels the violence and ensures its continuation. All the foreign parties to the conflict have a vested interest in who rules in Syria in the future and have invested heavily in ensuring an outcome that reflects their interests. In doing so they have incurred costs, whether financial or through battlefield casualties, but the primary cost has been to the peoples of Syria, who have lost their infrastructure and homes, life and limb, in a conflict that has become one prolonged and escalated by outsiders.

Civil War

There were three conclusions from the section on civil war. These were:

1. In terms of the literature on ending civil war, the Syrian War has passed the point where either side would be expected to have an advantage, it has yet to run its full course, and foreign military intervention has altered the dynamic, reducing the chances of a negotiated settlement, which at best were 30%.
2. The large number of veto players in the Syrian war lowers the chance of a negotiated settlement further and raises the possibility of spoilers to any agreement. The number of

parties involved in the conflict has increased over time and the opposition is divided and includes groups unlikely to reach a peaceful settlement.

3. There is no impartial outside actor willing to impose a peace settlement or provide the security required for either side, particularly the moderate opposition, to make a credible commitment towards a negotiated settlement.

At the end of 2017 all three still applied. The chances of a negotiated settlement remain low while the government has military dominance due to support from outside allies and the crucial ability to utilise airpower in the prosecution of its aims. It currently has little reason to negotiate or compromise outside of the controversial localised agreements for population transfers. These, it should be noted, are de facto military victories where opposition forces have withdrawn because their military situation has become untenable. The number of veto players in the conflict has not decreased even with the demise of ISIS as they were not interested or involved in attempts at mediation and negotiation in the first place. The analysis of the conflict complexes and incompatibilities above simply confirms the intractability due to the number of actors involved and their concomitant strategic interests. Nor is there any indication that there is an outside actor willing to impose a peace settlement on the ground even in the unlikely that one is reached. The only imposition observed to be been made is by military conquest of a given area, not one through mediation and negotiation.

Mediation and Negotiation

The contributions of mediation and negotiation at the national and local levels were discussed above and the following discussion relates to mediation and negotiation by the international community towards achieving a general ceasefire in the Syrian War.

There were eight conclusions from the section on mediation and negotiation, drawn from studies on the Arab League and UN led mediation: These were:

The nature of the conflict:

1. The lack of a hurting stalemate meant that the conflict has never been ripe for resolution.
2. The changing number and complexity of parties with a stake in the outcome of the conflict and the consequential changes in demands and expectations.
3. The changing battlefield situation in terms of the territory held, the relative strength of the actors involved, and the location of the fighting, and length of the violence.
4. A lack of consensus amongst the regional powers, major powers and the UNSC and consequential lack of leverage for the mediators.

Flaws in the mediation process:

5. An overemphasis on mediating the consequences of the conflict over addressing the incompatibilities between parties.
6. Absence of representatives of all affected parties at the talks.
7. Assumption of the outcome at the beginning of the peace process, which was carried through all the mediation attempts and affected the impartiality of the mediators.

8. Over-reliance on the 'third circle' due to the inability to achieve a resolution at the national and regional level, reliance on top down mediation and lack of investment in the first and second circles.

Regarding the nature of the conflict:

1. All four of the conclusions concerning the nature of the conflict remain as factors impacting on mediation. There has never been a situation of a hurting stalemate where the parties to the conflict all perceive that a settlement will achieve their aims more than the continuation of violence. Both the government and the moderate/Islamist opposition have considered settlement but have wanted it on their own terms.

2. The number of parties with a direct stake in the conflict has increased over time, from the initial fighting between the government and the FSA, the splits in the opposition, the addition of Hezbollah and Iranian sponsored troops to the government side, Turkey's military involvement, increased Russian and US led coalition involvement, Israeli actions and the Kurds. This continuing complexity and increase in parties in the conflict has evolved over time and impacted on every mediation attempt.

3. The battlefield situation has changed dramatically, from the expectation that the government would fall, intra-opposition fighting, the emergence of ISIS as a major actor in Syria and Iraq, Kurdish military success, the Government retaking cities from the opposition, the Kurdish fight for survival against ISIS, and military interventions by Turkey and the US. This is not forgetting the heavy commitment on the ground by Hezbollah and Iran or the incidental general battle against ISIS. All of this has lengthened the war at great cost to the combatants who all expect a return on their commitments and have opposing aims and goals that are incompatible.

