

Research Paper

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# Western Policy Towards Syria: Applying Lessons Learned



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## Summary

- Six years into Syria's conflict, 'victory' for any particular actor is likely to prove a relative term. The regime of President Bashar al-Assad holds the military advantage, but lacks the capacity and resources to recapture and govern the whole of Syria. A post-settlement Syrian state would likely see new elites and warlords wielding power and influence across the country. At the same time, extremist groups are likely to persist and evolve. This is no recipe for stability.
- There are no straightforward answers for Western policymakers. Short-term approaches that do not appreciate the nuances of the conflict bring more risks than opportunities. Policymakers must consider the long-term obstacles to stable and effective governance in Syria that are a direct result of the rise of new actors on the ground.
- In addressing these challenges, Western policymakers must be realistic. They must identify strategic objectives in accordance with their level of commitment to achieving them. Since 2011, Western policy towards Syria has been undermined by a wide gap between rhetoric and action, poor communication with allies, and a lack of vision.
- The absence of a coherent strategic vision – or the political will to see it through – on the part of Western governments has contributed to the increasing strength and influence of extremist groups. These groups cannot be countered by military means alone, however. Without a political agreement to end the conflict, tactical measures for fighting extremism in Syria will fail, as they have elsewhere.
- Policymakers must align 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' measures, as no national solution in Syria can be implemented effectively without the buy-in of local communities. To date, local-level humanitarian and governance initiatives have largely overlooked political issues, while national-level peace initiatives have focused on political issues but without enough attention to local dynamics and actors. A successful Western strategy must balance national-level policies with local-level priorities and concerns in order to cultivate the support of local constituencies.
- Western powers – specifically the US, the EU, the UK and France – must make the most of their limited leverage to extract concessions from the Assad regime and its international backers. The greatest leverage that the West possesses is economic: through sanctions, trade and reconstruction. This may prove significant in determining Syria's post-settlement future. The regime's external sponsors, Russia and Iran, have neither the capital to fund large-scale reconstruction efforts nor the interest in doing so.

## Introduction

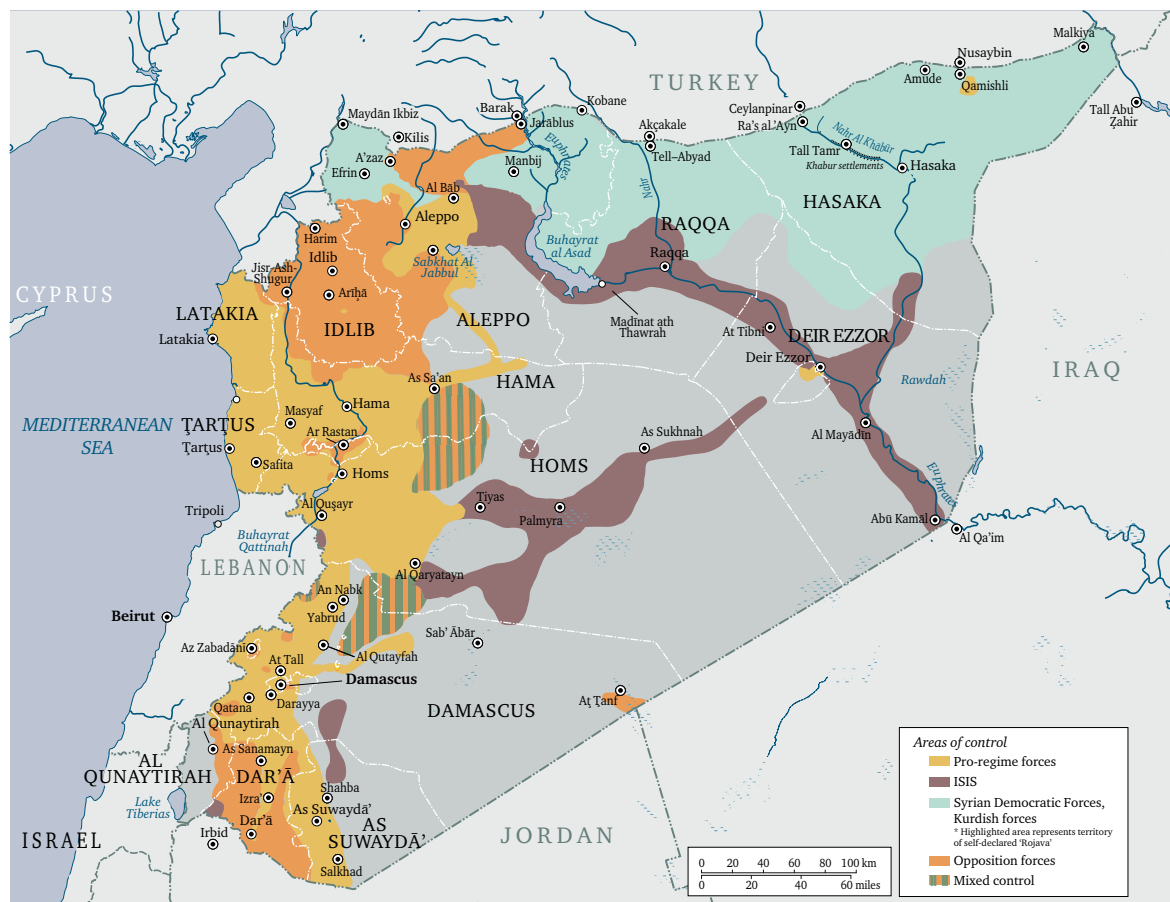
When protests broke out in Syria in February 2011, they were viewed – locally and internationally – as the next episode of the Arab Spring. Six years on, the narrative has changed dramatically. The conflict has developed into multiple wars involving a wide range of internal and external actors, while the emergence of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the rising influence of other extremist elements in Syria’s constellation of armed groups have resulted in the West reframing the crisis in terms of counterterrorism.

Yet this current narrative is itself too limited. The escalation in hostilities in Syria goes beyond the matter of terrorism. A securitized approach fails to adequately take into account the conflict’s complex dynamics, which continue to present challenges for Western policy and impede prospects for peace and stability.

This paper seeks a wider perspective. Divided into two main parts, it begins by presenting the Western policy community with lessons from the trajectory of the Syrian conflict to date – lessons fundamental to an effective fight against extremism in Syria and, more broadly, to the chances of reaching a settlement. The paper does not claim to offer a comprehensive or prescriptive set of policy recommendations. Rather, it highlights the parameters that must form the baseline for policy development as the West seeks to craft a more effective strategy. While governments are often good at conducting ‘lessons learned’ exercises, these rarely appear to influence future policy. The lessons presented in this paper should be seen as the starting point for further analysis and policy discussions, which the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Chatham House will continue to undertake in its future work on Syria.

The second part of the paper reviews, in turn, six ‘inflection points’ in the conflict that inform the policy parameters. These represent key developments that have contributed to the current military-political balance in Syria, and that will need to be taken into account in future policy deliberation. The aim of this section is not only to explore the rationale for – and provide context and background to – the authors’ proposals for improving Western policy effectiveness in Syria. It also offers a necessarily detailed analysis of the conflict’s complexities and dynamics over time, taking into account the evolving composition, alignment, tactics and/or priorities of its principal actors. If one of the key mistakes of Western policymakers to date has been to misinterpret the crisis, in particular by framing the issues too narrowly, a more flexible and multidimensional view is needed. This is also crucial if the adverse effects of another key policy shortcoming – incoherent and inconsistent engagement with the Syrian opposition – are to be remedied in the future.

Map 1: State of the conflict, February 2017



Source: Data as of 16 February 2017. Adapted from UN base map, and from Institute for the Study of War (2017), 'Syria Situation Report: February 2 - 16, 2017', <http://understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/feb%2016EDITS%20COT.pdf>. The boundaries and names on this map do not imply endorsement or acceptance by Chatham House.

# Parameters for Effective Western Policy in Syria

The Syrian crisis has evolved over the past six years into a conflict perceived by many in the policy community to revolve around the fight against extremist groups such as ISIS and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.<sup>1</sup> The increasing association of the war in Syria with the fight against these groups has allowed rivals for influence in the country – mainly the US and Russia – to find common cause. As the international community seeks an end to the conflict, the need to counter extremist groups has been one of few issues related to Syria on which the UN Security Council has been able to pass a resolution acceptable to all its members.

Fighting extremist groups in Syria is important because of the threat they pose not only to the country's stability both in the present and in the long term, but also to the world at large. ISIS, in particular, has expanded the scope of its operations to include almost any targets outside Syria and Iraq against which its members and sympathizers are able to execute violent acts.

This paper outlines the parameters that should underline the fight against extremist groups in Syria. The factors behind the rise and durability of ISIS and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham are complex, and encompass political, economic and social elements. Countering extremist groups in Syria must therefore involve addressing issues wider than their military capabilities alone; otherwise the fundamental drivers of the existence of these entities will persist, and similar groups will emerge. Indeed the West's focus to date on countering ISIS and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham through military means has not succeeded in eradicating these groups, and in some ways has actually strengthened them.

There is thus an urgent need for a political component in the West's strategy to overcome ISIS, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and other armed groups. The events of the past six years have underlined the fact that without a political agreement to end the conflict in Syria, tactical measures to fight extremism will not be sufficient. In the light of this and other lessons from Western responses to the Syrian conflict to date, a number of parameters for more effective policy can be identified.

In particular, fresh Western thinking on Syria needs to understand the following:

## The Syrian conflict is both fuelling and being fuelled by regional conflicts

The Syrian conflict has been increasingly fuelling regional rivalries and has had a material effect on other conflicts across the Middle East. The situation in Iraq became worse as a direct result of developments in Syria, which have allowed ISIS to expand its sphere of activity and ambition. In Yemen, an emergent 'ISIS Yemen' has launched a series of high-profile attacks. At the same time, the war in Syria has presented Israel with a threat to its stability that has only added to the barriers to resolving the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Tensions between the Turkish government and Kurdish

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<sup>1</sup> Until mid-2016, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham was known as Jabhat al-Nusra. Many parts of this paper refer to the group as it existed before the name change, and thus use the older designation. Underlining the fluidity of the situation on the ground, in January 2017 Jabhat Fateh al-Sham merged with a number of other armed groups to become Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. At the time of writing it was unclear how durable this new label will be. BBC Monitoring (2017), 'Tahrir al-Sham: Al-Qaeda's latest incarnation in Syria', 12 February 2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-38934206> (accessed 22 Feb. 2017).

groups have increased as a result of Kurdish attempts to establish autonomy in northern Syria. The Syrian conflict is contributing to sectarian and ethnic polarization in the region, and is also being fuelled by the increase in such polarization. This highlights the need for a long-term regional strategy and vision for Syria, and for policies that are part of the wider solutions that the West is seeking to other crises across the Middle East.

The first step is for the West to acknowledge that the Middle East has become multipolar. Countries such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt are no longer as amenable to Western influence as they were in past decades. In particular, the unilateral ability of the US to project power in the region has diminished. This has become apparent over the past six years in the difficulties experienced by the Friends of Syria<sup>2</sup> group, whose members have had glaring disagreements over how to achieve the group's objectives. Often, these differences have complicated the Syrian crisis rather than contributing to its resolution. No strategy for ending the conflict can be fully implemented unless it takes into consideration the different and often clashing capacities and goals of regional actors.

### Post-settlement governance in Syria will reflect a fragmented country and differences among the regime's backers

The allies of the Syrian regime are not united in their interests. Russia and Iran share some objectives in Syria, but they have different approaches to long-term engagement in the country. Moscow has been broadly supportive of keeping state institutions in Syria intact as long as they remain aligned with Russian interests. On the other hand Iran – as it has done in Iraq and Lebanon – has been attempting to weaken state institutions and has been supporting parallel institutions such as the various militias fighting alongside the Syrian regime. These new actors can be expected to make demands of the regime in the future, as their role is unlikely to end in the event of a peace settlement. Iran has also been cultivating grassroots support in Syria as a means to retain influence in the future, regardless of the eventual post-settlement political landscape.

In this sense 'victory' is likely to prove a relative term. In particular, the assumption that the regime will inevitably recapture and govern the rest of the country as before is flawed: the regime currently lacks the capacity and resources to do so. Its victory in Aleppo in late 2016 was made possible only by sustained support from Russia, Iran, Hezbollah and other militias, and even then the offensive to recapture the city took six months. In many regime-held areas, services previously delivered by the state have been subcontracted to non-state actors. Government-aligned militias handle security in many areas, while regime-aligned charities and civil society movements have formed to meet the needs of the civilian population (a development that in large part reflects their ability to receive humanitarian funding through international channels).<sup>3</sup> Unsurprisingly, the capabilities of Syria's state institutions and bureaucracy have been severely degraded by six years of conflict. The post-settlement Syrian state will likely be an atomized version in which new elites and warlords wield power and influence alongside – and in competition with – elements from the existing regime. This is no recipe for stability.

