

The Battle of Aleppo

The History of the Ongoing Siege
at the Center of the Syrian War

Charles River Editors

The Battle of Aleppo: The History of the Ongoing Siege at the Center of the Syrian Civil War

By Charles River Editors



A picture of wreckage in Aleppo during the fighting

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Introduction



A Free Syrian Army fighter in Aleppo in 2012

The Battle of Aleppo

“I’m not a puppet. I wasn’t made by the west to go to the west or any other country. I’m Syrian. I’m made in Syria. I have to live in Syria and die in Syria.” – Bashar al-Assad, 2012

In December 2010, a 26-year-old Tunisian street vendor’s self immolation triggered protests that spread from his hometown in Sidi Bouzid to cities across the country. The next month, on January 14, the country’s autocratic president, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, fled the country. This would be the start of what became known as the “Arab Spring,” which ultimately saw anti-government protests responded to with violence, reform, or both in countries across the Middle East. In Syria, the protests that began as early as January 2011 and increased in intensity the following March devolved into a complex armed conflict that involves multiple armed groups and wages to this day. Like the other dictators, Bashar al-Assad faced popular demonstrations against his regime at the height of the Arab Spring, but he steadfastly refused to step down from power, and the protests against him and his government quickly turned violent, which eventually enveloped Syria in a civil war that has already killed over 400,000, created over 4 million refugees,

and shows no signs of ending anytime soon.

In August 2016, over five and a half years after the initial protests, an image of a young boy captivated the world. Young Omran Daqneesh, who had been born around the time the Syrian civil war started, had been pulled out of a destroyed building in the Syrian city of Aleppo by a rescue squad and put inside an ambulance. He stared at the cameras - most likely in shock -covered in blood and debris from the collapsed building. His silence seemed more powerful than all the statements of condemnation from politicians around the world. This boy and his family were actually living the nightmare that Syrians across the country have experienced for more than five years. The video and image went viral and was picked up by several news outlets and spread quickly and globally across social media platforms.

Once again, the average citizen was faced with images depicting the consequences of this deadly and seemingly intractable conflict. While citizens and politicians again debate and discuss what to do about the Syrian Civil War, the people on the ground continue to suffer. The city of Aleppo is one of many battlegrounds in the war, but it has been directly in the war since 2012 when protests erupted against the regime of Bashar Al-Assad and the rebels of the Free Syrian Army became involved in the conflict.

In many ways, the city of Aleppo and the ongoing battle there can almost be thought of as a metaphor or microcosm for the civil war in general. Historically, Aleppo has been a very large and diverse city, comprised of several religious and ethnic groups living side by side throughout its long period of human inhabitancy. Syria itself is a large and diverse country, whose citizens include Sunnis, Shi'a, Christians, and Druze that come from Arab, Kurdish, Armenian, and other ethnic backgrounds. Interestingly, Aleppo has indeed become a battleground in which all the forces (both domestic and international) have come to exercise their agendas and their might against each other. The longer the parties fight, the further away they seem to get from peace agreements, and the more difficult it becomes to deescalate the conflict.

Today, Syria remains a flashpoint in the Middle East, and Aleppo is at the center of it. *The Battle of Aleppo: The History of the Ongoing Siege at the Center of the Syrian Civil War* looks at the Syrian civil war's most famous battle, and the way it has dominated the world's attention. Along with pictures of important people, places, and events, you will learn about the siege of Aleppo like never before.

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Chapter 1: The History and Geography of Aleppo

The Syrian city of Aleppo is without a doubt one of the oldest cities on Earth and, some argue, the longest continually inhabited city in history, as evidenced by various historical structures and artifacts from all over the city that are reminiscent of past kingdoms and empires that once controlled the area.[\[1\]](#) Aleppo's stone pathways, marble architecture and grand citadel reflect the city's ancient past and its meshing with modernity. Like many cities in the Middle East, Aleppo boasts pre-Islamic and Islamic styles of architecture literally side by side with more modern buildings.



Craig Jenkins' picture of the ancient section of Aleppo

The meaning of the city's name, "Halab" in Arabic, is not entirely clear. Various etymologists and inhabitants have taken the word to mean "milk" or "copper" from interpretations of these words in Arabic, but there are historical texts indicating other words used for the city so it is not altogether well-known. It is perhaps related to the Semitic origins of the city.[\[2\]](#)

Regardless of the meaning of the word, Aleppo's significance in history cannot be understated. Aleppo was once a hub of activity on various trade routes in the region, such as the Silk Road. Goods from China and India could once be bought on Aleppo's narrow alleyways all the while traders from different parts of the world exchanged ideas along with the goods they were peddling. The mixing of cultures led to the development of the city's cosmopolitan flair which is reflected in the various religions and ethnicities that inhabit Aleppo.

Geographically, Aleppo's location has been ideal for the various civilizations living within its walls. Indeed, it is part of the Fertile Crescent, or the Cradle of Civilization, where agriculture, writing, trade, city development, and science evolved in the very early days of human history. It is located between the Mediterranean Sea and the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers which made it easier for trade to pass through the area.^[3] The climate is moderate and its soil is considered very ideal for agriculture. Estimates of the population of Aleppo vary (a report from 2005 indicated about 2.3 million inhabitants), but the city is considered Syria's largest.^[4] In modern times, Aleppo is located in northern Syria and less than 100 miles from the Turkish border. What this means for the Syrian Civil War is that Aleppo is a very strategic location for all involved parties.

Throughout Aleppo's time as a trade hub over the 4000+ years of its history, the city has been invaded and conquered by many empires wishing to control the commerce in the area and the strategic location of this ancient city of activity. Some of Aleppo's most famous rulers include Alexander the Great, the Roman leader Pompey, the Ayubbid ruler Salahuddin of the Crusades, and the father of modern Turkey--Atatürk. The Hittites, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Arabs, Ottomans, Turks and the French are just some of the major civilizations to control and pass through Aleppo's gates, intermixed with more minor Semitic and Phoenician kingdoms over the past several millennia. The world's monotheistic religions--Judaism, Christianity, and Islam--have very strong ties with the city of Aleppo which is of course reflected in the art and architecture of the city. With this in mind, it is not hard to understand Aleppo's strategic and symbolic importance throughout history and even now during the Syrian Civil War. Aleppo has stood the test of time, and its inhabitants have been resilient during its many sieges and varying stages of destruction and reconstruction. The conflict now, however, is on a much more different scale with newer, more sophisticated weaponry and guerilla warfare tactics utilized among civilian populations.

Unsurprisingly, the inhabitants of the city of Aleppo were quite diverse in

background, just like they are today. Journal writings among travelers over the years have indicated a large Christian population thriving among Muslims and Jews at one point. According to an expert on Syrian history, Philip Mansel, “At a time when almost all European cities excluded or penalised religious minorities, Aleppo, like other Ottoman cities, contained Muslims, Christians and Jews.”[\[5\]](#)



Bernard Gagnon's picture of Khusruwiyah Mosque

Indeed, this large and long-inhabited group of Christians has turned out to be an ally of the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, which has put this Syrian Christian population in an unfortunate predicament against the warring parties in opposition to Assad. Christians make up about 10% of Syria's population, or just fewer than 1 million.[\[6\]](#) The Christians come from various denominations, such as Maronite, Greek Catholic, and Armenian. Syria's Kurdish population is also quite large, accounting for about 2.5 million people most of whom are Sunni Muslim.[\[7\]](#) The Shi'a of Syria hail from different sects as well, such as Alawi and Ismaili. [\[8\]](#) Finally, Sunni Muslims make up about three-quarters of Syria's population.[\[9\]](#) Syria's religious population is very much a mosaic, in which each group makes up a piece of the demographic and political system. Aleppo reflects this diversity, as most of the population is Sunni Muslim and the rest a mixture of Christian, Kurd and Shi'a.

Chapter 2: The Assad Regime

"During its decades of rule.. the Assad family developed a strong political safety net by firmly integrating the military into the government. In 1970, Hafez al-Assad, Bashar's father, seized power after rising through the ranks of the Syrian armed forces, during which time he established a network of loyal Alawites by installing them in key posts. In fact, the military, ruling elite, and ruthless secret police are so intertwined that it is now impossible to separate the Assad government from the security establishment.. So.. the government and its loyal forces have been able to deter all but the most resolute and fearless oppositional activists. In this respect, the situation in Syria is to a certain degree comparable to Saddam Hussein's strong Sunni minority rule in Iraq." – Foreign Policy magazine editorial, 2011

When Bashar al-Assad was born on September 11, 1965, he became his father Hafez's third child with his first wife, and he never had any aspirations of ruling Syria or being in the military or Ba'ath Party as a young man. In fact, his dream was to be an ophthalmologist, and as a young adult he trained to be an ophthalmologist in London during the 1990s. According to Bashar himself, one of the reasons ophthalmology interested him is because there was a lack of blood. While there, he was noted by fellow students and his teachers (who all knew his family background) for his humble and almost austere lifestyle (Zisser 2007, 23). Bashar was described as likable by his classmates, but a bit quiet and not especially outgoing (Zisser 2007, 23).

As much as Bashar may have dreamed of being an ophthalmologist and helping his fellow Syrians with their eye problems, duty and fate would quickly propel the young Assad to power in Syria. On January 21, 1994, Bashar's brother Basil, who was the "heir apparent" to their father Hafez's presidency, was killed in a car accident in the Syrian capital of Damascus (Zisser 2007, 19). Basil's untimely death left the Assad patriarch in a quandary. Hafez had invested time and energy into making sure that Basil would be a proper replacement, but upon his son's death a new replacement had to be found. Bashar was chosen by his father as a replacement because he was the oldest surviving son – he was actually two years older than Basil – and seen as a viable candidate because of his education and intelligence. Although he had previously shown no interest in wielding power, Bashar began to be groomed to eventually take power, and he explained the sense of duty he felt to Syria in a 2013 interview with *Der Spiegel*, a German publication: "It's human to love where you come from. But it is not just a question

of the emotional relationship. It is also about what you, as a person, can do for your home, especially when you are in a position of authority. That becomes especially clear in times of crisis.”

At first, there were major obstacles to his assumption of power (Zisser 2007, 30). Bashar had no military experience and he was not a member of the Ba’ath Party, both of which effectively acted as the power behind the government. Also, Syria was at least nominally a republic, which meant that Bashar would have to be first “selected” (or sanctified) by the Ba’ath Party and then stand in a general election, even if that election was fraudulent. If Hafez did not follow the protocol, he would run the risk of being accused of being a potentate of the Saudi variety and risk falling in a putsch to the military and Ba’ath Party, the very people who put him in power. Thus, to counter-act any ill perception important peoples may have had about Hafez elevating Bashar as his heir apparent, Hafez placed his son in the army, where he made vital contacts and built his power base (Zisser 2007, 30).

Before he became president of Syria, Bashar also became involved in his own machinations that were intended to strengthen his power base. One of the most notable steps he took was marrying a Sunni woman, Asma, which no doubt helped him appear less sectarian and appeal to the Sunni majority (though the two had a relationship before he was ever made heir apparent to the Syrian presidency) (Zisser 2007, 63). Asma’s beauty and Western roots were alluring to outsiders, as captured in a notorious profile of her done by *Vogue* magazine: “Asma al-Assad is glamorous, young, and very chic--the freshest and most magnetic of first ladies. Her style is not the couture-and-bling dazzle of Middle Eastern power but a deliberate lack of adornment. She’s a rare combination: a thin, long-limbed beauty with a trained analytic mind who dresses with cunning understatement. Paris Match calls her ‘the element of light in a country full of shadow zones.’”

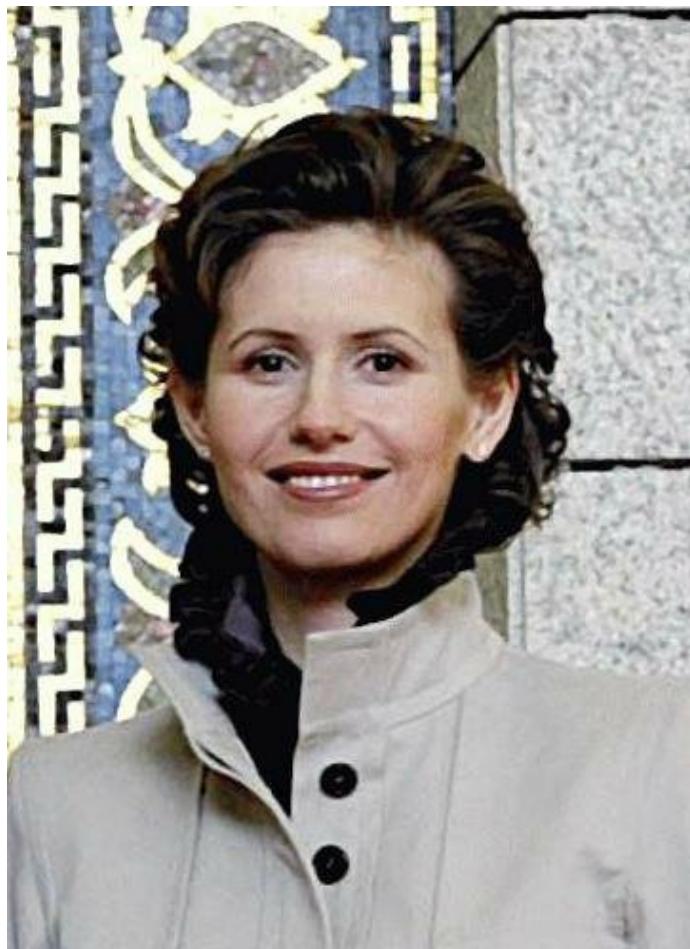


Photo of Asma al-Assad taken by Ricardo Stuckert for Agência Brasil

Despite the overtures and alliances he and his dad made, some Syrians were not happy with Bashar becoming the face of their country. Hafez's once loyal brother, Rifaat, who was living in exile due to fallout between the two, was implicated in a plot to kill Bashar, and the Assad regime reacted by killing and imprisoning several of Rifaat's supporters in 1999, which stopped any threat he posed to Bashar (Zisser 2007, 37).



Hafez and Rifaat (left)

With alliances made and enemies eliminated the only obstacle left in the way for Bashar to become president was his father, until June 10, 2000, when Hafez died of a heart attack at the age of 69. Right away, machinations were underway to ensure Bashar became president. First, the constitution had to be changed to allow the 34 year old Bashar to assume office because the minimum age requirement was 40 (Zisser 2007, 39). One week after his father's death, on June 17, 2000, Bashar took the oath of loyalty that made him president of Syria after a fraudulent election was conducted, in which he won 97% of the vote (Zisser 2007, 41).

