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A fractured rebellion: the war system and its functions for non-regime groups

2.1 Underlying grievances

Pre-war Syria was brimming over with grievances of various kinds but lacked the mechanisms – like political parties or a thriving civil society – for expressing them effectively. Corruption was a key grievance, and was often perceived not only as unjust but as a source of humiliation.⁴ As one lawyer commented to us: “On a personal level, I haven’t perceived myself as a human. Humans have dignity. Even though I am a lawyer, the judiciary is corrupted in every way.” Although the material causes of rebellion were often significant, several of our interviewees stressed that the uprising was propelled, in large part, by a concern with dignity. One man, a teacher, observed, “It is not a matter of hunger at all. The Syrian revolution was a revolution of dignity and fighting corruption.” Other writers have discerned a similar preoccupation with dignity elsewhere in the Arab Spring.⁵

Historically, Bashar al-Assad’s regime and that of his father Hafez al-Assad were founded on an alliance between the rural peasantry, the security establishment and allied businesses. However, the early 2000s saw Bashar responding to economic crisis by pushing through a process of market liberalisation that

⁴ See e.g. Bassam Haddad (2012), ‘Syria, the Arab uprisings, and the political economy of authoritarian resilience’, *Interface: a journal for and about social movements*, 4 (1), pp 113–130, May. See also Samer, pp 41–46.

⁵ Dalacoura.

significantly eroded the regime's support-base among the rural population, undermining livelihoods and failing to generate sufficient employment to take up the slack.

As in a number of other contexts,⁶ the social pressures generated by liberalisation in the short term produced a degree of discontent and disorder that precluded the possibility of long-term benefits. Unemployment and rural poverty rose significantly, with important price subsidies (including fuel and fertiliser subsidies for farmers) being phased out.⁷ Rising population, wasting water, and a drive for increased wheat production encouraged a significant fall in groundwater levels, prompting outmigration long before the drought. Youth unemployment was a particular problem, reflecting in part a demographic 'youth bulge'.⁸ Economic liberalisation tended to go against the Baathist tradition of channelling benefits to the peasantry and giving rural people opportunities in the state bureaucracy.⁹

In practice, moreover, liberalisation nurtured a kind of crony capitalism, benefiting a relatively narrow range of business and military interests close to the president (for example, in oil, telecoms, pharmaceuticals, chemicals, electronics, agribusiness and tourism). Not only were many business interests shut out of this charmed circle of 'oligarchs'; they were also actively threatened by the influx of cheap foreign goods that accompanied liberalisation (something that affected many established traders and industrialists in Aleppo and Damascus, for example).¹⁰ There was a widening gap between a minority of private entrepreneurs with good political connections and the rest of the population.¹¹

In rural areas, declining support for agriculture and pastoralism was made worse by severe drought and by the weak response on the part of the Syrian government and the international community, a response that is hardly ever mentioned in accounts of the causes of Syria's war. Yet towards the end of February 2010, only 19 per cent of funding requested by the UN the previous August had actually been provided; the UN noted "a dramatic decrease in communities' resilience and coping capacity" while there had been "a drastic increase in nutrition-related diseases between 2006 and 2009" as well as significant outmigration from drought-hit rural areas.¹² Drought was to prove a significant factor behind rebellion in the east and the north-east (Syria's

6 Venugopal; Kaldor; Keen (2005).

7 Lyme; Hinnebusch.

8 On youth unemployment, see Kabbani and Kamel.

9 Droz-Vincent, p 36.

10 Lyme.

11 E.g. Droz-Vincent, pp 35–36.

12 United Nations (2010), p 1, p 5, p 7.

poorest region) – not least when it uprooted large numbers of people into urban slums where services were gravely inadequate and where many rebel groups were to find a following.¹³ A leaked November 2008 memo from the US embassy in Damascus noted that the Food and Agriculture Organization’s representative in Syria, Abdullah bin Yehia, was predicting that if the drought remained unrelieved by donors, it could undermine stability in Syria – including through mass migration.¹⁴

Alongside growing discontent in the country at large there was also discontent in the military. While high spending on a bloated army had long taken resources away from economic development, relatively recent reductions in the military budget were creating loyalty problems among soldiers themselves.¹⁵ Many recruits were angered by corruption, which had often been actively encouraged by the regime as a way to control people. A captain in the Syrian Air Force told us:

Military corruption is one of the most important things that caused the revolution, because people know the military is not there to fight the enemy. It’s all about corruption, and you can pay not to do service. The regime was very aware and would know each general who took a bribe. They create this environment and pretend they’re not seeing it and if you don’t want a person, you can pick their fault and get rid of them...

Especially in elite units and near big cities,¹⁶ senior positions within the military were increasingly reserved – even before the war – for Alawites (broadly, a Shi’ite minority, often persecuted in the past, whose members achieved significant power under Hafez and Bashar al-Assad (themselves Alawites)). Military defections by Sunnis – particularly in the early stages of the uprising – exacerbated the already-disproportionate representation of Alawites.¹⁷

Corruption within the military was part of a wider system of corruption that alienated a great many Syrians. A system of military decentralisation had been implemented in 1984. Called the *quta’a* (sector) system, it assigned each combat division a specific geographical region, granting wide powers to the commanding officer so that these sectors became fiefdoms for senior officers.¹⁸ This foreshadowed the extensive disintegration of the Syrian military *during* the war (including widespread criminal activity), a breakdown that was to encourage increasing reliance on foreign powers, notably Iran and Russia.¹⁹

¹³ See also Zisser; UNDP (2010); cf. NPR.

