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# Table of Contents

<b>I. INTRODUCING A DREADFUL WAR .....</b>	<b>1</b>
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK .....	1
RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES: .....	3
METHODOLOGY:.....	4
<b>II. HOW DID WE GET HERE? .....</b>	<b>5</b>
SYRIA BEFORE THE AL-ASSAD FAMILY .....	5
SYRIA UNDER THE AL-ASSAD FAMILY .....	6
THE TIMELINE OF THE CONFLICT .....	9
MAPPING THE SYRIAN CONFLICT 2015-2018 .....	11
<b>III. WHAT ABOUT THEORY? .....</b>	<b>16</b>
REVIEW OF MEDIATION AND NEGOTIATION THEORIES.....	16
POWER-SHARING, CONSOCIATIONALISM, AND DEMOCRACY:.....	22
THE PROBLEM WITH NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENTS TO ETHNIC CIVIL WARS .....	25
<b>IV. THE INFUSION OF RUSSIAN INTERESTS IN SYRIA .....</b>	<b>28</b>
INTRODUCTION.....	28
THE RUSSIAN-IRANIAN-SYRIAN TRIAD BEFORE 2011: .....	28
MAKING WAY FOR A DIRECT MILITARY INTERVENTION: .....	30
<b>V. WHAT'S HAPPENING TO THE PEACE? .....</b>	<b>37</b>
THE UN-ARAB LEAGUE LED NEGOTIATIONS: KOFI ANAN AND LAKHDAR BRAHIMI .....	37
DE MISTURA, RUSSIA, AND THE SYRIAN PEACE PROCESS 2016-2018:.....	38
EXAMINING LOCAL TRUCES AND CEASEFIRES .....	43
<b>VI. RECOMMENDING AN ELUSIVE STABILITY.....</b>	<b>46</b>
RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT.....	47
RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE SYRIAN OPPOSITION .....	50
RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE MEDIATOR .....	51
RECOMMENDATIONS TO RUSSIA .....	54
RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE EU AND THE US.....	55
<b>VII. A CONCLUDING VISION .....</b>	<b>58</b>
IDEAL VISION 2028 .....	59
<b>VIII. BIBLIOGRAPHY: .....</b>	<b>60</b>

## Abstract

The following paper will be divided into seven sections. The first will contain the introduction, conceptual framework, and methodology. The second will be a brief overview of Syria's history and a timeline of significant events during the war. Section three will be an examination of the various theories relating to conflict resolution, mitigation, negotiation, and mediation. The fourth section will discuss the relationship between the Russian intervention and the Syrian conflict. Section five examines both UN and non-UN sponsored peace talks in bridging the political divide between several factions of Syrian society. Section six attempts to bridge the divide between the various groups and theories presented and offers recommendations to the mediator, the international community, and the warring parties. Lastly, the conclusion will summarize the key points of this paper while also providing a vision of what Syria could look like in 2028.

*Keywords: Syria; Russian intervention; conflict resolution; mediation; ceasefires; reconciliation; reform*

## Abstract (Deutsch)

Die folgende Arbeit wird in sieben Kapitel unterteilt. Das erste Kapitel enthält die Einführung, den konzeptionellen Rahmen und die Methodik. Das zweite Kapitel wird einen kurzen Überblick über die Geschichte Syriens und einen Zeitplan für wichtige Ereignisse während des Krieges enthalten. Kapitel drei thematisiert verschiedene Theorien in Bezug auf Konfliktlösung, Mitigation, Verhandlung und Mediation. Das vierte Kapitel wird Zusammenhänge zwischen der russischen Intervention und dem Konflikt in Syrien diskutieren. Kapitel fünf untersucht sowohl UN- als auch nicht-UN-gestützte Friedensgespräche, um Ansätze zu finden, die politische Kluft zwischen verschiedenen Fraktionen der syrischen Gesellschaft zu überbrücken. Kapitel sechs beinhaltet Empfehlungen an den Vermittler, die internationale Gemeinschaft, sowie an die Kriegsparteien. Schließlich werden in der Schlussfolgerung die wichtigsten Punkte dieses Papiers zusammengefasst und ein Ausblick angeboten, wie Syrien im Jahr 2028 aussehen könnte.

*Schlagwörter: Syrien; Konflikttransformation; Russische Intervention; Versöhnung; Vermittlung*

*On my honor as a student of the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, I submit this work in good faith and pledge that I have neither given nor received unauthorized assistance on it.*



## **I. Introducing a Dreadful War**

The Syrian civil war has been one of the deadliest civil wars of our time, well over 400,000 people have lost their lives. Over 5.4 million refugees and over 6.1 million internally displaced people were forced to flee their homes. What began as peaceful protests calling for reforms in March 2011, due to some foreign and domestic manipulation, turned into a bloody regional struggle. It cannot be denied that regional and international interests collided intensely in Syria. As a result, Syria was dragged into a proxy war involving numerous parties. However, the Syrian war is not just a proxy war; it is an ideological, sectarian and hybrid conflict. There are numerous parties involved; there is the Syrian Army, Hezbollah, Iranian Militia, and Russian air support on one side. On the other, there are remnants of the Free Syrian Army divided into several groups each supported by an international backer such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the US, and other Western countries. There is also the Kurds, who control much of the North-East, backed by the US and the autonomous Iraqi region of Kurdistan.

Even when the armed struggle is over, unless a political plan is set, Syria might end up with a fragile peace. Since its start, the Syrian war has been unpredictable, at the end of every year there was an entirely new balance of power, there was never really a strong stalemate or a victor, which is essential in negotiating long-term peace. There were several stages during the war in which it seemed highly likely that the regime would crumble, such as after the infamous Ghouta chemical attack of 2013. Moreover, we witnessed the rise and fall of a common enemy, ISIS, which played excellently for the regime's claim that it was only fighting terrorists, Al-Assad used the term to refer to almost all armed rebels. As a result, when the West started its anti-ISIS campaign, the regime took it upon itself to intensify its battles and sieges against areas held by moderate or mildly Islamist rebels.

### ***Conceptual Framework***

The arguments that will be presented in this thesis are generally about why most power-sharing structures will not suit the Syrian conflict unless Al-Assad wants to cooperate. At the same time, today the regime can no longer turn off the political minds of the people that were activated for the first time in 40 years. These arguments are built on the expectation that Russia and Iran on the one hand, and Europe and the United States on the other, can balance the post-conflict atmosphere. This balance could take the form of proper structural reform once a political settlement has been reached. However, it is fundamental to observe that at this point of the conflict, Al-Assad and his allies are the ones genuinely dictating what the transition period should look like and what sort of involvement the rebels are to play.

The thesis shall not delve into the role the Kurds have played or their future of Syria. The regime is merely incapable of denying the unique balancing role the Kurds played against ISIS. Therefore, they must be guaranteed something in the transitional and post-conflict era. Unfortunately, and mainly due to the recent Kurdish referendum of independence from Iraq, and Turkish pressure, it seems unlikely that the regime would grant the Kurds autonomy. However, Russia might be hesitant to allow the regime to go into an all-out war against the Kurds. There has been some tension throughout the war between these two groups but until now they co-exist, and before the referendum, several Syrian Kurdish leaders said they want to remain part of Syria but play a more prominent role in how post-conflict Syria should look like. As for the rest of the minorities, it is normal that most of Syria's minorities have this silent pact of either supporting each other or co-existing together. At the end of the day, Al-Assad is from a minority group. This has been going on for decades, and the war barely changed this relationship.

The regime's victory is a problem for almost everybody, from Israel to Turkey, to the European Union the United States, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Despite this, the reality of the situation is becoming clearer by the day and the sooner the international community, including the Arab region, realize it, the faster this war can be terminated, and the long rebuilding process can start. Since the regime and its allies are the victors, they get to dictate the terms of the peace. Syria is not a democracy, and at heart, even the regime stopped denying it. Like the rest of the Arab countries, namely the GCC members, sovereignty does not lie with the people, at the moment it lies with the Al-Assad regime. It seems hypocritical that the GCC countries are calling for democracy abroad while they run absolutist monarchies at home.

The peace negotiations that have been going on since 2014 at first aimed at Al-Assad's removal because the opposition was strong and capable, while the Syrian statehood was fragile. Since then, one can see a shift in the attitude of the UN-sponsored mediators. Initially, former UN Secretary-General Kofi Anan, in his role as the Special Envoy, was all for the transition from Al-Assad to Democracy. Veteran Mediator, Lakhdar Brahimi played the role of the frustrated mediator who cannot control his parties' interactions with the media and then just gave up. However, the current Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura was keen from the start to ensure the secrecy of the negotiations by limiting his media interactions and ensuring that the parties abided by the rules of negotiations. Moreover, recent peace efforts, particularly ones taking place in Astana and Sochi sponsored by Russia, Iran, and Turkey, are generating some optimism. Turkey is a sponsor because it influences and provides the supply line for a large

proportion of the rebels in the north, Iran is involved so that it does not disrupt the process. What's essential about the current negotiations is that although they are taking place outside the UN process, de Mistura either participated or endorsed several vital points of the negotiations. Hence he tried to remain optimistic throughout the process. Additionally, needless to say, these negotiations can have a decisive role on post-conflict Syria, even if the final solution ends up being a complete military victory for Al-Assad because the negotiations at least created a top-level communication line.

### ***Research Questions and Hypotheses:***

a) How can the various conflict theories help us analyze the Syrian conflict?

They generally offer valuable lenses through which conflict can be understood and, if lucky, mitigated. It is essential to understand that although most conflict resolution theorists believe that power-sharing is essential for sustainable peace, some claim otherwise. Moreover, several theories can give us a few clues into what not to do. There are essential theories that explain how mediation and negotiations work; these can give pointers and recommendations for all parties involved. Lastly, it is essential to examine the critiques of conflict resolution because they enable us to comprehend why some agreements work and others fail.

b) How has Russia transformed the Syrian conflict? What would a Russian solution look like?  
What can be done to balance the Russian solution?

Through supporting Al-Assad even before the war, Russia managed to assure its interests in the conflict. During the conflict, Russia provided the political umbrella that protects the regime in the international community. Additionally, it supported the regime through many arms trade deals and sending advisers and of course through its direct military intervention. Today, there can be no solution without Russia. Unless the West cooperates with Russia post-conflict Syria is bound to remain a weak if not a failed state. The EU and US must recognize Al-Assad's upper hand in the conflict and work together with Russia to promote peace and reform.

c) Will the ongoing peace talks lead to any form of peace? What about local truces?

The UN-led mediation process has not been impartial under the leadership of Anan and Brahimi. This was mainly due to the fact that it was sponsored by the Arab League and called for Al-Assad's departure. It thus encouraged the regime to downplay the importance of negotiations. Nonetheless, since de Mistura's appointment, there was an evident change in the UN's rhetoric, the aim was still transition, but of a different kind, de Mistura has tried to connect the negotiations with the facts on the ground. Additionally, the diplomatic peace process,

namely Astana, is supported by the numerous local truce agreements and ceasefires. These have proven to be effective in decreasing the violence and restoring stability. With regards to the fate of Al-Assad, he should remain in power until some form of stable peace has been reached, and the country is no longer shunned by the international community. There should be no retribution-based trials. Instead, we should encourage Peace and Reconciliation Committees and discourage war crime trials both domestically and abroad because they will further destabilize the region.

***Methodology:***

There are abundant theories examining conflict management, resolution and transformation. Accordingly, the theoretical section of this thesis will examine available academic sources, relating to the Syrian conflict and general conflict management. Moreover, since this paper targets conflict resolution, theories relating to mediation and negotiations will be examined. The conceptual framework described above shall form the base of the analysis.

The practical application of the theories will then be examined. This will be based on factual events that occurred during the war which have been documented over the past seven years. However, since the Syrian war is not yet over, one can only make calculated predictions to provide recommendations.



## II. How Did We Get Here?

### *Syria Before the Al-Assad Family*

Historically, Syria has been fought over by Egyptians, Hittites, Assyrians, Persians, Macedonian Greeks, Romans, Mongols, Turks, British, and French. Only during the Umayyad Caliphate in the 7th and 8th centuries A.D. was it the center of an empire. However, that period gave Syria its Islamic heritage. For many centuries, the society has been mostly Muslim. During the Ottoman occupation each religious community was autonomous, so the Ottomans did not interfere in their daily lives. They were allowed to preserve their cultures and live their lives how they wished. Nonetheless, there were several bloody sectarian outbursts in the 19th and 20th centuries from the Sunni population targeting the Christian one.

While under the French mandate (1920-1946), France aimed to replace the common language, Arabic, with French, and to make French customs and law the exemplary. France also promoted Catholicism as a means to challenge Islam and favored the minorities as a means of controlling the majority.<sup>1</sup> Syrian independence was granted on 17 April 1946. It was inevitable that the reaction to these intrusions would be the rise of xenophobia. Post-Independence Syria was a barely functioning state heavily distracted by the creation of Israel. As Abdul Nasser rose to power in Egypt, Pan-Arab nationalism swept the region. In 1958, Syria and Egypt formally became a unified country led by Abdul Nasser; who dismantled all political parties and ruled the United Arab Republic for more than three years.<sup>2</sup>

In the post-Nasser era, the nationalists were split. The major Islamic movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, argued and fought for the idea that the nation must be Arab Sunni (or “Orthodox”) Muslim. The Westernized nationalists, on the other hand, believed that nationhood had to be built not on a religious but on a territorial base.<sup>3</sup>

The Baath party was created on the basis of Arab nationalism and socialism; the Baath ideology was influential to the minorities because it was created by one of their members. Michel Aflaq, a Christian. Moreover, its main slogan was Arab unity, defining Arabs as people who speak Arabic or are born in an Arabic speaking region. Therefore, it pushed for a secularist definition

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Reich, *Political Leaders of the Contemporary Middle East and North Africa: A Biographical Dictionary* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 1990), 434-45.

<sup>2</sup> Karl R DeRouen, *Defense and Security: A Compendium of National Armed Forces and Security Policies* (ABC-CLIO, 2005), 781.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

rather than an Islamic one. Once in power, the Baath party adopted its current motto; Unity, Freedom, and Socialism.<sup>4</sup>

Economically the Baathists were not as extreme as communists with regards to private property, nor were they as liberal as capitalists. "There is a limit to the ownership of land and industry, and real estate may only be owned within the confines of justice, but property and inheritance are permitted."<sup>5</sup> The ideological doctrine of the Ba'ath party was founded upon the idea of an agrarian revolution that shifts the focus of the economy and politics to the agricultural sector.

### ***Syria Under the Al-Assad Family***

During his early years, Hafez Al-Assad tried to implement this socialist vision and was successful to a certain extent. The change Al-Assad executed was visible through the reform he implemented not only in the agricultural sector but also in education and economics through the promotion of domestic production. However, after the Hama Massacre and the events with the Muslim Brotherhood, Al-Assad unraveled his philosophy and thus made evident what had been his economic, political, and social goal since he first took power. Help the Syrian people to live better provided that they do not challenge his rule.<sup>6</sup> The Hama Massacre was a reaction to what the Muslim Brotherhood did in 1979-80; it is said that they killed over 500 Alawites. Since Hafez was an Alawite reacted by sacking the city of Hama with his Brother Rifat and killed over 5,000 men and women allegedly from the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>7</sup>

Agriculture was one of the most important sectors of the Syrian economy, until the late 1980s it accounted for 25% of GDP, and 50% of the Syrian population was considered to be rural. The Corrective Revolution that was initiated by Hafez Al-Assad to overthrow the government led by leftists of the Baath party. Al-Assad introduced a reform program. Al-Assad reversed the radical socialist economy of earlier Baathists and strengthened the private sector's role in the economy. In many ways the Corrective Movement resulted in a tacit alliance between the political elite and the Syrian bourgeoisie. This led to the development of what Bassam Haddad refers to as the Business Network of Syria.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Raymond A Hinnebusch, *Peasant and Bureaucracy in Ba'thist Syria: The Political Economy of Rural Development* (Westview Press Inc., 1989), 183.

<sup>5</sup> David Roberts, *The Ba'th and the Creation of Modern Syria* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), 63.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> "Syrian Troops Massacre Scores of Assad's Foes," *The Washington Post* 1981.

<sup>8</sup> Jamee K Moudud, "Business Networks in Syria: The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience," *Dialectical anthropology* 37, no. 3-4 (2013).

