3

Regime survival: the war system and its functions for regime actors

3.1 Behaviours that boosted armed rebellion – and fundamentalist elements within it

While one might expect that an incumbent regime would try to prevent an armed rebellion, to keep it small, to defeat it quickly and to oppose any extreme elements with particular vigour, we have noted that the Syrian regime's behaviour departed significantly and repeatedly from these 'common sense' assumptions. In particular, the regime took nine kinds of action that boosted armed rebellion and/or violent fundamentalist elements within it:

1. In relation to Iraq (before the Syrian war broke out in 2011), the Assad regime facilitated a flow of *jihadis* from Syria to help resist the US-led occupation of Iraq. This helped to forge links between Assad and fundamentalist elements that were to be influential in the Syrian war itself.

2. When Syria's war broke out, regime attacks on civilians – and widespread abuse such as torture and arbitrary imprisonment – helped to provoke and expand the armed rebellion.

3. The regime stirred sectarian sentiment through selective attacks and use of divisive language.

4. The regime selectively released violent fundamentalists from Syrian prisons.

5. The regime actively colluded with terror attacks, making the threat of terrorism seem greater than it initially was.

6. At times, the regime cooperated economically with rebel groups.

7. Regime actors engaged in a range of predatory behaviours that predictably lost 'hearts and minds' to the rebels.

8. The regime promoted scarcity in rebel areas – not least through blocking international relief operations. While this in many ways helped to weaken the armed opposition (especially the less fundamentalist elements), it also tended to radicalise public opinion and attract support for anti-Western groups.

9. The regime offered partial immunity from its own attacks to ISIS in particular, while concentrating much of its violence on alternative, non-fundamentalist governance structures.

In her insightful 1951 book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt highlighted totalitarian regimes' use of what she called 'action as propaganda'. In particular, she pointed to "the advantages of a propaganda that constantly 'adds the power of organization' to the feeble and unreliable voice of argument, and thereby realises, so to speak, on the spur of the moment, whatever it says."[112] President Bashar al-Assad proved something of a master at 'action as propaganda'. His regime claimed from the outset that the uprising was the work of criminals, sectarians and terrorists, and the regime also fairly consistently acted in ways that made this claim considerably more plausible (both domestically and internationally) as time went by. Highlighting criminal and fundamentalist elements offered the prospect of deflecting attention from the grievances fuelling rebellion.[113] Even more importantly, the stronger the more abusive and fundamentalist elements in the rebellion became, the greater the tendency in the international community to see Assad not just as a 'lesser evil' but even as some kind of 'necessary evil'.

Of course, it is never easy to establish *intention* with absolute certainty. We are not privy to the private plans of Assad and his inner circle; and in any war there will always be a significant element of unintended consequences. Nevertheless, the effects of regime behaviour (in boosting rebellion and/or fundamentalist elements) were in many ways quite predictable – and the 'pay offs' have also been considerable. Significantly, even when it became clear that the regime's tactics were reproducing the enemy (and reinforcing

112 Arendt, p 363.
113 Cf. Attree (2017).

fundamentalist elements within it), Assad's government did not change tack. We now consider these nine behaviours in turn.

Supporting insurgency in Iraq

The first type of Syrian regime behaviour that fed fundamentalist elements actually preceded the Syrian war. It was Bashar al-Assad's support for AQI and the insurgency against the US-led occupation from 2003. This involved facilitating the flow of jihadists from Syria to join AQI. When *Der Spiegel* acquired the private papers of Samir al-Khifawi (known as 'Haji Bakr', a former Iraqi officer who appears to have played a key role in planning ISIS's operations in Syria), the magazine noted Haji Bakr's "decade of contacts to Assad's intelligence services", adding:

> *In 2003, the Damascus regime was panicked that then-US President George W. Bush, after his victory over Saddam Hussein, would have his troops continue into Syria to topple Assad as well. Thus, in the ensuing years, Syrian intelligence officials organized the transfer of thousands of radicals from Libya, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia to al-Qaida in Iraq. Ninety percent of the suicide attackers entered Iraq via the Syrian route. A strange relationship developed between Syrian generals, international jihadists and former Iraqi officers who had been loyal to Saddam – a joint venture of deadly enemies, who met repeatedly to the west of Damascus.*[114]

This was a gamble. After all, it might have served as an additional reason for the US to topple Assad. But according to Weiss and Hassan in their book *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*, Assad wanted to use his control over the flow of jihadists – his ability to 'turn the tap on or off' – to make the case to the Americans that they needed his cooperation and they needed him as President of Syria. In any event, support from Damascus for jihadists in Iraq continued, and Lister notes:

> *In mid-2009, the Syrian government's military intelligence service convened a meeting in the Syrian mountain town of Zabadi, in which Assad regime officials sat alongside leaders from the Islamic State and from Iraq's deposed Baath Party and planned a series of debilitating bombings aimed at crippling Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's standing in Baghdad. We know about this meeting only because Iraqi intelligence had a mole in the room, wearing a wire. Those attacks took place in August 2009 and left over 700 killed and wounded.*[115]

There were consequences for Syria. As Assad's ties with fundamentalists were nurtured, the US-led occupation and then the Shia-dominated Iraqi

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114 Reuter.
115 Lister (2017b). Even before the war, Lister notes, "… the U.S. government and its intelligence apparatuses were wholly aware of the Assad regime's deep history of facilitating the growth of jihadist militancy and manipulating it for Damascus' own domestic and foreign policy agendas." (Lister, 2016, p 26).

government largely failed to tackle the grievances among Sunnis in particular that were fuelling the long insurgency.[116] A fortified AQI went on to provide many of the personnel for ISIS and al-Nusra in Syria.[117] Fighters returning from Iraq proved to be a significant source of instability within Syria: attempting to explain the appeal of fundamentalist groups among the Syrian rebels, one ICG investigation noted in 2013, "… a genuine jihadi culture has taken root in several communities, notably parts of Idlib and Aleppo governorates where, in the not-so-distant past, young men had volunteered to fight the U.S. occupation in Iraq."[118]

Attacking and abusing civilians

When mass protests broke out in Syria in 2011, the regime helped to precipitate (and swell) armed rebellion through a second set of behaviours: attacking and abusing civilians. Through its provocative and often indiscriminate attacks on Syrian civilians, the regime ended up turning a peaceful protest movement into an armed rebellion. Meanwhile, regime attacks on civilians also played a major role in turning the armed rebellion into something deeply infused with militant fundamentalist elements.

Violence against civilians does occasionally 'succeed' in suppressing a rebellion (even if the resultant grievances prove ultimately destabilising). Within Syria itself, the government's mass killings in Hama in 1982 helped to suppress revolt at that time; and after mass protests erupted in 2011, some state actors appear to have hoped that a vicious crackdown would similarly crush the uprising while deterring support for the regime's opponents.[119] After arresting more than 200 students at university dorms in one day, one defector from an elite regime unit in Aleppo commented, "We wanted to scare them and other students to prevent them from protesting again."[120] Another aim when attacking

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116 Wasser and Dodge; Gerges (2016). Maliki's Iraqi Government justified its repressive policies as part of its own 'war on terror' (Mathews, Gerges, 2016). The 'war on terror' framework has also had some damaging (and often ignored) effects on the Iraqi state. One important reason why underlying Sunni grievances in Iraq have not been effectively tackled has been the Iraqi Government's instrumentalisation of this framework. Jessica Mathews noted in August 2014 that Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki "has justified everything from denial of government resources to arbitrary arrest and torture on the grounds that he is fighting a war against terror. But he has pointedly failed to classify Shia violence – including, for example, dozens of killings by Asaib, a Shia militia in Basra – as terror… There is no military solution to this state of affairs. The solution must be political…".

117 On the Iraqi army background of most of the ISIS leadership and ISIS's 'almost bureaucratic' management style, see also Lister (2014), pp 75–6. Revealingly, Bakr's meticulous plan for gaining power in Syria involved a number of techniques that were staples of Saddam's Ba'athist regime, including systematic use of informants to discover any illegal or embarrassing activities that could be used to blackmail powerful figures such as the leaders of rebel brigades (Reuter; on the use of these tactics by Saddam, see Makiya).

