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The Structure of the Syrian Conflict: The Resilience of the Pro-Regime Camp Over That of the Anti-Regime Camp

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THE STRUCTURE OF THE SYRIAN CONFLICT: THE RESILIENCE OF THE PRO-REGIME CAMP OVER THAT OF THE ANTI-REGIME CAMP

By Major J.J. McCullough

TABLE OF CONTENTS

This paper will seek to determine the structure of the Syrian conflict by analyzing which actors have been successful in achieving their interests and objectives and identifying which factors have contributed to the resilience of the Pro-Regime camp over that of the Anti-Regime camp. The theoretical framework which will be used to analyze the actors involved in the Syrian civil war is constructivist in nature, and includes that of political identity and power relations. This analysis will conclude that actors within the Pro-Regime camp proved to be far more resilient and successful in achieving their interests and objectives due to cohesion within the camp and the extensive military support provided by the regime's allies. Conversely, the fragmented nature and lack of cohesion and unity amongst the Anti-Regime camp eroded its military effectiveness and resiliency, ultimately leading to its failure to achieve its primary objective of deposing Assad.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE SYRIAN CONFLICT: THE RESILIENCE OF THE PRO-REGIME CAMP OVER THAT OF THE ANTI-REGIME CAMP

INTRODUCTION

The Syrian conflict began as a political uprising in March of 2011 as part of the Arab Spring movement. By the fall of 2011, the political uprising had evolved into an armed rebellion and become a full fledged civil war by 2012. The Syrian civil war has proven to be a significantly complex conflict which has involved national, regional, and international actors with competing and diverging interests and objectives. This paper will seek to determine the structure of the Syrian conflict by analyzing which actors have been successful in achieving their interests and objectives and identifying which factors have contributed to the resilience of the Pro-Regime camp over that of the Anti-Regime camp. This analysis will conclude that actors within the Pro-Regime camp proved to be far more resilient and successful in achieving their interests and objectives due to cohesion within the camp and the extensive military support provided by the regime's allies. Conversely, the fragmented nature and lack of cohesion and unity amongst the Anti-Regime camp eroded its military effectiveness and resiliency, ultimately leading to its failure to achieve its primary objective of deposing Assad. The scope of this analysis will focus primarily on the period between 2011 and 2016. The following section will establish the theoretical framework in which the conflict structure will be analyzed.

The Syrian civil war can be characterized as a complex conflict structure involving national, regional, and international actors. Furthermore, most actors fall within either the Pro-Regime or Anti-Regime camps. At the national level, the three primary actors are: the regime, the political and armed oppositions, as well as the Kurds, who are not aligned with either camp.

At the regional level, Pro-Regime forces include Iran, represented by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF) and Iranian proxy groups such as Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) and Shia Militia Groups (SMGs). Regional Anti-Regime actors primarily consisted of Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Other secondary regional actors such as Jordan and international actors such as France and Britain, as well as non-state regional actors such as Daesh, will not be part of the scope of this analysis. Lastly, international actors are split into two camps, with Russia supporting the regime and the United States backing the opposition and Kurds.

In assessing a complex conflict structure such as the Syrian civil war, it is useful to establish a theoretical framework which can be used to understand individual actor's interests and actions as well as the relationships and interactions between actors involved in the conflict. The theoretical framework which will be used to analyze the actors involved in the Syrian civil war is constructivist in nature, and includes that of political identity and power relations. Political identify can be characterized as having three main components which are: past heritage, ideological and geopolitical alignment and intersubjectivity of actors.[1] In regards to past heritage, this typically constitutes the characterization of an actor's historical, cultural and ethno-religious background in relation to the primary actors in the conflict.[2] As will be demonstrated, actors that share a common heritage were more likely to align themselves with either the regime or the opposition. Similarly, the second aspect of political identity which will be considered is ideological or geopolitical alignment. Comparable to heritage, there may be common ideological

[1] Miloud Chennoufi, *Identité politique, structure de conflit, et médiation,* (Revue Études Internationales, publication forthcoming).
[2] *Ibid.*

or geopolitical factors that will align actors either with or against the regime.[3] The third aspect which will be considered as part of political identity is intersubjectivity, which can be defined as an actor's perception of its role in the conflict, perceptions and interactions between actors as well as an actor's interpretation of the conflict itself.[4] By understanding political identity in terms of heritage, ideological and geopolitical alignment and intersubjectivity, such will provide a framework to understand an actor's actions in the conflict.

The second element of the theoretical framework to be used in the analysis of the Syrian civil war is power relations. The four components to power relations which will be considered are actors' interests and strategies, the distribution of power, cohesion versus fragmentation, as well as the influence of third parties.[5] In regards to actors' interests and strategies, such can be defined as the individual actor's desired objectives and the outcomes it seeks to achieve by involving itself in the conflict, as well as the strategy and actions the actor undertakes in the conflict.[6] The second element of power relations pertains to the distribution of power within a conflict which consists of the elements of military power an actor brings to the conflict and how they affect the balance of power within either the Pro-Regime and Anti-Regime camps.[7] The third element, cohesion versus fragmentation, will evaluate whether the actors' actions solidified or fractured the camp it was part of.[8] The last component of power relations is the influence third parties had on other actors within their camp.[9]

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[3] *Ibid.*
[4] *Ibid.*
[5] *Ibid.*
[6] *Ibid.*
[7] *Ibid.*
[8] *Ibid.*
[9] *Ibid.*

The use of this theoretical framework to analyze the political identity and power relations of each actor will set the stage to determine the outcome of the competing interactions between the Pro-Regime and Anti-Regime actors. Specifically, the third section of each chapter will seek to determine which actors were successful in achieving their interests and objectives and which camp proved to be more resilient. Given that the Syrian civil war is arguably defined by national, regional, and international actors, this paper will be divided into three corresponding chapters. Each chapter will seek to define the political identities of the actors, describe the power relations between actors, and lastly determine the outcome of competing interaction between actors.

CHAPTER 1: NATIONAL ACTORS

At the national level, there are three groups of actors that will be considered. The first group is the regime, which is composed of the Syrian government, led by Bashar al-Assad, and the Syrian Arab Armed Forces (SAAF). The second group is the opposition, which consists of the political opposition and the armed opposition which can be broadly divided into two camps: armed groups under the umbrella of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Salafist-Jihadist groups. The third group which will be analyzed consists of the Kurds who are not aligned with either the regime or the opposition, and embodies the Democratic Union Party (PYD) political wing and its militia, the People Protection Unit (YPG).

REGIME POLITICAL IDENTITY & POWER RELATIONS

When defining the political identity of the Syrian regime, it can be characterized in three facets. First, is the heritage and ideology of the regime itself. Second, is the geopolitical events such as the impact of the Arab Spring on the regime's perception of the political uprising and armed rebellion. Third, is the intersubjectivity in how the regime perceived the threat posed by the opposition as it evolved from a political uprising to an armed rebellion and subsequently a civil war backed by foreign actors. As for the power relations which defined the regime, there are four key aspects to consider. First, the regime's interests and strategy can be summarized as having four broad objectives: the survival of the Assad regime, the military defeat of opposition forces, preserving the territorial integrity of the state, and avoid instigating a direct foreign military intervention by the West. The second element of power relations defines the distribution of power, which in this case can be viewed as the military capacity of the regime to counter the uprising followed by the armed rebellion and civil war. The third element of power relations will

explore how the regime was able to remain largely cohesive both politically and militarily. Lastly, consideration will be made for the influence that third parties, such as Iran, its proxies and Russia, had on the regime.

HERITAGE & IDEOLOGY

The political identity of the Syrian regime originates with Hafez al-Assad's regime and can be defined as the confluence of heritage and ideology. In November 1970, then Baath Defensive Minister, Hafez al-Assad seized power in a coup which subsequently established a secular Baathist autocratic regime which Bashar al-Assad would later inherit in 2000 upon his father's demise.[10] The Assad regime's socialist autocracy was a "hybrid of Leninism and Gaullist constitutionalism [and] the 1973 constitution declared the Baath Party the leader in state and society".[11] Furthermore, "independent opposition remained forbidden [and] membership to the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) remained punishable by death".[12] Unlike the Ottoman era which was primarily dominated by Sunni majority rule in Syria, the Assad regime consisted primarily of minority groups of which the Alawite sect, which the Assad family hailed from, featured prominently.[13] "The Alawites constitute 12 percent of the county's population and as an offshoot of Shiite Islam are not seen by conservative Sunnis as proper Muslims".[14] The popular uprising challenged the regime's grip on power, pitting the Sunni-Arab majority against the minority-led

[10] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 11.
[11] *Ibid.,* 4.
[12] *Ibid.,* 44.
[13] *Ibid.,* 12.
[14] Itamar Rabinovich, *The Syrian Civil War as a Global Crisis*, (Sfera Politicii 25, no. 1, 2017), 45.

regime.[15] At the core of the grievances against the regime was the Arab Sunni majority's refusal to accept Alawite hegemony.[16] The regime's Alawite identity also had several important implications in regards to regime cohesion, Sunni disenfranchisement, and third party alliances.

Prior to Hafez al-Assad's coup in 1970, Syria had experienced a series of coups and therefore "coup-proofing" the regime was seen as key to its survival.[17] To that end, Hafez Assad established several intelligence agencies whose primary purpose was to spy on the population and eliminate any threats posed to the regime. Furthermore, the regime "also filled the upper ranks of the military and security apparatus almost entirely with stubbornly loyal Alawites".[18] Having a strong security apparatus dominated by loyal Baathists and Alawities would prove to be significant for both regime cohesion and survival as well as key third party support by Shia Iran and its proxies, LH and SMGs. Prior to 2011 the most notable challenge to the Assad regime came in 1982 when the banned MB attempted to seize control of Hama city.[19] This uprising was ruthlessly and forcibly put down by regime security forces, resulting in the slaughter of up to 10,000 citizens.[20] The regime's willingness to rule through fear and use of force against its populace would become a defining characteristic of the regime's identity and would once again come into play during the political uprising and subsequent civil war.

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[15] Jeffrey Martini, Erin York, William Young, *Syria as an Arena of Strategic Competition, (*Rand Corporation, and Intelligence Policy Center (U.S.), Vol. RR-213-OSD, Santa Monica; CA;: Rand Corp, 2013), 3.
[16] Itamar Rabinovich, *The Syrian Civil War as a Global Crisis*, (Sfera Politicii 25, no. 1, 2017), 45.
[17] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 52.
[18] Kim Hua Tan and Perudin Alirupendi, *The "Geopolitical" Factor in the Syrian Civil War: A Corpus-Based Thematic Analysis, (*Sage Open 9, no. 2, 2019), 2.
[19] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 12.
[20] *Ibid.,* 12.

GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

The second aspect which defined the regime's political identity and response to the initial uprising and armed rebellion were the unfolding geopolitical events known as the Arab Spring. "Syria actually shared many of the same political, economic and social problems as other states that rose up during the Arab Spring, and so the outburst of unrest in March 2011 was not that surprising".[21] The regime likely captured lessons from its regional neighbours on the inherent risk of either providing protestors too many concessions or taking too firm of a response against them. As the regime observed events in Tunisia and Egypt, concessions likely only emboldened protestors, contributing to the downfall of those regimes.[22] In Bahrain, heavy handed foreign intervention by Saudi Arabia and UAE quickly subdued the protest movement without eliciting an international response. Whereas in Libya, the UN Security Council Resolution 1973 gave NATO a mandate to intervene in order to protect anti-regime demonstrators, which Muammar Gaddafi threaten to crush.[23] As such, "fears of international intervention deterred an immediate hardline option" by the Syrian regime to address the uprising.[24] To that end, the Syrian regime took a more gradual approach and incrementally increased the level of force used against the uprising in a calculated escalation of violence.[25]

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[21] *Ibid.,* 58.
[22] *Ibid.,* 56.
[23] *Ibid.,* 57.
[24] *Ibid.,* 58.
[25] *Ibid.,* 57.

INTERSUBJECTIVITY

In regards to intersubjectivity, the Assad regime viewed itself as a secular entity under threat from Islamic extremists waging a terrorism campaign against the state.[26] To the regime, "the security of the state was equivalent to the Assad regime's security, that is, they were indistinguishable".[27] In the early stages of the uprising, the Interior Ministry characterized the uprising as an armed insurrection seeking to establish a Salafist state".[28] The regime also began to portray the rebellion as a campaign by Sunni Jihadist, making the conflict about sectarianism and terrorism.[29] It was also key for Assad to frame the conflict as "merely counterterrorism and not a civil war, which gave it space to take virtually any measure against the rebels and allowed it to brush aside the demands for reform or a change in government".[30] Furthermore, the regime not only quantified the conflict along sectarian lines but also blamed external actors in that "it was facing an uprising led by armed gangs, criminals and sectarian jihadists supported by outside powers".[31] The regime's decision to view the conflict as a sectarian Sunni jihadist rebellion rather than a civil war allowed it to initially pursue a counter-terrorism approach. The opposition received "strong support [in terms of arms and finance] from Saudi Arabia and Qatar along with support from Turkey and Jordan, made Assad virtually surrounded by states that opposed him".[32] As such, the regime viewed the conflict as a struggle between external actors who supported

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[26] Kim Hua Tan and Perudin Alirupendi, *The "Geopolitical" Factor in the Syrian Civil War: A Corpus-Based Thematic Analysis, (*Sage Open 9, no. 2, 2019), 14.
[27] *Ibid.,* 9.
[28] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 55.
[29] *Ibid.,* 55.
[30] Kim Hua Tan and Perudin Alirupendi, *The "Geopolitical" Factor in the Syrian Civil War: A Corpus-Based Thematic Analysis, (*Sage Open 9, no. 2, 2019), 14.
[31] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 66.
[32] Kim Hua Tan and Perudin Alirupendi, *The "Geopolitical" Factor in the Syrian Civil War: A Corpus-Based Thematic Analysis, (*Sage Open 9, no. 2, 2019), 12.

Sunni extremists and jihadists, versus its allies who supported the preservation of the secular state.

INTEREST & STRATEGIES

At the core of the regime's interest was its own survival. The Arab Spring had demonstrated that Arab regimes, including those with similar republics such as Egypt, were vulnerable to overthrow. The threat to the regime's survival did not only come from internal opposition forces but also from potential direct military intervention by the West. As such, the challenge for the Assad regime's strategy was the degree of applying military force in order to quell the political uprising, and later the armed rebellion, while avoiding instigating a direct military intervention by the West, as had occurred in Libya. As the uprising morphed into an armed rebellion with opposition forces taking control of large swaths of Syrian territory, the regime's application of force intensified in an attempt to militarily defeat the opposition forces and preserve the territorial integrity of the state. This was most evident in the regime's willingness to commit brutal and unlawful acts against the opposition in order to end the rebellion through the use of chemical weapons and barrel bombs on civilian sites.[33]

There were two distinct moments in the Syrian conflict where the regime's survival was at greatest risk and was subsequently protected by Russian intervention. In the summer of 2013, the regime used chemical weapons against opposition forces in the Damascus neighbourhood of East Ghouta.[34] In an effort to avoid a direct military intervention by the West, Russia brokered a deal whereby the regime was required to surrender its chemical weapons to international monitors for

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[33] *Ibid.,* 13.
[34] Nikolay Kozhanov, *Russia and the Syrian Conflict: Moscow's Domestic, Regional and Strategic Interests, (*Berlin: NBN International, 2016), 46.

destruction. The second period in which the regime faced an existential threat was in the summer of 2015. After a series of successful spring operations, the opposition as well as Daesh had made considerable territorial gains, and it appeared that the regime was on the verge of collapse.[35] Russia, at the invitation of the Syrian regime, conducted a direct military intervention with its own forces in order to shore up the regime's military capacity. Russian intervention not only turned the tide of the conflict in favour of Pro-Regime forces, but also put an end to any potential plans for Western-backed intervention.[36]

It should also be noted that although numerous international diplomatic efforts were made to resolve the Syrian civil war through diplomatic means, the regime showed little interest in those negotiations, particularly as it related to any sort of transition of power by the Assad regime.[37] Russia's intervention in 2015 only emboldened the regime's belief that it could remain in power and militarily defeat the opposition. In sum, the Assad regime demonstrated its willingness to go "all the way to remain in power, regain control of the entire country and end the rebellion".[38]

DISTRIBUTION OF POWER

When considering the distribution of power, such encompasses all the elements of military power the regime had at its disposal to combat the initial political uprising and later the armed rebellion by opposition forces. Although it can be argued that the regime had sufficient military

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[35] *Ibid.,* 61.
[36] *Ibid.,* 66.
[37] Kim Hua Tan and Perudin Alirupendi, *The "Geopolitical" Factor in the Syrian Civil War: A Corpus-Based Thematic Analysis, (*Sage Open 9, no. 2, 2019), 13.
[38] *Ibid.,* 13.

power to contain the initial political uprising, the methods employed by the regime, particularly brutal and lethal tactics against demonstrators, only triggered and expanded the cycle of violence between regime forces and the armed opposition, thereby establishing conditions for a full-fledged civil war.[39] Once the conflict became a civil war, external actors spilled into the conflict in support of either the regime or the opposition. Despite the Pro-Regime camp being backed by more experienced and competent fighters from IRGC-QF, LH and SMGs, opposition forces backed by equipment and financial aid from Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar managed to make significant gains against the regime. By mid-2015, dire manpower shortages made it extremely difficult for the regime to seize the initiative and subsequently relied heavily on external support to be able to wage war effectively.[40] Furthermore, these territorial losses "demonstrated that the regime's military resources were extremely depleted and that Assad's fall was only a matter of time".[41] As such, the method in which the regime applied military power against the initial uprising only further inflamed opposition elements and drew in external actors. As the rebellion spread to several parts of Syria, and opposition forces grew stronger, it overwhelmed the regime's resources and necessitated further external intervention by Russia.