The percentage of the Syrian population that works in Agriculture went changed a lot with time. In 1970, 49.4% of the population worked in agriculture. In 1973, it reached a peak of 55.6%, only to go back to 49% in 1975. After 1975, the numbers plummeted yearly until reaching 28% in 1991. Al-Assad created what was known as the Agricultural Bank which gave farmers cash and in-kind donations to buy seeds, cattle, and machinery. The interest rates were very low, and payment plans were flexible. Moreover, the Syrian countryside witnessed major developments in electricity, sanitation, education, clean water, and healthcare. It is essential to remember that Hafez Al Al-Assad focused his economic policies towards agriculture because he had a clear goal. Al-Assad was focusing on economic self-sufficiency in major food crops, price control, and monopoly of the state on foreign trade.<sup>9</sup>

Syria underwent a major population increase from being around 6 Million in the 1960s to 14 million in 1995 and currently being close to 23 million. One can add to this over 100,000 Iraqi refugees and over 250,000 Palestinian refugees. Moreover, from 2006 till 2011 Syria witnessed a severe drought which followed over 60 sandstorms, this had a huge effect on the agriculture in Syria. Although the country was facing a drought, the Syrian government in 2006 decided to sell 70% of its conserve wheat.<sup>10</sup>

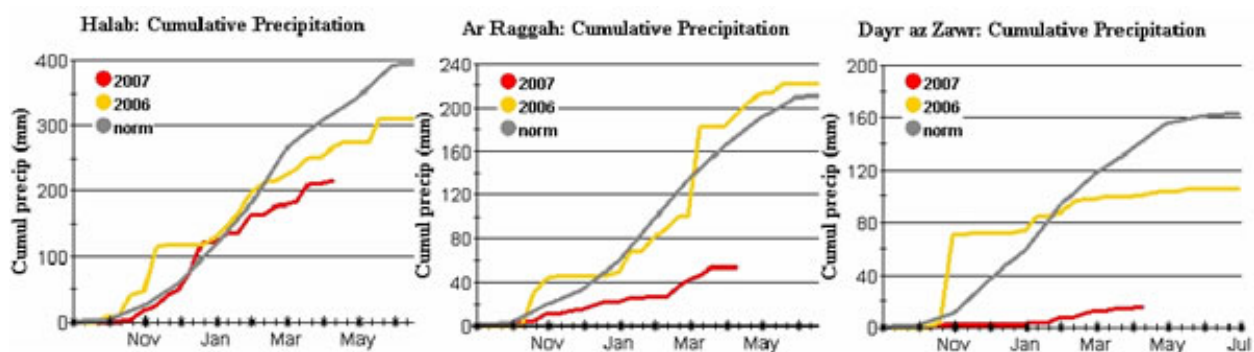


Figure 1: Rain precipitation graph showing 2006 and 2007

As a result of the drought, UN experts estimated that between 2 and 3 million of Syria's 10 million rural inhabitants were reduced to "extreme poverty." These people became climate refugees and moved from the suburbs to the already dense cities. Consequently, unemployment increased so did inflation. Such conditions along with the fact that the majority of the Syrian population was young, led to what was present in most Arab countries, a youth bulge. Tens of

<sup>9</sup> Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics* (Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> William Polk, "Understanding Syria: From Pre-Civil War to Post-Assad," *The Atlantic* 2013, 16.

thousands of frightened, angry, hungry, and impoverished former farmers were jammed into Syria's towns and cities, where they were ready to catch fire from the Arab spring.<sup>11</sup>

One should examine the Sunni-Alawite relation from a historical perspective in order to understand the shift in economic policy from a rural focus to an industrial crony focus. Dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Alawites were considered as the lowest class in Syria, with the majority living below the poverty line. As for the Sunni bourgeoisie and landowning feudalists, the nationalization movements of the late 1950s and 1960s, then followed by the Corrective Revolution, turned them by de facto against the regime. However, this did not stop the process of state formation once Al-Assad was in power. Since Al-Assad was focused on support from the peasants, he forgot about the elites, which caused the outbursts of violence that took place in 1980 between the regime and the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>12</sup>

Hafez Al-Assad was intelligent enough to realize that although he had crushed his radical opponents, he still had to give some power to the moderate capital owning Sunni elites. The first step to liberalize the Syrian economy was the creation of a public-private network. This network consisted of capitalists who heavily influence the Syrian economy, as such the network excluded workers and small businesses. The control of this network was, of course, in the hands of the government; furthermore, the relationship was a trust-suspicion one, with each side doing what they could to serve their personal agendas. This, of course, makes the economic reform process slower than it should be because it no longer represents the welfare of the country's overall economy but rather the elites in this business network. The development of indirect channels between officials and businesses proved durable only for the short term.<sup>13</sup>

On 10 June 2000, Bashar al Al-Assad took power from his father as if it was a monarchy. However, when one reads his inaugural speech one might think this person was a visionary and that Syria was just one step away from democracy, it goes as follows: "Administering democracy is a must for us, but we must not implement the democracy of others. Western democracy is the product of a long history from which leaders and traditions emerged to create the present culture of democratic societies. We, in contrast, must adopt a democracy that is distinctive to us, founded on our history, our culture and our civilization, and stemming from the needs of the society and the reality in which we live."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>12</sup> Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics*.

<sup>13</sup> Moudud, "Business Networks in Syria: The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience," 465.

<sup>14</sup> Eyal Ziser, *Commanding Syria: Bashar Al-Asad and the First Years in Power*, vol. 60 (IB Tauris, 2007), 48.

Bashar Al-Assad began restoring proper international trade and started to reform the country. Unfortunately, everything managed to slip back to the old corrupt ways within the first seven years. In 2001, he introduced what was known as the “Damascus Spring” which opened the door for the civil society to get more involved through forums. This was short-lived, only two years. He then focused on foreign relations and improving Syria’s international image.<sup>15</sup> He improved relations with the Arab countries, particularly Qatar, which invested large sums of money into the Syrian economy. Al-Assad grew closer to Turkey and even to Europe, he famously went on a state visit to France and even the UK where he met the Queen.

During the rule of both Al-Assads, Syria made considerable economic progress. By the early days of the civil war, Syrians enjoyed an income (GDP) of about \$5,000 per capita that was nearly the same as Jordan’s GDP. However, the regime maintained its hold on power through the usual measures employed by a dictatorship: eliminating dissent through censoring the media, silencing opponents and critics, preventing free speech, and denying political expression.<sup>16</sup>

### ***The Timeline of the Conflict***

On 15 March 2011, peaceful protests broke out in the province of Daraa demanding more freedoms and release of political prisoners. Within weeks, several other cities saw protests, but the protestors no longer wanted freedom. Just as in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, they started chanting for the downfall of the regime. In addition to sending secret service to shoot at the protestors, Al-Assad also made some concessions, a little too late some might argue. His March 2011 concessions included lifting the 48 year-old state of emergency and releasing some political prisoners. Unfortunately, that was not enough to satisfy the will of the people, and as such the revolution was slowly turning into a war. In May that same year, the army was sent to Daraa and Homs to squash the protestors which triggered sanctions by the US and EU. In more effort to show concessions, Al-Assad sacked the governor of Hama after protests erupted there. However, it failed to calm the people and accordingly troops were sent. In July, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was formed, it was a coalition of armed defectors and rebels attempting to take control of Syrian cities and ousting the regime. In August, the government passed legislative decree 107 on decentralization, this decree was used by several local councils as a legal basis

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<sup>15</sup> Polk, "Understanding Syria: From Pre-Civil War to Post-Assad," 14.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

for their formation. In October, the opposition in exile formed the Syrian National Council. In November, Syria was suspended from the Arab League.<sup>17</sup>

Two thousand and twelve, 2012, was the year the revolution in Syria turned into a war. In February, Al-Assad stepped up his military action throughout the country, especially in Homs. In March, the UNSC endorsed Kofi Annan's peace plan for Syria as fighting continued to rage. In July 2012, the FSA managed to pull off an attack on Syrian Security headquarters, killing three top chiefs in Damascus and they also seized Aleppo. In August, Syrian Prime Minister Riad Hijab defected. By October, much of the old city of Aleppo was destroyed due to the bombing. In November, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces was formed in Doha. In December, the US, France, Britain, Turkey, and the Gulf states formally recognized the opposition as legitimate representatives of the Syrian people.<sup>18</sup>

In December 2013, the US suspended its support for the rebels in the north after Islamist rebels took control of their bases. In January 2014, the first peace talks between the government and the National Coalition of Opposition Forces took place in Geneva and they failed. In March 2014, the Syrian army and Hezbollah recaptured Yabrud, the last rebel-held city on the border with Lebanon. In June 2014, ISIS was declared in Syria and Iraq. In September 2014, the US and Arab countries launched airstrikes against ISIS.<sup>19</sup>

In January 2015, the Kurdish forces proved their strength as a key player in Syria by capturing the city of Kobane, which borders turkey, from ISIS. In May 2015, ISIS seized Palmyra and destroyed much of this World Heritage site. Meanwhile, another Islamist group known as the Army of Conquest took control of the Idlib Province. In September 2015, Russia formally launched its direct intervention in Syria by conducting its first air strikes. In December 2015, the Syrian army recaptured Homs by bombing and then allowing rebels to leave to other areas.<sup>20</sup>

In March 2016, the regime recaptured Palmyra but was driven out again in December. In August 2016, Turkey sent troops to help moderate rebels push ISIS and the Kurds away from its borders. In December 2016, after five years of fighting and division, Aleppo was recaptured by the army.

In January 2017, Russia, Turkey, and Iran agreed to enforce and monitor a nationwide ceasefire after the moderate rebels and the government met in Astana. In April, the US launched missile

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<sup>17</sup> "Syria Profile - Timeline," *BBC News* 2018.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

strikes against the government as a result of the suspected use of chemical weapons in Khan Sheikhoun. In May, the US started sending weapons to the Kurdish Popular Protection units after they recaptured the Tabqa Dam from ISIS. This move caused tensions between the US and Turkey. In June, the US shot down a “Syrian fighter jet near Raqqa after it allegedly dropped bombs near US-backed rebel Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).”<sup>21</sup> In October 2017, ISIS was driven out of its self-declared capital, Raqqa, by the Kurds and the US-led coalition against ISIS. In December 2017, Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Syria to check on his troops and the base in Tartus. He also declared that his mission in Syria was accomplished.<sup>22</sup>

Up to 2018 at the time of this writing, the government managed to recapture the majority of Syrian cities from rebel-held and ISIS-held territories. This was exemplified by the recapturing of the entire city and suburbs of Damascus as well as suburbs in Hama and Homs. In June 2018, the rebels hold the entire city of Idlib in the North and Daraa to the South. The Kurds maintain their areas in Northeast Syria. Turkey launched an attack on Afrin in northwestern Syria and took control of some Kurdish areas. The government controls all of the principal cities such as Damascus, Aleppo (once Syria’s economic capital), Homs, Hama, Latakia, Tartus, and Palmyra.<sup>23</sup>

### ***Mapping the Syrian Conflict 2015-2018***<sup>24</sup>

As should be evident by the above timeline, a crucial turning point in the Syrian war, was Russia’s military intervention in support of Al-Assad’s ground campaigns by providing aerial cover and power. Consequently, the Syrian regime, supported by Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah managed to eliminate most of the armed opposition. In May 2018, the map of the Syrian battlefield is a lot different from that of two years ago, mainly because ISIS and rebel groups are almost non-existent. The Kurdish groups were essential to the elimination of ISIS and their relationship with the regime isn’t good. Nonetheless, several Kurdish Syrian leaders expressed their wish to remain part of Syria.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

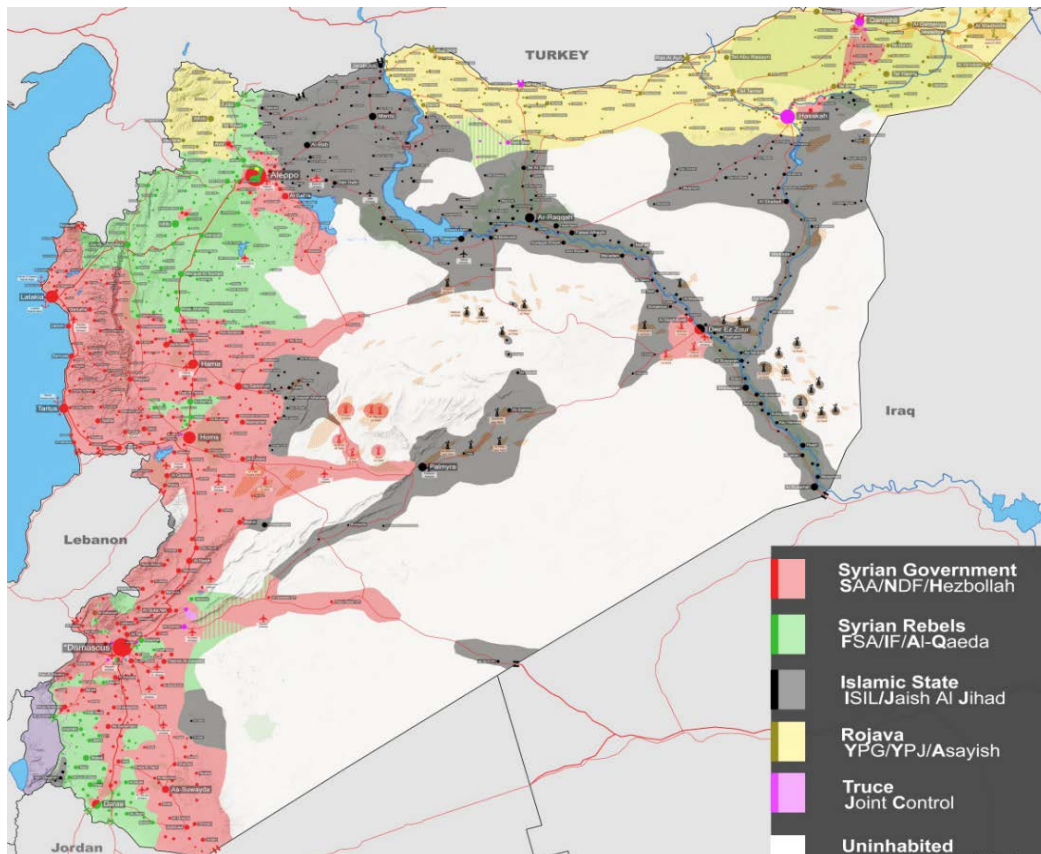
<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> The maps in the following pages are based on <https://syria.liveuamap.com/> this website compiles news and realities of the battlefields on a map.

