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# Partition: The post-Syrian society after the fall of Assad

Major Research Paper

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## Abstract

The current hostilities in Syria have exposed historical weaknesses in the state's cohesion and sense of national identity, and exacerbated sectarian divisions among the people, which threaten the stability of the state. At this point in the conflict, the future of Syria and its leadership is uncertain, and there are a number of possible outcomes. The paper presented here proposes that should the regime in Syria fall, the state could go through de facto partitioning along religious and ethnic lines. To demonstrate how this can happen, five factors that are shaping the possible partitioning are analyzed. The first of which is Syria's history of fragmentation that was deepened by the divide-and-rule policies of the French mandate era, and then continued under the Assad dynasty. The second factor is the backlash effect of "minority might" that has arisen from deep discontent of the majority Sunnis in Syria against the rule of the minority Alawites. The third factor is an examination of how the central government is no longer ensuring the physical and human security<sup>1</sup> of its people as it battles the opposition. Fourth, a dominant feature of the struggle is that neither of the warring factions enjoy enough support or power to bring down the other groups. The fifth factor is the deepening sectarian loyalties that are forming as a result of the conditions on the ground. The paper takes these factors and maps out the post-Syrian society whereby partition would create a state for the Alawites, the Druze, the Sunni, and the Kurds. The analysis culminates with a discussion on how partitioning could impact the Arab Peace Initiative, and the fate of the Golan Heights.

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<sup>1</sup> This is in terms of UNDP's definition of human security, with the exception of the element of political security, which the regime has never ensured.

## Introduction

The Arab Spring came to Syria in the same manner as it did in Tunisia: On January 28, 2011 in the northeast Syrian city of al-Hasakah, a man named Hasan Ali Akleh soaked himself with gasoline and set himself alight. His self-immolation is said to have instigated the earliest Syrian protests (Iddon, 2012). Today, Syria is a war zone engulfed by a proxy war manifesting itself through various battles led by individual armed rebel groups and opposition forces. Syrian society is no longer what it once was, the regime can no longer ensure the security of its people, nor does it have the confidence of many of them. Ethnic and religious loyalties have deepened in the absence of national cohesion, and Syrian identity is all the while being transformed by the crisis. Three years into this war and the regime is still intact—there haven't been ample defections to unseat the regime, the president is still in the country, and seemingly controlling the situation, and the regime remains capable of confronting what it has deemed "terrorists," and of recapturing territory. According to many observers, this is a puzzling, yet impressive feat. However, the one thing the regime has not been able to maintain is a critical mass of domestic support, which could suggest that its days ruling Syria en masse may be numbered. The international community is equally divided: Russia, Iran, Hizballah and Iraq have propped up the regime and gradually increased their assistance. Saudi Arabia and Qatar have taken the lead in shoring up their proxies within the opposition, which has also enjoyed various degrees of support from Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, France, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) (International Crisis Group, 2013, p.1). In the present, there is no telling what will come out of this conflict or who, if anyone, will prevail.

The Syria that existed before January 28, 2011 is unlikely to return. Once this conflict is over—which according to numerous analysts and US intelligence, could be as much as a decade from now (Associated Free Press, 2014), there will be new alliances and allegiances, the socio-economic landscape will have morphed, and its population distribution will have changed. There is much debate on the future of Syria and what will be left of this state when the war is over. There is also hesitation and concern over what will become of Syria and the region should the regime fall or be forcibly removed. The social, economic, religious, ethnic, and political conditions within Syria that have evolved from this conflict may lead to a breakdown of the national landscape, whereby Syria could undergo a de facto partitioning of its districts and engender what Dimitar Mihaylov has deemed a “post-Syrian society”: Where Syria would be partitioned according to ethnic and religious loyalties. Bashar al-Assad’s future as leader is uncertain at this point, but under this scenario, one possibility is that he could remain as leader of an Alawite enclave. The post-Syrian society would have regional implications, particularly regarding the Middle East peace process. With Syria proper no longer existing, the fate of the Golan Heights would be unclear as there would no longer be a state laying claim to it, countering the Israeli occupation of it, or even to which to return it. The Arab Peace Initiative would need to be applied in such a way as to reflect the new dynamic that could result from the post-Syrian society.

To make its case, this paper will be organized as such: Chapter 1 will give a brief overview of the events that have evolved over the last three years to demonstrate how Syria is entering a new phase of existence. This will provide the contextual background for explaining the post-Syrian society. Chapter 2 will begin by defining the post-Syrian

society and provide the five key factors that are shaping the new landscape. This chapter will also explain how Syria will be geographically divided, and provide a mapping of the new dimensions. Finally, chapter 3 will examine the implications of all of this for the Golan Heights and the Arab Peace Initiative.

## **Chapter 1**

### **From protest to civil war—or, proxy war?**

On January 31, 2011, Syrian president Bashar al-Assad sat down for an interview with the Wall Street Journal. It was three days following the self-immolation of Hassan Ali Akleh, and four days before Syrian opposition groups went to social media outlets calling for a “day of rage”—a day that failed to motivate protesters, and signalled the relative weakness of the opposition, (The New York Times, 2011), the fear of the people, and the apparent popularity of their president (Wikstrom, 2011). Bashar’s comments during the interview were timely in that he suggested Syria was immune to the Arab Spring events occurring in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen, telling the journalists that these protests were ushering in a “new era” in the Middle East and that Arab rulers would need to do more to accommodate their people’s rising political and economic aspirations: “If you did not see the need for reform before what happened in Egypt and Tunisia, it’s too late to do any reform” (Solomon & Spindle, 2011). Bashar appeared to be confident in the level of reform he had implemented in Syria, but also admitted that he wished there had been more, and that the necessary institutions needed to be developed to make it happen. In a moment of denial, he said of the conditions in Syria: “Syria is stable. Why? Because you have to be very closely linked to the beliefs of the people. This is the core issue. When there is divergence between your policy and the

people's beliefs and interests, you will have this vacuum that creates disturbance. So people do not only live on interests; they also live on beliefs, especially in very ideological areas. Unless you understand the ideological aspect of the region, you cannot understand what is happening” (Solomon & Spindle, 2011).<sup>2</sup>

The struggle for Syria started rather slowly and gradually, but it quickly disintegrated. The entire movement began in a very disorganized, ad hoc fashion, and most demonstrations focussed on local issues, as opposed to national ones. By the middle of February, protests were sporadically occurring across the country, and were quickly broken up by the security apparatus. One such example was in Baniyas, a predominantly Sunni, conservative city where demonstrators were protesting against the government’s anti-Islamic decrees of recent years, particularly a ban in the summer of 2010 on female school teachers wearing the niqab (Lesch, 2012, p.66). It was the March 6 arrest and torture of schoolchildren in Daraa who had scrawled disparaging words against the regime that lit the fire under many people in Syria. This was followed by the siege of Daraa and of Douma in late April, through which the regime sought to “crush a wave of dissent in virtually every province that has shaken the once uncontested rule of President Bashar al-Assad” (Shadid, 2011). From there the protests increased, and so did the government’s response. Bashar’s first public remarks on the escalating situation only came on March 30, and this came the day after the president’s cabinet resigned in a symbolic show of opposition to him, and amid pro-government marches that sprung up in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Tartous, and other cities. In his address to the nation, the president re-iterated previously-made promises for

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<sup>2</sup> This was in reference to Syria’s position on Palestinian and Israeli issues, and on the president’s perceived triumphant resistance to the “American project.”

reform, but it was clear at this point many of his people were no longer buying his promises, and the demonstrations intensified, as did associated crackdowns, which became more violent, and more deaths ensued.

Although its difficult to pinpoint one event, or one date when the uprising turned into full-blown civil war, there was a prolonged sinking of Syria into a quagmire whereby sporadic demonstrations turned into a broad popular protest, which in turn became a violent, uncompromising struggle between the regime and its opponents (Zisser, 2013, p.174). The greatest downfall of the regime may have been its immediate use of force to repress opposition activity. Bashar reacted in the same fashion as his father did in Aleppo in 1980 and then most egregiously in Hama in 1982. The arrogance of the regime's tactic was that it failed to acknowledge three main realities: That the Syrian society was still healing from the ruptures of Hama, and so the regime's bloody measures only served to install division and distrust for it (Mihaylov, 2013, p.22); having seen the events of Tunisia and Egypt, Syrians were now more empowered and motivated to confront their rulers and break the shackles of repression; and they also neglected the power of social media to mobilize internal and external forces. Furthermore, the regime continued to deny, at least publicly, the real reasons for the uprising, which were socioeconomic and political grievances. Rather, Bashar and his entourage continued to blame "external conspiracies to destabilize Syria" that are working with internal agents, but most poignantly, they repeatedly justified their actions by telling Syrians, and the world, that they were combatting terrorists (Lesch, 2012, p. 78). These claims were made even in the earliest stages of the conflict, before the entry

of jihadists, foreign fighters or even before a unitary opposing faction entered the struggle. In light of this, the regime was brutally cracking down on its own citizens.

The regime didn't waste time in pronouncing that it was fighting a battle against terrorists, and there are a number of reasons that indicate the Bashar al-Assad regime truly believed that the state was under siege by terrorist elements, as opposed to being faced by a popular rebellion. The Assad dynasty has a history of confronting and reacting to threats to its existence—although emergency law had been instituted in Syria in 1963 by the Baathists as a response to the tumultuous instability of the post-independence years, by the mid-1970s, Hafiz al-Assad's regime was facing the threat of internal opposition from the Muslim Brothers, which caused the regime to implement repressive measures to stem dissent;<sup>3</sup> in 1977 Hafiz strained ties with Jordan as a result of his regime's insistence that Jordan was harbouring members of the Muslim Brotherhood—an accusation that King Hussein vehemently denied; between 1976 and 1982, the regime confronted escalating violent subversion by the Muslim Brothers, which seemed to have put the regime in a perpetual state of paranoia, and turned Syria into a stifling and oppressive society that continued under Bashar; and the first five years of Bashar's reign was marked by increasing international isolation led by the United States for its perceived support of terrorism, which escalated amid accusations that Syria was responsible for the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Bashar's command was consumed by the need to protect its position, much like his father's experienced in the preceding decades.

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<sup>3</sup> See chapter 2 for further discussion on this.