Despite the questionable election and tactics that placed him in Syria's highest office and the obvious specter of his father's brutally authoritarian reign, many in Syria and across the world viewed Bashar al-Assad with optimism. The optimism that many felt towards Bashar al-Assad was based on a combination of his age, educational background, and his physical looks. Bashar was viewed by many across the world as a bright young attractive leader who was married to an equally bright and attractive woman. In that regard, Asma was an important piece of the puzzle, as her Western ways not only attracted foreigners but also induced them to believe Syria might be on the path toward Westernization. As the *Vogue* magazine profile glowed, "The first lady works out of a small white building in a hilly, modern residential neighborhood called Muhajireen, where houses and apartments are crammed together and neighbors peer and wave from balconies. The first

impression of Asma al-Assad is movement--a determined swath cut through space with a flash of red soles. Dark-brown eyes, wavy chin-length brown hair, long neck, an energetic grace. No watch, no jewelry apart from Chanel agates around her neck, not even a wedding ring, but fingernails lacquered a dark blue-green. She's breezy, conspiratorial, and fun. Her accent is English but not plummy. Despite what must be a killer IQ, she sometimes uses urban shorthand: 'I was, like...'"

Furthermore, Bashar did not fit the standard profile of a Middle Eastern despot. For example, he did not wear a military uniform replete with medals he never won, nor was he known for fiery invective that demonized Israel or the West. He was a young man that many had high hopes for, to the extent that even before he became the president many in Syria had nicknamed him "The Hope" (Lesch 2012, 2). Much of the high hopes for Bashar no doubt were the result of his age, but much of it was also the result of his own words and actions shortly after he became president. Assad announced that the central commitments of his presidency were the following: the continuity of his father's programs; modernization of Syrian society; more openness; and a more intellectual approach to the country's problems (Zisser 2007, 52-56). Bashar also made attempts, at least outwardly, to de-Ba'ath the government by limiting some of the party's powers (Zisser 2007, 73). In his own words, he suggested the direction that he intended to take the Syrian government: "Democracy is obligatory, but we must not enact the democracy of others. The Western democracies stemmed from a long history which produced leaders and traditions that created the present culture of democratic societies. We, by contrast, must adapt a democracy distinctive to us, founded on our history, culture and civilization and stemming from the needs of the society and reality in which we live." (Zisser 2007, 41)

Although what Bashar said concerning democracy and the development of his nation may be true, it's also easy to detect a slight tone of defiance in his words. Bashar's idea of Syrian democracy was continuous with his father's and essentially revolved upon the concept that what was good for the Assad family, the military, the Alawites, and the Ba'ath Party was good for Syria as a whole.

The anemic economy that Bashar inherited from his father no doubt was a factor in his current problems, but Assad also carried on many of his father's same policies towards dissidents, which would later be a reason for many outside of Syria to oppose his regime. One of the major criticisms of the Hafez al-Assad regime was over his treatment of political rivals and dissidents. Hafez's brutal

crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood was crushing, but Bashar's suppression of dissidents may have been more insidious, and it began to hurt his image in the eyes of the outside world. Many Syrians initially believed that Bashar was a legitimate reformer who would lead his country towards a true democracy, so shortly after Bashar's assumption of the presidency, many politically minded Syrians began to form "cultural forums", which were essentially groups that met at various locations (including at members' homes) to discuss the problems facing their country and how best to solve them (Zisser 2007, 84). As the numbers of Syrians who participated in those forums grew, Assad and the Ba'ath Party carried out a three-pronged attack on these groups, who they began to view as dissidents and enemies (Zisser 2007, 89-92). First, many dissidents were physically assaulted, while others met with serious and "mysterious" accidents (Zisser 2007, 89). Next, leaders of the cultural forums were forced to obtain permits, which were often costly and nearly impossible to get, or risk fines and/or jail time (Zisser 2007, 90). Finally, writers of dissident publications were arrested (Zisser 2007, 90-92). Bashar tried to counteract any negative image he had acquired by these actions by releasing a number of other political dissidents who were imprisoned before this crackdown, but the political and social damage had been done (Zisser 2007, 93). The world began to view Bashar much as they did his father. Although Bashar was younger and more modern, his actions began to belie his true nature as a typical Middle Eastern despot.

When anti-government demonstrations broke out in early 2011, hardline elements of the Syrian government that Bashar had, to a limited extent, attempted to sideline because of their opposition to his reform efforts, were re-empowered. For these elements, repression was deemed the appropriate answer, given, at least in part, the precedent of Hama, in which Hafez was perceived as "successfully" crushing dissent through violent measures. In hindsight, however, the emergence and proliferation of social media would be a bulwark against any swift suppression of the opposition.

Chapter 3: Syrian Demographics

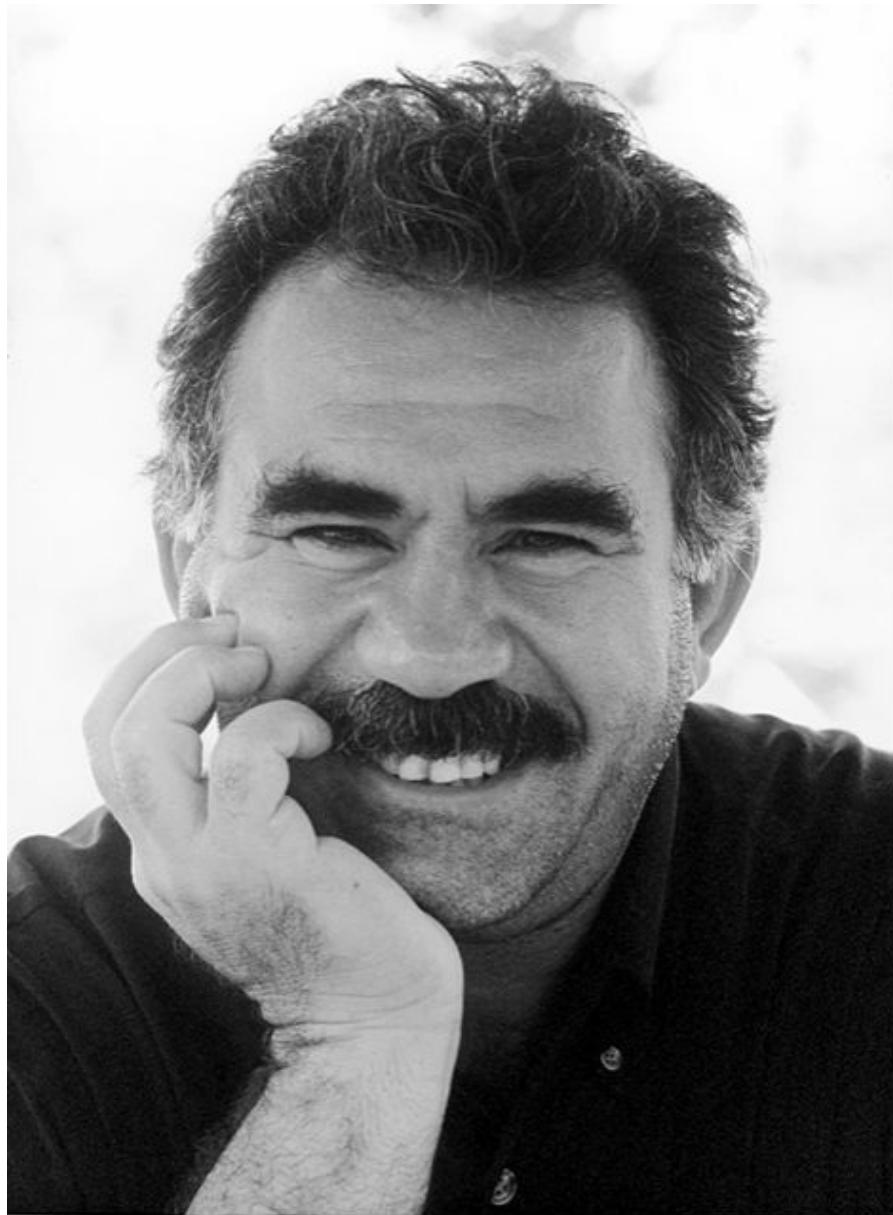
According to the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) World Factbook on Syria, Sunni Muslims comprise approximately 74 percent of the country's population.[\[10\]](#) This number alone, along with the explanations noted above, explains why Sunni Muslims also comprise a majority of the Syrian opposition. This is not to say that there were (and are) no Sunnis in the pro-Assad camp. Given, *inter alia*, the aforementioned efforts to coopt this sector via participation in the country's armed forces and core membership of the merchant class, it would be entirely inaccurate to claim that he retained (and retains) no Sunni backing. Aaron Lund, editor of the *Syria in Crisis* blog[\[11\]](#) at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, was quoted in *Foreign Policy* as stating that "the regime was really bleeding Sunni support in 2011 to 2013, but then it seemed to stabilize to some degree". Lund went on to explain that the Assad regime "always carefully cultivated support across sects, [...] filling the security services with loyalists of every religion and from major tribes".[\[12\]](#) Kheder Khaddour, also of Carnegie, argued further that the benefits system established for soldiers, including housing allowances, helped maintain backing for Assad among Sunnis in the military.[\[13\]](#)

Importantly, this reality helps dispute allegations that the initial protests and subsequent armed conflict should be seen through the lens of sectarianism rather than a civil war fueled by political and economic discontent. Although the conflict has certainly displayed elements of sectarianism, particularly as it continued, it is not at its core a sectarian war.

In addition, other minority groups in Syria, as is the case with the Middle East more generally, can be divided into religious and ethnic minorities, with the former largely placing their weight behind Assad and the latter either joining the opposition or pursuing their own interests. Religious minorities like the Alawi, Shia, Druze, and Christian communities have largely backed (and continue to back) the regime. The first two, which comprised about 13 percent of the population[\[14\]](#), can clearly be explained in terms of Assad's own religious affiliation and, particularly with regard to the Alawi, their outsized influence in the country's political, security, and economic sectors. In other words, their interests were closely linked with the survival of the Assad regime. Religious minorities in Syria also likely perceived their survival as dependent upon the continuation of secular governance, particularly given the perception among Sunni Islamists that Alawis, Shia, and Druze are heretics. Christians see the situation similarly, despite their

status as protected “People of the Book” under Islamic law[\[15\]](#), given the violent and destructive actions taken by militant jihadist groups toward Christian religious sites and populations elsewhere in the religion.

Ethnic minorities, on the other hand, saw neither their interests nor their survival as linked to that of the Assad regime. In a country with a 90.3% Arab population, ethnic minorities, including the Turkmen and Kurdish communities, persistently accused the government of state-sanctioned discrimination. This included polities of Arabization, bans on learning in their respective languages, and disenfranchisement. In a 1962 census, for example, approximately 150,000 Kurds were stripped of citizenship, creating an ever-increasing stateless population deprived of rights granted to citizens. Assad also regarded the Turkmen population, which is focused in northwestern Syria, as a potential “fifth-column” with loyalty to Turkey rather than Damascus.[\[16\]](#) Ankara, meanwhile, viewed the Syrian Kurds as threatening given links to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which was established during the Cold War (in 1978) in Lebanon and supported by the then-Soviet Union and Syria as a means of destabilizing Turkey, an ally of the West.[\[17\]](#) In 1998, however, after Turkey threatened to invade if Syria didn’t cease its support for the PKK and turn over its leader, Abdullah Ocalan, the Adana Protocol was signed, under which Damascus vowed to end its support to the group.[\[18\]](#)



Halil Uysal's picture of Abdullah Ocalan

Therefore, when it comes to the Turkmen population in Syria, they have largely opposed the Assad regime, formed armed groups and maintained ties to Turkey, from where they receive support. The Kurds, however, in pursuit of a long-standing goal of autonomy (if not necessarily independence)[\[19\]](#), as opposed to either the removal or preservation of the Assad regime, ultimately found themselves at different times throughout the course of the conflict on the de facto same side and at odds with both Assad and the armed opposition.

Chapter 4: Foreign Actors

At the start of the uprising, Iran was one of Assad's staunchest allies, a relationship that has continued to this day. For Tehran, Syria is a core component of its “Axis of Resistance”, which refers to an Iran-led alliance of both state and non-state actors, primarily but not exclusively Shia, whose goal is resistance against Israel and Western interests in the region. For Syria, its relationship with these two parties cannot be seen only through the lens of religion, particularly given the secular nature of the Ba’ath Party and the questionable link made between Alawis and Twelver Shiism. This alliance must also be seen in terms of its strategic benefit, including due to the shared aim of fighting Israel, which occupied and then annexed part of the Golan Heights on the Syrian border after the 1967 war.

The importance of Syria to Iran also cannot be overstated: It acts as the conduit for Iranian support to Hezbollah, in terms of arms, money, and equipment. Syria has also housed Hezbollah training camps.[\[20\]](#) The collapse of the Assad regime would, therefore, make Iran’s support to Hezbollah significantly more difficult to maintain and more easily exposed to interception. As a result, when the uprising broke out and even prior to the devolution into armed conflict, Iran and Hezbollah offered both physical and rhetorical support to Assad.

At the time of the Arab Spring, Turkish leaders in Ankara were pursuing a foreign policy known as “zero problems with neighbors”, the brainchild of then-foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu. This philosophy is exactly as its name describes: The goal was to develop and maintain good relations with all nations, particularly those in its neighborhood, relying on soft power that would allow Turkey to mediate between conflicting parties and emerge as an important—nay, essential—regional and international player.[\[21\]](#) Thus, 2007 witnessed a bilateral free trade agreement and, two years later, visa free movement between their populations. By 2010, Syria’s exports to Turkey rose from 187 million U.S.D in 2006 to 662 million in 2010; Turkey’s exports to Syria saw a similar rise during the same period, from 609 million U.S.D to 1.85 billion.[\[22\]](#) Turkey’s then Prime Minister (and current President) Recep Tayyip Erdogan also mediated indirect talks between Israel and Syria in 2008,[\[23\]](#) which, although ultimately failing, enhanced the image of Ankara as a go-between. Although this foreign policy and Turkey’s position in the regional and international arena would substantially evolve over time, it is important to understand that, prior to the Syrian uprising, relations between the two were good and, at the start of the uprising, Ankara saw

itself in the role of mediator.



Davutoglu



Erdogan

Russia had (and has) military, economic, and strategic interests in preserving its relationship with Syria as headed by the Assad government. Notably, it maintains a permanent naval base at Tartus, which is Russia's only base in the Mediterranean. The loss of Tartus would be detrimental not only to its position in the region, but also to Moscow's long term interest in acting as a counter to the West.