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<sup>2</sup> The 'Friends of Syria' group was established by the then French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, in February 2012 with the aim of marshalling international support to implement the Arab League Peace Plan. The group recognized the Syrian opposition in December 2012. Its members included more than 60 countries and representatives from the United Nations, the Arab League and the European Union, among others. Prominent members included the US, the UK, France, Germany, Italy, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar and the UAE.

<sup>3</sup> Khaddour, K. (2016), *The Coast in Conflict: Migration, Sectarianism, and Decentralization in Syria's Latakia and Tartus Governorates*, Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, July 2016, <http://bit.ly/2l2NX4J> (accessed 2 Feb. 2017).

The West should design post-settlement reconstruction and reconciliation strategies that take into consideration the dynamics of this changing landscape. It should avoid strategies predicated on the assumption that state institutions can be automatically restored to their pre-2011 status. Nor should it base those strategies on the assumption that Russia and Iran will remain fully aligned in the long term. Indeed differences between Russia and Iran may open up opportunities for exploring potential political transition scenarios in Syria.

### Western strategic objectives need to be consistent with the level of commitment to achieving them

In addressing the challenges of this political environment, the West must avoid repeating its persistent mistake to date of being vague about the endgame in Syria and failing to match rhetoric with action. For example, calls for President Bashar al-Assad to step down were never backed by adequate diplomatic or military pressure, and the West's credibility suffered as a result. This freed Russia to present itself as the leading external player in Syria. It also allowed extremist groups to exploit the West's lack of coherence in support of their own narratives as the forces that would enact political change in Syria. As a consequence, by 2014 the Obama administration found itself in the curious position of being more afraid of the fall of the dictator it publicly opposed than of the defeat of the rebels to which it provided support.

Extremist groups in Syria have exhibited a remarkable ability to take advantage of opportunities to expand their presence and scope of influence. Countering this trend requires the design and implementation of long-term conflict resolution measures that are effective on the ground. Despite the prioritization of military action against extremist groups in Syria, the West has also dedicated significant funding over the past six years to supporting humanitarian aid, civil society, local governance and the Syrian political opposition. While those efforts have kept important local services going – and have resulted in the recognition by most countries of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people – their horizons have largely been short-term. Of course, establishing long-term conflict resolution can only start with de-escalation measures to support short-term stability. However, when projects related to civil society, governance or aid delivery inside Syria have a lifespan of just one year or less, this creates a vacuum when projects end. Extremist groups can exploit this by presenting themselves to local communities as alternative providers of services, security or funding. This has contributed to the rise of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, for example, both in Idlib and elsewhere in the country. Designing on-the-ground initiatives with long-term objectives will act as a preventative measure to mitigate against the opportunism of such groups in the future.

A related lesson is the need for long-term initiatives to support governance structures and economic development. Support for these to date has mostly been on a micro level, such as through local councils. But there is an additional need for policies that tackle issues on a national level, and that anticipate the broader structures needed to make governance and economic development solutions sustainable in the future. Reconstruction,<sup>4</sup> for example – which the World Bank estimates will require US\$180 billion in investment just to return Syrian GDP to its pre-conflict level<sup>5</sup> – will be impractical

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion of the challenges of post-settlement/post-conflict reconstruction in Syria, see Butter, D. (2016), *Salvaging Syria's Economy*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, March 2016, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/salvaging-syrias-economy> (accessed 2 Feb. 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Deverajan, S. et al. (2016), *Syria: Reconstruction for Peace*, World Bank MENA Economic Monitor, April 2016, Washington, DC: World Bank, p. 48, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/777291467993169903/Syria-reconstruction-for-peace>.



unless policies are linked to the issue of political structures. This gives the West an opportunity to offer support for reconstruction with conditionality (for instance, regarding the return of refugees and internally displaced persons to their areas or origin). Reconstruction will require an approach that combines top-down and bottom-up measures, in order to prevent broader political issues from undermining efforts to support governance and the economy.

Such measures must be based on acknowledging that national solutions in Syria will require the buy-in of local stakeholders. To date, there has been a lack of alignment between policies directed at the local level and those directed at the national level. For example, local-level initiatives have tended to focus on issues such as the delivery of humanitarian aid while largely overlooking political issues, whereas national-level initiatives have focused on political issues such as the transfer of power without seeking sufficient local consent for those initiatives. Local councils and civil society must be represented in discussions about Syria's future hosted by the West. The Western policy community must also make an effort to give a platform to those voices, and not limit information and analysis on Syria to those in the diaspora.

### Questions over the future of the Syrian Kurds cannot be deferred for much longer

Policies towards Syria must take into account the diversity of its people, as well as local-identity politics relating to ethnic and sectarian issues. Addressing questions over the future of the Kurdish-majority areas in the north of the country is high on the list of priorities. With US support, the YPG/J militias<sup>6</sup> of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) have proven the most effective local forces in combating ISIS. The YPG inflicted the first major defeat on ISIS forces in the town of Kobane in 2014–15, and has since seized significant territory from the militant group. It has placed this territory under the control of its self-declared autonomous governance project, 'Rojava-Northern Syria'.

US support for the YPG is currently wholly dependent on its utility in fighting ISIS. The PYD is considered a terrorist group by Turkey because of its affiliation with the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). It has only temporary friends and no lasting allies in the international community. Turkey is committed to opposing Kurdish autonomy in Syria, while the neighbouring Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq is aligned with the PYD's Syrian Kurdish rival, the Kurdish National Council (KNC). The nature of the relationship between the PYD and the Assad regime is disputed, as the regime appears to be tolerating the PYD to an extent as long as its activities serve the regime's interests. But this relationship likely reflects a marriage of convenience and not an acceptance by the regime of Kurdish goals of political decentralization. The PYD's relationship with the opposition, and with Islamist groups in particular, is openly hostile.

Little fanfare and scant detail have surrounded the launching of the offensive on Raqqa, the capital of ISIS's self-declared caliphate, in November 2016. The ongoing offensive is spearheaded by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which include a number of Arab militias but remain dominated by the YPG. At the time of writing it was unclear what, if any, plans exist for the recapture of the city. The potential remains for Turkey to mount its own offensive on Raqqa. There is consequently little sign of a military or a political strategy for Raqqa, or, critically, for post-ISIS governance in the area. This illustrates once more that lessons have not been learned from similar experiences in Iraq.

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<sup>6</sup> The YPG designation refers to the People's Protection Units militia. The YPJ ('Women's Protection Units') is the organization's all-female brigade.

The new US administration's policy towards the PYD will have a significant impact on the future of PYD-led governance in northern Syria. To date, the US has not endorsed the PYD's political goals. If and when ISIS is ousted from Raqqa, US military support to the SDF may decrease, and Turkey's greater leverage may come to bear, potentially leading the Kurds' system of self-governance to be dismantled and their aspirations to be cast aside. Iran, too, has a restive Kurdish minority and will oppose autonomy for Kurds in Syria. Yet the PYD and its YPG will remain a force to be reckoned with on the ground. The PYD already has over four years' experience of self-governance in northern Syria, and the regime has made it clear that (non-Kurdish) rebel-held areas in the northwest of the country remain its primary target.

There is a need for initiatives to support dialogue between different Kurdish groups, between Kurds and Arabs, and between the PKK and Turkey. Without rapprochement on those three fronts, policies aimed at resolving the conflict in Syria will not succeed in the long term.

### There will be no clear end to the fighting, and displacement will continue

It is likely that the Syrian conflict will have no clearly identifiable end. An agreement that freezes hostilities will not trigger an automatic end to the flow of refugees, while a political settlement – should it follow similar parameters to those of the ongoing Geneva process – would not cover the whole of the country. It would exclude the PYD and its allies; Jabhat Fateh al-Sham's new umbrella organization of groups under the banner of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham; and ISIS. This means that fighting would continue in many areas of the country. Displacement of the civilian population would likely continue for an extended period. Furthermore, a qualified Assad 'victory' in the military context would raise questions about the viability of the return of 6.3 million internally displaced Syrians to their homes and of 4.9 million who have sought refuge outside the country.<sup>7</sup>

In many cases, refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) already face obstacles to returning to their areas of origin, either because they have invested in new lives elsewhere or because their homes have been devastated or taken over by other groups. Inadequate support for refugees may push some of those refugees – especially young people growing up without education or career prospects – towards crime and extremism, or at the very least will make them more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Solutions to the refugee crisis must therefore not be limited to resettlement. Moreover, resettlement must be fundamentally linked to the political conditions that should accompany reconstruction policies.

### Any political settlement will have to take into account the future of armed groups

Ineffective Western support for 'pragmatic' armed groups, such as battalions of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), over the past two years has contributed to the strengthening of extremist groups such as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, which have presented themselves to local populations as more efficient and better-resourced alternatives in the fight against the regime. The situation on the ground is evolving towards the division of armed groups in rebel areas into two camps – one 'extremist' and the other 'pragmatic' – with Jabhat Fateh al-Sham seeking to overwhelm or assimilate other groups.

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<sup>7</sup> Data accurate as of 2 February 2017. Source: UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2017), 'Syrian Arab Republic', <http://www.unocha.org/syria> (accessed 2 Feb. 2017).

The FSA needs Western funding and assistance in order to be effective against extremist groups (as well as to combat the regime). Military support would give local communities a sense of inclusion over security, important for safeguarding governance initiatives such as local councils and thus for preventing the rise of communal grievances. Starving the FSA of such support, in contrast, would have two possible consequences: it could create room for Jabhat Fateh al-Sham to expand its footprint (undermining Western efforts to support local councils and civil society); it could also help regime forces to retake rebel-held areas, thereby lessening the regime's incentive to accept conflict settlement negotiations. The West must be clear with the FSA regarding the level of military support it can expect. In the past, a lack of clarity has ended up hurting the FSA's credibility among Syrians and giving extremist groups an advantage both militarily and image-wise. The West must also be clear that the objective behind its support is to defend territory from regime advances and to fight extremist groups. As the FSA's goal remains to overthrow the regime, the West must not give it a false impression about the West's level of commitment to supporting this goal. It is increasingly evident that the Syrian opposition is unable to defeat the forces of President Assad and his allies. But this doesn't mean that the rebels will not continue to fight. Armed rebel groups are unlikely to dissipate. As they become less able to hold urban centres, their approach may shift towards insurgency tactics. This is likely to prove a major source of instability.

Finally, there can be no long-term stabilization in Syria without tackling the issue of foreign fighters. While a group like the Lebanese Hezbollah might cease military operations inside Syria in the event of a political settlement, the regime has already begun a programme to grant Syrian citizenship to foreign, predominantly Shia, mercenaries fighting on its side. Some are being settled in areas from which rebel groups have been cleared, such as Eastern Ghouta. This will have long-term repercussions for the resettlement of refugees, and plant the seed of further sectarian and ethnic tensions.

# Six Inflection Points in the Conflict: Contributing Factors, Impacts, and Implications for Policy

The parameters for effective Western policy presented in the previous section draw on an exploration of six decisive developments and/or phases in Syria's conflict. These have been identified by the authors not only as defining factors in the trajectory of the war, but also as crucial to understanding current political and security complexities, and hence the policy options now available to Western governments and other actors for ending hostilities, restoring stability, and beginning to rebuild institutions and infrastructure with a view to reaching and implementing a sustainable political settlement.

The six 'inflection points' – broadly in chronological order – are (1) the initial transition from peaceful protests in 2011 to war; (2) the Obama administration's limited response in 2013 to the Syrian regime's crossing of the 'red line' on the use of chemical weapons; (3) the growth of radical groups and the declining effectiveness of more moderate rebel groups; (4) the emergence of ISIS, and of the West's resultant 'ISIS first' strategy; (5) Russia's military campaign from September 2015; and (6) the Assad regime's recapture of eastern Aleppo in late 2016, which illustrated the West's marginalization as a meaningful actor in the country.

Examining those inflection points reveals significant shortcomings in the way Western countries have handled the crisis in Syria. Reflecting back on the past six years is necessary so that mistakes can be highlighted, and the lessons from them used as the baseline for effective Western policy towards the conflict.

## INFLECTION POINT 1

### From peaceful protest to war: Western hesitance and regional competition

The first inflection point in the Syrian conflict was its transformation into what came to be seen as a civil war. Between the outbreak of peaceful protests in February 2011 and the moment, in July 2012, when the International Committee of the Red Cross declared Syria to be in a state of civil war, nearly 18 months elapsed. Over this period, the international narrative shifted from one that framed events in Syria within the context of the Arab Spring's search for accountability and reform to one that identified an altogether different category of crisis – a protracted military conflict that eluded easy resolution.

In part because of uncertainty over the nature of the events unfolding in Syria, Western policy over this period was marked by a clear gap between rhetoric and action. President Barack Obama's statement in August 2011 that it was time for Assad 'to step aside' reflected the White House's desire to stay on the right side of events.<sup>8</sup> Briefings by US intelligence agencies at the White House in the

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<sup>8</sup> *New York Times* (2011), 'President Obama's Statement on Syria', 18 August 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/19/world/middleeast/19Obama-Statement-on-Syria.html> (accessed 10 Feb. 2017).