Against the background of demonstrations and violent repression, the president continued to make reforms in an attempt to make it seem like the regime was responding to popular demands. The first one was to reverse the ban on school teachers wearing the niqab. The ban was originally part of a campaign to mute sectarian differences in the country, but it angered many conservatives. Following this, on April 7, 2011, he granted the Kurdish population Syrian nationality; he issued decrees ending the emergency law and abolishing state security courts; and authorized a multi-party political system in Syria. In February 2012, he tabled a draft constitution that would restrict the president to serving a maximum of two seven-year terms and introduced a pluralistic political system (Al-Jazeera, 2012). It was put to a referendum, and came into force on February 27, 2012 (Syrian Arab News Agency, 2012). Despite these policy changes, the uprising continued to escalate, as demonstrators and opposition groups saw the regime's actions as mere lip service. On July 29, 2011, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), an armed opposition group composed of seven Syrian military officers, announced their formation and proclaimed that they intended to work with the people to bring down the regime (Landis, 2011). This announcement shifted the dynamics in the uprising because they were regime defectors, and their commander was believed to be an Alawite. Most importantly, this is when the uprising turned into an armed struggle against the regime. From there, the summer and autumn of 2011 saw a proliferation of armed groups joining the struggle against the system.

The lion's share of the rebellion erupted in majority Sunni Arab territories. This included the Muslim Brotherhood, which first confronted the regime in the 1980s, and is the largest single opposition group, with significant Sunni Arab support. As the crisis

deepened, many opposition and rebel groups entered the hostilities, with varying interests and objectives. The most prominent opposition group is the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (Syrian National Coalition, SNC), which is a coalition of opposition groups that was put together in response to increasing pressure from the United States and other countries for the formation of a Syrian opposition coalition that would include substantial representation from minority groups and groups operating inside the country. The stated aims of the National Coalition include: The removal of the Bashar al-Assad regime and "its symbols and pillars of support"; dismantling of the Syrian security services; rejecting dialogue and negotiation with the al-Assad government; and "holding accountable those responsible for killing Syrians, destroying Syria, and displacing Syrians (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, n.d.). The coalition has been recognized by numerous countries—including the US, the UK, France, Turkey, Arab Gulf states, and the Arab League as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people. Another important group is the Kurdish Supreme Committee, which is leading the Kurdish effort toward self-determination and is a partnership between the Kurdish National Council (KNC) and the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), and includes the participation of numerous smaller factions. These groups largely work on the political level and seek a negotiated solution, but the groups of greater concern are the jihadists, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which crossed into Syria from Iraq, and the al-Nusra Front—a domestic group, both of which started to play an increasingly dominant role as early as February 2012, and have a general objective of returning the region to the Caliphate system, and accordingly converting Syria into an Islamic state. They are not concerned

with the struggle of Syrians against their regime, but have the singular goal of instituting a theocracy. They have used many of the same violent and repressive methods as the regime, but they also forcibly impose mythical religious doctrines onto the populations in the areas where they dominate, such as sentencing a teenage girl to death by stoning for opening a Facebook account, and banning women from seeing male doctors (Daily Mail Reporter, 2014). The entrance of these groups into the conflict transformed the situation into a three-way war between the regime, the opposition, and the jihadists. In the beginning the opposition was composed of moderate rebels and more extremist ones, although they had ideological differences, they shared the common goal of unseating Bashar. By 2012 the SNC had become the dominant opposition group, but at the same time, jihadist forces started to break away and formed their own alliances, and this included al-Nusra, which was reported as being part of ISIS, but is actually working independently. Ahrar al-Sham, and Liwa al-Tawhid were two groups that formed the seven-group Islamic Front coalition, and all had the goal of establishing an Islamic state in Syria. These groups have also denounced the opposition, in particular pronouncing that they have completely split from the SNC (Spencer & Sherlock, 2013). The jihadists have overshadowed the armed efforts of the opposition, and as a result the violent struggle has increasingly grown into one between the jihadists and the regime. These groups are financed and equipped by their international supporters, and have incorporated foreign fighters in their struggle from over 60 countries (Lund, 2013) that come from the region, but also from places as far as Canada, the US, western Europe, the Caucasus, the Balkans, to name a few, and amount to anywhere between 5,000 and 10,000 fighters (Lund, 2013).

To complicate matters, it's been reported that the CIA and US special operations troops have been secretly training the FSA in Jordan and Turkey since November 2012, and supplying them with anti-tank missiles and other arms along with its regional allies Saudi Arabia and Qatar (Cloud & Abdulrahmin, 2013 ) since June 2013. Saudi Arabia and Qatar have reportedly been funnelling weapons purchased from the US to the extremists (Sanger, 2012). What's more, numerous sources in late 2013 claimed that Saudi Arabia was responsible for the formation of a group of Salafist jihadists under the Jaysh al-Islam<sup>4</sup> (Army of Islam) banner, and the Islamic Front,<sup>5</sup> who along with aiming to establish an Islamic state have the objective of countering al-Qaida in Syria. Yet the dilemma with these groups is that they openly call for the establishment of Sharia rule instead of secular democracy (Oweis, 2013 and Dark, 2013), which undermines the objectives of the moderate opposition, and the desires of many Syrians. This dual-sided support for the more moderate FSA and the Islamists demonstrates Saudi Arabia's keen interests in seeing the Assad regime replaced by a Sunni Arab one that would be friendly to it, and in seeing al-Qaida defeated. On the other hand, Iran has been active on the port of Tartous on the west coast of Syria since February 2012, and has been actively supporting the Assad regime with weapons, fighters, funding, and Hizballah also entered the battle in the summer of 2012. There are reports that Iran has also sent its external military force, al-Quds to combat alongside the Assad regime. The presence of fighters sponsored or representing Saudi Arabia and Iran has

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<sup>4</sup> See for example, Oweis, K.Y. (1 Octobre, 2013). INSIGHT-Saudi Arabia boosts Salafist rivals to al Qaeda in Syria. *Reuters*. <http://www.trust.org/item/20131001143727-5erqr/?source=shtw>

<sup>5</sup> See for example, Dark, E. (15 December, 2013). Rise of Islamic Front a disaster for Syria. *Al-Monitor*. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/12/syria-lebanon-islamic-front-political-transition-conflict.html>

escalated the situation into a proxy war. In backing Islamist forces, Saudi Arabia further complicated the political situation by undermining US policies toward Islamists.

Considering Syria's position in the region, there is also recognition among regional leaders and the international community that arming the Islamists could lead to the dangerous outcome of installing fundamentalists in power, which could have a devastating effect for regional stability and security. In their point of view, Bashar is the lesser evil, which explains why these same leaders have adopted him as a partner in seeing this tragedy end favourably for western powers and regional ones. The situation stopped being about the socioeconomic and political interests of ordinary Syrians very early in the conflict, and at this point, they are silenced amid the political and armed wrangling that continues to occur within Syria, and outside of it. The biggest failure of this struggle so far has been the lack of organization and cohesion among the opposition groups, which has weakened their ability to work toward a comprehensive solution. In addition, as will be described in the following chapter, territorial identity matters in this war, and this could lead to the end of Syria as a unitary state.

## **Chapter 2**

### **The post-Syrian society**

After three years of urban warfare, the uprising has mutated and produced unintended consequences. It has been hijacked by religious hardliners, criminal warlords, and regional rivalries. The early hopes and dreams of millions of Syrians of an open, inclusive and pluralistic post-Assad government are now buried in the country's killing fields (Gerges, 2013). This observation by Fawaz Gerges succinctly describes how the end of Syria is near. Syrians acted collectively in the first few months of 2011

in their attempt to transform the system that had been their bane for so long. But as Gerges asserts, unintended consequences have arisen from the nascent movement, and the Syrian landscape is changing in irreversible ways. The situation is fragile, and the regime's grip over its entire territory is waning in the face of jihadists capturing cities and consolidating their power. The regime has managed to reinforce its position, however, by gaining ground in areas that typically support it, such as in Aleppo, the mediterranean coast, the outskirts of Damascus (Lucas, 2014), Homs, and Hama. While the regime has maintained or re-gained a hold over the western and some central portions of the country, its control over the northern and eastern parts remains elusive—and this is part of an over-arching process of a new Syria being born. There are indications on the ground, and historical ones that are shaping the dissolution of the Syrian state. The regime has had to confront the opposition and the growing participation of jihadists and Islamists, and if it is unable to enforce its will on the entire Syrian territory, its power and civilian support could be severely weakened. That said, there are several factors that are shaping a post-Syrian society—one where Syria would be partitioned based on sectarian and ethnic identities, and one where Bashar al-Assad could find himself as a weakened leader of an Alawite enclave. The new society would break into separate statelets—one for the Druze, the Sunni Arabs, the Alawites, and one for the Kurds—albeit in a de facto manner, and would remain so until conditions arise that would again unite all Syrians. There are several factors that are contributing to this, and five of the most pertinent ones will be discussed here.

## **Factors shaping the post-Syrian society**

### *1. A history of fragmentation*

The first factor is Syria's historical fragmentation. Although Syrians live under one flag today, for centuries under Ottoman rule, the various regions of Syria were actually individually administered provinces, where separate legal courts pertained to "personal law" under which religious communities were allowed to rule themselves under their own system. Although the different communities lived in relative harmony, they did so under their own individual administration. When France gained the mandate over Syria and Lebanon in 1920, it continued this tradition by making Lebanon its own state, and established statehood for Aleppo and Damascus (including Homs and Hama), which had a Sunni majority, an Alawite territory in Latakia, and Jabal al-Druze nearest to the border with Jordan, where the Druze formed a majority (Yapp, 1996, p. 88). France had its own strategic, ideological, and economic interests in the region, and dividing Syria in such a manner constituted the first step in its divide-and-rule strategy, which was designed to fortify its domination in the region and prohibit the Sunni Arabs from overpowering it. The system protected the minority communities from Sunni control, a prospect they believed would put them in "mortal danger" (Pipes, 1989, p. 439). As a result of the common sentiment shared between France and the minorities against the Sunni Arab nationalists, the French cultivated close relations with these communities, and granted greater autonomy to the Alawites and to the Druze.

The French balanced ethnic representation by placing separate ethnicities at the head of different institutional branches of government, allowing one ethnic or religious group to be strongly represented in an institution. As a consequence, the Sunni Arabs

were dominant in politics, the officer corps, the gendarmerie, and the police, but underrepresented in the military's rank and file. By contrast, the Alawites were overrepresented within the army, but poorly represented in politics, the officer corps, the gendarmerie, and the police (Fidlis, 2012. p.1). The French administration also consciously neglected to train an efficient and dedicated administrative elite and quietly aggravated relations between the Sunni Arab majority and the minorities, through its seeming preferential treatment of the minorities, in particular the Alawites.