¹⁴ US embassy cable, Damascus (2008) “2008 UN Drought Appeal for Syria”, 26 November.

¹⁵ E.g. Syrian Center for Strategic and Political Studies/Syrian Expert House; Hinnebusch.

¹⁶ Droz-Vincent, p 39; Syrian Center for Strategic and Political Studies/Syrian Expert House, p 176.

¹⁷ Lyme.

¹⁸ Kozak (2017).

¹⁹ Kozak (2017).

2.2 The fragmentation and weakening of the rebellion

In theory, armed rebel groups came under the leadership of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which aimed to be the military wing of the opposition and coordinated with the Syrian National Council (the main opposition group in exile).²⁰ But in practice it proved difficult – and increasingly so – to forge a unified command with an agreed ideology or an agreed programme of reform. In his authoritative account of the war, Samer Abboud stressed the fragmentation of the FSA: “Inter-rebel relations were defined by both cooperation and conflict... What was consistent, however, was that the relations between rebel groups were quickly unraveling and that they failed to cohere.”²¹ Fighting *among* the rebels became routine,²² with ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra inflicting major losses on FSA brigades in the north and north-west so that by 2015 the FSA had mostly retreated to the south of the country.²³

Even as the rebellion fragmented, significant links between rival groups remained. For example, Abboud noted in late 2015 that in Aleppo, where the FSA Command generally remained strong, the FSA shared control of non-regime areas with the SILF (Syrian Islamic Liberation Front), the SRF (Syrian Revolutionaries Front), the Kurdish PYD (Democratic Union Party) and Jabhat al-Nusra, all major coalitions with affiliated brigades in the city and surrounding countryside.²⁴ Commenting on Syria as a whole, Abboud observed:

*The four major networks of violence – JAN [Jabhat al-Nusra], ISIS, FSA and YPG [the military wing of the PYD] – are in regular conflict with one another. However, the FSA has, depending on geographic area, entered into associations with both JAN and the YPG.*²⁵

There were three main reasons for the fragmentation and weakness of the FSA (and more broadly of the rebellion itself). The first was *economic*. As the rebellion evolved, money-making activities among the rebels became so widespread and so varied that it is hard to escape the conclusion that, for a great many rebels, war had become a business. Many rebels began to look more like warlords than revolutionaries, and fighters routinely extracted ‘protection money’ from families and businesses, sometimes engaging in kidnapping and

²⁰ Lister (2016).

²¹ Abboud (2015a), p 92; see also Lister (2014).

²² Abboud (2015a).

²³ Abboud (2015a), p 96.

²⁴ Abboud (2015a).

²⁵ Abboud (2015a), p 98.

then demanding ransoms. Rebels also became involved in stripping and selling assets from industrial plants, in stealing aid, looting banks, people-smuggling, stealing ancient artefacts, and extracting oil.²⁶ These various predations were accompanied by multiple abuses, and Amnesty International noted,

Residents in Aleppo and Idlib governorates at first celebrated the effective end of Syrian government rule hoping that the armed opposition groups would implement the rule of law. However, the hopes of many have faded away as armed opposition groups have resorted to the rule of the gun to impose their own version of order.²⁷

Al-Nusra was one of five groups that Amnesty found to be carrying out abductions and other abuses.²⁸ Many rebel groups also put a good deal of effort into raising donations abroad, sometimes using videos to show foreign donors that they were actively fighting. Some of our sources alleged that rebels would even delay victory in a high-profile campaign if the campaign was bringing in good donations.²⁹

Economic motivations combined with a simple survival instinct to encourage a variety of military ‘stand-offs’, accommodations that sometimes facilitated accumulation and the exploitation of civilians by ostensible opponents while limiting the risk of dying in battle. One of our interviewees noted back in 2013: “Parts of Aleppo are surrounded by the FSA, and the regime is paying the FSA not to attack.” One young man from Aleppo said, “If there’s an area the regime wants, this leader will give it back to the regime, in return for a large sum of money.” Both rebel and regime actors have profited from a variety of sieges (and, more specifically, from the organised breaching of these sieges).³⁰ This profiteering has helped to produce an interest in continued war, sometimes contributing to the breakdown of ceasefire processes that have threatened the income of relevant militias.³¹

The *reasons* for rebels’ increasingly acquisitive behaviour are complex. One factor was the need to acquire resources in order to wage war.³² The longer the war continued, the more pressure there was to find some kind of income for the fighters, and even something as basic as the lack of healthcare for fighters tended to fuel the rebels’ demand for money. Increasingly, fighters also pursued resources for their own sake – whether out of greed or to meet their immediate survival needs. Many people also joined armed groups as a way to make a

26 All of these were discussed by our interviewees.

27 Amnesty International (2016), p 4.

28 Amnesty International (2016).

29 This is also mentioned in Yazigi (2014), p 5.

30 Turkmani et al. (2014); Turkmani et al. (2015).

31 Turkmani et al. (2014); Turkmani, Ali et al. (2015).

32 Cf. Berdal.

living in the context of a collapsing economy.³³ As one International Crisis Group (ICG) report noted,

*Cousins from a single extended family in different parts of Aleppo joined various groups for the simple reason that they all needed income and gravitated toward whatever they could find.*³⁴

Social tensions also contributed to predation: for example, poorer farmers sometimes resented the wealth in cities like Aleppo and some were tempted to take their 'share' when they came to town as rebel fighters.³⁵

As in many wars,³⁶ another major incentive for joining an armed group was the widespread violence and exploitation directed at those who chose to remain *outside* the various militias. In other words, a situation in which armed groups were exploiting unarmed groups created few incentives (for those with a choice) to remain in the unarmed category. A further factor encouraging acquisitive behaviour among the rebels was the culture of corruption within the official Syrian military, a military that many rebels had recently deserted. One man from Aleppo said: "The FSA has lots of things that the regime army had – corruption and theft. The regime shaped the ideas of the Syrian people, and the FSA is no exception."

