> "With major regional powers in disagreement over how to solve the Syrian conflict . . . military and political stalemate continues, along with the territorial fragmentation of the country, the proliferation of networks of violence, and a humanitarian catastrophe that will have generational consequences."

How Syria Fell to Pieces

SAMER ABBOUD

As the Arab uprisings spread from Tunisia through the wider region in early 2011, Syria, a country whose authoritarian regime had remained firmly in power for more than four decades, was declared immune from the contagion effects by its president, Bashar al-Assad. His ominous certainty ignored the collective grievances that Syrians shared with protesters in Tunisia, Egypt, and other countries swept up in the uprisings. By 2011, Syria had undergone a decade of rapid transformation that was accompanied by major socioeconomic dislocations, including drought and depopulation in rural areas, a dramatic rise in semi-urbanization and informal housing, black market activity, increasing unemployment, and a decaying social safety net. The negative impacts of this decade of economic liberalization had produced a generation of Syrians for whom employment and a stable life were largely unattainable. At the same time, the Baath Party regime—headed by Hafez al-Assad from 1970 until his death in 2000, and since then by his son, Bashar—had maintained its grip on political life and stifled all forms of organized and individual dissent.

This combination of political repression, deteriorating socioeconomic standards, and the spillover effects of the Arab uprisings created the immediate context in which the Syrian uprising began. Syria's protesters used many of the same slogans, organizing tactics, and mobilizing strategies as their Arab counterparts. However, the Syrian experience followed a fundamentally different trajectory from the others, including those in Libya and Bahrain, which also led to intense violence. Almost five years later, the Syrian uprising has morphed into a brutal civil war that is spawning major social transformations, such as the displacement of more than half of the population, the rise of sectarianism, and the destruction of the middle class and increasing poverty, as well as continued demands for political rights and freedom. In addition to the internal dynamics driving the uprising, the trajectory of the conflict has been shaped by the aggressive intervention of regional states such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iran, and Turkey, for whom Syria serves as an arena for proxy war.

How did the Syrian uprising evolve from a series of peaceful protests in mostly rural areas into a violent conflict that has caused a catastrophic humanitarian crisis, with more than 250,000 dead, according to the United Nations? To answer this question, we must explore the trajectory of the uprising with a focus on the political and territorial fragmentation of the country and the effects this process has had on the evolution of the conflict.

WRITING ON THE WALL

Although some protests occurred even earlier in 2011, the Syrian uprising essentially began in March in the southern city of Daraa, when protests broke out after the arrests of teenagers who had written the slogan of the Arab uprisings—"The people want the downfall of the regime"—on city walls. The demonstrators initially demanded the release of the teenagers, but when local authorities responded with violence and repression the protests quickly turned into an opportunity to make economic and political demands that echoed those made in other Arab countries. As these events unfolded in Daraa, other parts of the country, including Damascus, saw small protests. They

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eventually grew into a movement that appeared to have national momentum. Despite its wide geographic reach, however, it was decentralized, uncoordinated, and unsustainable in the face of heavy regime repression.

Between 2011 and 2012, a "new" Syrian opposition emerged in the context of the uprising. It was composed of both local and exiled activists, as well as an armed element in the Free Syrian Army (FSA). However, the creation of these political and military wings would not lead to a unification of opposition efforts. The opposition's fracturing and its inability to bring about political change partly explain the regime's resiliency during this period.

A predictable pattern soon emerged: Protests in new areas were met with heavy repression as soon as they began. The regime mobilized the army and the intelligence apparatus to engage in violence against protesters, while simultaneously funding and arming what came to be known as *shabiha*, groups of younger men who would disrupt protests and attack demonstrators.

By mid-2011, the protests were spreading throughout the country despite the increasing repression. The regime's strategy in this period also included proposing a series of reforms aimed at placating the protesters, even as it repressed them. However, these reforms, which included constitutional amendments, the formal lifting of the state of emergency, and promises of more political freedoms, were merely cosmetic and failed to halt the protests.