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

119 E.g. Hinnebusch.

120 Human Rights Watch (2011b).

civilians *en masse* may have been to avoid military casualties – particularly when the regime shelled civilians from afar without an accompanying ground operation.[121]

That said, the regime's violence from 2011 was routinely so overwhelming, so indiscriminate and so cruel that it predictably had extremely counterproductive effects (even from a purely *military* point of view). Most importantly, it propelled large numbers of civilians *into* armed rebellion (a process that seems to have been assisted by a ready supply of weapons to rebel groups from foreign backers such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey).[122] As Stathis Kalyvas has shown in a more general discussion, where people have an option of defecting from a government to a rebellion, indiscriminate violence will tend to *create* rebels – first, by making people angry and, second, by removing or reducing the incentive that civilians would otherwise have for distancing themselves from rebels.[123] In Syria, that option of joining a rebel group was an increasingly feasible one, and many of those joining were themselves government soldiers who were personally repulsed by the atrocities they had seen or been ordered to carry out – something that underlines the counterproductive effects of the atrocities themselves.

In his well-researched book *Syria*, Samer Abboud stresses that initial protests were strongly committed to non-violence but that this commitment came under strain. In addition to support for armed rebellion from some external backers (including Qatar), there were important internal considerations pushing in this direction. In particular, as Abboud notes, "the sustained and brutal violence inflicted on protesters by the regime and its armed proxies… encouraged Syrians to take up arms… As [regime] violence increased, protests expanded." [124]

The regime's policy of crushing demonstrations and killing or imprisoning protesters also had the effect of squeezing moderates out of the opposition while the most radical anti-Assad elements sometimes had a better chance to survive.[125]

Our interviewees gave some horrific examples of vicious attacks on civilians.

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121 See e.g. International Crisis Group (2013b).

122 See e.g. Hersh (2016).

123 Kalyvas.

124 Abboud (2015a), p 87; International Crisis Group observes the same thing: "By seeking to force entire communities into submission, [the security services] pushed them towards armed resistance; the protest movement's militarization was a local by-product of heightened repression (p 4) … where repression was particularly ruthless, armed opposition groups emerged, for the most part as self-defence forces (p 10)." (International Crisis Group, 2012a). See also Lister (2016), p 4.

125 Wege.

At a meeting with local aid workers in Kilis on the Turkish-Syrian border, we were told:

> There's an airstrike and then people gather round to pull people out [*of the rubble*] *and then there's another attack. Radical groups are also the result of attacks on civilians. There's a deliberate tactic to attack civilians when there are protests against the regime. They used snipers and fired at people at funerals, they would shoot them also at cemeteries.*

Naturally, these actions encouraged many people to take up arms, if only to defend themselves. A language teacher remembered the March 2011 protests in Deir al-Zour, which began peacefully: "In the beginning, nobody had even a stick in their hands… For five months, the protests were peaceful… However, when the regime started to kill and abduct individuals, people were forced to be armed." One man we spoke to in Kilis said: "Many people's houses were destroyed, many family members died. There are two options: to run away or to become a brutal fighter to defend the family, land and country."

Prison itself turned many ordinary Muslims into Salafist militants[126] – not least because torture was routinely inflicted there.[127] As part of a detailed *al Jazeera* investigation in al-Bab (a large town 30 kilometres north-east of Aleppo), Anita McNaught quoted one local resident, "Some people were tortured too much… If they came home, they sold everything they had to fight the regime." [128] The systematic use of torture and starvation, as well as mass executions, at the regime's notorious Saydnaya prison has been documented by Amnesty International.[129]

Fomenting sectarianism

A third type of regime behaviour that in many ways nurtured rebellion (and fundamentalist elements within it) was *stirring up sectarian sentiments*. By mobilising various communities against the threat of 'Sunni extremists', the regime stirred up ethnic and religious differences. This appears to have reinforced the very 'Sunni extremism' that the regime claimed to oppose, while encouraging some members of other groups – notably the Alawites – into atrocities that themselves fuelled rebellion. The regime's use of language was instrumental in stirring up sectarian sentiments, and official statements routinely involved a threat from 'Sunni extremists'.[130] The regime also

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126 E.g. Weiss and Hassan.
127 Human Rights Watch (2011a).
128 Anita McNaught (2012), 'The business of detention in Syria', *al Jazeera*, 2 August.
129 Amnesty International (2017a).
130 E.g. International Crisis Group (2012b).

consistently portrayed the armed opposition as terrorists who were backed by foreign, 'Sunni' interests in the form, principally, of Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.[131] One interviewee noted:

> The regime was painting the opposition as sectarian before it was. It's true that protests were centred on mosques, but that was where you could get together with a group and organise! When I was studying in Damascus, if there was a group of five or more, security will come and say you need to separate.

Violence was also used strategically to heighten sectarian tensions. According to a detailed study by Weiss and Hassan, "The most notorious regime massacres typically occurred in areas where Alawite, Sunni and Ismaili (another Shia offshoot) villages and hamlets adjoined one another, the better to encourage sectarian reprisal bloodlettings."[132] Assad's forces also deliberately mocked core elements of Sunni belief.[133] One source reported that some of the 'Sunni militiamen' attacking predominantly Alawite neighbourhoods in major cities turned out to be 'card-carrying' members of the Security Forces.

Another interviewee in Kilis noted in August 2013:

> In order to stay in power, the government changed the conflict into a sectarian one. They wanted to establish the extremist image. Peaceful protesters have been bombed and shelled by rockets and missiles. Why do they attack civilians? Armed groups' locations are well known by the regime – why do they target the civilians? In the Ghouta area [near Damascus] where the chemical weapons attack took place, FSA bases are obvious. Why target civilians?

As far as the average Sunni citizen was concerned, regime violence tended to be quite indiscriminate (as noted), and even those unconnected to rebel groups often found themselves attacked.[134] At the same time, regime violence could quite cunningly *discriminate* between different ethnic and religious groups. Many minorities were spared the worst of the violence inflicted by the regime – not just the Alawites but also the Druze, the Kurds and others – as part of the regime's strategy of 'divide and rule', while the regime simultaneously stoked minorities' fears about Salafist groups in particular. This fear-mongering was also practised among Christian groups.

The regime also tended to spare wealthy members of the urban Sunni bourgeoisie, a key constituency that it was courting.[135] On top of all this, ISIS-controlled areas were also frequently spared regime violence.

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131 Merz. He also sometimes highlighted the 'criminal' elements in the armed opposition; Droz-Vincent.
132 Weiss and Hassan, pp 167–8; see also Darwisheh.
133 Weiss and Hassan.
134 E.g. Human Rights Watch (2011a, 2011b).
135 Rana Khalaf, personal communication; Hamidi.

The *shabiha* militias that were used against rebels and suspected rebel supporters often drew heavily on the Alawite ethnic group that the regime saw as one of its key supporters, and the threat of Sunni extremism was frequently invoked to induce loyalty from the Alawites as well as other minorities such as Christians.[136] Within the Syrian military, recruits – a great many of them Alawite – were sometimes told they were fighting for Shi'ite Islam and that, if they died, they would be martyrs of the highest rank.[137]

Naturally, when Sunnis saw Alawites playing such a prominent role in the repression, their own sectarian sentiments were also frequently reinforced. Thus, the regime's behaviour fed into the *production* of militant fundamentalist groups even as the regime avowed that these were the main threat to Syrian society.