Naturally, criminality among rebels tended to lose 'hearts and minds' when it came to civilians. A former regime soldier, who had spent time in a government jail and certainly held no brief for the regime, commented: "After a while, the robbers made a distortion in the FSA so some people thought *the regime* is better. The rebels will steal, kill, and cover the woman." Again mirroring many other conflicts,³⁷ the war saw a widening gulf between civilians and predatory factions whose claim to be providing protection rang increasingly hollow. In these circumstances, survival often meant some kind of partial accommodation with the regime. One knowledgeable aid worker told us:

Many believe in jihad, but also the regime has things over them. There are some connections there... Everyone deals with the regime. There's a dialogue to keep electricity going, water, and [rebels'] selling of grain and oil. People negotiate over kidnapping.

Apart from economic motivations, a second major factor encouraging fragmentation and weakness in the FSA were the different agendas of diverse external supporters. Weapons and funding coming in from Qatar, Saudi Arabia

³³ E.g. International Crisis Group (2013b).

³⁴ International Crisis Group (2013b), p 8.

³⁵ Abdul-Ahad, Ghaith (2012), 'Syrian rebels sidetracked by scramble for spoils of war', *Guardian*, 27 December.

³⁶ See e.g. Keen (2005), (2012).

³⁷ Keen (2012); Preston.

and Turkey went to a variety of different rebel groups, and the diversity of donors worked strongly against opposition coherence, undermining the idea of a Supreme Military Command.³⁸ Meanwhile, governments in the US and Europe chose not to give large-scale support to the FSA, while more fundamentalist groups – especially al-Nusra – were getting stronger militarily.³⁹ While united in denouncing Assad, those countries supporting the rebels have also had their own distinct strategic interests in relation to Syria.⁴⁰ For example, Qatar has an interest in constructing an oil pipeline through Syria to meet the European market, a project blocked by Assad in 2009, apparently mindful that it would compete with Russia's own oil exports to Europe.⁴¹ Foreign donors have exhibited different degrees of tolerance for Salafist factions, with the Saudis particularly fearful of 'blowback' into Saudi Arabia itself.⁴² As Abboud noted in late 2015:

Saudi Arabia had eschewed support of many Islamist, especially Salafist, brigades and had thrown most of their support behind FSA-affiliated groups. Qatar, on the other hand, had no reservations about supporting Islamist groups... many of the more hardline groups have received their support from private donors...⁴³

When different factions have bid for money from external donors, this has also incentivised corruption and has ultimately encouraged defection to fundamentalist groups. One Syrian expat, a restaurant owner in the Qatari capital of Doha, told *Foreign Policy* magazine in 2014 that he had had 13,000 men under his command in Deir al-Zour governorate, thanks to funding from Qatar. He stressed that many middlemen among the rebels had begun to exaggerate capabilities and needs when appealing to donors in Doha:

Often, groups would submit maybe 3,000 names, but in reality there would be only 300 or 400 people. The extra money goes in the wrong way. They would do the same thing with operations. If the actual needs were \$1 million, maybe they say \$5 million. Then the other \$4 million disappears.⁴⁴

In her *Foreign Policy* investigation, Elizabeth Dickinson commented, "The disarray helped push fighters increasingly toward some of the groups that seemed to have a stronger command of their funding and their goals – groups

38 Abboud (2015a); Abboud (2015b); see also Hokayem (2014).

39 Lister (2016).

40 For example, Qatar has an interest in constructing an oil pipeline through Syria to meet the European market, a project blocked by Assad in 2009, apparently mindful that it would compete with Russia's own oil exports to Europe (e.g. Nafeez Ahmed (2013), 'Syria intervention plan fueled by oil interests, not chemical weapon concern', *Guardian*, 30 August).

41 E.g. Nafeez Ahmed (2013), 'Syria intervention plan fueled by oil interests, not chemical weapon concern', *Guardian*, 30 August.

42 E.g. Hokayem (2014).

43 Abboud (2015a, p 142); see also Yazigi (2014).

44 Dickinson.

such as al-Nusra Front and eventually the Islamic State...⁴⁵ Significantly, those defecting from the FSA tended to take their foreign-supplied funds and weaponry with them.⁴⁶

A third major factor tending to fragment and weaken the FSA and the rebellion more generally was the appeal of militant fundamentalist groups. Many of the complex and ambiguous attractions of militant groups show the limits of the common Western stereotype that their members are 'brainwashed' into 'religious extremism' which then directly motivates violence and acts of terror.⁴⁷ Al-Nusra in particular presented itself as an effective counter to Assad, and both al-Nusra and ISIS gained support from a growing disillusionment with the role of the West in the Syrian war.⁴⁸ In fact, negative perceptions around international aid, sanctions and military action/inaction helped to fuel a pervasive disillusionment with the West that extended well beyond these militant groups. This disillusionment occurred not only despite but also, to some extent, *because of* the very considerable attraction of values – like democracy, freedom and human rights – that the West has espoused.