REGIME COHESION

Another aspect of power relations is determining whether the regime was a cohesive or fragmented actor. In this case, it can be argued that the regime remained largely cohesive both from a political and a military standpoint. At the start of the conflict, during the initial political

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[39] Itamar Rabinovich, *The Syrian Civil war as a Global Crisis*, (Sfera Politicii 25, no. 1, 2017), 45.
[40] Kim Hua Tan and Perudin Alirupendi, *The "Geopolitical" Factor in the Syrian Civil War: A Corpus-Based Thematic Analysis, (*Sage Open 9, no. 2, 2019), 9.
[41] Nikolay Kozhanov, *Russia and the Syrian Conflict: Moscow's Domestic, Regional and Strategic Interests, (*Berlin: NBN International, 2016), 45.

uprising, the regime did suffer from some "internal divisions within the regime hierarchy".[42] Furthermore, Assad's indecisiveness and "differences of opinion within his inner circle" likely contributed to the failure to effectively deal with the initial uprising, taking actions that only incited the situation resulting in its becoming a full fledge civil war within a year.[43] However, as the conflict progressed, and the regime's survival became existential, divisions within Assad's inner circle were cast aside and a collective sense of purpose emerged. From the military perspective, as was discussed under political identity and heritage section, coup-proofing significantly aided in ensuring the cohesion of the SAAF. As a whole, the Syrian military remained loyal to Assad. Desertions by soldiers and officers occurred individually and not as entire units.[44] "The officer corps had been packed with loyalists over the years, mostly Alawites, who were linked to or indebted to the Assads".[45] "This was particularly the case in the elite divisions [such as] the Republican Guard, the Third Corps and the Fourth Armed Division…[which were] "deployed in strategic locations to protect the regime".[46] As such, the regime proved to be largely cohesive both militarily and politically.

INFLUENCE OF THIRD PARTIES

As will be discussed in further depth in the next chapters, the regime's allies, Iran, LH and Russia, "were willing to give more to ensure the regime's survival than those states that wished to hasten its fall".[47] Both Russia, Iran and LH provided the regime with money, arms and

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[42] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*. (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 55.
[43] *Ibid.,* 56.
[44] *Ibid.,* 52.
[45] *Ibid.,* 52.
[46] *Ibid.,* 52.
[47] *Ibid.,* 166.

support as well as "willing to risk their regional reputations by sending their own personnel" to fight alongside the regime in Syria.[48] The regime's survival is indebted to the support it received from Russia and Iran. Iran ensured the regime did not collapse in the first few years of the civil war while Russia's direct military intervention in 2015 was critical not only to ensure the regime's survival but for turning the tide of the civil war, allowing the regime to regain both the initiative and territorial control of the majority of the country.

THE OPPOSITION'S POLITICAL IDENTITY & POWER RELATIONS

The challenge of defining the Syrian opposition is that it is not a homogeneous group, but rather comprised of numerous actors with distinct heritage, ideologies, and geopolitical alignments. Furthermore, power relations between opposition actors are extremely fragmented as they compete for support from third party actors in their pursuit of their own independent and often competing interest and strategies. However, the defining commonality that the opposition shares is the goal of overthrowing the Assad regime. To that end, this section will define the political identity and power relations of the main opposition actors as follows. The political opposition consists of the Syrian National Council (SNC), which later became a subset of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (National Coalition for short). In regards to the armed opposition groups, it can broadly be divided into two camps: armed groups under the FSA umbrella and the more formidable Salafist-Jihadist groups.

[48] *Ibid.,* 166.

HERITAGE & IDEOLOGY

The Syrian political opposition consist of numerous groups from varying ideological, religious and ethnic backgrounds.[49] The first official Syrian political opposition, the SNC, was established in Turkey in October 2011. The SNC consisted mainly of exiled activists and included secular elites, intellectuals, independents from numerous ethnic and religious groups such as the Kurds and Christians.[50] Prominent groups which joined the SNC included the MB, the Damascus Declaration and representatives from the Local Coordinating Committees (LCCs).[51] One of the main criticisms of the SNC was that it was heavily influenced and dominated by Sunni-Islamists, most notably the MB.

The MB was one of the most prominent and influential of all the actors in the political opposition.[52] The MB was initially welcomed into the SNC "for their ideological influence and history of opposition against the Baath regime".[53] The Syrian MB is a Sunni Islamist movement founded in the 1940s and fought an insurgency against the Assad regime in the 1970s and early 1980s only to be decisively beaten by the regime and banished from Syria in the mid-1980s.[54] Although the MB platform still held religious tenets that were not compatible with SNC minority groups, it did not push for the inclusion of these Islamic principles into the council's platform but

[49] Ufuk Ulutas, *The Syrian Political Opposition: What Went Wrong?* (Insight Turkey 18, no. 2, Spring 2016), 32.
[50] Jeremy M. Sharp and Christopher M. Blanchard, *Armed Conflict in Syria: US and International Response,* (Current Politics and Economics of the Middle East 4, no. 3, 2013), 426.
[51] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 106.
[52] Yehuda U. Blanga, *The Role of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Syrian Civil War*, (Middle East Policy 24, no. 3, 2017), 65.
[53] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 109.
[54] Yehuda U. Blanga, *The Role of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Syrian Civil War*, (Middle East Policy 24, no. 3, 2017), 65.

rather voiced a more secular and progressive agenda.[55] The MB also attempted to cooperate with other factions of the political opposition, at the price of its own ideological concessions, understanding that moderation was the key to inclusion.[56] The MB also had significant patronage from external actors such as Qatar and Turkey, who had a long standing relationship with MB charters throughout the Middle East.[57] However, the concern for Saudi Arabia, other Arab governments and the West was that the MB was "afforded too large a role, consequently scaring away potential supporters, notably Alawis, Christians, Kurds and secular Sunni Muslims" from joining the SNC.[58] Ultimately these concerns would lead to the demise of the SNC.

In November 2012, a new broader and more inclusive political opposition was formed with the backing from Saudi Arabia and the West. The National Coalition was an "umbrella coalition for opposition groups intended to expand representation and establish a legitimate unified voice for engagement with the international community".[59] The SNC was absorbed into the new coalition with the aim of diluting the influence of the MB.[60] The National Coalition consisted of a broader coalition than the SNC so as to include Sunnis, Christians, Alawites, Assyrians, Kurds, Turkmens and Arabs. The National Coalition also sought to reduce the influence of Islamist groups such as the MB and give a greater voice to Syrian minority groups.[61] One weakness of the SNC was its inability to bring in political representation of the Kurds.[62]

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[55] *Ibid.,* 65.
[56] *Ibid.,* 65.
[57] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 109.
[58] *Ibid.,* 108.
[59] Jeremy M. Sharp and Christopher M. Blanchard, *Armed Conflict in Syria: US and International Response,* (Current Politics and Economics of the Middle East 4, no. 3, 2013), 426.
[60] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 115.
[61] Ufuk Ulutas, *The Syrian Political Opposition: What Went Wrong?* (Insight Turkey 18, no. 2, Spring 2016), 34.
[62] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 110.

Although some Kurdish elements such as the Kurdish National Council (KNC) joined the National Coalition, other more prominent Kurdish groups such as the PYD and its afflicted militia, the YPG did not, largely because it rejected the notion of foreign intervention to topple the Assad regime and Turkey's rejection of the PYD/YPG as PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) affiliates. In theory having such diversity representing the official Syrian opposition projected considerable representative power, but in practice the National Coalition diversity made achieving consensus and delivering on commitments extremely difficult.[63]

The armed opposition was formed in July 2011 by defecting officers of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) who subsequently established the FSA.[64] The FSA can be characterized as a "loosely organized set of militias fighting in different geographic regions".[65] These militias have "varying political and ideological stances" and find common interest in their desire to overthrow the Assad regime.[66] Despite having a loose command and control construct, many militias fought directly for the FSA or at least recognized its leadership role.[67] That said, the FSA was never an army but merely an umbrela of armed groups that were reluctant to recognize or obey its authority. The majority of FSA armed groups are Sunni and their religious identity ranged considerably. Furthermore, as the conflict evolved, militia identities and affiliations were also subject to change. For instance, in the fall of 2012, Tawheed and Farouq helped form a new militia group called the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front (SILF) which fought for the FSA.

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[63] Ufuk Ulutas, *The Syrian Political Opposition: What Went Wrong?* (Insight Turkey 18, no. 2, Spring 2016), 34.
[64] *Ibid.,* 32.
[65] Jeffrey Martini, Erin York, William Young, *Syria as an Arena of Strategic Competition, (*Rand Corporation, and Intelligence Policy Center (U.S.), Vol. RR-213-OSD, Santa Monica; CA;: Rand Corp, 2013), 4.
[66] Ufuk Ulutas, *The Syrian Political Opposition: What Went Wrong?* (Insight Turkey 18, no. 2, Spring 2016), 32.
[67] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 132.

However, a year later, Tawheed and other members of SILF joined the newly formed Salafist-dominated Islamic Front alliance.[68] This is but one of many examples of the frequent rebranding and regrouping of opposition groups.

The Syrian conflict also attracted a more radicalized and extremist element consisting of Salafist-Jihadist groups. This camp identified itself as ultra conservative Sunnis who either sought to establish a religious state in Syria or part of a regional Jihadist movement seeking to overthrow secular regimes.[69] Notable groups in this camp include Ahrar al Sham (AAS) and Al-Nusra. AAS was motivated by anti-Shiite sectarian views and sought to establish an Islamic state in Syria. Ideologically, they rejected the National Coalition and the FSA. AAS also was ideologically opposed to Assad's predominately Alawite regime as well as the extensive support the regime received from Shia Iran. AAS led the creation of the Syrian Islamic Front in December 2012, further uniting other Salafist-Jihadist groups under one banner.[70] At the most extreme end of the spectrum of the Salafist-Jihadist camp was Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) later to be known as Al Nusra Front (ANF), an Al Qaeda affiliate who exercised "uncompromising views on the strict implementation of Islamic religious law".[71] "Although these [Salafist-Jihadist] groups share ideological affinities and cooperate with one another in military and administrative activities, they have not coalesced into a larger structure and still operate independently of one another".[72]

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[68] *Ibid.,* 132.
[69] *Ibid.,* 132.
[70] Jeremy M. Sharp and Christopher M. Blanchard, *Armed Conflict in Syria: US and International Response,* (Current Politics and Economics of the Middle East 4, no. 3, 2013), 426.
[71] *Ibid.,* 426.
[72] Samer N. Abboud, *Syria: Hot Spots in Global Politics,* (Newark: Polity Press, 2018), 83.

In sum, the heritage and ideology of the opposition is not homogeneous but in fact extremely diverse. Even within the political and armed opposition, there are divergent groups. The main commonality shared by all three groups is the desire to overthrow the Assad regime. However, that is where commonalities end. Even what form of government to replace the regime diverges immensely depending on which opposition actor is considered.

GEOPOLITICAL ALIGNMENT

This section will discuss how opposition actors geopolitically aligned or diverged with one another. The first aspect that will be considered is how the political opposition aligned with the armed opposition. The second aspect is the geopolitical realignment and restructuring of the political opposition that occurred in 2012 in order to limit the influence of the MB, as well as Turkey and Qatar. The third aspect is how the two armed opposition camps diverged from one another.

The main challenge of the Syrian political opposition was the divergence between it and the armed opposition. Although the international community recognized the SNC and later the National Coalition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian political opposition, there was a gap between the exile-SNC and the armed opposition on the ground.[73] Efforts to bridge the gap between the political and military opposition was through the establishment of the Supreme Joint Military Command (SMC). The "SMC was established a month after the inception of the SNC…in order to operate as the military wing of the SNC like a Ministry of Defence".[74] The

[73] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 106.
[74] Ufuk Ulutas, *The Syrian Political Opposition: What Went Wrong?* (Insight Turkey 18, no. 2, Spring 2016), 35.

SMC sought to organize opposition groups in Syria and better link them to the external leadership.[75] However, ties between the SNC, SMC and FSA were very complex, with the political and military branches of the opposition having not developed an interdependent and synchronized relationship.[76] Moreover, "the chain of command and bureaucratic hierarchy were never delineated clearly, and the SMC has enjoyed enormous operation independence from the SNC".[77] "Although certain factions of the military opposition have theoretically worked under the SNC, in practice the SMC never pledged their allegiance to or operated under the supervision of the SNC".[78] However, there were some successes in terms of cooperation and coordination achieved primarily through the influences of the MB. "If moderate militias tended to either operate independently or align with the FSA-SMC, then the less secular and more religiously orientated militias found a natural ideological partner in the MB, who in turn supported them financially through the SNC".[79] Also, the establishment of the National Coalition in November 2012 lead to improved coordination with the numerous military councils and a formal arrangement being agreed upon in December 2012 with a reorganized FSA.[80] As such, the SMC had mixed results coordinating activities and support between the SNC and National Coalition and the FSA. Further complicating matters is third party actors such as Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia often bypassed the SMC entirely and provided support directly with FSA armed groups.

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[75] Samer N. Abboud, *Syria: Hot Spots in Global Politics,* (Newark: Polity Press, 2018), 77.
[76] Ufuk Ulutas, *The Syrian Political Opposition: What Went Wrong?* (Insight Turkey 18, no. 2, Spring 2016), 35.
[77] *Ibid.,* 35.
[78] *Ibid.,* 35.
[79] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 131.
[80] *Ibid.,* 115.

The second aspect for consideration regards the geopolitical restructuring and realignment of the political opposition in the fall of 2012 in order to diminish the role and influence of the MB in the political opposition. By the fall of 2012, roughly a year after the SNC was established, it had become clear to several Arab and Western states that the MB had significant influence and control over the SNC. The influence of the MB within the SNC created an image problem for the SNC, in that it was labeled a creature of the MB.[81] Although this pleased Turkey and Qatar who were traditional backers of the MB, it became of increasing concern to Saudi Arabia, the US, and European states. As such, following another round of talks in Doha, the Syrian political opposition reorganized and established the National Coalition on 11 November 2012.[82] Although the MB still maintained some representation in the National Coalition as a member of the SNC, along with independent members in the Coalition itself, the reorganization achieved its purpose of diminishing the number of MB members in the National Coalition, and simultaneously expanding the size of the coalition itself. In doing so, the MB's "political power in the Coalition was less than it had been on the Council.[83] As such, it can be argued that the MB lead to the demise of the SNC.[84] The restructuring of the political opposition also shifted the geopolitical alignment, thereby reducing the influence Turkey and Qatar had over the political opposition and increasing that of Saudi Arabia.[85]

The third aspect regards as to how the armed opposition geopolitically aligned amongst the two camps. Although complex and dysfunctional at times, the political opposition maintained

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[81] Yehuda U. Blanga, *The Role of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Syrian Civil War*, (Middle East Policy 24, no. 3, 2017), 61.
[82] *Ibid.,* 61.
[83] *Ibid.,* 62.
[84] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 108.
[85] *Ibid.,* 123.

formal ties with the FSA. Conversely, the political opposition did not maintain formal ties with the Salafist-Jihadist groups largely to avoid alienating their international backers in the West. Furthermore, the relationship between the FSA and Salafist-Jihadist groups was largely adversarial, with frequent clashes occurring between them. However, within the Salafist-Jihadist camp relationships between major groups such as AAS and JAN/ANF were cordial. Salafist-Jihadist groups enjoyed "friendly, strategic relations…that have led to military and administrative cooperation".[86] Salafist-Jihadist groups "pursued largely cooperative relations with other brigades that share their ideological commitments".[87] Furthermore, "infighting between these groups over territorial control has not occurred on a wide scale; violence between them has been rejected in favour of shared governance of areas under their control".[88]

In sum, the largely independent FSA was loosely aligned with the SNC and National Coalition through the SMC. The geopolitical realignment of the political opposition and the creation of the National Coalition was designed to diminish and limit the power and influence the MB, Turkey, Qatar had within the political opposition and ultimately increased that of Saudi Arabia. Lastly, the political opposition only maintained formal ties with the FSA. The Salafist-Jihadist opposition did not have formal ties with the political opposition and often found itself in open conflict with FSA armed groups. Conversely, the Salafist-Jihadist opposition did maintain fairly cordial ties with other extremist groups in their camp.

[86] Samer N. Abboud, *Syria: Hot Spots in Global Politics,* (Newark: Polity Press, 2018), 83.
[87] *Ibid.,* 83.
[88] *Ibid.,* 83.

INTERSUBJECTIVITY

The political opposition, the SNC, and its successor, the National Coalition, viewed itself as the official opposition to the regime and the political entity that would determine the post-Assad transition to a new government. Although it gained political legitimacy from both regional and international actors, it did not have strong representative power from Syrians as it was formed primarily by exiles who operated from Turkey. The lack of legitimate support for the political opposition was only reinforced when it failed to deliver on the original promises of the Syrian Revolution.[89] Also, during the numerous political conferences that were held in the early years in an attempt to find a diplomatic solution to the Syrian conflict; the opposition voice was often represented by third parties such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, as well as Western powers.

The SNC and National Coalition viewed the FSA as its armed force that would overthrow the regime. As for the FSA, it also perceived itself as the official armed force of the opposition. Similar to the SNC, the FSA and SMC had a legitimacy problem as well. Given the FSA's leadership operated from exile in Turkey with the SNC, there was a disconnect between the FSA command hierarchy and the fighters on the ground in Syria.[90] The FSA also viewed its role not only as the legitimate fighting force to overthrow the regime but the Army that would replace the SAA. Although the primary adversary of the FSA was the regime and the SAAF, the FSA's primary competitor were Salafist-Jihadist groups. Given the FSA was highly dependent on arms and financing from third party actors, any aid provided to Salafist-Jihadist groups would

[89] Ufuk Ulutas, *The Syrian Political Opposition: What Went Wrong?* (Insight Turkey 18, no. 2, Spring 2016), 33.
[90] Samer N. Abboud, *Syria: Hot Spots in Global Politics,* (Newark: Polity Press, 2018), 77.

diminish their military capacity. As such, the FSA and Salafist-Jihadist groups were in direct competition with one another, not only for territorial and resource control within Syria, but for third party support and aid. As for the Salafist-Jihadist groups, they viewed both the regime and the FSA as adversaries. Salafist-Jihadist groups had their own interest and strategies which was to gain territorial control of large swaths of Syria in order to establish islamist governance. In sum, the SNC and later the National Coalition as well as its de-facto armed force, the FSA, viewed themselves as the legitimate political and armed opposition who would eventually determine and supersede the Assad regime.