ORGANIZATIONAL OBSTACLES

Organizing and mobilizing protesters proved extremely difficult, given that formal opposition politics were suppressed and the social institutions that could have organized and directed demonstrations, such as unions, were integrated into the regime. There was no central authority to provide political, logistical, and financial resources to sustain the protests.

In order to address these challenges, activists slowly started organizing in Local Coordination Committees (LCCs). Initially most of the members were media activists who saw the committees as an opportunity to collect information about the protesters and disseminate it to Syrians and the outside world. However, the LCCs soon became more than just media centers—they began to organize and mobilize protesters. This gave the protests an increasingly national character. Common themes, slogans, and political visions emerged throughout the country. Despite the decentralized, fragmented nature of the first protests in early 2011, the uprising seemed to be coalescing under a centralized authority as the various LCCs established formal relationships with one another.

At the same time, the exiled Syrian political opposition mobilized to form a movement that aimed to support the uprising and represent the protesters before the international community. The Syrian National Council (SNC) was established around August 2011 by elements including the Muslim Brotherhood; nationalist, liberal, and Kurdish oppositionists; and independent activists. The SNC rapidly gained support from the international community, which viewed the new body as a potential government in waiting, in case the regime collapsed. Yet the SNC suffered from many of the same logistical, political, and financial shortcomings as the internal opposition, and soon turned into a battleground for regional powers, including Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, that were vying for control and influence over the Syrian opposition. Since its formation, the SNC and the external opposition in general have undergone dramatic changes in their core alliances and memberships.

By the summer of 2011, sustained repression by the regime had provoked reprisals from Syrian citizens and army defectors who were loosely organized under the banner of the FSA. This supposedly united front has always attempted to portray itself as a parallel national army in both command structure and composition; but in reality, it has merely been a loose structure of various armed groups whose loyalty to a central command never took root. The units fighting under the FSA umbrella did not coalesce into a parallel army; they floated in a fluid, vague command structure that failed to facilitate distribution of resources among brigades. The FSA and its leadership structure only nominally directed most fighting units in this early period. The decentralized and fragmented nature of the domestic and external political opposition was mirrored in the armed opposition that emerged in the latter half of 2011.

LACK OF SUPPORT

Despite the internal challenges facing the FSA, the LCCs, and the SNC, and the weaknesses of the institutional linkages among these main arms of the uprising, regime forces had retreated from

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many parts of the country by late 2011 under the pressure of protests and armed insurrection. A shift in regional states' responses to the war, from trying to encourage reform of the regime to actively calling for regime change, gave further momentum to the opposition forces on the ground. The shifts by Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia toward a policy of regime change significantly expanded the resources available to opposition groups, but also fostered infighting, mistrust, and a lack of coordination between them.

The opposition contended with further problems that would have a profound impact on the trajectory of the conflict. The SNC suffered from a legitimacy crisis, since many of the exiled leaders were far removed from the uprising and shared little in terms of social background with the protesters. Syria's old politics and parties had given way to an entirely new generation of political activists who were not organized by any party or mobilized around particular ideological goals. These new activists were mainly drawn from segments of Syrian society that had been peripheral to formal politics, including young activists using social media, the urban semi-proletariat, displaced agricultural workers, and human rights activists.

Armed groups finance governance projects through their participation in the Syrian war economy.

In part because of the rapidity with which the uprising unfolded and the absence of preexisting institutional structures, the LCCs and SNC were unable to marshal the political and material resources to sustain the protests amid regime repression. To do so, both groups looked to the international community for support. Western countries provided very little material support to the LCCs and were willing to provide the SNC with moral support but little else. While many countries had declared a policy of regime change, few of them were willing to commit any substantive resources to bring it about, and SNC officials often shuttled between Western capitals in an attempt to garner assistance that never materialized.

Such realities exposed the weaknesses of the LCCs in sustaining the uprising and organizing society amid the tumult, as well as the SNC's inability to generate resources necessary to overthrow the regime. Similarly, the FSA was heavily reliant on light weapons smuggled from neighboring countries or stolen from weapons depots. FSA brigades initially achieved a number of battlefield victories against regime forces, but they were unable to maintain territorial control of these areas in the face of the regime's counterattacks. By 2012, they also faced the emergence of other armed groups, particularly Islamist brigades, that were receiving funding and arms from regional sponsors.