Strategic release of prisoners

A fourth major way in which regime behaviour nurtured militant fundamentalist elements was through the *strategic release of prisoners*. It is hard to imagine that the boost this predictably gave to militant elements was anything other than deliberate. On 31 May 2011, Assad issued an amnesty for 'political prisoners'. While this looked in many ways like an attempt to placate the protest movement, there was rather more to it. Weiss and Hassan noted in 2015:

> *… it was applied selectively – plenty of protestors and activists were kept in jail, while an untold number of Salafist-Jihadists were let out. Of these, many had not long ago been on rat lines to [join the insurgency in] Iraq, only to return to Syria and be collared and locked up by the very Mukhabarat [military intelligence] that had sent them there in the first place. Among those who took up arms were Zahran Alloush, Hassan Abboud and Ahmed Issa al-Sheikh, the current or former Salafist leaders of the best organized rebel brigades in Syria. There's a famous photograph of them standing in a row, all smiles, not long after being decreed free men by al-Assad… Future ISIS members were also amnestied, including Awwad al-Mahklaf, who is now a local emir in Raqqa, and Abu al-Ahir al-Absi, who served time in Sednaya prison in 2007 for membership in al-Qaeda [and seems subsequently to have become ISIS provincial leader for Homs].*[138]

Tarek Alghorani, a Syrian who was imprisoned from 2006 to 2011 for subversive blogging, was later interviewed in Tunis:

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136 International Crisis Group (2013b).

137 Weiss and Hassan.

138 Sands, Vela and Maayeh. Weiss and Hassan noted, "Prisons in Syria are bywords for Islamization – terrorist universities in the heart of the Middle East…" (p 145).

From the first days of the revolution (in March 2011), Assad denounced the organization [ISIS] as being the work of radical Salafists, so he released the Salafists he had created in his prisons to justify the claim… If you do not have an enemy, you create an enemy.[139]

In all, two of al-Nusra's founding members and three of ISIS's most important leaders in Syria were released.[140] *The National* featured an interview with a 12-year veteran of Syria's Military Intelligence Directorate, an Alawite who defected from his unit in northern Syria in summer of 2011. He commented:

The regime did not just open the door to the prisons and let these extremists out, it facilitated them in their work, in their creation of armed brigades. This is not something I heard rumours about, I actually heard the order, I have seen it happening. These orders came down from [Military Intelligence] headquarters [in] Damascus.[141]

The officer added that the regime made an abundance of weapons available to these actors in Idlib and also in Daraa, where the uprising began.[142]

Regime involvement in terror attacks

A fifth action that boosted fundamentalist elements – helping them to project an image of power and helping further to inflame sectarian sentiments – seems to have been *regime involvement in terror-style bomb attacks*, attacks that were then blamed on 'terrorists'. Of course, this involvement is difficult to prove and the intention behind any such involvement cannot be known for sure. But in the course of our interviews, there were many people who wanted to draw attention to official complicity in terror bomb attacks. One interviewee commented:

In my village of Haritan [10 kilometres from Aleppo], I didn't know or hear of anyone who had extremist tendencies, to commit terrorist acts. All of a sudden, they seemed to be present! In Aleppo, a day or two before the international monitors turned up,[143] *there were a series of bomb explosions in government security centres like the secret police and at police stations. They are sensitive locations and full of security! It is very difficult for an ordinary person to enter. So how come they become extremely*

139 Cordall.

140 Lister (2017b).

141 Sands, Vela and Maayeh; Weiss and Hassan, pp 147–8; see also Lister (2014), pp 71–2, on the release of jihadists helping Jabhat al-Nusra and a number of other Salafaist groups, including Ahrar al-Sham.

142 Sands, Vela and Maayeh.

143 The *Guardian* reported in April 2014 that rebels attacked a police station near Aleppo and the army repeatedly shelled Homs at the time UN observers were arriving in Syria (Beaumont). There was an explosion at an air force intelligence building in Damascus in March 2012 (Gerges, 2016). There were several other suicide attacks involving al-Nusra, many of them in Damascus (Sherlock, 2012b). The regime's intelligence centre in Aleppo was to be attacked repeatedly, with tunnel explosions being a common tactic (Mroue; Gebeily). A former military intelligence officer reported that security agencies would sometimes encourage rebel attacks on other security branches (Sands, Vela and Maayeh).

vulnerable to a series of terrorist bombings? In the video footage, you could see dead bodies, but no sign of blood. It looks like they brought bodies from elsewhere and put them around to make it look as if they have been killed by the explosion.

While there is clearly some conjecture and interpretation here, such accounts are in line with the views of Nawaz Farez, a former Syrian ambassador to Iraq who defected in July 2012. After recounting the history of Assad's support for AQI, Farez said all the large-scale terrorist attacks in Syria, beginning in late 2011 were "perpetrated by al-Qaeda through cooperation with the security forces", including a devastating attack on a military intelligence building in a Damascus suburb in May 2012.[144] One of our interviewees, commenting in 2013, downplayed the al-Qaeda presence but underlined the regime tactic of blaming terrorists:

> *The regime might kill ten people or have a bomb explosion somewhere and say al-Qaeda was responsible… There was an explosion at the Ministry of Defence and you could see intelligence police trying to create a fake scene [on Syrian state TV]… The regime is killing people and accusing al-Qaeda in order to project the narrative that the regime is fighting al-Qaeda.*

As in any war, the line between collaboration and infiltration has often been difficult to draw. But it appears that regime militiamen and secret security personnel would sometimes impersonate rebels (whether in pursuit of intelligence, as part of a strategy of targeting rebels, or as part of an attempt to make rebels look more extreme than they were at the outset).[145] One source, a former regime pilot-turned-soldier, recalled being captured by al-Nusra in early 2013 before encountering a former military colleague working inside al-Nusra, who arranged his release. The source commented, "Jabhat al-Nusra is full of spies and agents working for the regime."

One of our interviewees in Kilis suggested that al-Nusra had been created by the regime and that "The aim is to transform the Syrian revolution from a popular to an extremist revolution that needs to be destroyed." Again, such views need to be approached with caution: Nusra has a strong record of *opposing* Assad, and even the presence of government spies might simply imply a desire to monitor or subvert the enemy. Peter Neumann has stressed that there is no solid evidence that the jihadists as a whole are controlled by the regime, but he also notes that Damascus has a long history of embedding agents and turning suspects into collaborators, a history that goes back to operations against the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1970s and 1980s.[146]

144 Weiss and Hassan, p 148.

145 Impersonation of rebels has been noted in other conflicts (Schomerus, Keen).

146 Peter Neumann (2014), 'Suspects into collaborators', *London Review of Books* **36** (7), 3 April, www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n07/peter-neumann/suspects-into-collaborators

Intelligence documents do seem to suggest that the Assad regime has had agents inside ISIS, including in important positions.[147]

Cooperating economically with rebels

A sixth way the regime nurtured armed rebellion (and fundamentalism) was economic cooperation with rebel groups. Cooperation has included the sale of weapons and ammunition, the sale of information, the receipt of payment for not attacking particular areas, profiteering from supply of goods into besieged areas, and agreements surrounding the extraction of oil. The motives for such cooperation are complex (and are discussed further in section 3.2). But such behaviour suggests, at minimum, that weakening the rebels was frequently not an overriding priority for regime actors. Insofar as 'greed' and exploiting civilians was the motivation, such cooperation tended predictably to 'lose hearts and minds' as civilians recoiled.

Some idea of the systems of cooperation that evolved is conveyed by practices in eastern Ghouta on the outskirts of Damascus, where there was a significant rebel presence. From October 2013, this area was placed under siege by the regime. But the main rebel group, Jaysh al-Islam (or the Islam Army), was able to hold a military parade showcasing tanks and trained fighters, apparently without fear of regime attack. How was this possible so close to the heart of regime power in Damascus? Meanwhile, one interviewee asked Turkmani et al. "How can there be a siege when the head of Islam Army can go in and out of Ghouta several times this year and appear in Turkey and Saudi Arabia…?"[148] A pernicious economic system grew up in the context of the siege and the accompanying acute shortage of international aid. International aid to the besieged area was very scarce, and trade passing through a key checkpoint and an underground tunnel became a major source of income for armed groups in the besieged area (who took turns to control the tunnel) as well as for government forces and officials on the other side. Sugar inside the besieged area was sold for 24 times the price just outside.[149]

While 'across the lines' cooperation on arms is naturally difficult to prove, it was a common subject of discussion. One of our interviewees, a Kurdish aid worker, said: "The general rule is al-Qaida and regime cooperation. The regime supplied arms to protesters hoping to portray them as cruel, as rebels, as terrorists. Islamists have apparently been cooperating with the regime

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147 al-Wasl.
148 Turkmani, Ali et al. (2015), p 36.
149 Turkmani, Ali et al. (2015).

in abducting opposition figures." [150] Another interviewee suggested in 2013: "Nusra is controlled by Assad and the security police… They sold the weapons to the revolution."