4. Finally, the UNSC countries remain split over Syria, exemplified by the competing goals of Russia and the US, and the regional interests remain locked into a pro-Assad/anti-Assad dichotomy alongside a distinctly Shia/Sunni split, with Turkey's major intervention on the ground motivated by concerns over the establishment of a contiguous Kurdish region on its southern border. Consequently, the number of incompatibilities has increased with the race to take ISIS territory the only mitigating factor, raising the question of what will happen once ISIS has lost all its territory. This split also includes the development of rival peace processes in Geneva/Vienna and Astana, despite the claims of Russia to the contrary.

Regarding the flaws in the mediation process:

1. The impact of the conflict factors on the mediation processes has continued to be detrimental to the resolution of the Syrian war. Across all levels there has been an attempt to mediate the consequences of the conflict, but not to actually address the incompatibilities between the parties. This is understandable at the local and national levels as they are bearing the brunt of the violence and there is a need for ceasefires and negotiations in order for both civilians and fighters to be moved from conflict zones and to contain the level of violence at the local level, allow humanitarian access and medical treatment. It is truly

remarkable that this occurs given the brutality of the Syrian War and dispute over the motivations for the ceasefires. At the regional and international levels this is less forgivable, even given the severe constraints on mediation attempts, as if the incompatibilities are not addressed then there will be no resolution. It does not help that regional and international actors are a part of the incompatibilities.

2. The emergence of an additional round of talks in Astana has added to problem of not having all parties present at talks, in particular the absence of the Kurds in the negotiations at Astana, but also a more general problem as talks develop along a Geneva/Astana axis with even the US having next to no role at Astana and the UN Envoy sidelined. Despite the numerous talks that have taken place since the beginning of the Syria crisis there have been difficulties in getting all the parties involved to sit down with each other.

3. Despite the changes in the battlefield situation there is a still an assumption over the outcome of the talks, namely that there will be a regime change. This continues to be a problem as it still means that the end point of negotiations is being presented as a precondition for mediation instead of being an outcome of the mediation. It is entirely possible that at the more military orientated Astana talks the hosts are aware of the potential for a regime victory, much as Turkey would be opposed to this, and are effectively attempting to negotiate a surrender of the moderate opposition as the ceasefires they have negotiated and the establishment of de-escalation zones have been implemented from above and opposed by the opposition. This flips the assumptions of the outcome of negotiations on its head, and assumes a government victory of sorts, one that the moderate opposition is unlikely to accept and would struggle to get past the Islamists and does not include the jihadists. It is also the case that Turkey, Iran, and Russia can hardly be described as 'impartial mediators' as they have been heavily involved in the conflict and have incompatible interests of their own.

4. This brings us to the final consideration of a focus on the third circle, or international level over the regional and national and reliance on top down mediation. This remains a major problem and is due to the intractability of the conflict at the national and regional levels and linkages between the Syrian and the regional and international interests fuelling the Syrian War. The inclusion of Turkey and Iran as powerbrokers at Astana brings in the regional level, but the outcomes remain top-down as the ceasefires and de-escalation zones have been imposed on the warring parties, three of whom are leading the talks in the first place. It is effectively an imposition by two Syrian Government allies, Russia and Iran, and a third country, Turkey, which is in the process of rapprochement with Russia and is more concerned with the Kurds in Syria and Eastern Turkey than anything else. Critically, the cooperation between Russia and the US that had been pushing the UN led peace process along has diminished, meaning that the top down interventions in mediation barely have the cooperation needed to be effective and risk making the situation worse. Investment in the low key national and local mediation attempts remains negligible and regional deconfliction is almost nonexistent.

Prospects for Mediation and Negotiation

The overall prospects for a mediated outcome to the Syrian War remain low at the time of writing. The addition of an additional level one track to an already struggling peace process has added to the complexity and difficulty of negotiations at the international level. While the UN-led track had made the error of assuming the outcome of the negotiations from the start, the Astana track has been pushed through by Russia, a nation that is directly involved in the war on the behalf of the Assad regime. Put bluntly, while the Geneva process has its flaws, the Astana process does not rectify them and has become a rival as opposed to complementary process. Nor is it in any way impartial as it is in the interests of two of the chairing nations, Russia and Iran that the Assad regime survives. In effect, mediation and negotiation towards ending the Syrian War has become part of international rivalry at the international and regional levels.

