What Peace?

Fragmented Perceptions of Peacebuilding in Syria

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List of Abbreviations

AANES	Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria
AKP	Justice and Development Party (Turkey)
ASPS	Association de Soutien au Peuple Syrien
BRI	(China's) Belt and Road Initiative
CC	Constitutional Committee
CHP	Republican People's Party (Turkey)
CSOs	Civil society organisation(s)
GoS	Government of Syria
HNC	High Negotiations Committee (Syrian opposition body)
HTS	Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (Sunni Islamist militant group)
ICG	International Crisis Group
IDPs	Internally displaced people
IHEID	The Geneva Graduate Institute
INGOs	International non-governmental organisation(s)
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (Iran)
IS	Islamic State (Islamic State in the Levant; Islamic State in Iraq and Syria)
LACs	Local Administrative Councils
LACU	Local Councils Coordination Unit (Syrian opposition body)
LDF	Local Defence Forces (Syrian militia linked to the Government of Syria)
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MHP	Nationalist Action Party (Turkey)
NDF	National Defence Forces (Syrian militia linked to the Government of Syria)
NES	Northeast Syria
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê)
PYD	Democratic Union Party (PKK-affiliated Syrian Kurdish party)
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces (Syrian militia linked to AANES)
SIG	Syrian Interim Government (Syrian opposition body based in Turkey)
SNA	Syrian National Army (Syrian militia backed by Turkey)
SNC	Syrian National Coalition (Syrian opposition body)
SAA	Syrian Arab Army
SSG	Syrian Salvation Government (linked to HTS)
TEV-DEM	Movement for a Democratic Society (Tevgera Dîmokrat)
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
YPG	People's Defense Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, affiliated to PYD)
YPJ	Women's Defense Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Jinê, affiliated to PYD)

Executive Summary

The Syrian Civil War is the deadliest conflict in the country's history. The foundational causes of the conflict can be traced back to France's colonial Mandate when the country's Alawite minority was given disproportionate control over the governance and military power of the country. This sparked decades of conflict, culminating in the current fracturing of the state between the competing interests of major Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish ethno-religious groups. The conflict has also been complicated by participation from Russia, the United States, Turkey, and Iran. Given the fractured relationship among the different groups and the multitude of competing interests, Syria's chances of returning to peace and rebuilding are complicated.

This report combines an in-depth secondary source analysis with informant, semi-structured interviews with actors from/experts on different areas of control, to examine the historical trajectories of Syria's various ethno-religious groups and synthesise these findings with informants' perspectives to clarify each group's peacebuilding agendas in line with their respective perceptions of peace. This is done simultaneously with exploring the role of international and regional actors as vehicles for the promotion of certain peacebuilding frameworks, and the extent to which such foreign designs converge with local, Syrian-led, post-conflict narratives. Attention is also given to the ongoing high-level peace talks and mediation efforts, and their intersection with the various actors' visions of the country's post-conflict future.

The findings of this report indicate a frozen military reality on the ground. The historical ethno-religious character of Syrian actors, and their diverging peacebuilding agendas, have seen them prioritise short-term stabilisation efforts, making it challenging to realise a concrete vision for the reunification of the whole country. This stalemate has been further reinforced by the self-centred involvement of foreign patrons, ultimately bleeding into the current impasse in the official peace talks and mediation efforts. Despite difficulties detected at various levels throughout the research process, this report provides important insights and key recommendations that can help facilitate more grounded discussions on the future of the Syrian nation.

Introduction

In March 2011, Syria descended into a bloody civil war that has so far claimed the lives of over 300,000 Syrians - about 2% of its pre-war population - and displaced an additional 12 million - half of the pre-war population (Asseburg et al., 2022, 3-4). Besides the conflict's human toll, the war has also resulted in 13.4 million Syrians - almost 80% of the total remaining population - who are dependent on humanitarian aid, whilst simultaneously deeply fracturing the region (Ibid.). Powerful states have intervened, and Syria has spent the last decade as a constantly shifting hotbed of proxy wars, with competition over geopolitical interests intensifying and prolonging the conflict. Starting with a background look at the war, the present report will examine perceptions of peace within this devastating and fractured context, and how such normative constructs have evolved. Evidence of these evolving constructs will be examined practically at the institutional level to develop a greater depth of understanding of prospects for a peaceful future in the war-torn state.

