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Conclusion

Addressing the complex causes of violence: beyond a 'war on terror'

It is natural to assume that the aim in a war is to win, and the war in Syria has routinely been portrayed within this framework. A standard and 'common sense' interpretation is that rebels have been trying to overthrow the regime, the regime has been seeking ruthlessly to suppress the rebellion, and terrorists have been seeking to impose their own twisted ideology. While this picture contains important elements of truth, a closer look suggests that the aims in Syria's war are much more complex and diverse than simply winning. Beyond the purely military functions of violence, we need to take account of its economic, political and psychological functions. Mapping these can give us a better idea of the causes and function of Syria's long-running war, a war that is not simply a contest but also a *system* – a system of profit, power and protection that has shown a capacity to mutate and has exhibited considerable resilience.

Some neglected aspects of the war in Syria include: the intensification of rebellion as a result of regime violence against civilians; the strategic manipulation of disorder by various parties; the instrumentalisation by local and international actors of a 'war on terror'; the way the regime has adapted to its own (partial) disintegration; the war economy; the elements of collusion between ostensible enemies; and the tendency among civilians to turn to

violent jihadist elements in search of services and even sometimes a degree of protection. Syria's war has seen various warring parties offering (and sometimes providing) protection – both from their own violence and from violence by others.

So long as we imagine that war is all about winning, debates about international interventions tend to focus on which side to support and whether (and against whom) to intervene militarily. Those in favour of overthrowing Assad by military means have pointed to his horrendous human rights abuses against his own people, while those opposed to military intervention against Assad have pointed to the inability of previous Western military interventions to reduce violence in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. Faced with the question of whether to intervene militarily against Assad, Western policymakers might be seen as facing an impossible dilemma: damned if they do; damned if they don't. A parallel set of dilemmas centres on whether there should be military interventions against non-governmental militants and, if so, which ones?

However, if we try to step away from the view of war as a binary struggle with the aim of winning, the possibilities for intervening helpfully are much more numerous and varied than simply going to war or not. One possibility is to engage with – and counteract – the war economy. While this is difficult, the task is very different from simply 'picking sides' in a military intervention. Another possibility is to try to alter the incentives that have encouraged the strategic manipulation of disorder by various actors inside and outside Syria. Stepping away from a 'war on terror' framework can be part of this, as can attempting to see and respond to Syria's war as a system rather than simply a contest or a humanitarian disaster. Rather than focusing on physically eliminating violent jihadist groups while responding to humanitarian need, the international community should put the protection of civilians and the careful construction of just and lasting peace at the core of all actions in Syria.

While the abuses of the Assad regime have been widely remarked upon, a growing focus on counter-terrorism has tended to dilute the focus on Assad while also distracting attention from other abusive parties inside and outside Syria and from the need for a more holistic solution. Distilling lessons from elsewhere, the 2015 Saferworld report I wrote with Larry Attree (*Dilemmas of counter-terror, stabilisation and statebuilding*) noted:

> *In the counter-terrorism paradigm, designating certain actors as 'spoilers', 'radicals', 'terrorists' or 'extremists' risks framing the problem from the outset as lying with those actors alone – the solution being to 'counter' them, change their wrong-thinking (or physically eliminate them). Less biased analysis would ensure we understand the perceptions and motives of all actors in a conflict. It would also mean seeking to*

identify what all relevant actors – including national, regional and international governments – can change to contribute towards lasting peace.[542]

Naturally, the dangers of a confused and counterproductive approach increased once Western military interventions reinforced the media's focus on ISIS as 'public enemy number one'. The fantasy that the 'bad guys' in Syria can be separated from the 'good guys' (and then eliminated) has repeatedly proven to be a dangerous illusion, contributing strongly to the destruction of eastern Aleppo in 2016. It has also proven to be a pretext for abuses by a variety of local and international actors, who have hidden behind the apparent 'legitimacy' provided by a 'war on terror'.

One lesson from Syria's war – and from many other conflicts[543] – is that the *declared* enemy of key actors is not always the same as the *actual* enemy. While the former can logically be identified from statements, the latter must be identified from *patterns of violence* (*and collusion*). Yet Assad's declared antipathy to ISIS was rarely questioned (at least publicly) within Western official circles. Meanwhile, by pursuing their own versions of a 'war on terror', Western governments seem to have encouraged Assad to present his violence within this 'war on terror' framework, to present himself as a better alternative, and indeed to nurture the violent jihadist groups on whose existence this political strategy depended. The idea that one could reasonably 'go easy' on Assad because he was confronting 'terrorists' was a significant part of his impunity; yet, as this report shows, the regime's 'confrontation' with ISIS has generally been more apparent than real.

If the distinction between declared and actual enemies had been properly explored, there would also have been a better chance of challenging Russian violence in Syria. In particular, Russia's declared aim of standing up to terrorists would have been vigorously denounced as a smokescreen for Russian determination to support Assad.

It is of course true that governments have for centuries responded violently to protest and rebellion: you do not necessarily need a 'war on terror' framework to do this. But in every era, the *legitimation* of violence is an important consideration, and impunity deepens when abusive local and international actors successfully present their own violence within the framework of a righteous 'global' war. We have noted a growing perception among many Sunni Arabs that the West was complicit with Russia, Iran and the Assad regime in their devastating (and ostensibly 'anti-terrorist') campaigns, a perception that itself undermines Western security interests.

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[542] Keen with Attree, p 37.

[543] Keen (2012).

We should acknowledge, also, that the 'war on terror' framework is only one among *many* concerns and frameworks that have influenced Syria's war: other important concerns include human rights, humanitarian aid, trade, and the desire to strengthen ties with various governments in the region. At the same time, many of these concerns (such as humanitarian aid and relations with regional states) have themselves been strongly influenced (and often distorted) by the perceived need to wage war to counter terrorism.

Counteracting the most abusive military factions in Syria – and improving the humanitarian situation more generally – demands a holistic approach that seeks to support the Syrian economy, to support relatively benign forms of governance within the country, to establish and uphold mechanisms for physical protection of civilians, and to put a serious spotlight – and serious pressure – on those actors who have been fuelling conflict from the outside. The most important of these actors have been Russia and Iran, both of which have been crucial in shoring up Assad's abusive regime.

This concluding section looks at the economic, political and psychological functions of violence, and considers them with reference to four key themes: the war economy; the political manipulation of disorder; the failure of the 'war on terror' framework, and disillusion in relation to Western responses to Syria. The conclusion goes on to outline four recommendations.

5.1 Four main themes

The war economy

The economic functions of violence in Syria are varied and complex, and Syria's war economy has created important economic incentives for continuing the war. Even before the war, Syrians had suffered from the evolution of a kind of 'shadow state'[544] in which many influential actors used state power and the threat of violence for private accumulation. Unsurprisingly, this system did not disappear in wartime; rather, it mutated and, more often than not, intensified. A war economy has flourished both within government-held areas and within rebel-held areas. Where these two zones have come into close contact with each other in besieged areas, the war economy has tended to be especially exploitative.

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[544] The term was used by William Reno in his study of Sierra Leone (Reno).

When it came to *rebel areas*, many rebel fighters quickly became involved in a variety of economic activities – some of these designed to fund the fighting but many soon becoming important in their own right. One important activity was extracting 'protection money' from families and businesses, including through resort to kidnapping. Another was stripping and selling industrial assets from industrial plants. Then there was looting of banks, people-smuggling, stealing and selling ancient artefacts, extracting oil, and stealing aid. Meanwhile, donations to rebels from abroad frequently found their way into private pockets, and civilians suspected that some local 'battles' were being exaggerated or even prolonged to maximise the flow of funds.

Profiteering activities have often involved 'moderate' rebels as well as the more violent jihadist groups like ISIS. At the same time, it is important to emphasise that a desire to overthrow Assad has remained a powerful motivation to a great many rebels, and has been constantly stoked by the regime's abuses; the revival of the FSA from around September 2015 – with external (including US) support – reflects the continuing strength of this desire.