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summer of 2011 reportedly asserted that Assad's days were numbered. Obama apparently believed the Syrian president's departure to be a foregone conclusion,<sup>9</sup> despite cables from US and other Western diplomats on the ground in Damascus making it clear that they felt the regime had greater durability.<sup>10</sup>

Obama's comments were not meant as a statement of intent. But that is how they were interpreted within Syria and by regional US allies such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Indeed, Obama's comments emboldened these allies in their attempts to support the overthrow of Assad. Turkey had already started providing sanctuary for the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in July 2011, and Qatar helped supply weapons to opposition groups from November 2011. Both countries – Qatar in particular – exuded a confidence born from their earlier intervention in Libya. Growth in Saudi, Qatari and Turkish support for the Syrian opposition accelerated from the beginning of 2012.

At broadly the same time, the imposition of US and EU sanctions on Syria (starting from the autumn of 2011) pushed the regime closer to Iran and Russia. It would be forced to rely on these two countries for financial support. Sanctions on the sale of oil hit the hardest: prior to the uprising, nearly 40 per cent of Syria's oil was exported to EU states.<sup>11</sup> The West hoped that the threat of targeted sanctions would convince business elites to abandon the regime, but they never did so in significant numbers. Rather, sanctions incentivized some members of the business community to become more integrated with the regime as it sought ways to circumvent and exploit the sanctions.<sup>12</sup> Despite experiencing constraints, the regime was able to ride out the international pressure, while blaming the suffering of the Syrian people on hostile external powers. Inadvertently, the West's policy diminished its own influence and increased the leverage of Iran and Russia over the regime.

Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar also misunderstood the regime. Along with Western states, they initially gave it a chance to reform, hoping that Assad would compromise with protesters. But Assad's first major speech after the outbreak of protests, in March 2011, frustrated these hopes. While the president made some concessions, including recognizing the citizenship of many Kurds previously denied it, he blamed the protests on foreign powers and claimed that protesters had been 'duped' into taking to the streets.<sup>13</sup>

As the situation worsened, opposition-aligned states – principally Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey – presented themselves as interlocutors with the knowledge and access to strike a deal between the belligerents. When such a deal did not materialize, Qatar and Saudi Arabia tried to push through two peace plans under the auspices of the Arab League in quick succession, in November and December 2011 respectively. The first attempt lasted just a few days before being abandoned after the regime's crackdown on its opponents continued unabated. The second attempt stipulated the withdrawal of regime and rebel forces from the streets, the release of political prisoners, and the admission of international peace monitors. But Qatar and Saudi Arabia handled it naively, abandoning the plan little over a month later in the hope that its failure would form a *casus belli* in the UN Security

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<sup>9</sup> Mazzetti, M., Worth, R. F. and Gordon, M. R. (2013), 'Obama's Uncertain Path Amid Syria Bloodshed', *New York Times*, 22 October 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/23/world/middleeast/obamas-uncertain-path-amid-syria-bloodshed.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed 30 Jan. 2017).

<sup>10</sup> The British ambassador to Syria, Simon Collis, cabled London on 19 July arguing that it could take 18 months for sanctions to bring about the regime's fall. France's ambassador, Eric Chevallerier, counselled Paris that Assad was not about to fall, cautioning that ousting Assad would be more difficult than was assumed in the French press. The US ambassador to Syria, Robert Ford, opposed calling for Assad to go because he did not believe that the US could bring this outcome about. See Phillips, C. (2016), *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, New Haven: Yale University Press, pp. 79–80.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>12</sup> Abboud, S. (2017), 'The Economics of War and Peace in Syria', The Century Foundation, 31 January 2017, <https://tcf.org/content/report/economics-war-peace-syria/> (accessed 15 Feb. 2017).

<sup>13</sup> BBC (2011), 'Syria's President Assad vows to defeat 'plot'', 30 March 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12904156> (accessed 8 Feb. 2017).

Council for action against the regime. This tactic didn't work. Russia had felt deceived over the UN Security Council's earlier resolution (No. 1973) on Libya, and was thus expected to veto any resolution authorizing intervention in Syria. The regime knew this well. Although alienated from most other members of the Arab League, it knew that it could rely on Russian support in the UN Security Council. In the event, Russia – along with China – vetoed a draft UN Security Council resolution on 4 February 2012 that demanded Syrian government compliance with the Arab League's plans.<sup>14</sup> Former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan was appointed as Arab League-UN Special Envoy for Syria later that month, but a ceasefire agreed in April soon fell apart.

With no external deterrent, the regime continued its efforts to suppress dissent by force. Despite the violence employed against the opposition, the protests had not militarized to any significant extent before the summer of 2011. For the vast majority of those who had taken to the streets, the peaceful tactics employed by Egyptian protesters had been instructive. Chants of '*selmiyya, selmiyya*' ('peaceful') were frequently heard at anti-government protests. However, the mounting violence of the regime made this approach ever harder to sustain.

In charting the militarization of the opposition, it is important to note that it is not – and has never been – possible to talk about the 'Syrian opposition' as a monolith. The take-up of arms was an uncoordinated process. This reflected the fact that the opposition was a broad movement, not a cohesive political – or, later, military – force. There was no singular moment in which the opposition militarized. As Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shami have argued: 'Syria's revolutionaries didn't make a formal collective decision to pick up arms – quite the opposite; rather, a million individual decisions were made under fire.'<sup>15</sup>

The regime's violent crackdown prompted the establishment of a growing number of armed opposition groups. On 9 June 2011, Lt Col Hussein Harmoush of the Syrian army's Battalion 11 announced his defection, along with 120 of his men, in order to protect 'protesters who are asking for freedom and security'.<sup>16</sup> Harmoush made a vague reference to the 'free Syrian army', appearing to use the term as a means of imploring army soldiers to defect in order to protect the people and the state from 'criminal gangs led by Bashar al-Assad and his regime'. The same term would be echoed by others in a series of announcements on YouTube.

In July 2011, Colonel Riad Asaad – who had defected from the Syrian air force – announced the formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in an effort to bring coherence to the proliferation of armed rebel groups. 'You cannot remove this regime except by force and bloodshed,' Asaad told the *Washington Post* in September. 'But our losses will not be worse than we have right now, with the killings, the torture and the dumping of bodies.'<sup>17</sup>

Despite its name and rhetoric, the FSA remained a patchwork of forces predominantly focused on providing local security. In many cases, locals joined defectors to protect their own communities. The composition of such forces was thus diverse, and not limited to army defectors. Although most units soon aligned themselves either with Harmoush's grouping or the FSA – and the two merged after Harmoush was captured by government forces – Asaad's ability to exercise command and control over the newly enlarged FSA remained limited.

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<sup>14</sup> Phillips (2016), *The Battle for Syria*, p. 92.

<sup>15</sup> Yassin-Kassab, R. and al-Shami, L. (2016), *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, London: Pluto Press, p. 79.

<sup>16</sup> YouTube (2011), 'Syrian Soldier Hussein Harmoush announces split from Army', 10 June 2011, <https://youtu.be/mLaa9NSC9fo> (accessed 20 Nov. 2016).

<sup>17</sup> Sly, L. (2011), 'In Syria, defectors form dissident army in sign uprising may be entering new phase', *Washington Post*, 25 September 2011, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/in-syria-defectors-form-dissident-army-in-sign-uprising-may-be-entering-new-phase/2011/09/24/gIQAkef8wK\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.70f3012cfc04](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/in-syria-defectors-form-dissident-army-in-sign-uprising-may-be-entering-new-phase/2011/09/24/gIQAkef8wK_story.html?utm_term=.70f3012cfc04) (accessed 29 Nov. 2016).

Asaad's aspiration for the FSA to become a centrally commanded national force was always likely to be a challenge. The US and its allies were hesitant to fund it. They struggled to determine how to respond to the evolution of a peaceful movement into armed conflict in such a geopolitically complex environment, preferring instead to engage with the political opposition and wait for the regime to collapse.

The first major formation of the political opposition, the Syrian National Council (SNC), was created in October 2011. Yet from the outset the SNC was distanced from events on the ground. It was made up of a 'hodgepodge of exiles, intellectuals and secular dissidents bereft of a genuine political constituency, as well as Muslim Brothers geographically detached from their natural base'.<sup>18</sup> The SNC focused on gaining international support. Yet its engagement with the international community isolated the West from opposition groups active on the ground inside Syria, as the SNC's connections with such groups were limited. Following its formation, the SNC initially called for acts of civil disobedience rather than violence. Yet by March 2012, with no shift in Western policy and increasing militarization on the ground, the SNC had abandoned its policy of non-violence under pressure from Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

At around the same time as the Asaad and Harmoush groupings emerged, other armed groups were beginning to coalesce. Ahrar al-Sham was formed in late 2011, representing a fusion of Islamist fighters, some from various groups that had developed earlier that year. Other Islamist and Salafi-jihadist groups were officially founded in 2012. Jabhat al-Nusra – later to become Jabhat Fateh al-Sham – announced its formation in January 2012 and would begin operations soon after. (Islamist groups thus appear to have been present from the outset of the armed phase of the conflict.) Foreign fighters were also arriving in the country.

The emerging, but disparate, armed opposition looked for external support. Western states were reluctant to fund the new groups, but Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey were willing to do so. A chaotic influx of money and weaponry from these regional powers soon followed, along with significant support from private donors in the Gulf and the Syrian diaspora. Instead of bringing the opposition together, this exacerbated competition between armed groups, some of which remained disconnected from the political opposition. According to Derek Chollet, then US assistant secretary of defence for international security affairs:

We had partners who were just throwing all sorts of resources at the conflict. Many of those resources ended up in the wrong hands. It was very much in the spirit of "the enemy of my enemy," and to some [of] our partners it didn't matter if their support ended up with Jabhat al-Nusra or other groups. So we spent a lot of time on trying to persuade them to support the moderate opposition and galvanizing the international community to empower the moderate groups.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, the regime was divided over the best way to ride out the storm. On the one hand, it had seen how its counterparts in Tunisia and Egypt had failed to use force and had fallen. Some thus advocated an iron fist: Chief of Air Force Intelligence Jamil Hassan has said that he was in favour

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<sup>18</sup> International Crisis Group (2013), *Anything But Politics: The State of Syria's Political Opposition*, Middle East Report No. 146, Brussels: International Crisis Group, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/anything-politics-state-syria-political-opposition> (accessed 2 Feb. 2017).

<sup>19</sup> Lund, A. (2016), 'In an interview, Derek Chollet looks back at the Obama administration's decision-making on Syria', Carnegie Middle East Center, 6 December 2016, <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/66343?lang=en> (accessed 2 Feb. 2017).

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of a 'Hama model' from the outset.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, key figures such as Assef Shawkat, Assad's brother-in-law and the deputy defence minister, and Farouk Sharaa, the vice-president, believed the regime would have to adjust and compromise if it were to survive.

To some extent the regime navigated between these two poles in its initial response to the protests, firing on protesters but stopping short of Hama-style tactics. But as the armed opposition took shape in response to the regime's increasing use of violence, a spiral of escalation took hold towards the end of 2011. A UN conference in Geneva in June 2012 resulted in a communiqué setting the terms of a political transition in Syria. However, none of its steps were implemented, largely because the Syrian regime and Russia were not seriously interested in a transition despite their participation in the Geneva talks.

The bombing of the National Security Headquarters in Damascus in July 2012 was pivotal for the regime. The attack killed Defence Minister Dawoud Rahja, his deputy, Assef Shawkat, and a number of other top-ranking regime officials.<sup>21</sup> Shawkat's death ended any discussion within the regime of accommodation with the opposition, and prompted a spike in defections by regime officials. Critically, the bombing also led to an increase in Iran's influence over the regime. Following Shawkat's death, the regime acceded to Iran's desire to intervene directly in the country along with its close ally, Hezbollah.

### The bombing of the National Security Headquarters in Damascus in July 2012 was pivotal for the regime ... Assef Shawkat's death ended any discussion within the regime of accommodation with the opposition.

In response to news of the bombing, US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta told reporters that Syria was 'rapidly spinning out of control'.<sup>22</sup> The US and its allies had done little to prevent this from happening. In the critical period preceding the attack, the US had stepped back, leaving Saudi Arabia and Qatar to take the lead in diplomatic efforts. This was ironic given that the two states had sought to use the Arab League initiative in 2011 to precipitate Western-led intervention. It was not until the summer of 2012 that the West would seek to lead international efforts, after it became apparent that the regional powers were on a road to nowhere and regime non-compliance with Annan's 'six points' had stalled the diplomatic process.<sup>23</sup>

Caution continued to underpin US policy on Syria, however. Obama rejected the plan of CIA Director David Petraeus and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to arm the rebels extensively, noting the

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<sup>20</sup> Maarouf, M. (2016), 'General Jamil Hassan: The West resembles a shepherd who raises a wolf in his own home', Sputnik (Arabic), 3 November 2016, <http://bit.ly/2fKLNHW> (accessed 29 Nov. 2016). Tim Eaton's translation. In 1982, President Hafez al-Assad ordered a violent crackdown on an uprising in Hama and parts of Aleppo, crushing it and significantly weakening the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, which had played a key role in the uprising.