Background and Context

The Assad family, and its Alawite ethnic minority supporters, have ruled Syria for over forty years, with underlying sectarian tensions and occasional civil conflicts characterising the family's regime. While the current war is the largest outbreak of violence in the country's modern history, Syria has been plagued by growing "[anti-government] resentment", as well as simmering "social unrest" and sectarian strife, since Hafez al-Assad - Bashar al-Assad's father - took control of the country in 1970 (Ghattas, 2021, 84-85). Indeed, the ongoing bloodshed has been greatly exacerbated by sectarian tensions that date back to the colonial period and have been progressively stoked to the point of catastrophe in the current crisis.

When al-Assad took over the presidency from his father in 2000, he promised sweeping pluralistic and liberalising reforms of the country and the Ba'athist state (Khashan, 2016, 115-116). While the President did privatise many state monopolies, control of these assets was dominated by the longstanding tradition of political patronage. Thus, the reforms meant to expand economic inclusion across sectarian lines produced the opposite effect; they only deepened the divisions (Ibid.). To compound Syria's socio-economic problems, the country experienced a five-year drought between 2006 and 2010 which was among the worst in the nation's history (Gleick, 2014, 332-333). In addition to food shortages, increasing food prices pushed many among the already struggling Sunni majority to a breaking point (Ibid.).

The Tunisian Arab Spring proved to be the final trigger, inspiring the eruption of peaceful protests across many Syrian cities. However, the regime almost immediately resorted to armed forces to brutally put down the initial peaceful opposition with mass arrests, torture, and even killings in the street. While the Syrian leader did offer some token concessions, the police and army continued to brutally clamp down on dissenters, indicating that the Ba'ath regime would never meaningfully respond to peaceful protests (Laub, 2021). This followed the blueprint his father had used during the Hama Massacre of 1982 when the regime killed more than 15,000 individuals whilst trying to take back the city from the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni Islamist organisation (Ghattas, 2021, 84-85). The recent clashes, however, saw a wave of military defectors join the anti-regime activists and Islamist radicals, in turn creating the Free Syrian Army, and causing the conflict to evolve into a civil war (Lund, 2018, 17-18).

The violence escalated further with regional and international interventions in Syria, which largely "dovetailed" with the country's internal divides (Ibid.). Sunni leaders in Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia began arming the anti-Assad insurgents, whilst Shia forces in Iran, Lebanon and Iraq backed the regime. In an almost familiar Cold War pattern, Western states, led by Washington, took the side of the opposition, whilst imposing sanctions against the GoS, which, in retrospect "failed to have a tangible [behavioural] effect" on Damascus (Asseburg et al., 2022, 4).

Russia, meanwhile, given its historically close relations with the Syrian regime, allied with Assad (Lund, 2018, 18). The risk of Islamic extremism further complicated the conflict once the infamous Islamic State (IS) rose to prominence in 2013-2014 by breaking from rival rebels and its "parent organisation", al-Qaeda, essentially seeking to incorporate eastern Syria into its "self-declared caliphate" (Lund, 2018, 20-21). This dynamic gave birth to the alliance between the YPG and the United States, one which arguably lasted until the almost complete withdrawal of American troops in 2019, and which was largely based on Washington's belief that the Kurds were the "only effective and cohesive Syrian" force which could counter IS in the east (Ibid.).

At the same time, the regime's battlefield failures precipitated a Russian military intervention in September 2015. This occurred simultaneously with a "surge" in Iranian and Shia Islamist forces, a reality which birthed an opposing involvement of Jerusalem seeking to counter Tehran's influence near its borders. These developments, subsequently, have resulted in the resurgence of the GoS, enabling it, for example, to secure a victory in the Battle of Aleppo in

December 2016 (Ibid.). Concurrently, Ankara began to employ its military forces in northwestern Syria more routinely, seeking to crush the Syrian Kurdish forces, whilst also seeking to create a contiguous zone of Turkish influence across the border with its southern neighbour.

Consequently, Turkish, Iranian, Russian, American, and Israeli forces began to routinely operate inside Syria, giving birth to several sets of "deconfliction agreements" aimed at reducing the prospect of any unintended clashes (Lund, 2018, 22-23). Ultimately, Assad's victory in the south by the end of 2019 left only three regions outside the regime's control, all of which were protected by these delicate 'de-escalation' agreements: the Kurdish-controlled territory in the northeast; the Turkish-protected Sunni rebel territory in the northwest; and the US-held Syrian-Iraqi border crossing at Tanf in the southeast (Ibid.).