Often forgotten has been the war economy in *regime-controlled* areas, a system that has involved large-scale looting and extortion by government soldiers and *shabiha* and National Defence Force militias, the stealing of aid, the use of force to manipulate markets, the manipulation of exchange rates and currency reserves, and the confiscation of assets belonging to those labelled as 'disloyal'. Many elements of the elite linked to the regime have also profited from the sanctions that the regime's abuses have provoked. While different variations of the evolving 'shadow state' emerged in rebel-held and regime-held areas, these two systems have had important points of similarity.

Meanwhile, elements of the war economy have fed strongly into collusion. Indeed, economic motivations have sometimes combined with a simple survival instinct to encourage military 'stand-offs' in which accumulation takes precedence over confrontation. Meanwhile, as the war economy became more important and more rapacious, civilians increasingly looked for some kind of remedy – and opportunities for violent jihadist groups to offer their own versions of 'protection' (including clampdowns on criminality) increased.

While it is easy to think of the international community as 'helpless' in the face of local predation, the behaviour of international actors has powerfully shaped Syria's evolving war economy. Funding from Qatar, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States, as well as Turkey, fed into strategies of accumulation among rebel leaders. Meanwhile, Iran appears to have strongly sponsored a kind of 'shadow state' in regime-held areas, funding militias and constructing lines

of authority that gravitate towards Tehran rather than Damascus. The result is that, with or without Assad, Iran has ways of exerting strong influence on the country in the context of its ongoing rivalry with Saudi Arabia over Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Bahrain and other countries in the region.

Other elements of international interaction with the local war economy have also been notable. For example, profits from antiquities have depended on finding willing international buyers, while much of the profit derived from oil has often depended on such buyers. This underlines the importance of placing restrictions on these kinds of trading networks, particularly when they are funding abusive groups.

Resource scarcities and 'scarcity profits' of various kinds have been strongly fuelled by the manipulation of aid (particularly by the regime), the lack of international relief and development assistance (particularly in besieged and hard-to-reach areas) and international sanctions. They have had a devastating humanitarian impact in Syria, and have contributed significantly to the war. In 2017, access from cross-line convoys has so far been even worse than in the equivalent part of 2016; even a reduction in violence in some areas does not seem to have helped. In addition to its adverse effects on the humanitarian situation, we have seen that resource scarcity has fed the conflict through at least eleven mechanisms:

1. It has played into the Syrian regime's strategy of imposing starvation and offering resources (and 'protection') as an alternative.

2. It has been an incentive to join armed groups, whether in regime or rebel areas.

3. It has created an appetite for services – including humanitarian aid – that have been provided by fundamentalist groups.

4. It has encouraged crime and economically motivated violence.

5. It has encouraged people to tolerate abusive armed groups that promise to rein in criminality.

6. It has contributed powerfully to a sense of anger – and a loss of faith – in relation to the West and the 'human rights' discourse that the West has tended to promote, fuelling the emotional attraction of violent jihadist groups.

7. It has created additional incentives for keeping the war going by contributing to windfall profits for warlords, militias and associated businessmen who have been able to breach sanctions or sieges.[545]

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[545] Cf. Keen (1994).

8. Actors linked to the regime have been able to make 'political capital' out of international sanctions.

9. By fuelling criminality and fundamentalist groups, scarcity helped to reduce the perceived legitimacy of rebellion, particularly in international eyes, which in turn further undermined relief to opposition areas in a vicious circle.

10. Scarcity has encouraged a focus of international effort and energy on emergency humanitarian assistance, to a degree taking focus from the underlying protection crisis while also making the UN solicitous of Damascus's cooperation with a view to improving relief delivery.

11. Among Syrian refugees suffering from lack of educational and other opportunities in neighbouring countries, scarcity has in some cases encouraged recruitment into Syrian armed groups.

The political manipulation of disorder

Violence in Syria has also had *political* functions that go beyond simply achieving a military victory. A key part of this has been the widespread manipulation of disorder for political purposes. In particular, offering protection against one's own and others' violence has been one way of building a political constituency. As in many other countries (for example, Yemen, Somalia, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka), continued adherence to the idea of a global 'war on terror' has played a significant role in allowing and encouraging these political strategies.

To a large extent, the Assad regime succeeded in delegitimising a rebellion founded in genuine political grievances. Rather than seeking to destroy all rebel groups, Assad nurtured certain kinds of rebel violence while systematically denouncing rebels as 'criminal' and 'terrorist'. This in turn helped the regime to carve out significant impunity – both nationally and internationally – for its abuses. Part of Assad's political manipulation of disorder lay in the degree of encouragement he gave to the Kurds in resisting militant fundamentalist groups he had also encouraged. In addition to its domestic protection rackets, the Assad regime has also been running a kind of protection racket in relation to Western governments: facing possible overthrow in the wake of Saddam's forced departure, Assad stoked jihadist violence in Iraq (while simultaneously offering to rein it in); soon he was stoking jihadist violence within Syria (while again offering his services to the West and the wider international community as someone who could prevent the jihadists from taking over Syria). As the crisis elicited significant humanitarian aid, the regime was able to skim off a

large portion of this aid and tweak the aid tap for 'leverage'.[546] Looking ahead, capitalising on European and US concerns about immigration from Syria, there will be increasing opportunities for Assad to offer 'stability' as an antidote to the disorder – and mass migration – that he himself has promoted, adding another insidious element to his protection rackets.[547]

It seems pretty clear that jihadism has been intentionally nurtured in Iraq and Syria to function as a protection racket. While the emerging protection rackets around humanitarian aid and migration were probably not planned, they have been – and will be – exploited opportunistically by a regime with a well-honed instinct for survival.

Failure of the 'war on terror' framework

To a significant extent (and increasingly as time has passed), the Syrian war has been seen and presented internationally within a framework that identifies violent jihadist groups as 'public enemy number one' and that prioritises their elimination through military means. While Obama rejected the term 'war on terror', he did say the US was at war with the Taliban and al-Qaeda and affiliates and he did authorise military strikes against ISIS and al-Nusra/JFS in Syria. Under President Trump, the idea of a 'war on terror' appears to have been given new backing, and June 2017 saw a major US-backed offensive aimed at pushing ISIS out of its Syrian headquarters at Raqqa.

While we often think of the 'war on terror' as impacting countries invaded by Western governments (notably Afghanistan and Iraq), studies of Yemen, Somalia and Sri Lanka (for example) show that the 'war on terror' can have damaging effects on countries that are not invaded by Western governments, notably by helping to create impunity for abuses carried out by 'counter-terrorism' forces. This report suggests that continued adherence in practice (if not always in words) to a 'war on terror' framework has had at least nine adverse effects in Syria.

First, it has provided important cover and a veneer of legitimacy for abuses by the Assad regime, which has presented itself as 'the lesser of two evils'. The growing international priority attached to combating ISIS and al-Nusra/JFS/HTS has distracted from abuses by the Assad regime and its allies, who have been responsible for the overwhelming majority of civilian casualties in Syria.[548]

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546 Leenders.
547 Cf. Andersson; de Waal.
548 Lynch.

Second, the 'war on terror' framework provided a strong incentive for the Assad regime to nurture violent jihadist groups – both before and during the war. This applied particularly to ISIS. Again, when it comes to these kinds of perverse incentives, Syria is not an isolated example: others include Yemen, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Third, the idea of a 'war on terror' has provided cover and a veneer of legitimacy for abuses by Russia and Iran, both of which have allied with Assad and both of which have (like Assad) portrayed their own violence as 'anti-terrorist'. Even the new Russia-Iran-Turkey agreement on 'de-escalation' zones makes provision for the Assad regime to continue to attack 'terrorists' within these zones.[549] Yet the violence that Russia and Iran have perpetrated within Syria has generally served important military, political and economic purposes that have little or nothing to do with a 'war on terror'. Russia has repeatedly shown that its main priority is to weaken the Syrian insurgency and to shore up the Assad regime rather than defeating ISIS; another Russian aim may well be to create another 'bargaining card' in diplomatic games with the West. Meanwhile, Iran seems primarily concerned to extend its own influence in Syria (and Iraq) so as to keep up pressure on Israel (via Hezbollah and supply routes through Syria) and as part of its ongoing rivalry with Saudi Arabia. Russian and Iranian determination to tackle terrorism is also called into doubt by the fact that the casualties inflicted by Russia and Iranian-backed militias have had the predictable effect of generating support for violent jihadist groups.