As in other conflicts,[151] cooperation 'across the lines' could – on occasion – reflect bonds of sympathy. After Hezbollah fighters were used to shore up struggling Syrian army units, one Hezbollah fighter commented: "There are some soldiers in the Syrian army who are sympathetic to the opposition, and others who would sell information to anyone who pays for it. We got to a point where we, in Hezbollah, could no longer go to sleep altogether. One or two people would stay up to ensure that we wouldn't be betrayed." [152] Since grievances were widespread in the military and defecting from the military was a fairly dangerous step, it seems reasonable to surmise that even some of those choosing to remain will have had some degree of sympathy with the uprising.

'Across the lines' cooperation over oil was also a notable phenomenon, and the main beneficiaries among the rebels were al-Nusra and ISIS. Nusra controlled oil fields in Hasakah and Deir al-Zour in 2013 and early 2014.[153] We spoke to one member of the Deir al-Zour local council, who commented on the rebels who were controlling oil wells in the area:

> *They are threatened* [*by the regime*]. *Either the regime destroys the oil wells or the rebels keep it pumping. They open holes to take some of the oil for themselves, and the rest goes to the regime. The oil pipes reach Homs* [*and a government refinery there*] *and regime storages. It is normal. Gas is the same.*[154]

One May 2013 report in the *Guardian* noted, "In some areas, al-Nusra has struck deals with government forces to allow the transfer of crude across the front lines to the Mediterranean coast." [155] The resources helped al-Nusra to expand its influence. Abu Saif, a fighter with the Ahrar Brigade, linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, said:

> *The Syrian regime itself is paying more than 150m Syrian lire* [£1.4m] *monthly to Jabhat al-Nusra to guarantee oil is kept pumping through two major oil pipelines in Banias and Latakia. Middlemen trusted by both sides are to facilitate the deal and transfer money to the organisation…*

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150 See also Syrian Center for Strategic and Political Studies/Syrian Expert House, p 178).

151 See e.g. Keen (2005).

152 Naame Shaam, p 30. Hezbollah fighters added that if Hezbollah is involved in a battle, one Hezbollah soldier has to be on every Syrian army tank – to insure against 'betrayal'.

153 Lister (2014), p 85.

154 One man controlling a local gas plant said he had to keep supplying both rebels and the regime, since both would attack if they did not receive supplies (Ghaith).

155 Borger, Julian and Mona Mahmood (2013), 'EU decision to lift Syrian oil sanctions boosts jihadist groups', *Guardian*, 19 May.

A former Syrian oil executive in the rebel-held areas said in May 2013 that al-Nusra and other jihadist groups were using much of the money to win hearts and minds in areas they have captured, such as Raqqa city, which the regime lost to rebels in March 2013.[156]

ISIS, having been on the defensive in the face of an onslaught from rebel groups linked to the FSA in early 2014, took control of most of the eastern governorate of Deir al-Zour in August 2014 before taking control of most of Raqqa governorate in the same month.[157] In this, ISIS was assisted by its capture of Mosul in Iraq (including the looting of the Mosul Central Bank).[158] By September 2014, ISIS was earning perhaps US$2 million per day through the sale of oil in Syria and Iraq,[159] and many of ISIS's oil sales involved a significant degree of cooperation with the Syrian regime. Since ISIS did not have refining capacity (other than very basic improvised devices), it tended to trade crude oil. In an investigation published in September 2014, oil traders reported that ISIS had been guarding oil pipelines transporting crude oil from Kurdish oilfields in northeast Syria to a government-run refinery in Homs. ISIS oil was also finding its way into Turkey and into rebel- and government-held areas via a network of traders, some of them close to the Assad regime. Meanwhile, the regime was continuing to supply ISIS areas with some basic services like water, gas and electricity.[160]

An April 2014 report quoted one FSA commander saying that ISIS was selling grain to the regime: "As the fighting between the Free Army and Daesh (ISIS) intensified, the latter struck a deal with the regime to sell it the two-year grain stocks they had put their hands on and had hidden away in Deir al-Zor."[161] The FSA commander said ISIS had sold the grain very cheaply, adding: "About eight months ago [around August 2013], they [ISIS] completely stopped all fighting with the regime." One YPG commander reported, "When Da'esh came into Hasakah [in June 2015], many regime units switched to Da'esh's side. There are also many Da'esh spies within the regime."[162] As ISIS fighters marched towards Aleppo in that same month, Syrian opposition leaders said

156 Borger, Julian and Mona Mahmood (2013), 'EU decision to lift Syrian oil sanctions boosts jihadist groups', *Guardian*, 19 May.

157 Lister (2014).

158 One estimate is that by June 2014 ISIS was earning in excess of $12 million per month from activities in Mosul alone (Lister (2014), citing Amanda Macias and Jeremy Bender (2014), 'Here's how the world's richest terrorist group makes millions every day', *Business Insider*, 27 August).

159 Lister (2014), citing Indira Lakshmanan and Anthony DiPaola (2014), 'Islamic State: oil magnates of terror', *Businessweek*, 4 September.

160 World Bulletin/News Desk (2014); Abboud (2015b); 'Syria: an interview with Samer Abboud', *Jadaliyya*, 30 December. See also Turkmani.

161 Naame Shaam, p 48.

162 Jonathan Steele (2015) 'The Syrian Kurds Are Winning!', *New York Review of Books*, 3 December.

the regime was leaving ISIS unmolested while striking rival insurgents.[163] Meanwhile, the Twitter account of the (closed) US embassy in Syria noted, "Reports indicate that the regime is making airstrikes in support of ISIL's [ISIS's] advance on Aleppo, aiding extremists against Syrian population."[164]

Again, not all this behaviour implies a coherent plot to nurture rebels and extremists. But it underlines that cooperative motivations extended well beyond winning, and it shows that, for the regime, assisting one's 'enemy' – and not least the most fundamentalist elements – was far from being anathema.

Predatory behaviour

A seventh way in which regime behaviour boosted some rebels was through predatory activity. Such behaviour predictably lost 'hearts and minds' to the rebels. For example, the August 2012 *al Jazeera* investigation of al-Bab noted: "Many people in al-Bab – and apparently across Syria – were arrested just to extort money from the detainee's families… Locals told us that the sheer scale of the security services' corruption and sadism in the end proved their undo-ing." Predatory behaviour by regime actors also contributed to a war economy in which ISIS and al-Nusra were able to propose themselves as a source of 'law and order' (though it would presumably have been difficult for the regime to foresee this effect).

Among the most significant aspects of the war economy in regime-controlled areas have been: looting and extortion by government soldiers and *shabiha* militias; stealing aid; using force to manipulate markets ('forced markets');[165] manipulating the sanctions regime (for example, by profiting from smuggling);[166] manipulating the exchange rate and the currency reserves;[167] and confiscating businesses and other assets of those considered 'disloyal'. Many elements of the elite have adapted successfully to the war that the regime has been fuelling as well as to the international sanctions to which regime abuses predictably gave rise. But these elite strategies have also tended to deepen the poverty of the broad mass of Syrians.