Alawites constituted 12 percent of the Syrian population, and were historically among the most poorest peasants in Syria, working for Sunni and Christian landlords. For decades Alawites had a pro-French attitude, favoured partition, and were so heavily opposed to the Sunni rule of Prince Faysal, that they relied on the French, particularly during the mandate years to secure their independence from the Sunni Arabs. As France employed its divide-and-rule policy in the military and established the *Troupes Spéciales du Levant*—a local military force that later became the Syrian and Lebanese armed forces, they purposely recruited minorities. The Alawites enrolled in the military in droves, seeing this as an opportunity for social mobility. For the first time, Alawite youth benefited from a small, but secure income, and became disciplined, trained, and exposed to new ideas (Fidlis, 2012, p.3); the *Troupes* became central to their future ascent (Seale, 1989, p.18). The army developed a strong rural and minority representation, with special detachments of Alawites, Druze, Kurds, and Circassians. Sunni representation in the army was much lower than their numbers in the population (Fidlis, 2012, p.2). On the other hand, the Alawites constituted roughly half the infantry battalions making up the *Troupes*, and served in various capacities, including police

and intelligence. By the end of the mandate, several infantry battalions were composed almost entirely of Alawites. Not one battalion was composed entirely of Sunni Arabs. The wealthy Sunni Arab landowning and commercial families, who led the Arab nationalist movement during the mandate, indirectly reinforced the trend towards strong representation of minorities in the *Troupes* by refusing to send their sons for military training, even as officers, in a force which they viewed as serving France's imperial interests. As Patrick Seale describes, the wealthy Sunni Arabs despised the army as a profession, and regarded the Military Academy “as a place for the lazy, the rebellious, the academically backward, or the socially undistinguished” (1965, p.37), an attitude which contributed to the ascent of the Alawites, who would go on to capture power in the state, ruling it for more than fifty years, and marginalizing the Sunni Arabs.

Through this administrative structure, France encouraged separatism and the particularism of religious and ethnic minorities. One consequence of this system was the deepening of a focus on local ambitions and concerns, instead of attention to national interests. The legacy of division and regionalism among Syrians left by the French obstructed political integration after independence. Political life in Syria was characterized by rivalries at all levels: within the political elite itself, in towns, between leaders of rival towns, and between the nationalist elites and rural-based leaders. France's strategy eroded the ties among Syria's religious and ethnic groups, and forged factions within each bloc, and against the others. After independence, local loyalties strongly influenced the politics and society of the nascent state, more so than it did prior to France's influence. The lack of any shared loyalty meant that regional political conflicts were projected on the national arena and dominated national politics

(Van Dusen, 1972, p.125). The quarter century of France's mandate was characterized by numerous divisions and re-divisions of Syria. Its divide-and-rule strategy obstructed the development of a unified administrative elite.

In the period following Syria's independence in 1946, the urban Sunni Arab elite inherited the Syrian government after leading the resistance against the French. The government's major goal was to reduce, and gradually abolish regional and communal representation in parliament in order to establish a centralized rule in Damascus. Although Alawites continued to resist submission to the central government, and manifested their acts of resistance through a number of failed anti-government revolts, which further tarnished their reputation among Sunnis. Nevertheless, the Sunni-led regime fully re-integrated Latakia<sup>6</sup> into Syria and abolished the Alawite province, its military units, seats in parliament, and courts applying Alawite laws of personal status (Pipes, 1989, p. 440). This was a significant event for Alawites, because through this, they became resigned to Syrian citizenship and gave up the dream of a separate state, yet this only marked the beginning of their political progression in Syrian society.

The post-independence period in Syria was turbulent and marked by struggles regarding its identity, direction, and control (Zisser, 2013, p.169). There were many competing narratives, centring on pan-Arabism, pan-Islamism, and even pan-Syrianism. The period was marked by declining Sunni power and escalating Alawite command, which led to persistent and violent instability, as opposing Sunni and Alawite factions battled for supremacy, which continued until the 1970 coups d'état that saw Hafiz al-Assad and the Baathists take over the government. The country

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<sup>6</sup> Under French rule, Latakia was always autonomous, except during the years proceeding the Franco-Syrian Treaty of 1936, which integrated Latakia into a unitary Syrian state and given special status until 1939. It was placed under Syrian control again in 1942, and finally fully integrated into Syria in 1946.

experienced internal and external weaknesses, including a weak state institution, which made it difficult for its leaders to establish and maintain a central government capable of enforcing its authority over Syria's citizens; a deep divide in Syrian society along communal, religious, regional, socio-economic, and even ideological grounds, that had persisted for decades; and a growing gap between the urban centres and the rural and peripheral regions, which culminated in what many have called the "struggle for Syria" (Zisser, 2013, p.169). The struggle manifested itself through ten coups d'état and six constitutions before culminating in the Alawite consolidation of power in 1970.

The era of Hafiz al-Assad that started in 1970 brought a sense of stability to Syria and turned it into a regional power, but at the cost of political liberties and economic development. When Hafiz came to power, Syrian society was in tatters and he recognized the need for reconciliation and unity, yet his rule was marked by "political rigidity, cultural uniformity, and intellectual obedience" and in the end the state was stifling, inefficient, and oppressive (Cleveland & Bunton, 2009, p.404). His policies failed to strengthen national cohesion and identity, instead creating a society that was held together through systemic oppression and corruption, which continued into the first decade of Bashar's presidency. Syria under Hafiz developed a fragile stability, as evidenced by his policies and his regime's actions against threats to his legitimacy, such as in Aleppo in 1980 and Hama in 1982, in response to which he instituted repression and economic and religious inducements.

A hallmark of his rule was how he co-opted the support of different social and religious groups, in particular Sunnis of the urban middle class, and courted the disaffected social classes through economic and political liberalization, much like the

French before him, and as Patrick Seale writes, Hafiz promoted the “unfavoured classes” (1989, p.169). He continued the Baath programme of ruralization and integrated rural peasants into his power hierarchy, at which point the minorities, in particular the Alawites of the countryside, had already formed a majority in the armed forces (Batatu,1999). Through these policies, he built an “alliance of the minorities” while alienating a large segment of the Sunni population (Lund, 2012, p.14). Most importantly however, is that the Hafiz al-Assad regime nurtured a unity and homogenous identity that was based on repression and oppression, but there wasn’t any comprehensive national identification. The government’s two-week bombardment of Hama in 1982 altered Syria and its government-civilian relations. Following the conclusion of the uprising, the regime became permanently repressive: arbitrary rule became the norm, as did the repressive tactics used during the uprising. The regime unleashed the Special Forces on whole communities, used tank fire against residential neighbourhoods, slaughtered prisoners, armed civilian supporters, and shot suspects. Intelligence agencies loomed larger than ever, as they infiltrated many Syrian institutions, including the diplomatic service (Seale, 1989, p.338). The brutal crackdown changed the political dynamics in the country. These events raised the stakes for regime supporters, as a peaceful transition away from minority dictatorship appeared impossible, and instead of uniting society through conciliatory means, the regime used coercive force and intimidation. Hafiz didn’t achieve his objective of uniting Syrians, but left this society fragmented and in fear of its government. The Sunni struggle for domination persisted, as did the grievances of the minority groups. This atmosphere and state of government-civilian relations proliferated under the rule of Bashar al-

Assad, as he began his rule by talking of reform, but never delivering on those messages.

## *2. The backlash effect of “minority might”*

Since the ascent of the Alawites to power in 1963, and their consolidation of it under Hafiz al-Assad in 1970, the Sunni population in Syria has had to endure what Mihaylov describes as “a sense of political injustice.” They have viewed the Alawites as usurpers of power (Mihaylov, 2013, p.20), and as primitive and backwards. Taking this view, it would explain why the conflict first gained momentum in a Sunni stronghold—in Daraa, why it became inflamed throughout areas with Sunni majorities, and why most of the jihadist groups operating in Syria are Sunni. The backlash that is occurring today is rooted in the Baath programme of gentrifying the social and political status of Alawites while marginalizing Sunnis. In the 1960s the Alawites steadily acquired military and political power. Sunni in-fighting led to purges from the military, and with the removal of each Sunni officer, an Alawite took his place. After the coup d’état of 1963, roughly 700 high-ranking Sunni officers were discharged, half of those posts were taken up by Alawites, including top-tier positions (Pipes, 1989, p.442). As the Baath intensified ruralization of the armed forces, the Alawites ascended through the higher echelons of the army, concurrently with the decline of the urban Sunni military element (Batatu, 1999, p.157). It’s important to note that today, the majority of the military is Sunni, but the military leadership is largely composed of Alawites: 70 percent of career soldiers are Alawites, while the majority of the 300,000 conscripts are Sunni—many rural Sunnis have been compelled to serve longer than their compulsory two-to-three-

year service because of the decline in agriculture (Bhalla, 2011). Some sources claim that 60 percent of the overall military structure is composed of Sunnis (Cheterian, 2013).