Washington's declared intention to wage war on al-Nusra/JFS helped to create a *permissive environment* for the escalating 2016 attacks on Aleppo by Russia, the Assad regime and Iranian forces on the ground. In particular, the United States's rapprochement with Russia (in the expectation – or at least the hope – of a shared 'war on terror' agenda) involved a plan – articulated at various points in 2016 – *jointly* to attack al-Nusra/JFS, and to do so even in areas where al-Nusra/JFS was acknowledged to be a weak presence or where there was no certainty of its presence at all. The US also carried out its own attacks on al-Nusra/JFS, away from Aleppo city, and continues to do so on the HTS successor group. When Washington and other Western capitals reacted to the escalating and devastating attacks on Aleppo with strong condemnation, it was already too late to prevent them.

While US officials were aware of Russia's overwhelming focus on non-ISIS targets from the beginning of Russia's military intervention in September 2015 (a bias that sometimes attracted public criticism from the US), there was

also a tendency to project excessive optimism in relation to Russia's avowed intentions to target ISIS.

A fourth problem with the 'war on terror' framework has been the effect on the Kurds and on Turkey. US support for the Kurds as the 'best hope' against ISIS has helped to destabilise the peace process within Turkey, to push Turkey closer to Russia (including what some analysts see as Turkey 'selling' Aleppo to the Russians), and to precipitate Turkish military incursions into Syria (such as occurred in August 2016 and April 2017). The YPG's role in standing up to ISIS has also been complicated by its interest in confronting US- and Turkey-backed rebels, and by its interest in suppressing dissent. Nor can the strategy of using Kurdish fighters to defeat ISIS be expected to work in predominantly Sunni areas.[550] An overriding focus on defeating ISIS tends to push these important considerations dangerously to the side.[551] As Turkey extends its zone of influence within Syria, Russia may lack the desire to protect the Kurds, and even US support for the Kurds is uncertain.

A fifth problem with a 'war on terror' framework is that it has tended to increase disunity within the armed opposition (an opposition already severely prone to fracturing), and to destabilise fragile moves towards peace, including the 2016 ceasefire(s). Even as Russia and the United States intervened militarily against al-Nusra/JFS and even as Aleppo was devastated in 2016, al-Nusra/JFS *gained* in power and influence – in large part because of its local reputation for standing up to Assad.[552]

Particularly in 2016, Western governments and Russia tried to push a distinction between terrorists and non-terrorists in a context where this line was hard to draw, and the 2016 ceasefires explicitly committed some elements of the armed opposition to the elimination of more 'extreme' elements. Yet by labelling al-Nusra as a peace 'spoiler' and excluding it from the peace process, the international community created important incentives for al-Nusra to wreck any peace process. It was also difficult for other parts of the armed opposition to endorse the physical elimination of al-Nusra – with its strong record of standing up to Assad – as a condition for signing up to the February 2016 ceasefire. Ceasefire breaches by the Assad regime encouraged al-Nusra attacks, which were then cited to justify the regime violence, and so on.[553]

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550 Back in September 2014, in an assessment of operations against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, Peter Neumann of King's College London observed, "The Kurds are never going to take territories that are 100 per cent Sunni because they are unpopular there." (Shackle).

551 Bonsey (2017b). Washington's support for a YPG that alienates Turkey cannot be guaranteed; nor can the situation where American soldiers are used as something close to 'human shields' against Turkish strikes on YPG areas.

552 E.g. Lister (2017a).

553 Bonsey (2016) (2017a).

This helped the regime to wreck ceasefires without taking all the blame.

A sixth problem is that Western military intervention under the 'war on terror' framework has killed large numbers of civilians and caused other kinds of suffering among civilians, including injury, mass displacement and a deepening of the humanitarian crisis. Even though only a very small proportion of Syrians have signed up to ISIS or al-Qaeda,[554] the suffering arising from Western military interventions risks prompting additional support for violent jihadist groups among civilians. In other contexts, even attempts to target terrorists rather precisely in drone killings have sometimes led to huge resentment.[555]

We also know from contexts beyond Syria that heavy-handed military interventions often reverse what appears to be a natural tendency for ordinary people to recoil from violent fundamentalist groups.[556] Provoking such a response is typically part of the *intention* behind acts of terrorism, and many militant groups are aware that they do best under conditions of outright conflict in which the West is directly involved.[557] While it is true that most people in Raqqa are desperate for ISIS to depart,[558] the widespread suffering among civilians resulting directly from US-led attacks also carries a huge risk of 'losing hearts and minds'. Damage to local economies compounds this problem and (as we have seen in the past) can propel people into militias, even if only in search of an income.

A seventh problem with a 'war on terror' framework in Syria is the sheer difficulty of winning. If we focus on Syria and Iraq themselves, it appears that some progress has been made in the military campaign against ISIS. According to one UK House of Commons report, by end-June 2017 ISIS had lost 71 per cent of the territory it had held in Iraq and around half its territory in Syria.[559] But there are many grounds for believing that a comprehensive and lasting victory will be extremely difficult to achieve. Evidence from around the world suggests that the defeat of terrorist groups by military means is rare.[560] And in Syria the obstacles have been particularly potent.

Even in neighbouring Iraq, ISIS has proven somewhat resilient, and here international efforts to defeat it have taken place in harness with efforts by the national government and associated Shia militias (with a great deal of suffering

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554 Lister (2017b).
555 See e.g. Afzal.
556 See e.g. Gerges (2005), See also Kilcullen (on Afghanistan) and Shackle.
557 See e.g. Gerges (2005).
558 See e.g. Samer.
559 Smith and Mills.
560 Jones and Libicki; Cronin.

inflicted on civilians, for example in Mosul). Moreover, Iraqi insurgent groups that predated the rise of ISIS remain active, feeding many of the grievances that allowed ISIS to grow in Iraq.[561] Yet in Syria, it has been practically and morally impossible for Western governments to ally with the national government to defeat ISIS. This is a huge disadvantage for any international counterterrorism effort. Moreover, far from supporting international counterterrorism efforts, the Assad regime has in many ways been actively undermining them. All this underlines the need for the US and Russia as well as other interested parties – if they are serious about undermining terrorism – to exert coordinated pressure for a speedy transition away from the rule of Assad, whose regime has had a symbiotic relationship with ISIS in particular.

In Syria, ISIS has had a number of other advantages that have given it a significant degree of resilience. It has generally been well financed. It has had many commanders with military experience (notably from Saddam's Iraqi army). It has usually been able to retreat to the desert. And its fighters have often benefited from being able to move backwards and forwards across the international border between Syria and Iraq (as the Taliban has moved between Afghanistan and Pakistan). ISIS's recapture of Palmyra in December 2016 starkly illustrated the difficulties of waging a 'war on terror' across Syria and Iraq against a highly mobile enemy, since ISIS forces had earlier been pushed out of Mosul in Iraq before they headed to Raqqa, Deir al-Zour and eventually Palmyra.[562] In the summer of 2017, after Western publics were sold the US-led military assault on Raqqa as an attack on 'ISIS HQ' that would fatally weaken the organisation, experts were already saying that the big battle looming would be for Deir al-Zour in eastern Syria. Yet if Kurdish/SDA forces spearhead an assault on Deir al-Zour, the Kurds will be even further from home than they are in the largely Arab town of Raqqa.[563] As in the past, the prospects of 'winning' the war on terror continue to recede even as significant 'victories' are declared.