Economically, Damascus has been a main buyer for Russian arms since the Soviet period. Between 2007 and 2011, 78 percent of Syria's weapons imports came from Russia; in 2011, total sales reached one billion U.S.D.[\[24\]](#) That year, there were also an estimated 100,000 Russian citizens living in Syria, with Russian companies reportedly investing 20 billion U.S.D in Syria beginning in 2009.[\[25\]](#) These interests would define Russia's position vis-à-vis Syria from the start of the uprising to present day.

If Bashar's reign as Syrian president began with difficulty because of the socio-economic situation inside Syria, events outside his country would make his rule even more difficult. On Bashar's 36th birthday, September 11, 2001, the United States was hit with the most devastating terrorist attacks in its history. Americans were angry and wanted retribution and justice for the lost lives of their countrymen, and President George W. Bush vowed to do everything in his power to destroy and/or capture those who were responsible, which included Osama bin-Laden, al-Qaeda, and the Taliban. Bush also included Syria as a member of the "Axis of Evil". Initially, Bashar attempted to use the United States' misfortune and anger to his advantage by cooperating with U.S. intelligence and giving them information on al-Qaeda, but as Zisser notes, this may have been done more because he feared another Islamic insurgency in Syria like that which his father faced 20 years earlier (Zisser 2007, 136). It has also been suggested that Assad was not as forthcoming about information on al-Qaeda as the Americans would have liked, which suggests that he was simply continuing his father's geopolitical legacy of playing both sides in struggles between the Western and Islamic worlds (Zisser 2007, 132).

Regardless of Assad's motives, U.S.-Syrian relations briefly experienced a détente after the 9-11 attacks, but this was dashed when the American "War on Terror" expanded to target neighboring Middle Eastern dictatorships. The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 was an event that hurt Syria's economy and placed Bashar in the crosshairs of many American politicians. As noted earlier, Syria had supported the Shiite Persian Iranians in their war against the Sunni Arab Saddam Hussein regime in the 1980s, but after the Iran-Iraq War and the Cold War ended, alliances shifted and old enemies became new friends. Syria and Iraq normalized relations in 1997, and shortly thereafter the two nations began an economic policy through which Syria received cheap oil from their petroleum rich neighbor (Zisser 2007, 133). The U.S. invasion of Iraq not only stopped the flow of that cheap oil into Syria but also conceivably placed Assad into the same category as Saddam Hussein as a Cold War relic whose time had passed. Because of this, Bashar continued to support Hussein until he was captured, which further angered President Bush and several other American lawmakers (Zisser 2007, 127). After Hussein was captured and later executed, thousands of American soldiers began to occupy the Syrian-Iraqi border, which prompted Assad to make conciliatory gestures towards his political opponents in Syria. Assad's olive branch – whether real or just for show – was soundly rejected by most Syrians, who largely viewed it as an acquiescence towards growing American power in the region (Zisser 2007, 95). Furthermore, it escaped nobody's notice that throughout the war in Iraq,

Islamic jihadists were flooding across Syria's border with Iraq and joining the battle to fight American and other Western soldiers occupying the country and attempting to rebuild it.

Despite the position that the 9-11 attacks and the U.S. invasion of Iraq put Bashar in, he survived the first few years of his reign, and considering the political and cultural milieu he lived in, those years could be considered personally successful. However, pride comes before the fall, and Bashar's hubris soon put him on the path to where he finds himself today. When Bashar was re-elected to another seven year term through another dubious referendum, his self-satisfaction (or arrogance) was noticed by his biographer, respected journalist David Lesch (Lesch 2012, 31). Perhaps Assad felt more secure in his position as the American threat on his Iraqi border had dissipated by then; war-weary Americans who had tired of seeing many of their countrymen come home hurt or dead gave control of both houses of Congress to the Democrats in the 2006 mid-term elections. President Bush no longer had the political authority or the support of the American people to target other Middle Eastern countries.

All the while, the Bush administration distrusted Assad, and by the end of Bush's second term, the U.S. had no ambassador to Syria. As Bush put it in 2007, "My patience ran out on President Assad a long time ago. The reason why is because he houses Hamas, he facilitates Hezbollah, suiciders go from his country into Iraq, and he destabilizes Lebanon." This was no doubt a reference to Syria's continued meddling in Lebanon, particularly its connections with Hezbollah. In the summer of 2006, the Shiite militia, based in southern Lebanon, began firing rockets at Israel and conducted a surprise cross-border raid that killed several Israeli soldiers. Israeli troops rushed into southern Lebanon in the hopes of destroying Hezbollah, and the war in Lebanon lasted nearly 2 months, but Israel was unable to destroy Hezbollah, which managed to fire thousands of rockets indiscriminately into Israel the whole time. This forced Israelis in the north to all but live in bunkers during the war. The United Nations eventually brokered a ceasefire that called for stationing U.N. forces on the border to stand between Israel and Hezbollah, while also forbidding the shipment of weaponry from Iran and Syria into Lebanon. But the fighting indicated the extent to which Hezbollah, Hamas, Iran, and Syria were now all connected, posing grave security threats to Western interests. Despite the fact Hamas is an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, the very group Hafez cracked down on decades earlier, the geopolitical situation has made for strange bedfellows.

As part of his administration's efforts to reverse Bush's foreign policy, President Obama hoped to normalize relations with America's traditional Middle Eastern adversaries and engage with them. A new ambassador was appointed to Syria, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton famously said of Assad, "There's a different leader in Syria now. Many of the members of Congress of both parties who have gone to Syria in recent months have said they believe he's a reformer." However, any pretense of Assad being a reformer disappeared quickly when the protests started.

Chapter 5: From Protests to Civil War

Although demonstrations were seen as early as January, March 15 is generally considered to be the start of the Syrian “uprising”. On that date, a “Day of Rage” saw hundreds protest in Damascus and Aleppo and six participants were detained. [26] The next day, as many as 34 additional people were arrested when security forces intervened in another demonstration in the capital near the Ministry of Interior. [27] In Dara'a, located in northwestern Syria, protesters gathered to condemn the alleged arrest and torture of teenage boys responsible for anti-government graffiti earlier that month. [28] That Friday, March 18, large-scale demonstrations were held in Baniyas, north of Tartus in western Syria; in Homs, also in the country's west; in Damascus; and again in Dara'a. In all but Baniyas, where the entrances to the city were reportedly closed, security forces intervened and detained participants. [29] Human rights activists also stated that four people were killed in Dara'a. [30]

From this point on, protests became a daily occurrence, with funerals often acting as anti-government rallies and Fridays seeing some of the highest turnout. Assad's obstinate attitude toward the protesters took a fateful and violent turn when he gave his brother, Maher, a free hand to deal with them. Maher filled a role similar to Hafez's brother Rifaat before he was exiled from Syria, as he was head of the Fourth Armored Division and the Republican Guard, which served to protect the regime (Lesch 2012, 105). Just as Hafez called in Rifaat to put down the Muslim Brotherhood insurgency in the late 1970's and early 1980s, Bashar appealed to Maher to suppress protests in Syria 30 years later, which he gladly did with equally brutal methods, often carried out personally (Lesch 2012, 105). The primary difference between the two situations was that the methods employed by Hafez and Rifaat ultimately proved to be successful, while those used by Bashar and Maher have apparently thrown Syria into a state of sectarian warfare.

Forcible dispersal of protests, involving traditional methods like tear gas, as well as live ammunition, became commonplace, including at funerals. This then created a cycle, comprised of death, subsequent funeral-cum-protest, police intervention, additional deaths, and so on. Some of the operations by Syrian security forces also went further than forcible dispersal and detention, with government sieges and blockades routinely placed on cities witnessing regular opposition activity. Dara'a, for example, came under siege as early as April 2011. In addition to a daily curfew implemented 19:00 to 07:00, residents faced cuts to

electricity, water, and phone lines, as well as difficulties in accessing increasingly depleted stores of food, water, and medicine. Local residents described arbitrary arrests and torture, while attempts to bring supplies into the city were met with repression.[\[31\]](#) And although authorities announced the conclusion of this siege in May, other reports indicated that, despite the withdrawal of some participating forces, the blockade continued.[\[32\]](#)

Dara'a was not unique. Similar situations were seen in cities across the country, involving, like in Dara'a, the entry of tanks, closure of city entrances, and arrest operations. Torture was a common allegation. Notable cases in the first half of 2011 included Madaya, located in northwest of Damascus, and Douma, a suburb of the capital[\[33\]](#) in April; Baniyas in northwestern Syria,[\[34\]](#) the western cities of Homs,[\[35\]](#) Talkalakh,[\[36\]](#) Talbiseh, and Rastan[\[37\]](#) in May; the northwestern cities of Jisr al-Shughur[\[38\]](#) and Khan Shaykhun[\[39\]](#) in June; Hama[\[40\]](#) and eastern Syria's Deir Ez-Zor[\[41\]](#) in July; as well as the coastal city of Latakia,[\[42\]](#) Qusayr in the west, and multiple cities and towns in the northern Idlib Province in August.[\[43\]](#)

From the beginning, Assad described the events in Syria not as a domestic movement with legitimate concerns, but as actions taken by “armed groups” or “armed gangs” and backed by “foreign conspirators” and “enemies of Syria”. Israel, in particular, was frequently cited as one of these foreign conspirators, including as early as March 2011 in his first public address since the unrest began.[\[44\]](#) Assad said in a speech to the Syrian People's Assembly on March 30, 2011: “Our enemies work every day in an organized, systemic and scientific manner in order to undermine Syria's stability. We acknowledge that they had been smart in choosing very sophisticated tools in what they have done, but at the same time we realize that they have been stupid in choosing this country and this people, for such conspiracies do not work with our country or our people.” (Lesch 2012, 76-77).

Even as late as 2012, with the civil war raging, Assad remained defiant when *Der Spiegel* asked if he was sorry about the way his supporters handled Dara'a: “There were personal mistakes made by individuals. We all make mistakes. Even a president makes mistakes. But even if there were mistakes in the implementation, our decisions were still fundamentally the right ones.” And in response to questions from *Der Spiegel* about the Syrian people wanting him gone, Assad said of his enemies, “Again, when you talk about factions, whether they are opposition or supporters, you have to ask yourself the question: Whom do they represent? Themselves or the country that made them? Are they speaking for the United States,

the United Kingdom, France, Saudi Arabia and Qatar? My answer here has to be frank and straight to the point. This conflict has been brought to our country from abroad. These people are located abroad, they live in five-star hotels and they say and do what those countries tell them to do. But they have no grassroots in Syria.” At the same time, he has cast his opponents as the very al-Qaeda terrorists the West despises: “The whole problem wasn’t about the president. What do killing innocents, explosions and the terrorism that al-Qaeda is bringing to the country have to do with me being in office?”

Assad’s claims were also echoed by Iranian officials. In April 2011, for example, Iran’s Foreign Ministry spokesman stated that “what is happening in Syria is a mischievous act of Westerners, particularly Americans and Zionists”.[\[45\]](#) Foreign correspondents also fell under this category, with restrictions placed on media coverage and frequent reports of journalists being detained and expelled. [\[46\]](#) These actions would help the Assad government control the information leaving Syria and, most importantly, the narrative. It is one thing to be killing unarmed civilians with legitimate demands for reform, and it is quite another to be putting down a rebellion. Attempts to restrict media coverage, however, could only impact traditional news outlets and methods of reporting; the extensive use of social media meant that information about events on the ground would continue to leave the country.

By April, this narrative would also involve the depiction of Assad as being at the forefront of a battle against radical Islamists: In that month, the country’s interior minister stated that Syria was facing an “armed insurrection”, including by some groups using “the motto of Jihad [holy war] to set up a Salafist state”.[\[47\]](#) After all, the threat from al-Qaeda was real and Assad attempted to exploit this fear. Some even argue that the March 2011 release of 200 prisoners, the majority of which were reportedly Islamists, was not in fact an effort to appease protesters but rather the intentional release of Islamist prisoners to discredit the opposition. Some of these individuals were allegedly secretly trained by Syria and dispatched to Iraq to fight American forces there, only to be detained upon their return.[\[48\]](#)

While people outside of the country were rightly skeptical about such claims, one of the primary strengths of the Assad dynasty, the backing of the Alawite sect, became one of the major reasons why Syria devolved into sectarian warfare. Most of the government and police forces who participated in the violent crackdowns against protesters were Alawites, while the majority of the opposition was from the Sunni community, which was portrayed by the Assad regime as fundamentalists

(Lesch 2012, 106). Assad has used the fragmented sectarian demographic background of Syria to his advantage by arguing that if fundamentalist Sunnis came to power in Syria, it would mean bloodshed for the Alawites, Ishmailis, Druze, and Christians whom his family protected. After all, the Syrian minorities only needed to look at the persecution the Christian Copts of Egypt were experiencing in the wake of their Arab Spring (Lesch 2012, 107).

Side-by-side with the violent repression of protests and sieges of Syrian cities, Assad frequently promised to—and did—implement reform, even as his rhetoric to delegitimize the opposition movement also continued.[\[49\]](#) In his first public address in March 2011 since the unrest began, Assad promised to start implementing reform immediately with the caveat that the government’s “priorities are stability and improving economic conditions”.[\[50\]](#) Later, he ordered investigations into replacing the emergency law, which barred gatherings of over five people and legally legitimized police intervention; into deaths of protesters, including in Dara'a; and into the possibility of addressing and resolving the number of stateless Kurds.[\[51\]](#) All of these were demands of protesters.

Shortly after these promises, at the beginning of April, Assad issued a decree granting citizenship to the approximately 220,000 Kurds classified as “foreigners” in Hasaka, located in the country’s northeast.[\[52\]](#) He also aimed to address the demands of Sunni Islamists, which were, as previously discussed, perpetually part of the opposition. Therefore, also at the beginning of April, Assad closed the country’s only casino and lifted the ban on teachers wearing the *niqab*.[\[53\]](#)

The promise to replace the emergency law was revived again on April 16 in Assad’s second televised speech, this time to the new cabinet, which had been sworn in following the prior cabinet’s resignation over the anti-government protests.[\[54\]](#) “The juridical commission on the emergency law has prepared a series of proposals for new legislation,” he announced, “and these proposals will be submitted to the government, which will issue a new law within a week at the most”.[\[55\]](#) On April 21, Assad signed the bill that lifted the emergency law, which should have, at least in theory, legalized demonstrations by lifting the ban on gatherings of more than five people. However, in practice, the simultaneous passage of separate legislation that required a permit for demonstrations[\[56\]](#) meant that violent police intervention continued, as did arrests.