Hafiz ensured his community's minority domination through the cohesiveness of the Alawite community, and by keeping the Sunnis divided among themselves by splintering them geographically and economically (Ajami, 2012, p.91), which he did by exploiting existing structural divisions among them. Before his coming to power, Sunnis were divided along political, regional, and class lines, and while the Alawites, Druze and Ismailis were gradually taking politically sensitive positions in the military, the Sunnis were sent to regions far from Damascus, and often became figureheads with little power (Pipes, 1989, 442). Hafiz courted the old elite Sunnis of Damascus, which contained many of Syria's influential technocrats, intellectuals, and merchants. He propelled some of these people into high-profile (not powerful) positions in his government. Assad's patronage gave the Sunni elite a vested interest in accommodating itself to the new order, which helped legitimize and stabilize his regime. For example, he appointed Najah al-Attar, who is the sister of exiled Muslim Brotherhood opposition leader Issam al-Attar, as Minister of Culture in 1980.<sup>7</sup> The Attar family is respected by Damascus Sunnis, and so her appointment served to discourage the Muslim fundamentalist opposition from operating in Damascus (Collelo, 1987). Moreover, Sunni clerics were given leeway and deference, Hafiz raised the rank of some two thousand religious functionaries, built mosques, and appointed a religious scholar as minister of religious endowments, but limited their political role (Ajami, 2012,

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<sup>7</sup> She has held the position of Vice-President since 2006.

p.38 and Cleveland & Bunton, 2009, p. 402). The Sunni business class benefitted immensely from the economic liberalization programme of the 1970s, such that when the upheaval of the Muslim Brothers against the regime climaxed in Hama in 1982, they placed their weight with the regime. The stability the regime offered seemed like a better bet than what a rebellion carried (Ajami, 2012, p.91). As Hafiz sought to cultivate the support of the Sunni elites in Damascus and Aleppo, the Sunnis of less privilege from the rural areas were largely marginalized—while their Alawite counterparts were given bureaucratic and military opportunities in Damascus, the rural Sunnis were left behind. The policies of the Hafiz regime also split Sunnis ideologically, as many Sunnis didn't accept Baathist secularist ideals, and resistance in this regard manifested itself through Islamist movements starting in the late 1970s, which were composed mainly of urban Sunni youth; the largest and most militant of these groups was the Muslim Brotherhood (Collelo, 1987). The regime showed little tolerance for religiously conservative Sunnis who refused to remain quiescent. The state took over the administration of religious funding, cracked down on groups deemed as extremist, and empowered itself to dismiss the leaders of Friday prayers at will, fuelling resentment among the Sunni Islamist class (Bhalla, 2011).

Bashar attempted to continue the secularization plan of Baathist ideology, but he may have underestimated the appetite for associated reforms by the conservative Sunni class. The president took bold steps when he banned female school teachers from wearing the niqab, and when the government instituted coeducation. The tipping point, however was when a student was raped by a classmate in the city of Baniyas in the northwestern governorate of Tartous. The city was seething, and this added to the

Sunni community's frustrations with a regime that it saw as "bent on alienating the believers from their culture and religion" (Ajami, 2012, p.196). A defining step taken by the Bashar regime was an attempt to gradually transition civil society to one based on merit and equal opportunity, thus there was a move to improve the education system and the level of expertise within various government ministries by hiring more people on merit rather than on the basis of family connections. However, these steps were meaningless in the face of growing "cronyocracy" under his leadership. As David Lesch describes, under Bashar, it wasn't a more liberal capitalist system that was developing, but a system where crony capitalists benefitted from selective privatization that appeared to be funnelled toward those who were already economically and politically in a position to take advantage of it. Moreover, corruption had increased to such a degree under his rule that it became an aggravating factor for the public. It had become a way of life, and was applicable to everything, from fixing a plumbing problem, to getting a business licence, even to obtaining a favourable judgment in court—and this was exploited by the rich and powerful: if you were well-connected, you got better service (2012, p.63). Furthermore, one of the most serious problems facing the Syrian economy and social fabric was the growing inequality in the distribution of wealth under Bashar. His steps toward privatization and market-oriented reform added to unemployment, yet enriched the few who were tied to the regime. With the divide-and-rule of Hafiz and son, Alawites, other minorities, and some Sunnis were ensured to continue supporting the regime, even under such dire circumstances, because they were the patrons of the benefits for doing so. But for the class of

disaffected Sunnis, who were powerless, dejected, and alienated, it became a necessity to reclaim their position in Syrian society for the sake of their own survival.

As mentioned earlier, the protests originally accelerated in Sunni areas, an example of which is Homs, a city nicknamed the “capital of the Syrian uprising” and was the centre of much of the initial protests and subjected to a bloody siege by the government in April 2011. It’s no coincidence that this city was also once a bastion of Sunni wealth, which diminished due to Baath policies after the 1970s, whereby Sunnis in Homs were politically and economically weakened while Alawites were empowered. According to one Syrian expatriate originally from Homs, the anti-regime activities in the city were motivated by Sunni resentment over unequal access to economic opportunity and state patronage, unlike the Muslim Brothers’ upheavals of the 1970s and 80s, which were based on sectarianism. The brutal crackdown on demonstrators intensified resentment in the Sunni community and put it at odds with the Alawite population (Syria Comment, 2011).

Given all of this, the regime hardly had the support of many Sunnis, and they are unlikely to accept being ruled by the same authority once the situation is resolved. Sunnis remain divided however, with some supporting jihadist groups, such as ISIS, because they provide civilians with some semblance of normalcy and security, but this will be discussed further in the following sections. This is not to say that all Sunnis reject the regime and are fighting against it. The regime enjoys the support of the business class Sunnis and those who have benefitted politically and economically from it—particularly those who see their wealth and power threatened by opposition forces. Included among its supporters are the Sunni military officers, who continue to fight

alongside the regime, and analysts have given numerous reasons for this, including that they fear retribution against them or their families if they don't fight with the state. Another justification is that they do so out of ignorance of the situation on the ground due to information blackouts imposed on officers loyal to the regime (Cheterian, 2013) —a theory that many experts argue is weak, considering the widespread access to media available through various means. There are also those Sunnis who are trapped in Islamist-held areas that aren't swayed by the extremist ideologies that are sweeping through their cities, towns and villages, and they see the regime as a better option than the extremist rebels; they are joined by Sunnis not connected to the regime in other areas who carry the same belief.

What's more, the battleground in Aleppo province demonstrates the complicated relationship between the regime and Sunnis, and Sunnis among themselves. Aleppo has provided a unique front in that the conflict here has been split along blurred lines, whereas the conflict is split along sectarian lines in other provinces. The rebel forces, including islamists, are mainly composed of poorer Sunnis from the countryside—the majority of rural Aleppans tended to identify with the broader uprising through shared feelings of religious or economic persecution by the regime (Dark, 2014b). On the other hand, the cosmopolitan urban fabric of Aleppo city—Syria's commercial capital—which was home to a large minority of Christians, Armenians, Kurds, and a very prosperous Sunni elite initially rendered the city immune to the uprising (Dark, 2014b), and it's easy to see why the city's elite would align with the regime. What complicates the battleground in Aleppo even more is the fact that the powerful pro-regime militias that have made significant gains are primarily composed

of less privileged Sunni classes. Some Sunni towns and villages in the Aleppo countryside, such as Jibreen are staunchly pro-regime, but the majority of Aleppo's rural areas are vehemently allied with the opposition. One factor that may explain the abundant Sunni support for the regime in Aleppo could be the 2013 decree allowing conscripts from Aleppo to serve their mandatory military service inside the city itself, and optionally with a loyalist militia of their choice. Previously, conscripts had to serve in regiments well away from their hometowns. This regime strategy seems to have paid off well, because many are now choosing to serve their tour of duty in Aleppo instead of deserting—now, they could even go home and sleep in their own beds at night (Dark, 2014b). Serving in Aleppo was seen as easier than serving in regiments away from home, it paid a higher salary, and it drew many conscripts. This greatly swelled the ranks of loyalist militias such as the Baath Brigades, which was initially a small militant group made up of longtime Baath Party loyalists and members, but became the second most powerful regime unit in Aleppo after the elite Republican Guard. They're entrusted with high profile and sensitive military tasks, and have made significant gains for the regime by capturing strategic areas of the city.

It isn't only Syrian Sunnis that are fighting with the regime, but Palestinian Sunnis from the al-Nayrab and Handarat refugee camp in Aleppo city have established their own militia—the al-Quds Brigade, and they fight alongside other local pro-regime militias, such as the National Defence Force, which is also mostly Sunni and drawn from loyalist villages and clans (Akhbar Al-An, 2014). Al-Nayrab and Handarat are two of the poorest Palestinian refugee camps in Syria, and as a result of being given the same rights and duties as Syrians, Palestinians are conscripted into the military, which

means that the decree of 2013 applies to them, and could explain the Palestinian participation on the side of the regime. However, on the political level dealings between the Palestinians and the Assads has been defined by the regime's attempt to control and contain Palestinians by limiting the allowable activities of resistance forces, and this has led to relations that have often been strained. This is contrasted by the supportive stance taken by the Baath party before 1970, when resistance forces were allowed to operate and build military bases and training camps within Syria. That said, Palestinians living in camps and benefitting from the 2013 decree may be fighting with the regime as a way to secure their own livelihoods, but outside of the situation in Aleppo, Palestinians have taken mixed positions, just like Syrians.

This conflict has highlighted the complicated relationship between the regime and Sunnis, and the divisions among Sunnis. The escalation of violence and the proliferation of different groups participating in the push against the regime has further escalated fissures among these co-sectarians. Disaffected Sunnis were given the opportunity to attempt to reclaim their position in society for the sake of their own survival, and in choosing to fight against the regime, they are also fighting against other Sunnis who support the government. The bourgeoisie Sunnis have continued to back the regime politically and militarily. These lines are especially apparent in Aleppo, but what this indicates is that Aleppo province may be one of the toughest battlegrounds to overcome for the regime, the opposition, and the jihadists. Thus, the backlash effect of "minority might" is not only playing out against the regime, but it is posing serious implications for relations among Sunnis, and could cause deeper rifts between Sunnis of different classes and clans, which may change the social fabric of Syria, but more so

in Aleppo. The deepening ruptures of this multifaceted backlash are shaping the post-Syrian society.

### *3. No central security*

The regime made the fatal mistake in the early months of the uprising of violently attempting to silence dissent. In doing so, it instilled greater animosity and fear in its people against it. The regime, thinking it would bolster the state's security by crushing opposition, instead contributed to the initial deterioration, and by choosing to attack, it essentially said to protesters that they had a choice between "us or chaos." It has maintained this strategy for the duration of the conflict: First by offering concessions—as seen through its rhetoric on reforms, then turning to violent repression—such as in Daraa and Jisr al-Sughour, and security crackdowns—such as by cutting off water supplies and power lines and arresting hundreds of people in the most rebellious areas, and the current situation: The military solution. In doing so it continues to contribute to the collapse of the state. As the situation turned increasingly violent and evolved into a proxy war, the regime could no longer ensure the safety and security of its own people: Neither personal security, food security, environment security, community security, nor health security. Syrians have had to turn to alternative sources, such as to jihadists like ISIS and al-Nusra for their bread, jobs, or health services, to NGOs, and to neighbouring countries. Many Syrians even cross into bordering states seeking medical care, such as to Lebanon, and some 700 (Ashkenazi, 2014) of them have already been recorded as patients in Israeli hospitals in the last year alone—civilians and fighters from both sides alike (Eldar, 2013). Although few in numbers, this is a significant

development considering Israel is Syria's chief regional enemy, and some of the patients being treated could be Palestinian refugees from Syria. Aside from offering medical aid to Syrians in border towns, the Israeli Defence Forces have set up field hospital in the Golan Heights specifically to treat Syrians. What's more, Israeli hospitals and doctors are caring for Syrian patients directly, outside of partnerships with non-governmental organizations.