For there to be a resolution of armed conflict in the Syrian battlefield, which envisages one in which the Syrian nation remains intact, the incompatibilities need to be addressed. While the goal is to end the organised armed violence, therefore transforming and not resolving overlapping conflicts, peacebuilding measures should not be rejected. An ideal, if unlikely, scenario would see conflict transformation and conflict resolution work in parallel in a symbiotic relationship that leads to concrete and sustainable solutions, which allow a representative and legitimate Syrian state to provide for the needs of its people. The goal here, which is absence of violence, is a limited one and is effectively a scenario of negative peace where there is an absence of organised violence but unresolved differences remain.[106] Long term solutions require a scenario of positive peace, where differences are addressed and there is a national condition of proactive conflict resolution and accountability between parties leading to a Syria agreed on by its peoples, and its peoples only. Removing the violence is one step along the path to a positive peace, but it is a critical one in a conflict environment that centres on Syria where regional rivalries are played out and there are consequences in neighbouring countries. Syria then becomes a victim of its own misfortune, of regional interests, and an exporter of conflict to the countries around it.

Before proceeding to recommendations we must first make two observations. The first is that attempts at finding a resolution to the conflicts that form the Syrian war are subject to the factors pertaining to the nature of the war, and which work against resolution and encourage the continuation of organised armed violence. The changing nature of the war has also added complications and new incompatibilities that the negotiators could not have reasonably foreseen and have continually changed the status of the parties taking part in the negotiations, their willingness to participate, and with it their aims, goals, and interests. Conflicts evolve and the efforts to find solutions must evolve with them. The second is that there have been successful outcomes from mediation, which have taken place at all three levels, and these must be acknowledged. A considerable amount of effort has been made to find a negotiated solution and any propositions

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[106] This results in a *negative peace*, which is essentially the absence of violence, as opposed to a *positive peace* (the absence of structural violence). This draws specifically on Peace Studies.

made here build on those that went before. Peace processes are evident only when they reach their final goal, and rarely during the long period where little progress seems to be made. A glaring problem is that the major mediation attempts have been guided by the interests of powers external to Syria and have assumed a preferred outcome, to the extent that there are two tracks of mediation at the global level. They have also avoided addressing the national and regional levels due to the intractability at those levels when mediation began in 2011, thus pursuing a path of least resistance and failing to address the incompatibilities.

None of this bodes well for an immediate resolution to the violence, but it does provide a guide as to how a concerted and coordinated attempt can be made to match the incompatibilities of the Syrian war to attempts at a mediated solution.

SEVEN: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEDIATION AND NEGOTIATION

This report is committed to seeking a mediated solution to ending the violence of the Syrian War despite a situation that is hostile to effective mediation, difficulty in resolving the core incompatibility, the existence of supplementary incompatibilities, and the potential for further developments leading to more changes in the nature of the conflict. A situation of a hurting stalemate is not present in the core incompatibility, or the supplementary ones, but this does not mean that the barriers to resolution should not be addressed, in fact the need is more so. The primary change that needs to be made is to empower the UN to lead, facilitate, and back de-escalation and mediation at all levels, addressing the regional rivalries that are currently fuelling the war, and without the strategic interests of the UNSC powers determining the outcome.

A clear distinction needs to be made between *mediation* by impartial actors, which addresses the incompatibilities of the Syrian War and works towards conflict resolution and *mediation* by those with direct interests in the overlapping conflicts. The latter is closer to *negotiation* and while there have been successful negotiations involving actors at all three levels, these have served the interests of both sides and have had immediate or short term goals. They have not been aimed at the resolution of the core incompatibility.

The recommendations given below are comprehensive and multi-level and recognise the mediation and negotiation that has taken place at all levels of analysis. They are also ambitious, pragmatic, and recognise that the core incompatibility and supplementary incompatibilities need to be treated separately. It should be added that they see the Syrian War as taking years to end in the long term. The successful ending of hostilities between the government and the opposition groups fighting over the future governance of the Syrian state has been the focus of high level mediation but has been locked due to predetermined outcomes. These need to be set aside and mediation begun over all the incompatibilities and address the goals of ending violence and establishing a transitional government to be agreed by both sides. This does not overrule the primacy of the government-opposition incompatibility that remains at the core, working at all levels, and which is the key to ending the war.

Core Recommendations regarding the parameters of mediation and negotiation

1. The organisation and implementation of negotiations should be led by the UN as an impartial mediator with no separate interests outside of ending violence, promoting conciliation and resolution, supporting ceasefires, and promoting human rights. UN resolutions are to be implemented by all countries without exception. The UN is to promote and back local and regional organisations working to mitigate the effects of violence and promote conciliation and resolution.