INTEREST & STRATEGIES

This section will explore the interest and strategies of the opposition. Although the political and armed opposition was united in the aim of seeking to overthrow the Assad regime, they were divergent in their view of what should replace it. Some elements of the opposition wanted to establish a democratic representative government with respect for minority groups while at the other end of the spectrum opposition members viewed the Syrian conflict as a jihadist struggle to establish an Islamic State.[91] The divergence in the opposition's interest and desired outcome for the conflict prevented the opposition to formulate a coherent strategy. The SNC, as the official political opposition, proved to be fairly incoherent and ineffective in bridging the gap amongst competing opposition interests and as such was unable to agree on a political strategy.[92] Much of the disagreements within the SNC stemmed from "how much

[91] Jeffrey Martini, Erin York, William Young, *Syria as an Arena of Strategic Competition, (*Rand Corporation, and Intelligence Policy Center (U.S.), Vol. RR-213-OSD, Santa Monica; CA;: Rand Corp, 2013), 4.
[92] Kim Hua Tan and Perudin Alirupendi, *The "Geopolitical" Factor in the Syrian Civil War: A Corpus-Based Thematic Analysis, (*Sage Open 9, no. 2, 2019), 9.

weight to accord Islam in a post-Assad Syria and whether to request foreign intervention, military or otherwise, to stop the regime's violence against its citizens".[93] "Some members of the Council, especially the MB [and Turkey], saw no way to end the civil war without foreign military intervention from the air but firmly opposed boots on the ground".[94] Probably the most coherent element of the political opposition was the MB and the Islamic bloc it led within the SNC. The MB and the Islamic bloc was successful in advancing objectives within the SNC.[95] However, when the SNC was subjugated by the establishment of the broader National Coalition, the MB's influence and ability to push forward objectives was significantly diminished.

Like the SNC, the FSA struggled to develop a coherent strategy. The FSA's inability to marshal resources to the front lines or provide sound military strategies eroded support and legitimacy for the FSA-SMC. In addition, attacks against the regime by FSA armed groups were increasingly uncoordinated and absent of coherent military strategy.[96] "As the conflict evolved, there was an increase in the rise of sectarian and ideological commanders within the FSA leading to an increase in disagreements over military strategy".[97]

In sum, despite both the political and armed opposition sharing the common interest in overthrowing the Assad regime, they were unable to agree on a common outcome of what would replace the regime. Furthermore, the diverse and fractured nature of the opposition meant it did not operate with any coherence in regards to political or military strategies. As such, the

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[93] Yehuda U. Blanga, *The Role of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Syrian Civil War*, (Middle East Policy 24, no. 3, 2017), 60.
[94] *Ibid.,* 61.
[95] *Ibid.,* 61.
[96] Samer N. Abboud, *Syria: Hot Spots in Global Politics,* (Newark: Polity Press, 2018), 77.
[97] *Ibid.,* 78.

opposition's inability to achieve cohesiveness and coordination significantly reduced its prospect of toppling the regime.[98]

DISTRIBUTION OF POWER

This section will explore the elements of military power available to the two armed opposition camps in order to combat the regime. Although the armed opposition was extremely weak and vulnerable at the outset of the conflict, by mid-2012 armed opposition groups numbered over one thousand with over 100,000 fighters.[99] Furthermore, by mid-2012, external actors such as Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Western powers were providing both financial and material aid to the armed opposition. One of the main advantages the opposition had over the regime was its ability to recruit fighters into its ranks. Although initially the armed opposition in mid-2011 consisted of a few hundred defectors from the SAA, the conflict quickly became an attractive battle group between regional rivals.[100] Given the regime had strong Alawite and Shia influences as well as Iran as its primary backer, Sunni fighters from across the Middle East poured into Syria to join the opposition, providing an abundant supply of fighters.[101] To this end, the sectarian nature of the conflict favoured the opposition given that the Sunni-majority ensured a steady supply of recruits for the Sunni opposition, consequently making it more difficult for the regime to defeat the opposition.[102] However qualitatively, the IRGC and LH had better trained soldiers and fighters compared to the opposition.

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[98] Kim Hua Tan and Perudin Alirupendi, *The "Geopolitical" Factor in the Syrian Civil War: A Corpus-Based Thematic Analysis, (*Sage Open 9, no. 2, 2019), 9.
[99] *Ibid.,* 10.
[100] Samer N. Abboud, *Syria: Hot Spots in Global Politics,* (Newark: Polity Press, 2018), 76.
[101] Kim Hua Tan and Perudin Alirupendi, *The "Geopolitical" Factor in the Syrian Civil War: A Corpus-Based Thematic Analysis, (*Sage Open 9, no. 2, 2019), 12.
[102] *Ibid.,* 12.

Despite having an abundance of fighters the armed opposition suffered from a lack of unity. As will be discussed in further depth in the following section, the fractured nature of the armed opposition, in particular the FSA, eroded unity of effort within the opposition camp. Also as previously discussed, open conflict and battles were common between FSA militias and Salafist-Jihadist groups. The internal divisions within the FSA and conflict between the FSA and Salafist-Jihadist groups eroded any manpower advantage the armed opposition benefited over the regime. It should also be noted that the Salafist-Jihadist groups tended to be more united and cooperative amongst themselves than the various fragmented armed groups associated to the FSA.

Another key challenge for the armed opposition was availability of resources and material. Although the FSA enjoyed relative legitimacy among the international community, it was only awarded with low to mid-level arms.[103] "Unlike Pro-Regime forces, the supply of arms to rebels was limited for fear of the sophisticated weapons falling into extremists 'hands".[104] In the early years of the conflict, the FSA was not provided with game-changing weapons which could tip the balance in its favour.[105] It was only following Russia's military intervention did the FSA begin receiving more sophisticated weapons such as anti-tank and anti-air weapons from its external backers.[106] The restriction on supply of arms to the opposition was something the regime did not have to contend with, giving them a competitive advantage.[107] Although the SMC

[103] Ufuk Ulutas, *The Syrian Political Opposition: What Went Wrong?* (Insight Turkey 18, no. 2, Spring 2016), 32.
[104] Kim Hua Tan and Perudin Alirupendi, *The "Geopolitical" Factor in the Syrian Civil War: A Corpus-Based Thematic Analysis, (*Sage Open 9, no. 2, 2019), 11.
[105] Ufuk Ulutas, *The Syrian Political Opposition: What Went Wrong?* (Insight Turkey 18, no. 2, Spring 2016), 32.
[106] Kim Hua Tan and Perudin Alirupendi, *The "Geopolitical" Factor in the Syrian Civil War: A Corpus-Based Thematic Analysis, (*Sage Open 9, no. 2, 2019), 11.
[107] *Ibid.,* 11.

within the FSA "attempted to provide greater structure to the rebel groups by coordinating distribution of foreign funds and weaponry, key external actors often bypassed the FSA and SMC and provided support directly to individual rebel groups [thereby] marginalizing the FSA-SMC".[108]

In sum, although the armed opposition had enough manpower to extend the conflict for years, lack of unity amongst the armed opposition as well as scarcity of resources and not being supplied game changing weapon platforms prevented it from being able to defeat the Assad regime.

FRAGMENTED NATURE OF THE OPPOSITION

As has been briefly discussed in prior sections, the Syrian opposition was fragmented between the political and two armed opposition camps as well as internally within the SNC/National Coalition and the FSA. Further complicating matters, its support from regional and international backers had come with conflicting and competing agendas creating further divisions within the opposition.[109]

The political opposition has been characterized as having a lack of direction as well as being consumed with power struggles and disunity.[110] The opposition was also "divided along multiple fault lines between insiders and exiles and between Islamists and secularists".[111] As for

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[108] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 129.
[109] Ufuk Ulutas, *The Syrian Political Opposition: What Went Wrong?* (Insight Turkey 18, no. 2, Spring 2016), 33.
[110] *Ibid.,* 33.
[111] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 105.

the armed opposition, it was as divided as the political opposition and faced similar problems to those plaguing the political opposition.[112] Although mechanisms were put in place for coordination to occur between the political and armed opposition through the SMC, "the chain of command and bureaucratic hierarchy were never delineated clearly, and the SMC has enjoyed enormous operational independence from the SNC".[113] The "FSA and the political opposition made multiple, failed attempts to unify the command structure of the rebel groups to provide coordinated military strategies and resources".[114]

In addition to the schism between the political opposition and FSA, there is the internal fragmentation of the armed opposition. As of mid-2012, there were over a thousand different militias in Syria and by mid-2013, there were 1,050 brigades and 3,200 smaller militia companies.[115] Lack of leadership within the FSA contributed to its fragmented nature. Furthermore, cooperation among FSA affiliated armed groups "has not reflected any solidarity, cohesion, or a centralized command and efforts made to unite them have not yet worked".[116] It has been argued that "the fragmentation of the FSA and the lack of coherency and centralization within its ranks suggest that the brigades form more of a network of violence than an army".[117] The FSA resembles more a network of violence in the sense that it has a "decentralized form in which the various nodes of the network operate independently from one another but in relative cooperation".[118] The "infighting, resource and material deficiencies, and the geographical

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[112] Ufuk Ulutas, *The Syrian Political Opposition: What Went Wrong?* (Insight Turkey 18, no. 2, Spring 2016), 32.
[113] *Ibid.,* 35.
[114] Samer N. Abboud, *Syria: Hot Spots in Global Politics,* (Newark: Polity Press, 2018), 77.
[115] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 127.
[116] Kim Hua Tan and Perudin Alirupendi, *The "Geopolitical" Factor in the Syrian Civil War: A Corpus-Based Thematic Analysis, (*Sage Open 9, no. 2, 2019), 2.
[117] Samer N. Abboud, *Syria: Hot Spots in Global Politics,* (Newark: Polity Press, 2018), 76.
[118] *Ibid.,* 76.

diffusion of the FSA units all precluded the unification of the fighters into a hierarchical command".[119] The main disparity within the FSA was two groups of units. The smaller localized units were notoriously under-resourced and relied on the FSA for material support.[120] The second group within the FSA were self-proclaimed brigades that tended to be supported by regional and international donors and therefore were more interested in serving the political strategies of their patrons than those of the FSA. These brigades were in regular conflict with one another as they vied for control of key distribution routes and strategic areas.[121] Further fragmentation of the armed opposition occurred between FSA armed groups and Salafist-Jihadist groups. Salafist-Jihadist groups such as JAN complicated the dynamics of the armed opposition, leading to disagreements and clashes between the two camps.[122] Unlike the FSA that was divided despite being overarched by the SMC, the Salafist-Jihadist camp consisted of numerous independent groups that maintained more cordial relations amongst one another as was previously discussed in the geopolitical section.

As the conflict became increasingly militarized, it pushed the political opposition to the sidelines and brought the armed opposition to the center front.[123] This is most obvious given that regional backers often bypassed the political opposition and SMC and provided material resources directly to the FSA armed groups. "Such a strategy would end up dividing the more powerful brigades and turning them against one another, fostering mistrust among the commanders and between them and the SMC".[124] This also "lead brigades that were previously

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[119] *Ibid.,* 77.
[120] *Ibid.,* 76.
[121] *Ibid.,* 76.
[122] Ufuk Ulutas, *The Syrian Political Opposition: What Went Wrong?* (Insight Turkey 18, no. 2, Spring 2016), 32.
[123] *Ibid.,* 38.
[124] Samer N. Abboud, *Syria: Hot Spots in Global Politics,* (Newark: Polity Press, 2018), 78.

under the FSA umbrella to begin to break off and form independent brigades", further fragmenting the armed opposition.[125] Also, diverging interest between regional actors, notably Saudi Arabia and Qatar, led to their support for the armed opposition to be increasingly fragmented and consequently making the armed opposition less militarily effective.[126] Support for and divisions amongst third party actors will be discussed further in the following section and subsequent chapters.

In sum, the Syrian opposition was fragmented along numerous lines. The political opposition was divided within itself due to the broad nature of the opposition. The FSA was also fragmented with over 1,000 different militia groups. Mechanisms that were establish such as the SMC to help unify and coordinate efforts between the SNC and the FSA were challenged by internal divisions as well as competing interests amongst external actors. Ultimately fragmentation within the FSA would lead it to being sidelined and become irrelevant to battlefield dynamics by 2016.[127]

THIRD PARTY INFLUENCES

As discussed throughout this chapter, the main third party influencers to the opposition were Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Although the next chapter will discuss regional actors in greater detail, this section seeks to highlight the main influences these actors had on the opposition. The Syrian opposition was highly dependent on external support for its activities and

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[125] *Ibid.,* 78.
[126] Kim Hua Tan and Perudin Alirupendi, *The "Geopolitical" Factor in the Syrian Civil War: A Corpus-Based Thematic Analysis, (*Sage Open 9, no. 2, 2019), 11.
[127] Samer N. Abboud, *Syria: Hot Spots in Global Politics,* (Newark: Polity Press, 2018), 78.

operations.[128] Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar provided significant financial and military aid to the armed opposition and political support to the SNC and later the National Coalition.[129] However, the regional backers of the opposition were far from united. The Sunni regional actors were divided into two camps, with Turkey and Qatar being pro-MB and Saudi Arabia being anti-MB, splitting their support within the opposition.[130] Qatar and Turkey's strong ties to the MB ensured that the MB secured a leading role in the SNC, at the detriment of other groups.[131] Turkey also hosted the SNC and SMC within its borders while Qatar was largely responsible for bankrolling the SNC.[132] In an effort to diminish the role of the MB within the political opposition, the US and Saudi Arabia led the initiative to create a broader coalition opposition (the National Coalition) which trimmed the MB's influence on the political organs of the opposition.[133] As for the FSA, its "leadership being established in Turkey meant that they were heavily influenced and controlled by the Turkish government and its intelligence apparatus".[134] "By the summer of 2012, almost all of the rebel support from the international community was flowing from Turkey, [whereas] regional states such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia funneled resources and weapons [directly] to the rebels".[135] As the conflict evolved, Saudi Arabia and Qatar became "reluctant to provide full political and military support to the SMC and preferred resourcing particular [independent] brigades to be a more fruitful and advantageous strategy".[136]

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[128] Ufuk Ulutas, *The Syrian Political Opposition: What Went Wrong?* (Insight Turkey 18, no. 2, Spring 2016), 36.
[129] Kim Hua Tan and Perudin Alirupendi, *The "Geopolitical" Factor in the Syrian Civil War: A Corpus-Based Thematic Analysis, (*Sage Open 9, no. 2, 2019), 11.
[130] *Ibid.,* 3.
[131] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 107.
[132] *Ibid.,* 110.
[133] Yehuda U. Blanga, *The Role of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Syrian Civil War*, (Middle East Policy 24, no. 3, 2017), 65.
[134] Samer N. Abboud, *Syria: Hot Spots in Global Politics,* (Newark: Polity Press, 2018), 77.
[135] *Ibid.,* 77.
[136] *Ibid.,* 78.

In sum, although support from regional Sunni backers was critical for the opposition, competition between regional actors further weakened and divided the opposition.

KURDISH POLITICAL IDENTITY & POWER RELATIONS

Although Syrian Kurds share a common heritage they were divided into two camps based on ideology and geopolitical alignment. The most dominate group, the PYD/YPG was considered to be a non-aligned actor whose primary internal adversary was Daesh. The civil war provided the Kurds with an opportunity to further their quest for greater self-administration and governance. The Kurds also sought to expand their control over Syrian territory and the YPG brought an additional power dynamics to the conflict. Although the Kurdish camp was fragmented, the PYD/YPG as the dominate Kurdish actor operated cohesively. Lastly, the primary third party influences on the Kurds was the US who aligned with the YPG as its counter-Daesh partner and Turkey as a strategic rival and existential threat to the YPG.

HERITAGE

Syrian Kurds represent approximately 10 percent of the Syrian population and largely inhabit three regions (cantons) in the North and East of Syria (Jazeera, Kobani and Afrin). Unlike other Kurds in the region, Syrian Kurds are more interested in cultural and administrative autonomy over political independence.[137] Syrian Kurds "had long been marginalized by the Baath regime, enjoying no cultural or political autonomy and occasionally facing violent oppression".[138] Despite sharing a common cultural identity, Kurdish political groups were

[137] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 110.
[138] *Ibid.,* 110.

largely divided into two factions, the Kurdish National Council (KNC) and the Democratic Union Party (PYD). The KNC largely received its support from Iraq Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) leader Barzani whereas the PYD, as an offshoot of the Turkish-based PKK, received its support from the PKK.[139] Once the Syrian conflict turned into a civil war, "the PYD/YPG emerged as the most influential Kurdish actor both institutionally and in terms of the organization's outreach among the Syrian Kurds".[140] As such, the focus of this section will be on the PYD/YPG.

IDEOLOGY & GEOPOLITICAL ALIGNMENT

The PYD was established in 2003 and is considered to be the Syrian affiliate branch of the PKK.[141] The Assad regime has historically supported the PKK to counter Turkish influence and power. In 2012, in an attempt to bolster its defensives along its western spine, the regime withdrew its forces from the Kurdish cantons leaving the PYD and its YPG militia to administer the regions in its place.[142] The regime's voluntary withdrawal under no military pressure from Kurdish areas as well as the regime's historical support for the PKK fueled the perception amongst the opposition, KNC and Turkey, which the PYD was in league with Assad, something the PYD strongly denied.[143] As for the KNC, although it opposed the regime, it remained separate from the SNC. It was only after the National Coalition was formed did it become loosely affiliated with the political opposition. However, by 2013, the PYD had become the

[139] Samer N. Abboud, *Syria: Hot Spots in Global Politics,* (Newark: Polity Press, 2018), 85.
[140] Özden Zeynep Oktav, Emel Parlar Dal and Ali Murat Kursun, *Violent Non-State Actors and the Syrian Civil War: The ISIS and YPG Cases,* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2018;2017), 76.
[141] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 111.
[142] Özden Zeynep Oktav, Emel Parlar Dal and Ali Murat Kursun, *Violent Non-State Actors and the Syrian Civil War: The ISIS and YPG Cases,* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2018;2017), 76.
[143] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 111.

dominate and most recognized Kurdish group given its territorial control of the three Kurdish cantons and having a formidable militia in the YPG.