<sup>21</sup> Liwa al-Islam, an Islamist group, claimed responsibility, as did the FSA. But responsibility for the attack is disputed and no authoritative account exists. Roy Gutman has quoted sources from the opposition and defectors who claim that the bombing was, in fact, ordered by the regime itself and/or at the behest of Iran. This has been refuted by the anonymous Ehsani2, who claims that unnamed diplomatic sources indicated that the opposition had carried out the attack with support from Saudi Arabia. See Gutman, R. (2016), 'How Assad Staged al Qaeda Bombings', *Daily Beast*, 2 December 2016, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/12/02/how-assad-staged-al-qaeda-bombings.html> (accessed 6 Dec. 2016); and Ehsani2 (2016), 'Is Assad the Author of ISIS? Did Iran Blow Up Assef Shawkat? And Other Tall Tales – By Ehsani2', Syria Comment, 5 December 2016, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/assad-author-isis-iran-blow-assef-sawkat-tall-tales-ehsani2/> (accessed 6 Dec. 2016).

<sup>22</sup> MacFarquhar, N. (2012), 'Syrian Rebels Land Deadly Blow to Assad's Inner Circle', *New York Times*, 18 July 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/19/world/middleeast/suicide-attack-reported-in-damascus-as-more-generals-flee.html> (accessed 29 Nov. 2016).

<sup>23</sup> Annan's six points were accepted by the Syrian government on 27 March 2012, but it would never conform to their terms (<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=41646>). In summary, the six points were as follows: 1. To commit to working with the Envoy in an inclusive Syrian-led political initiative to address Syrians' concerns; 2. A cessation of violence; 3. Timely provision of humanitarian assistance to areas affected by the conflict; 4. To intensify the speed and scale of release of detainees; 5. Freedom of movement for journalists; 6. Freedom of association to protest peacefully. The full text of the six points is available here: [http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/documents/six\\_point\\_proposal.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/documents/six_point_proposal.pdf).



US's past failures to achieve its goals by backing proxies and the high risk that weapons would fall into the hands of extremists. And while the Pentagon had been asked to draw up a set of military options, it remained unenthusiastic about the possibility of establishing a no-fly zone, seeing the approach as unviable.<sup>24</sup> The Obama administration's committee charged with Syria policy focused mostly on post-Assad planning.<sup>25</sup> Obama's influential deputy national security adviser, Ben Rhodes, would later conclude:

We need to be realistic about our ability to dictate events in Syria. In the absence of any good options, people have lifted up military support for the opposition as a silver bullet, but it has to be seen as a tactic – not a strategy.<sup>26</sup>

Reflecting this hesitance, in July 2012 the CIA received clearance to vet FSA groups in order to determine which it could lend support to. However, by this time fault lines within the FSA had already appeared.<sup>27</sup>

In the same month, the regime began to withdraw from many areas to focus its resources on key urban centres. This set the stage for protracted conflict. The regime notably withdrew from Kurdish-majority areas in the north – apart from the cities of Hasaka and Qamishli. In the north, it developed a non-aggression pact with the Democratic Union Party (PYD), under which the PYD's militia, the People's Protection Units (YPG/J), would take control of local areas. The PYD's cooperation with the regime widened its rift with the opposition. Tensions were further heightened by the Syrian opposition's continuing attachment to Arab nationalist goals, which alienated members of the PYD and many other Kurds.<sup>28</sup>

By November 2012, the opposition had formed a broader representative body, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces. This came to be recognized by most countries as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people. However, despite the National Coalition's subsequent involvement in peace talks brokered by the UN, its establishment and actions failed to instigate a major change in Western policies towards the Syrian conflict.

It took another year for the CIA to establish a 'train and equip' programme for the opposition, and even then the programme's mandate was limited to sponsoring selected rebel fighters. This reflected a belief that empowering the opposition sufficiently to put pressure on the Assad regime, without enabling it to overthrow the regime, would bring the belligerents to the negotiating table. Moreover, US support for the FSA did not extend much beyond military matters. Inattention to the behaviour of FSA members and leaders – for example, how they handled finances and resources, and dealt with civilians – allowed some FSA officers to engage in profiteering and warlordism, causing a rift between them and local populations.

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<sup>24</sup> Entous, A. (2013), 'Inside Obama's Syria Debate', *Wall Street Journal*, 29 March 2013, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323639604578368930961739030> (accessed 20 Feb. 2017).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Mazzetti, Worth and Gordon (2013), 'Obama's Uncertain Path Amid Syria Bloodshed'.

<sup>27</sup> Lister, C. (2016), *The Free Syrian Army: A Decentralized Insurgent Brand*, Analysis Paper, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution: pp. 1–7.

<sup>28</sup> For an analysis of these events, see Sary, G. (2016), *Kurdish Self-governance in Syria: Survival and Ambition*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, September 2016, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/kurdish-self-governance-syria-survival-and-ambition> (accessed 2 Feb. 2017).

## INFLECTION POINT 2

### Obama's 'red line' that wasn't

The US decision in September 2013 to call off a proposed military strike on the Assad regime, despite the latter having apparently crossed President Obama's 'red line' on the use of chemical weapons, has proven one of the most controversial episodes of the Syrian civil war. Obama had declared in 2012 that the US would punish any use of chemical weapons by the regime. But when the regime was reported to have launched a chemical attack, in the Ghouta region of Damascus in 2013, the US did not intervene and instead accepted an offer from Russia to get the regime to dispose of its weapons. The Obama administration continued to insist that the deal with Moscow – which involved the Assad regime peacefully giving up its chemical arsenal – was a better outcome, as this both ensured that these weapons did not proliferate and avoided military intervention that would drag the US into the Syrian quagmire.

Obama's failure to follow through on the threat of military action ... served to embolden Assad and his Russian and Iranian allies, while shattering any hopes that the opposition and its regional backers had of US intervention.

However, Obama's failure to follow through on the threat of military action was viewed very differently outside the US domestic context. Ultimately, it served to embolden Assad and his Russian and Iranian allies, while shattering any hopes that the opposition and its regional backers had of US intervention. Moreover, the continuation of the conflict under these circumstances left the ground more fertile for jihadists to proliferate.

The expectations raised by US messaging in this context are instructive. Obama's call for Assad to stand aside in August 2011, added to the US record of interventions in Iraq and Libya, had caused many in the Syrian opposition to believe that America would eventually intervene directly. These hopes were boosted when Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia all told their Syrian allies at various times that 'intervention is coming'.<sup>29</sup> Obama himself was sceptical of such action, however. He had opposed George W. Bush's Middle Eastern adventures and had then seen the chaos that engulfed post-Gaddafi Libya – including the murder of the US ambassador in 2012 – after the US was persuaded to intervene there. Yet he did little to dispel the misconceptions of the Syrian opposition and the US's regional allies. He used hawkish language against Assad, stating on 20 August 2012 that 'a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized'.<sup>30</sup> The focus on Assad's chemical arsenal, one of the world's largest, came about partly under pressure from Israel – which feared Assad would transfer his weapons to Hezbollah – and partly from Obama's own fears of weapons of mass destruction proliferating in the event of Syrian state collapse. Assad's domestic and regional enemies thus interpreted Obama's remarks as auguring the long-hoped-for US intervention, and accordingly stepped up their efforts to prove the regime's guilt with respect to the use of chemical weapons.

Since the start of the crisis, Assad had been deploying ever more violent weapons incrementally, seemingly gauging international reaction before each subsequent escalation in force. By late 2012 and early 2013, the opposition claimed chemical weapons were being used. The regime replied that the rebels themselves were behind such attacks, and in March 2013 asked UN Secretary-General

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<sup>29</sup> Bassma Kodmani, private conversations with international policymakers, 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Kanat, K. B. (2015), *A Tale of Four Augusts: Obama's Syria Policy*, Istanbul: SETA Publications, p. 99.

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Ban Ki-moon to send a mission to Syria to investigate one such claim. Britain, France, Qatar and the US all insisted, however, that the resultant operation – the United Nations Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic – look into alleged regime-led chemical attacks as well. This prompted Assad to delay the mission's arrival. Barely three days after the mission was eventually permitted entry to the country, in August, up to 1,400 people were killed in a chemical attack in the Ghouta region of Damascus. Again the regime blamed the rebels, even though rockets not held by opposition forces were used, and even though Ghouta was a rebel-held area. The UN mission would later be careful not to blame either side, in line with its mandate only to establish that chemical weapons had been used, but Assad's enemies immediately blamed the regime.<sup>31</sup> Derek Chollet has since said that the Obama administration was sure that the attack had been perpetrated by the regime.<sup>32</sup>

With his 'red line' seemingly crossed with impunity, Obama came under significant pressure to act. He wanted to preserve the international norm against the use of chemical weapons, especially after the US had explicitly warned against it. As Obama later reflected:

[O]ur assessment [was] that while we could inflict some damage on Assad, we could not, through a missile strike, eliminate the chemical weapons themselves, and what I would then face was the prospect of Assad having survived the strike and claiming he had successfully defied the United States, that the United States had acted unlawfully in the absence of a UN mandate, and that that would have potentially strengthened his hand rather than weakened it.<sup>33</sup>

The president feared that striking Assad would hasten the collapse of the Syrian state, repeating the chaos seen in Libya and benefiting Al-Qaeda. He was unconvinced that either the political opposition or the armed opposition could provide a viable moderate alternative to Assad.<sup>34</sup> He possibly also feared that striking Assad could derail newly revived hopes of a nuclear deal with Syria's ally, Iran, with whom the US had reopened discussions on curtailment of its nuclear programme that March.<sup>35</sup>

Military plans were nonetheless drawn up, believed to involve a 48-hour campaign of cruise missile strikes against regime positions scheduled to begin on 2 September. Ships were deployed to the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>36</sup> However, Obama remained unconvinced. When the British government unexpectedly lost a rushed vote over the UK's anticipated involvement in the campaign, Obama took the opportunity to deliberate. While most of his administration favoured the strikes, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey urged caution, as did White House Chief of Staff Denis McDonough. After an evening walk with the latter on 30 August, Obama surprised his staff by announcing that he would seek congressional endorsement for military action. With the House of Representatives controlled by an obstructive Republican Party, approval was not guaranteed.

Obama was also likely buying time to explore other options. Almost immediately, Secretary of State John Kerry opened channels to the Russians, and Obama met with President Vladimir Putin at the

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<sup>31</sup> UN Security Council (2013), 'Report of the United Nations Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic on the alleged use of chemical weapons in the Ghouta area of Damascus on 21 August 2013', [https://disarmament-library.un.org/UNODA/Library.nsf/780cfafd472b047785257b1000501037/e4d4477c9b67de9085257bf800694bd2/\\$FILE/A%2067%20997-S%202013%20553.pdf](https://disarmament-library.un.org/UNODA/Library.nsf/780cfafd472b047785257b1000501037/e4d4477c9b67de9085257bf800694bd2/$FILE/A%2067%20997-S%202013%20553.pdf) (accessed 5 Sep. 2016).

<sup>32</sup> Lund (2016), 'In an interview, Derek Chollet looks back at the Obama administration's decision-making on Syria' (accessed 2 Feb. 2017).

<sup>33</sup> Goldberg, J. (2016), 'The Obama Doctrine', *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/> (accessed 15 Nov. 2016).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Engel, P. (2016), 'Obama reportedly declined to enforce red line in Syria after Iran threatened to back out of nuclear deal', *Business Insider UK*, 23 August 2016, <http://uk.businessinsider.com/obama-red-line-syria-iran-2016-8> (accessed 2 Feb. 2017).

<sup>36</sup> Burleigh, N. (2014), 'Obama Vs. The Hawks', *Rolling Stone*, 1 April 2014, <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/obama-vs-the-hawks-20140401> (accessed 14 May 2015).

G20 on 6 September. At a press conference a few days later, Kerry was asked if there was anything the regime could do to avoid a strike. Kerry responded that Assad could turn over ‘every single bit of his chemical weapons to the international community in the next week’.<sup>37</sup> Within days Moscow announced a plan for the pursuit of this option, and after US–Russian negotiations in Geneva it was agreed that Assad would disarm under the supervision of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). A UN resolution supporting this plan was passed unanimously on 27 September,<sup>38</sup> and the US assault was called off.