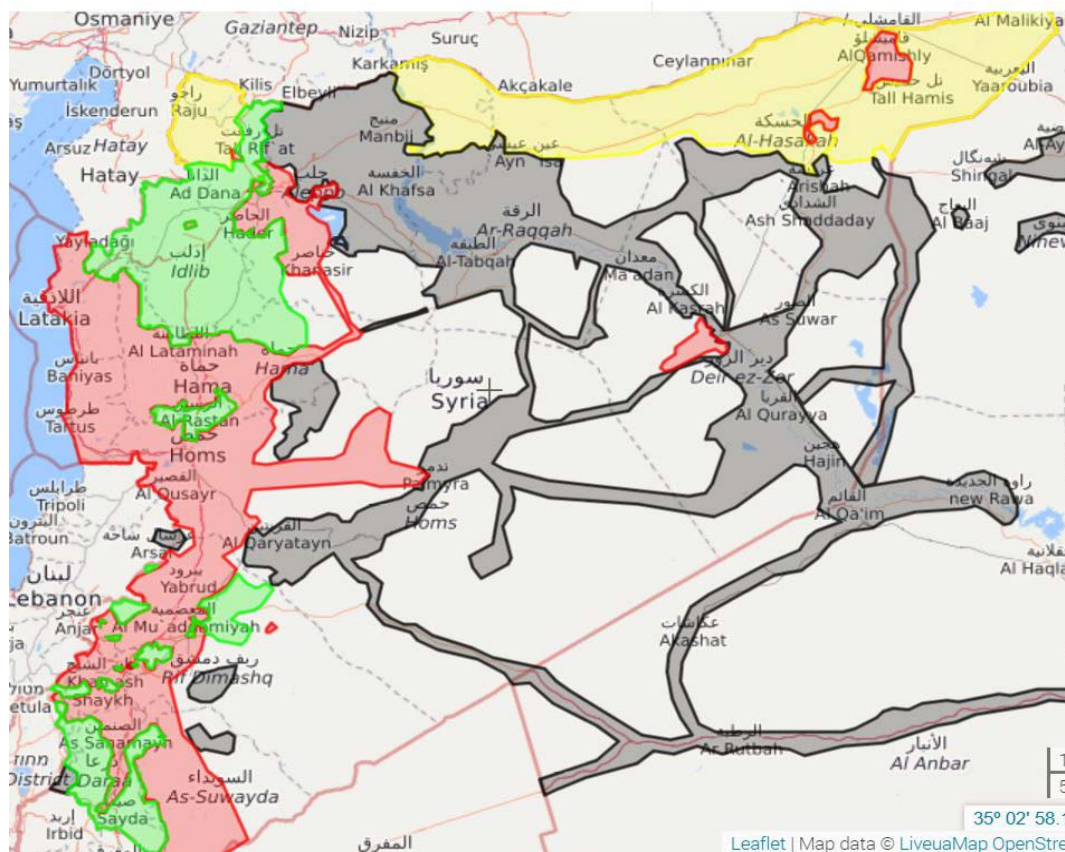


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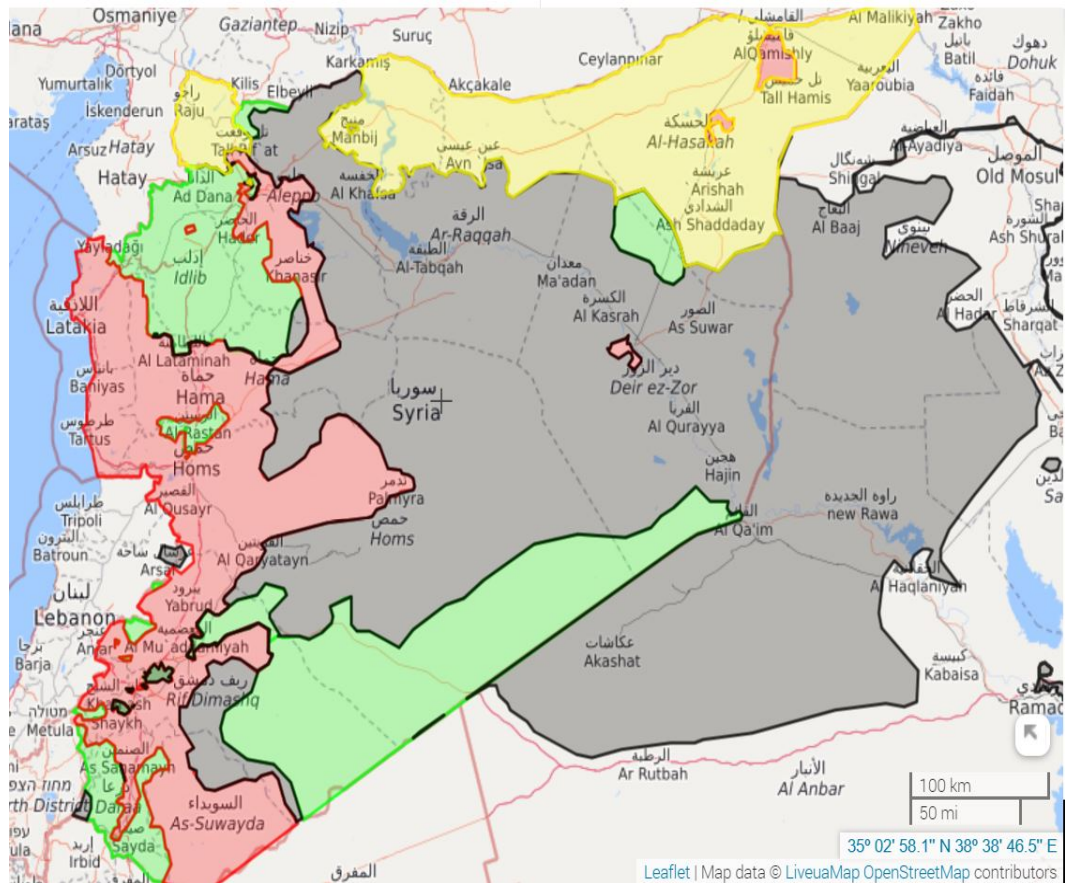




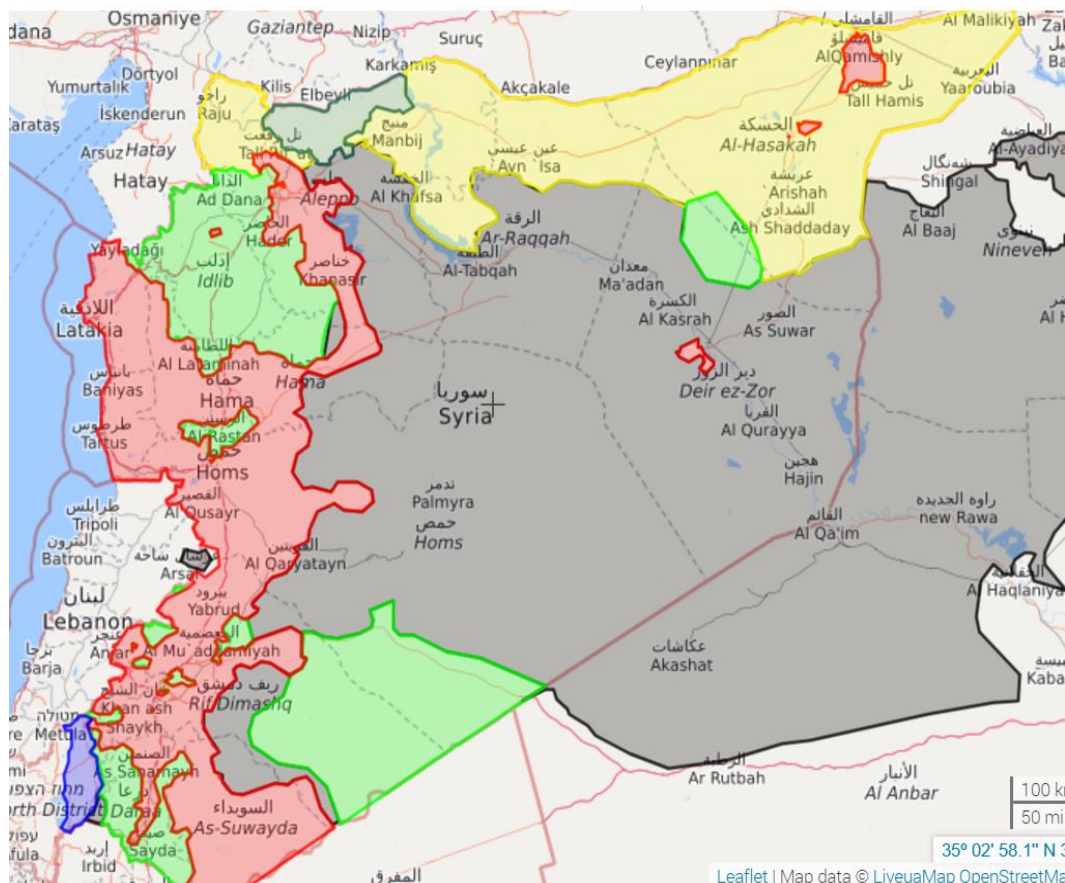
Conflict Map 1: September 2015. 3 weeks before the Russian Intervention. Regime Much Weaker than today.



Conflict Map 2: January 1st 2016, Regime still weak

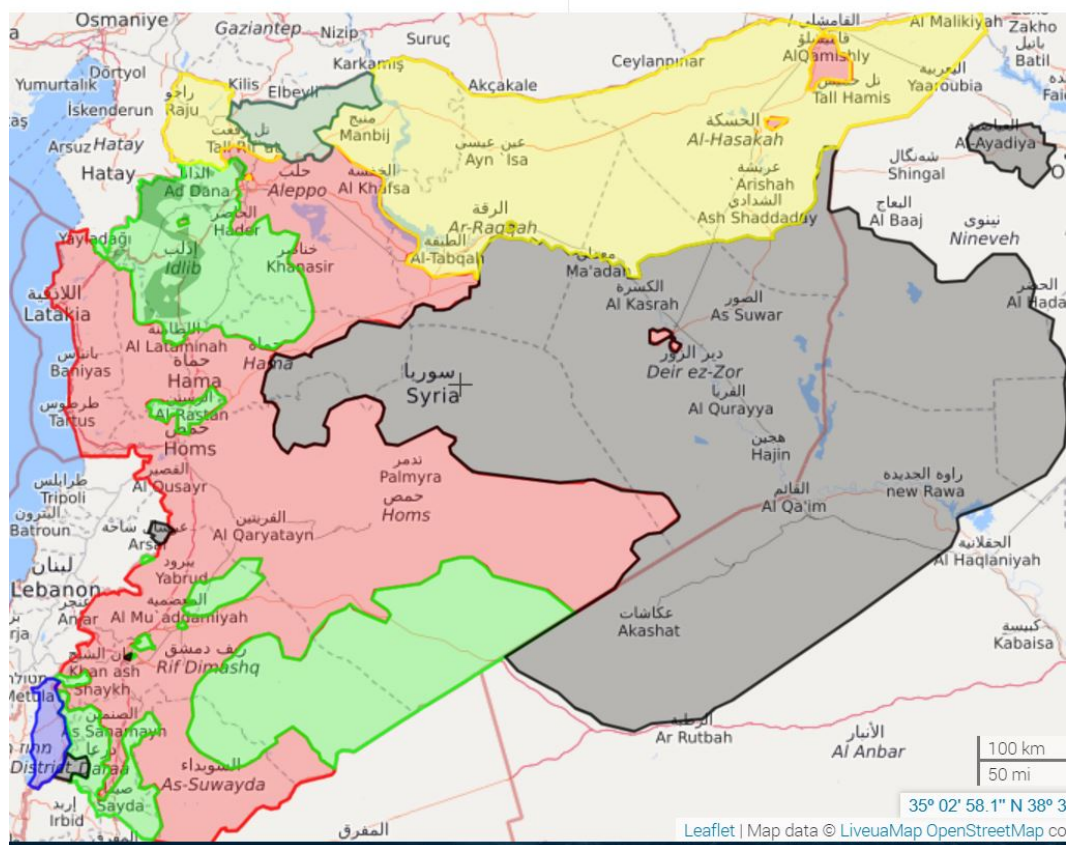


Conflict Map 3: July 2016, Regime advances in Aleppo, but still much weaker than today.

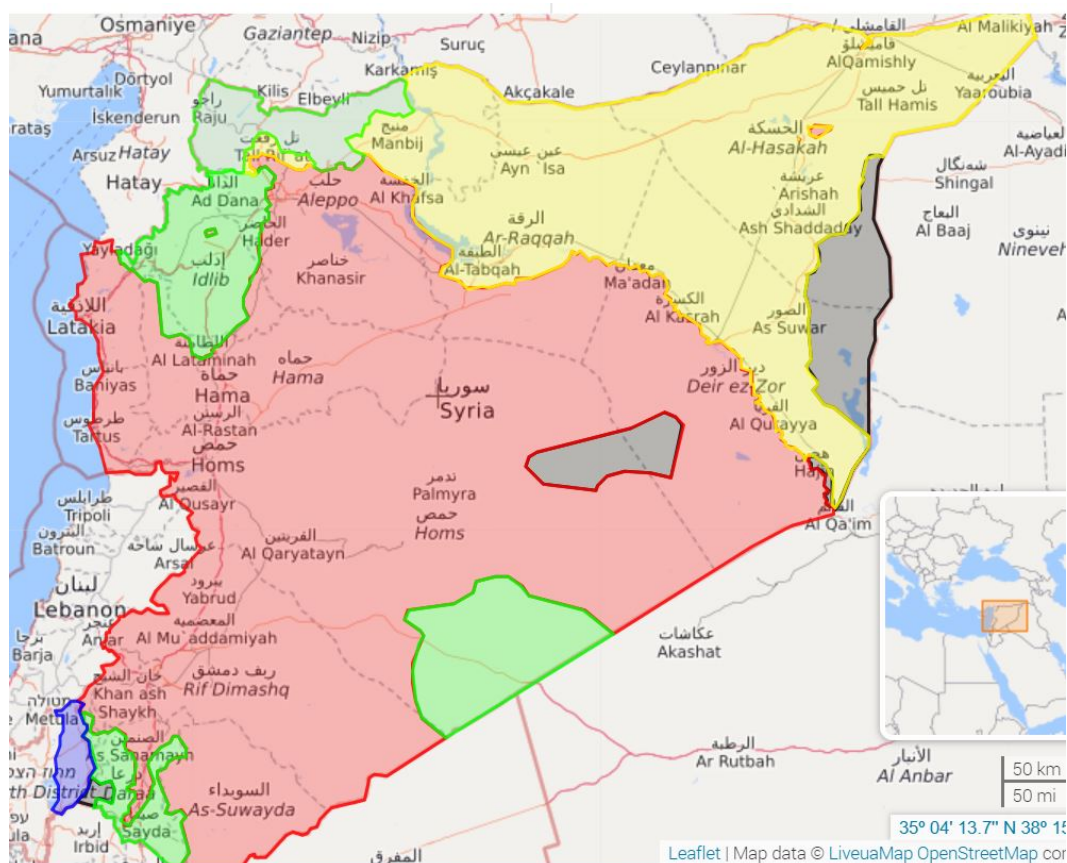


Conflict Map 4: January 2017





Conflict Map 5: July 2017, The Russian intervention proved useful, Regime is on the rise, Aleppo and Palmyra back



Conflict Map 6: May 25, 2018, Al-Assad is a clear victor

### III. What About Theory?

Since the 1990s, the international community has been focusing on promoting negotiated settlements as the ideal form of resolving civil conflicts. However, statistics show that most civil wars that terminate their war through power-sharing or autonomy are more likely to restart the conflict at a later stage than conflicts resolved by outright victory. Theories in conflict resolution, mediation, power-sharing, and post-conflict democracy building offer analysts a lens from which they can analyze specific conflicts. The theories mentioned below do not necessarily correspond to the Syrian crisis, but they do provide us with an idea of what significant theorists argue is the resolution to the civil conflict. The overview of mediation theories is essential to understanding why the peace talks in Syria have failed thus far; they also pave the way for recommendations to the mediators of the Syrian conflict. Although consociationalism as a concept is examined, it is by no means applicable to the Syrian case, the goal of mentioning these theories is to argue that they do not apply to Syria.

#### *Review of Mediation and Negotiation theories*

John Lederach is known as one of the pioneers in conflict theory, having written many books, peer-reviewed articles, reports, as well as leading many conferences. Through a careful examination of his book *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, many ideas emerge to assist a scholar in his analysis of conflict and possible ways to end it.

Lederach commences with a discussion on the emergence of asymmetrical conflicts, conflicts between a state and a rebellion, in such conflicts recognition is generally the main issue. These conflicts are further known as ‘zero’ sum conflicts, as in the goals are incompatible between the two sides and there is no mutual goal that peace can be built upon between the warring parties. In such cases, Lederach argues that the groups should begin thinking in terms of interests rather than goals in order for a compromise could be reached. Goals are generally big, such as winning, interests are generally smaller and changeable. Once common interests are discovered, mutual goals can be worked on, and a compromise might be reached to end the zero-sum dilemma.<sup>25</sup>

Of course, Lederach understands negotiating internal conflicts is anything but easy. The author believes issues such recognition, identity, land, and security are hard if not impossible to resolve. Conflicts driven by such issues, Lederach argues, will only be resolved if the needs and

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<sup>25</sup> John P. Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Institute of Peace Press, 1998), 81.

interests of all parties are satisfied. He further argues that traditional diplomacy in such conflicts has proven to be inadequate.<sup>26</sup>

Lederach introduces three levels of leadership in conflicts and how these levels all serve as different forums for mediation and negotiation. The Top-level leadership is generally the military and/or political leaders of a group. The Middle-Range level is comprised of respected leaders in religious groups, academia, etc. "The Middle-Range consists of people whose positions of leadership are not directly dependent on the power hierarchy of the top level. Middle-Range leaders include heads of educational or humanitarian organizations, ethnic leaders, respected heads of business or agriculture, or internationally known figures such as Nobel- or poet-laureates. Middle-Range leaders often know the top leaders and have their own connections to the grassroots constituency. They generally have a lower public profile than Top-Level leaders. Their position does not depend on political or military power but on social relations and activities."<sup>27</sup> The last level of leaders according to Lederach are Grassroots-Level leaders (community leaders, refugee camp leaders, etc....). For him, in order for sustainable peace to be reached, all three levels should be engaged in negotiations and mediation, they all must be involved in the process, but the most important level for him is the middle-range one because they have access to all other levels.<sup>28</sup>

In his building peace book, Lederach offers some tools and indicators to mediators on when and how to approach a conflict. He identifies four stages of conflict: The latent stage, the confrontation stage, the negotiation stage, and the peace stage. In the latent stage of a conflict, there is no direct confrontation yet, but rather issues start to surface. This is the ideal time for mediators to try and resolve a conflict before it manifests into a confrontation. Lederach believes that conflicts here are preventable through raising awareness about the issues and mediators should attempt to conciliate the issue through compromise. Unfortunately, it is quite rare that a conflict is detected and resolved at this stage, most efforts usually begin in the confrontation stage.<sup>29</sup>

If a mediator was involved in the first stage but failed, then in the confrontation stage, the mediator needs a new and different strategy because his old obviously failed. Lederach argues that at this stage the parties are not ready to sit on the negotiation table, thus mediators will

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>27</sup> "Structure: Lenses for the Big Picture," *Online Training Program on Intractable Conflict* 1998.