INTERSUBJECTIVITY

The PYD/YPG viewed themselves as a secular and moderate actor and chose not to align themselves with either the Pro-Regime or Anti-Regime camp. The PYD/YPG viewed Daesh as their primary adversary within Syria, and to a lesser extent other Salafist-Jihadist groups who sought to challenge its territorial control. The PYD viewed itself as responsible for providing local self-governance in areas it controlled. Backed by US/Coalition support, the YPG gained the identity of being the principle fighting force against Daesh responsible for liberating most of the territory east of the Euphrates from Daesh control and establishing local self-governance. The PYD/YPG also viewed Turkish involvement in the Syria conflict as an existential threat to the Rojava project which will be discussed further in the next section on power relations.

INTEREST & STRATEGIES

The Syrian civil war provided the Kurds, and particularly the PYD, an opportunity to pursue the Rojava project to increase self-administration of the Kurdish-dominated areas.[144] As previously mentioned, the withdrawal of regime forces from Kurdish cantons in 2012 allowed for the PYD to advance the Rojava project in terms of self-governance. The rise of Daesh and its threat to the territorial integrity of Syria provided a common enemy between the PYD and the regime. Although no formal agreement or alliance was formed, PYD's military wing, the YPG, fought against Daesh to liberate territories Daesh had seized east of the Euphrates River. This

[144] Samer N. Abboud, *Syria: Hot Spots in Global Politics,* (Newark: Polity Press, 2018), 87.

offered further opportunities for the PYD and the Rojava project to establish administrative councils in newly liberated areas. The regime likely did not challenge the emergence of autonomous Kurdish administered regions since it was preoccupied with fighting the opposition and Daesh west of the Euphrates. The regime "tolerates the Rojava project out of political necessity".[145] However, Kurdish control and administration of large areas of Eastern Syria, including oil fields in Dayr-ez-Zor province, provided the PYD with some political leverage in post conflict negotiations.

DISTRIBUTION OF POWER

The YPG was established in 2004 following the regime's crackdown of a Kurdish uprising in Qamishli in the Jazeera canton.[146] During the counter-Daesh fight, the YPG became part of a larger umbrella organization known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in October 2015, which consisted of Kurdish, Sunni, and Christian fighters. Despite the rebranding for political reasons, the YPG remained the most dominant military element of the SDF and continued to be command by General Abdi Mazloum.147 Of the Syrian Kurdish groups, the YPG was by far the best armed and had been trained by the PKK.[148] Furthermore, "the SDF has proven to be the only local force willing to directly confront ISIS and, as such, has received extensive U.S. support".[149] Being non-aligned with either the regime or opposition, clashes did occur primarily with Salafist-Jihadist opposition elements such as ANF.[150] As will be discussed

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[145] *Ibid.,* 88.
[146] Özden Zeynep Oktav, Emel Parlar Dal and Ali Murat Kursun, *Violent Non-State Actors and the Syrian Civil War: The ISIS and YPG Cases,* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2018;2017), 76.
[147] Samer N. Abboud, *Syria: Hot Spots in Global Politics,* (Newark: Polity Press, 2018), 88.
[148] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 111.
[149] Samer N. Abboud, *Syria: Hot Spots in Global Politics,* (Newark: Polity Press, 2018), 88.
[150] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 134.

in the section on third party influences, YPG's military power, which was so critical to the US/Coalition counter-Daesh campaign, would be perceived as a threat to Turkish security.

FRAGMENTATION & COHESION

Attempts to unify the Kurdish blocs were largely unsuccessful. Despite a deal brokered by Iraqi KDP leader Barzani in 2012, which created a Supreme Kurdish Council (SKC) consisting of both the PYD and KNC, and included a power-sharing agreement meant to avoid further conflict between the two groups, the agreement fell apart less than a year later.[151] Although the two Syrian Kurdish factions ultimately could not be united, the PYD was successful in establishing cohesive control over Kurdish administered territory to include the three cantons. Furthermore, the PYD created Local People's Protection Committees (PPC) which served to maintain order and creating administrative structures over areas it controlled.[152]

THIRD PARTY INFLUENCES

The primary third party influences on the PYD/YPG were the US and Turkey. The YPG/SDF were the primary local partner force for the US lead coalition counter-Daesh campaign in Syria. YPG/SDF combat power was augmented with the presence of Coalition Special Forces on the ground as well as Coalition surveillance and strike platforms in the air. As for Turkey, it viewed the PYD/YPG as an extension of the PKK and therefore a threat to Turkey's security. Turkey not only objected to any PYD role in the SNC but also viewed the

[151] Samer N. Abboud, *Syria: Hot Spots in Global Politics,* (Newark: Polity Press, 2018), 86.
[152] *Ibid.,* 87.

YPG as an ally of Assad.[153] PYD/YPG efforts to contiguously connect the three cantons along the Turkish border in an effort to form Rojava (western Kurdistan) lead to several Turkish interventions which seized large swaths of Kurdish territory along the border areas.[154] These interventions were driven by Turkey's concern over PYD/YPG efforts to form a contiguous Kurdish territory in northern Syria as a prelude to a declaration of independence.[155] As such, Turkish interventions to counter YPG/SDF advances not only threaten the counter-Daesh campaign but created significant friction between a vital US partner force (SDF) and a NATO ally (Turkey).

THE OUTCOME OF COMPETING INTERACTIONS BETWEEN NATIONAL PRO-REGIME AND ANTI-REGIME ACTORS

Having analyzed the political identity and power relations of Pro-Regime and Anti-Regime actors at the national level, this section will seek to determine whether these actors were successful in achieving their interests and objectives and what factors contributed to the resilience of the Pro-Regime camp over that of the Anti-Regime camp.

PRO-REGIME CAMP

It can be argued that the regime was successful in achieving its interest and objectives. The regime perceived the conflict as an existential threat and as such, the ultimate objective of the regime was survival. The regime's second objective was to preserve the territorial integrity of the state, which was under threat from both the armed opposition groups as well as the prospect

[153] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 112.
[154] Samer N. Abboud, *Syria: Hot Spots in Global Politics,* (Newark: Polity Press, 2018), 86.
[155] *Ibid.,* 88.

of Western intervention. As such, the regime sought to militarily defeat the opposition while avoiding Western intervention in the process. It can also be maintained that the regime was successful in achieving these objectives largely through third party support.

The main factors that contributed to regime's resilience were cohesion of the regime and support from third party actors. The primary factor that contributed to the cohesion of Assad's regime was that the security apparatus remained largely loyal to the regime. Both elite divisions and the officer corps derived from the Alawite sect and were extremely loyal to Assad. As a whole, the SAAF also remained loyal to Assad, whereby defections and desertions occurred on an individual basis and not entire units. As was briefly mentioned in this chapter and will be discussed further in the next chapter, the military support Iran and its proxies provided to the regime in the initial phase of the civil war was critical to the regime's survival between 2011-2015. In the third chapter, further amplification will be provided as to how Russia's direct military intervention not only ensured the regime's survival but also turned the tide of the civil war in favour of the Pro-Regime coalition.

ANTI-REGIME CAMP

It can be asserted that the opposition was not successful in achieving its interests and objectives due to a lack of coherence in its political and military strategies; it also lacked organizational cohesion. The main commonality shared by the opposition was the goal to overthrow the Assad regime. However, beyond that, the interest and objectives of the opposition diverged significantly, which made it impossible to build cohesive political and military organizations. The political opposition, whether it be the SNC or National Coalition, failed to bridge the gap amongst competing opposition interests and was unable to formulate a coherent

political strategy. It had little legitimacy from the Syrian people and failed to deliver as a government in exile. It also remained fairly divided on what form of government ought to replace the Assad regime and whether post-Assad Syria should be a secular or religious state. Similarly, the FSA never developed a coherent military strategy and failed to exercise proper command and control through the SMC over hundreds of armed opposition militias that made up the FSA. As a result, the FSA would ultimately become irrelevant as the military wing of the National Coalition and was unsuccessful in overthrowing the Assad regime. Similarly, Salafist-Jihadist groups would later also be militarily defeated by Pro-Regime forces and were unsuccessful in their aim of establishing an Islamic State in Syria.

The main factors that impeded resiliency within the opposition was the fragmented nature of the opposition and disunity amongst third party supporters. The political opposition being comprised of a diverse group suffered from power struggles and lack of unity. The inability of the political opposition to achieve consensus and formulate a coherent political strategy eroded its resilience. Similarly, the armed opposition suffered from a lack of unity and internal conflict. Open conflict between FSA militias as well as against Salafist-Jihadist groups were common since they were in direct competition for territory, resources and third party support. This in turn degraded their military capacity and resilience. The three primary third party actors who supported the opposition, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar did not have unity of effort. As will be discussed further in the next chapter, competing and diverging interests between the three regional backers fueled competition and conflict between opposition groups for scarce resources and support. In turn, this created further divisions within the armed opposition and made them less militarily effective and further eroded their resilience.

In sum, the regime was successful in achieving its interests and objectives as well as proving to be more resilient than the opposition. The regime's resilience derived from political and military cohesion as well as steadfast support from third party actors. Conversely, the opposition failed to achieve its objectives and proved to be less resilient due to a lack of coherence in its political and military strategy, the fragmented nature of the opposition, and the disunity amongst its third party supporters.

CHAPTER 2: REGIONAL ACTORS

The regional actors involved in the Syrian civil war can be divided into two camps. Regional Pro-Regime actors primarily consist of Iran and the IRGC-QF as well as its regional proxy groups such as LH and SMGs. Conversely, the main regional Anti-Regime actors that will be considered are Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey.

REGIONAL PRO-REGIME ACTOR'S POLITICAL IDENTITY & POWER RELATIONS

Iran and LH shared a common ethno-religious, ideological and geopolitical alignment with the Assad regime. Although Iran and LH do share a common ethno-religious affiliation through the Alawite identity of the Assad regime, it is their ideological and geopolitical alignment and interdependences as part of the Resistance Axis against Israel and the US that primarily bind them together. In terms of interest and strategy, both Iran and LH were supporting a long time ally where the risk of regime collapse threaten the Resistance Axis, LH's support network and strategic depth, and Iran's regional standing and influence. Iran and its proxies ensured the regime's survival through extensive military support exercised as part of a cohesive military effort which would eventually be extended to include Russian support.

HERITAGE

For decades both Iran and LH had maintained close ties with the Assad regime. Although the political identity that united Iran and LH to Syria was primarily ideological and geopolitical in nature, it is also important to note that the Assad regime's Alawite identity gave it an ethno-religious kinship as a Shia sect to both Iran and LH. Despite having an Alawite regime, Syria's

population is primarily Sunni Arab and the country has historically been viewed as having a pan-Arab identity.[156] As such, Iran's alliance with Syria offered a means to improve its regional appeal amongst Sunni Arabs, especially when its principle regional rival Saudi Arabia sought to delegitimize Iran's appeal to the Arab masses by emphasizing its Shia and Persian character.[157] Due to both ethno-religious kinship as well as a legitimizing appeal, Iran placed much value in preserving its ties with Syria as its oldest regional ally in the Arab world.[158]

IDEOLOGICAL & GEOPOLITICAL ALIGNMENT

Despite having differing political ideologies, Islamic revolutionary Iran and secular nationalist Baathist Syria found a common geopolitical alignment in their opposition to Israel and to US interference in the Middle East.[159] This geopolitical alignment came to be known as the Resistance Axis and would also include LH, Hamas and Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ). The Resistance Axis found common ground in supporting the Palestinian cause, to include opposing the political settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict, as well as opposing attempts for Arab states to normalize relations with Israel.[160] LH, as part of the Resistance Axis, would become "Iran's primary instrument of deterrence and retaliation against Israel and the US".[161] Conversely, Syria played a critical role in providing strategic depth to LH as well as the main conduit for arm

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[156] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 152.
[157] *Ibid.,* 152.
[158] Jeffrey Martini, Erin York, William Young, *Syria as an Arena of Strategic Competition, (*Rand Corporation, and Intelligence Policy Center (U.S.), Vol. RR-213-OSD, Santa Monica; CA;: Rand Corp, 2013), 2.
[159] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 70.
[160] *Ibid.,* 70.
[161] Emile Hokayem, *Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War,* (Survival: London;: 56, no. 6, 2014), 71.

shipments to LH from Iran.[162] As for LH, it also shared the common commitment to undermine the "US project" and its policies in the Middle East and viewed the Israelis and the Arab Gulf regimes as US proxies.[163] Syria's membership in the Resistance Axis also provided Iran with much needed Arab legitimacy and cross-confessional appeal.[164] "The 'Resistance Axis 'had given both the Syrian and Iranian regimes domestic and regional legitimacy."[165]

The Iran-Syria alliance proved resilient over a period of decades stretching back to the early 1980s. Following the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, "Syria was the first Arab country to recognize the Islamic Republic".[166] Israel's invasion of Lebanon in both 1978 and again in 1982 lead to greater coordination between Iran and Syria and sowed the seeds for the establishment and rise of LH in the 1980s.[167] Following the US embargo against Iran in 1983, Syria became the life-line for smuggling arms from Iran to Lebanon to support LH.[168] "By the late 1980s, the Hezbollah–Syria–Iran alliance had a direct effect on the power balance in Lebanon and on the Arab–Israeli conflict".[169] Syria was also the only Arab state to support Iran during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. In sum, Iran, LH, and Syria have shared a common strategic and geopolitical alignment for decades leading up to the Syrian civil war.

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[162] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 71.
[163] Randa Slim, *Hezbollah and Syria: From Regime Proxy to Regime Savior*, (Insight Turkey 16, no. 2, Spring, 2014), 65.
[164] Emile Hokayem, *Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War,* (Survival: London;: 56, no. 6, 2014), 71.
[165] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 31.
[166] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 71.
[167] *Ibid.,* 70.
[168] Ofira Seliktar and Farhad Rezaei, *Iran, Revolution, and Proxy Wars,* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020;2019), 168.
[169] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 71.

INTERSUBJECTIVITY

The section on intersubjectivity will discuss how Iran and LH viewed the conflict and how they perceived their respective roles in it. It can be argued that Iran and LH viewed the conflict primarily through a defensive lens.[170] That is, Iran and LH sought to support an ally, prevent regime change, as well as maintaining the Resistance Axis and protect LH's support network. In addition, Iran also viewed the conflict as a regional power struggle with GCC and the West whereas LH perceived the conflict as an existential threat to its existence.

As previously discussed, Syria was Iran's most significant and longstanding Arab ally for several decades prior to the Syrian civil war.[171] "Tehran framed its support of Assad as loyalty towards a reliable ally, resistance to foreign schemes to weaken the alliance, and denial of a violent challenge to what it portrayed as a legitimate and popular regime".[172] Iran was also concerned that the civil war presented an opportunity for its regional rivals to deprive it from its most valuable ally in order to diminish Iran's influence in the region.[173]

Perhaps even more important than maintaining an ally was Iran's fear of the alternative to an Assad regime. From Iran's perspective, there was no viable alternative to the Assad regime, believing that if the current regime were ouster it would likely be replaced by a regime hostile towards Tehran.[174] In a worst case scenario, Iran assessed that if the regime were to fall, so

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[170] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 151.
[171] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 153.
[172] Emile Hokayem, *Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War,* (Survival: London;: 56, no. 6, 2014), 74.
[173] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 141.
[174] *Ibid.,* 142.

would state institutions, thus ushering in chaos and instability, and resulting in Syria becoming a failed state where Sunni extremist elements would emerge as the dominant force.[175]

Iran viewed the Assad regime as a critical part of the Resistance Axis as it provided "Tehran with access to the Levant and the Arab–Israeli arena in order for the Islamic Republic to demonstrate its solidarity with the Arab-Palestinian cause in the struggle against Israel."[176] Syria also served as the primary conduit for weapons shipment to LH since the 1980s.[177] "Through Syria, Iran provided LH support of weapons, money and training".[178] Its ties with Syria also showcased an enduring example of Arab-Iranian cooperation and collaboration.[179]

Iran perceived the Syrian conflict as part of a broader regional power struggle. Iran portrayed the conflict as being fomented by external influences.[180] Iran viewed the armed opposition as being aided by these external actors in order to topple a legitimate government.[181] Regional and international adversaries were also providing support to the armed opposition in order to undermine the Assad regime in an effort to break the Syrian-Iranian alliance.[182] "As far as Tehran was concerned, any outside meddling and the toppling of the Assad regime was unacceptable and had to be resisted vigorously".[183] Iran also viewed the conflict as a struggle

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[175] *Ibid.,* 150.
[176] *Ibid.,* 153.
[177] *Ibid.,* 153.
[178] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 31.
[179] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 153.
[180] Emile Hokayem, *Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War,* (Survival: London;: 56, no. 6, 2014), 71.
[181] Ghaidaa Hetou, *The Syrian Conflict: The Role of Russia, Iran and the US in a Global Crisis, (*Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 39.
[182] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 140.
[183] *Ibid.,* 140.

against continued US interference in the region. Iran's fear of a western-led regime change dated back to Iraq's invasion of Iran in the 1980s as well as more recent US interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan.[184] From Iran's perspective, by saving the Syrian regime, it would mark a strategic defeat to US interest.[185] The survival of the Syrian regime would also "add credibility to the long-term objective of Iran's leadership to prove the policy of the US and its allies 'to be short-sighted, destructive, weak and most importantly, defeatable".[186]