In the early stages of the uprising, the emergence of the FSA-LCC-SNC opposition umbrella movement was successful in placing tremendous political and military pressure on the regime. However, this pressure was not enough to bring about regime change or a political transition process, as had occurred in Tunisia and Egypt. The conflict had reached its first major stalemate. The opposition groups were strong enough to force the regime's retreat in certain areas but not strong enough to maintain governance and military control of these areas or to generate the resources to do so.

The inability to consolidate territorial advances and unite the political and military opposition into a coherent, structured chain of command paved the way for the further militarization of the conflict and the gradual fragmentation of Syrian territory into competing sites of authority.

Networks of Violence

The failure of the opposition to bring about a political transition would profoundly alter the trajectory of the conflict. The regime's retreat from areas in the northeast and northwest of the country invited more armed groups to vie for territorial control of those areas. By 2012, the border areas with Turkey were largely free of regime control and a number of armed groups affiliated with the FSA or with independent Islamist brigades emerged to take over key border crossings and highways. These developments portended the fragmentation of Syrian territory into micro-sites of armed rebel control.

With the FSA model faltering and the arrival of new armed groups siphoning off both fighters and resources, the scope of violence in Syria widened considerably. One of the main determinants of the structure and nature of this violence is that most of the fighters are civilians who have taken up arms. The civilianization of violence and the fluidity of loyalty and command throughout the conflict have accelerated the fragmentation of

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both the opposition and the geographic continuity of Syria.

Today there are well over a thousand armed groups operating in Syria. They are loose conglomerations of fighters whose loyalty to a particular group is tenuous at best and often tethered to factors that extend beyond ideological affinities, such as wartime economic opportunities. With this in mind, it is perhaps more appropriate to think of armed rebel groups not as cohesive fighting units in which the loyalty of the rank and file ensures the stability of a central leadership, but rather as networks of violence in which different fighting units and individual fighters support certain armed groups based on their specific needs and opportunities at a particular moment.

The basic structure of these networks of violence typically begins with a fighting unit that emerged in a particular neighborhood, consisting of locals who came together to offer security to residents. These units at first were largely immobile and focused specifically on defending their own territory from regime forces. In some cases, they would morph into brigades of a few dozen or several hundred fighters, who operated within a governorate and had some mobility between towns and villages. These brigades would often adopt flags, slogans, and a loose command structure in which the leaders would exercise nominal control over fighters. The FSA, for example, was merely a conglomeration of smaller brigades that cooperated with the central leadership in some circumstances but not in others. Such patterns were replicated in the formation of fronts that serve as centralized commands for brigades. The cooperation of multiple brigades means that the fronts have wider geographical reach and greater resources with which to wage violence.

While many countries declared a policy of regime change, few of them were willing to commit any substantive resources to bring it about.

However, these fronts are constantly changing and the loyalty of the brigades is tenuous at best. The changing structure of the fronts is often related to questions of governance, territorial control, access to the war economy, and disagreements over military strategy. Ideology is important but not a determining factor. For example, the Islamic Front (IF) was created in 2013 by seven larger Islamist brigades, including Salafi elements, that were active in the northern parts of the country. These brigades included Ahrar as-Sham and Liwa al-Haqq, which had previously belonged to the Syrian Islamic Front but defected to join the IF. By 2014, the IF had become the Levant Front, which brought together other Islamist-leaning brigades and concentrated its activities in the northern areas around Aleppo. Similarly, the Syrian Revolutionaries Front, considered a more moderate group, was formed in 2013 but later dissolved when most of the fighters defected to Islamist brigades associated with Jabhat al-Nusra. Such fluidity characterizes the formation and transformation of networks of violence throughout Syria.