2. The future of the Syrian state is to be decided by the people of Syria alone and the outcome to be decided by representation and not military force. The international community is to recognise the rights of Syrians to choose their future on the basis of a government that recognises and includes all, regardless of gender, religion, ethnicity, and political affiliation.

This is to include the possibility of a centralised state, federation, autonomous regions, and independence. Talks are not to have a predetermined outcome outside of achieving a representative solution and ensuring human rights.

3. High-level negotiators need to address the conflict according to its incompatibilities alongside attempts to mediate the violence. It is natural to want to do the second when the primary actors at the national level are not willing to compromise and so negotiate and call ceasefires for strategic gain instead of attempting to reach a negotiated solution. Addressing the incompatibilities ensures that the root causes of the conflict are considered and discussed by the participants.

4. Mediation and negotiation is to be separated from the interests of the global powers and is to reflect the needs and values of the people of Syria as a whole based on the borders that existed in 2011. The competing high-level tracks of the UN and Astana talks need to be attended by representatives from both tracks.

5. A commitment to be pursued at the national, regional, and global levels towards the peaceful resolution of the Syrian War and the future withdrawal of external military forces in the event that a representative Syrian state committed to human rights is established. This is to exclude peacekeeping forces recognised and/or authorised by the UN, which are to reflect the socio-ethnic characteristics of the area in which they are based and operate.

6. The active promotion by interested parties of mediation and negotiation at the national, regional, and global levels, and the inclusion of all parties wishing to participate through either direct participation or trusted representatives. The parties involved to understand that this does not confer legitimacy for their political and military aims and goals, or their current territorial status, but instead their right to participate in a negotiated solution to the Syrian War.

7. A requirement to be placed on regional organisations and actors to find concrete and realisable solutions to the both the central and supplementary incompatibilities of the Syrian War. This is on the basis that the investment of regional actors in the Syrian war affects their acceptance of potential outcomes and there will be a compromise by them regarding their interests. It is the responsibility of the global actors to drive this forward and work pragmatically to reduce tensions and incompatibilities at the global level. Rapprochement at the global level and removal of global level interests from the region will promote rapprochement at the regional level.

8. Mediation attempts at all three levels are to be recognised, placed on record, and assessed in terms of their contribution to resolving the conflict. This is regardless of the originator or the parties involved and will provide a database through which potential openings and opportunities for mediation can be identified.

Decoupling the core and supplementary incompatibilities

9. The progressive decoupling of regional interests from the Syrian War aimed at the withdrawal of foreign militaries, militias and fighters from Syrian territory according to the borders that existed in 2011.

10. The detaching of the core incompatibility from the supplementary incompatibilities in order to allow the core incompatibility to be addressed separately and allow for mediation between the Syrian government and opposition groups, to include the Kurds, willing to accept a representative Syrian state. This has been a consistent approach by both the high level mediation tracks and should remain so.

11. The recognition that foreign states have made a significant investment in actors involved in the conflict and will have concerns over the future status of such actors, including their right to representation, and the right to live free from the threat of death or harm due to their religious, ethnic, or political identity.

On the Syrian Government and the Opposition

12. The acknowledgement that the current Syrian government is responsible for the security of the people in the territory it currently holds and that some of its opponents are committed to a jihadist campaign against the state and other actors, which threatens the safety and security of people in the territory they hold and/or take from the government and other opposition actors.

13. The acknowledgement by the Syrian government that the international community and human rights organisations have legitimate and serious concerns regarding, not exclusively, the actions of the government and its allies during the uprising, usage of banned weapons (chemical and conventional), the actions of the secret police, and the torture and killing of opponents in state prisons.

14. The Syrian government to commit to restoring its legitimacy to rule by instituting reform in the territories it currently holds and bringing violators of human rights to account without exception. The Syrian government to accept the involvement of UN representatives, human rights organisations, humanitarian groups, and foreign journalists by providing safe and unfettered access to state territory and institutions. The Syrian government is to commit to establishing a transitional government with its future to be decided by the people of Syria and acknowledging that a potential outcome may be the end of the Assad regime.

15. The recognition that the Ministry of Reconciliation (MOR) has worked proactively to promote and implement local peace agreements, albeit to the benefit of the Syrian government, and demonstrating that there is willingness to negotiate and compromise alongside the prosecution of its military campaign.