While the Syrian regime's use of *shabiha* militias was undoubtedly intimidating and will have deterred some potential rebels, it also came at a cost in terms of military efficiency – not least because the predatory activities of the *shabiha*

163 Barnard (2015b).
164 Barnard (2015b).
165 Keen (1994).
166 E.g. Yazigi (2014).
167 E.g. Yazigi (2014).

tended to alienate ordinary people from the regime. Making money also became – for many militiamen – a significant distraction from 'winning' or confronting rebels. One former regime soldier, who had spent time in a regime jail, said of the *shabiha*: "Lots are thieves, robbers and when the revolution began, they thought they will take money and stand with the government."[168]

In 2013, an attempt was made to regulate the *shabiha* and incorporate them formally into the National Defence Forces (NDF) under Iranian supervision (which numbered 80–100,000 fighters at the peak). But even after this initiative, the leaders of the NDF were sometimes seen as warlords who had a significant material stake in continued conflict and a set of interests that frequently diverged from those of the regime.[169] A March 2017 report for the Institute for the Study of War noted that "Over the past year, the NDF reportedly fragmented and reverted to local groups outside the formal command structure as economic turmoil hampered the regime's ability to match the salaries offered by foreign or private actors."[170]

Promoting scarcity in areas of rebel strength

An eighth way in which regime behaviour boosted fundamentalist elements was through *promoting scarcity in areas of rebel strength* – in particular by undermining international relief efforts. The primary motive here was probably to put military pressure on the rebels: the regime has systematically used shortages and sieges to pressure rebels and civilians into local truces, which then allow the regime to concentrate its limited military resources on offensives in other areas.[171] Scarcity has also been routinely manipulated by the regime so as to promote large-scale outmigration from rebel areas, attempting to undermine the rebels' population base.[172] At the same time, the boost to militant jihadist elements was, to a degree, predictable.

In effect, the regime's policy of starvation tended to propel those people living in rebel areas into one of three paths: surrendering; moving to regime areas; or embracing fundamentalist alternatives. Faced with deepening shortages, many people turned angrily against a West that was seen as deserting them and some sought solace – and practical help – from factions with fundamentalist ideologies.

168 See also Hallaj; International Crisis Group (2013b).

169 Abboud (2015b); see also Turkmani et al. (2014).

170 Kozak (2017), p 2.

171 See, notably, Bonsey (2017a).

172 This is not uncommon in counterinsurgencies, e.g. Keen (2012).

Providing some immunity from regime attacks

A ninth way in which the regime helped at least some rebel groups – and fundamentalist elements in particular – was through *granting significant immunity from regime military attacks*.

Consider western Aleppo. In a 2015 paper, Rana Khalaf notes that ISIS had made significant inroads, getting credit for pushing out a number of parasitic gangs as well as for providing important services.[173] Khalaf added, "This, coupled with the fact that the regime hardly shelled ISIS bases, enabled ISIS to reconstitute partial security that helped locals live and resume their work. This issue served to improve the legitimacy of ISIS."[174] When ISIS lost control of the areas, the regime's behaviour was equally revealing. Khalaf noted:

> …*ISIS's brutality and hostility to civil society and armed groups triggered a strong resistance against it. Armed resistance, under the leadership of the Jaish al-Mujahadeen local branch soon managed to expel ISIS from Aleppo. This raised expectations of improved civil life in the city. However, directly after the outcast of ISIS, the regime started its random bombing of civilian areas and institutions like the Local Council, field hospitals etc., but not the Sharia Court. This resulted in massive migration out of the non-government-controlled part of Aleppo city…*[175]

The spared Sharia Court was run by powerful Islamist groups on the ground, including al-Nusra.[176] After ISIS took full control of Raqqa in January 2014, ISIS's Sharia Court in Raqqa was rarely attacked.[177] In general, the Assad regime preferred to target non-fundamentalist parts of the opposition – including local councils, schools and hospitals in Aleppo and Deir al-Zour.[178] After extensive fieldwork (mostly in Gaziantep, Turkey), Agnes Favier noted that the regime had often bombed or besieged cities in which local councils were considered most successful (including Aleppo city and also Daraya, Douma, and Maarat al Nouman).[179] Thus, through a variety of mechanisms, governance in opposition areas was actively pushed towards the models established by fundamentalist groups. The presence of non-fundamentalist rebels could easily bring a regime attack, while the presence of ISIS frequently provided a degree of protection against these attacks. Of course, local people were aware of these differences, and this was a powerful incentive for at least tolerating ISIS.

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173 Rana Khalaf (2015).
174 Rana Khalaf (2015), p 60.
175 Rana Khalaf (2015), pp 60–61.
176 Rana Khalaf (2015), p 61.
177 Rana Khalaf, personal communication.
178 Rana Khalaf, personal communication.
179 Favier.

As for al-Nusra, the position is much less clear. Wege suggests that al-Nusra may at times have received a degree of respite from Assad's determination to attack the moderate opposition.[180] Several accusations of collusion with the regime have been mentioned. But most of our interviewees stressed that support for al-Nusra stemmed, in large part, from its reputation for *standing up to* the Assad regime on the battlefield.[181] What seems very clear is that the regime's provision of selective immunity applied much more strongly to ISIS. Again, the difference with al-Nusra was not lost on local people. For example, shortly before ISIS took over from al-Nusra in Deir al-Zour in 2014, one activist said, "I am not afraid. What we have now 'al-Nusra' is like having ISIS except ISIS is less corrupt and at least we will not be shelled by the regime."[182] In her more general interviews with Syrian civil activists, Rana Khalaf noted that when ISIS controlled a particular area, this was "seen as a security measure [protecting] from the random barrels of the regime."[183]

A December 2014 *NBC* report analysed ISIS and regime violence, finding that both parties tended to avoid each other:

> *Around 64 percent of verifiable ISIS attacks in Syria this year targeted other non-state groups, an analysis of the IHS Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Center's (JTIC) database showed. Just 13 percent of the militants' attacks during the same period – the year through Nov. 21 [2014] – targeted Syrian security forces. That's a stark contrast to the Sunni extremist group's operations in Iraq, where more than half of ISIS attacks (54 percent) were aimed at security forces…*

At the same time, the JTIC data showed that Assad's own operations (more than two thirds of which were airstrikes) overwhelmingly targeted rebel groups other than ISIS: of 982 listed regime operations for the year up to 21 November 2014, just 6 per cent directly targeted ISIS.[184] The NBC reported noted:

> *For now, ISIS appears focused on emerging as the dominant Islamist, non-state actor and operating in areas where Assad's troops have largely withdrawn. Assad is focused on destroying opposition to his rule from the same groups ISIS wants to dominate – and engaging more in recent months with ISIS as that comes to pass.*[185]

The *NBC* report also analysed data on Aleppo, finding that of 238 regime operations for the year up to 21 November 2014, only 15 targeted ISIS. This in

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180 E.g. Wege.

181 See e.g. International Crisis Group (2012), 'Tentative Jihad: Syria's fundamentalist opposition', *Middle East Report* 131, 12 October.

182 Rana Khalaf, personal communication.

183 Khalaf, p 62.

184 These operations were labelled 'counterterrorism operations' but were directed against a variety of rebels.

185 Vinograd and Omar. Abu Hafs, a local ISIS leader from Aleppo, said taking over rebel areas was a necessary step towards fighting the Assad regime (Vinograd and Omar).

itself is not surprising, since ISIS was only a relatively minor presence. But even in the militants' stronghold of Raqqa, just half of the listed 22 operations targeted ISIS; and 22 was in any case a small total for the 'HQ' of such a vehemently denounced 'enemy'. The December 2014 NBC report went on:

> *Some rebels suspect coordination between the Syrian regime and ISIS. Yusuf Abu Abdulla, one of the leaders of the Al-Mujaheddin Army in Aleppo, said when his fighters have attacked regime bases, they have come under separate attacks from ISIS. That's forced them to withdraw and battle the other militants instead of Assad's forces. 'Most of the front lines between ISIS and the regime are very quiet – you wouldn't even hear the sound of firing,' he said. 'The exact opposite is on our frontlines, which are very dangerous and where the fights don't stop for 24 hours.' If ISIS was interested in fighting the regime, he said, they would have gone to Aleppo – a city besieged by Assad's forces. Instead, they chose to fight for Kobani where there is no Syrian army presence.*[186]

In February 2014, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces circulated a detailed memo entitled 'ISIS and the Assad Regime: From Marriage of Convenience to Partnership.'[187] The memo presented 'significant evidence… about the links between the regime and ISIS', including a range of 'testimony from FSA fighters that describe events on the ground where regime forces have been protecting and assisting this group'. For example, it notes that:

> *The ISIS headquarters in Raqqa are distinctive and famous buildings (the government building and Armenian Catholic Church). When the regime shells the city, the aircraft fly down very low to target FSA-held areas, however they never bomb the ISIS HQ or target areas under its control.*[188] *This is also the case for ISIS HQ in Jarablus on the Syrian-Turkish borders and the HQ in Al-Danna (Idleb). In turn, ISIS has never attacked Jisr Al-Shughour, a regime-controlled area of strategic value in Idlib or the regime-controlled areas of Deir Ezzor [Deir al-Zour] or Aleppo City.*[189]

We should note that ISIS did go on to take control of Deir al-Zour in August 2014, so the picture is complicated. One cannot rule out the possibility that both ISIS and the regime have been biding their time and waiting for the opportunity to defeat the other. Even so, the elements of regime-ISIS cooperation have been a crucial part of the war.