There are numerous examples of how the government has been failing to provide human security for its people, a few are discussed:

- I. The devastation at the Yarmouk refugee camp outside of Damascus that was under siege for 8 months. The camp became the focus of heavy fighting in December 2012 when rebel forces moved in to consolidate their positions to the east and south of Damascus. Syrian government forces responded with aerial bombardment, sending thousands fleeing in search of shelter in other parts of Syria and Lebanon. Over the past six months, it has become synonymous with infant malnutrition, women dying in childbirth for lack of medical care and besieged communities reduced to eating animal feed, grass (Gunness, 2014), and spices boiled in water. Forces loyal to the regime succeeded in surrounding the camp and controlling access to it in February 2013. Military-held checkpoints opened to allow aid to enter and residents to escape, but in the following July government forces began blocking access points (Al Jazeera, 2014). Thus, roughly 18,000 people are trapped inside without food or access to medical care, and people are dying.

The situation in Yarmouk is perhaps the most illustrative example of how the regime is failing its people. The standoff between regime forces and jihadist elements,

in particular al-Nusra and ISIS has prevented aid from flowing through the area, and blocked anyone from moving in or out of the camp. A ceasefire was put in place on February 10 in order to allow UNWRA to distribute desperately needed food packages and other aid to residents, but al-Nusra broke the agreement on March 2nd when it stormed through the camp and took over checkpoints. Al-Nusra has claimed the regime violated the terms of the agreement by setting up “booby trapped” checkpoints and allowing groups of loyalist paramilitary forces to enter (Sherlock, 2014). Thus, the United Nations’ humanitarian efforts in the area are again being blocked, and the people must wait until the regime and the jihadists negotiate a new settlement, which could take months, if precedence provides an example.

II. Rebel groups, the main ones being ISIS and the homegrown al-Nusra, have established a presence in the northern parts of the country: namely Raqqa and Aleppo provinces.<sup>8</sup> They are filling the void left by the Syrian government and the declining influence of moderate opposition forces (Dark, 2014a). They operate much in the same way as Hizballah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza strip: by providing a range of humanitarian and social services, they are building grassroots support from Syrians who have otherwise been neglected. For example, in Aleppo after the four grain stores were forced to shutdown, the FSA took control of them and started to distribute flour to bakeries, which eased the bread shortage. However, the FSA distributed the bread in a discriminating fashion, which frustrated Syrians who weren’t on their side, and led many residents to protest in favour of the regime

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<sup>8</sup> See appendix 1 for a map depicting the distribution of territorial control

(McEvers, 2013). Al-Nusra pushed out the FSA from the grain and bread business, helped grain producers to operate again, and established a system to distribute bread to all the rebel-held areas, thereby ensuring that everyone who wants bread, gets it—and they're selling it at discounted prices: whereas other bakeries sell a bag of bread for 125 Syrian pounds, al-Nusra sells two bags for 50 Syrian pounds (Sherlock, 2013). In doing so they resolved the bread shortage dilemma, started selling bread to those who could afford it and giving it away to those who couldn't, and are subsidizing farmers to secure the harvest. They've also set up Sharia courts, and instituted a program to clean up the streets of Aleppo (Sherlock, 2013).

III. There were two defining government military actions that prompted Syrians to flee to neighbouring countries. The first incident occurred On May 14, 2011, when security forces launched a large-scale operation in Talkalakh, a town of around 80,000 near the Lebanese border on the western edge of Homs governorate. Locally elected officials in Lebanese border towns claimed that 3,500 Talkalakh residents had sought shelter in Lebanon by May 20 (Human Rights Watch, 2011). According to Human Rights Watch, a large peaceful protest took place in Talkalakh the day before tanks and armoured personnel vehicles surrounded the town. Residents interviewed by Human Rights Watch reported heavy shelling and gunfire; water and electricity were cut on that day as well. In the following days, on May 17 and 18 security forces carried out house-to-house searches, detaining a large number of men and boys, regardless of age (Human Rights Watch, 2011). Residents started to organize transport trucks to Lebanese border towns on the first day of the

bombardment, but this exodus was small compared to the mass evacuation that occurred just months later in Jisr al-Sughour.

The government military assault on Jisr al-Sughour, a town bordering on Turkey that lies between Latakia and Aleppo in the Idlib governorate, is said to have instigated the Syrian refugee crisis. In June 2011 the government undertook a massive military operation involving 200 vehicles and 15,000 troops in the small town nestled in a region that has a history of hostility toward the regime. Although there is disagreement regarding the actual events, it was reported that a mass defection of troops to rebel groups had taken place (Chulov, 2011 and Godfrey & Chulov, 2011) after refusing to attack anti-government protestors, and as a result 120 soldiers were killed for defecting. This operation led to the first major population displacement of the war as 10,000 Syrians fled for Turkey, and effectively emptied the town and the villages surrounding it of inhabitants (UN Radio, 2011). For those who didn't flee, they faced shortages of food and medicine, as shops shuttered and workers no longer tended to their fields of crops. This is another example of how the regime instituted its "us or chaos" strategy, which backfired, and added to the vulnerability of the population, causing people to seek protection and security outside Syrian borders. Since then, as the violence escalated, 2.5 million Syrians have fled to neighbouring Iraq, Turkey, Lebanon, Egypt, and Jordan (Syria Regional Refugee Response, 2014).

IV. The worsening humanitarian situation in Syria and outside of it demonstrates how the Bashar al-Assad's government hasn't been ensuring the security of its people, both deliberately and consequentially. It's been reported that so far, the conflict has

killed over 100,00 people—however, this is a rough estimate since the United Nations stopped updating the toll of casualties in January 2014. As a result it can't confirm any figure over 100,000<sup>9</sup> (Stampler, 2014). Various organizations provide their own figures, such as the anti-regime Syrian Observatory of Human Rights, which estimates the death toll to be 146,000—including approximately 74,000 civilians (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 2014). The conflict has created 9.3 million vulnerable people within Syria, who need basic services like health care, water, and sanitation, this figure includes 6.5 million people who are internally displaced, and 4 million who need food (UNOCHA, n.d). What's more, in September 2013 the United Nations also reported that 1.2 million homes in Syria have been destroyed, which represents one-third of its housing stock. This is in addition to the 3000 destroyed or damaged schools, and the 1000 of them that are being used as makeshift shelters. The insecurity has led to 2 million grade school students to drop out of school (Miles, 2013). The violence has also damaged water, electricity, telephone and sewage infrastructure, causing many to flee to areas with better living conditions. A report by Human Rights Watch documents seven cases of large-scale demolitions of entire neighbourhoods by the regime in Hama and Damascus that are rebel strongholds. The organization contends the destructions had no military purpose for the regime, and some of the demolitions occurred after fighting ended between the regime and opposition forces. When asked about the demolition of homes, government officials either stated that they were part of urban planning efforts, or the homes were illegally constructed (Human Rights Watch,

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<sup>9</sup> A figure from July 2013

2014). The regime has also blamed the rebels for the destruction of industrial and public infrastructure that has caused power cuts and fuel shortages.

The internal humanitarian situation is only part of how the state is no longer providing for the security of its people. Syrians have migrated to neighbouring countries where many of them are living in NGO and state-sponsored refugee camps. They crossed borders to flee the violence and their dire living conditions, to which the regime has contributed immensely, but are facing hardships nonetheless. In Lebanon, for example, to where about a million refugees have fled (Syria Regional Refugee Response, 2014), they are facing malnutrition, disease, hypothermia, and exploitation such as sex trafficking and child labour. In Jordan, where 585,000 Syrians have relocated (Syria Regional Refugee Response, 2014), they are living through much of the same dreadful conditions. According to the United Nations, 450,000 of them are living outside of the camps (UNHCR, 2014), but live in inadequate dwellings, don't have access to education due in part to an over-stretched public education system, only a third are employed, and many children must go to work to help support their families instead of going to school. These refugees have placed undue pressure on the states hosting them, and are enduring living conditions that are not much better than the circumstances under which they lived in Syria. The Assad regime's inability on one hand, and its unwillingness on the other, to put an end to hostilities has created a situation where it has left the burden of ensuring the security of its own people on the NGOs, regional governments, and the broader international community—these actors are filling the void left by the Syrian state.

By migrating, the refugees have further fractured Syrian society. In looking outside of their borders for protection and security, they have split the Syrian people between those who remained in Syria enduring the hardships that come with living through war, and those who left in a desperate attempt to save themselves and their families. Once the war is over, it may be difficult for them to return to Syria and to the communities in which they once lived—assuming that many of them will choose to return. Those who will return may experience challenges re-integrating into a society that has been transformed by the circumstances endured during the war, and the economic, social, and political realities that will have arisen at the end of the war.

The humanitarian situation is a result, in part, of the government's simultaneous unwillingness and inability to ensure the essential survival needs of its people, such as water, food, and electricity. It has proven this through its bombardment of heavily populated areas, such as in Hama, Jisr al-Sughour, Talkalakh, and as seen through its use of barrel bombs that indiscriminately cause damage and fatalities, which the state has used in its assaults on Homs in 2012, and in Damascus and Aleppo more recently (Dark, 2014c), among others. Although the government has been re-capturing some territory previously lost to the jihadists, such as parts of Aleppo, and towns bordering Lebanon, like the rebel stronghold of Yabroud, it still does not provide the necessary security for its citizens, largely because it regularly undertakes ground and air operations that are deadly, and most victims are civilians. As the war rages on, more Syrians will need to seek alternative means to secure their daily living needs, and many of them, as will be explained in the next section, see the regime as the greatest threat to Syria.

#### *4. No critical mass*

Of all the groups involved in the conflict—the regime, the opposition, and the jihadists, there isn't one group that has so far gained a critical mass that can bring about the collapse of the other. That there are three forces at play makes it increasingly difficult, but not one group has majority support from civilians or the international community, thereby depriving the situation of any tipping point, or one actor to which interest groups could reliably hedge their bets. Support for the regime is fragmented based on religious, economic, and ethnic divisions, the opposition is divided and disorganized, and the rebels espouse an ideology that is too extreme for many, and also have internal divisions.