Obama later remarked that he was proud of his decisions in September 2013: of standing up to a hawkish foreign policy community in Washington in order to remove chemical weapons, without risking American lives or getting sucked into the Syrian quagmire.<sup>39</sup> Speaking in London in October 2016, John Kerry lamented:

President Obama still gets blamed for not, quote, “enforcing the red line,” but in fact, he achieved the goal. Our goal was to prevent them from using chemical weapons, and by getting them all out we did a better job of that than we would have by sending him a warning militarily that he shouldn’t do it.<sup>40</sup>

Obama’s supporters maintain that the deal, at the minimum, removed the spectre of chemical weapons stocks proliferating over Syria’s complex battlefield. However, his critics counter that Assad has still used industrial chlorine, not officially outlawed by the OPCW, and possibly other hidden banned substances too.<sup>41</sup>

In effect, not only had Assad been legitimized by the international community for at least as long as it would take him to complete the disarmament, but it also seemed that the use of all non-chemical weaponry had been endorsed.

The US deal with Russia profoundly affected the course of the conflict. Whereas on the eve of the proposed strikes the regime appeared rattled, relocating troops and emptying security headquarters while many officials and their relatives fled to Beirut, it was now emboldened. In effect, not only had Assad been legitimized by the international community for at least as long as it would take him to complete the disarmament – a process scheduled to finish in mid-2014 – but it also seemed that the use of all non-chemical weaponry had been endorsed.

Facing an opposition demoralized by the lack of US action, the regime enjoyed numerous battlefield successes in late 2013 and early 2014. It also started to benefit militarily from the reorganizations of its forces that had taken place under Iranian and Hezbollah guidance in the summer of 2013. It remains unknowable whether the regime, had it been under more pressure, would have been more willing to compromise at the second UN-backed Geneva conference in January 2014. As things were,

<sup>37</sup> U.S. Department of State (2013), ‘Remarks with United Kingdom Foreign Secretary Hague’, 9 September 2013, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/09/213956.htm> (accessed 17 Jan. 2017).

<sup>38</sup> United Nations (2013), ‘Security Council Requires Scheduled Destruction of Syria’s Chemical Weapons, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2118 (2013)’, 27 September 2013, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2013/sc11135.doc.htm> (accessed 24 Feb. 2017).

<sup>39</sup> Goldberg (2016), ‘The Obama Doctrine’. CENTCOM had earlier estimated that it would take a commitment of 75,000 US troops to enter Syria and secure Syria’s chemical weapons in the event of state collapse. Sanger, D. E. and Schmitt, E. (2012), ‘Pentagon Says 75,000 Troops Might Be Needed to Seize Syria Chemical Arms’, *New York Times*, 15 November 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/16/world/middleeast/pentagon-sees-seizing-syria-chemical-arms-as-vast-task.html> (accessed 2 Feb. 2017).

<sup>40</sup> U.S. Department of State (2016), ‘Remarks With Chatham House Director Robin Niblett at the Chatham House Prize Ceremony’, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/10/263905.htm> (accessed 17 Jan. 2017).

<sup>41</sup> The White House (2016), ‘Statement by NSC Spokesperson Ned Price on the UN-OPCW Report on Syria’, 24 August 2016, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/08/24/statement-nsc-spokesperson-ned-price-un-opcw-report-syria> (accessed 17 Jan. 2017). Also see Lynch, C. and Kenner, D. (2016), ‘U.S. and Europe Say Assad May Have Kept Some Chemical Weapons’, *Foreign Policy*, 23 August 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/23/u-s-and-europe-say-assad-may-have-kept-some-chemical-weapons/> (accessed 2 Feb. 2017).

an increasingly confident regime refused to take the process seriously, and negotiations swiftly broke down. In a sign of this confidence, the regime held elections in June 2014 as scheduled, with Assad prevailing. His opponents dismissed the results as illegitimate.

The impact on the opposition was no less significant. The moderate forces championing cooperation with the US, and who had expected eventual military intervention, lost ground to the radicals whose anti-Western narrative now seemed vindicated. The 'red line' episode and its aftermath therefore proved to be quite a turning point, though the implications will remain contested. Obama's critics see it as the moment when the US abandoned the moderate rebels, emboldening jihadists and Assad alike. Yet it should be recalled that Washington had only proposed a limited 48-hour strike, not a full military campaign for regime change or even a no-fly zone. Assad's forces may have been damaged, but there was no guarantee of further US involvement, nor that intervention would actually prevent further chemical weapon use – hence Obama's preference for peaceful disarmament. Obama should perhaps be criticized more for not having dispelled the expectation of US intervention earlier in the conflict. The use of hawkish language demanding Assad's resignation, and suggesting there was a 'red line' to be crossed, raised expectations among Assad's domestic and international opponents that Obama was ultimately never willing to meet.

Critically, this failure to follow through would also undermine potential US leverage in any future peace negotiations, with the regime and its international backers henceforth operating with little fear of US sanction.

### INFLECTION POINT 3

## The West's ineffective support to moderate groups and the growth of radical groups

Following the US's failure to enforce its red line on chemical weapons, Western support for FSA groups was eclipsed by that of regional powers for Islamist armed groups. Even prior to this, some FSA groups had started adopting a more religious image in order to attract Gulf funding. Some fighters had defected to better-equipped Islamist rivals. Jihadist groups skilfully sought to exploit the weakness of other rebel groups to increase their power and influence within the rebel movement, sometimes targeting FSA units. Paradoxically, this made the FSA increasingly reliant upon jihadist groups on the battlefield. The growth of radical groups was further facilitated by the regime's attempts to Islamize the conflict; and by its battlefield alliances with Hezbollah and other Shia militias, which reinforced the sectarian narrative of jihadist groups.

The Syrian regime did more than just portray its crackdown as a fight against Islamist terrorism. It actively sought to create a self-fulfilling prophecy of extremism to justify its claims, for example by quietly releasing prominent Islamists. Among those released from the notorious Seydnaya prison in July 2011 were Hassan Abboud and Zahran Alloush, who went on to form the Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam groups, respectively. Meanwhile, the attempts of Islamist groups to cast the conflict as part of a regional Shiite–Sunni struggle benefited from the direct participation of Iranian-sponsored militias such as Hezbollah, Shiite militias from Iraq, and pro-regime fighters from a mix of other countries such as Afghanistan. This allowed Sunni Islamist groups to capitalize on the use of sectarian discourse, for example by exploiting fear of Shiite militias to recruit fighters.<sup>42</sup>

Recruitment was also aided by Western reticence in supporting the opposition. The US response to the Ghouta chemical attack was the last straw for many Syrian opposition fighters, causing them to lose hope that any significant Western military action would be forthcoming to end atrocities by pro-regime forces and topple Assad. Many concluded that they would be better served by joining and/or supporting jihadist groups than by hoping for Western intervention that would likely not materialize. As one fighter from the group Harakat Hazm told one of the authors:

After the US's decision not to attack Assad despite his use of chemical weapons in Ghouta [rural Damascus], it was clear to all Syrians that the West will never intervene against Assad in Syria, no matter what he does. People reacted to this differently, but all of them were disappointed. We started noticing that many fighters started joining other groups like [Jabhat al-]Nusra, who were stronger and better organized. I spoke personally to some of those who joined al-Nusra and they told me that they are joining this group because it has the capacity to overthrow Assad.<sup>43</sup>

The US was initially reluctant to arm rebel groups, but it endorsed regional allies supplying money and weapons to them, with the CIA allegedly assisting in this. Washington's hesitance stemmed from fears that advanced weapons intended for the FSA might end up being appropriated by extremist groups hostile to US interests. Although the US eventually accepted a limited arming programme from the spring of 2013, its relative lack of support for FSA groups pushed them to seek funding from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey. However, while these regional powers agreed that the regime needed to be overthrown, they differed over which groups should be supported, as each country sought influence over a post-Assad order. Divisions within the Friends of Syria group further exacerbated

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<sup>42</sup> Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami (2016), *Burning Country*, pp. 112–13.

<sup>43</sup> Haid Haid interview via Skype with former Harakat Hazm fighter Omar Akoush, February 2016.

divisions within the armed opposition. Most of the weaponry given to FSA groups arrived through channels outside the FSA Supreme Military Command (FSA-SMC), the route officially recognized by the opposition's international backers. The CIA's establishment (in conjunction with allies including the UK, France, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey) of a covert operations room in Turkey known as the Müşterek Operasyon Merkezi (MOM) to support moderate rebels illustrated the differences among the external backers of the opposition. 'A toddler could enter the MOM room and be able to tell which guy the US was pushing for, who the Turks wanted, or who the Saudis were pushing,' a rebel using the pseudonym 'Abu Omar' told the *Financial Times*. 'MOM became the legal face to cover all the extra support they were giving these groups behind each other's backs.'<sup>44</sup>

These events hindered the development of a strong FSA and pushed groups to look for alternative sources of support. Unlike the US, which sought to support those FSA groups that offered a national agenda, Qatar and Turkey proved (to differing extents) willing to fund Islamist groups. So too did Saudi Arabia after September 2013, outraged at what it perceived as a weak US response to the regime's use of chemical weapons.

**From this point on, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey each provided official support to different armed groups, depending on each group's perceived loyalty to, and alignment with, their respective agendas.**

As a result, some Islamist groups, including some formerly affiliated with the moderate FSA-SMC, sided with Jabhat al-Nusra in denouncing the Western-backed political opposition, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, on the grounds that it was not achieving political change as anticipated and had limited credibility on the ground. In November 2013, a further group of militias disaffiliated themselves from the FSA-SMC to co-found the Islamic Front.

From this point on, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey each provided official support to different armed groups, depending on each group's perceived loyalty to, and alignment with, their respective agendas. Qatar and Turkey armed Muslim Brotherhood-linked groups as well as Salafist groups. Additionally, Salafist fundraisers and businessmen in the Gulf began giving money to various groups on the condition that the recipients raised Islamic banners and adopted Islamic slogans.<sup>45</sup> The impact of this would soon be clear, as many FSA units started to court funding by projecting religiosity through their media statements and on their Facebook pages. One brigade in the Ghouta region reportedly changed its name from 'the Martyr Meshaal Temmo' (the name of a Kurdish liberal leader) to 'the Mujahid Osama bin Laden'.<sup>46</sup>

Many FSA fighters defected to jihadist groups that had more stable funding, and that were better trained and equipped. 'When a leader cannot provide for the minimum vital needs of his fighters who face the risk of death every day, ... while they watch well equipped Islamist brigades with frustration, they end up abandoning their leader and the group to join better endowed units, which to date have invariably been more radical,'<sup>47</sup> wrote one of this paper's authors, Bassma Kodmani, and Félix Legrand, arguing that such material advantages were the key to the phenomenon of defections.

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<sup>44</sup> Solomon, E. (2017), 'The rise and fall of a US-backed rebel commander in Syria', *Financial Times*, 9 February 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/791ad3bc-ecfc-11e6-930f-061b01e23655> (accessed 16 Feb. 2017).

<sup>45</sup> Haid Haid interview via Skype with local activist Waleed Obyan, September 2016.

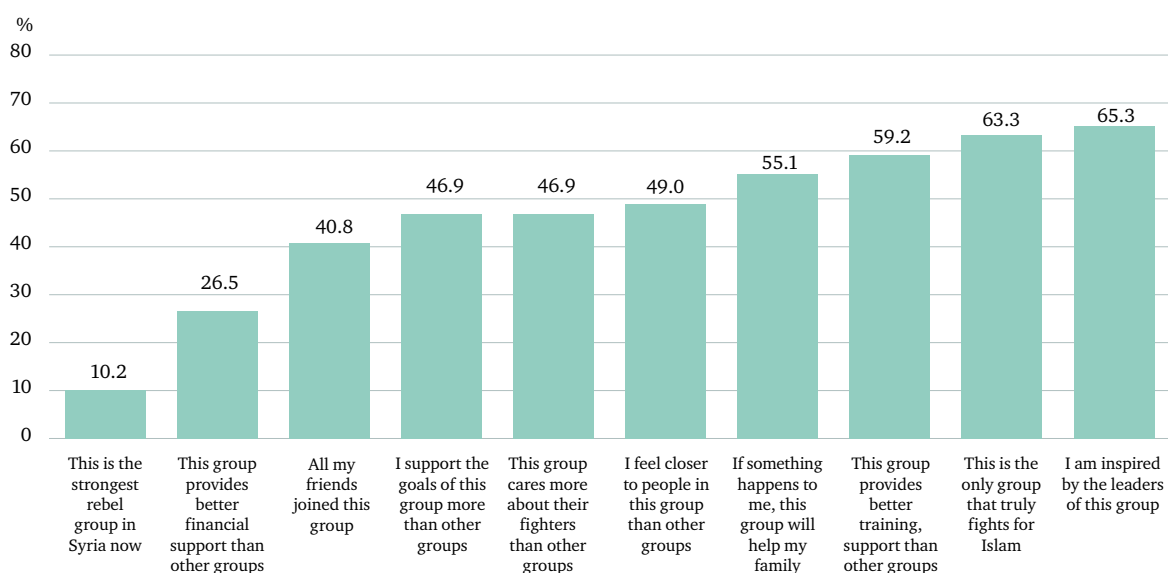
<sup>46</sup> Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami (2016), *Burning Country*, p. 122.