Another major obstacle to military victory against ISIS has been its ability to recruit new fighters. While this ability is waning, ISIS has often in the past been able to replace lost fighters through international recruitment or through local recruitment assisted by its relatively high salaries in a context of drastic economic decline. Turkmani observed in 2015 that ISIS's "ability to recruit

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561 Anagnostos (2017).

562 Fisk.

563 ICG (2017b). A February 2016 Institute for the Study of War report noted, "ISIS has established itself in multiple major urban centers, including Fallujah [in Iraq], Palmyra and Deir ez Zour [both Syria]. Any of these cities in Iraq or Syria could serve as a *de facto* capital for its caliphate were it deprived of Mosul or ar Raqqa." (Cafarella, Gambhir, and Zimmerman (2016), p 7).

based on economic needs is not something that can be countered by aerial bombardment."[564] ISIS is getting weaker. But ISIS or its successor groups are still likely to draw on significant local grievances (certainly on grievances among the Sunni in Iraq but also on grievances that centre on lack of protection and services in Syria). So too is HTS (formerly Nusra/JFS).

Even if it proves possible to declare victory against ISIS and/or successor groups in Syria and Iraq, this does not mean 'winning' worldwide. Indeed, ISIS's reduced territorial control in Syria and Iraq may be spurring an *increase* in ISIS-linked terror attacks in the West. Consider Morocco and Tunisia, for example. About a thousand former ISIS members are thought to have been smuggled back to Morocco and Tunisia as ISIS's caliphate has weakened in Syria and Iraq. The threat posed by such individuals is significant. In the wake of the August Barcelona attack, a former leader member of ISIS's external operations arm said he believed some will take their grievances back to their European countries of birth and pursue revenge for ISIS's loss of land and personnel. Combat with ISIS has been very bloody. In Syria, thousands of young men – mostly foreigners – died within ISIS in a series of futile military pushes, mostly against US-backed Kurdish groups. "We would send hundreds of people out to be killed and they would all die," the former leader said.[565] In the case of people who have survived such carnage, it is hard to imagine a swift or easy transition to peaceful coexistence in the short or long term.

While there are good grounds to expect further violence in destination countries – and there will need to be an efficient criminal justice approach to prevent and interdict violent acts – any violations of human rights will tend to nurture violent fundamentalism even if ISIS (and any successor groups) are defeated in Syria and Iraq.

An eighth problem is that the 'war on terror' framework within Syria is part of a much wider 'war on terror' that has done a great deal to nurture the violence in Syria. This includes the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Turkey's long-running (if intermittent) domestic 'war on terror', and the 'war on terror' that Baghdad has been waging on ISIS. On a broad view of the problem, it seems unlikely that a 'war on terror' is going to remedy a situation that a 'war on terror' did much to create. It is also important to note that Russia and Iran's destructive actions in Syria reflect, to a significant degree, a perception that *their own*

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564 Turkmani, p 5.
565 Chulov (2017).

security is at risk in a world where governments in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya have been toppled by Western governments.[566]

A ninth difficulty is that the 'war on terror' framework has contributed to sanctions and aid approaches that, as noted above, have had very adverse humanitarian effects while feeding strongly into the war.

Disillusionment with the West

Negative perceptions around international aid, around sanctions and around the pattern of military interventions and non-interventions have fuelled a significant disillusionment with the West, which in turn has helped violent jihadist groups. Many Syrians report being treated by the international community as 'less than human', whether inside or outside Syria.[567] For example, many Syrians have seen a focus on confronting terrorists rather than Assad as evidence of a prioritisation of Western over Syrian lives. We have noted also the perception among many Syrians, especially Sunni Arabs, that they have been deserted by the West and even the perception of a *de facto* Western alliance with Russia, Iran and the Assad regime.

Such perceptions carry a significant risk of building support for anti-Western militancy, at least in certain individuals. The perception also echoes many Syrians' explanations for the original 2011 rebellion, explanations that often centre on affronts to 'dignity' and 'humanity' in the pre-war period.

Given the threat to people's safety and survival and the extreme injustices experienced by many of Syria's people, it is unsurprising that, in Syria as in other deeply insecure environments, many people have aligned themselves with violent groups in search of resources, safety and even some kind of moral certainty.

Within Syria, ISIS and al-Nusra/JFS/HTS (while often extremely violent and extremely abusive) have offered – and sometimes even delivered – an element of protection and a modicum of services in a context where these precious public goods had virtually collapsed. This statement may seem particularly odd in relation to ISIS, whose vicious behaviour has included filmed beheadings of Westerners and mass rape of Yazidi women. But even the Taliban in Afghanistan, an organisation that has been similarly reviled, is known to have

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566 Noting the 'color revolutions' in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004 as well as NATO overtures to Georgia and Ukraine and NATO's 2011 toppling of Gadaffi, Russia expert Fiona Hill observes, "In Putin's view… the United States was now responsible for a long sequence of revolutions close to Russia's borders and in countries with close ties to Moscow." (Hill).

567 E.g. author's research in 2016, Calais, France.

offered some services and some protection against warlords. In any peace process and any political transition, it will be vital to give people a sense that they are being protected and their needs are being met. Vital in itself, this goal is also essential if violent jihadist groups are to be successfully countered.

As in other wars, a desire for revenge has also become an important motivation for violence, effectively superimposing itself on the desire to win, to make money, and to find protection. Indeed, in the absence of mechanisms for establishing justice (and a properly functioning state), revenge can easily be seen as *a form of* justice.[568]

The severe shortfalls in meeting the needs of Syrian refugees have also fed a sense of neglect and even betrayal. Compounding the problem, President Trump's executive order of 27 January 2017 suspended the US refugee programme entirely for 120 days and indefinitely for Syrian refugees. Donors have often been very slow to commit money they have pledged.[569] And Syrians are being sent back from Greece to Turkey without EU evaluation of their protection claims.[570] In these circumstances, it hardly seems helpful that some of the most prominent academic commentators (Alex Betts and Paul Collier) have recently advocated assistance in the region (and especially the use of migrants' labour) *in preference to* asylum in the West, while presenting the latter as politically destabilising. One needs to take seriously the common perception of the West as washing its hands of problems that it has done a great deal to create.

5.2 Four main recommendations

Four key ways forward for international interventions emerge from the report: first, a clear rejection of a 'war on terror' framework; second, relieving the scarcity of resources through improving aid and shifting from generalized sanctions; third, a stronger diplomatic push for peace; and fourth (linked with this push for peace), a major push for an inclusive political transition led by Syrians, probably including some elements of decentralisation, so as to tackle Syria's endemic governance problem and weaken Assad's formal political power even if he were to remain president in the short term.

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568 Cf. Pendle.
569 Wintour (2016).
570 E.g. Human Rights Watch (2016a).

Rejecting the 'war on terror' framework

In Syria there can be no shortcuts to the defeat of particular problem groups without finding a solution to the wider conflict. Paradoxically, as in many contexts (such as Afghanistan, Somalia, Yemen), abandoning a 'war on terror' framework is a necessary step towards bringing about the conditions in which ISIS and its successor movements are unable to wage violent attacks and claim control over people's lives. It would be easier to think clearly about ending the conflict and bringing about a just peace if the simplistic solutions promised by a 'war on terror' framework were put to one side. Doing so would remove important blind spots in international strategy and would allow a focus on tackling the damaging behaviour of many other actors involved, including the Syrian regime, international actors like Russia and Iran, and apparent 'allies' – for all of whom the 'war on terror' has provided an important pretext for pursuing their own interests, with destabilising results.

Given the limited potential to end the Syrian war and defeat individual violent groups through military action, international strategy cannot afford to depend on Trump's promise to 'bomb the hell out of ISIS'.[571] Rather than attacking those groups seen as most dangerous without a broader strategy in place, it will be vital to recognise the counterproductive impacts of violence in feeding cycles of revenge, and explore alternatives to the use of force more vigorously.