<sup>28</sup> *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, 64.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 65.

probably try to introduce ideas and compromises, but these wouldn't probably work at this stage. However, the mediator should constantly continue preparing the conflicting parties for negotiations, this process is generally known as pre-negotiations. During this process, the mediator often employs his tools through consultations with the parties and maybe international sponsors, communication is the essence to inspire them to go to the negotiation tables.<sup>30</sup>

The third stage, negotiation, is the most important for Lederach, he believes that the involvement of parties in negotiations is essential. Engaging in negotiations does not automatically constitute that an agreement will be reached, sometimes the negotiations may take many years, collapse, restart, and sometimes freeze. Deadlocks occur, and one might reach partial success or nothing. In general, the parties would be more amenable to enter negotiations when they both reach a stalemate. In asymmetrical conflicts, it is common that the rebellion aims to be recognized as a party to the conflict, if there is mutual recognition between the two parties, that helps with the negotiations. Recognition is the most important precondition or co-condition to negotiations because legitimacy comes with recognition. If there is no legitimacy there is no credibility.<sup>31</sup>

During the negotiations, Lederach argues that although it is difficult, the mediator should try to focus on changing the perception of the enemy. Changing the image would possibly repair the broken relationship between the warring parties and pave way for fruitful negotiations. Lederach further points out that although they try to be neutral and flexible, the mediators are often hampered by the issues of the conflict, the warring parties, the mediation process itself, international sponsors, or the end goal itself. The fourth and final stage of a conflict is sustainable peace. According to Lederach, this stage is dependent on the third stage, because without negotiations it is rare to have sustainable peace. Therefore, all parties should be satisfied in order to have sustainable peace. One might end up with peace, but without negotiations, tensions might not disappear, and the conflict might re-erupt.<sup>32</sup>

William Zartman is also a well-renowned conflict and conflict resolution scholar who has published countless work on conflicts. In a chapter he wrote for the SAGE handbook on conflict resolution titled Conflict Resolution and Negotiation, Zartman examines the inter-relation between these two key aspects of the conflict. He defines negotiations as the process of combining conflicting positions into a joint agreement, which could further lead to conflict

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 67.

resolution. Zartman believes that the negotiation process operates under a loose bundle of norms that can be termed as the ethos of equality. Negotiation involves an exchange of goods rather than a victory, it can be conducted as concession and compensation.<sup>33</sup>

Zartman gives us several approaches to negotiations. For him, a structural approach examines the distribution of powers and means of attaining them. It is about promises and threats. The leverage tools available to negotiators are plenty, they can range from persuasion, limitation, extraction, termination, to gratification and deprivation. To Zartman, structure refers to the relative position of the perceived power of the parties, the keyword is perceived. Zartman urges mediators and observers to engage in behavior analysis since the personalities of the warring parties and their behavior often plays a big role in the negotiation process. Mediators should come up with the appropriate motivators to encourage acceptance among the warring parties.<sup>34</sup>

Strategy in negotiations is essential for Zartman, the mediator must always employ strategic analysis. Zartman believes that negotiation is a process that can be explained by process analysis. Active conflicts usually require a set of steps for negotiation to be successful.<sup>35</sup>

Like Lederach, Zartman gives several stages in the negotiations process, he begins with the pre-negotiation level. This level consists of three stages before a conflict is ripe enough for successful negotiations. The first is petition over needs and grievances, this is followed by the conflict consolidation stage, in which the conflict is no longer about petitions but about violence. The third stage is conflict ripeness where warring parties feel that they can no longer expect to win through escalation. This stalemate is a very important aspect as it brings forth the parties to serious and constructive negotiations.<sup>36</sup>

Zartman then proceeds to the negotiation level. At this point the negotiating parties should start thinking of their real interests, real goals, issues, risks and costs of the conflict. Exaggeration and unrealistic goals are very common during this stage; however, they hamper achieving successful negotiations. The focus should be on finding a common problem and framing a common formula around it. The next stage should focus on concessions and the ability of both sides to move from extreme stances on opinions to agreeing on some mutual points. Once trade-offs are on the table, the conflict is no longer a zero-sum non-negotiable conflict. It is quite

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<sup>33</sup> William I Zartman, "Conflict Resolution and Mediation," in *The Sage Handbook of Conflict Resolution*, ed. Jacob Bercovitch, Victor Kremenjuk, and I. William Zartman (SAGE Publications, 2008), 324.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 325.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 328.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 329.

important to integrate reconstruction in the resolution and negotiations process because it could be a factor that all warring parties would benefit from.<sup>37</sup>

Unless a nonsolution is actually painful, it may constitute a viable situation that leaves the future open, creates no pressure for a search for a solution, and requires no risky decision. The decision to seize a negotiating opportunity and turn it into a search for a solution depends not merely on a judgment of how well that or any solution meets the parties' needs and interests or objectively resolves the conflict, but how its uncertainty compares with the better-known value of the status quo. ... To constitute a resolving formula that in turn becomes a Mutually Enticing Opportunity, the agreement must meet both procedural and substantive demands, in exchange for an end to violence. The reason why violence is so high is that it has a lot to buy. Violence is not only a money of exchange, however; it is also a measure of the strength of the parties, in the absence of other measures.<sup>38</sup>

A chapter in the 2008 SAGE handbook on conflict resolution examines the various aspects of mediation. Jacob Bercovitch gives us an excellent overview of what mediation is and how mediators should think and behave. He starts off by defining mediation as a third-party intervention in which there are interests, among them the interests of the mediator. Mediation is a voluntary initiative; therefore, the mediator shouldn't only be able but more importantly be willing to mediate in the conflict. An important aspect is the motivator behind the mediator's will to mediate. The mediator should try to be as neutral or impartial as possible because any perception of bias will hamper the mediation process. However, this isn't always the case, as there are many situations in which a mediator only intervenes because their goal coincides with that of the resolution of the dispute. Bercovitch insists that the mediation strategy cannot be random, it should be rational and educated based on many factors such as the intensity, the time, the mediator, etc. Mediation is a complex business.<sup>39</sup>

Usually, mediators have no sticks, only carrots which could be a sweetener to make the solution attractive to the warring parties. But in order to have effective carrots, and maybe sticks, the mediator needs the willingness and ability of the international community to deliver on their promises. When they don't fail, mediation efforts can result in either full or partial success. A

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 332.

<sup>38</sup> *Negotiation and Conflict Management: Essays on Theory and Practice* (Routledge, 2007), 239.

<sup>39</sup> Jacob Bercovitch, "Mediation and Conflict Resolution," in *The Sage Handbook of Conflict Resolution*, ed. Jacob Bercovitch, Victor Kremeneyuk, and I. William Zartman (SAGE Publications, 2008), 344.



full success would be a complete termination of hostilities, whereas a partial success could be a ceasefire. The most important aspects that the mediator should always remember are the nature of the conflict and the issues behind the violence.<sup>40</sup>

According to Bercovitch, mediators have three different strategies they can employ in mitigating a conflict. In communication facilitation strategies, the mediator has a passive role. He channels information between the parties and facilitates cooperation. Procedural strategies, on the other hand, enable a mediator to exert more formal control over the mediation process particularly in the environment of the mediation. Using procedural strategies, a mediator may determine structural aspects of the meeting, control media and the resources of the parties. Lastly, there are the directive strategies which by far are the most powerful form of intervention. The mediator influences the content and substance of the mediation. The mediator provides incentives or issues ultimatums.<sup>41</sup>

There are several factors impacting the choice of strategy, according to Bercovitch they are: the relationship between the parties, the relationship of the mediator with the parties, and the mediator's characteristics. There are of course several additional factors that de facto influence mediation, these include: 1) the intensity of the conflict, 2) the type of issues in the conflict, such as identity, territory, etc.... 3) the internal characteristics of the parties such as structure, legitimacy, and power, 4) the pre-conflict relationship experience, 5) the mediator's Identity and rank, 6) the initiation and timing of the mediation, 7) the mediation environment.<sup>42</sup>

What form of leverage can the mediator actually use on the conflict parties in order to persuade them to reach a mutually acceptable agreement? According to Bercovitch, the mediator has several leverage strategies he can employ. The mediator could pursue a persuasive strategy to try and urge the parties to reconcile their differences. This is a commonly used form of leverage. Another method could be the extraction of a concession from one of the warring parties while trying to persuade the other party of the importance of such a concession. In such a strategy, the mediator plays a big role. Another strategy employed by the mediator is to exert more pressure by terminating the mediation activities. This strategy can work sometimes because this termination is a sort of threat.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 346.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 347.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 349.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 348.

Bercovitch reminds us that while analyzing negotiations we must remember the symmetry of the conflict. Most of the conflicts are asymmetrical conflicts, in which parties are unequal and with different goals. In such conflicts, it is extremely difficult to reach a resolution, so mediation efforts here should attempt to reach a form of the common principle. These common grounds should be explored and negotiated until some resolution is reached. An example of these common grounds could include, a referendum, interim government, etc. These could all be viewed as the minimum agreement formula. This formula is needed if parties are to engage in deep and detailed negotiations.<sup>44</sup>

What about the parties to the conflict? What strategies do they use? They may use a disruptive strategy (value taking strategy) so they won't reach a resolution because they are not ready to make concessions. Parties usually make this because reaching an agreement is not in their best interest. For them, it's zero-sum game, the negotiations will drag on and on and on without the minimum agreement formula.<sup>45</sup>

The parties may, of course, engage in an integrative strategy (value making). This is a positive strategy with a positive sum. It leads the mediator to come up with a solution and some concessions could be made. Such an attitude could lead to a resolving formula that addresses the major concerns of both parties.<sup>46</sup>

### ***Power-sharing, Consociationalism, and Democracy:***

In a 2018 edited book titled *Post-conflict Power-Sharing Agreements: Options for Syria*, several conflict resolution specialists offer their arguments on how the war in Syria could end by examining options for conflict resolution. Most authors in the book argue that power-sharing is essential for Syria and that no sustainable peace could be reached without some form of power-sharing or autonomy. In the first chapter, the three authors argue that any mitigation of the conflict has to consider the overlapping interests of not only the international and regional players but also of the countless ethnic and confessional groups that make up Syria.<sup>47</sup> They also argue that the reality in the Middle East is that sub-national communal identities are much stronger than national identities, this reality having been heavily shaped by colonialism.<sup>48</sup> They

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 350.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 346.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Imad Salamey, Mohammed Abu-Nimer, and Elie Abouaoun, "Comparative Post-Conflict Power Sharing Models for Syria," in *Post-Conflict Power-Sharing Agreements: Options for Syria* (Springer, 2018), 7.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 8.

also argue that the interests of the Syrians that were forced to flee should be addressed in any settlement because any sustainable democratic peace will depend on the participation of citizens and integration into the system.

The second chapter which is written by Chahine Ghais argues that the Syrian conflict is at heart an identity conflict. He offers a theoretical understanding of how to end such conflicts. He argues that it is essential to pay particular attention to identity pluralism and the proper management of ethnicities and faiths not just in Syria but in the whole region. Ghais brings forth his 1998 argument that “identity conflict is a structural problem of the Nation-state system.”<sup>49</sup> He defines identity politics as the combination of identity and interest; he argues that in Syria, identity is enshrined in the political system because of the interactions between the many groups within one state. The author also argues that the international community has been treating the symptoms of conflicts but not the actual disease. He further elaborates that the interactions between groups in states where there is the forceful inclusion of minorities are the “practical invitation for identity conflict.”<sup>50</sup>

Ghais then gives an overview of Joseph Nye’s notion of different levels of integration to understand why states with unresolved issues are vulnerable to external influence. Accordingly, he argues that there is a theoretical limitation to applying realpolitik to identity conflict. The whole notion that states are the only basic unit of analysis that is “rational and sovereign,” doesn’t fit into analyzing identity politics. Ethnically mixed countries, according to the author, are an exception especially in periods of transition since the state is not rational and sovereignty is constantly challenged by internal and external interests. He argues that in the Middle East, most of the conflicts are either initiated or amplified by support from regional and international actors to certain identity groups, which in turn forces the guardian of the other groups to increase their support. The author then brings the case of Syria to support his argument that the role and interests of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Turkey, Israel, USA, and Russia only exacerbated the conflict and reinforced identity politics.<sup>51</sup>

Ghais argues that “power-sharing is still the most humane approach to identity conflict, yet it is the most difficult politically.”<sup>52</sup> He believes that power-sharing is voluntary and based on mutual recognition of all groups, along with an educated elite who can manage the nationalistic

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<sup>49</sup> Chahine Ghais, "Resolving Identity Conflict in the Middle East: A Theoretical Understanding," *ibid.*, 25.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

passions of the public and pave the way for an active society. He further presents the arguments of the supporters of consociationalism, which is a term coined by Arend Lijphart to describe power-sharing democracies. Consociationalism reduces the likelihood of intense open conflict and is positive for all the groups involved. However, the opponents argue that it is elitist by definition and anti-democratic.<sup>53</sup>

The author then argues that political and economic development are a pre-requisite for consociationalism; there should be a legal sense of equal opportunity to participate in the system. The author then continues with Hans van Amersfoort's argument that the leaders of all the different groups should be powerful enough to protect their groups' interests and also be able to educate their masses about political participation properly. He then concludes by presenting some of the challenges facing Consociationalism in Syria: "The main concern was that the conflict transformed from a containable internal conflict over identity and resources into a regional and even international conflict."<sup>54</sup> All identity groups have different belief systems and interests which are sometimes shared or opposed by foreign backers, so any solution would need the alignment of the interests of the major foreign sponsors and their major domestic actors. The direct involvement of foreign actors at this point, the author argues, is indispensable as they are more likely to yield a sustainable, inclusive, decentralized government.<sup>55</sup>

In their 2015 article on power-sharing and post-civil-war democracies, Caroline Hartzell and Mathew Hoddie provide some elaborate theoretical and empirical arguments on how power-sharing and democracy go hand in hand. Their findings show that little more than half of the countries that fought a civil war adopted a minimalist Schumpeterian form of democracy. They also argue that a good power-sharing arrangement helps nations advance to this minimalist form of democracy. Hartzell and Hoddie acknowledge that forming a democracy after a civil war is a challenge and as such, they believe that even achieving a minimalist form of democracy should be satisfying, especially if looking at a prolonged conflict.<sup>56</sup> In their theoretical analysis, just like Matthijs Bogaards, Hartzell and Hoddie provide an elaborate analysis of Lijphart's theory. They agree with Lijphart that power-sharing structures address concerns that the government could become tyrannical towards a minority, particularly when there are good

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>56</sup> Caroline Hartzell and Matthew Hoddie, "The Art of the Possible: Power Sharing and Post-Civil War Democracy," *World Politics* 67, no. 1 (2015): 38.

measures to prevent dominance by one group, so the main issue to be addressed is group security.<sup>57</sup> They show that at first Lijphart and other theorists were too focused on the political aspect of power-sharing. However, Lijphart's newer work acknowledges the important role of political, military, economic and territorial power-sharing arrangements and institutions. Military power-sharing could be the integration of war-time militias into the army, or co-existence of a national army and a militia, or it could be based on a formula. The territorial solution could be in the form of federalism, autonomy, or even zones of influence. Economic power-sharing is more concerned with access to resources and opportunities.<sup>58</sup>

Hartzell and Hoddie present the arguments of the critics of consociational democracy. While recognizing the validity of several arguments, they argue that without power-sharing as a form of a post-conflict formula, democracy wouldn't even be on the table. They insist that democracy and power-sharing often go together when the warring parties recognize that their interests are best served when they stand competitive elections yet without the winner and loser type of situation. The authors argue that critics of power-sharing often underestimate how difficult it is to end some wars and in bleak times democracy seems impossible. Even with all its flaws power-sharing is still one step in the right direction towards democracy.<sup>59</sup>

Hartzell and Hoddie repeatedly call for democratic institutions to be built immediately after the termination of war if social order is to be restored and these institutions need to be inclusive. They also concur with Roland Paris in his argument that when the West insisted on promoting Liberal democracies in post-civil-war situations in the 1990s, "The result of this mismatch has been, in many instances, a failure of democracy to take hold and the reemergence of armed conflict."<sup>60</sup> He says; the elitist nature of Schumpeterian democracy fits best with the leadership mentality and group insecurities of post-conflict situations. While the authors do recognize that power-sharing on its own doesn't need democracy to function, they argue that bargaining between government and opposition leads to democratization.<sup>61</sup>

### ***The Problem with Negotiated Settlements to Ethnic Civil Wars***

In his long journal article titled, *The Problem with Negotiated Settlements to Ethnic Civil Wars*, Alexander Downes argues that negotiated settlement fails in resolving ethnic conflicts as often as two thirds. "The most current research on civil war termination finds that 77 percent of such

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 51.

conflicts that reach a conclusion end in decisive victory, compared to 23 percent that end in negotiated settlements. In 47 of these two types of war termination, decisive victories are more stable: only 12 percent of wars (4 of 42) ended in this way reignited, whereas 23 percent of negotiated settlements (3 of 13) broke down into renewed warfare.”<sup>62</sup> Several scholars argue that the essential principle of this new form of war termination is devolution and power-sharing, which have become the commonly prescribed remedy of the international community. According to the author, negotiated settlement often requires that groups forsake their arms and their ability to protect themselves to enforce what was agreed upon in the negotiations.<sup>63</sup>

Most actors are faced with the prisoner’s dilemma: how can they be sure that the adversary will not cheat? “Structural realism traditionally has argued that states’ inability to know whether other states’ present or future intentions are malign or benign inhibits cooperation in a world without a sovereign authority to provide protection or enforce contracts.”<sup>64</sup> Downes then argues that after inter-state wars, the warring parties get to keep their armies, however, in a civil war that is not the case for the combatants. They are often forced into surrendering their weapons and then end up sharing the same state with the people they were fighting against. Given the history and urge for survival, warriors are often reluctant to risk settling through negotiated solutions based on disarmament. “the use of violence itself engenders new obstacles to the reestablishment of peace. Fighting sharpens feelings of hostility. It creates fears that an opponent might again resort to violence, and thus adds to the skepticism about a compromise peace.”<sup>65</sup> This is often dueled by the political uncertainty of the opponent’s future intent, or how the newly negotiated institutions will function; moreover, there is a large amount of distrust and fear that somehow a group will be excluded from resources and power. “In other words, knowledge about state type is not public, but only indirectly observable via state behavior. Uncertainty about current intentions inhibits cooperation because of the possibility that the other side is motivated by goals beyond simple security.”<sup>66</sup>

Wars often increase the importance of ethnicity as a cleavage in society, and what negotiations do sometimes instead of resolving these cleavages is that they leave the groups able to reopen the struggle in the future. Downes argues that once a full-scale ethnic war begins, solutions such as autonomy or power-sharing are unlikely to settle a conflict. He believes that secession or a

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<sup>62</sup> Alexander B. Downes, "The Problem with Negotiated Settlements to Ethnic Civil Wars," *Security Studies* (2004): 17.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>65</sup> Fred C. Ikle, *Every War Must End* (Columbia University Press, 2005).