LH viewed the conflict and the risk of regime collapse as a threat to its strategic depth and support network, its domestic influence and the survival of the Resistance Axis. It can be argued that "Hezbollah faced a grave, even existential threat should Assad be toppled".[187] As previously discussed, LH has been inextricably connected with Syria in terms of its political identity and interests since its birth.[188] Syria has provided LH with strategic depth, including the essential supply line to Iran for arms shipments.[189] LH viewed its fight in Syria as a means to ensure the regime's survival for its own interest rather than seeking victory over the armed opposition.[190] If the Syrian regime fell, it would not only have threaten LH's strategic depth and supply lines but also marked the dismemberment of the Resistance Axis which LH considered to

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[184] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 152.
[185] Ghaidaa Hetou, *The Syrian Conflict: The Role of Russia, Iran and the US in a Global Crisis, (*Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 40.
[186] *Ibid.,* 39.
[187] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 157.
[188] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 82.
[189] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 157.
[190] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 69.

be crucial for its war-making capability with Israel.[191] Furthermore, the fall of the Assad regime would constitute a strategic blow to the Resistance Axis and would likely bring to power a pro-US regime whether it be a Saudi or Turkish led coalition which would seek to curb Iran's influence in the region and isolating LH in Lebanon.[192] As LH "depends on Syria as a supplier and transit point of its armaments, it justifiably fears that a Sunni led Syria would cut off this important supply route".[193] Alternatively, in what LH assessed as a worst case scenario, Syria would turn into a failed state providing sanctuary for islamist extremists which would in turn threaten Lebanon's stability and territorial integrity.[194] From a domestic perspective, LH feared a Sunni-dominated regime being emplaced in Damascus "might shift Lebanon's delicate sectarian balance in favour of the Sunnis, at the expense of the Shia and Hezbollah".[195] A power shift in Lebanon in favour of LH's domestic rivals could pressure LH to disarm creating an opportunity for Israel to either defeat LH militarily or extract substantial political concessions.[196]

INTEREST & STRATEGIES

The primary objective for Iran was to prevent the military defeat of the Assad regime.[197] Regime survival ensured that two of Iran's strategic interests would be served. First, Syria was a key conduit to deliver weapons to LH. Lebanon's fractious politics prevented Tehran from

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[191] *Ibid.,* 81.
[192] *Ibid.,* 75.
[193] Jeffrey Martini, Erin York, William Young, *Syria as an Arena of Strategic Competition, (*Rand Corporation, and Intelligence Policy Center (U.S.), Vol. RR-213-OSD, Santa Monica; CA;: Rand Corp, 2013), 2.
[194] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 75.
[195] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 157.
[196] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 76.
[197] Randa Slim, *Hezbollah and Syria: From Regime Proxy to Regime Savior*, (Insight Turkey 16, no. 2, Spring, 2014), 63.

sending arms directly to Beirut.[198] With an Iran friendly regime now in place in post-Saddam Iraq, Iran now had a land bridge to Lebanon through Iraq and Syria that it was keen on maintaining.[199] As such, maintaining a friendly regime in Damascus was critical to supporting LH. Second, Syria played a key role as part of the Resistance Axis. Syria served as the support hub and strategic depth that kept LH powerful and capable of pressuring Israel and by extension the US, as well as maintain LH's political dominance over Lebanon.[200] "Iran also used Syria's proximity to Israel and the occupied territories to strengthen its ties with Palestinian groups, notably Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and Hamas, the political wings of which were both headquartered in Damascus" prior to the civil war.[201] Iran employed a two-track strategy which consisted of propping up the Assad regime through the provision of arms, oil and financial aid while also engaging diplomatically to attempt to resolve the Syria conflict.[202] Although the primary reason for pursuing the diplomatic route was to ensure the survival of the Assad regime, it also served to demonstrate Iran's importance as a key regional actor.[203] Iran also invested in the development of the National Defence Force (NDF). Iran's strategy in establishing the NDF appeared to be two-fold. The NDF provided additional combat power to ensure the regime's survival but also could serve as an Iranian proxy should Assad's regime collapse.[204] "The NDF was Tehran's

[198] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 152.
[199] Ofira Seliktar and Farhad Rezaei, *Iran, Revolution, and Proxy Wars,* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020;2019), 188.
[200] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 152.
[201] *Ibid.,* 152.
[202] *Ibid.,* 143.
[203] *Ibid.,* 143.
[204] *Ibid.,* 144.

attempt to build a pro-Iranian proxy from scratch to act in its interests as a back-up plan should Assad fall".[205]

LH's primary interests in intervening in Syria was to preserve the Assad regime in order to ensure its supply route from Iran through Syria as well as ensuring its strategic depth was not jeopardize.[206] LH was also naturally coming to the aid of an ally and supporting Iran. There were also numerous secondary objectives for LH in the Syrian conflict. These included "protecting Shiite-majority Lebanese villagers who lived on the Syrian side of the border; protecting Shiite shrines in Syria to prevent regional sectarian strife; and preventing Sunni extremist groups that were starting to establish a foothold in northern Syria from coming to Lebanon".[207] The Syrian conflict also offered LH the "opportunity to open up a new front against Israel and increase its strategic ties with Iraqi Shi'a militias" operating in Syria.[208] LH's strategy was relatively straightforward. As of April 2013 when LH's leader Nasrallah publicly announced LH's military intervention in Syria, LH began sending thousands of its fighters into Syria to both directly support Pro-Regime offensives as well as serving as advisors and trainers to Pro-Regime forces.

DISTRIBUTION OF POWER

The military support provided by IRGC-QF, LH and SMGs was critical to the regime's survival in the first four years of the Syrian conflict. IRGC-QF support initially consisted of

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[205] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 162.
[206] Augustus Richard Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History,* (Princeton University Press, 2018), 186.
[207] Randa Slim, *Hezbollah and Syria: From Regime Proxy to Regime Savior*, (Insight Turkey 16, no. 2, Spring, 2014), 64.
[208] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 82.

specialist personnel and units.[209] Iran was also responsible for providing an uninterrupted flow of weapons to Syria and assisted the regime in reorganizing its forces for urban warfare.[210] The IRGC-QF also coordinated the deployment of thousands of Shia foreign fighters, primarily from Iraq and to a lesser extent Afghanistan, in addition to the thousands of LH fighters from Lebanon. With the SAAF facing serious manpower shortages, these foreign fighters became increasingly important.[211] Through defections, desertions and attrition, the SAAF went from having 325,000 personnel in 2011 to 178,000 in 2013 to 80,000 by mid-2015.[212] It is estimated that by early 2016, 20,000 Shia foreign fighters were in Syria to include 8,000 from LH.[213],[214] Although reinforcements from Iran, LH and SMGs were vital to help the regime make up some of the manning shortfalls, more importantly they helped improve training, equipping and directing strategy and tactics.[215] LH "offered manpower, military advisers, trainers for pro-regime militias, and, crucially for combat in urban areas, reconnaissance, sniper fire, and light infantry".[216] "By offering expertise that Assad lacked, such as light infantry and urban warfare expertise, training, and directing military tactics, LH became a vital component of Assad's forces and greatly shaped the conflict".[217] One of Iran's "greatest contributions was its mentoring and development of the NDF".[218] The NDF, predominately composed of Alawite and other regime

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[209] *Ibid.,* 141.
[210] Emile Hokayem, *Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War,* (Survival: London;: 56, no. 6, 2014), 73.
[211] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 163.
[212] *Ibid.,* 150.
[213] *Ibid.,* 165.
[214] Augustus Richard Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History,* (Princeton University Press, 2018), 191.
[215] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 150.
[216] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 77.
[217] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 158.
[218] Emile Hokayem, *Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War,* (Survival: London;: 56, no. 6, 2014), 73.

loyalists, served to supplement the Syrian army.[219] "While the initial aim was to build up a force which was at least 50,000 strong, by 2015, it had grown to 100,000".[220] In sum, Iran, LH and SMG's were vital in supporting and sustaining the regime through the provision of manpower, expertise, training, equipment as well as directing strategy and improving tactics.

COHESION OF THE PRO-REGIME CAMP

For the most part, the Pro-Regime camp largely operated as a cohesive entity. Under the leadership of Suleimani, the IRGC-QF "led a major reorganization of the regime's forces, brought in Hezbollah and other Shia militias, and directed key aspects of military strategy".[221] This included the establishment of the NDF, which "functionally became a branch of the regime military, manning checkpoints and taking on combat roles".[222] The IRGC was also responsible for establishing several "command centres comprised of Syrian military, Hezbollah, and other Shia militias…[in an effort to] streamline Assad's complex web of competing security forces into an effective fighting force".[223] This also included conducting numerous joint operations, such as the battle of Qusayr in May 2013 and the Aleppo offensive of October 2015. At the battle of Qusayr, Suleiman was directing operations with LH leading the assault which was the first significant battlefield victory for LH.[224] In the Aleppo offensive, "2,000 Iranian IRGC troops, Hezbollah and Iraqi Shia militia commanded by [IRGC-QF Commander] Suleimani" conducted

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[219] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 77.
[220] *Ibid.,* 143.
[221] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 166.
[222] *Ibid.,* 162.
[223] *Ibid.,* 161.
[224] *Ibid.,* 161.

a combined offensive with regime forces.[225] "For the first four years Iran was by far Assad's most important ally".[226] The cohesiveness of Pro-Regime forces proved to be a significant advantage over the fragmented nature of the opposition camp allowing the regime to survive until Russian intervention in the fall of 2015.

THIRD PARTY INFLUENCES

Having already established how Iran and its proxies influenced the Pro-Regime camp, this section will briefly discuss how Iran influenced Russia's decision to militarily intervene in Syria. Iran's overtures to Russia began in the spring of 2015. "In late July, Suleiman, travelled to Moscow, where he met with senior Russian officials and warned that unless drastic measures were taken, the Syrian regime would fall".[227] Iran "calculated that Russia would not accept the fall of Assad, given their historical and strategic relations".[228] It can be argued that Russia's intervention in Syria in the fall of 2015 was due in part to intensive lobbying by Iran.[229]

REGIONAL ANTI-REGIME ACTOR'S POLITICAL IDENTITY & POWER RELATIONS

Saudi Arabia and Qatar shared a common heritage with the Sunni population in Syria whereas Turkey's heritage links dated back to the Ottoman period. In regards to ideology and geopolitical alignment, as a member of the Resistance Axis, Syria has been ideologically opposed to Turkey and Saudi Arabia who were in the US camp. That said, all three regional

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[225] *Ibid.,* 218.
[226] *Ibid.,* 166.
[227] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 145.
[228] *Ibid.,* 76.
[229] *Ibid.*, 152.

actors had favourable relations with Syria prior to the start of the conflict, but by the end of 2011 all three actors had turned against Assad. In terms of intersubjectivity, Turkey and Saudi Arabia viewed the conflict through a security lens and all three states viewed the conflict as a regional power competition and an opportunity to increase their influence in the region. Although Anti-Regime actors shared the common interest of deposing Assad, their separate quests to replace Assad with a new government that would be favourable to their own regional interest eroded unity of effort. The divergence in regional actor's interests lead to a rivalry and uncoordinated approach to supporting opposition groups, which in turn further fragmented the opposition.

HERITAGE

Although Anti-Regime regional actors shared a common affiliation with the majority Sunni population in Syria, in particular Saudi Arabia and Qatar in terms of a common Sunni-Arab identity, the ethno-religious component was not the dominate factor that aligned the Anti-Regime actor's. The Syrian conflict provided Turkey an opportunity to revert Syria back to a Sunni majority rule as it had been during the Ottoman period. Furthermore, Turkey had been a longstanding supporter of MB branches in various Middle East countries.[230] When Turkish-Syrian ties deteriorated at the onset of the uprising in 2011, Turkey was quick to throw its support behind the MB and secure it a leading role within the SNC.[231] Turkey also has had a long standing struggle with the PKK that operates in both Turkey and Syria. The Syrian regime's support for the PKK had historically been a significant source of friction between Ankara and Damascus.

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[230] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 109.
[231] *Ibid.,* 107.

Similar to Turkey, Qatar also had a long standing practice of supporting MB charters in the Middle East, to include the MB branch in Syria.[232] Qatar and Turkey's support for the MB branch is based on a shared ethnic, political, and cultural vision and lead to the MB gaining a dominant role in the SNC.[233] Qatar also maintained ties with Sunni tribal groups in Syria which it used to provide military support to armed opposition groups.

Unlike Qatar and Turkey, Saudi Arabia was a staunch opponent to the MB.[234] Saudi Arabia viewed the rise of the MB across the region during the Arab Spring as a threat to the kingdom and Middle East regimes.[235] Saudi-Arabia's sponsoring of the military coup against Morsi's Egyptian MB branch in July 2013 caused a serious fracture within the anti-Assad camp.[236] It was also during this period that Saudi Arabia successfully revamped the political opposition and established the National Coalition in the fall of 2012 which significantly diminished the role of the MB within the political opposition. Lastly, similar to Qatar, Saudi Arabia also leveraged its Sunni tribal affiliations to provide military support to opposition groups.

IDEOLOGICAL & GEOPOLITICAL ALIGNMENT

Prior to the Syrian uprising, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey all maintained favourable relations with Syria.[237] Furthermore, these states initially had no desire to see Assad removed

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[232] *Ibid.,* 109.
[233] *Ibid.,* 110.
[234] *Ibid.,* 119.
[235] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 128.
[236] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 193.
[237] *Ibid.,* 59.

from power similar to what occurred to Mubarak in Egypt and Ben Ali in Tunisia.[238] Their initial approach was to urge Assad to conduct reforms. However, Assad's failure to seriously consider their pleas for reform and the regime's increasing use of violence against political demonstrators in the summer of 2011 lead them to abandon Assad and call for his removal.[239]

Saudi Arabia "perceived Assad to be a resilient leader who had survived isolation, rebellion, and US policies in Iraq; he earned good will from the kingdom by refraining from condemning the Saudi intervention in Bahrain in March 2011".[240] "As a result, during the early stages of the Syrian uprising, Saudi Arabia remained favourable to Assad's regime and encouraged Assad to adopt reforms and desist from repressing protests".[241] In addition, Saudi Arabia had been pursuing a regional policy favouring regime stability in the face of growing popular unrest due to the Arab Spring.[242] Saudi Arabia believed that isolating or attempting to overthrow the Assad regime would be counterproductive to its policy of countering the effects of the Arab Spring and maintaining regional stability.[243] However, by summer 2011, "it became clear that Assad was unable to deal with the crisis despite heavy-handed tactics, the Saudi kingdom perceived a geo-strategic opportunity to disrupt the Syria–Iran axis."[244] Syria, as part of the Resistance Axis, was ideologically opposed to Saudi Arabia which had strong ties to the US. Therefore, if Assad was unable to contain the political uprising, Saudi Arabia elected to

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[238] *Ibid.,* 59.
[239] *Ibid.,* 60.
[240] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 121.
[241] *Ibid.,* 121.
[242] *Ibid.,* 124.
[243] *Ibid.,* 120.
[244] *Ibid.,* 121.

pursue its greater strategic objective of countering Iran by supporting the overthrow of Assad in order to inflict a strategic blow to the Resistance Axis.[245]

Qatar was one of the first Arab states to suspend diplomatic relations with Syria, ending a period of rapprochement and warming relations between the two countries.[246] Within a few months, "Qatar transformed itself from Syrian ally to leading anti-Assad state".[247] As will be discussed further in the next section on intersubjectivity, Qatar's shift in geopolitical alignment was largely due to the opportunity presented to be the lead Arab nation in the anti-Assad camp.

Turkish relations with Syria have historically been confrontational with a brief decade of detente in the 2000s. During the Cold War, Syria and Turkey were ideologically opposed, with Turkey in the US/NATO camp and Syria within the Russian camp.[248] Tensions escalated during the 1980s following Israel's occupation of Southern Lebanon which Syria perceived as Turkish-Israeli encirclement which lead Syria to join the Axis of Resistance as well as support for the PKK insurgency within Turkey.[249] In 1998, Turkey threaten military intervention in Syria if the regime did not cease its support of the PKK. Syria responded by moving "against Kurdish militancy on its soil and expelling the PKK's leader, Öcalan, from Syria".[250] This proved to be a turning point in Turkish-Syrian relations leading to a period of detente whereby Syria abandoned its support for the PKK and signed a security treaty with Turkey. In the 2000s, concern over US-

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[245] *Ibid.,* 124.
[246] *Ibid.,* 106.
[247] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 69.
[248] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 195.
[249] *Ibid.,* 195.
[250] *Ibid.,* 195.

backed Kurdish independence movement in Iraq brought both countries closer together out of a common concern for Kurdish separatist ambitions within their own countries.[251] In the 2000s, new leaders in both countries maintained cordial ties based on visions of shared history, culture and religious values.[252] Once the political uprising began in Syria in 2011, Turkish leader Erdoğan "called for political reform and national dialogue with the demonstrators".[253] When Assad did not respond to calls for dialogue and reform, Erdoğan denounced the regime's repression of peaceful demonstrators.[254] Similar to Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the assault on protestors in the summer of 2011 proved to be the breaking point for Turkey.[255] "As an Islamist regime, supporting the Muslim Brotherhood across the Middle East, Erdogan's government could not tolerate the Syrian regime's suppression of the Sunni majority and the large scale killing of Sunni population".[256] Realizing that Assad could not be persuaded, Turkey cut ties with Syria in September and by November 2011 Erdogan was formally calling for Assad to step down.[257]

INTERSUBJECTIVITY

Anti-Regime actors primarily saw the Syrian conflict in the boarder context of the Arab Spring. Saudi Arabia and Turkey viewed the Syrian conflict primarily through a security lens

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[251] *Ibid.,* 196.
[252] *Ibid.,* 203.
[253] *Ibid.,* 199.
[254] *Ibid.,* 199.
[255] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 72.
[256] Itamar Rabinovich, *The Syrian Civil War as a Global Crisis*, (Sfera Politicii 25, no. 1, 2017), 46.
[257] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 72.

and regional power competition. As for Qatar, it primarily viewed the conflict as an opportunity to further boost its regional influence.