16. The commensurate recognition that moderate and Islamist opposition groups have been party to negotiations involving the MOR and with local representatives, mitigating the

consequences of the violence and reaching compromise agreements. The piecemeal low level mitigation featuring unsung local actors has proved to be crucial to localised conflict resolution and requires a commitment from the government and willing opposition groups to provide security with the provision of monitoring by the UN and human rights organisations.

17. Clearly delineate between conciliation, mediation, negotiation, and compromise for tactical and strategic gain and the interests of the regional and global actors on one hand and the mediation conducted by impartial actors with no agendas other than the termination of violence and preservation of human rights.

Recommendations specific to the supplementary incompatibilities

18. The formation of a UN led working group to address the supplementary incompatibilities that are causing external actors to deploy their military forces on or over Syrian territory and explore the means by which foreign fighting forces allied to either the government and the opposition can be withdrawn. These are to include: Intra-opposition violence, Turkey and the Kurds, Israel and Hezbollah/Iran, and the US-led war(s) against ISIS and Al-Qaeda.

19. A separate mediation track to be established to address the incompatibility between Turkey and the Kurds, with the complementary aims of facilitating the removal of Turkish armed forces from Syrian territory, and demilitarising the conflict between the Turkish government and the Kurds in Turkey. This recognises that the two are linked and therefore represent a serious incompatibility with implications wider than the Syrian War.

20. Regional actors and organisations, state and private, to work towards deescalating conflict within the opposition, aimed at the moderate and Islamist groups, but willing to accept approaches by jihadist groups. This would treat the opposition as being on a spectrum ranging from moderate to jihadist and ideally, but not exclusively, involve the Arab League, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States and Turkey.

CONCLUSION

The Nature of the War

Since the uprising in 2011 the conflict in Syria has changed dramatically from one in which a ill-formed military and political opposition contested the legitimacy of the Assad regime to rule to one in which there are multiple overlapping conflicts linked to regional conflict complexes, including one centred on Syria itself. The spectrum of groups within the opposition alone makes this complicated but the gradual addition of new actors, regional and global, has meant that additional conflicts are ongoing outside of the one between the government and the opposition. Two critical ones amongst these are Turkish-Kurdish conflict and the war against ISIS. In this paper, this has been termed 'The Syrian War' to reflect the fact that it is no longer simply a civil war, nor an intra-state one. Syria is both a victim of the regional actors and conflict complexes around it and an exporter of conflict to the countries neighbouring it. This makes Syria a centre of violence for the regional conflict dynamics and a threat to the stability of neighbouring countries and the people within them. Within this the central incompatibility of the question of who rules a future Syrian state is a constant factor and its resolution, whether by mediation or negotiated surrender, will still leave other conflicts ongoing within Syrian borders and a constant threat of regional conflict complexes re-escalating the violence. The changing nature of the Syrian war affects attempts at mediation and negotiation at all levels and we have to be aware that it may keep on changing and with it the barriers to resolution and solutions to them. While we can make forecasts based on existing trends and incompatibilities we can never be sure of what the future of the Syrian War will be.

Incompatibilities

The Syrian war is undeniably complex, even on the basis of trying to understand the opposition alone, but the above analysis demonstrates that its complexity can be broken down and clear incompatibilities identified. These incompatibilities have varying degrees of susceptibility to mediation and negotiation and some require a separate track, but there is a distinct central incompatibility between the government and the opposition that has been the focus of international mediation efforts, but is complicated by the differences in the opposition. The supplementary incompatibilities bring their own complications and drive home the brute fact that much of the violence is extraneous to the central incompatibility. Moreover, the central incompatibility in particular is linked at all levels with national, regional and global actors having a vested interest over who will rule Syria when in fact the nature of the nation-state system and principle of self-determination means that the only people who should have a say are Syrians themselves.

Mediation

Syria is a case of repeated mediation, which began during the uprising, carried on through the civil war and continues today during the Syrian War. The mediation has taken place at the national, regional and global levels, with the two major tracks, represented by Geneva and Astana focused on