<sup>66</sup> Downes, "The Problem with Negotiated Settlements to Ethnic Civil Wars," 8.

decisive victory are the only way out. He also recommends that the international community should start exerting flexibility in their solutions and not only insist on a negotiated settlement. “If the IC values stability—defined as the absence of war—it should allow or assist governments or rebels to win civil wars decisively.”<sup>67</sup>

Downes argues that uncertainty about the present and the future increases the difficulty of implementing successful political institutions after the war (and thus often fail?). Moreover, it handicaps the chances that democracy will be sustainable. To further support his argument, new data shows that applying a democratic negotiated settlement does not necessarily lead to democracy in the long run. “States that have civil wars ended by negotiated settlement receive a short-term boost in their level of democracy, but 20–30 years after the agreement these same states tend to be less democratic than those which had a civil war end with a decisive victory.”<sup>68</sup> The author cites the work of other researchers who found that almost half of all negotiated settlements to civil wars failed in comparison to only 15% of victories.

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 11.

## **IV. The Infusion of Russian Interests in Syria**

### ***Introduction***

A lot has changed in Syria since the Russians directly intervened almost three years ago. Major battles have been fought and won, the war is not yet over, but it does feel like it is in its final stages. With the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, Russia was faced with two options: either join the west in toppling regimes or choose the opposing side and become a black knight in the international arena. The Russians felt greatly deceived by the West in Libya because the mission's goal was humanitarian and not regime change. Accordingly, it chose to defend the regime under the excuse of preserving Syria's sovereignty and the state institutions. Regrettably, Syria's peaceful revolution was doomed from its start because the protests were no match for the government's brutal reaction.

However, for Russia, its support for Al-Assad is vital because Syria is its only remaining proxy ally in the region; in addition, it provides its only naval base on the Mediterranean. Furthermore, Russia has plenty of trade deals and investments in Syria. In 2013, Russia's involvement became evident when red lines were drawn over the use of chemical weapons. Russia was quick to decrease the tension. In 2015, the Syrian regime asked for Russia's direct military intervention to aid its ally when it was on the edge of collapsing. Officially, the intervention was marketed as opposing Islamic terrorists.

### ***The Russian-Iranian-Syrian Triad before 2011:***

#### ***The Soviet Union and the Russian Federation***

During the cold war, Russia reinforced its relation with satellite states through arms trade, buying their products, and supplying these states with their needs for below market prices, most prominently ensuring they don't become Liberal.<sup>69</sup> The Russians invested profoundly in Syria's infrastructure, the Soviets built up a dam on the Euphrates in 1973, they also established a naval base in Tartus in 1971. The Soviets improved and built much of the railway and highways connecting major cities in Syria. In the 1980s the USSR assisted Syria through turning oil wells into commercial use, yet, under Yeltsin, the accumulation of debt for investments and state building programs reached over \$12 billion. Accordingly, the relationship between the two countries dwindled until Putin took charge, which coincided with the death of Hafez al Al-Assad and the ascension of Bashar to power. The two leaders started their fresh relationship in

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<sup>69</sup>Patrick W. Quirk, "Russia-Syria Internal Threat Alliance (2010-2016)," in *Great Powers, Weak States, and Insurgency. Governance, Security and Development*. (Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2017), 181.



2004 when Al-Assad visited his Russian counterpart in Moscow and where Putin decided to start on a clean slate by relieving Syria of most of its debt.<sup>70</sup> When Syria was forced out of Lebanon in 2005, Russia and Syria grew even closer to fend off the expansionist new Middle East strategy which was becoming evident in Iraq through the New Middle East Project of Cheney.<sup>71</sup>

### *The Islamic Republic of Iran*

Essentially one cannot examine the current shape of the Syrian war without understanding the web of alliances that were formed in the years leading up to the war. Today there is a triple alliance between Russia, Syria, and most importantly, Iran. Although Iranian-Russian interests might not always converge in other areas, the Syrian crisis managed to bring Iran and Russia ever closer to one another. It has been argued that the Russians aren't too keen to preserve Al-Assad and could be amenable to a different figure after a transitional period, however, Iran has been keen to preserve him because he managed to improve the relations and continued to provide access to Hezbollah.<sup>72</sup>

Syria's Baathist Alawite leader Hafez Al-Assad stood against the only other Baathist, Saddam Hussein, during the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s. In return, Al-Assad was isolated by Saudi Arabia and most of the Arab countries, with the notable exceptions of Libya, Lebanon, and Algeria. In exchange for Syria's support, Iran provided the Al-Assad regime with free or very cheap oil. Prior to 2012, Iran was also involved in implementing several industrial projects in Syria, including building cement factories, car assembly lines, and power plants. "In 2009 Al-Assad announced a 'four seas strategy' aimed at transforming the country into a regional hub for oil transportation between the Persian Gulf and the Black, Caspian, and Mediterranean seas. He began taking steps to realize the country's transit-center potential and bring the four seas strategy closer to reality."<sup>73</sup>

To further tighten the relations between Iran and Syria, namely due to the Iraqi ban on Iranian travelers, Syria opened its doors to visits to the holy sites, namely Sayidah Zaynab's Mosque.

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<sup>70</sup> Mark N. Katz, "Putin's Foreign Policy toward Syria," *George Mason University* 2006, 7.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Julian; Inzaurrealde Borger, Bastien, "West 'Ignored Russian Offer in 2012 to Have Syria's Assad Step Aside'," *The Guardian* 2015.

<sup>73</sup> "There Is More to the Syrian Conflict Than Meets the Eye - Syria's Transit Future: All Pipelines Lead to Damascus," *Center for Geopolitical Analyses* 2013.

Even after the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, Syria kept witnessing a large number of Shia' pilgrims coming to visit holy shrines.<sup>74</sup>

The Iranian and Syrian economic alliance has operated on multiple levels of interaction, both between the states and their business networks. Iran allocated \$5.8 billion to build an Iranian Center for Strategic Research (CSR) in Syria.<sup>75</sup> In 2011, Western pressures on both countries pushed Iran and Syria to sign a symbolic free trade agreement as an attempt to diminish the effects of economic sanctions imposed by the west. "These recent financial agreements are crucial for both countries, but particularly Syria, in order to open up a new market for its products and increase revenue. These agreements are believed to increase Iran and Syria's annual trade volume to \$5 billion".<sup>76</sup> In January 2013, Syrian state media announced a \$1 billion "credit facility agreement" with Iran. Five months later, Syrian officials announced that Iran would provide Damascus an additional \$3.6 billion line of credit for petrol. Evidently, Iran is as equally invested in Syria as Russia.

### ***Making Way for A Direct Military Intervention:***

#### *Political Involvement of Russia During the War*

From the beginning of the uprising, Russia handled the Syrian problem strategically. At first, they urged the Syrians to implement fast reforms and avoid unnecessary violence. In return they gave the regime international shield; hence the absence of any UN Security Council Ch. VII resolutions against Syria until then.<sup>77</sup> It remains blurred why the regime refused to implement Russia's advice early on or did Russia not pressure enough? Regardless of the reform, political and military support from the Iranians and the Russians continued. On the military end, before the 2015 direct intervention, the Russians expanded their base in Tartus. Additionally, they were supplying the Syrian regime with weapons.

#### *Positive Rapprochement between Russia and USA*

US President Barack Obama stated in 2012 that the United States considered any use of Chemical Weapons (CWs) a violation of a red line and would pave the way for possible targeted military strikes.<sup>78</sup> In 2013, Syria formally demanded a UN-led inquiry into the allegations of

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<sup>74</sup> Karim Sadjadpour, "Iran's Unwavering Support to Assad's Syria " *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* 2013.

<sup>75</sup> Majid Rafizadeh, "Iran's Economic Stake in Syria," *Foreign Affairs* 2013.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Quirk, "Russia-Syria Internal Threat Alliance (2010-2016)," 186.

<sup>78</sup> Karim Makdissi and Coralie Hindawi, "Creative Diplomacy Amidst a Brutal Conflict: Analyzing the Opcw-Un Joint Mission for the Elimination of the Syrian Chemical Weapons Program," *Issam Fares Institute* 2016, 6.

CW use, namely in Khan al Assal. Russia supported this move. At the time of the onset of the investigative mission in Damascus, the most significant CWs attack took place in the eastern Ghouta region on 21 August 2013.<sup>79</sup> The team investigated, and their report affirmed the attack short of naming the culprit. Intelligence gathered by Mossad analyzed trajectories which named Al-Assad. Of course, both the regime and Russia were quick to denounce these moves.

Following the CWs attack tension was rising, and the US president seemed keen on a military strike.<sup>80</sup> The British parliament was quick to reject the prime minister's request for approval of a military strike. In return, the US was restricted, which led to a rapprochement between the Russians and the Americans with the famous Kerry-Lavrov talks which led to the framework for eliminating the Syrian Chemical Weapons Program.<sup>81</sup> The mission began with a Declaration Assessment team that helped the Syrian government set up its declaration of what chemicals it had and in what quantities. The Assessment team's input was of course only technical because they cannot know where the government is hiding chemicals and as such, they focused on double checking that the quantities and properties matched those declared by the government. Within a year of its conception, the Organization for Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and United Nations Joint Mission in Syria was brought effectively to an end on 30 September 2014 after successfully completing its mission.<sup>82</sup> One of the primary targets of the mission was to avoid staying in Syria for too long, so that mission creep does not kick in and another Iraq scenario takes place. Its mission was the complete removal of Syria's declared Chemical Weapons, along with the destruction of the production and transport facilities.

Sometimes exceptional circumstances must occur for international cooperation to take place. When great power interests are intertwined, significant changes can take place in international politics. When Russia and the US are in agreement, events can happen rather quickly. With the Syrian chemical disarmament process, there were more states interested in making it a success rather than a failure.<sup>83</sup>

As unfortunate as it is, use of chemical weapons continued long after the mission was concluded. Since 2015, there have been numerous claims and investigations into the further use of chemical weapons. Moreover, several of these alleged attacks have been through the use of commercial chlorine as a weapon. The mandate of the OPCW-UN Joint Mission did not include

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 33.

chlorine for the reason that it is a commercial chemical. However, the OPCW did establish a fact-finding mission to determine the use of chlorine; some reports were positive about chlorine, while others were inconclusive. The main problem with chlorine is that once it is in the open air, it disperses quickly, and its traces disappear; accordingly, the only way the fact-finding mission conducted its task was through interviews with victims, doctors, and witnesses.<sup>84</sup>

### *Stalemate in Syria, more involvement from Iran and Hezbollah*

The country most willing to help Syria was Iran. By 2014 it was estimated that Iran covertly sent over 10,000 operatives to Damascus.<sup>85</sup> Some were even generals and officers from the Revolutionary Guards' Corps (IRGC) sent to assess, train and lead the Syrian army and its paramilitary forces. Iran spent a large sum of money on improving and developing the Syrian armed forces.<sup>86</sup> However, with all this training the government was still fighting on defensive and still losing many territories. More help was needed.

In May 2013, Hezbollah came in to train and support with attrition tactics and an indoctrinated militia. This Lebanese Shi'a group first emerged victorious in the battles for the city of Qusair, bordering Lebanon, which of course orchestrated Al-Assad's newly gained militia capabilities. Hezbollah was the picture-perfect brutal force that the regime needed to begin turning the tide in its favor. Hezbollah views this fight as both a fight to maintain its supply line to Iran and to fight a holy existential war against the threat of Sunni fundamentalism.<sup>87</sup>

Hezbollah is an Iranian-groomed militia formed in the late stages of the Lebanese civil war as a proxy for Iran on the Lebanese border with Israel. Today, within the Lebanese borders, Hezbollah has massive support from the Shia population. Moreover, it is the single most powerful party in Lebanon, the only one remaining with an armed force, not to mention that its armed force is stronger than the Lebanese Armed Forces. It remains unclear how many Hezbollah fighters are in Syria today, but the number of its casualties until the end of 2015 was estimated at around 1500, which shows that there is substantial involvement. By leading and coordinating with Iran, the militia significantly changed the shape of the Syrian map. "In 2016, the group commanded an estimated 20,000 active troops and 25,000 reservists, making it comparable to a medium-sized army. Hezbollah is the most resilient and militarily capable sub-state actor the world has ever known, period, says Bilal Saab, a fellow at the Atlantic Council,

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ruth Sherlock, "Iran Boosts Support to Syria," *The Telegraph* 2014.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Sulome Anderson, "Battle-Tested Hezbollah May 'Stand No Chance' in an All-out War with Israel," *Newsweek* 2017.

a think tank based in Washington, D.C.”<sup>88</sup> With most advances, other setbacks followed, and it became clear to the Syrian Government, Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah that the only solution out of this stalemate was aerial support.

### *The Intervention*

When Russia first broadcasted its decision to intervene militarily in Syria, plenty of Western politicians claimed that the Russians would get a hard blow in their venture. As former US President Barack Obama said in December 2015, "I think Mr. Putin understands that ... with Afghanistan fresh in the memory, for him to simply get bogged down in an inconclusive and paralyzing civil conflict is not the outcome that he's looking for."<sup>89</sup> Nevertheless, against the odds, they proved their army's prowess and sent a clear message to the international community that Russia stands by its allies, and it will come to their aid when requested. Throughout the Syrian crisis, Russia maintained close ties with Iran. Pierret argues that three factors managed to turn the tide in Al-Assad's favor: "First, the Russian intervention vastly increased the firepower of pro-regime forces through the deployment of several dozen aircraft and the upgrading of the Syrian army's armored and artillery components. Second, loyalist manpower has been bolstered by thousands of Shia foreign fighters. The third factor was Russia's ability to secure deconfliction agreements with key sponsors of the rebels."<sup>90</sup> These agreements can range from agreeing to coordinate missions in an attempt to avoid collisions between the forces, to pressuring Jordan to decrease its backing of certain militias in southern Syria so as to ease the tension on the government in Damascus.<sup>91</sup>

Following the September 2015 intervention, the regime forces consisted of the following: Russian Aerial, strategic, and political support; Iranian military, strategic, financial and political support; Hezbollah's guerrilla manpower and training, and Syrian ground and air power. It is essential to outline that majority of Russian strikes targeted armed rebels (Islamist and otherwise) who opposed Al-Assad. However, ISIS is the umbrella justifying Russia's presence in Syria. Russia, if the Chechen wars taught us anything, like most of the West, has a fear of

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Steven; Eilperin Mufson, Juliet; Jaffe, Greg, "As He Departs Paris, Obama Defends His Islamic State Strategy in Syria.," *The Washington Post* 2015.

<sup>90</sup> Thomas Pierret, "Syria in the Aftermath of the Russian Intervention: The Paradoxes of De-Confliction," in *Dossier: Geopolitical Turmoil and Its Effects in the Mediterranean Region* (IEMed. Mediterranean Yearbook 2017).

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

Islamist extremism. This dread was continuously reiterated by the domestic media in Russia to tell the people that the goal of the intervention was to protect them from Islamism.<sup>92</sup>

Internally, the Syrian government was keen to avert bandwagoning, which is when soldiers desert to join the rebels or give rebels information or weapons.<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, this does not mean there has been no desertions but quite the reverse. At the start, there was much bandwagoning taking place on all levels, from former Prime Minister Riad Hijab to the numerous soldiers who left to join the enemy. "The reason for mentioning the bandwagoning issue is that, when there is much desertion, the forces are bound to weaken and fail. Moreover, had the regime not been able to control its troops, the Russian military intervention would not have changed so much on the ground."<sup>94</sup> As the battles intensified, so did the government's resolve to avert desertions. They began by giving benefits and advantages such as housing to families of the military. Such moves, along with the fear of retribution, kept bandwagoning to a minimum.<sup>95</sup> Fundamentally, when linking the unity of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) with the disunity that is evident in the opposing forces, it turns out to be obvious why the government is now emerging as the victor.