Early in the Syrian war, the US adopted the position that 'Assad must go' without being willing to ensure that he *did* go. Many Syrians have condemned not only the unwillingness to depose Assad through the use of force but also the unwillingness to take less drastic measures like imposing a 'no-fly zone' on the lines of those that gave a degree of protection to Iraq's Kurds and Shi'ites between the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 invasion.⁴⁹ Beyond this, many Syrians have argued strongly that Western judgement has been distorted by the determination to pursue a 'war on terror'. As with aid and sanctions, there has been a tendency to look at the Western military interventions and non-interventions and to ask whether they serve the interests of Syrians or of Westerners.

Labelling Jabhat al-Nusra as terrorist went down badly with many Syrians. Al-Nusra was designated by the US as a foreign terrorist organisation in December 2012, making it illegal to provide material support to, or engage in transactions with, the group; al-Nusra has also been identified by the UN Security Council as a terrorist group that the international community is committed to eliminating. In the eyes of most people in the West, al-Nusra's links to al-Qaeda would probably be enough to justify its pariah status. But the December 2012 US initiative in particular was strongly condemned by the

⁴⁵ Dickinson.

⁴⁶ Dickinson.

⁴⁷ On 'religious' motivations and what lies behind them, see particularly Aubrey et al.

⁴⁸ See, notably, Lister (2016).

⁴⁹ Many local people have advocated for a no-fly zone e.g. Khalaf (2015), Keen (1993).

main Syrian opposition groups, including the National Coalition, by the FSA umbrella and by popular protests inside Syria.⁵⁰ Following the designation of al-Nusra as terrorist, opposition civilians marched with the slogans ‘We are all Jabhat al-Nusra’ and ‘There is no terrorism in Syria except that of Assad’.⁵¹

It is important to note that many civil society actors did develop a strong *antipathy* towards al-Nusra – not least because of unease with its ideological position, anger at its habit of declaring civil society organisations to be illegal, and revulsion at its propensity for killing activists.⁵² Even so, many Syrians’ perceptions about ‘terrorism’ – and the rights and wrongs of international interventions – have been strongly shaped by the fact that the Assad regime posed by far the greatest danger while al-Nusra was actually standing up to Assad.

Quite apart from the goods, salaries and services that militant groups could often provide (see section 2.3), the religious ideology of fundamentalist groups – including al-Nusra – sometimes proved appealing in situations of extreme danger and scarcity. Fundamentalist religious ideologies, having generally been unappealing for most Syrians (especially at the outset of the war), nevertheless acquired a degree of appeal for some people. The chaos and hopelessness induced by war and unemployment sometimes produced a degree of attraction to jihadist groups offering structure, a sense of purpose and of being useful, and a sense – or even a possibility – that they were actually ‘winning’.⁵³ On a very immediate level, the effectiveness of al-Nusra meant that if a fighter’s FSA faction ran out of bullets, joining al-Nusra could mean a better chance of survival.⁵⁴

In May 2016, International Alert published some research based on interviews in Syria, Turkey and Lebanon with over 300 young Syrians and their families and community members. One interviewee told International Alert, “Because of the ongoing shelling, youth become more religious for fear of sudden death.” International Alert observed that many young Syrian men saw their role as protecting the honour of women, children and the land: one interviewee commented, “Islam tells us that whoever defends his honour, his land and dies, dies a martyr. We are proud to all die martyrs in defence of our honour and our land.”⁵⁵ Several other interviewees described the importance of anger

50 Anzalone.

51 France24/AFP (2012), ‘Syrians march in support of Jabhat al-Nusra militants’, 16 December (www.france24.com/en/20121216-syria-march-support-jabhat-nusra-militants-us-terrorist).

52 Rana Khalaf, personal communication.

53 See, in particular, Aubrey et al.

54 Aubrey et al.

55 Aubrey et al., p.12.

and the desire for revenge against the regime as important motives for joining al-Nusra or ISIS.⁵⁶ International Alert concluded: “For Syrians, belief in extreme ideologies appears to be – at most – a secondary factor in the decision to join an extremist group. Religion is providing a moral medium for coping and justification for fighting...”⁵⁷

This chimes with our own information. For example, an interviewee in Kilis said, “Many members of these groups [when the rebellion began] gained the strength to fight from their religious faith. In Islam, it is their religious duty to protect their brothers. It is called defensive jihad.”⁵⁸ Thoughts of the afterlife could give courage, while the idea of surrendering to God’s will proved attractive for some of those who found otherwise that they had little or no control over their own lives – and little hope for the future.⁵⁹ A loss of faith in the West could feed into an increased faith in God. Speaking on the day after the regime’s August 2013 chemical attacks in Damascus, one interviewee told us:

All Syrian people are full of rage with the Western governments like USA, Russia and all the world. They didn’t do anything to stop this massacre... Syrians understand the political game of the Western world. They have no trust in them and have surrendered to God’s will.

Again, this is not the same as saying that violent jihadist groups ‘brainwashed’ their new recruits, though it is clear that ISIS propaganda and training has involved significant degrees of ‘brainwashing’ (both within Syria and abroad).⁶⁰ We also need to be extremely wary of suggestions that ‘Islam’ is somehow driving terrorism. Indeed, International Alert’s interviewees and our own frequently cited religious teachings as reasons *not* to become involved in violence.⁶¹

Some recruits have seen themselves as standing up not simply to Assad but also to Western indifference or hostility towards Muslims in general in the context of a war on terror. Several people reported being treated by the international community as ‘less than human’ (a description that echoed accounts of the regime behaviour that had caused the war in the first place). The views

56 Another interviewee in Turkey said “Many Syrians want to get revenge against the regime for destroying their families, houses, lives and everything else. Jabhat al-Nusra actually fights the regime and now offers the best chance to get that revenge.” A peace educator in Beirut underlined the motive of revenge: “In Syria, children who aren’t engaged in [psychosocial support] like this are so vulnerable to recruitment, they could be directly recruited by Da’esh or Al-Nusra... We give them tools to express themselves in the community, rather than using weapons to express anger at their losses.” Aubrey et al., pp 11, 23.