##### *1. The regime*

Although the regime enjoys wide support from the minorities, it has lost much of its legitimacy since it escalated the protests to armed violence by forcefully repressing dissent. On the one hand, it enjoys the support of Russia, Iran, Hizbollah and Iraq, but it has had to face the mounting jihadist and Islamist threats to its power and territory. In terms of civilian support, it's mixed for the regime: A NATO study published in May 2013, demonstrated that 70 percent of Syrians support the Assad regime, another 20 percent were deemed neutral and the remaining 10 percent expressed support for the jihadists—the reason being that a majority of Syrians were alarmed by the al-Qaida takeover of the Sunni revolt and preferred to return to Bashar (World Tribune, 2013). However, a survey conducted in Aleppo late last year found that 40 percent of the 561 Aleppo city residents surveyed tend to believe “no one” represents the Syrian people. The study found a low degree of support for the Syrian government even in the regime-

controlled western portion of the city. Between 20 to 40 percent of residents in those neighbourhoods, many of which are largely Christian, described the regime as the “greatest threat to Syria.” The government had the support of only about 12 percent of the population. The jihadists, including al-Nusra, had about 29 percent support, with other Syrian-led forces at about 21 percent (Slavin, 2014).

## *II. The opposition*

The opposition landscape is so fragmented and disconnected, that there is little clarity even among activists themselves about what groups and coalitions are truly effective or enjoy popular support. It is disconnected and represented by different political, social, religious, sectarian, ethnic and even ideological movements. Michel Kilo, a well-known independent dissident describes it as such: “There are personal problems, and problems connected to our methods, and problems with alliances, and problems with the past” (Lund, 2012, p.20). Furthermore, individual groups within the SNC have their own objectives, which leaves them largely at odds with other groups, like the Kurdish Bloc, which is composed of Syrian Kurdish political bodies that aim to create an autonomous Kurdish state. Another example is the Muslim Brotherhood Alliance, which has connected itself to the SNC, and has portrayed itself as moderate, but it is highly suspect of being Islamist in ideology—this has created rifts within the SNC because there are some members supporting the Brotherhood’s participation, and others that denounce it based on the organization’s reputation of violence and want for Islamic rule. On the other hand, the SNC has wide support from the

international community, with countries like the US, France and the Turkey recognizing it as the official opposition.

### *III. The jihadists*

The other factors shaping the post-Syrian society duly describe the level of sway the jihadist groups enjoy in Syria, and this is corroborated by the data presented in the discussion on the regime's lack of critical mass. The financial and military support the jihadists receive from outside entities could mean that they can continue their activities for a prolonged period of time, and because they already lack legitimacy among many Syrians, their battle is an uphill one: they can prey on the weaknesses of the vulnerable populations where they have captured territories by offering social and humanitarian services (like meeting the basic need of bread) to co-opt support. Yet, they still haven't gained enough territory to have widespread influence, and have been mainly concentrated in the northeastern parts of the country. In addition, sectarian loyalties are working against them: The population is 74 percent Sunni, 12 percent is Alawite, and 10 percent Christian of various denominations, and it is a far-fetched notion to believe that Alawites or Christians could be induced to ally with them. Thus, the jihadists don't have the power in numbers or territory that they need to tip the scale in their favour, nor will they reach this point—unless the political situation changes so dramatically as to give them an advantage.

### *5. Deepening of sectarian loyalties*

Among the chaos of the conflict, there's a growing sense of subgroup solidarity that is contributing to the already fragile collective identity of Syrians. The obvious one being among Alawites who have long felt a solidarity with the regime, but the sharpest one is the unity among the Kurdish population, which has been largely alienated by the state, has been detached from the conflict, and seeks its own autonomy akin to the one its brethren has gained in Iraq following the demise of Saddam Hussein. However, the most vulnerable sects are the minorities who have long relied on the patronage of the Alawite regime, which has always pledged to protect them, and in return has been abetted by them. That said, sectarian militias have sprung up in defence of the regime, against it, and largely to protect the territories where each group forms a majority. Although this doesn't suggest the various subgroups have any sharp bias against, or for the regime, and there are inter-group divisions. As will be explained, some groups that support the regime do so out of a historic solidarity, and for the sake of their own security. They fear what may become of their communities should the state fall into the hands of the dominant Sunnis or even worse, the jihadists. Militias are fighting jihadists to reclaim territories, but these militias are fighting both in support of the regime, and against it. The discussion here will only focus on the Christians, Druze and the Kurds, and will not include the Sunni Arabs or the Alawites, considering they've been covered at length throughout this chapter. The groups presented here are only a few of the different subgroups that make up Syria, and a more complete depiction of the sectarian and ethnic landscape is provided in appendix 2.

## *I. Christians*

First, it's important to note that Christians in Syria fall under a number of different sects and ethnic identities, including Antiochian Greek Orthodox, Melkite Greek Catholic, Syriac Orthodox, Assyrian Church of the East, Aramean churches, Maronites and Chaldeans. To a degree, sect affiliation corresponds with geography, with more Melkites and Greek Orthodox found in western Syria, particularly the major urban centres like Damascus, while Syriac and Assyrian denominations have been the primary Christian demographic in the eastern parts of the country. Sect affiliation also has implications for ethnic identity, the main ones being Arab, Syriac, Aramean, and Assyrian (al-Tamimi, 2014).

Second, the political dynamic of Christians in Syria have been largely simplified, and they have been grouped as a whole, but the reality is far different—not all Christians side with the regime or look to it as a protector. Instead, geography and sect affiliation are factors determining Christian involvement in the crisis, and this suggests inter-group fragmentation that has been typical of all the parties involved in the conflict: In western Syria, Melkites and Antiochian Greek Orthodox, which are concentrated in the Wadi al-Nasara (“Valley of Christians”) area of rural west Homs governorate are staunch regime loyalists, and have formed local defence militias, have been drafted into the Syrian Armed Forces with little resistance, and are confronting local jihadist groups. In eastern Syria, (mostly in Hasakah province) there is less propensity among Christians to identify as Arab because of the common Syriac language of the Syriac, Aramean and Assyrian sects. Christians in Syria who have not identified as Arabs have faced problems with the Baathist regime’s lack of acceptance of open expression of

non-Arab identity. That said, in this district, Christians have either looked to the Kurdish groups for protection, or have aligned with political organizations that represent their identity interests, like the Assyrian Democratic Organization and the Syriac Union Party, the latter which is fighting with the regime and has joined forces with Kurdish militias. Others have formed their own military organizations, like the Syriac Military Council, which are in opposition to the regime and have called for the “liberation of Syria and the fall of the despotic Ba’athist regime and fighting for a just, pluralist, democratic and secular state,” while emphasizing no partisan affiliation and repeatedly stressing the need to defend “our people” with their cultural and historical rights (al-Tamimi, 2014).

What’s significant about the Christians in this conflict is that in the face of no guarantee of protection by the regime, they have had to find other means to safeguard their interests. Whether they are fighting with, or opposed to the regime is less relevant than the fact that they have formed groups independent of the main rebel forces, like the FSA, which have failed to attract Christians en masse. Some have also joined ranks with Kurdish groups—who are fighting their own, unique battle.

## *II. Druze*

This is a community that was given its own territory under the French mandate, but was integrated into the Syrian state in the period following independence. They still maintain a strong hold on their land, and having formed their own militias, their main priority in this conflict has been to protect the community’s land and honour (al-Tamimi, 2013). Interestingly, the protests that started in Daraa stopped at the border of Suwayda, the capital city of the Suwayda governorate within the Jabal al-Druze (Ajami,

2012. p.89), which suggests that the Druze either overwhelmingly supported the regime, or chose to stay on the sidelines. Furthermore, where demonstrations did occur in Druze territories, they were mainly quiet sit-ins. The relative quiet in the Jabal al-Druze could be because the Druze don't have serious qualms with the regime like the Sunnis: At the outset of the protests, economic conditions were better in Jabal al-Druze than in Daraa. Higher emigration rates and lower birth rates in the Druze community reduced the relative size of its youth demographic (Gambill, 2013a)—a critical driver of popular uprisings elsewhere in Syria and the Arab world. In addition, the Druze clergy remained broadly supportive of the regime at the outset of the protests, and all three Druze Grand Muftis denounced the protest movement and strongly discouraged dissidents from taking part (Gambill, 2013a). There is widespread support for the regime among the Druze of the Jabal, but information on the political leanings of Druze outside of the Jabal is scarce. However, Gary C. Gambill has written about some notable Druze intellectuals from other parts of Syria and outside the country that have joined the protest movement (2013a), and there have been a few news reports of the regime using threats and intimidation to secure their quiescence, but the details of such are sketchy and rely mainly on eye-witness accounts.

The Jabal al-Druze has also been the site of anti-government bombings by rebel groups, and such incidents give them reason enough to form their own militias and protect their territory. The Druze have a historic solidarity with the Alawites—and by extension, the regime, but there exist fissures among the Druze as well: while some are fighting in support of the regime, others have the singular goal of defending their land, and will confront any entity that threatens their security, but the fact remains that most

Druze support the regime (Gambill, 2013a). That said, it could be that if the community sees the regime losing its grip on their territory and is no longer able to secure it, they may revoke their allegiance.

Israel has also stepped into the conflict in an attempt to protect its interests in the Golan Heights. There are reports that it has been courting the Druze in the Golan, such as by committing to spend almost \$60 million between 2014 and 2017 on social development, transportation, and tourism development within the Druze communities (Ashkenazi, 2013). Some see this as an attempt to co-opt the Druze in the Golan, which have been resistant to Israeli rule since the seizure of the territory in 1967 (Lang, 2014). This is an opportunity for Israel to bind the Druze closer to Israel, and further from Syria. If this strategy works, in the face of partition and the possibility of Sunni domination, those in the Jabal al-Druze could be convinced that an Israeli occupation is more stable, even if they don't agree with it much.