<sup>47</sup> Kodmani, B. and Legrand, F. (2013), *Empowering the Democratic Resistance in Syria*, Arab Reform Initiative, September 2013, <http://bit.ly/2iINpDB> (accessed 15 Oct. 2016).

Jihadist groups were better organized and more effective, and provided better benefits for the families of fighters in case of the latter’s disability or death. Although there are no comprehensive statistics on the scale of defections to Jabhat al-Nusra, Charles Lister has estimated through interviews with sources close to the group that it accepted into its ranks more than 3,000 Syrians from Idlib and southern Aleppo between February and June 2016 alone.<sup>48</sup> In another study, interviews with fighters from Islamist groups (Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham and ISIS) indicated that the provision of training and support, and support for the family should something happen to the fighter, ranked highly among motivations for joining (see Figure 1, below).

**Figure 1: Reasons for not joining other groups (Islamists)**

*Q: Why did you join this group as opposed to the FSA or other rebel groups?  
(Select all that apply, % selecting each option)*



Source: Mironova, V., Mrie, L. and Whitt, S. (2014), 'Fight or Flight in Civil War? Evidence from Rebel-Controlled Syria', SSRN, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2478682>.<sup>49</sup>

Due to their links to the West, FSA groups were perceived as the main threat by both Assad and ISIS, and were targeted accordingly. The regime and ISIS avoided fighting each other to focus on defeating the FSA, using ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend’ logic. Christoph Reuter, an investigative journalist for the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, told the Lebanese news site NOW in July 2015 that analysis from 15 clashes between rebels and ISIS between early 2014 and June 2015 showed that the Syrian air force had exclusively bombed the rebels. He concluded:

<sup>48</sup> Lister, C (2016), *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, Analysis Paper No. 24, July 2016, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, July 2016, p. 6, <http://bit.ly/2jLq6Vy>.

<sup>49</sup> Mironova, V., Mrie, L. and Whitt, S. (2014), 'Islamists at a Glance: Why Do Syria's Rebel Fighters Join Islamist Groups? (The Reasons May Have Less to Do With Religiosity Than You Might Think)', *Political Violence @ a Glance*, 13 August 2014, <http://politicalviolenceataglance.org/2014/08/13/islamists-at-a-glance-why-do-syrias-rebel-fighters-join-islamist-groups-the-reasons-may-have-less-to-do-with-religiosity-than-you-might-think/> (accessed 2 Feb. 2017).



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When Daesh [ISIS] was removed from Al-Bab by the rebels, the regime pounded Al-Bab 12 hours later and made it easier for Daesh to come back. Daesh basically borrowed the regime's air force, and this was the clearest evidence that they are potentially helping each other.<sup>50</sup>

Such developments help to explain why radical-dominated coalitions have outperformed FSA groups on the battlefield, most notably in Jaysh al-Fateh's capture of Idlib governorate, completed in May 2015. Many high-level military officers who had defected from the regime complained of being sidelined by the West. The weakening military capacity of FSA groups – due in large part to insufficient and ineffective international support and the additional pressure of Russia's intervention – contrasted with the more effective support received by jihadist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS. This led some rebel groups to begin cooperating with Jabhat al-Nusra either directly or under the umbrella of Jaysh al-Fateh, especially after Jabhat al-Nusra declared its separation from Al-Qaeda in the summer of 2016 and rebranded itself as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. As a Liwa' Amajd al-Islam leader told one of the authors:

Since May 2015, there was a significant decrease in the US lethal assistance to FSA groups in northern Syria ... There was no obvious reason or justification for that action, especially as FSA groups were doing well militarily ... That had a huge impact on our fighting capacity, which we are still paying the price for.<sup>51</sup>

These developments allowed Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and other extremist groups to demonstrate themselves as indispensable allies in the fight to defeat Assad while also exploiting the weaknesses of their FSA rivals. Jabhat al-Nusra fought and eliminated many FSA groups backed by the US, including Harakat Hazm, Division 30 and the Syrian Revolutionaries Front. The FSA units' possession of US-supplied weaponry added to their value as targets, their combat losses vindicating US fears that arms provided to rebels could end up in the hands of extremists.

The FSA's challenges were exacerbated by its deteriorating relationships with local populations. Profiteering, warlordism and widespread allegations of corruption began to alienate the support bases of some FSA units, while other groups became preoccupied with internal differences over toppling the regime. This helped the jihadists. Jabhat al-Nusra gained respect among both other jihadists and non-jihadists for its discipline, fair treatment of local populations, anti-corruption efforts, honesty and fighting skills. 'Fighters feel proud to join al-Nusra because that means power and influence,' said Abu Ahmed, an FSA commander in Aleppo, in May 2013. 'Al-Nusra fighters rarely withdraw for shortage of ammunition or fighters and they leave their target only after liberating it,' he added.<sup>52</sup> A fighter from the jihadist group Liwa Ansar al-Khalifeh told one of the authors: 'When you see that opposition armed groups are doing more politicking than fighting, and that their priority is to secure funds and protect their gains, Nusra looks like the only option for those who want to fight on the frontlines.'<sup>53</sup>

Jihadist groups also provided public services as a tactic to generate community support and bolster recruitment. The Syrian regime had systematically targeted and disrupted attempts by political and civil opposition groups – particularly those that had received Western support – to establish their own viable alternatives to the regime's performance of state functions and provision of essential services. Networks of local councils and civil society organizations continued to operate, but were undermined by a lack of security. In contrast, regime forces largely left extremist groups such as ISIS free to

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<sup>50</sup> Ghaddar, H. (2015), 'ISIS's strategy of terror', interview with Christoph Reuter, NOW, 14 July 2015, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/10questions/565586-isis-strategy-of-terror> (accessed 31 Jan. 2017).

<sup>51</sup> Haid Haid interview via Skype with a military leader in Liwa' Amajd al-Islam, February 2017.

<sup>52</sup> Mahmood, M. and Black, I. (2013), 'Free Syrian Army rebels defect to Islamist group Jabhat al-Nusra', *Guardian*, 8 May 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/08/free-syrian-army-rebels-defect-islamist-group> (accessed 23 Jan. 2017).

<sup>53</sup> Haid Haid interview with rebel fighter who spoke not for attribution, July 2016.

build and expand their own systems of public service provision.<sup>54</sup> These groups also maximized the impact of their services by choosing what to provide, when and to whom. They usually chose the services they offered on the basis of what was needed the most locally, especially when such services were unavailable or difficult to obtain. According to a local activist interviewed for this paper:

Daesh was always trying to take advantage of crises to win more support. When cooking gas was not available in Atarib [a city in the Aleppo governorate], Daesh started providing it at cheaper rates. Similarly, when drinking water was not available, Daesh used a water truck tank to provide people with water. It distributed water to its members at a low rate. As a result, people started joining Daesh to receive its services and support.<sup>55</sup>

Likewise, when there was a bread crisis in Aleppo in late 2012, Jabhat al-Nusra took over grain compounds, and provided fuel and protection for bakeries to reopen.<sup>56</sup>

**While the West has continued to back local governance initiatives, its efforts have been plagued by logistical problems resulting from the collapse of infrastructure and humanitarian organizations' limited access to opposition-held areas.**

In sum, competition among opposition backers for influence, and the absence of a clear strategy on what could be achieved in Syria, has undermined the attempts of opposition groups to create sufficient alternatives to the Assad regime.<sup>57</sup> Failure to achieve coherence in the military sphere has affected similar attempts in the non-military arena. While the West has continued to back local governance initiatives, its efforts have been plagued by logistical problems resulting from the collapse of infrastructure and humanitarian organizations' limited access to opposition-held areas. A lack of coordination among donors has increased local competition for resources in some cases, and contributed to the emergence of rival structures. When combined with the absence of a secure operating environment and regime attempts at disruption – including continued payment of salaries to state employees who refrain from joining local governance initiatives<sup>58</sup> – this has meant that opposition-held areas have struggled to provide quality services. In turn, the chaotic operating environment has provided fertile ground for the growth of corruption and warlordism.

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<sup>54</sup> Khaddour, K. (2015), *The Assad Regime's Hold on The Syrian State*, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 2015, [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/syrian\\_state1.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/syrian_state1.pdf) (accessed 16 Nov. 2016).

<sup>55</sup> Skype interview with local activist Waleed by Haid Haid, September 2016.

<sup>56</sup> McEvers, K. (2013), 'Jihadi Fighters Win Hearts And Minds By Easing Syria's Bread Crisis', National Public Radio, 16 January 2013, <http://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2013/01/18/169516308/as-syrian-rebels-reopen-bakeries-bread-crisis-starts-to-ease> (accessed 31 Jan. 2017).

<sup>57</sup> Yacoub Oweis, K. (2014), 'Struggling to Build an Alternative to Assad', German Institute for International and Security Affairs, SWP Comments 35, July 2014, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/syria-opposition-government-undermined/> (accessed 30 November, 2016).

<sup>58</sup> Khalaf, R. (2015), 'Governance without Government in Syria: Civil Society and State Building during Conflict', *Syria Studies*, Vol. 7 No. 3, p. 59, <https://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/syria/article/view/1176>.

## INFLECTION POINT 4

### The emergence of ISIS and the West's 'ISIS first' strategy

The lack of a comprehensive strategy on the part of the West and its regional allies for ending the conflict in Syria contributed to the rise of extremist groups such as ISIS. As UN-brokered peace talks in Geneva, during which the Syrian authorities repeatedly refused to discuss a transitional government, failed to bring an end to the conflict, and as the grievances driving the conflict subsequently remained unaddressed, extremist elements and their external backers found fertile ground in Syria to expand the scope of their activities. This contributed to the establishment of ISIS in April 2013, and its declaration in June 2014 of the formation of a 'caliphate'. Defeating ISIS would soon become the priority in Iraq and Syria for Western powers, as the organization was deemed the pre-eminent security threat in the region and, later, globally. This led the West to subordinate the peace process to an 'ISIS first' policy imperative.

ISIS had its origins in Al-Qaeda in Iraq, later becoming Islamic State in Iraq and crossing into Syria after 2011 as part of Al-Qaeda before splitting from it to become a distinct group in 2013. In Syria, the group would benefit from the Assad regime's attempts to Islamize the conflict. ISIS proved to be a useful tool for the Syrian regime, as the main target for ISIS was not the Syrian army but the FSA and other rebel groups. The regime therefore facilitated the expansion of ISIS in Syria whenever it saw that this would result in attacks on rebels, such as when ISIS advanced towards Palmyra in the spring of 2015 unopposed by regime troops.<sup>59</sup>

The rise of ISIS had a variety of implications for external actors. Russia in particular exported its own jihadists from Chechnya to Syria as a way of minimizing their threat at home, as well as of putting pressure on the FSA. Iran also found ISIS a 'useful' enemy, as Tehran was able to present the organization's threat to Shiite shrines in Syria as a justification for Iranian intervention in the country. At the opposite end of the geopolitical spectrum, Turkey turned a blind eye to foreign fighters crossing through its territory to join ISIS in Syria because it believed that jihadism would provide a quick means of toppling Assad. Meanwhile, private donors from Gulf countries funnelled money to ISIS on the same basis; this increased the capacity of ISIS to co-opt local residents through the delivery of services and cash.<sup>60</sup>

The advance of ISIS into the Iraqi city of Mosul in May 2014 and its beheading of two American hostages prompted the West to adopt a counterterrorism narrative regarding the Syrian conflict. In doing so, Western powers inadvertently aligned their own narrative with that of the regime. After the failure of the second round of peace talks in Geneva in 2014, the Syrian conflict came to be viewed increasingly through this prism, and Western countries consequently paid less attention to the Syrian political process. The US saw ISIS as a threat to its interests in Iraq, particularly to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). This spurred Washington to create a US-led, international 'anti-ISIL' coalition – to borrow this alliance's own terminology – in August 2014. The focus on counterterrorism became even stronger as ISIS increased its recruitment of foreign fighters and threatened to export terrorism beyond Syria and Iraq. Attacks carried out in ISIS's name in the Tunisian beach resort of Sousse, and in Paris, in 2015 led Western states to view ISIS as their pre-eminent national security threat. In response to the Sousse attack, in which 30 British nationals were killed, the UK parliament in December 2015 authorized airstrikes on ISIS in Syria as part of the 'anti-ISIL' coalition.

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<sup>59</sup> Interviews by Lina Khatib with local fighters in southern Syria, May 2015.