57 Aubrey et al., p 4.

58 This positive gloss on religious motivations for violence contrasts with many perceptions in the West.

59 Our interviews.

60 On ISIS ideology and behaviour in Raqqa, see e.g. Samer.

61 Aubrey et al.

of an engineering student, expressed in the summer of 2013, have a prophetic ring today:

The civilian community in Europe is powerful, not like the civilian community here. But they did nothing for us. I expected millions in the streets saying this is a crime against humanity. Where are the millions of humanity lovers? We don't see anything. We are human too. This is why people are supporting Nusra. I am a college student. I hate the regime. I'm not religious. People like Western civilisation. But we have a situation of people getting tortured and killed in front of the whole world... YouTube has millions of videos explaining the regime crimes. All the people that want to know could know. So I was wrong [in liking Western civilisation]. I should go to my religion and have more faith in my religion. So I can say, 'We will make an Islamic army and kill these people.' There is a transformation from a civilian thinking to a religious thinking, with people saying 'I like to work with other Muslims because the other one didn't help me, so I have to find another mentality to help.' What kind of Islam will be adhered to? That depends on the kind of people that help me. If this is a foreign fighter, I'll be in another mentality, a bad mentality.

Some very similar points emerged from our meeting in Kilis: “The people who are thinking, they get killed. The people with the gun say ‘The West didn’t help you. You liked the Western civilisation but they didn’t help me or you.’” Another of our interviewees said:

When it comes to the lives of Syrian people, they [the Western countries] don't even care... 1500 people or more were killed by chemical weapons, most of them were children and women. And they still have doubts about it! They claimed that there is terrorism in our regions, or what is so-called terrorism, to have an excuse not to interfere. Do you think people living under these circumstances will not perceive the West and the USA as enemies? Do you think that all people can control their feelings and be rational like others might do? No! Especially the Arab people! They are emotional and they react quickly. So do you blame people who use weapons? Do you blame people who explode themselves? [...] Even if the West perceives them as terrorists, they are terrorists in the West's eyes not in our eyes.

Raised expectations exacerbated this disillusionment. When US military assets were put on immediate alert after the eastern Ghouta chemical attacks in August 2013, pro-regime circles began to panic and there was a rapid mobilisation of forces within the largely FSA-aligned opposition.⁶² Charles Lister noted, “There can be no underestimating the catastrophic impact that the U.S. threat reversal had upon the FSA brand and on the SMC [Supreme Military Council] in particular.”⁶³ By the end of 2013, the FSA lost the allegiance of its three most powerful armed groups.⁶⁴ All of these groups

⁶² Lister (2016).

⁶³ Lister (2016), p 11.

⁶⁴ I.e. Jaish al-Islam (in Damascus, Idlib and Aleppo), Suqor al-Sham (in Idlib) and Liaw al-Tawhid (in Aleppo).

joined the new Islamic Front, with encouragement from Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia.⁶⁵ Although the FSA was not finished and the CIA continued to coordinate support with regional states, most of the opposition was now looking to al-Nusra for military assistance against Assad.⁶⁶

In their book *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*, Weiss and Hassan spelled out how the chemical weapons attacks changed the mindset of many rebels:

When the United States failed to respond militarily, according to Obama's own 'red line', many had had their fill of empty or broken promises. Not long after Obama inked a deal with Vladimir Putin to decommission Syria's chemical weapons program, scores of Western-backed rebels either quit the field, mutinied, or invited ISIS to raid their Syrian warehouses filled with US-sent aid and supplies.⁶⁷

In 2014, tensions between what remained of the FSA and al-Nusra were escalating and Lister notes, "October 2014 marked a turning point when, for example, Jabhat al-Nusra began meting out harsh punishments, such as stoning men and women to death for adultery and prosecuting people for 'witchcraft'."⁶⁸ Open conflict ensued between al-Nusra on the one hand and the FSA's Syria Revolutionaries Front and Harakat Hazm on the other, with al-Nusra victorious and the FSA factions largely unprotected by their international backers.⁶⁹

While weakened by the growing strength of al-Nusra and ISIS, the FSA remained a significant force and was eventually to enjoy something of a resurgence. In particular, Russia's military intervention in September 2015 led to increased supplies of US-made TOW (tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided) missiles to 'vetted' FSA factions, helping them to stem the advance of regime forces through the end of 2015 and giving the FSA renewed credibility as a military force.⁷⁰ Significantly, in key areas of al-Nusra influence (including Idlib and Aleppo), "al-Nusra became dependent on the FSA to sustain tactical and strategic interests, rather than vice-versa," Lister notes.⁷¹ Meanwhile, powerful groups like Jaish al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham reverted to identifying with the FSA.⁷² The destruction of eastern Aleppo was to play a significant part in a second resurgence of fundamentalist groups outside the FSA umbrella, as we shall see.

⁶⁵ Lister (2016).

⁶⁶ Lister (2016).

⁶⁷ Weiss and Hassan, p 144.

⁶⁸ Lister (2016), p 16.

⁶⁹ Lister (2016).

⁷⁰ Lister (2016).

⁷¹ Lister (2016), p 20.

⁷² Lister (2016).