### *III. Kurds*

The Kurdish community in Syria has long faced policies of segregation, and various historical events influenced the shaping of the Kurdish identity and their alienation in the Syrian society. The Treaty of Sèvres had landlocked a Kurdish state, located among Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq, but the treaty was never fully implemented, and the Kurds became minorities in each of these countries. Syria's Kurds, as an ethnic subgroup have faced segregation and assimilation attempts at various points, like through the Arab nationalism movement that rose in the mid 1950s, and after the Baath party took over Syria in 1963. Kurds have been systematically deprived or faced

orchestrated assimilation (Tokmajyan, n.d.). They had been denied citizenship, and prevented from using their own language, but during the mounting pressures on the regime during the 2011 protests, they were granted nationality as an olive branch. Their struggle in the war is unique among all the minorities in Syria. Upon the onset of the conflict, Kurdish political organizations that were formerly established—The PYD and the KNC—became the Syrian Kurd mouthpiece under the Kurdish Supreme Committee banner, and began a program of self-determination. Significantly, neither party stands for a democratic Syria, and Syrian unity and solidarity is not a priority. Militarily, the PYD's army, composed of 10,000 troops, which is the strongest Kurdish militia, doesn't cooperate with the government forces or opposition groups. Furthermore, in the early stages of the war, the Syrian military withdrew from the Kurdish areas, which ostensibly gave the Kurds the responsibility to protect their territory against the insurgents. By the end of 2013, they declared the establishment of a Kurdish autonomous region in Syria, published a draft of a Kurdish constitution, called for elections to a Kurdish parliament, and decided to join the Geneva conference on Syria as a unified delegation separate from both the government and the opposition (Bengio, 2014)—although they were denied this endeavour when Russia and the US refused to support it, thus they are participating as part of the SNC delegation.

### **Mapping the post-Syrian society**

Based on the ideas presented so far, if the regime falls, it could result in a de facto partitioning of the state. However, as Gary Gambill explains, Syria is not neatly divided into geographic ethno-sectarian constituencies. Apart from Jabal al-Druze and the coastal hinterland of Latakia and Tartous provinces, there are few sizeable blocs of

Syrian territory where any one minority is a majority, but there are plenty where Sunnis predominate.<sup>10</sup> All of the major cities are confessionally mixed. However, insofar as refugees from government-controlled areas are disproportionately Sunni and those fleeing rebel-held areas are disproportionately non-Sunni, territories under the control of both the regime and the opposition are becoming steadily more homogenous (Gambill, 2013b). Accounting for the distribution of the population based on religious and ethnic affiliation, as is depicted in appendix 2, and the current territorial divisions divisions illustrated in appendix 1, some conclusions can be made about how Syria could be partitioned. The Alawites and Christians are mainly concentrated in the northwestern part of the country in and around Latakia, and the Druze form a majority in the south on the border with Jordan in the Suwayda governorate (Jabal al-Druze). The regime has a hold on the area to the northwest of Aleppo, down through Latakia, and the corridor going from Hama in the north, to Homs, and down to Damascus and including the Druze Suwayda. The Kurds have numerous northern areas, and the Sunni-led opposition has parts of the eastern coast, and scatters of strongholds in northern areas. Given these circumstances, Syria could partition into a land for the Alawites, where they've always had their stronghold, that is in the western mediterranean coast, in Latakia, but including the corridor going from the south, and up through Damascus, Homs, and Hama. Given this area already has a dominant Christian population, they would be swallowed up in this enclave. However, the fate of Damascus remains unclear, so it could also fall to the jihadist groups. Also, the Assad dynasty might even maintain its reign of power over the Alawite zone, and considering

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<sup>10</sup> See appendix 2.

the Syrian Armed Forces and the intelligence apparatus already have a sizeable amount of high-ranking Alawites, the Alawite enclave may be able to maintain some form of military and intelligence capabilities. The Druze would remain where they are today, and that is in Suwayda governorate (including the Jabal al-Druze) south of Damascus and bordering on Jordan. Sunnis would be established in the northern areas, namely Deir al-Zor, and Raqqah, and possibly Aleppo, depending on whether the regime or the jihadists capture it. There will be a Kurdish state, likely in the northeast bordering on Iraqi Kurdistan—seeing as Syrian Kurds have been working toward self-determination throughout this conflict, and have taken their model from the self-governing system of Kurds in neighbouring Iraq. Lastly, the model proposed doesn't include the scattered minorities, but they would likely face ethnic cleansing, and this would subject them to possible marginalization or persecution by the majority group. It also doesn't consider what will happen to the Syrians who have fled to neighbouring countries throughout the conflict. It's likely that many will never return, and will settle in the countries where they sought refuge. However, for those that will choose to resettle in the new Syria, sectarian, ethnic, and tribal loyalties, and family connections will determine where they should settle.

The problem that will arise, however, is how these individual entities will be connected, if at all. As Michael O'Hanlon theorizes, there could be a "hard" partitioning resulting in two or more independent states (such as in Sudan in 2011), or a "soft" one resulting in autonomous centralized cantons under a weak federal government (such as what happened in Bosnia in 2005) (O'Hanlon, 2013). Considering the current climate in Syria, and the proposed lines of partition, it is likely that it will befall to hard partitioning,

but because it is unlikely to be institutionalized as such, it may work its way toward a soft partitioning whereby all the enclaves will coalesce to form an extremely weakened federation. Hard partitioning may work for some time, but it might leave the different cantons financially deficient due to regional economic constraints. Seeing that agriculture plays a dominant role in the Syrian economy, many areas deficient in wealth-producing industries may face economic hardships. Meanwhile, some cantons would assume more lucrative industries, for example the Alawite state would dominate the port, but the profitable oil and gas field are concentrated in the east and north, which could be inherited by the Sunni enclave and the Kurdish state. These constraints could stump economic and social development, and it is possible that the socio-economic conditions of these new states, coupled with international pressure and other political factors could eventually lead to a weakened federation, which may alleviate some economic hardships.

Partitioning isn't the favoured solution by most actors in this situation. Most Sunni Arabs vehemently oppose partition, not so much because they see Syria's sovereignty and current borders as sacrosanct, but because they expect to win out under majority rule in a unitary Syria (Gambill, 2013b). However, Sunnis may come to support partition if it means escaping Assad's grip without paying the catastrophic costs of defeating him. They may also come to prefer living in a more homogenous polity less susceptible to outside—particularly Iranian—influence (Gambill, 2013b). This is contrasted by the long-held Alawite desire for partition. At the regional and international level, the idea of partitioning has mixed perspectives. Gambill theorizes that Jordan and Israel would find a friend in a Druze statelet, while a coastal Alawite-

dominated statelet would align with Iran and Russia—for strategic reasons, such as Russia’s naval base in Tartous. The Kurdish zone would likely form a close relationship with its counterpart in Iraq. The Arab Gulf states would dominate the centre (2013b), likely as a result of the large concentration of Sunnis. Partition could be an arrangement from which regional and international players have little incentive to unilaterally depart once it is in place (Gambill, 2013b).

Partitioning would solve the problem of cohesion, identity and Sunni-Alawite rivalry over the whole of Syria. It would also alleviate the fear many minorities have of being dominated by Sunnis. Yet this could destabilize the region, and inflame attempts for similar scenarios in other countries. For example, Lebanon, which has had a flawed and weak confessionalist system since 1943, and has already partitioned to an extent: Shia Hizballah in the south and central-east, Christian centralized and scattered, and Sunnis in the north and southeast. The capital city, Beirut, is also divided between Muslim (or Shia) west Beirut, and Christian east Beirut. The Lebanese have been living under these circumstances for decades, and they were inflamed during the civil war that ended in 1990, which were in part exacerbated by Hafiz al-Assad to solidify his influence in Lebanon. Furthermore, there are similar sectarian tensions in Lebanese politics, with Christians occupying the right to hold the presidency, Sunnis the premiership, and Shia the speaker of the house role, and these divisions of responsibility have been the source of much tension among the different political and sectarian groups. So, a partitioning of Syria might cause sectarian differences to become more inflamed and further destabilize the country.

Partitioning could also aggravate the Palestinian cause. As a group that has been struggling to achieve self-determination since 1948, the situation in the new Syria may be their catalyst to take bolder steps to independence. The likelihood of this happening is becoming ever more present as the conflict drags on. There are signs that the fighting has reinvigorated the Palestinian spirit for unity and the right of return, such as a push by The Global Palestinian Right to Return Coalition, which has renewed calls for the right to return and has led a global day of action called Return Unifies Us. The renewed call has been signed by over 150 popular and grassroots organizations globally (Nabulsi, 2014), and they held their first day of action on March 22, 2014 (which coincides with the anniversary of the battle of Karama). The action brought Palestinians from everywhere, but especially from the West Bank, Lebanon and Syria—including from besieged Yarmouk—together in an effort to promote the popular demand for unity and the right of return (Nabulsi, 2014). However, the conflict may also worsen their situation if Israel sees it as an opportunity to further galvanize its hold on the territories. This is not so say that the Assad regime that may remain in the Alawite state wouldn't attempt to maintain its role in the conflict, as Iran may want it to do so in order to maintain pressure on Israel, but it would be a lot more trying, and it would have to rely more heavily on the backing of Hizballah, Iran, and Hamas to have an effective role in the situation. Yet it couldn't have the dominant role it did in the past. Individual leaders of the new enclaves may attempt to play a role in the peace process and in the Palestinian struggle against Israel, or they just might be inclined to focus their attention on their own states and leave the Israeli-Palestinian issue alone. Israel

might see partitioning as an increased threat, considering the multiplication of enemy states.

The partitioning of Syria may be a temporary evolution of the present hostilities. There isn't an appetite for institutionalizing the new borders among international actors, and although the Syrian state would be broken up initially, the struggle wouldn't end there. It would be difficult to imagine a scenario where all the enclaves accept the break up of the state—with the exception of the Kurds, if they achieve autonomy, and perhaps the Alawites. Instead, this conflict will mutate to a new form in the post-Syrian society. Partitioning could have serious implications for its neighbours, but it also raises new challenges for the Arab Peace Initiative and for any future settlement between Israel and Syria on the Golan Heights.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **The implications for the Golan Heights and the Arab Peace Initiative**

In June 1967 Israel captured the Golan Heights after a battle with neighbouring Arab states. Since that time, there have been numerous diplomatic attempts to return the Golan to Syria—Hafiz al-Assad engaged in direct negotiations, while Bashar has hesitated to do the same publicly. It has been reported that before the violence erupted in Syria, the two countries were in talks over the return of the Golan to Syria (Kershner, 2012). However, the has changed the internal dynamics within the state, and if the partitioning suggested in this paper occurs, Bashar al-Assad's influence would be severely weakened. Furthermore, as discussed earlier, Israel has recognized the vulnerability of the Alawite regime, and has seen the opportunity for co-opting the Israeli Druze residing in the Golan. The situation in Syria could also have potentially

devastating effects in Israel, including the Golan, if the fighting spills over, and there have been indications of some spill over in recent weeks. In addition, last year, Israel's Water Resources Ministry permitted an American company to drill for oil. The company explored for oil in a southern patch of the Golan, and found that the area may contain significant quantities of conventional oil and gas in "relatively tight formations" (Lindsay, 2013). This is a significant move, considering that oil permits were halted for the area 20 years ago under peace talks between the two states (Lindsay, 2013). Given the current situation in Syria, Israel's latest advances in the Golan suggests that it doesn't see the conflict ending soon, and any conclusion will result in a severe blow to the regime, which perhaps would void past discussions and agreements between the two.