a top down approach due to the perceived intractability at the national level. While this is accurate, given the difficulties in actually getting representatives of the Syrian government and the opposition to the talks, it is also the case that local agreements between warring parties have been achieved. This demonstrates pragmatism on their part but carry the caveat that agreements usually occur because they are of mutual benefit to the parties concerned and in the case of population transfers amount to redistribution on a sectarian basis. The work of local actors in mediating the violence and building trust goes largely unsung as it is out of sight. This piecemeal and decentralised peacemaking is inherently dangerous but is creating the conditions for a workable peace. Returning to the global level, the Geneva and Astana tracks are have pursued different objectives: For Geneva it is the end of the Assad regime and establishment of a transitional government; for Astana it is the negotiated surrender of the Opposition. Both are flawed in attempting to determine the outcome but have achieved the feat of getting people into the conference room. In this respect mediators are working with both hands tied behind their backs and the global powers are at fault for this and for developing rival tracks. The global and regional powers need to be talking to each other as one group, not two, and the mediation needs to reflect the fact that the Syrian War is dynamic and has changed and may change again. National borders, even badly conceived and drawn ones, should be respected and Syria's are open to all, with too many foreign actors playing out their own political and territorial ambitions and prolonging the Syrian War.

Future prospects

Given the above it is not surprising that the future prospects for a mediated peace in Syria are low and there is a strong likelihood that a series of negotiated surrenders and battlefield successes will determine Syria's future. The principal barrier to successful mediation, negotiation, and conflict resolution is the core incompatibility between the government and opposition, which the high level mediators have attempted to address. This is exacerbated by the presence of foreign actors on the Syrian battlefield, who are pursuing aims and goals separate to the central incompatibility of the nature of the future government of Syria. The Assad regime, which dominates the government, appears strong but is propped up militarily by Russia and Iran, and so is dependent on their need to ensure the survival of the regime in order to meet their strategic goals. There are possibilities for compromise at the national level, notably between the government and the 'moderate' opposition, and the government and the Kurds, which would de-escalate the violence, but still leave the Islamists, jihadists and ISIS, and would also leave Turkey hostile to the Kurds. The US will likely remain in the theatre as long as the jihadists and ISIS are present, and in the event that there is any threat to the Kurds in the north and Israel or Jordan in the south. Given the fractious nature of the relationship between the Arabs and Kurds of the SDF future battles between them of a serious nature are possible. The regional Shia-Sunni based rivalry of Iran and Saudi Arabia also looms over the search for a mediated solution as they are backing opposing sides

Epilogue

The Syrian War is both complex and dynamic and a central argument of the report presented in the previous pages is that it is not only a civil war, with actors fighting at the national level, but one that is internationalised and so influenced by regional and global interests. In the two weeks between the writing of the report's prologue and this epilogue the Assad regime has been accused of using chemical weapons and has completed its offensive in Eastern Ghouta, the permanent members of the UN Security Council have escalated their war of words over Syria, and the United States, France and the United Kingdom have launched a joint operation against targets they have designated as linked to chemical weapons. While the direct targeting of Syrian government facilities has been undertaken previously by the United States it is the first time that France and the United Kingdom have directly attacked government targets.

The furore over whether Ghouta was struck by chemical weapons, who is responsible, and the legality and timing of the Western response will rumble on for months to come, as will the split at the regional and global levels regarding their own rivalries and their position over the future of Syria. The competing narratives of the Syrian War, working at the national, regional and global levels, will no doubt continue with a war of words that solves nothing and feeds the hostilities within Syria. It will have little impact on the course of the war, except potentially preventing future use of chemical weapons by the regime (see the prologue on this) and having set a problematic precedent for Western action if they do. Aside from the raising of the already febrile tensions between the West and Russia to dangerous levels and provoking a panic over a dangerous escalation of the new cold war between them, the impact on the death and destruction within Syria will negligible as the majority of direct deaths and injuries are due to conventional weapons, legal and illegal. Of note, is the repeated assertions made after the airstrikes that they were not an attempt at regime change but had limited goals. This underlines the largely unspoken realisation by the leaders in the West that the Assad regime is not going to fall in the near future.

This author contends that despite the current ascendency of the Syrian government on the battlefield in Syria the war is far from over and the only way in which it will be brought to an end is through impartial and effective mediation and negotiation aimed at deescalating the conflict at all levels and addressing all five of the incompatibilities identified in this report. The prospects of this are low at this time but this is no reason not to work towards enabling dialogue between actors through open-ended talks chaired by the UN and backed by all the permanent UN Security Council members. This starts at the highest level, with ending the violence a priority and accountability to follow, as without accountability for war crimes by all sides there cannot be a sustained peace without re-escalation.

While we wait for this to happen, the violence continues, unabated and brutal, with potential escalations looming on the horizon.

Carl P Turner, 16th April 2018.

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 Identifying incompatibilities and the prospects for mediation and negotiation

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