Meanwhile, the international community needs to put the protection of civilians and the careful construction of just and lasting peace at the core of all actions in Syria. Influencing the situation in the right direction requires seeing the motives, grievances and relations between actors that are shaping the conflict as a system, at local, national, regional and international levels, and attempting to influence these in a more strategic way.

Resource scarcities and violence: the role of aid and sanctions

If resource scarcities had damaging *effects* (humanitarian effects and impact on the conflict itself), the *causes* of this scarcity have been complex. Many people were living in poverty even before the war, and the conflict massively disrupted the economy. On top of this, international aid has fallen severely short of needs, and international sanctions have further contributed to scarcity. Going forward, the international community should ensure it meets its obligation to deliver aid based on needs, notably in the besieged and hard-to-

reach areas. Obstruction of humanitarian aid to besieged areas must be clearly identified as a war crime.[572]

Delivering more aid would require overcoming obstacles such as legal restrictions, pervasive insecurity and the risks posed by theft; and, as with all aid in conflict contexts, it would be important to monitor and mitigate the potential negative impacts of injecting resources on local power dynamics. But the consequences of scarcity require that these obstacles be overcome.

Beyond the immediate humanitarian needs, Syria also urgently needs developmental interventions such as livelihoods and education.[573] Developmental interventions hold out the prospect of providing economic alternatives to joining military factions, and shortcomings here have fed the conflict. Livelihoods programmes would need to be cognisant of the lessons of similar such efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, and be complemented by other types of programmes and actions. For example, large-scale delivery of fuel – especially diesel – can help to support local livelihoods (including agriculture), and to reduce the leverage that ISIS has sometimes exerted through controlling oil supplies to other rebel groups.[574] Fuel delivery would carry risks of diversion by armed actors, but if these could be mitigated it would have clear benefits.

Particularly in any peace process or genuine 'de-escalation', local councils will need strong external support if they are to fashion alternative forms of governance to those offered by the regime and by abusive military factions. In many ways, the space for such interventions narrowed as violent jihadist factions gained an increasing hold. But the need for good local governance is present even in conditions of conflict, and relatively un-abusive groups will be unable to retain local control without appropriate resources. A peace process would also rapidly reopen these spaces, re-energising the initiative that Syrians have already shown in providing their own services. Going forward, local governance and 'bottom up' approaches will be an essential component.[575] The Trump administration has taken the line that 'nation-building' is not part of the US's agenda, and in areas retaken from ISIS we are already seeing a dangerous neglect of services. A June 2017 Center for New American Security report noted, "In the counter-ISIS fight, the new administration… has thus far put much less emphasis on humanitarian assistance, reconstruction, and economic aid to areas liberated from ISIS

572 Turkmani et al. (2015).
573 Turkmani, Ali et al.
574 Turkmani et al. (2015).
575 Turkmani et al. (2015).

than the Obama administration did."[576] Yet it is precisely this kind of vacuum that encouraged the rise of ISIS in the first place.

Over the course of Syria's war, fears about aid being diverted into the hands of fundamentalist groups have overridden other important concerns, with damaging consequences. But while the aspiration that aid should 'do no harm' is understandable at an abstract level, in practice it has tended to be quite crippling.[577] Concerns around aid manipulation have been taken up very *selectively* in the case of Syria (as in other recent emergencies like those in Somalia, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka), and regime manipulation of aid has often proceeded relatively unhindered alongside international concerns about fuelling terrorism. To uphold the commitment to 'do no harm' donors and humanitarian agencies need to redouble their efforts to circumvent the manipulation of relief by the regime while redoubling efforts to reach those in need in opposition-held areas.

They must also seek to reverse levels of scarcity and lack of support for livelihoods, recognising these as a greater problem than the risks posed by aid falling into the hands of abusive non-governmental groups. As we have seen, diversion of aid into the hands of militants tends to have relatively little impact in circumstances where militant groups have access to other more valuable resources. NSAGs in the country have tended to have diverse and lucrative sources of funding (including oil, protection money, loot, and money from foreign donors), so that the value of any stolen aid has been much less significant than in, say, Sudan, Ethiopia or Mozambique (countries where 'do no harm' originated).

In discussions on sanctions, Syrians have repeatedly emphasised the very *negative* effects on the country exerted by prolonged and relatively generalised sanctions. Sanctions have strongly impeded humanitarian operations and have fuelled shortages of key supplies like medicines. Sanctions have also fuelled violence by deepening resource scarcities and undermining livelihoods. They have also made it easier for the regime (and actors close to it) to profit from scarcity – profiting economically, militarily (through the policy of starvation) and politically (through the message that Syrians are victims of shortages imposed by the international community). Sanctions have had important negative impacts on rebel-held areas as well as on regime-held areas.

576 Kahl et al.

577 The author's work on the misuse of aid in Sudan (Keen, 1994) was one of a number of studies (e.g. Africa Watch) that informed this agenda (and in particular Mary Anderson's influential book *Do No Harm* [Anderson]).

Targeted sanctions offer a way round this impasse, but must go a lot further than at present. In February 2017, Russia and China vetoed a UN resolution to impose sanctions (including targeted sanctions on selected individuals as well as a ban on helicopter sales) as punishment for use of chemical weapons.[578]

Since ISIS (unlike many terrorist organisations) needs a lot of money to finance its governance project, effective efforts to restrict key resource flows such as oil can play – and have played – a role in weakening it.[579] Such measures include border controls implemented by Turkey and Iraq in particular, attempting to ensure that ISIS is not smuggling oil and antiquities or receiving new military supplies or recruits.[580] Pressure is also needed to stem the flow of private funding from Gulf States to fundamentalist organisations within Syria.

Finally, there is the question of assistance to victims of Syria's war outside of Syria. Assistance to Syrians in nearby countries is clearly vital and must be greatly enhanced including by significantly improving access to education. Apart from the obvious humanitarian benefits, a much more generous reception for Syrian refugees in Western countries – not least the UK and US – would also help to address the strong sense of neglect and even betrayal that has fed the rise of fundamentalist groups within Syria as well as anger outside the country.[581]

The need for a diplomatic solution

Syria's war has been messy and complex, and peace will be correspondingly messy and complex. Peace will necessarily involve, for example, a series of compromises with many unsavoury actors. But complexity should not preclude taking some relatively obvious steps. Nor should the need for compromise be a barrier to action.

Most importantly, the US and EU governments need to ramp up the diplomatic pressure on Russia and Iran to stop their support for a profoundly vicious regime while working with Russia, Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States to find an acceptable political transition that will (necessarily) be distasteful to all relevant parties. The Assad regime's heavy dependence on foreign backers, while it has fed the Syrian war in various ways, is also an

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578 Reuters/*Guardian*.
579 Financial Action Task Force/OECD.
580 Turkmani, p 27; see also Khalaf (2015).
581 It is worth noting that the humanitarian response from Gulf countries has generally been weak.

opportunity – not least because the regime's own military forces are considerably weaker than they have often been made to appear.**582**

Of course, the rebels too are weak and divided, but this presents opportunities in relation to *their* backers. Given that Assad has been responsible for mass murder on a horrifying scale, it would be profoundly disturbing (to say the least) if he were a part of a political transition in Syria. It was also disturbing when Slobodan Milosevic was part of the political transition in former Yugoslavia. However, in the absence of anything resembling a viable intention or plan to oust Assad, insisting that he disappears immediately as a condition for peace would seem to be an act of wishful or even magical thinking (or rather a continuation of the wishful thinking that started very early in the war); it may be a deal-breaker as far as Russia and Iran are concerned, though these powers are likely to be more concerned with protecting their own interests (and saving face) than with Assad *per se*.