2.3 ISIS, al-Nusra and the promise of ‘protection’

After Syria’s war broke out, the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, sent Abu Mohammed al-Julani to Syria to organise jihadist cells there,⁷³ and this led to the formation of the al-Nusra Front, an al-Qaeda affiliate. It appears that al-Qaeda boss Ayman al-Zawahiri wanted to revive his organisation’s reputation (which had been damaged by atrocities in Iraq), and he thought he could do this via an al-Nusra movement in Syria that was more tolerant of minorities and that was focused on overthrowing Assad.⁷⁴

However, in April 2013 Baghdadi announced that he wanted to merge AQI and al-Nusra under the new name of Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIS or ISIL). Al-Nusra leader al-Julani rejected the merger and al-Qaeda’s overall leader Ayman al-Zawahiri backed this rejection, leaving al-Nusra as his affiliate in Syria.⁷⁵ What followed – from early 2014 – was a bitter war between ISIS and al-Nusra in Syria, a conflict that effectively pitted Baghdadi against his former mentor Zawahiri.⁷⁶ This fighting was especially severe in Raqqa, in Aleppo and in Idlib, and ISIS suffered significant reverses. The Nusra-ISIS conflict was also intense in oil-rich Deir al-Zour, from which ISIS managed to eject al-Nusra. ISIS established bureaucratic control in Deir al-Zour and Raqqa along with the provision of some social services and harsh Islamist punishments.⁷⁷ Al-Nusra has had a predominantly Syrian composition,⁷⁸ while ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi gathered together radicals from a wide range of countries including Syria and his native Iraq but also a range of other countries such as Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Chechnya and Uzbekistan as well as many countries in Europe. While al-Nusra was determined to overthrow Assad, ISIS has been more concerned to set up a caliphate.

Syrians have routinely condemned ISIS in the strongest terms and many have also strongly criticised al-Nusra. For example, one Syrian activist, whom we met at Kilis on the Turkish-Syrian border, commented:

ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra came from outside and they came with money and dollars... But Islam is a religion of peace. It is not about butchering people. They are accusing people of being secular and punishing people for kissing and other simple things.

⁷³ Abboud (2015a); Anzalone.

⁷⁴ Atrocities in Iraq included the targeting of non-Sunni religious groups like Shias, Yazidis and Christians. Weiss and Hassan; see also Birke (2013), and Birke (2015).

⁷⁵ Gerges (2015).

⁷⁶ Gerges (2015).

⁷⁷ Anzalone.

⁷⁸ Abboud (2015a).

There is evidence that al-Nusra's justice systems have sometimes alienated civilians, particularly when perceived as corrupt and based on patronage systems.⁷⁹ As far as ISIS is concerned, there have been many reports of young people who journey to Syria to join the organisation but then find they have made a terrible mistake, are horrified by ISIS brutality, and are unable to leave (perhaps because their commanders threaten to kill them if they try to escape, or because their countries of origin would arrest them on return).⁸⁰ Many of those fleeing ISIS areas have expressed extreme horror at ISIS atrocities, sometimes noting that even some members of ISIS are repulsed by its extreme violence.⁸¹

ISIS's vicious methods and its routine use of extreme intimidation have been documented, for example, in *The Raqqa Diaries*.⁸² ISIS's hostility to civil society prompted a popular backlash in western Aleppo after the organisation had gained ground there.⁸³ ISIS has used coercion to get and keep recruits and has run protection rackets. ISIS's atrocities against the Yazidis in Iraq included selling women into slavery and prompted US air strikes in support of the Yazidis trapped on Mount Sinjar.⁸⁴ ISIS's beheadings of Western hostages have also received widespread media coverage – not least because ISIS has made horrific videos to dramatise its own power and brutality.

At the same time, it is also important to understand that both ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra managed to gain influence within Syria in part by promising (and sometimes even delivering) a degree of protection and material support. The 'protection' has been routinely ambiguous and often brutal. In many ways it resembles the protection – mixed in with a heavy threat of violence – that is provided by mafia organisations (the proverbial 'offer you can't refuse'). In fact, ISIS and al-Nusra can be said to have 'offered' four main kinds of protection: protection from their own violence; protection from criminal groups and other rebels; protection from the regime; and protection from the chronic – and often extreme – scarcity of goods and services within Syria.

If intimidation implied the first kind of 'protection' (that is, protection from a faction's own violence for those who were compliant), the second type of protection offered has been protection against violence by criminals, warlords and other rebel groups. As the war economy became more rapacious, civilians

79 Khalaf (2015).

80 Atwan, p 145.

81 Helene Cooper, Eric Schmitt and Anne Barnard (2015), 'Battered but unbowed, ISIS is still on offensive', *New York Times*, 13 March. Rukmini Callimachi (2017) "Freed from ISIS, but in shock", *New York Times*, 27 July.

82 Samer.

83 Khalaf (2015).

84 E.g. Barkey.

increasingly sought some kind of antidote – and the opportunities for offering even perverse kinds of ‘law and order’ correspondingly increased.⁸⁵ Referring to a range of the more radical jihadist organisations, Abboud observed:

*The private financing of these jihadist groups gave them superior military resources and allowed them to make significant battlefield gains at the expense of FSA brigades. Moreover, the flow of private donations allowed the jihadist groups to avoid the criminality and illegality that was rampant in FSA brigades, who were increasingly infiltrated by opportunists and criminals hoping to gain economically from violence.*⁸⁶

Some of our sources also suggested that the relatively good access to foreign funding enjoyed by al-Nusra and ISIS had made them *less acquisitive* than other rebel factions, less dependent on stealing and extortion to fund their violence. An ICG report noted in 2013 that al-Nusra “seemingly imposes more discipline on members, cultivating a contrasting profile to some rivals’ corrupt, criminal behaviour”⁸⁷ ISIS confronted parasitic gangs in western Aleppo, and provided important services there.⁸⁸ Both al-Nusra and ISIS were also said to have benefited from the experience of practical governance that fighters had originally acquired as part of AQI.⁸⁹ Al-Nusra also extended its influence through non-regime areas by entering into the kinds of cooperative relations with other armed groups that were noted earlier.