The poster child of the Russian intervention was the fall of Aleppo in 2016-2017. Aleppo is Syria's largest city and is the industrial capital of the country.<sup>96</sup> When the rebel fighters occupied it in 2012, they were unable to control the entire city. Consequently, the city was separated into two zones. With regard to the battle for Aleppo, Russia was quick to use its deconfliction policy with Turkey to urge it to cease supporting the rebels in the North. Because of fear of a greater refugee crisis resulting from significant fighting in Aleppo, Turkey agreed to stop the support and even joined Russia and Iran in organizing the Astana Process.<sup>97</sup>

Russia was also quick to retrieve Palmyra from ISIS in 2016. This was a move with moral effects rather than important strategic ones; Palmyra is a UNESCO world heritage site with artifacts dating back thousands of years. When Russia got it back, it was sending a clear message to the world that this intervention was not only to turn the tides in Al-Assad's favor but also to protect world history and fight ISIS. Most of the world welcomed the retrieval of Palmyra. Russia even sent Alery Gergiev, a supporter of Russia's President Vladimir Putin, to

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<sup>92</sup> Hanna Notte, "Russia in Chechnya and Syria: Pursuit of Strategic Goals," *Middle East Policy* (2016).

<sup>93</sup> Quirk, "Russia-Syria Internal Threat Alliance (2010-2016)," 200.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>96</sup> Pierret, "Syria in the Aftermath of the Russian Intervention: The Paradoxes of De-Confliction," 1.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 3.

conduct the St. Petersburg Mariinsky Symphony Orchestra in a free public concert held in the Ancient Roman amphitheater, within days after recapturing the city.<sup>98</sup> Once again Putin was sending a message that not only was Palmyra back, but it was even safe to send Russians there to hold a concert. However, within months, Palmyra was yet again captured by ISIS and once again liberated by the Al-Assad regime and Russia in 2017.

Although in 2016 Putin announced his country's exit from the direct intervention in Syria, Russia maintained critical military assets there and chose to re-deploy troops at will. Of course, this partial or (non-existent) withdrawal may have been seen by some opposition groups as balancing; it indeed wasn't. When Moscow announced its withdrawal from Syria, Slim argues that Russia was confident that no threat to the Syrian regime's survival would materialize.<sup>99</sup> However, at the same time, Slim believes that withdrawal could be directed at Al-Assad and his inflexibility in negotiating peace.<sup>100</sup> If this is the case, then it indeed portrays Russia as a rational player which can be negotiated with. Slim believes that Russia was never behind the figure of Al-Assad.

'On Nov. 27, 2012, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev said Moscow has "good working relations" with Al-Assad — but not the "privileged relation" that existed with his father, Hafez Al-Assad. Over the past five years, Al-Assad ignored numerous requests and recommendations made by Putin.... Moscow did not invite Al-Assad to the Kremlin — despite numerous requests from Damascus. Al-Assad wanted the symbolism of a handshake.'<sup>101</sup> However, the Kremlin only granted that request in October 2015, four years after the conflict erupted. That meeting served both parties. For Putin, it gave him a domestic legitimacy that the military intervention was requested by Al-Assad. For Al-Assad, it was a chance for him to show his supporters and enemies that Russia was behind him. Slim also argues that Russia and Al-Assad do not necessarily have the same strategy. She reminds us how on 18 February 2015, Russian U.N. envoy Vitaly Churkin said that Al-Assad's remarks to fully retake Syria militarily "do not chime with the diplomatic efforts that Russia is undertaking."<sup>102</sup>

Russia's intervention in Syria empowers its status as an international power and assures that Russia will be the key player deciding Syria's future. Russia was also careful when it insisted

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<sup>98</sup> "Russia's Valery Gergiev Conducts Concert in Palmyra Ruins - BBC News", May 5, 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36211449>.

<sup>99</sup> Randa Slim, "Putin's Master Plan for Syria," *Foreign Policy* 2016.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

that the presidency should not be mentioned in UNSC resolution 2254; it knew that at this point of the conflict, no one could force Al-Assad's government to resign.<sup>103</sup>

It is also noteworthy mentioning that Russia isn't stringent on not accepting political reform in Syria. On the contrary, as Slim argues, Putin is open to the possibility of establishing a federation in Syria, assuming Syrians themselves want it. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov assured that "it is the Syrians themselves who must choose the power structure of their country."<sup>104</sup>

Slim brings forward an exciting conclusion about the fate of the Syrian President. She argues that Russian interests may be served in Syria without Al-Assad remaining in power. However, Iranian interests indicate that for them Al-Assad is essential. With that in mind, she argues that a power-sharing solution that guarantees the interests of both Russia and the West might be amenable to Russia but not Iran.<sup>105</sup> Accordingly, it is up to Russia to try and persuade the Iranians to accept that Al-Assad might not be the only leader to look out for Iranian interest. It is understandably a hard job for Russia, mainly keeping in mind that Al-Assad's focus since he took power in 2000 was to strengthen his ties with Iran and Hezbollah. Accordingly, Iran views the person of Al-Assad as a key figure for its national interests.

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.



## V. What's Happening to the Peace?

### *The UN-Arab League led Negotiations: Kofi Anan and Lakhdar Brahimi*

Magnus Lundgren argues that when Anan, Brahimi, and de Mistura failed to influence the government and the opposition, they always shifted their focus upwards by attempting to gain leverage from regional and international actors.<sup>106</sup> While presenting an overview of the challenges facing mediation and conflict resolution in Syria, Lundgren argues that starting from 2014, there was increasing international recognition that power-sharing is the only option for Syria. However, there was absolutely no progress in negotiating the design and implementation of such a structure. This was primarily due to increasing mistrust, sectarianism, and the “mother of all issues,” the fate of Al-Assad.<sup>107</sup> It should be noted that this thesis argues that power-sharing does not apply to Syria anymore.

In early 2012, United Nations Secretary-General (UNSG) Ban Ki-Moon responded to the mounting violence by assigning his predecessor, Anan, as the joint UN-Arab League mediator for Syria. Of course, just the association with the Arab league automatically meant that the negotiator was biased simply because the Arab League was clear in its demands for Syria; it wanted regime change. This naturally meant that Al-Assad was at a disadvantage in the negotiations. Accordingly, his regime wouldn't be too serious about the negotiations since they aimed at disassembling it.<sup>108</sup> Nonetheless, Anan began his mission by engaging in wide consultations ranging from the UN to regional and international actors.<sup>109</sup> Anan also met with Al-Assad and representatives from the opposition. His strategy was to employ external pressure to reach a ceasefire paving the way for the political transition. After weeks of back and forth discussions, a ceasefire was established on 12 April 2012, it was endorsed by a UN monitoring mission to ensure there were no breaches. The mission did reduce violence for a month or more, however, hostilities soon restarted, and the UN mission was shut down.<sup>110</sup> In response, Anan created a response team for Syria composed of interested states. They met in Geneva and set out the Geneva Communique guidelines which have shaped the Syrian peace process since. In the summer of 2012, Anan attempted his best to weaken Russian support for the regime while

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<sup>106</sup> Magnus Lundgren, "Mediation in Syria: Initiatives, Strategies, and Obstacles ..." *Contemporary Security Policy* 37 (2016): 274.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 276.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

trying to bridge the divide between the US, and Russia. However, he failed, and then resigned his mission.<sup>111</sup>

Soon after, the UNSG was quick to appoint the veteran Algerian negotiator who “resolved” the Lebanese conflict in the 1990s, Lakhdar Brahimi. Brahimi adopted a cautious and consultative approach. He attempted to convince the parties that nothing could be achieved through violence, stressing the urgent humanitarian costs. Nonetheless, the Geneva criteria and its stipulation for regime change remained a guiding force for Brahimi, which also meant that the regime wasn’t motivated in the negotiations and viewed Brahimi with mistrust. The opposition and its regional Arab sponsors weren’t too keen on supporting Brahimi because he wanted to involve Iran in the consultations.<sup>112</sup>

Regardless, Brahimi went ahead and hosted the Geneva II conference in January and February 2014. This was the first time the two sides met one another at the negotiating table, but it is fair to say that the meeting was a disaster. Lundgren argues that just the fact that they were brought together was severely influenced by the fact that ISIS was on the rise and that meant a ‘short-lived’ rapprochement between Russia and the US. Of course, no progress was reached in Geneva II as both sides stuck to their positions, Al-Assad insisting that all the people he is fighting are terrorists and the opposition conditioning the talks on Al-Assad’s departure.<sup>113</sup> Brahimi resigned shortly after the conference.<sup>114</sup>

It can be argued that the failure of the talks and the ceasefires relate to the fact that the US and Russia were and still are unable to overcome their disputes. For example, the Vienna II meeting of 2014 was unfruitful because of the worsening US-Russian ties due to the Ukrainian crisis and the annexation of Crimea.<sup>115</sup>

### ***De Mistura, Russia, and the Syrian Peace Process 2016-2018:***

When comparing the duration of the tenure of each of the appointed mediators, it is hard not to admire de Mistura. He had been the UN special envoy for four years and still had not resigned. Although resignation has been a mediation strategy adopted by his two predecessors, he views resignation as giving up on the Syrian people, as such he has continued his job regardless of the obstacles. Lundgren argues that de Mistura’s initial strategy was to end the search for a

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 277.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 278.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> "Between Astana and Geneva: The Outlook of Conflicting Agendas in the Syrian Crisis," *Al Jazeera Center for Studies* 2017, 5.

comprehensive, nationwide ceasefire, instead, he sought to mediate limited truces in countless Syrian territories. The pilot of his truces was Aleppo. Initially, it failed to take-off, which pushed de Mistura to hold indirect consultations among the regime and opposition delegations in Geneva. At this time in the conflict, the parties suffered from war fatigue and accordingly, he says that the conflict was riper for negotiations than at any stage since 2011, namely because the sides realized the threat from the rising Islamic State. This is a good point that the author makes, although both sides sought to blame the rise of ISIS on the other, it nonetheless brought them closer to accepting that there was a third player that they can't negotiate with.<sup>116</sup>

In 2015, Russia was eager to replace the Geneva communique's language by replacing "transitional government" with "non-sectarian representative government", which no longer mentions Al-Assad's transitional fate. The Vienna arrangement resulted out of a rare agreement between Russia and the US, it became the roadmap for resolving the Syrian crisis and was reinforced in UNSCR 2254 of December 2015. The agreement emphasized the urgency of reaching a ceasefire while also creating the new government, amending the constitution, and conducting UN-monitored elections. This was given the unrealistic deadline of eighteen months. Others argue that regardless of the new language, it was still based on the Geneva communique and ultimately called for a transition from Al-Assad.<sup>117</sup>

Regardless, negotiations commenced in February 2016, however, they were immediately suspended due to the enmity between the opposing delegations. de Mistura also pointed out that the parties were still deadlocked and perceiving the conflict as a zero-sum one. Notwithstanding these disagreements, the International Syria Support Group met in Munich also in February 2016 and proposed a nationwide cessation of hostilities based on a joint statement between the US and Russia. As is extremely visible throughout the life of the Syrian conflict, disagreements between the US and Russia would lead to escalation, and agreements between the two would lead to de-escalation. The cessation of hostilities entered into force on 27 February 2016, and for the most part, it held due to the monitoring mechanism set up by the US and Russia. "Given the pessimism that has prevailed for a long time, the tentative success of the February ceasefire came as a surprise to many. Optimism was further bolstered when mediated meetings in Geneva in March 2016 resulted in a document listing 'Points of Commonalities' between the parties."<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>118</sup> "Mediation in Syria: Initiatives, Strategies, and Obstacles ..." 279.

Although there was some optimism regarding the point of commonalities that de Mistura devised, the Geneva III meeting nonetheless failed. Its failure, some argue, was a result of the Russian military intervention in Syria and America's refusal to coordinate its Syria mission with Russia. Which was "a condition set by Moscow for a truce between the regime and the opposition, and to center efforts on striking IS; therefore, the ceasefires of February and September 2016 broke down."<sup>119</sup>

*Russia as a mediator:*

With Russian-US efforts failing to produce an agreement in 2016, Russia no longer aimed at joint action with America but instead aimed at a regional engagement. Putin, of course, gained a lot from the new regional dynamics, especially the alteration of the Turkish position, particularly because of the US support to the Kurdish Democratic Party (PYD).<sup>120</sup>

Realizing that America's interest in intervening in the Syrian war was fading, Russia took it upon itself to initiate a new track for diplomatic negotiations in Syria, paving the way for its role as a mediator. "Throughout the spring and summer of 2017, given progress against ISIS and with an eye toward post-ISIS stabilization, two parallel sets of talks progressed: Geneva IV, between the Syrian government and the High Negotiations Committee, under the auspices of the United Nations; and the Astana talks, indirect negotiations between the regime and the opposition, with Russia, Turkey, and Iran acting as sponsors."<sup>121</sup>

The Astana track came about after Russia invited Iran and Turkey to join it in trying to resolve the conflict. Turkey was invited to guarantee the commitment of rebel forces and Iran was invited so as not to disrupt.<sup>122</sup> The trilateral meeting resulted in the Moscow Declaration of December 2016. In this declaration the sponsors called for extending the Aleppo ceasefire to include all of Syria except areas under control of ISIS and the Al-Nusra front. The declaration also called for the speedy implementation of UNSCR 2254. Russia also called for a meeting between Syrians to be held in Astana on 23 and 24 January 2017. The meeting's main objective was the stabilization of Syria's ceasefires.<sup>123</sup> Of course, it is essential to remember that at this point in the conflict the regime had already regained all of Aleppo and as such had the upper hand in the conflict.

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<sup>119</sup> "Between Astana and Geneva: The Outlook of Conflicting Agendas in the Syrian Crisis," 4.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>121</sup> Katy Collin, "7 Years into the Syrian War, Is There a Way Out?," *Brookings Institute* 2018.

<sup>122</sup> "Between Astana and Geneva: The Outlook of Conflicting Agendas in the Syrian Crisis," 6.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 7.

Moscow was clear about who from the opposition should be invited to Astana. At first only the armed groups. That automatically meant that Syria's foreign-based political opposition had no role to play in this process. The explanation Russia gave was that these negotiations are technical and thus do not touch upon political issues that involve the Syrian Supreme Commission for Negotiations. Through its influence in Turkey and Jordan, Russia tried to get as many armed opposition factions as possible to come to Astana. Its efforts were somewhat successful and resulted in a 'united' opposition delegation led by Mohammed Alloush, leader of the Jaysh Al- Islam (Army of Islam).<sup>124</sup>

Russia may have been serious about the reform it wanted to see in Syria because it presented a draft constitution and asked the opinion of the armed opposition. One of the highlights of this draft was article 44: "the people's association (parliament) holds the following functions: declaration of war and peace issues, the removal of the president, the appointment of members of the Supreme Constitutional Court, and the appointment and dismissal of the president of the central bank."<sup>125</sup> This would not be much of a change to the current powers of the Parliament, but the question is whether Russia is able to guarantee the proper functioning of such a parliament.

The Syrian armed opposition and the government both refused to sign the agreement of Astana I agreement. Accordingly, Russia invited members of the political opposition to Moscow to discuss the progress reached in Astana with Foreign Minister Lavrov, who wanted to solicit their opinions on the Syrian constitutional project.<sup>126</sup>

Since the inception of the Astana talks, some argue that Russia has been in a race against time to build the pillars of the Syrian solution before reaching the Geneva process.<sup>127</sup> Russia has been doing that namely by amending the opposition delegation to fit its needs, and of course, drafting how the solution should look. Through these, Russia has effectively altered the purpose of the Geneva game and installed itself as the mediator of the Syrian conflict.

To achieve its goals, Russia undermined the Supreme Commission for Negotiations' (SCN) monopoly on representing the opposition. The reason for doing this is because the SCN is committed to forming a transitional government without Al-Assad. Russia does not share this view notably because its intervention has changed the battlefield and it did not intervene to go

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 6.

back to the initiation point.<sup>128</sup> In an attempt to stop the Russians from undermining them, the SCN held a meeting in Saudi Arabia to reformulate its position. This was met with great support from many regional powers as well as the West, especially the group known as the friends of Syria, who rejected any attempt to replace the Geneva process. However, Russia never viewed Astana as moving away from Geneva because it was still interested in the Geneva process, but it just wanted to go to Geneva with an agreed solution in hand. “At the same time, Moscow is trying to establish an independent trajectory in Astana just in case it fails to impose its conditions for a solution in Geneva.”