In June 2011, Assad’s third public speech promised additional reform, including

a national dialogue, Parliamentary elections in August, and legislation aimed at fighting corruption. He also mentioned electoral and constitutional reforms, but left this vague.[\[57\]](#) All of these were, as before, demands of protesters. The next month, in July, the national dialogue was opened at a resort northwest of Damascus in Dimass (also spelled Demas) and tasked with discussing a transition to multi-party democracy. Although politicians who were described as “moderate” participated in the dialogue, opposition figures refused to attend any talks while violence against protesters continued. Demonstrations were also called under the slogan “No to dialogue”.[\[58\]](#) The results of the national dialogue were then implemented in early August when Assad issued a decree permitting the formation of multiple parties.[\[59\]](#)

The devolution into armed conflict can be seen as a result of four main factors: Assad’s continued use of violence to repress demonstrators despite parallel reform measures; the perception among the opposition that Assad had lost all legitimacy and that his reforms were not being implemented in good faith; the inability of the international community to concretely influence the on-the-ground situation; and the developing belief that protests were no longer a sufficient way to effect change in the Syrian leadership.

Even if the reforms implemented by Assad were done in good faith, which is understandably debatable, continued efforts to suppress and delegitimize protesters created a “too little, too late” attitude among and meant that, after time, there was nothing Assad could do to satisfy the opposition aside from leaving his position. This is clearly seen in the evolution of the demonstrators’ demands from calls for reform, including the abolition of the emergency law, increased freedoms, multi-party democracy, an end to corruption, and the release of political prisoners, to calls for Assad to be overthrown. To the opposition, the government wouldn’t be using armed force against protests if they truly intended to listen to and implement their demands.

Outside of Syria, the international community as a whole proved both ineffective in influencing Assad to alter his policies and highly divided. In April, Russia, China, and Lebanon opposed the wording of a United Nations Security Council resolution presented by European nations that condemned the government’s crackdown on protesters. Russia’s deputy UN ambassador explained his country’s opposition by stating that Syria’s response to the protests was not a threat to international peace and security. Rather, he stated, “a real threat to regional security could come from outside interference”.[\[60\]](#) In fact, the first statement

issued on Syria from the Security Council would be unrelated to the government's suppression of protesters but and instead condemn the July 12, 2011 attacks against the French and U.S. Embassies in Damascus.[\[61\]](#) A month later, a statement expressing concern over the situation in Syria was finally issued by the Security Council president.[\[62\]](#)

Although the lack of collective action caused individual countries to engage Syria on their own, they proved equally ineffective at changing the behavior of the Assad regime. In April 2011, for example, the U.S. imposed sanctions on "Syrian officials and others responsible for the commission of human rights abuses, including those related to repression". The next month, designations were placed on Assad and six other senior Syrian officials, and still other sanctions were imposed in June. Iranian entities and figures were included in these designations for offering material support to the Syrian government. By August, "the President issued Executive Order 13582 which blocks the property of the prohibits new investments in Syria by U.S. persons, prohibits the exportation or sale of services to Syria by U.S. persons, prohibits the importation of petroleum or petroleum products of Syrian origin, and prohibits U.S. persons from involvement in transactions involving Syrian petroleum or petroleum products."[\[63\]](#)

In May and June, the European Union (EU) also imposed and expanded sanctions on Syrian and Iranian individuals and entities. Initially in May, 13 senior officials "identified as being responsible for the violent repression against the civilian population" were sanctioned and an embargo on arms and equipment designated for "internal repression" was passed. Later that month, 10 additional officials, including Assad, were added to the list, with another seven more in June, including members of the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps Quds Force (IRGC-QF),[\[64\]](#) as well as four entities.[\[65\]](#) These economic measures occurred alongside condemnations of the situation in Syria by various parties, including the UN Secretary General (UNSG), Arab League, and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC),[\[66\]](#) as well as the recall of ambassadors from Damascus. By August, the leaders of multiple western countries, including the U.S., Canada, Germany, and France were publically calling for Assad to step down.[\[67\]](#)

However, Assad didn't step down, the sanctions and arms embargo didn't stop the crackdown on protesters, and the recall of ambassadors, much less public condemnations, didn't influence his decisions. Thus, much like the evolution in the opposition's demands, continued repression and inaction elsewhere transformed the perception of successful ways to bring about change. If protests couldn't and

wouldn't trigger Assad's removal and remained ineffective in the face of armed security forces, if the UNSC wasn't able to pass a resolution, and the international community could do naught other than enforce sanctions, recall ambassadors, and issue condemnations, then perhaps armed opposition would see more success.

The fact that the initial instances of armed opposition came in response to government sieges supports this argument. One of the first recorded incidents occurred at the end of May 2011, when the sieges of Talbiseh and Rastan triggered an armed response by residents using automatic rifles and rocket-propelled grenades. According to an activist quoted by the *Associated Press* (AP), it was not uncommon for Syrians to be in possession of light arms,[\[68\]](#) including those used in Talbiseh and Rastan. Both were ultimately suppressed.

The next month, armed opposition was similarly reported during the siege of Jisr al-Shughur that began on June 11; however, by June 13, the Syrian government stated that the city had been completely retaken.[\[69\]](#) The solidification of this perspective was likely also assisted by the formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) at the end of July 2011. Led by Colonel Riad al-Asaad and composed of defectors from the Syrian military, its stated objective was the removal of the Assad regime. This was the first organized military opposition and demonstrated that even former members of Syria's own security forces saw organized armed opposition as the appropriate way to defeat the regime.

Although Assad's tactic of dividing Syria's population may have initially helped him stay in power, it had the effect of deepening the sectarian conflict. Furthermore, as defectors from the Syrian army began to form the Free Syrian Army, Islamic militant jihadists also began to enter the war (Lesch 2012, 174-75). Although the Free Syrian Army is comprised of a lot of secular elements (British Broadcasting Company 2013, October 17), Assad's propaganda campaign has tirelessly depicted his enemies as al-Qaeda connected terrorists, and he has portrayed a potential Free Syrian Army victory as genocide for Syria's Shia and Christian communities. The fear has prompted paramilitary Alawite gangs, known as *Shabihas* (ghosts in Arabic), to kill members of the opposition and Sunnis indiscriminately (Lesch 2012, 177). Perhaps not surprisingly, Assad has denied the Shabihas exist, even while justifying their existence: "There is nothing called 'Shabiha' in Syria. In many remote areas where there is no possibility for the army and police to go and rescue the people and defend them, people have bought arms and set up their own small forces to defend themselves against attacks by militants. Some of them have fought with the army, that's true. But they are not militias that

have been created to support the president. At issue is their country, which they want to defend from al-Qaida.”



Riad al-Asaad

Chapter 6: From Civil War to Theater for Foreign Parties

“First of all, you’re talking about the president of the United States, not the president of Syria -- so he can only talk about his country. It is not legitimate for him to judge Syria. He doesn’t have the right to tell the Syrian people who their president will be. Second, what he says doesn’t have anything to do with the reality. He’s been talking about the same thing -- that the president has to quit -- for a year and a half now. Has anything happened? Nothing has happened.” – Bashar al-Assad

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines “civil war” as a “war between the citizens of inhabitants of a single country, state, or community”.[\[70\]](#) And, while the Syrian conflict certain began as largely an intra-Syrian conflict involving the Syrian government and a primarily Syrian opposition, the conflict would ultimately see substantial intervention by foreign parties and a significant rise in numbers of foreign fighters. By the time the uprising and subsequent armed conflict entered its 5th year, the use of the term “civil war” was no longer technically accurate.

Indications as to Iranian support for the Assad regime came as early as April 2011, when the IRGC-QF was identified by the U.S. as “providing support to the Syrian General Intelligence Directorate (GID), the overarching civilian intelligence service Syria” that played a key part in repressing protests. Two senior IRGC-QF commanders were also designated “for their roles in the violent suppression of the Syrian people”.[\[71\]](#) Iranian individuals and entities would frequently appear on designations related to the conflict in Syria.

Hezbollah’s support for the Assad regime was also publicly acknowledged, and in August 2012, the U.S. Treasury officially designated Hezbollah “for providing support to the Government of Syria”. In a special briefing given on August 10, U.S. Treasury Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David Cohen explained that “Hezbollah has directly trained Syrian Government personnel inside Syria and has facilitated the training of Syrian forces by Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Qods Force” since the beginning of 2011. Cohen further stated that Hezbollah “also played a substantial role in efforts to expel Syrian opposition forces from areas within Syria”.[\[72\]](#) This public acknowledgment served to legitimize prior allegations that Hezbollah forces were operating alongside Syrian government forces[\[73\]](#) despite denials from Hassan Nasrallah, the group’s secretary general.



Cohen



Nasrallah

This support must be seen within the lens of the aforementioned “Axis of Resistance” and the importance placed on preserving the Assad regime, including in order to retain existing supply routes that moved Iranian arms, equipment, and money into Hezbollah-controlled areas of Lebanon via Syria. Thus, both Iran and Hezbollah would do what they could to prevent Assad’s replacement with a less friendly, pro-U.S., and Sunni government: The U.S.-led intervention in Iraq had transformed a once enemy of Iran’s to a friendly state ripe for its interference and influence, and Tehran wasn’t about to reverse these gains with the loss of Syria.

Initially, the support offered by Hezbollah was limited in “size and scope primarily to advisory and support roles”.[\[74\]](#) Iran’s assistance, provided via the IRGC, was also relatively limited at the start, with reports ranging from participation in arrest operations to technical assistance with blocking communications to the supply of arms.[\[75\]](#) In June 2011, the U.S. Treasury

designated Iran Air, the country's national carrier, for "ship[ing] military-related equipment on behalf of the IRGC since 2006". This includes to Syria, where "commercial Iran Air flights have also been used to transport missile or rocket components".[\[76\]](#) Ultimately, these operations were scaled up, corresponding to the outbreak and spread of armed conflict, as well as the deterioration of the country's armed forces, particularly the Syrian Arab Army (SAA).

However, Iran and Hezbollah would increase the manpower when it looked like the regime was faltering. For example, in July 2015, Assad publicly admitted that there was a manpower shortage; in a televised speech in Damascus, he explained that "sometimes, in some circumstances, we are forced to give up areas that we want to hold onto". Estimates, moreover, put the number of soldiers as approximately half of the 300,000 it was said to have prior to the outbreak of the conflict.[\[77\]](#) As the regime's forces became weakened by defections, intense and continuous fighting, casualties, and a substantially more limited population from which to recruit, it naturally became more reliant on deployments of Hezbollah, the IRGC, Iranian-backed Iraqi Shia militias,[\[78\]](#) and Shia Afghans who had sought refuge in Iran from their own conflict and were being recruited in exchange for benefits.[\[79\]](#) The participation of foreign fighters became even more essential as opposition to the draft emerged among regime supporters. In some instances, men turned to desertion, bribery, and even emigration to avoid the draft, primarily due to the growing perception that it meant certain death on the front lines.[\[80\]](#) Thus, as the conflict wore on, "regime forces" evolved from being primarily Syrian, with limited support from Iran and Hezbollah, to being increasingly comprised of Lebanese, Iranian, Iraqi, and Afghani soldiers.

Although these forces share Assad's goal of remaining in power, it also means that he became progressively reliant on Hezbollah and Iran, a situation from which a number of implications can be drawn. Most obviously, this reliance makes Assad beholden to their [re: Iran's] interests both at present and in any post-conflict reality that would see his continued involvement. Regionally, the growing need for supplemental forces shifted Hezbollah's focus from resistance to Israel, its *raison d'être*, to ensuring the survival of the Assad regime. This is not to say that the group entirely ceased targeting Israel - there was, for example, a limited escalation witnessed between the two in January 2015, triggered by an Israeli airstrike that killed six Hezbollah fighters and an IRGC general in the Syrian Golan Heights.[\[81\]](#) However, Hezbollah's sizeable commitment to Syria makes the opening of a second front with Israel undesirable, even if the practical battlefield experience

gained by its fighters on the ground in Syria may make a future conflict with Israel much deadlier. In an April 2016 article, Voice of America (VOA) quoted an unnamed “Hezbollah commander” as describing Syria as “a dress rehearsal for our next war with Israel”.[\[82\]](#)

Even with the extensive support of foreign forces, the Syrian government continued to face pressure on the battlefield. This eventually led to an expansion in foreign intervention on the side of the Assad regime with the entry of Russia in September 2015. Although couched in terms of combating the spread of ISIS, Russia entered Syria with three main strategic and tactical goals, according to Michael Horowitz, a Syria expert and author of a special report on the intervention. This includes protecting its naval assets in Tartus and expanding Russia’s military presence in the country, including to reduce deployment time for any potential future operations; ensuring the Syrian regime’s viability, including in order to prevent its replacement with a pro-Western government; and develop its deterrence by demonstrating its military readiness and capabilities.[\[83\]](#) In fact, despite the rhetoric that placed combating ISIS as a key reason for its entry into Syria, Russia’s airstrikes “overwhelmingly targeted rebel-held territory in western Syria rather than the ISIS strongholds in the north and east”.[\[84\]](#) And although Russia’s President Vladimir Putin announced Russia’s “withdrawal” in March 2016, Reuters reported that Moscow had shipped more equipment and supplies to Syria, and it continued the airstrikes.[\[85\]](#)



Putin

Russia's continued involvement, including support for military operations, necessarily meant further evolution. Not only were the regime's ground forces increasingly filled with foreign fighters, but its air power would also be supplemented by Russian jets. On the ground, Russia placed itself as an essential ally and altered the trajectory of the conflict to be more in Assad's favor. [\[86\]](#) As a result, in any post-conflict Syria, Iran's interests would no longer be the only, or even the main consideration. Although relations with Iran appear good (for a brief period in August 2016, Russia even used a base in Iran to launch strikes in Syria), Putin's priority is to preserve Russia's influence in Syria, the region, and the world, particularly given that a resolution to the Syrian conflict will involve various international parties. This includes, perhaps even intentionally, at the expense of Tehran's.

As mentioned above, the initial outbreak of armed conflict in Syria involved, with the exceptions of limited Hezbollah and Iranian support, Syrian security forces on one side and members of the Syrian opposition on the other side,

primarily elements that had defected. In other words, it was an intra-Syrian conflict. By the time the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) declared the situation in Syria a civil war^[87] and as the conflict dragged on, the composition of the opposition, much like the composition of pro-Assad forces, would become neither exclusively Syrian nor exclusively anything.