<sup>60</sup> Khatib, L. (2015), *The Islamic State's Strategy: Lasting and Expanding*, June 2015, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

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Meanwhile, the international community regarded the Iraqi government in Baghdad and the KRG as partners in counterterrorism. This position, combined with US interests and the absence of a ready partner in Syria, led the coalition initially to adopt an ‘Iraq first’ approach to fighting ISIS. While this eventually led to the liberation of Iraqi cities from ISIS control, beginning with Fallujah and Ramadi and moving on to Mosul, it meant that the coalition largely ignored Syria.

When Western attention was subsequently directed to Syria, the debate focused on ISIS rather than on the fate of the regime or political transition. The ‘ISIS first’ approach to Syria and the expressed willingness of the international coalition to target the group there illustrated to the Syrian opposition that the West was ready to intervene directly to counter ISIS, but not to protect civilians in opposition-held areas from the regime’s barrel-bomb attacks. This fostered a deep sense of betrayal among many within the Syrian opposition, as the ISIS-first approach communicated the prioritization of a military solution to one of the *products* of the conflict over the search for a peace settlement that would tackle its *drivers*.<sup>61</sup>

Underlining this was the fact that the ‘anti-ISIS’ coalition limited itself to military operations, mainly in the form of airstrikes, instead of trying to draw up a comprehensive strategy that would take into account the political and social dimensions of the crisis and address grievances between Syrians. The latter would have offered Syrians a way out of the conflict that neither maintained the regime’s power nor enabled extremist groups to take advantage of communal tensions to rally support. In the absence of a wider strategy, the military weakening of ISIS simply led its fighters to join other jihadist groups in Syria.<sup>62</sup> Meanwhile, civilian casualties caused by coalition airstrikes pushed some local residents who opposed the regime – but who now saw the coalition’s tactics as indirectly benefiting the Assad government – to rally around ISIS.<sup>63</sup>

Inadequate delivery of humanitarian aid to non-regime areas by the UN and the international community further contributed to the rise of ISIS. An investigation by The Syria Campaign, an advocacy group, concluded that 88 per cent of UN aid in 2015 was distributed to areas under the sole control of the regime, and that the regime either ignored or denied 90 per cent of UN requests for aid deliveries in opposition-held areas.<sup>64</sup> Significant amounts of aid were channelled to areas controlled by regime militias such as the Shabeeha and National Defence Forces, often via private companies and organizations established by regime insiders such as Assad’s maternal cousin, Rami Makhlof, using arrangements brokered by Iran.<sup>65</sup> Meanwhile, in rebel-held areas faced with siege conditions, local resentment grew. Some residents embraced ISIS as an alternative both to the regime and to FSA warlords.

In addition, the US favoured partnering with those local actors – most notably the PYD – willing to prioritize the fight against ISIS over the fight against the regime. After the battle to liberate the northern Syrian town of Kobane from ISIS, which PYD-affiliated fighters conducted with support from coalition airstrikes, the US and its Western allies directed humanitarian aid to Kurdish areas. However, the regime prevented UN-supplied aid from reaching a number of other opposition-held areas, which remained largely neglected. This created tensions between Kurds and Arabs. Coalition support for

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<sup>61</sup> Interviews by Lina Khatib with political members of the Syrian opposition in the diaspora, November 2015.

<sup>62</sup> Interviews by Lina Khatib with local fighters, February 2015.

<sup>63</sup> Interviews by Lina Khatib with ISIS supporters, February 2015.

<sup>64</sup> Ensor, J. (2016), ‘UN attacked for giving control of aid ‘to Assad regime’ in Syria’, *Telegraph*, 15 June 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/14/un-attacked-for-giving-control-of-aid-to-assad-regime-in-syria/> (accessed 20 Feb. 2017).

<sup>65</sup> Hopkins, N. and Beals, E. (2016), ‘UN pays tens of millions to Assad regime under Syria aid programme’, *Guardian*, 29 August 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/29/un-pays-tens-of-millions-to-assad-regime-syria-aid-programme-contracts> (accessed 25 Jan. 2017).

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Kurdish forces against ISIS also helped Kurds expand their areas of control in Syria, including into areas with majority Arab rather than Kurdish populations. Discriminatory behaviour by some YPG fighters towards Arab residents led to clashes between Kurds and Arabs in those areas.<sup>66</sup>

US support for the PYD coincided with increasingly ineffective support for the FSA: from January 2015, a number of FSA factions that had been trained by the US saw their funding reduced. This led to the eventual break-up of some FSA umbrella groups, such as the Southern Front, as different factions competed for resources.<sup>67</sup> The contradictions in US policy surfaced even more visibly as CIA-funded units clashed on the battlefield with forces belonging to the SDF, some elements of which (though not those involved in these particular skirmishes) received Pentagon funding.<sup>68</sup>

Turkey became alarmed by the support provided by the US to the YPG to fight ISIS, as this support had helped the Kurdish group to make significant gains on the ground. These concerns, in addition to US and European pressure to control its borders to stop the flow of foreign fighters, pushed Turkey reluctantly to join the the 'counter-ISIL' coalition of states in an effort to lessen the YPG's influence. Pressure from Saudi Arabia also led Turkey to cooperate in the creation by local proxies of Jaysh al-Fateh ('Army of Conquest'): an umbrella military body mainly consisting of Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, the two major anti-ISIS and anti-regime jihadist groups in northern Syria. The formation of this military body was meant to be a way to co-opt Jaysh al-Fateh's constituent armed groups and push them towards pragmatism, which would then allow Saudi Arabia and its allies to utilize the new organization's military capabilities against the regime in the service of their own strategic interests.<sup>69</sup> In March 2015, Jaysh al-Fateh's rebel alliance captured the city of Idlib, the capital of the Idlib governorate.

The growing strength of extremist rebel militias, particularly Jabhat al-Nusra, in Idlib alarmed not only the Assad regime but also Russia, which six months later began a military campaign in Syria under the pretext of fighting ISIS and other jihadist groups.

As ISIS began to lose territory as a result of the international coalition's attacks, it compensated by escalating its attacks in Europe and worldwide. This ensured that Western governments became even more absorbed in addressing security matters, and less interested in the Geneva and Vienna peace processes or the fate of the Assad regime. What ISIS's global operations clearly illustrated was that the Obama policy of containment had failed. ISIS had lost ground in Syria and Iraq but its actions worldwide continued, while inside Syria the rising influence of Jabhat al-Nusra was presenting a new threat to Western interests. The prominence of such groups, and the persistence of ISIS despite its weakening, meant that Western debate on Syria continued to be defined in military terms. By focusing on the defeat of extremist groups on the battlefield, the West ignored the constantly evolving social, economic, geographical, political and military factors driving people to support or join different armed groups. Yet these were precisely the factors it needed – and still needs – to address as part of a comprehensive strategy to ending the Syrian conflict.

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<sup>66</sup> For discussion of alleged PYD abuses in Tell-Abyad in 2015, see Khalaf, R. (2016), *Governing Rojava: Layers of Legitimacy in Syria*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, p. 15, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/governing-rojava-layers-legitimacy-syria> (accessed 2 Feb. 2017).

<sup>67</sup> Interviews by Lina Khatib with the Southern Front, May 2015.

<sup>68</sup> See Heller, S. (2016), 'Are CIA-backed Syrian Rebels Really Fighting Pentagon-backed Syrian Rebels?', War on the Rocks, 28 March 2016, <http://warontherocks.com/2016/03/are-cia-backed-syrian-rebels-really-fighting-pentagon-backed-syrian-rebels/> (accessed 17 Feb. 2017). SDF units have clashed with CIA-supported Arab and Turkmen rebels in Aleppo province. These SDF units have not received direct support from the Pentagon, but other elements within the SDF umbrella organization continue to receive extensive support from the US Department of Defense.

<sup>69</sup> Interview by Lina Khatib with Saudi official, March 2015.

## INFLECTION POINT 5

### The Russian intervention: changing the balance of forces

President Vladimir Putin's intentions were unclear at the outset of Russia's intervention in Syria in September 2015, but its effects were unambiguous: the deployment significantly changed the balance of forces on the ground, emboldened Assad and undermined the prospects for a political settlement. More than anything, the intervention marked the rise of Russia as the foreign actor with most clout in the conflict, as Moscow capitalized on the West's dwindling interest and involvement in Syria.

Although Russia's direct military intervention surprised Western policymakers, it was more the scale of the intervention rather than the action itself that caught them off-guard. It amounted to a significant military operation, including the stationing of Su-34, Su-25 and Su-24 attack aircraft in Latakia, and the deployment of attack and transport helicopters and a battalion of marines from the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade.<sup>70</sup>

President Putin's penchant for unpredictable, hostile and bold political moves, including the annexation of Crimea in February 2014, had left Western policymakers guessing what he intended to achieve in Syria. A senior Western official, speaking at a closed-door meeting at Chatham House days after the deployment, acknowledged that his government would simply have to wait and see. Equally, Putin's surprise announcement in March 2016 that Russian armed forces would start to withdraw, as he purported to push instead for peace talks, left many policymakers bemused. In the event, however, neither a full drawdown nor even a significant reduction in Russia's armed presence materialized. On the contrary, Russia soon increased the scale of its armed deployment in the country and expanded its direct military engagement against the Syrian opposition.

Putin's decision to intervene in late 2015 appeared to be driven by three factors: Syrian regime forces were under increasing pressure and losing territory; US policy towards Syria and the wider region appeared weak; and Russia was anxious to circumvent its growing international isolation over the annexation of Crimea and its policy towards Ukraine.

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Russia had calculated that the Assad regime was unable to win the conflict and required direct material support to guarantee its survival. Following its defeat in Idlib, the Syrian regime appeared at its weakest in the summer of 2015, as opposition forces and ISIS both made significant territorial gains. In July 2015, Assad had given an uncharacteristic speech in which he acknowledged that manpower shortages had made ceding territory necessary, saying: 'There is a lack of human resources ... Everything is available [for the army], but there is a shortfall in human capacity.'<sup>71</sup> It was the first real indication that the regime was under serious strain and could fall. The Russian operation put an end to the rebels' advances and removed any possibility of outright military defeat for the regime.

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<sup>70</sup> Marcus, J. (2015), 'Syria: what can Russia's military do?', BBC, 7 October 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-34411477> (accessed 27 Nov. 2016).

<sup>71</sup> Al Jazeera (2015), 'Syria's Assad admits army struggling for manpower', 26 July 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/07/syria-assad-speech-150726091936884.html> (accessed 25 Jan. 2017).

Russia's deployment was aimed at securing the regime and helping it to consolidate and recover territory. Without doubt, the intervention changed the balance of power between regime and opposition forces; importantly, it also gave Russia an indisputable advantage over the US in influencing events on the ground.

Given that the US had 'blinked' over the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons and had failed to enforce its own so-called 'red line', Putin calculated that the US would have no direct military or political response to his country's intervention; and that in one fell swoop, intervention would not only secure Russia's key territorial interests – ports and airbases – but also irrevocably deter Turkey and/or the US from establishing no-fly zones or safe zones. More importantly, it would guarantee the failure of efforts to achieve Western-imposed regime change – an objective essential to Putin's political strategy.

The US, on the other hand, had miscalculated that the Syrian regime's weakness would lead Russia to temper its support for Assad in a bid to win the eventual support of a successor regime. The US intensified efforts to persuade Russia to abandon Assad. For some months prior to the intervention, some US and UK officials believed that Russia was moving closer to the West's position on a political transition, and that Assad would not feature in any such settlement.

In this the US had also misjudged Russian intentions, however. At the time of the intervention, the US administration, while surprised, expected Russia to become bogged down in the conflict and suffer its 'second Afghanistan'. However, Russia had calculated the risks of intervention and had carefully weighed them against the potential rewards, which included limiting the options open to the US to respond forcibly; and providing an opportunity to undermine the 'moderate' opposition and change the overall narrative of the conflict.

Indeed, despite Moscow's claims to be at the forefront of a fight against terrorism, Russian forces overwhelmingly targeted more moderate opposition groups.<sup>72</sup> Following the rise of ISIS, the drive to categorize groups into 'moderates' and 'extremists' enabled Russia to characterize its intervention in Syria as a fight against extremist groups. Russia's intervention further sought to change the narrative of the overall conflict: from one of revolution and uprising to one of counterterrorism. Russian fighter aircraft had the freedom of Syrian airspace to strike against groups that it determined to be terrorists. While Moscow used the language of the 'anti-ISIL' coalition, it was clear from early on that Russian airstrikes were targeting not only ISIS units but other groups – including Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, but above all the FSA.<sup>73</sup> By claiming to target groups that the US had designated as 'terrorist' organizations, Russia built itself considerable latitude, in terms of public messaging, to strike against opposition forces posing a threat to the Syrian regime.