Regime retreat

The retreat of the regime throughout the country resulted from military setbacks and defections that emasculated the armed forces. Increasing territorial losses forced the regime to rely on the support of local militias, which, like the fighting units in areas outside regime control, emerged to protect loyalist communities from rebel attacks. These militias were loosely associated with the *shabiha* and had grown considerably throughout the country, so much so that an entirely new paramilitary body, the National Defense Forces (NDF), was created by the regime. The NDF was largely controlled by Assad family members and was institutionalized by 2013; fighters were given government identification cards, uniforms, and meager salaries. The NDF has grown into a formidable fighting force, attracting many men who seek to take economic advantage of the conflict by engaging in predatory activities such as looting, kidnapping, and taxation.

Regional militias from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq are also fighting in Syria in regime-held areas, especially around Aleppo, and the Lebanese Shia militant group Hezbollah has been very active since 2013 in fighting rebels in the border areas near Lebanon. The regime's reliance on these groups helps explain its resiliency during the conflict—the army and security apparatus likely would have collapsed otherwise—but it also reflects the gradual withering of the regime's capacity to defend itself. Its dependence on nonstate militias, Hezbollah, and Iranian and Russian direct military intervention into Syria, including both the use of special forces and air strikes,

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highlights the inability of the regime to reverse its territorial losses and reassert state authority throughout the country.

DECENTRALIZED AUTHORITY

The regime's retreat from more than half of the country has not led to the monopolization of authority by any one group. Instead, it has accelerated the geographic, political, and administrative fragmentation of the country into competing zones of authority. There are four large areas under the control of different groups, including the regime-held areas in and around Damascus and north through Homs and to the coast; Kurdish areas organized under an autonomous administration in three cantons in the north and northeast, known as Rojava; areas held by Islamic State (ISIS) in the eastern parts of the country; and areas under the control of the FSA and Islamist-dominated military fronts, such as Jaish al-Fateh (Army of Conquest), in the northwestern and southern parts of the country. These latter areas and groups have been the main targets of Iranian, Russian, and Syrian attacks in late 2015.

In conflicts such as Syria's, governance and the provision of services are central to an armed group's ability to control captured territory. In 2012 and 2013, when local councils played a key role in governing non-regime areas, armed groups would often enter into cooperative relationships with them to share responsibilities. As time passed and the local councils suffered from a lack of financial resources, armed groups assumed more responsibility for governance and took control of key institutions. In Manbij, for example, a revolutionary court created after regime forces withdrew in 2012 was replaced by an Islamist-dominated court the following year. Such examples abound throughout Syria. Armed groups, finding themselves in control of more and more territory, have sought to establish courts, governing councils, prisons, and schools. (Islamist groups have increased their control of such institutions, but have failed to develop a monopoly on governance in areas outside of regime control.) These institutions have not served as sufficient substitutes for the state, since they are unable to provide extensive, sustainable services to local populations.

Armed groups have been able to finance these governance projects through their participation in the Syrian war economy. All of them, regardless of their alliances or ideological leanings, have participated in predatory activity, including kidnapping, looting, taxation, and the operation of checkpoint and border controls to extract transit fees for people and goods. This provides them with the resources not only to finance violence but also to provide services and governance in areas under their control.

In the ISIS areas, a combination of rudimentary oil production, taxation, and other predatory activities has helped sustain the institutions to govern daily life in Raqqa and beyond. Although services are weak outside Raqqa, ISIS has nevertheless been successful in cycling revenues from the war economy back into its governance project. People living under ISIS rule are dependent on the group for services and goods but do not necessarily support its ideology. To date, the group has relied extensively on systems of patronage, fear, and repression to coerce the population into acquiescence to its rule. We should not equate ISIS's continued presence in Syria with support from the local population.

Similar patterns can be seen throughout the country. Armed groups are engaging in predatory activities to finance both violence and governance. This nexus structures conflict and cooperation among the armed groups. It is the most powerful driver of the conflict today.

EVERYDAY INSECURITY

The de facto division of the country into competing centers of power has not only been a major factor contributing to the protracted nature of the conflict. It has also had profound effects on the daily lives of Syrians. The conflict has caused the worst humanitarian crisis of the twenty-first century. More than half of all Syrians have been killed, injured, or displaced from their homes by the violence. Millions have fled to neighboring countries: Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq. Many have settled in these countries, either in refugee camps or, when resources permit, in cities and villages, and have attempted to reestablish their livelihoods. Tens of thousands have attempted to reach Europe by crossing the Mediterranean. The millions of internally displaced persons inside Syria have often been forced to keep moving across the country as they flee violence.