Initially, the FSA was formed by defectors from the regime's forces, and while their banner would be adopted by various emerging armed groups, in practice the leadership maintain limited if any operational control over the events on the ground. These groups and others that would be formed also began diverging in terms of priorities, goals, and backers. Some, including elements of the FSA, want the removal of the Assad regime and the establishment of a pluralistic democratic state.^[88] Others prefer a future state with a more Islamist but still democratic character. The Syrian Kurds, represented militarily by the People's Protection Units (YPG), wanted, and then declared, an autonomous region.

Still others fight for the removal of the Assad regime in order to establish an Islamic state and/or the promotion of global jihad. This includes al-Nusra Front, ^[89] which was established as a branch of al-Qaeda by the emir of what was then known as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), the result of the 2006 merger of various militant groups (largest of which was al-Qaeda in Iraq).^[90] Despite its links to al-Qaeda, the group has attempted to present a more moderate face to Syria in the world. In 2015, for example, al-Nusra Front commander Abu Muhammad al-Julani claimed that all factions would participate in deciding whether Syria would become an Islamic state, despite this being the publicly stated goal of the organization's operations there. At one point, he also alleged that al-Qaeda's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, ordered al-Nusra Front to refrain from attacking the U.S. or Europe in order to prevent jeopardizing its mission in Syria.^[91]



Zawahiri

In its most notable move to date, the group changed its name to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham in July 2016 and announced that all ties with al-Qaeda had been severed. This rebranding was an effort to reposition itself more favorably in Syria, including by removing one of its primary obstacles, that is, the al-Qaeda name. A number of rebel groups were hesitant to unify with the group, particularly given the revelations that a joint U.S.-Russian air campaign to target al-Nusra Front was being discussed. A name change, however, does not mean a change in ideology, and it is questionable whether its ties to al-Qaeda have actually been severed.[\[92\]](#)

Of course, it is impossible to discuss either Sunni jihadist groups in Syria or the conflict as a whole without ISIS. This group's goal is the creation and expansion of the Islamic Caliphate, which refers to an Islamic state that implements Islamic law and is headed by a caliph, who must be a descendant of the Islamic Prophet Muhammad.[\[93\]](#) ISIS emerged from the April 2013 announcement by ISI's then-leader, and ISIS's now caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, that the group had expanded into Syria. Although al-Nusra Front and al-Qaeda central denied any merger with ISI, elements loyal to al-Baghdadi split off to join what would now be called ISIS. The official renouncement of any connection between the two, however, did not come until February 2014, the month after ISIS took control of Raqqah,[\[94\]](#) the provincial capital of Syria's northeastern Raqqah Province, and Fallujah, a main city in Iraq's western Anbar Province.[\[95\]](#)

By June, the militant jihadist group would increase the territory under its control to include, *inter alia*, Mosul, Iraq's second largest and predominantly Sunni city located the country's north.[\[96\]](#) That month, the group announced a name change to Islamic State, declared a new Islamic Caliphate, and named al-Baghdadi as the caliph.[\[97\]](#) This announcement would trigger declarations of allegiance and the announcement of ISIS *wilayat*, or provinces. In addition to the various ones in Syria and Iraq, ISIS "provinces" and affiliates were declared in Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Nigeria, Afghanistan and Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, and Russia (North Caucuses region). There is also a "Bahrain Province", although the only attack to date that this cell has claimed is a shooting that targeted Shia in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province in October 2015, an area where ISIS's "Najd Province"[\[98\]](#) claimed responsibility for prior attacks.

The militant group's activity, however, would not be constrained to areas where provinces had been announced; by the summer of 2016, ISIS-directed or inspired attacks would take place in Algeria, Australia, Bangladesh, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Indonesia, Kuwait, Lebanon, Malaysia, Tunisia, Turkey, and the U.S.[\[99\]](#) The amount of territory that ISIS was able to seize, which was assisted by the collapse of the Iraqi military in the face of ISIS's advance, along with its global spread, are some of the main factors that changed the course of the conflict in Syria and attitudes toward Assad, which will be discussed in further detail below. In short, it caused a shift in priorities to the extent that the West's fight against the spread of ISIS, both physically and ideologically, would take precedence over all else, including previous insistence on Assad's removal.

ISIS, along with al-Qaeda, would also change the composition of the Syrian conflict. Although foreign fighters are not exclusive to these two groups, the vast majority of those fighting against the Assad regime in Syria are believed to have joined militant jihadist organizations in general and ISIS in particular. According to a report released by *The Soufan Group* in December 2015, between 27,000 and 31,000 foreign fighters traveled to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS.[\[100\]](#) Thus, as the war continued, so did the participation of foreigners on the side of both the opposition and regime. If we return to the OED's definition of "civil war", it is clear that Syrian conflict could no longer be accurately categorized as such.

As the fighting expanded across the country, so too did its impact on Syrian communities, neighboring states and, subsequently, the international community. Initially, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and the flow of

refugees outside of Syria, which began in April 2011, were limited in number, but gradually increased alongside the rise and intensity in fighting. For those who sought refuge outside of Syria, neighboring countries logically became the first destinations. May 2011, for example, saw an influx into Lebanon, largely via unofficial border crossings used for smuggling, following the entry of the Syrian military into Talkalakh, located approximately three miles (less than five kilometers) from the Lebanese border. The next month, the siege of Jisr al-Shughur triggered the flight of 5,000 Syrians out of the city and into Turkey, given its location approximately ten miles (about 16 kilometers) from the border.[\[101\]](#) For those fleeing fighting in the south, Jordan became a logical destination, including for residents of Dara'a, located about four miles (approximately 5.6 kilometers) from the border. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the autonomous region of northern Iraq often referred to as "Iraqi Kurdistan", also welcomed refugees, many of whom were of Kurdish origin and particularly toward the beginning of 2012.

As fighting escalated, the numbers of IDPs and refugees skyrocketed. According to U.S.Aid, as of May 2016 there were 13.5 million people within Syria in need of humanitarian aid and 6.5 million IDPs.[\[102\]](#) A high number of these also had limited or no access to aid. This can be explained by a number of factors: The expansion of fighting across the country until few areas remained unaffected; the destruction of existing services and infrastructure; the sheer numbers of individuals requiring assistance, which is constantly rising; and the inability to access certain areas, including due to persistent fighting, the expansion of territory controlled by militant jihadist groups like ISIS, and the refusal by the Assad regime to grant entry. In May 2016, for example, Deir Ez-Zor was under siege by ISIS and the delivery of aid was all but impossible, so high altitude airdrops were utilized to provide some level of relief.[\[103\]](#) That June, Darayya, the rebel-controlled neighborhood of Damascus, received in June 2016 its first aid convoy since 2012; previously, Assad had barred access to this area.[\[104\]](#) There have been multiple accusations that the Syrian government was intentionally blocking the delivery of aid to rebel-held areas, in order to "starve out" rebels.[\[105\]](#)

Externally, neighboring countries bearing the brunt of the crisis saw increasing pressure on their infrastructure, economies, and populations as the number of refugees steadily rose. In November 2012, for example, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) stated that 11,000 people had fled Syria over a period of 24 hours to Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, bringing the

total number of refugees to 408,000.[\[106\]](#) Almost four years later, as of August 16, 2016, there were 4,808,229 Syrian refugees registered with the UNHCR.[\[107\]](#) Countries like Jordan and Lebanon were also already struggling economically prior to the influx of displaced persons. In 2010, for example, even before the uprising in Syria began, the World Bank reported unemployment in Jordan at 12.5 percent[\[108\]](#) and youth unemployment at a staggering 30.1 percent.[\[109\]](#) In Lebanon, the World Bank put Lebanon's poverty headcount ratio, referring to the percentage of the population living below the national poverty lines, at 27 in 2012.[\[110\]](#)

In addition to creating further competition for employment, the fact that a large portion of the refugees were not living in camps but, rather, in various communities, caused existing services and institutions to often become overwhelmed in the face of growing populations. The UNHCR also faced, and continues to face, funding shortages;[\[111\]](#) in March 2016, half of the 12 billion U.S.D in funding pledged at a February conference in London had yet to be allocated.[\[112\]](#) All of these factors increased the burden, particularly the financial burden, on host countries, creating serious concerns about their own long-term stability. This includes because the outbreak of the Arab Spring can, in part, be explained in terms of dissatisfaction and anger regarding poor economic conditions and prospects. Recall, for example, Tunisia's Mohammad Bouazizi, who was from a city with an estimated 30 percent unemployment,[\[113\]](#) and set himself on fire after his produce cart, his method of making a living, was confiscated.

The refugee crisis evolved further by becoming a European crisis, even if this situation cannot be blamed entirely on those fleeing Syria. This "crisis" began in 2015, when approximately one million migrants and refugees entered Europe. According to the UNHCR, of those arriving via the Mediterranean Sea from January 2015 to March 2016, approximately 46.7 percent came from Syria, with Afghanistan in the number two spot at 20.9 percent.[\[114\]](#) To make matters worse for the EU, Erdogan threatened in February 2016 to send the millions of refugees hosted in Turkey to the EU if additional support wasn't provided. He further stated that the country had already spent nine billion U.S.D since 2011 on hosting these refugees.[\[115\]](#)

One of the methods in which the European Union (EU) approached this issue was through a deal with Turkey in March 2016 that pledged financial assistance in exchange for Ankara curbing the flow of refugees into the EU. This included a concept known as "one-for-one", which involved the resettlement of a registered

Syrian refugee into the EU in exchange for each illegal refugee returned from (primarily) Greece to Turkey, albeit with a cap on this number.[\[116\]](#) In June 2016, the EU Regional Trust Fund also announced a package that included 165 million Euros (approximately 186 million U.S.D) for Turkey to “support education, including school construction and higher education of young Syrians, and extend water and waste-water facilities in southern Turkey”. As part of this package, money, albeit a substantially smaller amount, was granted to Jordan (21 million Euros, or about 23.5 million U.S.D) for the rehabilitation of “overstretched water networks”, and to the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which received 15 million Euros (approximately 16.8 million U.S.D) for assistance to Palestinian refugees that fled Syria.[\[117\]](#)

In addition to evolving from a crisis in Syria to Syria’s neighboring states and Europe, concerns that refugees pose a national security threat also rose to prominence, particularly as the number of ISIS-affiliated and inspired attacks in Western countries rose. A U.S. House of Representatives Homeland Security Committee report issued in November 2015 discussed this issue. It found, among others, that “Islamist terrorists are determined to infiltrate refugee flows to enter the West” and that the U.S. “lacks the information needed to confidently screen refugees from the Syria conflict zone to identify possible terrorism connections”. This was despite acknowledged “security enhancements to the vetting process”. As a result of this, the report went on to explain that “surging admissions of Syrian refugees into the United States is likely to result in an increase in federal law enforcement’s counterterrorism caseload”. In fact, the report’s findings directly cited the situation in Europe, describing their “open borders” as a “cause célèbre” for jihadists” and the Syrian refugee population present already there as being “targeted by extremists for recruitment”.[\[118\]](#) Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump has called Syrian refugees a “Trojan horse” for Islamist militants,[\[119\]](#) while the UK vote to leave the EU, referred to as “Brexit”, is often described as a vote against immigration, including the entry of refugees.[\[120\]](#)

Chapter 7: The Early Fighting in Aleppo

In September 2016, U.S. presidential candidate Gary Johnson was interviewed on MSNBC about his various stances on several important political issues. At one point, the news anchor asked Mr. Johnson what he would do if he were president about Aleppo, to which Johnson responded, “What is Aleppo?”[\[121\]](#) The internet immediately responded with mockery, sadness, and disbelief, questioning how a person attempting to push his way into the tight presidential race could possibly not know what was happening in a city that has been a daily news fixture for quite awhile.

Of course, even though Mr. Johnson responded later that he was aware of the battle in Aleppo and had a momentary lapse in memory, he was reflecting what most people believe is the general American understanding of what is going on inside the country: people have no clue about the reality on the ground. If anything, the world has only recently really started to pay attention to the fighting in and around Aleppo primarily because its intensity has increased significantly since Russia entered the war to support the Syrian regime in late 2015. In fact, the battle for Aleppo has been ongoing for over 4 years.

Originally, the conflict within Aleppo began when violence broke out between protesters and Syrian forces in May 2012, more than a year after protests started in the country. The rebel groups, made up of Free Syrian Army, Jabhat Al-Nusra and other smaller jihadist groups at the time, were quickly labeled by the regime as terrorists, a term the international community understood well. According to Turkish Prime Minister Recep Erdogan, "It is out of question that we would allow a terrorist organization to be based in northern Syria and become a threat to our country."[\[122\]](#) Even at this point, the Turkish government understood the risk, especially as it witnessed the region devolving into chaos during the Arab Spring. This was a general response by more conservative regimes and dictatorships around the region: how could they support rebels when that might lead to their own citizens starting a civil war?

The regime began shelling neighborhoods and carrying out helicopter attacks in Aleppo, and as the fighting continued in late 2012, there were reports that the rebel groups were stealing supplies from locals and forcing them to allow them to stay inside of their homes.[\[123\]](#) "It is extremely sad. There is not one government institution or warehouse left standing in Aleppo. Everything has been looted. Everything is gone."[\[124\]](#) Some claimed that the looting and violence among rebels

and residents of Aleppo were also a result of longstanding grudges that people in these militant forces harbored (those of rural and generally less wealthy families) against more wealthy people of Aleppo. The grievances emerged in a big way even early on in the battle.

This level of guerrilla warfare and chaos was the excuse used by the Syrian government to intensify attacks, and when this happened, the looting intensified primarily because the leaders of the rebel groups were not able to easily feed and pay their soldiers. In many cases, fighters would move to other rebel groups that were better funded at that time (and this has continued to be an issue for the rebel groups over the years). Not only do the rebel groups compete for fighters and resources, they also compete for external support from international sponsors and over the claim that their group is the one carrying the true revolution forward against the Assad regime.

The entrance of the jihadist groups into the fray drastically changed the battle for Aleppo, and the war in Syria in general. Like in many cases, jihadist groups enter a battle when they note a vacuum and chaos in order to fill the void. Al-Qaeda seized on this opportunity and encouraged the development of Jabhat Al-Nusra, as did others. Many foreign fighters from other Muslim and non-Muslim countries also made their way to Syria in order to fight for a jihadist cause, hoping to take down Assad and install an Islamic caliphate. These rebels hailed from Tunisia all the way to Chechnya, and thousands of fighters have traveled from Western Europe as well.