Perhaps significantly, when Raqqa was originally lost by the regime to a range of rebel groups in March 2013, press reports noted a sudden and 'mysterious'

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[186] Vinograd and Omar.

[187] National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces memo (2014), 'ISIS and the Assad regime: from marriage of convenience to partnership', 10 February, www.etilaf.us/isis_assad, p 1.

[188] National Coalition memo, p 1.

[189] National Coalition memo p 1.

capitulation by government forces, with many government soldiers apparently removing their equipment from Raqqa to the HQ of the army's 17th Division outside the town without harassment from opposition fighters.[190] Raqqa also had little tradition of radicalism or Islamist activism,[191] adding to the mystery of the rebels' takeover.

When the army's 17th Division suffered a major attack from al-Nusra rebels near Raqqa in November 2013, the presence of ISIS fighters inside Raqqa helped the regime. An Institute for the Study of War report noted, "Four days into the offensive, amid fierce clashes with regime forces, JN [Jabhat al-Nusra] was forced to send fighters away from the front lines in order to reinforce its head-quarters building… against ISIS fighters who were massing in the vicinity."[192]

By January 2014, ISIS was able to take control of Raqqa, helped by reinforce-ments from Iraq[193] as well as by a perception among some local people that ISIS could bring a degree of protection amid the general chaos, looting and extortion.[194]

Underscoring the impression of a rather limited regime-ISIS antipathy has been the regime's practice of continuing to pay many people's salaries in Raqqa even after ISIS had gained control.[195] The February 2014 National Coalition memo gave further examples of ISIS/regime collaboration in Homs and in the areas between Raqqa and Aleppo. These include battlefield reports of how regime forces avoided targeting ISIS while heavily shelling the FSA in Homs, and the protection by Syrian warplanes of the convoy of a senior ISIS commander.[196] The same document also observes how a certain continuity in personnel appears to have underpinned regime-ISIS cooperation, giving examples of ISIS emirs who were formerly serving officers with the Syrian regime.[197] It further alleges that ammunition may

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190 al-Hakkar; Khalaf (2015); see also Birke (2015) on the regime tendency to focus on retaining power in the west rather than the east.

191 Birke (2015); see also Turkmani.

192 Caris and Reynolds, p 11.

193 Caris and Reynolds, p 12.

194 Khalaf (2015); see also Birke (2015).

195 Payment of state salaries was common in areas controlled by many types of rebels.

196 During the battle between ISIS and FSA in the northern suburbs of Homs (10 January 2014), regime aircraft were heavily shelling the FSA, avoiding ISIS, which assisted them to move forward in battle. During the last battle between the Islamic Front and ISIS, when ISIS was defeated in Aleppo, two days prior to this a convoy led by an ISIS military leader, Emir Omar Shishani, drove from Raqqa to Aleppo; there are many eyewitness accounts saying this convoy was protected by regime warplanes. In contrast, the next day, another convoy from Liwa Al Tawhid drove a similar route north and was heavily bombarded by regime planes. National Coalition memo, p 1.

197 National Coalition memo, p 1: "Current emirs in ISIS were serving officers with the regime, e.g. Muhana Juneidi was serving with the regime in Dier Ezzor during the Iraq war where he was responsible for the section following and investigating those who went to fight in Iraq and returned… He was responsible for security issues inside ISIS in this area before FSA defeated ISIS and drove them out of Idlib." (9 January 2014).

also have found its way to ISIS from the regime.[198]

Drawing on the secret papers of a senior ISIS official and former Iraqi officer, *Der Spiegel*'s investigation tends to corroborate the views of the National Coalition:

> *IS [ISIS] leaders had no problem receiving assistance from Assad's air force, despite all of the group's pledges to annihilate the apostate Shiites… In battles between IS and rebels in January 2014, Assad's jets regularly bombed only rebel positions, while the Islamic State emir ordered his fighters to refrain from shooting at the army. It was an arrangement that left many of the foreign fighters deeply disillusioned; they had imaged jihad differently. IS threw its entire arsenal at the rebels, sending more suicide bombers into their ranks in just a few weeks than it deployed during the entire previous year against the Syrian army. Thanks in part to additional air strikes, IS was able to reconquer territory that it had briefly lost. Nothing symbolizes the tactical shifting of alliances more than the fate of the Syrian army's Division 17. The isolated base near Raqqa had been under rebel siege for more than a year. But then, IS units defeated the rebels there and Assad's air force was once again able to use the base for supply flights without fear of attack.[199]*

It is important to note that the alliance between the regime and ISIS has tended to be a fragile one; at times, it has broken down completely. As *Der Spiegel*'s investigation noted,

> *… after IS conquered Mosul [in June 2014] and took control of a gigantic weapons depot there, the jihadists felt powerful enough to attack their erstwhile helpers in Syria]. IS fighters overran Division 17 [near Raqqa] and slaughtered the soldiers, whom they had only recently protected.[200]*

But elements of collusion also continued. After regime forces took over the historic city of Palmyra in March 2016, *Sky News* (which obtained leaked ISIS documents) revealed a degree of communication and coordination between the retreating ISIS forces and the Syrian regime – including an arrangement for ISIS to evacuate some areas *before* the Syria army attacked.[201] In his account of life in Raqqa, published in March 2017, Samer observed:

> *I find it really telling how Daesh [ISIS] responds to territorial advances by their enemies. For example, when the regime took Tadmur [Palmyra] from them, it was more of a handover than a takeover. Daesh had already pulled out and moved its entire forces to Raqqa and other areas still under its control. It seems to me that there's*

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198 National Coalition memo, p 1: "During military clashes between FSA and ISIS, ISIS ammunition cases have been recovered by the FSA. Empty cartridges are labeled as having been manufactured in the Institute of Defence Factories, the regime Ministry of Defence factory or from Russia."

199 Reuter.

200 Reuter.

201 Ramsay.

some sort of special understanding between the regime and Daesh, like that between father and son.[202]

3.2 The functions of regime support to armed rebellion and fundamentalism

If many regime actions had the paradoxical effect of boosting armed rebellion and boosting fundamentalist elements within it, it is possible that these were *mistakes* or simply unintended consequences.[203] But such was the range and persistence of behaviours that nurtured many of those the regime proclaimed to be its enemies that it is only reasonable to ask what the *functions* of this enduring and apparently counterproductive behaviour might be.

When it came to regime actors' predatory behaviour and the many instances of economic cooperation between rebels and government forces, an obvious function was economic – making money. Indeed, it is not hard to detect the emergence of a profitable *war system* in Syria, a system in which 'opposing sides' often collaborated – usually at the expense of civilians. There were also elements of economic cooperation that seem to have been aimed at 'winning hearts and minds'. This included the practice of paying state salaries to officials in rebel areas (not only in ISIS areas),[204] something that has given the regime an important and lasting way to pressure people into supporting it. It is quite possible also (as noted) that some soldiers harboured a degree of *sympathy* with the rebellion, perhaps contributing to the 'leakage' of arms to rebel groups.

However, what is most striking – and something repeatedly emphasised by the Syrians we talked with – are the *political* functions of behaviour that nurtured rebels and fundamentalists in particular.