Such a complex reality has been further strained by the seemingly stalling, and growingly convoluted, official peace negotiations. Efforts by the UNSC, as well as the Geneva Process, which have given birth to the UNSC Resolution 2254[1] on "credible, inclusive, and non-sectarian [Syrian] governance," have, effectively, come to an impasse, "hobbled by disagreements" among the warring sides and their foreign supporters (Lund, 2018, 35-37). The more recent Astana and Sochi tracks also have had limited successes, essentially failing to bring the Western coalition on board. Even the Constitutional Committee (CC), which stipulates limited decentralisation and empowerment of local councils, has been hamstrung by the lack of a clear time frame and "divergence of [post-conflict] expectations between the opposition and the Syrian government" (Hatahet, 2020, 7).

Therefore, the war has created facts on the ground leading to fragmented geographies under various forces of control. This not only reflects the diversity of interests across and within areas but also the formation of different trajectories of how post-conflict Syria should look. On the one hand, lie normative understandings of what peace is, and on the other, practical notions of how state institutions should look to foster peaceful co-existence. The substantiation of what peace is on an institutional level is often lost in the discussion between what Syrians aspire for and what is possible, a reality that is further complicated by the multiplicity of foreign patrons, such as Russia and Turkey, who themselves seek to shape the peace-building process in line with their interests.

[1] It aims to establish a Transitional Governing Body through a Syrian-led and Syria-owned process, and UN-supervised elections (Al-Tanf, Syria, 2022).

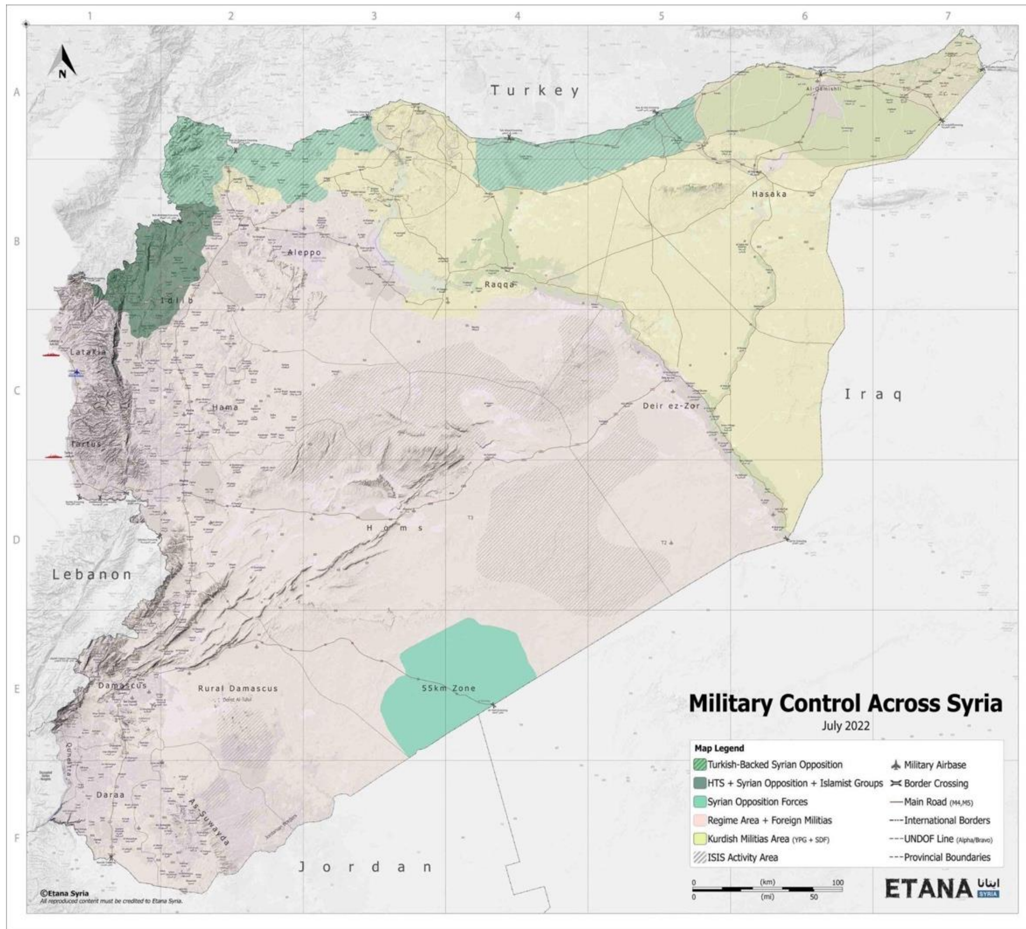

Figure 1: ***Military Control Across Syria, July 2022 - ETANA Syria*** (Military Control)