The scale of the tragedy has been enormous, and insecurity permeates Syrians' daily lives. Violence has become ubiquitous and even those in relatively safe areas live with the constant fear of militias that have emerged as the primary authorities and can act with impunity. The fragmentation

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of Syria into a series of competing governance projects under the consolidated rule of armed groups has led to a further carving up of the country into a network of checkpoints, which are extremely difficult and dangerous for civilians to navigate, especially those trying to travel longer distances.

The formal economy has all but collapsed and Syrian families have been forced to divest assets and adopt other strategies to cope with deteriorating socioeconomic conditions, including hyperinflation, increasing unemployment, and overall uncertainty. These conditions have driven much of Syria's capital to neighboring countries and have left the economy with very few businesspeople to oversee the import and sale of goods and to provide services to the population. While this situation has created economic opportunities for some, it has largely come at the expense of average Syrians.

The circumscription of mobility, the increasing economic insecurity, and the persistent threat of violence are fueling the humanitarian crisis and forcing many Syrians to seek shelter and livelihoods elsewhere. Yet the international community has not been sufficiently moved by the crisis either to marshal the political resolve to end the conflict or to provide greater resources to respond to humanitarian needs.

CATASTROPHIC STALEMATE

The recent Iranian nuclear deal with the West brought hope that it might lead to greater Western cooperation with Iran, and perhaps even Russia, on the Syrian conflict. Yet, at the time of writing, Russia has significantly increased its military presence in Syria in support of the Assad regime and has started a bombing campaign against armed rebels. Sustained Western military intervention, long advocated by the FSA and the external opposition, is unlikely to ever materialize in such a context, particularly now that Russian forces have intervened to support the Assad regime. The deployment of 50 US special operations troops in October 2015 does not portend greater American or Western involvement in Syria, since these troops have orders merely to coordinate air attacks while avoiding direct engagement with either regime or rebel forces.

The nuclear deal has had no demonstrable effect on Russian, let alone Iranian, calculations on Syria. Meanwhile, Russia and the United States have put forth radically different visions for a political transition as both the Geneva process (international talks led by the United Nations and supported by the Syrian opposition and Western states) and the Moscow talks (a peace process started by Russia to bring together the Syrian regime and members of the internal opposition) have ground to a halt. A new, multilateral process that began in Vienna in October 2015 brought together more than a dozen countries, including Iran, to negotiate a solution to the Syrian conflict. Despite the inclusion of Iran in the negotiations, they are unlikely to prove successful because each country at the table is pursuing a bilateral policy that is inconsistent with the spirit of multilateralism and there are wide gaps among the regional actors' interests in Syria.

With major regional powers in disagreement over how to solve the Syrian conflict and no credible or legitimate political process that could lead to a negotiated solution, a military and political stalemate continues, along with the territorial fragmentation of the country, the proliferation of networks of violence, and a humanitarian catastrophe that will have generational consequences. In the short term, a solution to the conflict that can undo these realities seems highly unlikely. It is difficult to see how a sustainable solution that reduces violence and brings about a political transition process can come about so long as Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah remain committed to propping up a regime that, for all intents and purposes, has lost all sovereign capacity and has presided over the material and human destruction of Syria.

The rebels, for their part, remain hopelessly fragmented and incapable of cohering into a unified authority that could create parallel state institutions, earn legitimacy among Syrians, and promote a vision for a postconflict nation. The external opposition, which took on the task of generating international and domestic legitimacy for the uprising, has failed in that mission and has become an ineffectual actor in the conflict.

Today the networks of violence are driving the conflict, which is no longer simply about an uprising over socioeconomic grievances but has morphed into something much more multilayered. The conflation of economic and political motivations has further complicated our understanding of the conflict and of how armed groups enter into cooperative or competitive relationships. It has also darkened the prospects for a resolution of this brutal and horrific war. ■

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