In a meeting held in Sochi in January 2018, the Kremlin managed to secure the presence of some of the armed groups, members of the Syrian government, and the regime approved domestic opposition. However, just like in Astana the political opposition was nowhere to be found. They boycotted the meeting under the auspices that it was Russia and the regime who were setting the solution. Regardless, Putin was quick to open the meeting with “Today all the conditions are in place to turn this tragic page in Syria’s history.”<sup>129</sup> An irony that Dr. Cherkaoui outlines is that the UN ended up asking Russia for assurances that it is the UN-led process that’s responsible for drafting the new constitution. The UNSG was also hopeful that something positive would happen in Sochi and gave assurances that the Sochi process is a contribution to the Geneva process.<sup>130</sup>

To give more legitimacy to the Sochi and Astana process, the UN special Envoy Staffan de Mistura was also present in the meetings and actually viewed the results as optimistic. According to him, it was an apparent shift from theory to practice. He said, “We never had the government side and the opposition actually getting involved in a discussion of a new constitution because they were not in agreement.”<sup>131</sup> Some observers believe that Putin held the Sochi congress to try and bridge the technical Astana talks with the political Geneva talks. But it is also clear that Putin is directly trying to shape the future of Syria by providing a deal and a future on Al-Assad’s terms.<sup>132</sup> “The road to a political solution in Syria goes through Tehran, Ankara, and Moscow.”<sup>133</sup> Other experts such as Aron Lund, “a Syria expert and Century Foundation fellow, believes that Russia is trying to push Syria toward a diplomatic framework

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>129</sup> Mohammed Cherkaoui, "From Geneva to Sochi: The Revolving-Door Diplomacy of the Syrian Crisis," *ibid.* 2018, 10.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

more in tune with military realities - both in Astana and in Sochi.”<sup>134</sup> Like Russia, Turkey was firm in expressing that the Astana and Sochi processes do not compete with the UN-led Geneva talks. Turkey’s Prime minister said “This process is not competing with the Geneva process. Astana peace talks, trilateral meetings, [are] not an alternative to Geneva, what we try to do is prepare infrastructure for solution[s] ... in Geneva.”<sup>135</sup>

### ***Examining Local Truces and Ceasefires***

In their 2017 article, Hinnebusch and Imady argue that de Mistura chose to adopt bottom-up approaches because all top-down approaches failed, so he chose to focus on local truces.<sup>136</sup> “After years of unrest, massacres, and deadlocks, public opinion seems to shift in favor of the security and safety which the regime could deliver.”<sup>137</sup> They go on to explain how in Astana the thirteen armed groups were brought unwillingly to the negotiation table; this was mostly because of their loss in Aleppo and the loss of Turkish backing.<sup>138</sup> The third Astana meeting between the regime and the armed rebels resulted in the establishment of four de-escalation zones in rebel-held areas. This took place in May 2017, the regime wasn’t expected to stop the fighting, but was obliged to allow humanitarian aid and restore public services to these areas. After this, we had the Putin-Trump pact which established ceasefires in the south between rebels and government forces. It is important to mention that unlike the deal reached in Astana, the Putin-Trump pact excluded Iran and Hezbollah as parties to the pact.<sup>139</sup>

Hinnebusch and Imady argue that the rebel groups had to accept the massive Russian role because the alternative was Iran, so they separated from the Jihadist rebels.<sup>140</sup> In the end, the deconfliction zones represent the only success story that rebels could claim since in theory they’re not held by the government but somewhat under international observation.<sup>141</sup>

Hinnebusch and Imady offer a great insight into the regime’s motivations for entering into these local truces. The Russians set up a center in 2016 to broker truces, Russia claims that it brokered over 1479 truces.<sup>142</sup> The idea of national reconciliation was articulated by Al-Assad after establishing a ministry for it in 2012 lead by “Ali Haidar who claims successful conclusion of

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>136</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch and Omar Imady, "Syria's Reconciliation Agreements," *Unknown Publisher* 2017, 1.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 3.

50 reconciliation projects as of September 30, 2015.”<sup>143</sup> To conclude truces, the ministry would select influential local people to form reconciliation committees who were then tasked with assuring fighters who don’t want amnesty a safe passage out of the areas. “Assad granted blanket amnesties eight times in the last five years for a total of about 20,000 former Syrian mercenaries. In July 2016, Al-Assad issued Legislative Decree No. 15, the legal basis for ‘reconciliation,’ which includes amnesty for those who ‘turn themselves in and lay down their weapons.’ Opposition supporters are guaranteed the right to work with the internal Syrian opposition.”<sup>144</sup> However, Hinnebusch and Imady argue that the primary motivation for the Al-Assad regime could be seen in Legislative Decree 107 of 2011 which stipulates a framework for post-conflict devolution and decentralization. It is said to allow sides of the conflict to retain some power in areas they hold; it also expands the powers of the local councils.<sup>145</sup> Although it is not ideal, and its implementation thus far has been quite limited, this decree does offer some power-sharing arrangements that the Al-Assad regime can concede to.

Hinnebusch and Imady outline four different types of reconciliation agreements. The first is the most unbalanced form and leads to mass displacement of specific populations. An example they give is the “four-towns” agreement in which a Shia populated village was engulfed by Sunni rebels and the agreement stipulated the displacement of the entire villagers.<sup>146</sup>

The second less punitive form required that fighters lay down their weapons in return for lifting the siege and restoring services. Anyone who did not accept the conditions was expelled to different rebel-held areas. Those fighters who submit are then absorbed into the Syrian army or its local militias. Another condition often stipulated in these agreements is the disbandment of the local opposition councils since they compete with state institutions and were seen as a threat to peace. However, local leaders are given temporary authority in certain areas. More importantly, religious leaders often reintegrate while they change their rhetoric; some of them were even transformed into mediators between the people and the state.<sup>147</sup>

A third and much more balanced agreement dictates that rebels maintain control of their areas in exchange for handing over heavy weapons and stop targeting regime forces. In return, the government would lift the sieges and allow for the return of displaced people and public

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.



services such as electricity.<sup>148</sup> “A similar deal was reached in 2014 in Jiroud, which thereafter remained peaceful. The deal was characterized by an opposition activist as a “temporary truce” that served the interests of the opposing sides.”<sup>149</sup>

In the fourth agreement type, the rebels generally have more power than the government, because they control a resource crucial to the regime.<sup>150</sup> An example would be the Wadi Barada region which is responsible for the fresh water supply of all of Damascus. In this area the regime forces didn’t intervene at all in exchange for the secure pumping of water to Damascus from the Al-Fija spring.<sup>151</sup>

The result of these agreements has been largely positive. Hinnebusch and Imady say that these agreements delivered improvement in humanitarian aspects that the top-down approach couldn’t.<sup>152</sup> For Syrians it gave them a relief from war, therefore, these agreements have, to a certain degree, given local populations actual tangible peace. Accordingly, there is great support amongst the population for such deals. These agreements didn’t only affect the areas that covered them, but also somewhat empowered local leaders in areas under government control. Therefore, it is hard to deny that the Russian solution to the Syrian crisis excludes power-sharing. While writing in 2017, Hinnebusch and Imady conclude “As the situation stands today, the regime appears to have not only proven it can achieve military victory, but also that the only type of changes it is willing to tolerate are those decentralized forms of governance that are taking place within in the framework of reconciliations.”<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

## VI. Recommending an Elusive Stability

When approaching negotiations and conflict resolution we must decide whether we want to adopt a peace-first approach, a justice-first approach, or an infusion of both.<sup>154</sup> Although the opposition was aiming at infusing peace with justice, their demands today seem too idealistic to apply to the Syrian scenario. The actions of the UNSC show that it has decided to adopt a peace-first approach by minimizing justice.<sup>155</sup> Nonetheless, the international community did attempt in some instances to infuse accountability and justice into the Syria debate. The recommendations presented in this section urge for the adoption of a peace-first approach in settling the Syrian conflict. “The peace-first approach prioritizes ending the conflict above all other interests. The singular role of negotiators is to seek an agreement that brings the most immediate end to the violence. All other goals and concerns that may impede immediate peace should be pushed aside. In this way, the approach is single-minded and pragmatic: peace is the priority and any obstacle to peace should be avoided or eliminated.”<sup>156</sup>

Although achieving justice may be the goal of some parties, it may not be what other parties want. Hence, in a peace-first approach, whatever prolongs the conflict should be excluded, including justice. In a peace first approach, the negotiator must not assume the role of the prosecutor or assign responsibility.<sup>157</sup> “The focus on peace also encourages national reconciliation and social reconciliation.”<sup>158</sup> Should the negotiations focus on prosecutions, then this allows for animosities between the faction to grow. Therefore, the focus of negotiations should be on granting amnesty as it may lead to forgiveness and reestablishing normal life in a divided nation.<sup>159</sup> In Sudan for example, using the justice first approach, the fact that the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for the Sudanese president Omar Al Bashir only complicated the conflict.<sup>160</sup> “The mediators and the parties must equally avoid the temptation to be diverted or to use the peace process to create a modern inclusive democratic state. That is the task of the parties—with assistance from the international community—only after the conflict has ended.”<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Paul Williams, Lisa Dicker, and C. Danae Paterson, "The Peace Vs. Justice Puzzle and the Syrian Crisis," *ILSA Journal of International & Comparative Law* 24, no. 2 (2018): 416.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 418.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 419.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 420.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 421.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 441.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 422.

The mediator and the parties must consider the creation of truce and reconciliation committees throughout Syria similar to the South African model. Granting amnesty, once people declare all relevant facts to the acts they committed during the war, as in the South African case, has been shown to provide a stable peace.<sup>162</sup> Moreover, proper social rehabilitation should take place throughout the country, both for victims and perpetrators alike, along with a plan for disarming non-state actors. More importantly, the international community should entirely avoid any form of post-conflict retribution tribunal where Al-Assad or leaders of other various groups must stand trial. Over the past four decades, the Syrian regime provided stability and to some degree prosperity. Today, after assuring its survival, the regime is invested in taking control of the numerous surviving rebel-held and Kurdish areas, by force or through grassroots negotiations among local leaders.

An essential key to a post-conflict stable and prosperous Syria is raising awareness about civic engagement and empowering democratic institutions and civil groups. Therefore, it is necessary for post-conflict Syria to begin to exhibit some form of minimalistic yet factual decentralization, namely through the empowerment of the already existing local and provincial institutions as well as enabling them to hold free local elections. This would serve as ample opportunity for the European Union to engage in proper democracy promotion and balance the Russian and Iranian sphere of influence in Syria.

### ***Recommendations to the Syrian Government***

It cannot be denied that the Syrian government, orchestrated by the Russian military, managed to turn the tide in its favor. However, the government should not be too optimistic about regaining the entire country through continued bloodshed. The government of Syria has the opportunity today to end the conflict while emerging as a victor and maintaining much of the power in its hands. The government, as well as the mediator, must approach reform with caution and optimism because any extreme changes might completely upset the system and everyone involved. Nonetheless, it is vital for the government to adequately address the issues of the Kurds, the rebels, and the extremists.

The government surely has the upper hand in the conflict, but it cannot win a quick war against the Kurds. Accordingly, should the government wish to end the war rapidly through negotiations rather than continued bloodshed, it must make a deal with the Kurds. This deal can

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 426.

be in the form of autonomy as in Iraq while asking the Kurds to provide assurances that no secession will take place.

Although the government managed to eliminate most of the armed opposition, there are still a few cities, towns, and provinces under their control. It seems unlikely that the government will allow the rebels to maintain control over these strongholds. However, the question the government should be facing at the time of writing is whether it should continue following the Aleppo model of divide, siege, truce, and conquer. The government should use the ongoing Astana process to discuss the surrender and rehabilitation of rebels; it should also be willing to offer a nationwide amnesty to the non-Islamist rebels who fought against it.

The government is then faced with the question of handling extremists. This is a very tough and sensitive problem. Currently, in the West, there are programs for the rehabilitation of fundamentalists, namely the youth.<sup>163</sup> Keeping in mind that these processes are not necessarily going to be successful, and also remembering that ISIS and Al-Nusra were responsible for some of the most gruesome forms of terror, it might be unlikely that the government will spare the lives of such people regardless of age.

However, the government can no longer just keep calling everyone who fought it a terrorist if it wants peace. Should it choose to imprison or kill the Islamist rebels, it should make sure to only focus on the ones who belonged to ISIS and Al-Nusra. This will be difficult, but some coordination with the remaining moderate rebels and the Kurds could prove useful in preventing the deaths of innocents.

Politically, the government would have better chances for securing peace if it chooses to implement horizontal reform of the local power structure. Such reform does not necessarily mean Al-Assad will depart, nor does it mean that he will have to lose much of the power he has. The reform aimed at here could be in the form of decentralization. Such decentralization does not need to end in federalism; it can continue upholding the currently existing structure.

Currently, the national political structure consists of the Presidency, the Prime Minister, and his cabinet, the People's Assembly, and the judiciary. Locally, the structure consists of a province, a city, and several rankings of towns based on the number of their inhabitants. As per Legislative Decree 107 of 2011, these local units all have the right to elect a local council, and they elect their leaders. For every province, there are 14, there is a governor appointed and

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<sup>163</sup>Andrew Higgins, "For Jihadists, Denmark Tries Rehabilitation," *The New York Times* 2014.

dismissed by Damascus; under him each local council, whether town or city, elects a council leader and his deputy who are responsible, along with the governor, for providing services to their constituents. Also, there is a Ministry responsible for local councils, and there is a national local leaders council headed by the PM that meets twice a year to discuss budgetary and technical issues.

Since the above structure already exists, it has been used by specific opposition council as a legal basis for their existence. However, the regime now has a genuine opportunity to give these local councils more executive power and enable the governors of provinces to run in free elections. Doing so might empower local leaders to bring on effective reform locally. The government would not be losing much power to the local councils, but it would enable these councils to run more efficiently.

When approaching negotiations, the government no longer needs to be on the defensive. After all, the target of negotiations should no longer be the dismantlement of the regime; it should be the rebuilding of the country. The regime has to maintain a position of strength during the negotiations and - as will be expected - it will hamper the negotiations, and there will be suspensions and resumptions. However, the government needs to remember that its soldiers are fatigued after seven long years. It should also keep in mind that the longer the war rages, the more scrutiny from the international community. The Al-Assad regime should cooperate in these negotiations because the EU, along with other states, would likely offer reconstruction aid in return for reform.

One of the critical points the government will insist upon is the future of the president. Currently, the government's position is that only the people through elections can remove President Al-Assad. Moreover, the international community and opposition are quite skeptical about elections monitored by the current administration. Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that presidential elections in Syria will take place before 2021 since the last one was in 2014 and the term of the presidency is seven years. Therefore, keeping these facts in mind, the government must be willing to accept concessions on local and maybe even legislative reform. The government has many platforms available to negotiate with the opposition; it could be done through the rigid UN-mediated Geneva process, or through the Russian influenced Astana and Sochi processes. It seems more likely that the Geneva process will be to rubberstamp whatever is reached in Astana. The reason is that the Astana process is not limited by a mandate calling for new governments.

### ***Recommendations to the Syrian Opposition***

The Syrian opposition should primarily focus on forming a united front. The lack thereof has been the main weakness of the opposition thus far; should this disunity persist; the government will abuse it. The rebels must also distinguish themselves from the extremists such as Al-Nusra and ISIS. The government might choose to offer different concessions to different groups. The exiled opposition needs to better coordinate with the rebels who are still in Syria, particularly those in Idlib and on the southern front. The rebels located in Syria have a stronger bargaining chip than that of the opposition abroad. Many factions of the Syrian society mistrust the foreign opposition. Some argue that more than half of the foreign-based opposition has not been to the country during the war and thus cannot fathom what the population actually needs.

Just as Hinnebusch and Zartman recommended, the opposition should not demand as a pre-condition what it hopes to gain from the negotiations. This was common in the negotiations that took place under UN-auspices. The opposition always demanded that Al-Assad's departure be a pre-condition for the negotiations. However, to be clear, the opposition is no longer in a position to make such demands. Perhaps back in 2014 and 2015 when it still maintained some presence in most major cities, it could make such demands, but today they are in no position to make any significant demands.

The opposition needs to keep in mind that any concessions from Al-Assad are a bonus as he is under no obligation to concede; he has the upper hand in the conflict. The opposition must no longer be misled by the thought of winning the war since that is no longer a possibility. Instead, it should focus on survival in the post-conflict period. Moreover, the International Community no longer has interests in prolonging the war by arming them again. Secondly, as the IC learned, it cannot guarantee that weapons sent to the moderate rebels will be received by the moderate rebels. Moreover, the continued infighting between factions of the opposition is only strengthening Al-Assad.

The opposition and the rebels must come up with draft points on what they wish to accomplish in Syria without focusing on significant changes at the executive level. As mentioned in the previous section, the local councils that were empowered by legislative decree 107 of 2011, should be the primary focus of the negotiations. If the opposition would like to gain any form of power in Syria, its best chance is to focus primarily on establishing local, decentralized power. It is highly unlikely that the regime will accept significant changes to the executive branch. As such the opposition needs to come up with proposals on how to improve decentralization, maybe by setting up the local electoral law and demanding international

monitoring of local and legislative elections. Now, of course, the regime will continuously fight the opposition in the negotiation room regardless of what their demands. However, if the opposition chooses reasonable demands, then it might be able to use Russia to pressure Al-Assad to concede.