In other words, the intervention not only changed the lexicon on what constituted moderate or extremist groups, but also gave Russia licence to attack opposition forces backed by the US and its allies. The result was that the Russian air campaign in some ways strengthened Jabhat al-Nusra's anti-Western narrative (as the West had failed to protect its allies on the ground), while undermining

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<sup>72</sup> A report by the Atlantic Council drawing on open-source and social media intelligence (OSSMINT) found in April 2016 that 'the almost six months of Russian air strikes caused only peripheral damage to ISIS' and had 'a limited effect on the al-Qaeda-linked Nusra Front'. It concluded: 'The operation destroyed the capabilities of the only credible non-jihadist alternative to Assad's regime, including those elements directly backed by the West.' See Czuperski, M., Herbst, J., Higgins, E., Hof, F. and Nimmo, B. (2016), *Deceive Distract Destroy: Putin at War in Syria*, Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, <http://publications.atlanticcouncil.org/distract-deceive-destroy/> (accessed 1 Feb. 2017).

<sup>73</sup> Johnston, I. (2015), 'Russia in Syria: Over 90% of air strikes not targeting Isis, says US', *Independent*, 7 October 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/russia-in-syria-us-and-turkey-claim-russian-warplanes-hitting-moderate-syrian-rebel-groups-a6685496.html> (accessed 2 Feb. 2017).

poorly equipped and poorly trained moderate rebels and pushing them towards extreme groups, a development that Russia in turn used to confirm its narrative that all rebel groups in Syria were extremist and therefore legitimate targets for its campaign. The imbalance in the levels of foreign support enjoyed by Russian- and Western-backed groups, respectively, led some of the latter to lose faith in their patrons and seek refuge with more hard-line outfits. These gained ever more local support.

Russia's deployment in September 2015 also sent a clear signal to Syria's regional neighbours and the international community that Moscow was willing to stand up for its allies. Russia demonstrated a level of commitment that other powers, such as the US or EU states, could not match. Consequently, this allowed the Syrian regime to remain intransigent in international peace talks in Geneva and once again talk about retaking 'every inch' of Syria.

The intervention has clearly shown that Assad's friends are more committed to keeping him in power than his enemies are to unseating him. Nonetheless, there are signs of discomfort in the relationship between Putin and Assad. In October 2015 Putin summoned Assad to Moscow, in what appeared to be a public demonstration of the Russian leader's influence over his Syrian counterpart. This may reflect a tug of war between Russia and Iran over the future of the Syrian state. Whereas Russia expects Assad to conform to its broader goals of securing and stabilizing Syria through the machinery of the state, Iran is more comfortable embedding itself and operating through a series of non-state actors that resemble parallel states.

In sum, Russia's intervention not only tipped the military dimension of the conflict back in favour of the regime, but also gave Moscow the initiative in the Geneva peace talks. Russia has since become the main arbiter in international peace talks, and has effectively sidelined the UN and made the US a junior partner in the process. The Russian intervention has also upped the ante for any form of future Western intervention, as this would bring a real threat of direct combat with Russian forces. The cost of intervention is now much higher for the West, and its already narrow set of options more limited.



## INFLECTION POINT 6

### Western marginalization in Aleppo

The recapture of rebel-held eastern Aleppo by regime and regime-aligned forces in December 2016 was the most significant victory for Assad in the conflict to date. The rebels had been undermined by internal divisions, but their defeat was largely determined by the structural factors discussed earlier in this paper.

The regime's victory in the city may also prove decisive for the West's role in the conflict. Trust between the US and Russia had seemingly evaporated in September 2016, when a ceasefire brokered by the US and Russia collapsed after an apparent Russian airstrike on a UN aid convoy.<sup>74</sup> Days earlier, a US airstrike in the city of Deir Ezzor had killed 62 Syrian army soldiers, with the US claiming that it had mistaken the government soldiers for ISIS militants. The subsequent inability of the US and its allies to secure a ceasefire deal with Russia as pro-regime forces closed in around the rebel-held areas of Aleppo led to high-profile recriminations in the UN Security Council, which made for good political theatre but had little real impact. While diplomats quarrelled, the offensive against the city pressed forward.

The retaking of Aleppo summarized broader trajectories in the conflict. It showed how efforts by the international community to deliver humanitarian aid through the UN had been obstructed as the regime and its allies adopted starve-and-siege tactics. It also underlined the West's unwillingness to take significant steps to counter these tactics. The US and the UK ruled out airdrops of aid, with UK ministers citing fears that British planes could be shot down.<sup>75</sup> By contrast, the UN had airdropped aid into regime-held areas of ISIS-besieged Deir Ezzor.<sup>76</sup>

Following the collapse of US–Russia negotiations, coded threats<sup>77</sup> that the US would no longer oppose Gulf states' plans to supply rebels with more advanced weaponry – such as man-portable air defence systems (MANPADS) – never materialized. In contrast, the regime's external backers significantly increased their support.<sup>78</sup>

If events in Aleppo cemented Russia's role as the main external actor in the Syrian conflict, they also resulted in Turkey replacing the US as the key interlocutor with Russia. Turkey realigned its priorities in 2016 to focus on countering Kurdish attempts at self-governance, thus moderating its ambitions to unseat Assad. Following the downing of a Russian aircraft in November 2015, Turkey had found itself under economic, political and security pressure from Russia. At the same time, Turkish appeals to the US to cease funding the YPG had fallen on deaf ears. This led Ankara to seek to restore its relationship with Russia in the interest of maintaining stability on Turkish soil and prioritizing its efforts to counter YPG gains. It was thus Turkey that negotiated an evacuation deal in eastern Aleppo, and Turkey that concluded a nationwide ceasefire agreement on 29 December after the recapture of the city was complete.

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<sup>74</sup> Waters, N. and Al-Khatib, H. (2016), 'Analysis of Syrian Red Crescent Aid Convoy Attack', Bellingcat, 21 September 2016, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2016/09/21/aleppo-un-aid-analysis/> (accessed 15 Jan. 2017).

<sup>75</sup> BBC (2016), 'Aleppo air drops 'would endanger UK planes'', 28 November 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-38134858> (accessed 2 Feb. 2017).

<sup>76</sup> Middle East Monitor (2017), 'UN resumes aid drops in Syria's Deir ez-Zor', 1 February 2017, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20170201-un-resumes-aid-drops-in-syrias-deir-ez-zor/> (accessed 2 Feb. 2017).

<sup>77</sup> Landay, J. and Mohammed, A. (2016), 'Gulf may arm rebels now Syria truce is dead: U.S. officials', Reuters, 26 September 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-usa-idUSKCN11W2NN> (accessed 2 Feb. 2017).

<sup>78</sup> Heller, S. (2017), 'Aleppo's Bitter Lessons', The Century Foundation, 27 January 2017, <https://tcf.org/content/report/aleppos-bitter-lessons/> (accessed 27 Jan. 2017).

Turkey and Russia then announced that they would host direct talks between the rebels and the regime, along with Iran, in January 2017 in Astana, Kazakhstan. For the first time, the US, its Western allies and the UN were not given official roles – although representatives of most of these parties attended as observers. The talks, ostensibly about enforcement of the 29 December ceasefire that had been consistently violated, also excluded the Syrian political opposition in favour of representatives from armed groups. The former chief negotiator for the High Negotiations Committee (HNC), Mohammed Alloush of Jaysh al-Islam, led the delegation, but it was not under the auspices of the HNC. The discussions were rounded off by a statement from Russia, Turkey and Iran over an enforcement mechanism for the ceasefire.

The battle for Aleppo has effectively ended the debate over Western counter-escalation in response to intensified Russian and Iranian support for the regime. Broadly, there has been a division among analysts over the best means to bring the conflict between the rebels and the regime to an end. Some argue that the West should escalate the conflict to force the regime and its allies to negotiate with the opposition.<sup>79</sup> However, after six years of hostilities, it is clear that such escalation would more likely exacerbate matters given Western powers' unwillingness to commit the resources needed for such a policy to be effective. Since 2012, Western support to the armed opposition has not drawn concessions from the regime and its external backers. Indeed, Western counter-escalation would be likely to beget reciprocal counter-escalation. Given the greater commitment of Assad's allies, such a cycle would likely only result in further suffering.

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<sup>79</sup> For example, the Atlantic Council's Middle East Strategy Task Force, headed by former US secretary of state Madeleine Albright and former US national security adviser Stephen Hadley, concluded in November 2016 that, 'Opposition forces must be strengthened to defend civilians from a murderous regime and to go after Daesh and al-Qaeda with enhanced outside support.' The taskforce argued that the US should eliminate the regime's capacity to bomb from the air, enforce an end to starvation sieges, create safe zones and provide enhanced support to opposition forces. Albright, M. K. and Hadley, S. J. (2016), *Middle East Strategy Task Force: Final Report of the Co-Chairs*, Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, <http://mest.atlanticcouncil.org/final-report/>.

## Conclusion

On the eve of the sixth anniversary of the Syrian conflict, the US and its Western allies confront a dilemma partly of their own making. Having ceded the initiative to other actors and watched on as Aleppo was recaptured by the regime, do they now accept Western marginalization in Syria and leave Russia and Iran to resolve the conflict – on terms almost certain to favour those two countries' interests? Or do they seek a policy reset, and try to explore options for forging a more effective peace strategy? This research paper has argued for the latter: a recalibrated Western policy with clear strategic objectives, capable of delivering the maximum return on the limited leverage that the West continues to hold.

The West must learn the lessons from its failed policies to date. Western powers have displayed an inability to lay out their strategic objectives for Syria. In the US, divisions between the White House, the CIA and the Pentagon over the correct course of action have contributed to a series of half measures that have ended in failure. European actors have limited their roles to humanitarian, civil society and local governance assistance, but their efforts have been undermined by the escalation of hostilities. France has been vocal in its support for Syrian rebels but incapable of effecting change. Likewise, the UK has continued to push for outcomes that it is unable to secure, such as Assad's removal, while the EU overall has been largely invisible, despite its economic clout.

Western governments and institutions must also be firmer and more resourceful in extracting concessions from the regime, for example taking opportunities to use economic incentives to enforce compliance with the terms of any political settlement. To date, the Assad regime has been able to extract concessions from other parties without giving anything in return. And when it has broken its own commitments, it has faced little or no sanction. Unburdened by the legacy of the Obama administration, the new Trump administration now has an opportunity to make clear that US commitments will be backed by action. The US's greatest leverage, as for the EU, is economic: through sanctions, trade and reconstruction. This may prove significant in determining Syria's post-conflict future. While Russia and Iran have invested in Syria, neither is likely to have the capital to fund large-scale reconstruction efforts or be interested in doing so. Should the West step in with substantial plans for reconstruction, this could increase the chances of securing compliance on security, political or human rights commitments, but only if the West has a clear strategy based on the key parameters presented in this paper.

Above all, countering extremism in Syria must involve the West going beyond military intervention. In this context the post-election trajectory of US politics and policy remains concerning. One constant theme of Donald Trump's administration in its first weeks has been its emphasis on combating extremist groups, but this appears to be manifested in a narrowly militarized focus. If this is reflected in actual policy, it will make progress difficult. Instead, a more expansive, multidimensional approach is needed. Firstly, policies must encompass an understanding of the dynamics affecting external actors and their roles in the Syrian crisis. Not only has the West's ability to influence regional allies such as Gulf countries declined, but those allies are not harmonious in their approach to Syria. At the same time, the interests of the foreign backers of the Syrian regime of President Assad – Russia and Iran – are not fully aligned.

Secondly, policymakers must take into consideration the long-term challenges to governance in Syria that are a direct result of the rise of new actors on the ground. These include not just rebel groups but also pro-regime militias. The proliferation of competing new interests means that even a military ‘victory’ for the regime – to the extent that any side is likely to secure a decisive outcome – will not translate into a restoration of the status quo ante. Extremist groups have been taking advantage of the lack of a long-term comprehensive strategy on the part of the West. They have been leveraging developments on the ground to strengthen their presence and widen their scope of influence in Syria. This underlines the importance of a Western strategy for fighting extremism that links national-level policies with local-level priorities and concerns in order to cultivate local constituencies’ buy-in.

Yet there is no escaping the fact that any post-settlement landscape will be fraught with tensions – and that violence will persist. Armed groups will likely continue to exist and act in Syria, regardless of any political settlement that may emerge. The shapes and roles of such groups are already adapting to changing local and external contexts. Western policymaking will need to take into account the future of armed groups in Syria and their exploitation of rising ethnic and sectarian tensions. It will especially need to address the status of the Kurds and the presence of foreign elements inside the country. The evolving challenges on the ground also highlight the importance of strategies that recognize the problem of refugees and IDPs as a long-term issue that cannot be separated from the debate on the political future of Syria and post-settlement reconstruction.

Six years into Syria’s conflict, there are no straightforward answers. Short-term approaches that do not appreciate the nuances of the conflict bring more risks than opportunities. Effective policy must be based on an accurate reading of the constantly evolving Syrian battlefield.

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For more on the Initiative and its research, please visit: <https://syria.chathamhouse.org>.

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Cover image: Damaged buildings in old Aleppo's Jdeideh neighbourhood on 9 December 2016.

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