As far as the FSA was concerned, a lack of coherence and discipline within the loose collection of FSA groups was important in creating opportunities for al-Nusra and ISIS. As Abboud noted in late 2015:

*Had the FSA been successful in consolidating its control of non-regime areas, the conditions that allowed for the entry of other groups would not have existed. Moreover, as the FSA brigades began to lose legitimacy among Syrians, who were increasingly weary of the FSA’s own brutality and criminality, many groups were able to step in and fill a void. In addition, the arrival of newly formed armed groups who were often better equipped and more disciplined than the FSA led to migration of fighters to these groups.*⁹⁰

While al-Nusra was no less brutal than many FSA factions and there were some reports of nepotism,⁹¹ it did offer a challenge to the FSA’s corruption. ISIS too offered a degree of protection against criminal activities (other than

⁸⁵ Compare also Afghanistan and Somalia, e.g. Keen (2012).

⁸⁶ Abboud (2015a), p 143.

⁸⁷ International Crisis Group (2013b), p 8.

⁸⁸ Khalaf (2015).

⁸⁹ Rana Khalaf, personal communication.

⁹⁰ Abboud (2015a), p 96; see also Lister (2014).

⁹¹ Aubrey et al.

its own).⁹² After talking with Syrians who had experienced ISIS rule, Lina Khatib noted in a March 2015 report for the Carnegie Middle East Center:

Despite its brutality, ISIS imposed a sense of order in areas under its control that appealed to those who had been living either in the chaos of war or under the authoritarianism of a regime that was unpredictable in the way it handled citizens' property. In the heyday of Assad rule, if someone's car was stolen, they may or may not have gotten it back depending on whether they had connections with the regime, and on whether the victim of the crime was well connected or not. Under the rule of the Islamic State, if the same problem were encountered, people could rely on the ISIS sharia courts to secure their property rights without the need for 'wasta' (personal connections). No matter that ISIS suppresses people's freedom of speech and that its courts are far from equitable on most matters, the organization has used property rights to build up a reputation of 'fairness.' In doing so, it has capitalized on how both war and authoritarianism reduce people's concerns from high-level values like freedom and democracy to basic needs, so that justice comes to be associated with material goods not with human dignity.⁹³

The third type of protection offered by rebel groups (discussed in more detail in section 3) has been protection against *regime* violence. Importantly, a key impetus for the initial formation of armed groups was the need to protect protesters against the regime's vicious retaliation. As the war evolved, some groups (most notably ISIS but also the PYD Kurdish faction) were able to achieve some kind of 'understanding' with regime actors that had the effect of limiting armed confrontations and regime attacks (discussed further in section 3.1). Al-Nusra also promised a form of protection against regime violence, but most of this related to al-Nusra's ability and willingness to confront regime forces militarily. Interviewees stressed that al-Nusra got a good deal of its support through standing up to Assad's forces more effectively than many other groups. In this, it was helped by foreign funding and by the resources and weaponry that it was able to obtain from insurgents in western Iraq.

The fourth type of protection offered by al-Nusra and ISIS has been protection from conditions of scarcity. ISIS and al-Nusra have provided a range of goods and services.⁹⁴ These services included education – a significant attraction in a context where the existing state education system has been devastated by the war.⁹⁵ The lure of protection, goods and services proved considerable in a context where no-one else – not the state, not the FSA, not even the international community – was offering very much. For all its viciousness, it would

⁹² E.g. Hallaj; see also Turkmani (2015).

⁹³ Khatib.

⁹⁴ Atwan; Turkmani, Ali et al. (2015); Turkmani (2015); Hallaj; Abboud; Lister (2014).

⁹⁵ Aubrey et al. ISIS has also offered stipends for students (*ibid.*).

be a mistake to see ISIS as no more than an atrocity-producing machine. Like al-Nusra, ISIS is a symptom of wider problems of state breakdown that need to be understood and addressed.

While it is tempting to dismiss the idea that ISIS actually offered something to local people, this phenomenon has been well documented. For example, Rim Turkmani, a Syrian researcher at the LSE, noted:

*The most important thing Syrians lost because of the conflict is simply their state, which is exactly what ISIL is attempting to provide by reversing the process of state collapse. The key to its success is that it plans and acts like a state... Its reputation for governance is one of its key recruiting tools for both civilians and fighters.*⁹⁶

A July 2014 report for the Washington-based Institute for the Study of War noted similarly: “ISIS has built a holistic system of governance that includes religious, educational, judicial, security, humanitarian, and infrastructure projects...”.⁹⁷ ISIS is also reported to have curried favour with relatively low taxes, though reports from Raqqa say taxes on businesses have sometimes been crippling.⁹⁸ As Lister observed in an assessment for the UK’s International Institute of Strategic Studies:

*ISIS... spends considerable financial resources on the provision of social services to civilian populations under its control. It is common, for example, for ISIS to finance the subsidizing of staple-food costs and to help fund the supply of food and money to the poor and elderly; to cap rent prices and provide free bus transport, children’s education, healthcare and vaccinations; and to undertake the general maintenance of local infrastructure. Amid a wider context of spiraling violence and instability, such services are a key facet of ISIS’s attempt to present itself as offering a sustainable and workable alternative to the existing state-based system offered by the Syrian and Iraqi governments.*⁹⁹

The appeal of fundamentalist groups also had an important social – or class – dimension. One ICG report noted that jihadist groups have often been strongest in city suburbs where rural migrants are congregated.¹⁰⁰ This underlines the importance of grievances in shaping not just the occurrence of Syria’s war but the evolution of it. It also underlines the potential for expanding one’s influence by offering services to those who are chronically lacking them (as well as offering, perhaps, a sense of certainty to those who have been uprooted).