Throughout the summer of 2012, the various rebel groups rapidly took control of different parts of the city and various neighborhoods. Aleppo's population at this time was about 2.5 million people and was still considered an economically important city for the country, so losing such a city to rebels was non-negotiable to the Syrian government. The rebel groups most likely felt emboldened by the fact that a large portion of the population was Sunni. "Of Aleppo's 2.5 million people, a majority are Sunni Muslims, many of whom feel alienated from Assad's Alawite-led government. The city's proximity to the Turkish border allows rebel forces to ferry in men and matériel with relative ease."[\[125\]](#)

The Syrian government clearly understood the importance of the proximity to Turkey and the Turkish government's propensity for a more conservative view of Islam (ála the AKP's political background) and was sure to respond. The Syrian army attacked different rebel-held neighborhoods in attempts to force the rebels out

which in turn prompted large waves of refugees fleeing the city, mostly toward Turkey. The neighborhood mainly affected during this battle was that of Salahuddin, a poor area in western Aleppo.[\[126\]](#) During the battle there in the summer of 2012, the rebel groups were able to beat back the Syrian army and push toward the city center for some time until the Syrian forces retaliated. During this long summer battle, the rebels and the Syrian army moved back and forth around the city like pieces on a chessboard. Before the government entered certain areas, they sometimes sent text messages to cell phone owners in the area telling them “the game is over” and that rebels should surrender immediately or be killed.[\[127\]](#)

Throughout the battle, the government and the rebels would use tactics to push the other out into the open or to expel them from the city. The Syrian army, for example, targeted locations like bakeries, hospitals and other popular locations, cutting off access to food and aid. Thus, the siege-like warfare that has been a hallmark of the battle has been taking place from the beginning.



A FSA fighter walking among the rubble in Aleppo in 2012



FSA fighters in the ancient part of the city in 2012



The wreckage of a tank in Aleppo

Such actions had unintended consequences, however. Jabhat Al-Nusra (now called Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham) introduced itself to neighborhoods full of civilians in need of food and aid. Al-Nusra began providing different services to residents and advertised themselves as protectors of the average Syrian from the harsh Assad regime. In late 2012, the group took control of the airport in eastern Aleppo and declared it would shoot down any planes flying in the airspace.[\[128\]](#) Al-Nusra claimed it was trying to prevent Assad from flying in fighters in secret on regular passenger planes and carrying in supplies for the Syrian army. Later during the

year, Al-Nusra officially split from ISIS, its Al-Qaeda affiliated sister group. Al-Nusra continued on its own to develop relationships within its controlled territory around Syria in order to bolster their legitimacy, especially in light of ISIS' increasing brutality. Al-Nusra operated as an "Al-Qaeda lite," a jihadist group that was strict in its application of religion, but supposedly less violent than ISIS. This angle is an important one, and one that Al-Nusra has continued using in 2016 as it tries to create more distance with Al-Qaeda and present itself as a more legitimate option to the Assad regime when the international community and Syrian population look toward power transitions.

Slowly but surely, Al-Nusra and other such groups worked to turn people against the regime. In some areas, this has appeared to work, but in others, the groups are skeptical. The Christians of Aleppo, for example, have been targeted and accused of supporting the Syrian regime--and many do--because they do not want to take part in the activities of rebel groups, particularly those that are religious in nature, for fear that Salafism would subsequently control their way of living. Moreover, with the huge push of ISIS into Syria and Iraq in 2014, Syrian Christians saw their Iraqi counterparts beheaded and forced out of cities. Thus, the Syrian regime still holds fairly strong support from the country's Christian population.

The Kurdish neighborhoods around Aleppo also experienced a tough predicament when they came into contact with the Syrian army and the rebel groups attempting to take over their areas. While some Kurdish leaders claimed they wanted to stay out of the battle, others felt like they were being pulled into the conflict. When clashes occurred, the rebels blamed the government. "Our Kurdish brothers are comrades in our nation," the Free Syrians Brigade said in a statement. "The problem... was the result of a misunderstanding that was created by a regime plot."[\[129\]](#) To the rebel groups, the Kurds were a group to be swayed, but if they did not work in collaboration with the rebels, then they must be guilty of being manipulated by the government.



A picture of destruction caused by suicide bombings in Aleppo in late 2012

The Kurds of Aleppo also were pulled more heavily into the battle during 2013. Various attacks against their neighborhoods such as Sheikh Al-Maqsud were blamed on the rebels and the government, which blamed each other in turn. In November 2013, the PYD declared its own independently ruled area for Kurds in northern Syria, a huge shock to both the Syrian government and Turkey, which had both tried to avoid such an occurrence from ever happening. The rebels again criticized the Kurds for not engaging the Syrian army directly but rather defending their own interests. “The Kurds say they support the rebellion against Assad but they have not been engaged in battles with the Syrian President’s forces since the army withdrew from Kurdish areas in the early months of the civil war.”[\[130\]](#)

The Kurds’ involvement in the battle has been characterized by their unique position. They do not outright support the Assad government due to years of oppression, they also do not necessarily support the rebels who have taken the lead in the civil war, namely Jabhat Al-Nusra and its affiliated jihadist groups. The jihadist groups’ ties to the Turkish government leaders, led by the conservative, Muslim Brotherhood offshoot of the AKP, very much opposes Kurdish independence and civil rights within their own borders, primarily due to their ongoing conflict with the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), a Kurdish separatist group. When the PYD declared its independence, Turkey was worried this would embolden its own Kurds to join the cause.

Another faction to fully join the fray during this time was the Lebanese Shi'a

militant group Hezbollah. Hezbollah has been a long-time ally of the Syrian regime since its inception in the early 1980s during the Lebanese Civil War. Syria's position as a conduit for weapons and aid to Hezbollah in their fights against Israel and their internal political issues in Lebanon ensured they took up arms when called upon by Iran.

Hezbollah used a similar tactic as the Sunni rebels by positioning themselves initially in Shi'ite towns and neighborhoods around Aleppo from which to launch attacks. Hassan Nasrallah, the spiritual leader of Hezbollah, claimed they entered the battle at Assad's request to remove the "terrorist" infiltrators around the country.[\[131\]](#) Part of Assad's strategy for utilizing Hezbollah forces as reinforcement was to strategically place them in these Shi'ite towns and clear out any rebellious forces. These towns would then become launch sites for attacks against rebel forces in Aleppo, and the towns also happened to be very close to major highways.[\[132\]](#)

The entrance of Hezbollah into Aleppo and the implications that Iran was beginning to insert itself in the civil war alarmed Western countries. The internal fears that shook Western countries during the Arab Spring were coming true, and it became more apparent that the power vacuums created by these conflicts were creating avenues for enemies of the West to gain power and influence in the region. And even though past efforts to arm rebels during the Cold War against Russia eventually backfired (as with the Taliban and Osama bin Laden), the U.S. and its allies began to consider doing this once more in Syria. During the summer of 2013, it was reported that the United Kingdom sent about 8 million British pounds in "non-lethal" aid to rebels in Syria, which, "according to official papers seen by *The Independent*, [comprised] five 4x4 vehicles with ballistic protection; 20 sets of body armour; four trucks (three 25 tonne, one 20 tonne); six 4x4 SUVs; five non-armoured pick-ups; one recovery vehicle; four fork-lifts; three advanced 'resilience kits' for region hubs, designed to rescue people in emergencies; 130 solar powered batteries; around 400 radios; water purification and rubbish collection kits; laptops; VSATs (small satellite systems for data communications) and printers."[\[133\]](#)

In turn, the U.S. sent additional "lethal" aid to Syrian rebels such as weapons, vehicles and other equipment. [\[134\]](#) Within the U.S., this move was controversial on both sides of the political aisle. Some criticized the Obama administration for taking so long to aid the rebels, and others criticized the administration for not learning from past actions during the Cold War that led to disastrous effects for

American interests and foreign policy in the long-term. This difficult political issue has been a conundrum for an administration that has tried to support rebels in the dictatorships around the Middle East during the Arab Spring but also worked to support allies in the region and keep the political balance as much as possible. Though the U.S. has not been an ally of Syria by any means, their own allies like Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey have been outright supporting Al-Nusra and their religio-political objectives in the new Syria post-Assad.

Eventually, Russia also found a prime moment to enter the conflict. In response to the U.S. condemnation of the Syrian regime's chemical attacks against civilians in Ghouta, Russia released reports at the United Nations concerning the rebels' use of sarin gas against civilians in March 2013.[\[135\]](#) While the U.S. dismissed the report, Russia used this as an opportunity to point out Western selectivity over what it considered to be legitimate attacks and illegitimate attacks. A war of over words between the U.S. and Russia has characterized much of this relationship throughout the war.

The fighting in Aleppo in 2013 was also characterized by the Syrian government's increased use of barrel bombs around the city. This increased usage is thought to have been due at least in part to the fact that the regime avoided potential American airstrikes by handing over their declared chemical weapons for transport and disposal in compliance with a controversial agreement made between the U.S. and Russia after a regime chemical attack seemed to defy Obama's explicit redline. According to the *Washington Post*, "The barrel bombs are oil drums packed with explosives, nails and other shrapnel. They are dropped by helicopters and are far simpler than the chemical weapons that the United States and other Western powers are trying to ferry out of the country. But they are also imprecise, killing rebel forces and civilians alike, and the fear they provoke is almost as intense, activists and rebel fighters say."[\[136\]](#)

By the end of 2013, hundreds of people--rebels and civilians--were killed by the barrel bombs around Aleppo. This amount increased significantly in 2014 as the Syrian Civil War entered its third year. During December 2013, the Syrian army began its Operation Canopus Star, an offensive to gain control over supply routes around Aleppo by intense air raid bombings as well as maintaining direct lines to central Syria.

Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) also stepped up its involvement in the battle for Aleppo in 2013. Iran initially claimed that their forces were inside Syria

to advise the Syrian armed forces, but evidence indicated the IRGC was actually involved in the fighting. Iran reported their first soldier's death in Syria in late 2013.[\[137\]](#) Many of the IRGC members are actually veterans of the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, though they maintained for some time that they were there for training and advising. Also during this time, a video appeared of an Iranian commander discussing Iranian actions inside Syria with a filmmaker. The commander, Ismail Haydari, was killed in Aleppo.[\[138\]](#)

As Iran and Hezbollah intervention make clear, 2013 was the year Syrian regime began increasingly relying upon its allies to help fight. In addition to lacking the manpower to fight all the rebels by itself, the regime has had to deal with the fact that urban warfare against these very well-organized and well-supported rebel groups is challenging, since they refuse to fight in the typical way armies fight. Instead, the rebels have embedded themselves in the community, and as long as they stay, the more they are able to garner support for their presence, thus creating an entrenchment situation. Civilians in some neighborhoods in Aleppo and other cities around Syria came to see rebels as liberators, or at least more reliable than the Syrian government in terms of providing services.

Chapter 8: The Siege of Aleppo

Since Operation Canopus Star put the regime in a better strategic position, not only by taking more territory but also better connecting Aleppo to the rest of regime-controlled territories in Syria, it gave Assad space to attempt negotiations. In January 2014, the Syrian government proposed a possible ceasefire with the rebels inside Aleppo and presented this path to peace prior to an international conference focused on finding a solution to the civil war.[\[139\]](#) The way the deal was framed, as well as Syria's appearance at the conference, intentionally portrayed Assad as fighting terrorists and hoping for help from the international community while the battle kept going. Ultimately, a ceasefire was not reached and the battles continued.

As the battle in Aleppo raged on, the Syrian regime continued to gain the upper hand. In the spring, Assad's forces surrounded a prison in northern Aleppo, which led to the cutting of a supply line for the rebel forces inside the city.[\[140\]](#) As they took control of the prison, they began to destroy key locations in the vicinity, such as hospitals. The scene on the city streets was that of a ghost town: "Aleppo is eerie and abandoned. Its streets seem cleaner and better-kept than before, mainly because there are so few residents left. The only messes to clean up are caused by regular bombing raids by Syrian planes and helicopters, which destroy homes and buildings with unmitigated savagery. In some districts near the eastern fringes, up to 30% of all buildings have been demolished. Whole neighborhoods have been emptied, or are down to their last hardy souls, many of whom have no option but to stay."[\[141\]](#)

As the military encroached upon the city, the battle began to take a more sectarian turn. While the civil war started out as a secular revolution demanding social justice for all Syrians and change in society as a whole, Assad and the insurgent militant jihadist groups managed to divide the various ethnic and religious groups inside the country. Nowhere was that more obvious than in Aleppo in 2014. Propaganda from the Syrian regime and the jihadist groups put fear into their respective groups that their enemies were bent on turning Syria into another Iraq, heavily divided along religious and ethnic lines. This touched a nerve because Syrian history is replete with examples of the kind of trouble such divisions can cause, particularly when the ruling government shows favoritism toward one group over others. Interestingly, however, there are several instances that appear to contradict the sectarian narrative espoused by the government and rebel factions.

Most soldiers in the Syrian army are in fact Sunni, and the main division between those loyal to Assad and those loyal to the opposition almost appears to be a geographical issue. Many Sunnis in the more rural areas around Aleppo stood in support of Assad, while a growing number of Sunnis inside support the opposition. [\[142\]](#)

During the summer of 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) launched onto the scene and took up much media attention. While ISIS had been present in the city for some time, their rise to notoriety very much concerned the U.S., especially since their prominence came at a time when Obama was more heavily considering assisting some Syrian rebel groups on the ground in Aleppo. Knowing that the U.S. was considering fighting ISIS in Iraq, the jihadist groups already inside Aleppo preemptively attacked ISIS. “Battles also erupted in the Salahedin district of Aleppo itself, where both groups had reluctantly co-existed during recent months as Isis had imposed its hardline influence on parts of the city.” [\[143\]](#) The Free Syrian Army even called on the U.S. to carry out airstrikes against ISIS for fear that the wider power vacuum inside the city would be ripe for the picking for ISIS as they spread and gathered recruits. Thus, even as the Syrian regime began maintaining a siege of Aleppo in hopes of controlling all-important supply routes to Turkey, the rebel groups were also fighting ISIS inside of the city.

In September 2014, the U.S.-led international coalition began conducting airstrikes against ISIS targets inside Syria. [\[144\]](#) The coalition primarily focused on Raqqa, ISIS’ declared capital of their caliphate. While the U.S. targeted supplies and weapons locations, Syrians in other parts of the country expressed frustration that the U.S. was not carrying out strikes in other parts of the country, particularly against the Syrian regime, which was responsible for far more civilian deaths than ISIS. However, during America’s confrontation with ISIS, Obama was careful not to engage the Syrian government or take part in other aspects of the conflict. As this suggests, the president has tried to walk a very fine line in fighting ISIS while not getting further enmeshed in the civil war, even as he repeatedly called for Assad’s removal from power. Critics have slammed Obama for failing to enforce his stated redline over the use of chemical weapons, and others have claimed the administration refused to attack the Syrian regime for fear of jeopardizing negotiations over Iran’s nuclear energy program or scuttling the nuclear agreement reached in 2015.