So, with Israel already stepping into the Golan and staking a further claim to it, a partitioning of Syria would undoubtedly lead to a prolonged cessation of talks between Israel and a Syrian entity—at least in the interim, and talks between Israel and an opposing entity laying claim to the Golan will have to wait until the new Syrian statelets sort out any possible disagreements regarding which enclave will claim the territory. That said, with the break up of Syria, technically there would no longer be a state for Israel to negotiate with, so with the chaos ensuing in Syria, the war is indirectly causing Bashar's regime to lose any hold that it once had on the Golan, while providing Israel with the opportunity to build up its presence and hold on the territory. This will lead to difficulties where the peace process is concerned, and particularly for the Arab Peace Initiative.

Where the Golan Heights is concerned, the first issue to be dealt with will have to be which Syrian enclave will claim it. Considering that a future Druze statelet and an Alawite one will be geographically closest to the territory, it would be simple to assume that one, or both of these will make that claim. However the other enclaves may also express ownership of it, which will sink all of these cantons into a drawn out dispute until they agree on who's going to assume responsibility for it. That said, the current Assad regime has already been capturing rebel-held areas, most recently Rasm al-Hour and Rasm al-Sad, along the edge of the Golan (Mroue, 2014). If the regime continues to make gains in the area, a future Alawite statelet could easily adopt the claim to the territory. Once this is established, talks between Israel and the new claimant can resume, but by then there will be a new set of issues to deal with, the biggest one being security, and this could be a sticking point in negotiations, considering the structure of the post-Syrian Society. The new society would continue to face conflict and violence on some level, and Israel would certainly be reluctant to hand over the Golan if it meant making it more vulnerable to attack or spill over of violence. So it could be that the resolution between the two parties would continue to be drawn out, at least until the different factions in the new Syria settle their differences, or figure out a way to live harmoniously. This is an optimistic view of the direction that the new society can take, but any settlement with Israel, no matter which Syrian enclave claims the Golan, will be hampered by the ongoing fissures between the different enclaves.

The other issue relates to the Arab Peace Initiative. With Syria proper out of the picture, the destiny of the Golan will hang in the balance until the new Syrian enclaves

sort out which one of them will claim it. The Initiative first and foremost centres on resolving the Palestinian issue, in doing so it calls for the return of all occupied lands since June 1967, including the Golan, which is stated as such:

Emanating from the conviction of the Arab countries that a military solution to the conflict will not achieve peace or provide security for the parties, the council:

1. Requests Israel to reconsider its policies and declare that a just peace is its strategic option as well.

2. Further calls upon Israel to affirm:

- I- Full Israeli withdrawal from all the territories occupied since 1967, including the Syrian Golan Heights, to the June 4, 1967 lines as well as the remaining occupied Lebanese territories in the south of Lebanon...(The Arab Peace Initiative, 2002)

Thus, the Initiative as is would remain valid, and the negotiating parties will continue to tackle the issue of the Palestinians primarily, while the other issues will be dealt with after. With respect to resolving the matter of the Golan, because of all of the new developments in the new Syria that would contribute to more complications for the territory, negotiations over the remaining components of the Initiative should not be delayed by the Syrian dynamics, and the larger process should move forward while the new Syrian enclaves sort out their dispute over claiming the territory.

Therefore, after the establishment of the post-Syrian society, the biggest obstacle for negotiating a settlement with Israel over the Golan is the question of which enclave will claim the territory. Once that hurdle is dealt with, the claimant could move on to opening negotiations with Israel. The other obstacle would be the probable continuing disputes and conflict occurring between the enclaves, which would deter Israel from agreeing to a settlement that involves handing the territory to a Syrian enclave because of the heightened security risk of removing the Golan as a buffer zone.

## Conclusion

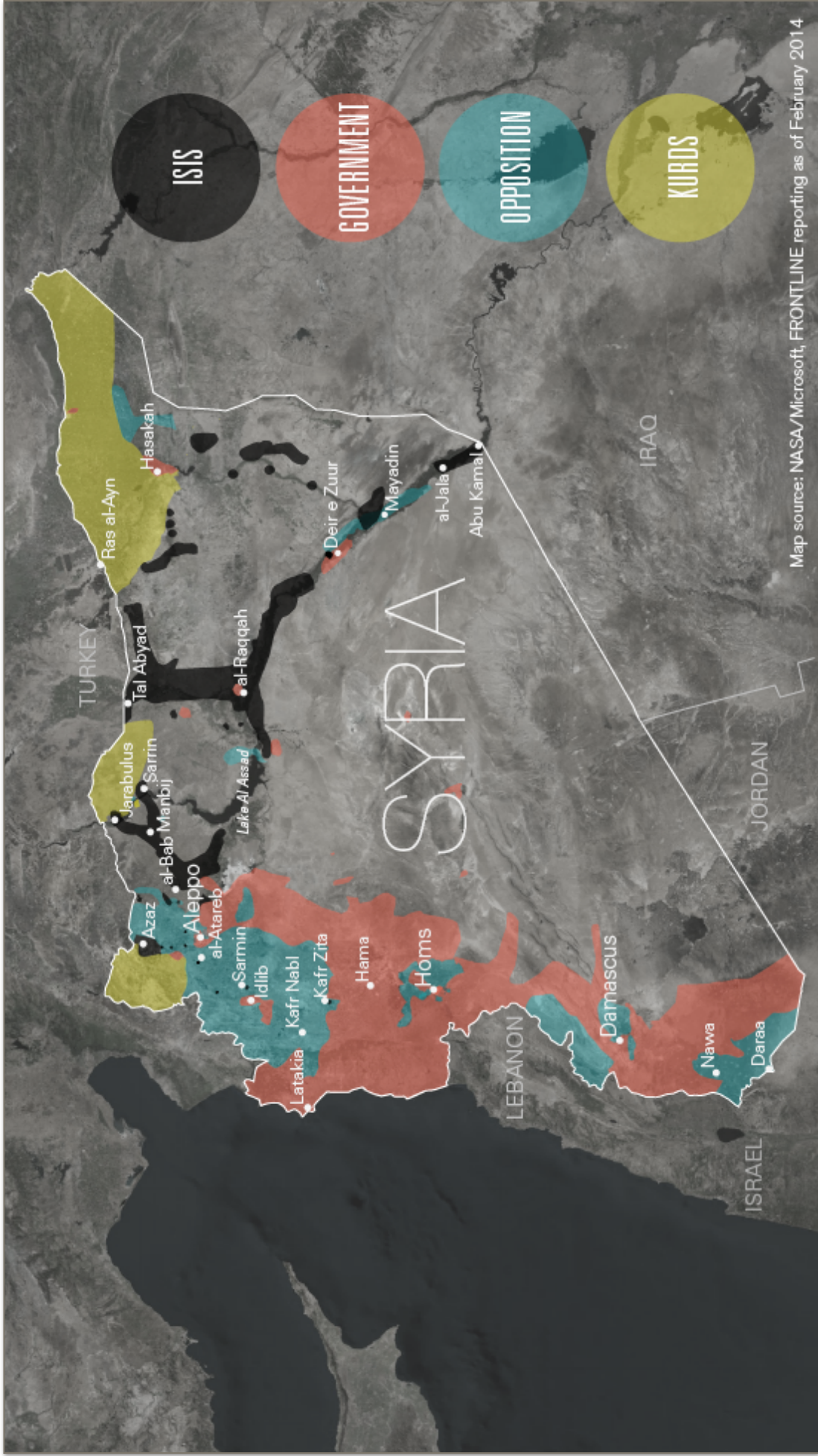
What at the outset was essentially an internal conflict pitting the regime against a broad popular uprising with multiple, separate flashpoints has broken into several battlefields and front lines, shaped by local characteristics, including social makeup, the basis for regime presence and the cross-border dynamics (International Crisis Group, 2013, p.6). The conflict has taken on many shapes as it mutated from a popular mass movement for political change into a proxy civil war with sectarian undertones. Each region is a diverse tapestry with intricately interwoven social, ethnic and religious ties bound together with the strings of a shared history, and has experienced the conflict in distinct ways (Dark, 2014b).

The crisis in Syria has largely thrown the country off balance. Although its experience with authentic national identity and cohesion has been a fragile one, the authoritarian rule of successive governments and their reliance on sectarianism has led to the situation we have today. This is not to discredit the influential role that regional powers Saudi Arabia and Iran are playing, for if it wasn't for their support, this would not have turned into the even-bloodier proxy-war. Nevertheless, the state has reached a point of no return, it will never regain the vitality that it once had, and the regime can't expect to maintain the same level of legitimacy across its territory, unless it defeats the opposition, jihadists, and Islamists militarily. In the face of deteriorated security in the country, Syrians have had to look elsewhere for protection, and many have found this in their own communities. The war is no longer about national interests, but about local ones. Thus, if the regime falls, so might Syria, and it could partition into individual enclaves. For some, such as the Kurds and Alawites, this will be a favourable

scenario. For others, like the Sunnis, this will be a disaster because their push to again rule the entire territory will be fruitless. Yet it seems like the only solution for a state that has for so long fought an internal battle of power and ideology.

This will have complicating consequences for the Middle East peace process. While the new Syrian enclaves figure out which one of them will claim the Golan, peace talks within the parameters of the Arab Peace Initiative should continue without being delayed by the ongoing rifts between the Syrian enclaves. Israel will also be looking at the situation with an increased interest for its own security, and a settlement between the two parties on the Golan may be hard to come by until the security of the post-Syrian society is rectified.

**Appendix 1**  
**Territorial holdings of ISIS, the government, the opposition,**  
**and the Kurds as of February 2014.**



Source: The Washington Post, 2014



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