Saudi Arabia perceived the Syrian conflict as part of a wider set of regional concerns which included countering the Arab Spring, confronting Iran, stemming the rise of the MB, and opposing the spread of Jihadism.[258] In the first half of 2011, the kingdom's primary concern was preventing the Arab Spring protests from spreading and reaching the Gulf.[259] It is for this reason that Saudi Arabia initially viewed supporting the Assad regime as the best way to halt the Arab Spring's momentum.[260] However, by summer 2011, with Assad's ability to counter the political uprising in doubt, Saudi Arabia's second goal of confronting Iran took primacy.[261] Flipping Syria from Iran's orbit had been a long time goal for Riyadh.[262] Replacing Assad with a friendly Sunni government in Damascus would not only sever LH's supply route but likely threaten LH's position in Lebanon, potentially shifting Lebanon into Saudi Arabia's orbit as well.[263] From Saudi Arabia's perspective, the regional balance of power had been upset following the 2003 Iraq war where the rise to prominence of Iraqi Shia parties and SMGs had swayed Iraq into Iran's orbit.[264] Therefore, the Syrian conflict presented an opportunity to counter the loss of Iraq with the prospect of gaining Syria into its sphere of influence and severing Iran's link to the Levant.[265] However, "the pursuit of Saudi Arabia's goals in Syria was [further] complicated by

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[258] *Ibid.,* 117.
[259] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 121.
[260] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 68.
[261] *Ibid.,*, 69.
[262] *Ibid.,* 118.
[263] *Ibid.,* 118.
[264] Emile Hokayem, *Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War,* (Survival: London;: 56, no. 6, 2014), 64.
[265] *Ibid.*, 65.

its simultaneous desire to prevent two forces among the anti-Assad groups from triumphing: the Muslim Brotherhood and the Jihadists".[266] For Saudi Arabia, the MB represented a serious threat to the Kingdom for the MB's "long-term agenda is to erase the current Arab borders and topple present leaders in order to install the 'true 'Islamic rule".[267] It is for this reason that Saudi Arabia sought to diminish the role the MB had in the SNC and later the National Coalition. In its efforts to counter Jihadist groups, the Kingdom initially supported through its support behind the FSA.[268]

Qatar viewed the Arab Spring and the Syrian conflict as an opportunity to boost its regional influence.[269] "The campaign in Libya, in which Qatar had led international support against Gaddafi, had swelled Doha's sense of regional influence – boosting its popularity across the Arab world and among western leaders".[270] The successful campaign to depose Gaddafi "translated into a feeling among Qatari policy leaders that practically anything might be possible" and that a similar intervention could be replicated in Syria.[271] It is with this sense of confidence that Qatar approached the Syrian conflict, viewing it as yet another opportunity to demonstrate its regional power. Qatar's involvement in the Syrian conflict was therefore opportunistic and did not steam from security threats as was the case for Saudi Arabia and

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[266] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 118.
[267] Line Khatib, *Syria, Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E. and Qatar: The 'Sectarianization' of the Syrian Conflict and Undermining of Democratization in the Region*, (British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies 46, no. 3, 2019), 395.
[268] *Ibid.,* 402.
[269] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 69.
[270] *Ibid.,* 135.
[271] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 108.

Turkey.[272] The Syrian conflict also provided Doha with an opportunity to demonstrate itself as a regional leader, an alternative regional power to Riyadh.[273]

Turkey viewed the Arab Spring and the Syrian conflict as an opportunity to promote a new regional order whereby old regimes would be replaced by popular Islamist governments, preferably dominated by the MB.[274] Once Turkey had turned on Assad in the fall of 2011, it came to view the regime as an "obstacle to its ambitious programme of regional leadership and economic expansion".[275] "Turkey was again a 'neo-Ottoman imperialist' power with an Islamist agenda favouring the exiled Syrian Muslim Brotherhood against the secular Syrian regime".[276] "Turkey expected the Syrian Brotherhood could bring a friendly and identity-congruent regime to power in Damascus".[277] The Syrian crisis "also reignited Turkey's competition with Iran for regional leadership".[278]

INTEREST & STRATEGIES

As discussed as part of intersubjectivity, all three regional Anti-Regime actors viewed the Syrian conflict as an opportunity to enhance their regional influence and power. Anti-Regime actors were keen on seeing Assad's regime disposed of and replaced by a regime favourable to their own regional interest. Whereas Saudi Arabia and Turkey viewed Iran as their primary

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[272] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 135.
[273] Emile Hokayem, *Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War,* (Survival: London;: 56, no. 6, 2014), 70.
[274] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 74.
[275] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 200.
[276] *Ibid.,* 201.
[277] *Ibid.,* 201.
[278] *Ibid.,* 201.

regional competitor, Qatar viewed the Syrian conflict as an opportunity to challenge the Kingdom's regional influence.

Saudi Arabia's primary objectives in the Syrian Conflict was to depose Assad and shift Syria into the Kingdom's orbit. "Overthrowing Assad and replacing his regime with one friendly to the Saudis meant further isolating Iran and depriving it of its main ally" in the Resistance Axis.[279] "As Syria is located at the heart of the Arab world, the establishment of an allied regime would enable the Saudis to exert more influence in Iraq and Lebanon".[280] This would include severing Iran's links to LH in Lebanon and fracture the Resistance Axis. In terms of strategy, Saudi Arabia exercised a range of instruments of power to include diplomatic, military and financial tactics against Assad".[281] The Kingdom initially provided a supporting role to the SNC, but later played a dominate role in formation of the National Coalition in an effort to diminish the MB's political role and influence. Saudi Arabia initially focused its military support towards arming the FSA in an attempt to prevent Jihadist groups from becoming the dominant element of the opposition.[282]

Qatar's primary interest in the Syrian conflict was the opportunity to enhance its regional influence and power by taking a lead role in opposing the Assad regime. In the first few years of the conflict, Qatar took a lead role in calling for foreign intervention and "publicly imploring the international community to support and arm the opposition to the Syrian government".[283] Qatar itself provided billions in funding to the armed opposition as well as becoming the main supplier

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[279] *Ibid.,* 127.
[280] *Ibid.,* 127.
[281] *Ibid.,* 133.
[282] *Ibid.,* 121.
[283] *Ibid.,* 110.

of arms to the rebels in northern Syria.[284] Qatar would also become the primary supporter of the Salafist-Jihadist groups in Syria.

Turkey's primary interest in the Syrian conflict was to replace the Assad regime with an islamist government, led by the MB, that could further its regional interest. To that end, Turkey played an instrumental role in hosting the MB-led SNC and allowed defectors from the Syrian army to use Turkish territory to organize themselves into the FSA in order to set the conditions of a post-Assad Syria.[285] Turkey's second objective was to limit the spillover of the conflict into Turkey and prevent Kurdish elements such as the PKK from taking advantage of the conflict. To that end, Turkey used the Syrian conflict as an opportunity to become more of an interventionist power, conducting three operations into Syria against the YPG and seizing control of a large swath of territory along the border.

DISTRIBUTION OF POWER

Given the divergent interests amongst Anti-Regime actors, it is not surprising that the provision of military support to opposition groups was competitive and uncoordinated. Also, Anti-Regime actors lacked experience compared to Iran in supporting proxy forces and were also restricted in the type and quantity of weapons they could provide to the opposition.

Despite Anti-Regime actors sharing the common goal of toppling Assad and backing the FSA as the principal armed opposition group, Anti-Regime actors pursued independent

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[284] Line Khatib, *Syria, Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E. and Qatar: The 'Sectarianization' of the Syrian Conflict and Undermining of Democratization in the Region*, (British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies 46, no. 3, 2019), 398.
[285] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 200.

approaches which ultimately undermined efforts of achieving their common goal.[286] Saudi Arabia and Qatar competed over the leadership and strategy of the FSA, and as a result, the process of supplying weapons to the rebels proceeded in a haphazard and opportunistic manner, exacerbating competition and inefficiency.[287] "Qatari and Saudi funding and weaponry was finding its way to competing factions within the FSA", with Qatar supporting groups with close links to the MB while Saudi Arabia favoured Salafist groups.[288] Although the Saudis primarily supported the FSA until 2013, the perceived weakness of the FSA in making gains against Assad lead the Saudis to shift their support in late 2013 to Salafist groups that operated independently from the FSA, such as the Islamic Front. Qatar initially backed groups affiliated with the MB and part of the FSA but would later back more radical groups such as JAN.[289] A lack of unity of effort and coordination between Qatar and Saudi Arabia prevented the creation of a unified rebel force to topple the Assad regime.[290] "Ultimately, the uncoordinated, competitive character of the initiative to arm the rebels contributed to the progressive fragmentation of the rebellion".[291]

Unlike Iran and the IRGC-QF who had decades of experience providing military training and support to their proxy forces, "neither Saudi Arabia nor Qatar provided a significant amount of direct military training or organizational and operational guidance to the rebels".[292] "Qatar had little experience of power projection, and fewer diplomatic and intelligence resources" in

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[286] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 139.
[287] Emile Hokayem, *Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War,* (Survival: London;: 56, no. 6, 2014), 67.
[288] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 111.
[289] *Ibid.,* 131.
[290] *Ibid.,* 111.
[291] Emile Hokayem, *Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War,* (Survival: London;: 56, no. 6, 2014), 68.
[292] *Ibid.,* 68.

comparison to Iran.[293] In addition, Anti-Regime actors had to exercise caution and restraint in the type and quantity of weapons they provided to opposition forces, given these weapons were typically channeled through 'operation rooms' in Turkey and Jordan. Weapon transfers were supervised by Western intelligence and military representatives who sought to ensure that sophisticated weapons were not being provided to radical and extremist elements of the opposition.[294]

FRAGMENTATION OF THE ANTI-REGIME CAMP

The previous section discussed how fragmented the Anti-Regime regional actors were in their approach to providing military support to the opposition. This section will briefly discuss how these regional actors were also divided in their overall approach of supporting the opposition, despite having a common objective of deposing Assad. The early stages of the conflict were largely characterized by the Saudi–Qatari rivalry which "complicated the difficult task of organizing the Syrian opposition".[295] Despite its many interests in the Syrian conflict, Saudi Arabia delegated the international leadership of the opposition to Qatar and Turkey in the first two years of the conflict.[296] However, as the conflict evolved, Saudi and Qatar "increasingly disagreed [on] how best to unseat the Syrian president…[and]…disputes over recipients of aid, political objectives and military matters eroded their professed unity of purpose".[297] Doha and Riyadh also "chose to support competing factions within the SNC and National Coalition.

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[293] *Ibid.,* 81.
[294] *Ibid.,* 78.
[295] *Ibid.,* 67.
[296] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 121.
[297] Emile Hokayem, *Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War,* (Survival: London;: 56, no. 6, 2014), 78.

Whereas Saudi Arabia relied on tribal ties, Qatar used its pre-existing links with the MB to play an influential role in Syria".[298] "Qatar's support for the MB faction was increasingly seen as a major cause of the persistent divisions within the Syrian opposition".[299] By the spring of 2013, the rising pressure on Qatar, due to the lack of progress of the opposition and its waning regional influence, culminated in the transfer of responsibility from Doha to Riyadh.[300] "By May 2013, Saudi Arabia stepped in to take the lead in channeling financial and military support into Syria. The region thus witnessed a 'shift in military supervision', with Qatar stepping back and letting the Saudis take over the situation on the ground".[301] In sum, "the regional powers prioritized their own agendas ahead of helping to forge a united and effective opposition".[302] "The political opposition may have started with a bad hand, but their external allies made it worse, and all played their cards badly".[303]

INFLUENCE OF THIRD PARTIES

Having established how Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey influenced the Anti-Regime camp, this section will briefly discuss how the Anti-Regime camp miscalculated the willingness of America to intervene in the conflict. On 18 August 2011 President Obama announced that it was time for President Assad to step aside.[304] Following the announcement, "Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia would proceed to act in Syria on the assumption that eventually the US would step

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[298] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 131.
[299] *Ibid.,* 113.
[300] *Ibid.,* 114.
[301] Line Khatib, *Syria, Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E. and Qatar: The 'Sectarianization' of the Syrian Conflict and Undermining of Democratization in the Region*, (British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies 46, no. 3, 2019), 399.
[302] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 124.
[303] *Ibid.,* 124.
[304] *Ibid.,* 79.

up".[305] Moreover, both "Riyadh and Doha anticipated that the US would eventually head and coordinate the effort to oust Assad, both politically and operationally".[306] Qatar "overestimated western willingness to repeat its Libya intervention in Syria".[307] However, little it be known to the Anti-Regime regional actors, "Obama had little intention of following up with military action".[308] In August 2013 another US red line was crossed when Assad used chemical weapons. Once again, Saudi Arabia and Qatar tried to persuade Washington that Assad had crossed the line set by President Obama and that military intervention to depose him was the most appropriate response".[309] Once again, the US did not intervene. In the next chapter, a more in-depth look will be given on the ramifications to the Anti-Regime camp of the US not militarily intervening in the conflict.

THE OUTCOME OF COMPETING INTERACTIONS BETWEEN REGIONAL PRO-REGIME AND ANTI-REGIME ACTORS

Having analyzed the political identity and power relations of Pro-Regime and Anti-Regime actors at the regional level, this section will seek to determine whether these actors were successful in achieving their interests and objectives and what factors contributed to the resilience of the Pro-Regime camp over that of the Anti-Regime camp.

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[305] *Ibid.,* 82.
[306] Emile Hokayem, *Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War,* (Survival: London;: 56, no. 6, 2014), 79.
[307] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 135.
[308] *Ibid.,* 82.
[309] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 130.

PRO-REGIME CAMP

It can be argued that Iran and its proxies were successful in achieving their interests and objectives. Iran and its proxies were able to achieve their primary objective of preventing the collapse of the Assad regime through the provision of extensive military support in the form of manpower, weapons and equipment, training, as well as advice and expertise in directing strategy and improving tactics. In doing so, Iran and its proxies were successful in achieving additional objectives, including: maintaining a vital ally, preventing spillover of the conflict into Lebanon that would threaten LH's domestic support base, preserving LH's supply network and strategic depth in Syria, as well as strengthening the Resistance Axis.

The Syrian conflict also provided opportunities beyond the initial objectives set out by Iran and LH. The Resistance Axis is arguably stronger today than it was prior to the start of the Syrian conflict. Not only has LH gained valuable combat experience in Syria but it has strengthened its ties and relationships with Iraqi SMGs, the NDF and the Assad regime. Furthermore, the land bridge between Iran and Lebanon through Iraq and Syria has also been strengthen. IRGC has also established a network of bases, factories and storage facilities throughout Syria which serves as a new front to support a future confrontation between Iranian proxies and Israel.[310] The success of Iran and its proxies and the additional enhancement of LH's strategic depth and the Resistance Axis is a major win for Iran in its regional power struggle against the GCC, Israel, and the US.

[310] Ofira Seliktar and Farhad Rezaei, *Iran, Revolution, and Proxy Wars,* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020;2019), 191.

The main factors that contributed to Pro-Regime coalition's resilience was the military support Iran and its proxies provided the regime as well as the cohesive nature of the Pro-Regime camp. The IRGC, and LH to a lesser extent, played a critical role in reorganizing regime forces, establishing the NDF, marshalling LH and SMGs, directing military strategy, establishing joint command centres and conducting joint operations. In short, "Iran proved essential to Assad's military adaptation and resilience".[311]

ANTI-REGIME CAMP

Anti-Regime regional actors were largely unsuccessful in achieving their interests and objectives. All three actors failed in their ultimate goal of deposing Assad and installing a new government favourable to their regional interests. Saudi Arabia failed to install a new regime that would have severed LH's links to Iran and turn Syria into its orbit, and ultimately fragmenting the Resistance Axis. Although Saudi Arabia was successful in countering the MB's influence and power, it was unsuccessful in curtailing the rise of Jihadism. Qatar failed to capitalize on the opportunity to increase its regional influence and was further marginalized by Saudi Arabia. Although Turkey was unsuccessful in its primary objective to install the MB in power, it was able to take advantage of the conflict to conduct counter-PKK operations and establish a Turkish security buffer zone within Syria.

The main factors that impeded resiliency within the Anti-Regime camp was the lack of cohesion and unity of effort amongst the regional actors. The rivalry between KSA and Qatar lead them to prioritize their own agendas ahead of contributing to forge a united and effective

[311] Emile Hokayem, *Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War,* (Survival: London;: 56, no. 6, 2014), 73.

opposition. The uncoordinated and competitive approach of providing military aid to the armed opposition only further fragmented the latter, rather than creating a unified opposition force. Lack of experience in supporting proxy forces on behalf of the regional actors resulted in an uncoordinated scattergun approach of arming the rebels, which in turn greatly impacted their unity and effectiveness.[312] Lastly, Anti-Regime actors did not face an existential threat as did their Pro-Regime rivals, and as such, their survival was not at stake and therefore could afford to be less committed to the cause compared to Pro-Regime actors.

In sum, Pro-Regime regional actors led by Iran and its proxies were successful in achieving their interests and objectives and proved to be far more resilient than Anti-Regime regional actors. The Pro-Regime camp not only ensured the survival of the Assad regime but Iran and its proxies have further entrenched themselves into Syria. Not only are LH's supply lines through Syria secured but it has gained valuable battlefield experience. As a result, the Resistance Axis is arguably stronger now than it was prior to the start of the conflict. Iran and its proxies were also far more proficient, committed and coordinated in their provision of military support to the regime compared to the Anti-Regime camp whose support to the opposition was uncoordinated, competitive, and lacked strategy and experience in supporting proxies. Although the Anti-Regime camp miscalculated the resilience of the Syrian regime and its regional backers, its own strategy "had a significant impact on the fragmentation of the opposition and its inability to forge a viable unified military front against Assad".[313] Lastly, Iran was successful in

[312] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 136.
[313] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 132.

influencing Russia's intervention, whereas the Anti-Regime actors not only miscalculated the probability that the US would eventually intervene but also failed to convince it to join the fight.