We must keep in mind that both parties need to realize that the benefits they gain from ending the war are much higher than those of continuing the fight. Accordingly, Al-Assad might prefer to continue fighting until all rebels are eliminated. However, the opposition has no benefit in continuing the fight and should accept being in a weaker position in order for negotiations to be fruitful. The opposition should discuss the surrender and reintegration of Idlib and the Southern Front as took place in Aleppo and Eastern Ghouta. Their main demands should be complete amnesty and empowerment of local councils.

Before approaching the negotiating table, the first and foremost thing the opposition must stop doing is publicly bashing the government and blaming it for hampering the negotiations. Such charges help no one, and the government might react by halting the negotiations and intensifying the attacks on the few remaining rebel-held areas. The international community will do nothing more than condemn and, in the end, the casualties will be rebels. The opposition chief negotiator, Nasr Al-Hariri, said in January 2018 “The leverage on the regime is the critical issue ... We saw during the last round of negotiations that the regime is under no pressure to negotiate. They had zero interest in the talks. Without pressure from Russia, the political process will not work. ... If the presence of US troops is a helpful actor in pushing for a political solution, that will be good. All the efforts must be focused on that.”<sup>164</sup> The opposition still believes it has some sort of upper hand or leverage in the negotiations, but it does not, and the sooner it realizes this, the faster the conflict can end. If the rebels are serious about playing a role in post-conflict Syria, they need to assess their strength correctly. They need to realize that they cannot make outrageous demands such as a transitional government or Al-Assad’s departure. Instead, they should aim for reintegrating back into the Syrian state and attempting reform from within, supported by conditioned aid packages from the west.

### ***Recommendations to the Mediator***

The mediator has so far supported the ongoing Astana process, which is good because it shows flexibility. De Mistura has been dealing with the Syrian crisis for over four years; he has gotten to know the negotiators quite well. Accordingly, he has become aware of the attitudes and what

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<sup>164</sup> Patrick Wintour, "Us Must Do More to Force Assad to Negotiate, Says Syrian Opposition Leader," *The Guardian* 2018.

each side views as a red line. As the mediator, de Mistura needs to pressure the international community to begin negotiating with the Al-Assad regime and Russia. He also needs to collect all the sponsors he can for the rebuilding efforts that will take place once the war is over. During the latest meeting held in Astana on 15 May 2018, de Mistura emphasized that the Astana process has been helpful in bringing about progress with regards to detainees, abductees, and disappeared persons. Such focus on issues that are common amongst all groups is essential in trying to change each group's image of the enemy. As Bercovitch argued, this is indispensable for building trust. It could also be the minimum agreement formula that he and several other theorists argue is essential to bringing peace.

De Mistura has been keen to involve as many people from the civil society as he could in the negotiations. He had often argued that it is the future of all Syrians that is at stake. As Lederach argues, the inclusion of Top-Level, Middle-Range, and Grassroots-Level members of society is essential to reaching a sustainable peace. To that extent, de Mistura has done much more than his predecessors did: he attempted to include as many factions of Syrian society as he could.

Usually, mediators have no sticks, only carrots which can be sweeteners to make the solution attractive to the warring parties. However, to have effective carrots, and maybe sticks, the mediator needs the willingness and ability of the international community to deliver on their promises. When they do not fail, mediation efforts can result in either full or partial success. A full success would be a complete termination of hostilities, whereas a partial success could be a ceasefire.

Raymond Hinnebusch and William Zartman came up with a critique on the attempts of Annan and Brahimi. They begin by arguing that the mandate of the mediator for ending the conflict was restrictive in the sense that it was too focused on transition while expecting the Al-Assad regime to dismantle itself in the negotiations.<sup>165</sup> The recommendation they give is that the regime may have responded kindly had the negotiations aimed at reconciliation and power-sharing rather than transition.<sup>166</sup>

Hinnebusch and Zartman's second point is that end results were treated as a precondition. They point out how the opposition always insisted that the result of these negotiations should be the precondition, namely Al-Assad's departure.<sup>167</sup> They recommend that "one should not demand

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<sup>165</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch and William I Zartman, "United Nations Mediation in the Syrian Conflict: From Kofi Annan to Lakhdar Brahimi," *International Peace Institute* 2016, 1.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.



what one hopes to gain in negotiations ... Particularly if those demands cannot be achieved by other means (Force).”<sup>168</sup> Hence, de Mistura must help the opposition come up with realistic demands, particularly ones that address the present unbalanced situation.

Another argument that Hinnebusch and Zartman highlight was that although the mediators had high prestige, they were unable to attain strong international support, namely because of the split on the mediator’s mandate between the West and Russia and China.<sup>169</sup> Hinnebusch and Zartman say that the primary condition of mediation – impartiality – was not achieved, as the negotiation aimed at Al-Assad’s departure. Nonetheless, they argue that even mediating a transition requires balanced treatment of the involved parties.<sup>170</sup> However, due to the Arab League’s influence on these negotiations, the aim was also to sideline Al-Assad even during the transition. Hinnebusch and Zartman believe that the negotiations were not inclusive since the biggest test of inclusivity is whether any party capable of disrupting the negotiations is excluded.<sup>171</sup> They argue that the exclusion of the armed rebels from Geneva II and the regime from Geneva I hampered the success of the mediation.<sup>172</sup>

The main argument the authors outline is the lack of perception of a mutually harming stalemate (MHS). Hinnebusch and Zartman are of course not alone on this point; in fact, most negotiation theorists believe that a MHS is essential for fruitful negotiations. In that sense, the conflict was not ripe enough, and the warring parties did not perceive that the costs of peace outweighed those of fighting. They further argue that neither parties in Geneva II engaged with Brahimi unless he adopted their viewpoint.<sup>173</sup>

While pointing out the faults with the mediation efforts, Hinnebusch and Zartman argue that it was wrong to focus all the efforts only on ceasefires. They argue that ceasefires without negotiating a resolution, and a resolution without cessation of hostilities, are rarely successful. So, they recommend that there should be a focus on both aspects of conflict mitigation. Moreover, Hinnebusch and Zartman point out that both mediators lacked carrots and sticks: they could neither dissuade a party by threats nor could they tempt them by offering packages.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

To understand Zartman's critique and some of the solutions he offers, one must examine his earlier works, particularly his book on negotiations and conflict management. In it, he suggests that a formula based on trade-offs between rebel violence and government concessions is needed. "The details of the agreement, that is, how much violence is needed to buy how many concessions, are obviously as idiosyncratic and manipulable an equation as any bargain about prices."<sup>175</sup> Extreme solutions are unlikely to be fruitful.

For solutions not to be extreme and to satisfy the needs of the regime, the mediator must focus on the peace-first approach. He must forgo any plans to include justice in the immediate resolution plans. Instead, he must promote the creation of a truce and reconciliation committee. "Given that nearly every conflict in the past few decades involved the commission of war crimes or crimes against humanity by at least one of the armed actors, there is little appetite for accountability. It is the job of the mediator to find a way to embrace the political reality and accommodate these less than ideal or altruistic interests to get the armed actors to cease the killing."<sup>176</sup>

### ***Recommendations to Russia***

From the time when Putin ordered the commencement of the military campaign in Syria, Russia successfully switched the tides to the regime's favor, while also working on a side plan for post-conflict resettlement. As imperfect as the current situation is to democracy promoters and the opposition, it still is a period of relative stability and decreased deaths. It may not last, but it almost certainly placed Russia at the top of the hegemonic pyramid of foreign influence in Syria. However, Russia must realize by now that it cannot end the Syrian conflict without cooperating with Europe and the US. Some Western commentators argue that Russia intervened to prop-up a client. Others believe that Russia got what it wanted in Syria, a controlled conflict where deaths are minimal but with no end in sight. They believe that continued instability serves the interests of Russia in Syria. It seems unlikely that Russia wants this, primarily because it keeps hosting and promoting peace talks. It may, however, be likely that Russia will continue delaying the end of the conflict until the opposition is completely exhausted and willing to engage in peace talks under Russian terms.

Since Russia has been heavily involved in the mediation process, it proposed drafting a new constitution for Syria. It might seem appealing to Russia to base it on its own constitution. However, a move might be controversial, however, keeping in mind that constitutionally Russia

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<sup>175</sup> Zartman, *Negotiation and Conflict Management: Essays on Theory and Practice*, 238.

<sup>176</sup> Williams, Dicker, and Paterson, "The Peace Vs. Justice Puzzle and the Syrian Crisis," 423.

is composed of several states and even republics that form the Russian Federation. Accordingly, should it pursue a federation in Syria, it might appeal to the rebels but mainly to the Kurds as it gives them one of their main demands: autonomy.<sup>177</sup> Moreover, such a resolution should appeal to the United States. However, this author worries that the US will continue refusing any advancements reached through the Astana process since until now it has not sent any delegation to join the Astana process. Leaving Russia to strengthen its alliance with Turkey, further risking the future of the Kurds. At the moment, the Kurds face an impasse; they cannot expand because of Turkey, they are engaging in talks with the regime, but want autonomy, and they feel secure with the backing of the US. Turkey, however, could declare war on them at any minute and send in troops under the pretext of protecting its borders. If it does, the Kurds are bound to be defeated. If they do not agree with Al-Assad's and Russian demands to reintegrate and maintain some autonomy, they will probably also be defeated. Their best option at the moment is to reach a deal with the regime, and for that, they need to convince their ally, the US, to support the agreement. It must be noted that from a realist perspective, Russia's involvement in Syria is an attempt to further its interests. This may at one point converge with the eventual termination of the Syrian war.

Russia must also maintain its pressure on Al-Assad to engage in proper negotiations and implement reform on a national level. Russia must realize that a stable and peaceful Syria is more in its interests than a Syria torn by civil war.

### ***Recommendations to the EU and the US***

The European Union has received over one million refugees since the war in Syria erupted. Consequently, it also suffered from the spillover from the war. The EU has an opportunity to intervene positively in the Syrian conflict. This intervention is in the form of rebuilding assistance conditioned on political and economic reform. The EU could target aid packages to local councils; it could condition aid to the government until visible reform occurs. More importantly, it is now almost exclusively up to the EU to try and minimally balance the influence Russia, Iran, and Turkey have on the peace process in Syria. Whatever these three powers agree upon as a formula in Syria, it cannot result in proper decentralization and reform without European and even American negotiations with Russia.

Communication channels between the leaders of all states involved should be reestablished, and the West needs to stop calling for regime change as this window of opportunity has been

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<sup>177</sup> Hossam Al Jablawi, "The Future of Kurdish Relations with the Assad Regime Post-Isis," *Atlantic Council* 2017.

shut. The only concrete change can now only come from within the regime itself. The regime, as cruel and outrageous as it is, has squashed the revolution and rebellion. It would not be the first time the West has looked the other way in return for ending the conflict. European nations must begin negotiating directly with the government over the settlement of the conflict. They can urge the integration of rebels into the army and link aid to the empowerment of local council, democratizing the governor's office, and aim mainly at decentralization of local politics.

Europe and the US can enable de Mistura to do a better job by providing him with carrots, incentives, and motivators he can use during the mediation and negotiation process. Currently, as much as he has public political support, the mediator is weak when it comes to leverage.

With regards to military support and political objectives in Syria, the United States has been shifting positions and alliances since the Obama administration. As was mentioned earlier in this thesis, the rebel groups in Syria are numerous; each group garners support from an outside sponsor, including the US, which has continuously altered its support. The problem the US was facing was the fact that several of the groups it once supported either joined hands with Al-Nusra and maybe even ISIS, or lost quickly to them and American weapons ended up with terrorists.

The only effective allies the US has in Syria are the Syrian Democratic Forces, the main umbrella gathering of Syrian Kurds and some Arabs. The US, however, is faced with a dilemma in the present situation: maintaining support for the Kurds will continue worsening the rift between NATO and Turkey, who views the Kurds as a threat. Turkey has been a critical ally for the US in the region and through most of the war. However, following the failed coup in Ankara, Erdogan reshuffled his interests to align them with those of Russia and Iran. Accordingly, the United States must begin reconsidering its position on Syria, because further drift with Turkey could push it even closer to Russia.

Of course, it cannot be denied that President Trump's decision to pull out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran will further complicate the chances of peace in Syria. Iran might decide to be more of a spoiler and become more attached to its positions in Syria, further undermining the Astana process. Additionally, the fact that the US has openly rejected

several conclusions reached in Astana, insisting that only Geneva is the road to peace in Syria, shows how inflexible the US position is.<sup>178</sup>

The US seems unable to accept the reality that Al-Assad has the upper hand in the conflict, but this does not deny the fact that the US still maintains a bargaining chip; the Kurds. Once ISIS is utterly defeated, the US should withdraw its troops from Syria and encourage the Kurds to accept a deal with the government where they maintain autonomy in exchange for going back to government control. Furthermore, the US should begin getting involved in or at least show some support for the Astana process. If the United States and the EU, maintain objecting or not participating the Astana process, then the war might maintain with the US as a spoiler. It could also be possible that Russia, Iran, Turkey, and Syria reach an agreement and impose peace without the US involvement and just present a fait accompli to the IC. As a recommendation to the United States and the European Union, this author believes that both need to cooperate with Russia and sponsor reconstruction efforts.

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<sup>178</sup> Anton Mardasov, "Syria Talks Involve Many Cooks — and Many Kitchens," *Al-Monitor* 2018.

## **VII. A Concluding Vision**

Much has been said and written about the Syrian conflict. The theories on conflict mitigation and resolution that were examined in this thesis proved essential in devising the above recommendations. Theorists such as Hinnebusch, Zartman, and Lederach to name a few, were essential to comprehending the mediation and peace process. Theorists such as Downes were critical to understanding that peace can be reached through outright victory. Of course, a consociational model proved to be inapplicable to the Syrian conflict as it is not a purely ethnic conflict. However, it does seem plausible that a federal structure could be the long-term solution that one could aim for.

To decipher any hope for peace in Syria, one must examine the role of Russia in the conflict. Unfortunately, this thesis was unable to thoroughly examine the roles of the United States and the European Union in the conflict. However, it is essential to remember that whenever there is international cooperation, namely between the US and Russia, decisive action becomes possible. As was heavily discussed, Russia and Iran supported Al-Assad, which resulted in the balance of power we have today. The direct Russian intervention turned the tide and paved the way for a scenario where Russia may position itself as a mediator and peace enforcer.

The UN-led mediation efforts have yet to show any substantive success. Initially, the first two mediators resigned after failing to bridge the differences between both sides. However, de Mistura is currently in his fourth year as the mediator and has shown himself to be flexible. His flexibility became visible when he observed the Russia sponsored Astana peace process. De Mistura went further to support several statements that resulted from the Astana and Sochi processes, saying they were a move from theory to practice.

As a general recommendation to all parties involved, a peace-first approach must be adopted in the negotiations. Al-Assad's upper-hand must be respected, and he must engage with the Kurds in fruitful discussions. Additionally, the government must be willing to implement reform in the form of decentralization; in that sense, the executive branch does not lose much power. To the opposition, the recommendation is that they need to unite and start making realistic demands, such as amnesty, the right to return of refugees and political exiles, and decentralization. They, along with the West, must comprehend the fact that the road to Syrian peace, as unpleasant a thought as this is, must involve both Russia and Al-Assad.

### ***Ideal Vision 2028***

*The vision below is set in an idealistic world in 2028 where the recommendations presented in the thesis were applied to the Syrian peace process, and no spoilers arose:*

On 31 December 2028, president Bashar Al-Assad formally resigned as president of the Syrian Republic after serving four terms. He left office with absolute international immunity. The country has slowly transitioned towards a federal structure based on checks and balances. The parliament had its first fair elections in 2024, and while maintaining a majority, the Ba'ath party commanded only 40% of the multi-partied Syrian parliament. Local governors now must run for office in free and fair elections. As such, the first local elections occurred with the national elections of 2024. Four years later, over twelve candidates were running for the presidency in Syria, from various ideological backgrounds. The winner who was the first president after Bashar Al-Assad, was a previous minister who served under Al-Assad and then ran for governor of Homs in 2024. He won the second round of elections with 58% of the popular vote. The turnout rate was 53%, but that was expected.

Syria's infrastructure still showed damage from the war, which ended formally in an agreement in 2019. The agreement stipulated that truth and reconciliation was part of the transition process. Amnesty was granted to Syrian citizens involved in the war, for whatever charge except for extremists. Those who were in ISIS and Al-Nusra who managed to survive the extensive bombing of early 2019 were either imprisoned or sent to rehabilitation centers. The reconstruction aid sent by the EU and the rest of the world indeed had an impact on limiting the presence of destruction in Syria and helped reconstruct major cities such as Aleppo, Homs, and Raqqa. This reconstruction disabled ISIS from returning because there was no more vacuum to fill. Also, the Kurdish region showed no interest in seceding. It has a good working relationship with Damascus now that it, along with all other regions, enjoyed a federal structure.

Internationally, after the 2024 elections, Syria was welcomed back into the IC. Trade resumed with the West, and the Syrian economy witnessed its first signs of growth since 2011. Syrian refugees who fully integrated into European societies, and those who did not, were allowed to return home by the Syrian government and their rights and new foreign citizenships respected. Their input in urging the European nations to sponsor the rebuilding packages was essential to the significant improvements seen in Syria in 2028.

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