Russia has reasons to move towards a more peaceful situation as well as reasons to continue fighting, and diplomacy can appeal to the former. In particular, Russia may be anxious not to get drawn into a permanent (and expensive) quagmire in Syria. In theory at least, there would appear to be considerable overlap with US interests, including an interest in stability in Syria, in keeping a limit on Iranian power, and (particularly given Russia's large Muslim population) in limiting the rise of Islamist jihadist groups.**583**

Militant jihadist groups tend to do well in conditions of war (and may also be aware of the 'advantages' of provoking external military interventions). Pushing strongly towards a political transition will undermine violent jihadist groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda far more effectively than some variation of a 'war on terror' that brings its own destruction and invites, to varying degrees, the cooperation of Assad, Russia and Iran. Insofar as Russia and Iran are interested in defeating terrorism, this point will be of interest to them. Fundamentalist jihadi groups are primarily a *symptom* of the wartime collapse of services and protection. As Fawaz Gerges notes: "The most effective means to degrade IS [ISIS] is to dismantle its social base by winning over hearts and

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582 A March 2017 report from the Institute for the Study of War noted: "The pro-regime coalition is a house of cards that consists of a small core of Syrian Arab Army forces concentrated around Damascus, a group of Syrian militias paid for and controlled by various individuals in the Syrian elite, many thousands of Lebanese Hizbollah fighters who report to their commander and to the Iranians, tens of thousands of Iraq Shi'a militias paid for and controlled directly by Iran. The Iranians have also periodically deployed their own conventional ground forces, while the Russians have provided limited contingents of special forces troops." (Cafarella et al. (2017), p 16).

583 Hill.

minds, a difficult and prolonged task, and to resolve the Syria conflict that has given IS motivation, resources and a safe haven."[584]

Once you let go of the fantasy that 'bad guys' can be separated from 'good guys' and eliminated (the fantasy that lies at the heart of a continuing adherence to some version of a 'war on terror'), it then becomes easier to consider how peace can be achieved through vigorous diplomatic efforts, and to pursue a diplomatic solution to the war based on a transition from the Assad regime to more inclusive governance.

Even in terms of defeating 'terrorism', a peace settlement and a shift towards more inclusive government are much more likely to be effective than a policy of waging war on 'spoilers' (particularly those with significant local support). Given the significant backing Nusra/JFS/HTS has had, it will be important to open dialogue and explore the viability of political options for engaging the movement – or at least elements of it – in a process to end the conflict and shape a future settlement.[585]

Clearly a number of diplomatic 'games' have been taking place between the US and Russia, the US and Iran, the EU and Russia, and the EU and Iran. The US and the EU need to give Syria a higher priority in relations with Russia. When it comes to sanctions, Russia's actions in Ukraine have been much more censured than Russia's actions in Syria. Yet the latter have been immensely destructive. While asset freezes (and travel bans) were imposed on more than 100 people as part of the sanctions responding to Moscow's military intervention in the Ukraine,[586] only a limited number of sanctions have been imposed on Russian entities that have provided support to Assad.[587] While new US sanctions were imposed in June 2017 over Moscow's military intervention in Ukraine, we did not see a similar move in relation to Russia's military intervention in Syria. Since the US was planning joint military operations with Russia, this would have been very odd in any case. Even at the height of Russia's attacks on eastern Aleppo, EU leaders decided to keep in reserve the possibility of sanctions on Russia for abuses in Syria, with German Chancellor Angela Merkel saying that providing humanitarian relief to people in Aleppo should be the top priority.[588] Increased pressure on Russia should include a strengthening of targeted sanctions – for example, restricting access to US and European markets for Russian banks known to be supporting Assad.

584 Gerges (2015); Kilcullen.

585 See, notably, Powell, on the importance of dialogue with such groups (Powell).

586 Ashford.

587 Harrell, Keatinge, Lain and Rosenberg

588 Troianovski and Norman (2016).

For its part, Iran has played a hugely destructive role in Syria and there is an urgent need for the international community to do everything possible to rein in this behaviour. This means speaking clearly and strongly about Iran's continuing abuses in Syria. It also means there is a need for more explicit conditionality when it comes to these abuses. Charles Lister has suggested, for example, that "The United States' best method of pressure on Iran and its use of militant groups in Syria is the use of targeted sanctions, especially against airlines used to fly weaponry and militiamen daily from Iran to Damascus." [589] In a February 2015 article in the *New York Review of Books*, Sarah Birke noted that the pursuit of a nuclear deal with Iran had allowed the Iranian Government to provide support to the Assad government with a degree of impunity. [590] Now, with the deal in place and the President Hassan Rouhani anxious to honour the agreement (and fresh from a landslide re-election), Western actors may be in a position to try to coax a different approach from Iran in relation to Syria, appealing to Iranians' desire for quick economic progress. [591]

Pressuring Russia and Iran should not mean demonising them; nor does it mean ignoring or minimising their security fears – including (in both cases) the fear of 'being ganged up on' by the international community. The UK Trade Envoy to Iran, Lord Lamont, recently described Iran as insecure and fearful of its own security, surrounded by potentially hostile and well-armed opponents. [592] Iranian insecurities stem from decades of international censure and sanctions and were reinforced by Western military intervention to over-throw Saddam Hussein in Iraq. [593] Security fears in Russia are well known and are informed by a long and bloody history.

A recent UK House of Lords report also noted a growing sense in Iran that the country had 'humiliated' itself in the July 2015 nuclear deal, and was not getting the benefits promised in the deal – in terms of a greatly improved economic environment. [594] The threat of fines for international banks continues to make it extremely difficult to finance trade with Iran. And now, under President Trump, the US's economic relationship with Iran is under threat. [595] If relations cool still further, Iran will turn further towards Russia and China. [596]

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589 Lister (2017b).

590 Birke (2015).

591 On this desire, see International Crisis Group (2017a).

592 House of Lords (UK), p 45.

593 See e.g. House of Lords (UK), p 53.

594 House of Lords (UK), p 49.

595 House of Lords (UK), p 30.

596 House of Lords (UK).

As part of any effective pressure on Iran, Western governments need to grasp the nettle of recalibrating their military and economic alliance with Iran's chief rival in the region, Saudi Arabia. Noting the UK's extensive trade connections (including major arms sales), a recent House of Lords report stressed that it was dangerous to see the region through the eyes of the Gulf States, ignoring Iranian insecurities.[597] The UK's influence in Iran is naturally eroded by the sale of weapons that the Saudis have used in Yemen, where Saudi rivalry with Iran has strongly fuelled the war and Saudi bombing and siege tactics are inflicting huge suffering. In pressuring for peace in Syria (and gaining credibility in Iran), it is also important to pressure Riyadh in relation to its support for its proxies in Syria, which are formally or informally allied with HTS (formerly Jabhat Fateh al-Salem and al-Nusra).[598]

Some greater degree of humility in relation to the West's own role in the Syrian war could also be helpful in relations with Russia and Iran. This could include acknowledgement of the civilian suffering arising both from Western airstrikes and from the wider 'war on terror' (not least in Iraq).[599] In any conflict, humiliating your opposite number may reinforce the underlying violence, and both Russia and Iran have shown themselves to be very sensitive to humiliation. There is a danger that Trump's increasingly hostile stance towards Iran will be mirrored by many experts in US civil society. For example, a March 2017 report by the Institute for the Study of War noted, "We must show once again that we are willing to fight and die with Sunni Arabs against their enemies and ours – al-Qaeda, ISIS and Iran."[600] Such language is unhelpful.

In Russia and Iran – as in Syria – it is important to note that even some targeted sanctions can cause relatively widespread suffering, while also sometimes feeding into exploitative systems.[601] Some of the so-called 'smart' or targeted sanctions against Russia have actually inflicted significant economic damage, effectively inflicting widespread punishment on the Russian population (notably by restricting access to international finance during a recession).[602] The impact of these sanctions is difficult to know. Some experts say they have prevented Russia from seizing additional Ukrainian territory,[603] while others

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597 See e.g. House of Lords (UK), p 57.