⁹⁶ Turkmani (2015), p 4.

⁹⁷ Caris and Reynolds, p 4.

⁹⁸ Hallaj; Khatib; Samer.

⁹⁹ Lister (2014), p 79; on price regulation, see also Birke (2015).

¹⁰⁰ International Crisis Group (2013b).

Notwithstanding the importance of anti-Western ideologies in ISIS and al-Nusra, the success of these groups has been due, in some sense, to market forces: specifically, they have been able to offer higher salaries in comparison to other armed groups or other potential employers.¹⁰¹ One of our interviewees, from Aleppo, noted:

Rebels find people and give them money and with this they can get a large number of Syrian people. My family has three guys working with al-Nusra. My family does not believe in the ideology of al-Nusra, but were forced to, for the money, for the salary.

One investigation put Nusra salaries at US\$300–400 per month, compared to FSA salaries (often paid late) of around US\$100 per month; this disparity reflected the relative abundance of foreign funding for al-Nusra.¹⁰² Al-Nusra's resources from foreign donors and from insurgents in western Iraq also helped its attempts to provide services and a degree of 'law and order'.¹⁰³ ISIS salaries seem to have been particularly high,¹⁰⁴ and its sources of income have been diverse. A detailed investigation in German magazine *Der Spiegel* noted:

The air strikes flown by the US-led coalition [from 2014] may have destroyed the oil wells and refineries. But nobody is preventing the Caliphate's financial authorities from wringing money out of the millions of people who live in the regions under IS [ISIS] control – in the form of new taxes and fees, or simply by confiscating property. IS, after all, knows everything from its spies and from the data it plundered from banks, land-registry offices and money-changing offices. It knows who owns which homes and which fields; it knows who owns many sheep or has lots of money.¹⁰⁵

This account should further caution us against portraying ISIS as a source of good governance or even as a consistent protector of private property. But ISIS's income-stream did give it governance options. Like al-Nusra, ISIS benefited from relatively secure supply routes from insurgents in western Iraq. Both al-Nusra and ISIS also benefited, at various points, from the oil in north-east Syria. One estimate in October 2014 was that ISIS was making a million dollars a day from its oil smuggling operations.¹⁰⁶ Another estimate was that ISIS oil revenues in Syria amounted to US\$3–5 million per day.¹⁰⁷ ISIS's looting of Mosul Central Bank helped fund military advances in Syria, including the

¹⁰¹ Aubrey et al. stressed high mobility between armed groups depending to a large extent on salaries.

¹⁰² Aubrey et al.

¹⁰³ Abboud (2015a); Anzalone; Khalaf (2015).

¹⁰⁴ See e.g. Hallaj; Khatib.

¹⁰⁵ Reuter.

¹⁰⁶ Spencer Ackerman (2014), 'Foreign jihadists flocking to Iraq and Syria on 'unprecedented scale' – UN', *Guardian*, 30 October.

¹⁰⁷ Atwan, p 147, citing www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-29370484. Also Atwan p 147, citing www.cnn.com/id/102115652#, 'Remarkably, the Assad regime in Syria buys oil from Islamic State in Iraq because, since the US and European Union banned Syrian oil exports in 2011, official production virtually came to a halt'.

takeover of Deir al-Zour from al-Nusra.¹⁰⁸ ISIS defeated al-Nusra in eastern Syria.¹⁰⁹ Military success attracted further support. As Fawaz Gerges noted, “As long as IS [ISIS] is on a winning streak, it can get away with its poverty of ideas and widespread opposition from Muslim opinion: it promises utopia and delivers by winning.”¹¹⁰

The appeal of ISIS among Syrians should not be exaggerated, and as soon as ISIS stopped ‘winning’, it rapidly lost support. As International Alert noted, “Research respondents often (although not exclusively) said that ISIS is a foreign force that lacks legitimacy and local support. The majority... consider ISIS to be brutal and illegitimate – as something to be feared rather than something to aspire to... [Jabhat al-Nusra] has been much more successful in establishing itself as a quasi-legitimate, community-based organisation providing relative security, protection, education and structure on a daily basis.”¹¹¹

From the evidence presented in section 2, it is apparent that the growing influence of al-Nusra and ISIS reflected not only their use of coercion and fear (though this was considerable) but also their ability to offer – and sometimes deliver – a degree of protection and a modicum of services in a context of acute scarcity, crime and danger from the Assad regime. Meanwhile, the external funding base and the spoils of a lucrative war economy shaped the fortunes of a variety of rebel groups. To achieve sustained peace in Syria, it will be important to consider how these aspects of the war system – and the needs they reflect – can be addressed.

¹⁰⁸ Richani.

¹⁰⁹ Lister (2016).

¹¹⁰ Gerges (2015); see also Lister (2014), p 79.

¹¹¹ Aubrey et al.