Many interviewees argued that this behaviour reflected the fact that armed rebellion – especially rebellion riven by divisions and tainted by sectarianism, criminality and terror attacks – was in crucial respects less threatening to the regime than peaceful protests. Particularly in the context of the Arab Spring that saw regimes ousted in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen,[205] peaceful

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202 Samer, p 86.
203 Cf. Kalyvas for a more general analysis.
204 E.g. Richani; Khalaf (2015); Favier.
205 Yemen's case was complex as President Ali Abdullah Saleh handed power to his vice-president after mass protests.

protesters – and even pro-democracy rebels – were actually less easy to dismiss or stigmatise than 'Islamic terrorists'. One careful 2013 analysis by Housam Darwisheh noted that when the regime was faced with the (paradoxical) threat of a non-violent protest movement:

> *The security forces lost their patience with a non-violent protest movement that delegitimized the use of force against the people… the regime militarized the uprising by using excessive violence in order to justify large-scale military operations and discourage the opposition from joining the protest movement. By doing so, the regime was able to push part of the protest into the field most familiar to the regime: military confrontation.*[206]

This process also had an important international dimension, and the priority attached to combating 'terrorism' by the international community gave Assad the perfect opportunity to play the game of *delegitimising domestic dissent* with both cunning and skill. For Assad, indeed, 'extremists' among the rebels became the ultimate in 'useful enemies', sowing damaging seeds of doubt not only in the minds of many Syrians who feared 'Salafist extremism' but also in the minds of Western policymakers. This tended further to undermine the prospects of international assistance and protection.

It is striking that, even as the Syrian state has 'failed' and large areas of the country have fallen outside regime control, Assad proved notably successful in the art of survival. At the start of the rebellion, Western officials regularly measured his time left in office as a matter of weeks or months.[207] Yet he endured. Paradoxically, Assad may have survived as president not so much *despite* the war as *because* of it. Like President Omar al-Bashir in Sudan, Assad has given a masterclass in the macabre art of nurturing disorder and turning it to his advantage.[208]

Some sources perceived that fostering sectarianism was designed to discredit protest and rebellion in *international* eyes, particularly in relation to Western governments. One interviewee commented in 2013:

> *The regime has turned the struggle into a sectarian conflict. The Syrian land – which is the cradle of all civilisations, beliefs and religions – became a land of sectarian struggle. We ended up having all sorts of radical groups. We have extremist groups, they want to create an Islamic state. Also, there is another type of so-called Islamist groups created by the regime to make the revolution collapse. They are using the name*

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206 Darwisheh. On provoking war and on the fear of non-violent opposition, see also Droz-Vincent. See also Naame Shaam, p 43.

207 Hokayem (2013), p 157.

208 Stressing the Syrian regime's cultivation of 'terrorist' entities, George Ahmad also notes that "Syria has been in an emergency-justifying state of war with Israel for over four decades, a rationalization for the iron grip of the Assad dynasty and the Baath party". (p 50.)

of Islam but have nothing to do with Islam. And they don't represent the Syrian people… The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria for instance have nothing to do with Islam. It was the creation of the Syrian government in order to destroy the Syrian revolution's image among the international community… The aim is to create fear and make the international community believe that the Syrian revolution has been taken over by al-Qaeda.

After highlighting Syrian regime involvement in a number of terror bomb explosions, one of our interviewees at Kilis made a similar argument: "The regime wants to fool the international community, to say this is not a popular Syrian revolution, that these are terrorists and it is al-Qaeda who wants to take over Syria." In playing up the threat of fundamentalist groups while often actively stimulating their growth, the Assad regime courted political support (or at least tolerance) from both domestic and international audiences. The strategy was to prove at least somewhat successful.

The release of violent fundamentalists from Syrian government prisons has also plausibly been interpreted as a calculated move to discredit protest and rebellion. According to Major General Fayez Dwairi, a former Jordanian military intelligence officer and a Syria specialist:

Many of the people who established Jabhat Al-Nusra were captured by the regime in 2008 and were in prison. When the revolution started they were released on the advice of Syrian intelligence officers, who told Assad 'They will do a good job for us. There are many disadvantages to letting them out, but there are more advantages because we will convince the world that we are facing Islamic terrorism.'[209]

Similarly, the former military intelligence officer interviewed in *The National* said Assad's general amnesty in 2011 was designed to sow terrorism in Syria for propaganda value.[210]

Meanwhile, the scarcity of regime attacks on ISIS (and *vice versa*) seems to have been part of Assad's attempt to nurture fundamentalists so as to buy time and tolerance for his regime as 'the lesser of two evils'. The opportunity for a policy of 'live and let live' was created in part by ISIS's explicit objective of setting up an Islamic state, and in part by Assad's willingness to settle for a truncated state that embraced Syria's most populated and urban areas, particularly in the west of the country.[211] In a July 2015 speech, President Assad – rather than expressing determination to win back control of the whole country – stated, "We must define the important regions for the armed forces to hold onto, so it doesn't allow the collapse of the rest of the areas

209 Sands, Vela and Maayeh.
210 Sands, Vela and Maayeh; see also Weiss and Hassan.
211 On this willingness, see Abboud (2015a).

[that is, those not yet controlled by rebels]. The army is capable and we have everything we need. It's just manpower that's lacking."[212] Both ISIS and the Assad regime seem to have regarded their own control as compatible – at least in the short and medium term – with the survival of the other.

In nurturing fundamentalist elements while trumpeting the threat from them, the regime seems to have had several audiences in mind. Domestically, the Syrian regime persistently presented its violence as a 'war on terror'. As in many countries (for example, Sri Lanka), this discourse of a 'war on terror' served as cover for diverse forms of political repression and intimidation. Faced with the protests in Daraa at the very beginning of the Syrian rebellion, the Syrian authorities blamed the violence on 'terrorist groups' and 'foreign elements'.[213] Even as Assad stirred up sectarian and ethnic tensions, he was able to suggest – in the tradition of other ruthless autocrats such as Mobutu in the DRC, Doe in Liberia, and Saddam Hussein in Iraq – that unless he remained in power, these conflicts would take over the country. As one Kurdish activist put it, "Assad used to say, 'If I go, then sectarianism will take over.' He used this to stay in power. There's a degree of truth in this [claim] now."

A former regime soldier highlighted popular fears when he told us: "The regime is very weak and very powerful at the same time. People are convinced that people with big beards will come and force us to cover up the women, and so they rally round the regime."

A particular focus for the regime was punishing alternative forms of governance. This seemed to apply especially to secular governance and to governance that was working relatively well – the 'threat' of a good example. The regime's strategy has not only involved a variety of strategic accommodations but also a consistent – and very often successful – attempt to push politics in a direction that emphasises what divides people rather than what unites them. Even in relation to the Kurds, the regime encouraged Kurdish 'ethnic' demands to a degree (notably the demand for autonomy) while being much more punitive towards Kurds who framed their grievances within a more 'national' framework.[214]

Boosting, and then playing up the threat from, 'extremists' was also designed to appeal to the Syrian military and security apparatus, and the idea of a 'war

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212 BBC World Service, Newshour, 26 July 2015 (speech on 25 July 2015). This policy of 'triage' also seems to have been applied within particular cities. As one knowledgeable UN worker put it to us, "If an area is critical for regime survival, the regime will control it… Class is [also] a big factor – wherever you have a bourgeois area, the regime controls it…."

213 Human Rights Watch (2011a).

214 Ali; also International Crisis Group (2012a, 2013a).

on terror' was used by the Syrian regime to motivate state security personnel when they were being prepared to use major force against protesters.[215] Human Rights Watch talked with 12 defectors from Syria's security services, all of whom reported that their superiors had told them they were fighting infiltrators, Salafists, and terrorists with foreign backers.[216]

We have noted that playing up the threat from Salafists and 'Sunni extremists' also helped to shore up support from the Alawites, who were not only one of the regime's key constituencies but also provided a large number of militiamen as well as occupying senior positions in the military. Fear of recriminations was part of this process. Referring to the importance of the Alawites in the military, one Syrian aid worker said, "Regime soldiers see it as a sectarian struggle and believe they will all be murdered if they don't defeat the rebels – or they will be executed by the regime."

Another interviewee commented: "He [Assad] has involved his sect in this crisis, saying, 'I am your protector. If I go away, they will kill you and take revenge.'" A former regime soldier stressed that war had brought ethnic fault-lines to the fore: "Sectarian rhetoric has driven many people to support the regime, many Alawites who would otherwise be against the regime." Meanwhile, playing up and nurturing the threat of Sunni extremists also helped to shore up a degree of support from the various non-Alawite minorities, including the Druze, the Christians and, most significantly, the Kurds.