598 House of Lords (UK), p 47.

599 The 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq helped to destabilise the region and, more specifically, to foster the eventual emergence of ISIS. ISIS emerged from al-Qaeda in Iraq, an organisation that had itself been formed in large part by Baathists who were humiliated and discarded with the defeat of Saddam Hussein and the quick disbandment of Saddam's army (e.g. Dodge and Wasser).

600 Cafarella (2017), p 17.

601 See e.g. discussion in Keen (2012).

602 Ashford.

603 Harrell, Keatinge, Lain and Rosenberg.

point out that Russia has not stopped supporting separatists in eastern Ukraine or occupying the Crimean peninsula.[604] Interestingly, Moscow has tried to compensate for the impact of sanctions on key businesspeople by offering them lucrative public procurement contracts.[605] Between January 2014 and June 2015, billionaires with stakes in sanctioned Russian companies lost far less of their wealth (3 per cent) than did those who had no such stakes (9 per cent), suggesting that the Kremlin was able to shield those with connections to the ruling circle.[606] Meanwhile, those sanctioned are sometimes able to hide assets or transfer them to family members.[607] Sanctions always carry the risk of a *loss* of influence, and China has stepped in to finance Russian oil and gas projects.[608] In one Russian poll, more than two thirds of respondents said they thought the main goal of sanctions was to weaken and humiliate Russia.[609] Such perceptions can easily strengthen a leader like Putin.[610]

Nevertheless, extensive and well-enforced targeted sanctions can send a useful signal and influence decision makers, even if they are rarely enough on their own. Where there are political obstacles to recrafting targeted international 'sanctions' in a formal sense, it will be important to try to establish alternatives, such as financial controls on relevant businesses and individuals within the jurisdiction of the US and supporting countries.

Another part of a diplomatic solution for Syria will be the right kinds of pressure in relation to Turkey. As things stand, the West's 'war on terror' framework has tended to provide a useful cover for the Erdogan regime to intimidate a wide range of civil society professionals and activists under the rubric of combating the PKK. Yet Turkey's move towards authoritarianism and its resumption of oppressive policies towards the Kurds have damaging implications for Syria and require much more careful scrutiny and much more vigorous criticism.

Even as Turkey looks increasingly to Russia, Europe retains bargaining power in relation to Turkey, thanks largely to Turkey's long quest to join the European Union. But this leverage seems to have been weakened by European governments' preoccupations with ensuring Turkey is an ally against ISIS and in the 'fight' against migration. Robert Worth noted in May 2016 in a *New York Times* investigation,

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604 Harrell, Keatinge, Lain and Rosenberg; Ashford.
605 Harrell, Keatinge, Lain and Rosenberg; Ashford.
606 Ashford.
607 Harrell, Keatinge, Lain and Rosenberg.
608 Harrell, Keatinge, Lain and Rosenberg.
609 Ashford.
610 Hill.

European Union officials are now so desperate for Turkey to stop the flow of refugees that they have made little mention of Turkey's civil rights issues or the Kurds in recent talks. One Kurd who lost his house in Cizre [south-eastern Turkey] told me bitterly that no-one would help, 'because the EU only cares about stopping the migrants.'[611]

At present, the twin Western preoccupations with reducing flows of migrants (notably from Syria) and with waging war against ISIS have given the Erdogan regime a great deal of bargaining power, since Ankara's cooperation has been considered essential for both endeavours. This has reinforced the impunity of the Turkish Government by inducing a reluctance to criticise or hold Erdogan to account. Western governments also fear driving Turkey further into the arms of Russia, a trend that has been greatly accelerated by Turkish military purges (particularly of pro-Western officers) following the unsuccessful July 2016 coup attempt.[612] But if Western governments choose to abandon the Turkish Kurds and Turkish civil society more generally in the interests of stemming migration, promoting the fight against ISIS, and engaging in super-power rivalry, this will only fuel conflict within Turkey, Syria and the wider region.

In these circumstances, there is a pressing need to set conditions on support to Kurdish groups, strongly encouraging an increased role for non-YPG and non-Kurdish elements and recognising the dangers of further escalating existing levels of confrontation and instability in Turkey.[613] Likewise, the US should push for a Turkish ceasefire with the PKK.[614]

The need for inclusive governance

The international community should provide major and prompt assistance to Syrians in building an inclusive state that can provide services, protection, dignity and representation to the Syrian people. The only lasting solution to the threats that have emerged from Syria will be the construction of functioning and accountable states.[615] Any peace agreement will be only the beginning of a long struggle for more accountability that will require vigorous external involvement and generous external resources, particularly since more oppressive versions of peace-as-surrender are already being pushed on a continuous basis by Damascus and its allies.

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611 Worth.
612 Jacinto (2017).
613 See e.g. ICG (2017c).
614 See e.g. Lister (2017b).
615 See e.g. Wasser and Dodge; Gerges (2016).

International actors who recognise the need for Assad to go must make a concerted effort to pressure and persuade those who disagree so as to secure a peaceful transition towards new governance arrangements in Syria. Of course, this will be difficult. But a close look at the causes and functions of the war suggests a number of relevant considerations.

Crucially, it was a lack of good governance that gave rise to rebellion in the first place. This deficit nurtured violent jihadist groups, and has continued to do so even as individual 'terrorists' have been killed. Rather than reducing the war to the rebels' initial passion for democracy or to the 'evil' of Assad or ISIS, there is a pressing need to look carefully at the complex grievances that produced the war as well as the grievances that have arisen from – and fed into – the war as it evolved.

Without a fair and functioning state, 'rogue' or terrorist groups will tend to revive in some form, as we saw in Iraq when the 'defeat' of AQI was quickly followed by the emergence of ISIS amid Sunni grievances that remained largely unaddressed.

Although it is easy to imagine that the salient grievance in Syria was that democracy was absent and Assad was a tyrant, grievances were naturally much more complicated than this. One key problem that is easy to overlook was resentment within the Syrian military; this fed directly into the rebellion and will need to be addressed in any reconstruction. Grievances within the pro-regime militias will also be important to understand as well as grievances within the wider Alawite community on which the regime has relied heavily for support (including fighting – and dying – in the war). Not without reason, the Alawite community has tended to fear violent 'retaliation' in a post-Assad Syria – so a viable peace could in part depend on what security guarantees are offered to them.

A key priority in ending the Syrian war must be delivering some sense of redress for injustices suffered during the conflict. There is a pressing need to reduce impunity. To work towards this, international actors should continue to support the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, and should also throw their weight behind the UN General Assembly's initiative to investigate and prosecute crimes during Syria's war.[616] These bodies will lay the groundwork for legal-judicial responses to the abuses committed in Syria. It is important for these mechanisms to avoid politicisation and to remain independent, if they are to lay the foundation for any future process of transitional justice.

616 UN General Assembly.

Part of the peace strategy must be doing everything possible to support livelihoods and to provide economic alternatives to enlisting with the various militias. This could include livelihoods in a reformed Syrian military. Simply dismantling state institutions is likely to be counterproductive, as it was in Iraq after 2003.

Another important set of grievances in Syria have been those centred on the 'mafia' linked to the regime, a mafia whose peacetime extraction of resources through the use and threat of violence has been mirrored in more extreme forms of mafia activity during the war itself. A 'liberal peacebuilding' model that emphasises privatisation could easily provide opportunities for a small ruling clique, as it did in Russia and Iraq for example. Emphasising privatisation and tight controls on public spending would also be inconsistent with the strong evidence that privatisation and official austerity helped to generate the Syrian war in the first place. Considering Syria's economic future, it could therefore be important to maintain public enterprise and service provision, and ensure checks on economic actors who may seek to make windfall profits in the post-war phase without advancing the public interest.