CHAPTER 3: INTERNATIONAL ACTORS

The two primary international actors involved in the Syrian civil war consist of Russia and the US, with Russia firmly in the Pro-Regime camp and US supporting Anti-Regime actors.

RUSSIA'S POLITICAL IDENTITY & POWER RELATIONS

Russia's political identity is in part defined by the geopolitical alignment it has shared with the Assad regime spanning several decades. In terms of intersubjectivity, Russia viewed the Syrian conflict as presenting both threats and opportunities. Russia was particularly concerned with the prospect of a US lead foreign intervention and the rise in islamist extremism, both of which threatened the regime's survival. Russia also viewed the conflict as an opportunity to reassert its influence in the region. In regards to power relations, Russia's interests and strategy in Syria evolved from that of limited diplomatic and military support to conducting a direct military intervention. Its military intervention in 2015 would prove to decisively shift the balance of power in favour of the Pro-Regime camp which operated far more cohesively than the Anti-Regime camp.

IDEOLOGICAL & GEOPOLITICAL ALIGNMENT

"Russia's relationship with Damascus had formed the cornerstone of Russian strategy in the Middle East since before the era of President Hafez al-Assad".[314] In 1980, Hafez al-Assad's Baath party signed "an agreement of friendship and cooperation between the Soviet Union and Syria".[315] At the time, the Syrian regime "sought a Soviet alliance to counter what was seen as

[314] *Ibid.,* 229.
[315] *Ibid.,* 230.

Western and Israeli threats".[316] Although the Syrian Arab Republic and Baath party did not share a common ideological identity with the communist Soviet Union, they were nevertheless both strategically aligned against the US. It was also during the early 1980s that the Soviets established a logistical support base at Tartus which served the needs of the Soviet navy.[317] Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian ties with Syria and the Middle East as a whole waned. However, in the mid-2000s, Putin revitalized relations with its Syrian ally, primarily via economic means.[318] Russia's historical geopolitical alignment with Syria, including its agreement of friendship and cooperation, "played an important role in legitimizing Russian involvement in the Syrian crisis".[319] Russia's geopolitical alignment with Syria would be a factor that both lead to Russian initial support and later legitimized its military intervention in Syria.

INTERSUBJECTIVITY

As previously mentioned, Russia viewed the Syrian conflict in terms of threats to its interests as well as an opportunity to reassert its influence in the region. The two threats Russia was primarily concerned with was the prospect of US/Western military intervention and the rise of Islamic extremism, both of which threaten the survival of the Assad regime. From Russia's perspective, nothing good had come from the US lead regime change in Iraq and Libya and that the prospect of US backed intervention in Syria would not only overthrow a Russian ally but

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[316] *Ibid.,* 229.
[317] Nikolay Kozhanov, *Russian Support for Assad's Regime: Is there a Red Line?* (Null 48, no. 2, 2013), 26.
[318] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 231.
[319] *Ibid.,* 230.

likely lead to further instability and the rise in jihadism.[320] "The Russian government sincerely believed that Assad's removal from power would trigger the expansion of jihadism and instability in the Caucasus and southern Russia".[321] Due to the presence of an islamist movement in the Caucasus, Russia was extremely concerned that foreign fighters gaining battlefield experience in Syria would later return to continue their jihad in Russia.[322] Furthermore, "Moscow was deeply concerned about the efforts of Qatar and Saudi Arabia to support the most radical factions in Syria".[323] As such, and similar to the regime's position, Russia viewed the conflict as a battle against Islamic extremism backed by external actors. Russia also viewed the Syrian conflict as an opportunity to reassert its influence in the region after being largely absent since the fall of the Soviet Union two decades prior.[324]

INTEREST & STRATEGIES

Although Russian interest in the Syrian conflict remained largely consistent, the strategy it employed evolved in due course of the conflict, from limited diplomatic and military support between 2011-2015 to a direct military intervention in the fall of 2015. As discussed in the previous section, Russia's primary interests in the Syrian conflict was to ensure the regime's survival by deterring US/Western military intervention as well as containing the rise of Islamic extremism. Russia would also seek to reassert its regional influence through the national dialogue and conflict settlement process.

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[320] *Ibid.,* 245.
[321] Nikolay Kozhanov, *Russian Support for Assad's Regime: Is there a Red Line?* (Null 48, no. 2, 2013), 29.
[322] Samuel Charap, Elina Treyger, and Edward Geist, *Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria, (*RAND Corporation, 2019), 4.
[323] Nikolay Kozhanov, *Russian Support for Assad's Regime: Is there a Red Line?* (Null 48, no. 2, 2013), 29.
[324] Ghaidaa Hetou, *The Syrian Conflict: The Role of Russia, Iran and the US in a Global Crisis, (*Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 86.

In terms of strategy, prior to Russia's military intervention in 2015, Russia sought to ensure the regime's survival through the provision of diplomatic support and military aid. In regards to diplomatic support, Russia believed that the conflict settlement could only be achieved through the national dialogue process.[325] Although Russia primarily represented the regime's interest at international conventions, it also established itself as the only country that was capable of talking with both the opposition and the regime, further legitimatizing its role in the conflict settlement process.[326] Russia also used the national dialogue process in order to oppose any foreign military intervention and stressed the need to maintain Syrian territorial integrity.[327] As such, the national dialogue process furthered two Russian objectives: that of preventing foreign intervention, as well as demonstrating its influence and diplomatic abilities at conflict resolution. Although the national dialogue process failed to achieve any tangible results in terms of conflict resolution, Russia did achieve a significant diplomatic success in August 2013 by preventing US/Western military intervention following the regime's chemical attack against opposition forces.[328] In coordination with Iran, Russia convinced the Syrian regime to surrender its chemical weapons for destruction in order to stave off military intervention by the West. This diplomatic achievement not only avoided foreign military intervention in Syria, but also demonstrated Russia's ability to act as a regional powerbroker.[329] As such, prior to resorting to a military intervention in 2015, Russia invested significant efforts in seeking a political solution to the conflict.

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[325] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 253.
[326] *Ibid.,* 258.
[327] Nikolay Kozhanov, *Russia and the Syrian Conflict: Moscow's Domestic, Regional and Strategic Interests,* (Berlin: NBN International, 2016), 44.
[328] *Ibid.,* 46.
[329] *Ibid.,* 47.

Russia's provision of military aid to the regime leading up to 2015 sought to achieve two objectives. First, it would provide the regime necessary resources to fight the armed opposition and second, it would ensure regime survival and prevent the spread of Islamic extremism to Russia. By 2015, a resurgent armed opposition backed by regional and international actors was posing an existential threat to the survival of the regime.[330] By the summer 2015, it had become clear to Moscow that the regime was on the verge of collapse and a new approach was clearly needed if the regime were to survive.[331]

There were several factors that influenced Russia's decision to conduct a military intervention in the fall of 2015, which can be directly linked to Russian interests. These included the perception that the regime was at risk of imminent collapse which would legitimize Western-back regime change efforts through their support of the armed opposition. Regime collapse would also create another failed state and safe haven for Islamic extremism which could threaten Russia. It would also represent a failure in Russia's attempt to reassert itself as a regional player. Following Russia's military intervention, it pursued a dual strategy of applying military pressure on the armed opposition while pursuing the diplomatic track. This involved establishing de-escalation zones in order to temporarily create ceasefires with opposition forces, all the while allowing regime forces to conduct offensives on other fronts.[332] By 2017, embolden by Pro-Regime forces tactical victories on the battlefield, Moscow became increasing assertive

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[330] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 216.
[331] Nikolay Kozhanov, *Russia and the Syrian Conflict: Moscow's Domestic, Regional and Strategic Interests, (*Berlin: NBN International, 2016), 61.
[332] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 257.

diplomatically, establishing its own conflict settlement process through the Astana Talks with Turkey and Iran.[333] In sum, when Russia's interests in the Syrian conflict were in jeopardy, it doubled down by shifting its strategy from limited diplomatic and military support to conducting a direct military intervention.

DISTRIBUTION OF POWER

Russia's military intervention in Syria in the fall of 2015 had a significant impact on the power distribution for the Pro-Regime camp. The main objective of Russia's military deployment was to re-establish the regime's military capacity in order to ensure the regime did not collapse.[334] Within a week of Russia's intervention, Pro-Regime forces consisting of IRGC-QF, LH, SMGs supported by Russian air force launched a series of offensives against opposition forces along multiple fronts.[335] Within months, opposition forces began to lose ground and Pro-Regime forces were able to "stabilize their front lines and made a number of territorial advances".[336] By early 2016 the Pro-Regime forces were making major territorial gains and "Russia's intervention had ultimately reset the military balance [of power] in Syria" in the regime's favour.[337] By 2017, the regime had been successful in retaking numerous parts of Syrian territory from opposition forces.[338] Russia's military intervention in 2015 prevented the imminent collapse of the regime, re-establish the regime's military capacity, and set the

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[333] *Ibid.,* 256.
[334] *Ibid.,* 248.
[335] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 218.
[336] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 250.
[337] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 219.
[338] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 256.

conditions for the regime to regain the initiative and territorial control of most of Syria from the opposition.

COHESION OF THE PRO-REGIME CAMP

Although Russia's military intervention and redistribution of power in favour of the Pro-Regime camp was a critical element in turning the tide of the civil war, it is important to note that it would not have been possible if not for the cohesive nature of the Pro-Regime camp. Chapter 2 discussed cohesion between Iran and the regime, this section will discuss the cohesion between Russia, the regime, and Iran. Syria and Russia had a pre-existing military relationship of cooperation and intelligence sharing prior to the Syrian conflict.[339] The regime provided the Russian intervention legitimacy by requesting its assistance and providing the Russians basing rights at Tartus naval base and Basel al-Assad (BAA) airbase.[340]

As for Iran, it provided Russian aircraft overflight rights as well as permission to conduct cruise missile strikes from Russian warships in the Caspian through their airspace.[341] Iran also provided Russia with temporary basing rights to conduct Long Range Aviation strikes from Iran airbases.[342] "Moscow and Tehran also closely coordinated their military efforts in support of Damascus".[343] "A clear division of labour between the Russians and Iranians [was established] whereby Russian air power supported ground offensives lead by IRGC and supported by LH and

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[339] Samuel Charap, Elina Treyger, and Edward Geist, *Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria, (*RAND Corporation, 2019), 12.
[340] *Ibid.,*, 9.
[341] *Ibid.,* 9.
[342] *Ibid.,* 10.
[343] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 150.

SMGs.[344] Having conducted its direct military intervention in September 2015, Russia commenced coordinating airstrikes with Pro-Regime offensives, conducting over 6,000 sorties in the first four months following its intervention.[345] This collaborative spirit between Iran and Russia was echoed by President Putin during a visit to Tehran in November 2015 where he praised Iran's collaboration with Russia stating that" all that has been done in coordination with our Iranian partners and without their help it would have been impossible".[346] As such, cohesion within the Pro-Regime camp ensured strong coordination and collaboration of military efforts which turned the tide of the war against the opposition.

US POLITICAL IDENTITY & POWER RELATIONS

US political identity is defined by a historical adversarial relationship with the Assad regime. The US viewed the Syrian conflict as part of the unstoppable forces of the Arab Spring and would inevitably lead to Assad's demise. For its part, the Obama administration had no interest in conducting a military intervention in Syria similar to that of Libya and believed that the Syrian conflict should be resolved through a political settlement process. In regards to power relations, US strategy in Syria can be describe as a reluctant actor which sought to provide limited support to the opposition and the means for the latter to defend itself against the regime rather than the capacity to militarily overthrow the regime. Despite US reluctance to militarily intervene, the Anti-Regime camp predicated their strategy in the first few years of the conflict on the assumption that the US would eventually intervene. Lastly, lack of US involvement and

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[344] *Ibid.,* 146.
[345] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 214.
[346] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 146.

leadership in the Anti-Regime camp contributed to the fragmented approach undertaken by Anti-regime regional actors.

GEOPOLITICAL ALIGNMENT

Syria's historical relations with the US have largely been adversarial. Friction points include Syria's role in the Axis of Resistance against Israel, its support for US designated terrorist organizations such as LH, its occupation of Lebanon, and its pursuit of chemical weapons and missile programs.[347] During the 2000s, relations further deteriorated with the Bush administration over Syria's failure to prevent foreign fighters from entering Iraq, as well as harbouring former Iraqi regime elements supporting the insurgency in Iraq.[348] Prior to the onset of the Syrian conflict the Obama administration was redefining US foreign policy in the Middle East. The US endeavoured to reduce its military presence in the region and rebuild its reputation within the wider Islamic world. This included rolling back on Bush's interventionist policies and seeking to bring the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts to an end.[349] In Syria, the Obama administration sought to reverse Bush's isolationist policy towards the regime by cautiously reengaging with Syria, in part by appointing a US ambassador following a five year absence.[350] The US also viewed Syria as an important actor in ensuring the stability of Iraq by stemming the flow of Jihadist fighters entering Iraq from Syria.[351]

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[347] US Department of State, *US Relations with Syria*, (Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, 20 January, 2021).
[348] *Ibid.*
[349] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*. (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 26.
[350] *Ibid.,* 26.
[351] *Ibid.,* 26.

It is important to also consider the Syrian conflict as part of a wider US regional interest. The Syrian conflict was a lower priority for the US compared to other regional foreign policy objectives, such as negotiations over the Iran nuclear program.[352] Although the fall of Assad would have further isolated Iran and potentially precipitated a quicker resolution to the nuclear negotiations, US military intervention leading to direct combat with Iranian and LH combatants on the battlefield could have jeopardized those negotiations.[353] As a concession to those within the government that were in favour of a US military intervention, Obama authorized covert operations to armed rebel groups as well as gave Saudi Arabia and Qatar the green light to further militarize the conflict. This concession was made in order to avoid a direct involvement that could have jeopardize US diplomatic strategy on the Iranian nuclear programme. In short, any actions taken against the Assad regime would have to be weighed against the risk of impacting negotiations with Iran, which was a higher priority.[354]

INTERSUBJECTIVITY

The US viewed the Syrian conflict as the "latest falling domino in the Arab Spring".[355] Moreover, many senior US officials perceived the Arab Spring as "as an unstoppable historical force that would eventually sweep aside Assad as it had Mubarak" in Egypt.[356] By the summer of 2011, "Obama's team was increasingly convinced that Assad was finished".[357] Following the

[352] *Ibid.,* 27.
[353] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 214.
[354] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 434.
[355] *Ibid.,* 77.
[356] *Ibid.,* 80.
[357] *Ibid.,* 80.

regime's violent crackdown in summer 2011, Obama called on Assad to step aside on 18 August 2011.[358] "Obama's statement immediately raised concerns in the State Department: he had declared it was US policy to pursue regime change in Syria, but without a clear strategy to achieve this".[359] Obama had no plans for the US to affect regime change nor desire for the US to intervene militarily. The calculus in the Obama administration in the summer of 2011 was that the regime was on the verge of collapse and there was more political risk in not denouncing the regime at this point than to do so. Furthermore, calling for Assad to go was perceived as the end point since the regime would be toppled by internal forces. However, the regime's continued resilience would put increased pressure on the US to do more and there was a rising expectation by other actors that the US would use military means to achieve its goal of regime change.[360] Pro-Regime actors such as Iran and Russia were emboldened to stand by their ally while Anti-Regime regional actors felt vindicated in their hostile stance towards Assad and proceeded with the expectation that the US was committed to regime change and assumed that the US would eventually intervene militarily.[361] The following section on power relations will discuss US strategy in Syria and how it impacted power distribution and contributed to the fragmentation of the opposition.

INTEREST & STRATEGIES

Following Obama's announcement for Assad to step aside in the summer of 2011, US policy sought a negotiated political settlement to the Syrian conflict whereby a new authority

[358] *Ibid.,* 79.
[359] *Ibid.,* 81.
[360] *Ibid.,* 81.
[361] *Ibid.,* 82.

would be established to replace Assad that could provide basic stability, administer state institutions, protect Syrians, and counter terrorism.[362] This policy was based on the premise that the civil war could not be resolved militarily and partly for this reason the White House remained firmly against a US military intervention.[363] The Obama administration's reluctance to militarily intervene was due to several other factors: fears of exacerbating the violence, risking regional spillover, absence of a UN mandate, and continued divisions within the Syrian opposition.[364] Although the policy objectives clearly called for an end to the Assad regime, US strategy aimed to support the opposition in the pursuit of a political settlement rather than the military overthrow of the regime.