The regime will also have been aware of the military advantages of sowing divisions among the rebels and of avoiding the scenario in which all parts of 'the enemy' attack at once. Importantly, ISIS and the regime have had a common hostility to the more moderate elements in the opposition, and the rise of ISIS forced the mainstream Syrian opposition to fight on two fronts.[217] ISIS and the regime also had, from 2014, a common hostility to al-Nusra.

Kurdish grievances have been a significant threat to the regime and the threat of Kurdish unrest in the north-east is of long standing. Damascus's well-established policy of 'divide and rule' was manifest in government schemes that encouraged Arab groups to settle in some of the most fertile land there. Kurdish discontent was dealt with in part by official encouragement for fundamentalist elements among the Arabs, even though these were linked to the rebellion. Again, this paradoxical strategy helped Bashar al-Assad to present himself as a more palatable alternative. As one Kurdish activist put it, "Lots of Kurds are saying we are right not to rebel because we look at the

215 Human Rights Watch (2011b).
216 Human Rights Watch (2011b).
217 Birke (2013).

alternative and it's these corrupt Islamist groups."

Meanwhile, the armed opposition was accused of taking insufficient steps to reassure minorities, including the Kurds.[218] In fact, some jihadist rebel groups ended up attacking Kurds in the north-east and sending tens of thousands of people into Iraq.[219] The regime made some attempts to woo the Kurds by making concessions on citizenship, by withdrawing most of its combat troops from Kurdish areas, by exempting predominantly Kurdish areas from much of the regime's direct violence,[220] and even by channelling assistance to armed Kurdish elements (alongside its support for rival Arab groups). However, support for Kurdish armed groups has in many ways disempowered civil society, as local people find themselves caught in a struggle between unrepresentative armed groups who often care more for their own interests than the civilians they claim to represent.

Assad always needed significant Sunni support as well as support from minorities if he was to survive, and wealthier Sunnis were another key constituency. One Syrian human rights worker remembered:

> *The Syrian elite has some intermarriage, for example, the President's wife is Sunni* [*Assad himself has an Alawite background*]. *It's to solidify the elite and for business purposes, but they encourage sectarianism in the general population – to divide the opposition and maintain their privileges…*

As people dared to protest in 2011, there was at least the possibility of a less ethnically divisive politics. While ethnic and religious tensions were not easily swept aside (and many minorities remained aloof from the uprising from the outset), the same human rights worker noted the beginnings of a new spirit:

> *In the early days of the revolution, Syrians came together. There was a great openness. People were discovering that people they'd been encouraged to hate or distrust actually had a great deal in common with them. People were discovering, for instance, that the Alawi* [*Alawites*] *were not all privileged and many were actually living in villages without electricity…*

Yet armed conflict tended quickly to reverse this process: "War has reignited differences and fears of the other. It's renewed comforting conspiracies and separate world-views." As in many other wars, sectarian sentiments were as much a *product* of conflict as a cause.[221]

Even as he tried to shore up domestic support with the Salafist 'bogeyman',

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218 Interviews with Kurdish human rights workers.
219 See e.g. Chulov (2013).
220 See, e.g., Jonathan Steele (2015) 'The Syrian Kurds Are Winning!', *New York Review of Books*, 3 December.
221 Cf. Turton.

Assad was also courting an *international* audience. This helped him secure material support from Russia and Iran as well as staving off the threat of Western military intervention.

By highlighting the threat of 'Sunni extremism' (and the threats to the Shi'ite Alawites in particular), the Syrian regime successfully appealed to the Iranian government and Hezbollah, with Iran being consistently determined to promote its influence in Syria, to counter the influence of Saudi Arabia, and to preserve supply routes through Syria for Iranian arms destined for Hezbollah.[222] For Assad, support from Iran has been a lifeline in a context where the Syrian regime has not been able to rely on its own army. Weiss and Hassan noted in 2015 that Iranian-backed militias "have taken on more and more military responsibility as al-Assad's conventional forces have deteriorated, died, or fled."[223] Drawing on information from Russians closely acquainted with regime strategies, Lister noted in April 2017:

> … the [Syrian] national army retains no more than 20,000 personnel who it believes to be sufficiently trained, offensively deployable and loyal for use in key operations. Iran on the other hand has key hands in Syrian paramilitary and foreign Shia militia forces that may now number 150,000 men at arms. Some of those groups are designated terrorist organizations, legally no different from al-Qaeda or ISIS…[224]

Even where Sunni troops remained within the Syrian military, their loyalty has often been doubted, and this underlines the importance of the militias. Significantly, Tehran presented its interference in Syria (and Iraq) as part of its own 'war on terror',[225] while many Iranian fighters were sent to Syria with the ostensible purpose of protecting Shia shrines against the threat of 'Sunni extremists'.[226] There have also been various Iraqi militias in Syria on the regime's side, funded, armed and directed by the Iranian regime, again ostensibly protecting Shia holy shrines against 'Sunni extremists'.[227]

Russian support for Assad was vital in shoring up his regime in 2015 (as we shall see). When highlighting and nurturing the threat from 'terrorists' and 'fundamentalists', the regime was also courting political favour in Moscow. Even before the Syrian war, Russia – a key ally for Assad – had for many years framed its counter-insurgency as counterterror, and particularly after 9/11 Moscow exaggerated the links between Chechen rebels and al-Qaeda, for

222 See e.g. Lister (2017b).
223 Weiss and Hassan, p 139.
224 Lister (2017b.)
225 PressTV.
226 Naame Shaam.
227 Naame Shaam, p 34.
228 Mann (2003).

example.[228] Yet Russia never prioritised the assault on ISIS (as we shall see).

Assad also had Western audiences in mind. Preventing Western military intervention against his regime was naturally a major priority – particularly in the light of Western interventions in Iraq and Libya, for example. And just as Assad had tried to position himself as someone who could help the US in Iraq (by controlling the flow of jihadists from Syria), he also tried to position himself as someone who could help the US in Syria. The regime's international discourse was illustrated in October 2013 when Syria's Deputy Prime Minister Walid al-Moualem told the UN General Assembly that the conflict ravaging Syria was not a civil war but a war on terror.[229] In line with Assad's strategy, some influential Western actors bought into the regime's 'anti-terrorism' narrative. In a 2015 article, Peter Seeberg noted "changes in the prevalent narrative of the EU from an 'Arab Spring narrative' to focusing on security or even counter-terrorism".[230] In December 2015, a *Telegraph* article was boldly entitled "Let's do a deal: Why we should work with Vladimir Putin and Bashar al-Assad in Syria". The article supported the military advances being made by Assad, proposing that the Syrian President was the best hope against ISIS's "evil death cult". Boris Johnson, the author of the article, became UK Foreign Secretary in July 2016.

Following the intensified assault on eastern Aleppo in 2016, which Johnson rightly if rather incongruously condemned, Peter Ford (who was British ambassador in Damascus from 2003 to 2006) said Assad's government should be given "a little credit" for the "relatively peaceful" end to the siege in Aleppo. He said there was a Christmas tree in Aleppo's central square, which would not be there "if the other side had won." Assad was the lesser of two evils in relation to the *jihadi* opposition, he added.[231]

Syrian fears around violent jihadist groups are indeed not to be underestimated, and Assad has been strikingly successful in using the threat of violent jihadism to underpin his system of political repression and economic exploitation. As we shall see in section 4, these tactics have been greatly facilitated by the West's 'war on terror' framework, which also powerfully shaped external military interventions as well as international aid.

229 *Asia News Monitor* (2013), 'Syria: Conflict in Syria 'a war on terror', Deputy Prime Minister tells UN General Assembly', 7 October.

230 Seeberg, p 31.

231 Wintour (2016c). See also remarks by Baroness Cox, House of Lords Debate, 4 July 2017. Middle East (IRC Report) – Motion to Take Note, Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust, https://www.hart-uk.org/news/house-lords-debate-4th-july-2017-middle-east-irc-report-motion-take-note/.