Inclusion will be critical. It is crucial that civil society – and in particular civil society groups that are led by, or represent, women and youth – are substantially included in peace talks and peace processes: where armed actors are given an excessive or exclusive stake, their vested interest in war can be a powerful obstacle to peace. Without the genuine involvement of civil society, any move towards peace would almost certainly enable impunity and the war economy to continue into peacetime, including a continued manipulation of shortages and a widespread use of violence to enhance profits during reconstruction.[617] Already, when regaining opposition areas (for example, in the Damascus countryside), the Syrian regime has been destroying opposition governance and entrenching the privileges of local sheikhs and other elites, while often imposing conscription and reneging on promises of services; all this has been done under the heading of 'reconciliation'.[618] Meanwhile, business elites close to the regime have their eye on real estate development in land 'vacated' by those forcibly displaced.[619]

In any Syrian peace process, it will be important to recognise that newly empowered groups and regions will not easily cede what they have gained in wartime, while many people could oppose the re-imposition of state

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617 As they have been in post-war Lebanon and Bosnia, for example. (Turkmani et al. (2015); Keen (2000); Berdal and Keen; Kaldor; de Waal.

618 Ezzi.

619 See also Hallaj.

authority.[620] Yet, peacemaking should itself be informed by the war economy, and even collusive and corrupt economic relationships in wartime can sometimes create a basis for more peaceful cooperation.[621] The role of international actors is not to establish new arrangements on behalf of Syrians, but to midwife alternative governance arrangements in support of Syrians. The failure of Yemen's federalisation process after 2011[622] illustrates the importance of avoiding any hastily agreed elite bargain, which would likely prove exclusionary and therefore unsustainable.

Solving Syria's conflict will require looking beyond the reconstruction of a unitary and centralised nation state. Any simple attempt at 'reconstruction' would risk recreating the conditions that led to war in the first place, and simply prescribing 'democracy' is unlikely to be a solution in itself. Some degree of decentralisation is probably desirable, and it offers a way of accommodating the interests of a variety of factions. Importantly, it may offer a way of 'knitting together' zones of relative peace (policed by a variety of international actors) alongside a regime in Damascus that may, unfortunately, bear at least some resemblance (at least in the short term) to the present regime.

On one reading, Syria has fragmented into six zones: Assad's statelet; al-Qaeda's north-western haven; northern Syria, divided between Turkey and the Kurds; ISIS-held eastern Syria; and a moderate opposition buffer supported by Jordan and Israel in the southwest.[623] It may be possible to build on elements of autonomy that have already evolved – for example, the partial autonomy in predominantly Kurdish regions of Syria.[624] Decentralisation may also help with one of the root causes of Syria's war – the fact that many of the areas richest in resources are also among the poorest in terms of income.[625]

At the same time, any decentralisation will be highly contentious – not least because the richer areas will not want to lose access to resources. It would require a willingness to work together towards mutually agreed-upon goals among deeply divided groups, and thus depend for its success on concerted long-term efforts at reconciliation. Formal recognition of autonomous zones dominated by particular ethnic groups could also result in repression of minorities in particular areas. A Kurdish entity within Syria could feed further into regional instability given the conflict between Turkey and the PKK and the struggle for autonomy underway in neighbouring Iraq. If any

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620 Yazigi (2014).
621 Ken (2000); Le Billon (2003); Turkmani et al. (2015).
622 Attree.
623 Kahl et al.
624 Kurdish ambitions will always be sensitive in Turkey, Iran and Iraq, and have to be handled carefully.
625 Yazigi (2016).

reconstruction is left in the hands of Russia and Iran and a regime with some resemblance to the present one, the 'peace' is likely to involve high levels of violence and corruption – and to be ultimately unsustainable. International actors should do everything in their power to mitigate such risks by offering long-term support to a process led by Syrians, applying pressure on Russia, Iran and the regime, together with financial and political support for Syrian civil society in what will be a lengthy struggle.

One possibility is to link the construction of a relatively decentralised state with the construction of a variety of safe – or relatively safe – zones within Syria. Turkey has established a zone of influence in northern Syria, prompting significant return of refugees as well as the evacuation of al-Qaeda from northern Aleppo province.[626] In May 2017 the governments of Russia, Turkey and Iran agreed to establish so-called 'de-escalation areas' in Syria, aiming at conditions for safe and voluntary return of refugees and IDPs. Four areas were listed: Idlib governorate, south-west Syria, eastern Ghouta, and the northern Homs countryside. A proliferation or expansion of such zones might conceivably join up (in what is sometimes called an 'ink-spot' strategy).[627]

At the same time, it is crucial to remember the chequered history of so-called 'safe zones'. In Bosnia and Rwanda, for example, 'safe zones' were also killing zones.[628] Even in Iraq (often seen as a more successful example), there were severe limits to the protection that the UN-declared 'safe haven' could provide.[629] Safe zones may also legitimise a refusal of asylum. For example, a Turkish-sponsored 'safe zone' risks legitimising forcible returns from Turkey as well as increased Turkish violence against the PYD.[630]

UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Stephen O'Brien has pointed out that the four 'de-escalation' areas "essentially encompass all the besieged locations except for those in Damascus and Deir ez-Zour."[631] One might reasonably ask why the Syrian Government and its Russian and Iranian allies, having promoted a policy of siege and bombardment for these areas, would suddenly turn around and promote humanitarian access and improved human rights observance; of course, the strong suspicion is that the condition for peace and humanitarian access will (as has already been the case with besieged areas) be some kind of surrender. The Assad regime is already selling surrender as peace and 'reconciliation' and its international allies may be more

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626 Lister (2017b).
627 Lister (2017b).
628 See e.g. Frelick; Cameron.
629 See e.g. Keen (1993).
630 On Kurdish fears in relation to such a 'safe zone' see e.g. Steele (2015).
631 O'Brien (2017).

than willing to 'buy'. O'Brien has also highlighted the danger of the international community standing by while violence flares up outside any agreed 'de-escalation' zones.[632]

Looking at the rise of violent jihadist groups and at the fate of Iraq and Libya after the fall of Saddam Hussein and Gaddafi, some Syrians fear a future that could be even worse than the present. Such perceptions represent a major triumph for the Assad regime's strategy of 'action as propaganda' that this report has documented – for Assad has repeatedly and successfully used violence to create a situation that deprives large parts of the rebellion of international legitimacy. Nevertheless, these fears about further disintegration are real, and any peace process will need huge international support if Syria is not to degenerate further into a chaotic zone of decentralised violence that is strongly fed (as it has been during the war to date) by opportunistic international actors of various kinds. There must be no repeat of the grievous neglect of reconstruction in Iraq and Libya.

Without a wider strategy, it is hard to envisage a future that moves beyond the kind of fractured, authoritarian states that spawned and nourished the current generation of violent fundamentalist factions. It will be vital to address the vacuum of a collapsing state that these groups have attempted to fill. This must be approached in a just way that seeks to heal the divides between the different groups involved – learning from past mistakes in Iraq, Libya, Yemen and comparable contexts.[633] Alongside a recognition of the difficulty in achieving a military victory over ISIS in Syria and Iraq, we also need to look at what is making ISIS's cause attractive in many other countries far from ISIS's 'heartlands.' Anger at the suffering of people in countries destabilised by Western (and Western-backed) military interventions is a significant factor – as are Western strategic alliances with repressive regimes. In Syria and beyond, a perception that Western lives count while Syrian lives do not continues to feed support for jihadist groups.

ISIS is a vicious organisation, but it is all too easy to forget its members are human beings. Nor does the systematic manipulation and even brainwashing of new recruits abolish this humanity. International Alert interviewed a young Syrian man:

> *My friend was involved in the demonstrations with me for a long time. He got picked up by the regime. He was raped and tortured in prison. As soon as he came out, he renounced the revolution as ineffective in defeating the regime. He went and joined*

632 O'Brien (2017).
633 See Keen with Attree; House of Commons (2016).

one of the small battalions around Aleppo before eventually going over to Islamic State. He is completely brainwashed now. Last time I wrote to him online, he said that if he ever saw me again he would happily kill me.[634]

This is just one story of trauma among millions thrown up by the horrendous violence of the Syrian war; it seems very unlikely that more war – no matter how righteous it is made to appear – will be a solution.

634 Aubrey et al., p 21.