In the first year following Obama's announcement, the US "believed that rhetoric and sanctions would be sufficient to push the regime over the edge".[365] The next significant development came in the summer of 2012 when then Secretary of State Clinton and CIA Director Petraeus "proposed a plan to provide lethal aid to vetted rebel groups".[366] Although this plan was rejected by Obama at the time, the President did make a significant policy announcement on the 20th of August whereby he remarked that the movement or use of chemical weapons would constitute a "red line" and cause him to change his calculus on US intervention and provision of lethal aid to the opposition.[367] The "President's declaration implied

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[362] Jeremy M. Sharp and Christopher M. Blanchard, *Armed Conflict in Syria: US and International Response,* (Current Politics and Economics of the Middle East 4, no. 3, 2013), 419.
[363] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 171.
[364] Jeremy M. Sharp and Christopher M. Blanchard, *Armed Conflict in Syria: US and International Response,* (Current Politics and Economics of the Middle East 4, no. 3, 2013), 434.
[365] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 80.
[366] Jeremy M. Sharp and Christopher M. Blanchard, *Armed Conflict in Syria: US and International Response,* (Current Politics and Economics of the Middle East 4, no. 3, 2013), 431.
[367] *Ibid.,* 428.

a willingness to intervene in Syria should Assad go too far, after a year of seemingly ruling the possibility out".[368]

"From September 2012 to February 2013, U.S. policy concentrated heavily on helping lay the foundation for a more unified political and armed opposition that could serve as a recipient of potentially greater U.S. and international support".[369] Then in February 2013, Secretary of State Kerry announced a new US initiative to provide non-lethal aid to the National Coalition and SMC.[370] In March 2013, Kerry also "endorsed several Middle Eastern nations ' efforts to provide weapons to Syrian opposition groups".[371] By April 2013, the US was doubling the amount of non-lethal aid it was providing to the opposition.[372] Non-lethal aid consisted of medical supplies, food, communications equipment, body armour as well as hundreds of millions of dollars in humanitarian aid.[373] It should be noted that non-lethal aid was "aimed at strengthening the effectiveness of the SMC to defend themselves against a repressive regime".[374] "Any support for the rebels would at minimum be a means to protect civilians from Assad's slaughter, and at most a way of pressuring the regime into negotiating a transition".[375] As such, it

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[368] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 176.
[369] Jeremy M. Sharp and Christopher M. Blanchard, *Armed Conflict in Syria: US and International Response,* (Current Politics and Economics of the Middle East 4, no. 3, 2013), 428.
[370] *Ibid.,* 432.
[371] John R. Crook, *United States Recognizes Syrian Opposition as "Legitimate Representative of the Syrian People," Will Provide Small Arms and Ammunition to Opposition Forces,* (The American Journal of International Law 107, no. 3, July 2013), 656.
[372] *Ibid.,* 656.
[373] Jeremy M. Sharp and Christopher M. Blanchard, *Armed Conflict in Syria: US and International Response,* (Current Politics and Economics of the Middle East 4, no. 3, 2013), 436.
[374] John R. Crook, *United States Recognizes Syrian Opposition as "Legitimate Representative of the Syrian People," Will Provide Small Arms and Ammunition to Opposition Forces,* (The American Journal of International Law 107, no. 3, July 2013), 656.
[375] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 142.

can be argued that US non-lethal aid intended to provide the opposition with the capacity to defend itself against the regime until a political settlement to the conflict could be reached.

On 13 June 2013, White House officials confirmed the U.S. intelligence community's assessment that "the Assad regime has used chemical weapons, including the nerve agent sarin, on a small scale against the opposition multiple times in the last year".[376] This latest report crossed the US red line established a year earlier and Obama gave the green light to Clinton's plan to provide lethal aid to the rebels.[377] However, this CIA lead lethal assistance programme proved to be limited in scope and was meant to "give a psychological boost to the rebels, deter Assad's backers, placate America's frustrated regional allies and allow the US to better shape events in Syria, diminishing the role of radicals".[378] As such, although the program was designed to support elements of the armed opposition in their fight against the regime, it did not provide the opposition with the military capability to overthrow the regime. It should also be noted that although these small scale chemical attacks did lead to the provision of limited lethal aid to the opposition, it did not warrant a US military intervention.

On 21 August 2013, the regime conducted a large scale chemical attack in the Ghouta suburb of Damascus killing up to 1,400 people.[379] The attack was viewed as a direct challenge to the US red line policy and necessitated a response by the Obama administration. To that end, the US "sent six destroyers to the eastern Mediterranean in late August armed with Tomahawk

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[376] Jeremy M. Sharp and Christopher M. Blanchard, *Armed Conflict in Syria: US and International Response,* (Current Politics and Economics of the Middle East 4, no. 3, 2013), 433.
[377] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 178.
[378] *Ibid.,* 143.
[379] *Ibid.,* 177.

missiles".[380] The plan was for the US to conduct a 48 hour operation consisting of cruise missile strikes against regime positions beginning on 2 September.[381] "Obama declared any military strikes would be limited, merely to punish the Assad regime, not to remove it from power".[382] From the US perspective, "protecting the international norm on not using chemical weapons was important, but even more important was to show that the US backed up its threats, especially with negotiations on Iran's nuclear programme coming up".[383] As discussed in Chapter 1, Obama would ultimately "call off the planned strike on Assad in favour of Russia's disarmament plan".[384] The disarmament deal was in line with Obama's objectives which was "to prevent the proliferation and usage of chemical weapons and to avoid being sucked into the Syrian civil war".[385] "From Obama's perspective it was the threat of force that had made Assad and Russia compromise, producing all the results the administration sought without having to go to war".[386] The decision not to militarily intervene in the summer of 2013 was a significant inflection point in the conflict. Until then, it remained a realistic prospect that the US would militarily intervene in the civil war. Now that the only red line for US military intervention had been resolved, it became clear to all the conflict actors that US military action was unlikely.[387]

With no plans to militarily intervene, the US embarked on a more robust plan to provide military aid to the opposition in 2014. With the rise of Daesh, the Department of Defense (DOD)

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[380] *Ibid.,* 168.
[381] *Ibid.,* 179.
[382] Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli. *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 219.
[383] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 179.
[384] *Ibid.,* 181.
[385] *Ibid.,* 182.
[386] *Ibid.,* 182.
[387] *Ibid.,* 169.

"led a program to train and equip (T&E) vetted members of the Syrian moderate opposition".[388] Unlike the previous CIA program which sought to arm the opposition against the regime, the T&E program sought to train vetted fighters to defend the Syrian people against Daesh and regime attacks.[389] As such, the T&E program focused primarily on defending areas under opposition control towards the goal of a political settlement and not as a means to overthrow the regime.

In sum, although US policy called for an end to the Assad regime, the strategy and methods employed by the US would indicate that it was in pursuit of a political settlement rather than the military overthrow of the regime. This is demonstrated by the reluctance of the US to initially provide lethal aid to the opposition, the US pursuit of a diplomatic solution rather than a military intervention when red lines were crossed, providing lethal aid to the opposition primarily for defensive purposes and finally to fight Daesh rather than providing the opposition the ability to militarily overthrow the regime.

DISTRIBUTION OF POWER

There are two key aspects to consider in terms of how the US affected the distribution of power in the conflict. Firstly, the limited scope of US support did not provide the opposition with the military capacity to overthrow the regime but rather the ability for the opposition to resist the regime and fight Daesh in an effort to set conditions for a political settlement. The second aspect which significantly influenced power dynamics was the perception that the US would eventually militarily intervene in the conflict. As previously discussed in Chapter 1, the regime for its part

[388] Unknown, *Train and Equip Program for the Syrian Opposition: Questions and Answers about U.S. Aid to Syrian Rebels,* (The Congressional Digest 93, no. 9, 2014), 10.
[389] *Ibid.,* 10.

sought to gradually escalate the use of violence in an effort not to provoke US intervention. Similarly the desire to encourage western intervention had led regional powers [such as] Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar to initially favour more moderate elements of the armed opposition.[390] Moreover, as discussed in Chapter 2, both the opposition and its regional allies developed strategies and operated on the assumption that the US would militarily intervene. Anti-Regime actors believed "there would be a tipping point where Assad's violence would become so great that intervention would become unavoidable".[391] Arguably that tipping point could have been the summer of 2013 when Assad conducted a large scale chemical weapon attack crossing a well-established US red line. For its part, the US "did not communicate convincingly that intervention was not a preferred" option to its regional allies.[392] "Obama's unwillingness to dispel the myth that he might intervene served as a conflict escalator as rebels and regional allies pursued strategies that rested on eventual US military support".[393] As such, the actions of the Anti-Regime camp in the first two years of the conflict were predicated on the assumption that the US would eventually intervene militarily. Once the prospect of US military intervention was removed in the summer of 2013, the Syrian civil war unquestionably worsened thereby allowing the regime to "deploy whatever conventional weapons they liked… [while]…the US 'furious regional allies increasingly shifted their sponsorship to more radical groups".[394]

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[390] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 2016), 187.
[391] *Ibid.,* 172.
[392] *Ibid.,* 171.
[393] *Ibid.,* 187.
[394] *Ibid.,* 187.

FRAGMENTATION OF THE ANTI-REGIME CAMP

Although the US was not the major contributor to the fragmentation of the Anti-Regime camp compared to the opposition and their regional allies, the lack of a strong US leadership role in supporting the armed opposition arguably lead the Anti-Regime regional actors to adopt independent and uncoordinated strategies. That is, had the US taken a larger leadership role, it could have potentially been able to channel regional actors' resources through a single US-approved body and achieved greater cohesion within the Anti-Regime camp.[395] US "hesitancy to coordinate regional backers and provide effective and timely financial and military support was central to the fragmentation and radicalization of the rebels".[396] As such, the lack of engagement and leadership by the US likely further contributed to the fragmented approach regional actors took to arming the opposition. Following the US decision not to conduct strikes against the regime in mid-2013, Anti-Regime regional actors shifted their support away from the US backed FSA-SMC towards the more radical elements of the opposition resulting in Salafist-Jihadist groups becoming the main elements of the armed opposition by 2015.

THE OUTCOME OF COMPETING INTERACTIONS BETWEEN INTERNATIONAL PRO-REGIME AND ANTI-REGIME ACTORS

Having analyzed the political identity and power relations of Pro-Regime and Anti-Regime actors at the international level, this section will seek to determine whether these actors were successful in achieving their interests and objectives and what factors contributed to the resilience of the Pro-Regime camp over that of the Anti-Regime camp.

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[395] *Ibid.,* 146.
[396] Kim Hua Tan and Perudin Alirupendi, *The "Geopolitical" Factor in the Syrian Civil War: A Corpus-Based Thematic Analysis, (*Sage Open 9, no. 2, 2019), 4.

PRO-REGIME CAMP

It can be argued that Russia was successful in achieving its interest and objectives in Syria. Russia's primary objectives were to deter US/Western military intervention against the Assad regime and contain the rise of Islamic extremism. Both of these objectives were in line with Russia's interest of ensuring the survival of the Assad regime. Prior to Russia's direct military intervention in 2015, one could argue that Russia was successful in preventing US/Western intervention as demonstrated in 2013, but was unsuccessful at containing the spread of Islamic extremism within Syria. Following Russia's military intervention, additional objectives would be achieved. Firstly, Russia's intervention ensured the regime's immediate survival. Second, it put an end to any notion of possible US/Western intervention against Assad. Third, it turned the tide of the civil war in favour of the Pro-Regime forces, marking the demise of both the armed opposition and Islamic extremist groups. Russia's intervention in Syria would further another objective of reasserting itself as a major power in Middle East affairs. Diplomatically, Russia established itself as both a regional powerbroker and representative of the regime in the national dialogue and conflict settlement process. Militarily, the Syrian conflict demonstrated Russia's ability to project beyond its periphery by establishing permanent bases in Syria.

The main factors that contributed to Pro-Regime coalition's resilience was the military support provided by Russia as well as the cohesive nature of the Pro-Regime camp. Russia's military intervention decisively shifted the military balance of power in favour of the Pro-Regime coalition and was critical to ensuring the survival of the regime and re-establishing the regime's military capacity and leading to the demise of the armed opposition. Furthermore,

cohesion within the Pro-Regime coalition was also vital to their success. It was the combination of IRGC and LH ground forces backed by Russian air power operating in close coordination with the regime that provided the Pro-Regime camp the necessary military capacity and resilience to prevail over the Anti-Regime camp.

ANTI-REGIME CAMP

It can be argued that the US was not successful in achieving its interests and objectives in the Syrian conflict. Although US policy called for Assad to step down, efforts to establish a new regime through a negotiated political settlement was unsuccessful. US strategy focused on supporting the opposition's survivability by providing it the capacity to defend itself against the regime until such a time that a political settlement to the conflict could be reached. The US also held the view that the conflict could not be resolved militarily but only through a political settlement process, which in turn explains its reluctance to intervene militarily to achieve its stated policy objective of regime change. As such, although the US achieved one of its secondary objectives of not being pulled into the Syrian conflict, the US was unsuccessful in achieving its primary objective of deposing Assad and installing a new regime through a negotiated political settlement. Furthermore, the limited scope of military support the US provided to the opposition failed to give it the necessary capacity to withstand to the regime in the long run.

The US also contributed to the lack of resilience within the Anti-Regime camp given the limited scope of US military support, unwillingness to militarily intervene, and the absence of its traditional leadership role. In terms of support to the opposition, the US was initially reluctant to provide any form of lethal aid, and when it finally did, it provided it to vetted opposition elements that were primarily engaged in the fight against Daesh. Second, the prospect and

assumption by Anti-Regime actors that the US would militarily intervene significantly influenced their strategy and actions in the first two years of the conflict. Third, the lack of US leadership in coordinating efforts within the Anti-Regime camp contributed to the fragmented approach undertaken by its regional allies, ultimately leading to the demise of the US backed moderate elements in favour of the more radical elements supported by regional actors.

In sum, Russia's involvement in the Syrian conflict was arguably far more successful than that of the US. Russia achieved its objectives of ensuring the survival of the Assad regime and deterring US military intervention whereas the US failed in its efforts to see Assad deposed and the formation of a new regime by the opposition through the political settlement process. Russia's military support and leadership within the Pro-Regime camp provided both cohesion and resiliency whereas the lack of US leadership and reluctance to provide effective military support or intervention eroded both the distribution of power and cohesion within the Anti-Regime camp.

CONCLUSION

Having evaluated how each actor at the national, regional, and international level performed in terms of achieving their interests and objectives, and having considered what factors contributed to their resilience or lack thereof of each camp, this analytical work will conclude by demonstrating how the Pro-Regime camp proved to be far more resilient and successful in achieving its interests and objectives in comparison to the Anti-Regime camp.

The Pro-Regime camp was successful in achieve their primary objective which was the survival of the Assad regime. The regime was successful in retaining power, regaining control of its territory and militarily defeating the opposition while avoiding instigating a foreign military intervention by the West. In the case of Iran and LH, the regime's survival was crucial to maintaining a vital ally within the Resistance Axis as well as LH's strategic depth and supply network through Syria. As for Russia, the survival of the Assad regime was key to containing the spread of Islamic extremism. Russia was also successful in preventing a potential US lead intervention in 2013. Pro-Regime actors were successful in achieving additional objectives. Iran and LH were able to further entrench themselves in Syria and the Resistance Axis is arguably stronger today than it was prior to the Syrian civil war. The Syrian conflict has further bolstered Iran's influence in the region at the detriment of its regional rivals. Russia has also succeeded in reasserting its influence in the region, demonstrating both the ability to militarily assist an ally outside its periphery and exert diplomatic influence in the conflict settlement process, assuming a role as a regional powerbroker.

The two key factors that contributed to the resilience of the Pro-Regime camp was cohesion amongst actors and the military support provided to the regime by its allies. The regime

itself proved to be fairly cohesive both politically and militarily. Assad was successful in retaining power and the SAAF remained largely loyal to the regime. Within the Pro-Regime camp, actors worked cohesively by establishing joint command centres and conducting joint operations, to include IRGC lead ground offensives supported by Russian air power. The regime's allies also coordinated efforts in directing military strategy and tactics with the regime. The provision of military support by Pro-Regime actors in terms of material, manpower, training, advise and assist was vital in sustaining the regime's war-fighting capacity. Assad's allies were willing to go further than Anti-Regime actors by deploying considerable resources from their own militaries and assumed greater political risks in doing so. It can be argued that Iran and LH ensured the regime's survival in the first phase of the civil war until Russia's military intervention in 2015. Russia's intervention decisively shifted the military balance of power in favour of the Pro-Regime coalition. Russia not only ensured the regime's survival but restored the regime's military capacity, allowing Pro-Regime forces to regain territorial control of Syria and militarily defeating the opposition.

The Anti-Regime camp was unsuccessful in achieving its primary objective of overthrowing the Assad regime. Despite attempts to form a unified opposition through the SNC and National Coalition, these entities were largely unsuccessful at achieving consensus due to having divergent objectives and as such were unable to formulate coherent political and military strategies. For their part, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey prioritized their own interests rather than seeking to forge a unified opposition. Not only did their pursuit of divergent interests further fragment the opposition but they also failed to achieve their objectives. As for the US, although it was unsuccessful in achieving its primary objective of having Assad disposed of through a

negotiated political settlement process, it did manage to avoid having to conduct a military intervention.

The main factors that impeded resiliency within the Anti-Regime camp was the fragmented nature of the opposition and the lack of unity amongst third party supporters. Fragmentation within the armed opposition created a competitive rather than collaborative effort whereby armed opposition groups competed for territory, resources, and third party support. Lack of cohesion and unity of effort amongst Anti-Regime regional actors resulted in an uncoordinated approach in their provision of military aid to opposition groups, further fueling competition and conflict between them. This in turn further fragmented the armed opposition and eroded their resiliency. Regional actors' military strategy was also predicated on the faulty assumption that the US would eventually intervene militarily in the conflict. For its part, the lack of US leadership in coordinating support within the opposition camp, reluctance to provide lethal aid and unwillingness to militarily intervene further eroded the distribution of power and cohesion within the Anti-Regime camp.

In sum, the Pro-Regime camp was successful in achieving their objectives and their resilience was derived from cohesion within the camp and the extensive military support provided by the regime's allies. Conversely, the fragmented nature of the opposition and lack of cohesion and unity amongst third party actors significantly eroded the military effectiveness and resiliency of the Anti-Regime camp which in turn lead to the failure of achieving their objective of deposing Assad.

The Syrian civil war has proven to be one of the most complex conflicts of the 21st century. Although this analysis concentrated on the main actors involved in the conflict, further

study could also include the role of actors such as Daesh, Jordan, France and Britain. Other areas to explore are the broader implications of the conflict. Topics to consider include: the future of the Assad regime; how Israel is likely to respond to the strengthening of the Resistance Axis and Iranian entrenchment in Syria; continued Turkish occupation of the Syrian border area and its conflict with the Kurds; and lastly, implications of Russia's reasserting itself as a regional power, just as the US declines as a regional hegemonic power. Although this paper has demonstrated that the Pro-Regime camp was successful in achieving its interests and objectives and proved to be more resilient than the Anti-Regime camp, numerous questions remain as to the future of Syria and the region.

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