In the fall of 2014, another ceasefire plan was presented to end the battle in Aleppo. This ceasefire was intended to “freeze” the battle, allowing for

humanitarian aid to enter the city and also give rebels and civilians an opportunity to leave the city.[\[145\]](#) The ceasefire deal eventually fell through, with all sides blaming each other. For example, the Free Syrian Army refused to stop fighting, as they did not believe the Assad regime was serious about such an agreement and that they may be setting the rebels up for a Srebrenica situation, in which the government may massacre the rebels as they attempted to leave Aleppo.

Early 2015 saw rebel victories early around Aleppo, forcing the Syrian regime to retreat to the edge of the city, but that fall, Russia officially entered the civil war to bolster Assad's forces around the country. In October 2015, Russian airstrikes and assistance on the ground helped the Syrian regime recapture towns around Aleppo.[\[146\]](#) Even as the Russians have insisted they entered Syria to fight terrorist groups like ISIS, the West couldn't help but note that Russia barely targeted ISIS, or that Russia had targeted some of the very groups supported by America. In fact, the rebels argued that Russia's involvement only helped ISIS to regain strength in the area: "The regime and Isis tried to take Aleppo last year and they couldn't, and now they are trying again with the Russians. The Russians are doing Isis a huge favour. They are giving them air cover while they are attacking us from the ground."[\[147\]](#)

Part of Russia's attacks on rebel-held areas in Aleppo included cluster bombs, explosives full of projectiles.[\[148\]](#) Moreover, in order to assist the regime's new offensive, Hezbollah increased its operations around Aleppo and continued to work to capture strategic locations around Aleppo that would better assist the Syrian government in connecting its currently held areas to its other controlled territories in eastern Syria.

As the Syrian regime advanced to take control of important locations around Aleppo, Turkey became increasingly worried about the spillover effect of the conflict, as well as the possible difficulties it would experience in supporting the Sunni rebels inside the city. Tension between Turkey and Syria escalated, especially when the Turks shot down a Syrian drone near the border.[\[149\]](#) In mid-2015, Turkey established a sort of "safe zone" for rebels to operate under cover of Turkish and U.S. jets.[\[150\]](#) This provided a buffer for Turkey against the Syrian regime as it continued to expand into Aleppo, while simultaneously supporting the continued expansion of Jabhat Al-Nusra and its affiliated jihadist groups fighting in and around Aleppo. In August 2015, Jabhat Al-Nusra reportedly retreated from northern Aleppo into the safe zone partially due to America's continued assertion that it cannot work with Al-Nusra because of their association with Al-Qaeda.

As the Russians steadily expanded their intervention in Syria, the U.S. announced it had abandoned its efforts to train and advise rebels and would instead focus on arming them. “The Pentagon said it would shift its focus to providing weapons and other equipment to rebel groups whose leaders have passed a U.S. vetting process to ensure they are not linked to militant Islamist groups.”[\[151\]](#) At the same time, the rebel groups being assisted have historically complained that the Obama administration has required them to pledge not to target Assad, just terrorist groups like ISIS. The worsening situation inside Syria as well as the global refugee crisis fueled by the flood of refugees fleeing into Europe was other factors in a reassessment of American involvement in the conflict.

Caught between the Syrian-Iranian-Russian alliance and the Turkish-backed Sunni rebels, the Syrian Kurds found themselves once again in a difficult situation. As previously noted, the Kurdish population of Syria did not have an ideal relationship with the Assad regime, but their issues with the Turkish government put them in a situation where supporting Assad was better than risking losing territory and direct confrontation with the Turkish army. “To win the battle for Aleppo, Assad will therefore need to cooperate with the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian franchise of the Turkish Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The PYD is eager to connect its cantons around Kobane and Afrin and open a corridor to Sheikh Maqsoud, the Kurdish district of Aleppo.”[\[152\]](#) In late 2015, there were reports that Kurdish forces of the PYD began receiving military aid from Russia in Aleppo, though the PYD denied the claim.[\[153\]](#)

The efforts of the Syrian regime in January and February 2016 resulted in important gains in their efforts to take back Aleppo. “The Syrian army and its allies have broken a three-year rebel siege of two Shi’ite towns in northwest Syria...cutting off a main insurgent route to nearby Turkey.”[\[154\]](#) By cutting off the rebels’ connection to the Turkish safe zones north of Aleppo, the Syrian government now had direct access. After this, the Syrian government conducted operations to encircle Aleppo and cut the rebels off even more from outside resources in hopes of starving them into surrender.

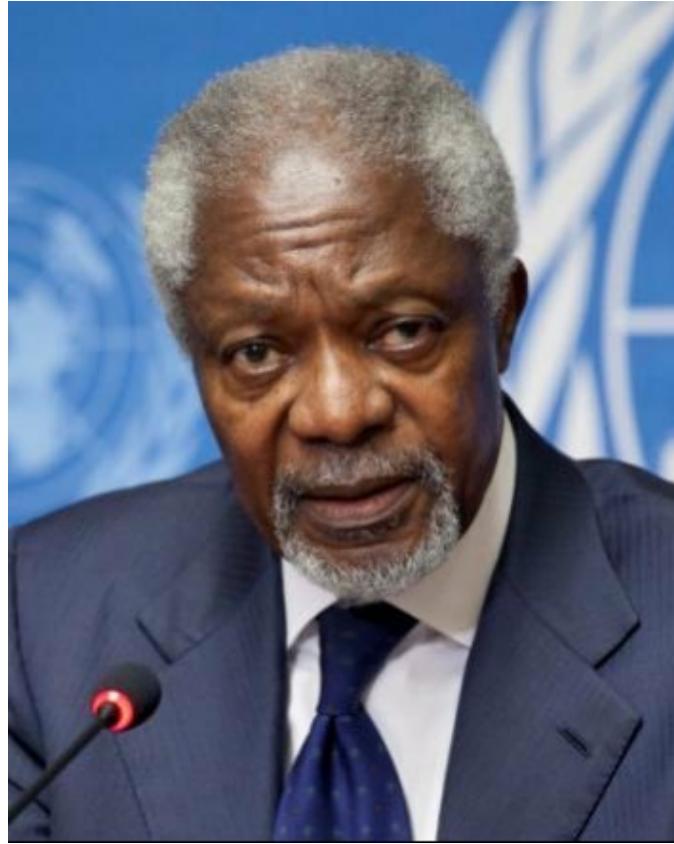
In late July, the Syrian government and Russia opened “humanitarian corridors” to enable civilians and unarmed rebels to leave Aleppo,[\[155\]](#) and in a last ditch effort to regain outside connections, the rebels launched an offensive in southern and northern Aleppo in August 2016. In southern Aleppo, Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham (formerly Jabhat Al-Nusra until early August 2016, a name change that was supposed to signal the group’s formal break with Al-Qaeda) and their local

affiliates shelled neighborhoods controlled by the Syrian regime in an effort to open new supply routes.[\[156\]](#) While the rebels continue to fight against the Syrian military as of early September, reports of fuel running out and a food crisis exacerbate the situation.[\[157\]](#)

Chapter 9: The Shifting Goals for Aleppo and the Syrian Civil War

Al-Qaeda and ISIS didn't just bring foreign fighters to the conflict; their expansion helped change the course of foreign intervention in the country and the perception of Assad, years after he first depicted himself as battling militant Islamist forces. Following ISIS's declaration of the "Caliphate" in June 2014, the U.S. began conducting airstrikes against the militant group and ultimately formed what would become known as the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition. Similarly, when Turkish tanks crossed the border into Syria in August 2016, the operation may have been conducted alongside FSA forces, but the stated goal was to force ISIS out of Jarabulus. These events necessarily put the U.S.-led coalition and Turkey on the de facto same side as Assad, Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia in terms of the fight against ISIS. Although there was no coordination among the West and the others, and the backing of "moderate rebels" in their fight against the regime continued, rhetoric toward Assad's future began to soften as well. The notion that Assad must be barred from any transitional or future government was crumbling.

How did the international community[\[158\]](#) get to this point? As noted above, international "intervention" at the start of the Syrian uprising was limited to sanctions, arms embargos, and rhetoric. At that point, divisions between Security Council's five permanent members prevented any joint action. In the second year of the uprising, in April 2012, the former UN Secretary General and then-UN-Arab League Joint Special Representative for Syria, Kofi Annan, presented the first internationally backed peace proposal to resolve the situation in Syria. In hindsight, it would also be the first of many others to fail. This was referred to as the six-point peace plan and included a parallel UN-supervised cessation of violence and the commitment "to work with the Envoy in an inclusive Syrian-led political process to address the legitimate aspirations and concerns of the Syrian people". Other aspects included the provision of humanitarian aid to areas affected by the conflict, "the release of arbitrarily detained persons", freedom of movement for journalists and "a non-discriminatory visa policy for them", and a promise to "respect freedom of association and the right to demonstrate peacefully".[\[159\]](#)



Annan

Annan's plan was verbally accepted by both sides but was short-lived, practically collapsing by June when violence escalated despite the ceasefire provided for in the plan. That month, the United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS), which was comprised of 300 unarmed monitors and responsible for overseeing the six-point peace plan's implementation, suspended its normal operations, citing this rise in violence and concerns for the safety of UNSMIS personnel. The mission was then extended for a final 30 days in July, with the UNSC only considering a further extension "in the event that the Secretary-General reports and the Security Council confirms the cessation of the use of heavy weapons and a reduction in the level of violence sufficient by all sides". This was not achieved and the mandate expired at midnight on August 19.[\[160\]](#) That month, Annan stepped down from his position as joint special representative to Syria, citing the failure of his peace plan and lack of unity in the UNSC.[\[161\]](#)

Two years later, in 2013, the drums of intervention (and war) beat louder when, in August 2013, reports and videos emerged from rebel-held areas in Eastern and Western Ghouta describing an attack involving sarin gas or another nerve agent that

killed hundreds of people, including many children.[\[162\]](#) This was not the first alleged use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government, but it was the most severe. The year before, in July 2012, Foreign Ministry spokesman Jihad Makdissi stated “any stock of W.M.D. or unconventional weapons that the Syrian Army possesses will never, never be used against the Syrian people or civilians during this crisis, under any circumstances”. He continued to explain that they would, however, “be used strictly and only in the event of external aggression against the Syrian Arab Republic”.[\[163\]](#) It is important to recall that the Assad regime was depicting the uprising as involving “foreign conspirators”, creating the implication that it could be used during the conflict. Shortly after Makdissi’s statements, Obama articulated his infamous “red line”, stating that “seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized [...] would change [his] calculus”.[\[164\]](#)

In the months before the Eastern and Western Ghouta attacks, additional claims of chemical weapons use would emerge. This includes in December 2012 in Homs, [\[165\]](#) which was later determined by a U.S. State Department investigation to be a misuse of riot-control gas, not a nerve agent.[\[166\]](#) But chemical weapons were used in March 2013 in Aleppo city and a Damascus suburb, with both sides accusing the other of responsibility;[\[167\]](#) and the next month more was used in Saraqib, a city in northwestern Syria.[\[168\]](#)

Ultimately, the Eastern and Western Ghouta attacks proved to be a turning point. That month, Obama announced that he would seek Congressional approval to intervene militarily in Syria in response to the use of chemical weapons, which would certainly involve strikes against Assad regime targets. The intervention, however, never materialized. Instead, as was consistent with Obama’s foreign policy philosophy, a joint U.S.-Russian agreement that would allow for the peaceful “control, removal, and destruction of Syria’s chemical weapons capabilities” was prioritized over war. From this came the Framework for Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons, which would involve personnel from the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the UN, included a schedule of target dates. By November, on-site inspections by OPCW inspections would be completed and production and mixing/filling equipment would be destroyed, while the “complete elimination of all chemical weapons material and equipment” would occur in the first half of 2014.[\[169\]](#) Although the 2014 target date was not met, by January 4, 2016 the OPCW announced the destruction of all chemical weapons declared by the Syrian government.[\[170\]](#) All

the while, both analysts and federal government agencies rightly presumed that Assad hadn't declared all his chemical weapons and had held onto some, and more chemical weapons uses have taken place in violation of the agreements.

Annan's six-point peace plan would be the last to include any on-ground presence by outside forces, but efforts to forward a real solution to the conflict continued. What later became known as Geneva I but was really an "action group" conference, was held at the end of June 2012. Although parties agreed to a set of "Principles and Guide-lines on a Syrian-led transition" (hereafter "Geneva II communiqué"),[\[171\]](#) disagreement emerged on whether Assad could play any role in a transitional government. Then-U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated no, sticking to the position of the U.S. that Assad must step down. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, on the other hand, denied that there were any preconditions regarding who may and may not participate in any transitional government.[\[172\]](#)



Lavrov and Secretary of State John Kerry

The Geneva II Conference on Syria subsequently took place in 2014 with the aim of bringing the Syrian government and opposition together in order to discuss the transition agreed upon by Geneva I. In addition to continued disagreement on the future of Assad, the conference's two rounds yielded no actual negotiations. In fact, parties couldn't even agree on the proper order of negotiations, with Lakhdar

Brahimi, Annan's successor as UN envoy to Syria, stating that the Syrian government was opposed to the suggestion that the top demands from both sides be discussed, rather than initially focusing on just the government's.[\[173\]](#)

There would be no successful negotiations of any kind until September 2015, when a limited ceasefire was negotiated and implemented in al-Zabadani, a city located in southwestern Syria's Rif Damashq Province near the Lebanese border, as well as Fuaa and Kafraya, two Shia majority villages in the Idlib Province. The truce lasted only until October.[\[174\]](#)

That month, attempts were again made in Vienna at the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), which can be considered the most successful conference to date. Often referred to as the “Vienna peace talks”, meetings were held in October and November with the notable participation of Saudi Arabia and Iran. And while disagreement regarding Assad's role persisted among participating members, point eight in the October joint statement stated that the “political process will be Syrian led and Syrian owned, and the Syrian people will decide the future of Syria”.[\[175\]](#) Based on the aforementioned Geneva II communiqué, the ISSG called for negotiations between the Syrian government and rebels to run parallel to a nationwide cessation of hostilities. There was no mention of Assad in the interest of coming to agreement on a conflict that was about to enter its fifth year. By December of that year, the UNSC had endorsed the November statement and “acknowledge[d] the role of the ISSG as the central platform to facilitate the United Nations' efforts to achieve a lasting political settlement in Syria”.[\[176\]](#)

Although the Geneva III conference was suspended shortly after it began at the beginning of February 2016, by the end of that month the nationwide cessation of hostilities was agreed to and implemented, although ISIS, al-Nusra Front, and other UN-designated terrorist organizations were excluded. The ISSG Ceasefire Task Force was simultaneously created to exchange information and address issues of non-compliance during the truce.[\[177\]](#) In practical terms, this meant that ISSG member parties would monitor the truce from afar and report violations to the task force. Despite the failure of parallel peace talks and despite allegations of violations,[\[178\]](#) the ceasefire was largely considered to be a success and held until April, when the regime resumed its attack against the opposition-held Aleppo city.[\[179\]](#)

If anything has demonstrated the West's shifting goals, it is the fact that the only military intervention seen to date by parties backing the opposition came in the

form of operations to target ISIS and al-Qaeda, not the Assad regime. Initial airstrikes conducted by the U.S. occurred in Iraq in August 2014 in response to ISIS's rapid expansion and seizure of territory, as well as the plight of Yazidis, a religious minority perceived by ISIS as heretical and who were surrounded by the militant group.[\[180\]](#) By September, Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) was formed. "By, with and through regional partners", its goal is to "militarily defeat Da'esh[\[181\]](#) in the Combined Joint Operations Area", referring to Iraq and Syria.[\[182\]](#) The first airstrikes against the militant group were reported in Syria that month and, although it is a multi-national coalition, the U.S. has been responsible for the majority of strikes: According to the U.S. State Department, as of July 27, 2016, the U.S. had conducted 4,433 airstrikes in Syria and 6,393 in Iraq, compared to the 249 in Syria and 3,018 in Iraq by other members of the coalition.[\[183\]](#) It is unclear if these numbers include U.S.-only strikes in Syria that targeted the al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Nusra Front and Khorasan Group.[\[184\]](#)

Similarly, Turkey's August 2016 intervention into Syria had two goals, neither of them being Assad's removal: Ankara aimed to expel ISIS from Jarabulus, located west of Kobane along the Turkish border, and, in doing so, prevent the Kurds from expanding their territorial control along Turkey's border. Ankara sees the Kurds as its natural enemy, given their links to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has been in direct conflict with the Turkish government in the country's southeast for years.

Diplomatic initiatives and military interventions, therefore, transformed from public disagreements on Assad's role into an agreement that Syria's future would be decided by the Syrian people and include a large-scale international intervention that focused exclusively on rolling back ISIS's expansion. It is no surprise then that public statements from officials, and corresponding attitudes, saw a similar shift from "Assad must go" to "perhaps Assad can be part of the transition". In September 2015, German Chancellor Angela Merkel stated during a news conference that Assad should be part of negotiations with the West. "We have to speak to many actors", she explained, "this includes Assad, but others as well".[\[185\]](#) The next month, then-UK Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond said that the UK could accept a short transition period that included Assad, albeit with some caveats, including his loss of control over the security establishment and a pledge against running in any future elections.[\[186\]](#) In December of that year, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry told reporters after a meeting with Putin that the

removal of Assad is no longer the top priority. Attention, he stated, is “not on our differences about what can or cannot be done immediately about Assad”, but on the pursuit of a peace process that allows “Syrians [to be] making decisions for the future of Syria”.[\[187\]](#) All of these occurred ahead of, during, or after the breakthrough at the Vienna peace talks, whose statement, as previously noted, included no mention of Assad and resulted in the February 2016 ceasefire. Perhaps the most notable shift came from Turkey (discussed further in the case study below) in the summer of 2016, when Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım stated on August 20 that Ankara was willing to accept a role for Assad during a transitional period.[\[188\]](#)

This transition in attitudes and rhetoric can be clearly described by one word and demonstrated by the military interventions of the U.S.-led coalition and Turkey: ISIS. It is not that the leaders of the world changed their perception of Assad from that of a war criminal to a benevolent leader; rather, the global threat posed by ISIS caused a change in priorities among those in the “anti-Assad” or “pro-opposition” camp. In other words, targeting this group became more important than removing Assad.

The story of the Syrian conflict, therefore, is also a story of evolving political and military goals. At its onset, efforts focused on pressuring the Assad government into ending the violent repression of protesters and implementing reform; as it continued, these transformed into calls for him to step down. From that point on, Assad was perceived by opposition backers as having no place within a future Syria, a point of contention with Assad’s allies and one of the main obstacles in reaching agreement on a post-conflict transition. As the conflict waged on, however, the emergence, expansion, and overall threat posed by ISIS began shifting attention away from Assad and toward combating the spread of this militant group and its ideology. This shift was further cemented by military intervention that targeted ISIS, not Assad, and a move in rhetoric away from “Assad must go” to either indirect or direct references to a role for Assad in future negotiations or a transitional government. And there is no country that embodies this evolution as clearly as Turkey.

Not surprisingly, resolving the situation in Aleppo is also central to efforts at stopping the war as a whole. In the study of conflict resolution and management, Galtung’s model of conflict explains that conflict can be viewed as a triangle, “with contradiction (C), attitude (A), and behavior (B) at its vertices. Here the contradiction refers to the underlying conflict situation, which includes the actual

or perceived ‘incompatibility of goals’ between the conflict parties generated...”[\[189\]](#) The Syrian Civil War at its core is about the mismatching goals of the Syrian government, the initial protesters, and the defectors of the Free Syrian Army. The conflict parties expanded as the chaotic environment of Syria and neighboring Iraq permitted the entry of more parties. Al-Qaeda affiliated groups and other homegrown militias found the opportunity perfect for uprising. The interests of the United States and Russia also have importance here, since their international influence can move pieces in the conflict chess game more quickly than the rebels on the ground.

The city of Aleppo became a focal point for the various parties due to its strategic location and its diverse population with differing views for the path of the country appears to make it a prime breeding ground for factionalism and support during battle. Indeed, Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham, Hezbollah, and the PYD--all paramilitary organizations--found support among their associated ethnic and religious identities in the city.

As the Syrian government continues to surround Aleppo and attempt to force the rebels inside the city into surrender, one might assume the moment is ripe for a peace agreement, but conflict resolution analysis suggests this may actually not be the case. A ripe moment can be understood as a moment in which the warring parties see the situation as one in which they can “find a way out” through peace agreements. However, the conditions for forcing a peace agreement can be tricky. I. William Zartman claims, “The concept of a ripe moment centers on the parties' perception of a mutually hurting stalemate (MHS) -- a situation in which neither side can win, yet continuing the conflict will be very harmful to each (although not necessarily in equal degree nor for the same reasons). Also contributing to “ripeness” is an impending, past, or recently avoided catastrophe. [2] This further encourages the parties to seek an alternative policy or “way out,” since the catastrophe provides a deadline or a lesson indicating that pain might be sharply increased if something is not done to settle the conflict soon.”[\[190\]](#)

For the Syrian government, there may indeed be the perception that neither side can win in the war of attrition--particularly inside Aleppo--but as Russia, Iran and Hezbollah continue their current support, they do not necessarily face an ultimatum. The alternative for the regime would be to lose Aleppo, a strategically important location, even as the Syrian government still controls about $\frac{1}{3}$ of Syria, including the capital Damascus.[\[191\]](#) As for the rebels--Free Syrian Army, Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham and their allies--they also are not necessarily facing an ultimatum that would

force them to lay down their weapons. Indeed, Turkish and Gulf supporters continue to provide assistance and safe zones, especially in northern Syria, for their operations.

Another complication for the rebels is their ultimately objective. The Free Syrian Army is, for the most part, a secular militia focused on toppling Assad and replacing him with a secular government. JFS and their jihadist allies, however, are bent on establishing a Sunni caliphate for the country, a vestige of their Al-Qaeda past and the same exact goal of ISIS. With this in mind, it is not unreasonable to assume at least one of these groups would be a spoiler in negotiations, with the aim of destroying a peace agreement and bringing the parties back into the conflict for their own benefit.

As recently as September 10, 2016, the U.S. and Russia signed an agreement to reduce and eventually end violence in Syria. While skepticism no doubt exists on all sides of the conflict, it is hoped this will be the step toward not only ending the siege and worsening humanitarian crisis in Aleppo but also possibly bringing about the end of the conflict. A reduction in violence is expected to take place in the city so that humanitarian aid can enter the most affected areas. While Russian and Syrian regime strikes are supposed to stop targeting certain rebels, the U.S. will work to encourage rebels to separate themselves from Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham. After this happens, the U.S. and Russia will work together to target areas where ISIS and JFS are present in hopes of eliminating their presence. Ideally, the U.S. and Russia will be able to differentiate between rebel groups and work to eliminate the ones of mutual concern in Aleppo. If this happens, there is hope that after ridding the conflict of the jihadist groups, the warring parties can work toward a long-lasting peace agreement to end the conflict itself.

The results of this agreement remain to be seen, but if past attempts at ceasefires and agreements are any indication, the hopes are slim. After all, Assad and the Russians have constantly branded as terrorists some of the very groups the U.S. has supported, and they may use the guise of the ceasefire agreement to continue targeting groups that aren't part of Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham or ISIS by claiming there are Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham fighters interspersed with them. The difference here may lie in the fact that there is agreement among both Russia and the U.S. that the most dangerous spoilers at this time are the violence extremist groups, JFS and ISIS. While the U.S. had considered working more closely with JFS in the past since they had even provided lethal aid to other rebel groups during the war, the Syrian government's concern over Turkish-backed jihadist groups taking over Syria

proved more pressing.

Regardless, the battle and sieges of Aleppo have proved to be the most coveted city in all of the Syrian Civil War by all sides of the conflict. The evidence of Aleppo's cultural and historic significance could already be seen around the city through its architecture, historic markers and diverse inhabitants. Unfortunately, the long battle in this once great city has left a remarkable amount of destruction. This includes the ancient market (souq), the Great Mosque of Aleppo and the larger citadel area [192] Aleppo's future will bear the scars of the civil war much in the same manner of Beirut following the Lebanese Civil War. The citizens of Syria can only hope that their reconstruction period will lead to development and change toward healing and reconciliation. The amount of violence that has taken place between the different ethnic and religious groups inside of Aleppo and Syria more generally will take many years and monumental efforts on the part of domestic leaders and international partners.

As the ceasefire agreement seems to intend, the battle of Aleppo may very well eventually bring the warring factions to a mutually painful stalemate, but it is unreasonable at this stage to assume that it will happen now. As long as Russia and the U.S. stay involved in a fairly limited way and Turkey continues to influence the Sunni parties, an agreement is unlikely to be successful. The Syrian government and the allies will likely continue to fight over Aleppo and if the city is lost to one group or the other, the conflict will persist in other parts of the country. The challenge, then, will be in how Turkey and the Gulf countries are able to engage with the rebels when they no longer have a direct route like they currently do via Aleppo.

If anything, the story of the Syrian conflict is less clear in 2016 than it was in 2011. Even with direct outside intervention boosting Assad on the battlefield in places like Aleppo, the Syrian regime only controls about a third of the country. The Kurds currently control most of Syria's border areas with Turkey, while moderate rebels and jihadist groups like ISIS control nearly as much ground as Assad.

Thus, the only safe guess is that political resolutions, Assad's role after the war, the refugee crisis, and the characteristics of the war will all see more evolution. It may successfully transform into a political transition period with the fight coalescing around a common enemy, or it could cause a disintegration of the country and a division into distinct states based on ethnic or religious identity. The

humanitarian and refugee crisis may gradually morph into a process of construction, reconciliation, and repatriation, but it may also continue to the point where intervention in neighboring host countries becomes necessary to ensure their own stability and survival. At the same time, the devastating impact of the conflict on the country's infrastructure, economy, and population means that even if a political solution is agreed upon and implemented, rebuilding Syria and reconciling the Syrian people will take years, if not decades.

Against this backdrop, there is the long-term implications of ISIS, a threat that will not be resolved by ending the conflict (although it certainly would help). While ISIS' creation cannot be placed solely on the shoulders of the Syrian government, the group's ability to expand at the rate and to the extent that it did was a direct result of both the Syrian conflict and circumstances that existed in Iraq at that time. ISIS thrives on war, instability, and discontent, which create vacuums for the militant group, which perceives itself as an actual state with all of its corresponding responsibilities, to enter. Furthermore, ISIS is a brand and ideology that will not disappear even if all the territory under its control is retaken; the group has shown its ability to radicalize from afar. In May 2016, ISIS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani released a recording admitting to losing territory and promising that any future "loss of Raqqa, Mosul and the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi would not mean that [they] have lost".[\[193\]](#) For ISIS, territorial loss will mean a return to prioritizing asymmetric warfare over governance of the "Caliphate", that is, implementation of Islamic law, missionary activities, and the like. This is not to say that asymmetric warfare is not already a main component of ISIS's strategy, since it is. Rather, territorial control requires a division of attention between governance and offensive attacks and, therefore, the loss of this territory means the need to focus only on the latter. In fact, this trend was noted in Iraq in 2016, when increased military offensives corresponded to a loss in ISIS territory and a rise in large-scale attacks away from battlefronts.[\[194\]](#) Thus, the fight against the militant group and its ideology will continue locally and globally, even if Syria and Iraq are stabilized in the future and ISIS is pushed out of the territory it controls.

The legacy of the Syrian conflict, alongside those in Libya, Yemen, and Iraq, may also be an evolution in the way of thinking about modern state borders and nationalism. When one reads formal documents issued by various international bodies, including the UN and Arab League, the concept of respecting Syria's sovereignty and territorial continuity persistently appears. However, as the conflict

has dragged on and divisions along sectarian and ethnic lines have deepened, the notion that the modern state of Syria (with the borders as currently constituted) must be preserved has frequently been challenged by out-of-the-box suggestions with long-standing implications: Will Alawis ever really be safe in a post-conflict Syria in which the majority Sunni population will dominate the state's various institutions? Why, when it comes to considering solutions to complicated conflicts, are modern state borders so untouchable?

As a result, it appears that the war in Syria will continue indefinitely, with two possible outcomes. It's possible the country may eventually be partitioned according to religious and ethnic affiliations, similar to the situation in India after it was given independence by Great Britain in 1947, but the more grim possibility is that the war spills over Syria's borders and becomes regional. Many different nations have competing interests and preferences regarding the outcome of Syria's civil war, and several of them are taking proactive steps to influence events, including Russia, Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia.

Either way, it appears that the war will continue for some time into the future and countless more lives will be lost before it is resolved. The house of cards that is Assad's presidency may fall, but if so, it will almost certainly be in a manner that is slow and painful for all involved.

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