Central to the sustainability of a future peace agreement are convergences between these different areas on what social contract binds them together, how power is redistributed, and how positions are assumed. Nevertheless, each of these areas has developed historically and throughout the conflict to share specificities unique to the experiences of the actors controlling them and their constituencies. These dynamics inadvertently may clash with those in other areas of control.

Therefore, this applied research project has sought to address these intricacies by producing a concise policy report in collaboration with our partner organisation. The scope of our research has specifically focused on domestic actors who currently control physical territory in Syria: The Syrian Government, Kurdish Authorities, and Opposition-Armed Groups (Figure 1). International actors in question have included Russia, Iran, Turkey, the United States, and the Western Coalition since these foreign patrons are actively participating in ongoing peace negotiations and are currently supporting their respective proxies on the ground.

Table 1: Definitions and Use of Concepts

The table below presents an overview of the definitions of key terms, and concepts, that underpin our research, and which are continuously referred to throughout the report.

Peacebuilding	The United Nations Department of Peace Operations (UNDPO) defines peacebuilding as the process of "assisting countries in their transitions from war to peace". Peacebuilding aims to "reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national conflict management capacities" (UN Documents, 2022).
Liberal Peacebuilding	The tenets of liberal peacebuilding suggest that armed conflicts, including civil wars, can be resolved through "inclusive [and participatory] peace processes and liberal state transformation, including democratisation and good governance" (Lewis, 2022, 654).
Statehood	This paper will define statehood not only as a process by which "actors [seek] to control and wield [state] violence", and, in turn, claim to be an organised, and independent, political community worthy of a state but also, and especially in the case of Syria, as a system by which "...power is negotiated, gathered, and contested by different actors" in an evolving manner (Sosnowski, 2020, 1397).
Historical Trajectories	Historical trajectories will be conceptualised as the historically rooted inter-group societal, economic, and political processes which have shaped the contemporary sectarian dynamics within Syria and fed into each group's respective claims to statehood and power.
Institution(s)	The concept of a (political) institution describes "organisations in a government that create, enforce and apply laws". Furthermore, institutions often "mediate conflict, make [governmental] policy on the economy and social systems, and otherwise provide representation for the population" (Boddy-Evans, 2020).
Governance	This research identifies governance along the lines of the definition provided by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), specifically as "the exercise of political, economic, and administrative authority to manage a nation's affairs". It is viewed as the complex web of "mechanisms, processes and institutions" through which citizens' "interests… and rights" are articulated, and differences are mediated (Kahf, 2021, 226-227).

Constitution	The Day After (TDA)[2] organisation defines a constitution as the "fundamental law shap[ing] the political system of a country". It is based upon "... principles agreed upon by all components of society through social contract". Most constitutions include a "description of the political system structure, regulations of inter-authority relations", and definitions of the "boundaries and practices of political authorities" (Survey: Which Constitution, 2018, 1).
Decentralisation	The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UN ESCWA) defines decentralisation as "the downward transfer of resources, responsibilities or authority from national to subnational, [local] governments" (Haid et al., 2020, 15-16).

Research Objective and Questions

The research objective of this project is to unpack "what peace" different areas within Syria advocate for, how such normative constructs have evolved, and, in turn, how these existing visions materialise on a more tangible, institutional level. Given Syria's long history of sectarian conflict and deeply embedded divisions across geographical and ideological lines, this examination of disparate, evolving definitions of peace among different groups fills the gap between "what" peace is for different geographies and foreign actors, as well as "how" they concretely seek to materialise it in a post-conflict institutional arrangement. To this effect, the research aims to enhance understanding of how local and foreign discourses on peace dictate the post-conflict trajectories of Syria and, therefore, inform international policy debates on effective peacebuilding in the country.

At this point, it is essential to note that the term 'Syrian' is used in this report in a fundamentally hopeful sense. Syria's historical trajectory has followed that of many post-colonial states where different ethnic groups were forced together into pluralistic states against their will. While the conflict in such situations may seem inevitable, this report undertakes its work from a position of optimism; recognizing the need for reconciliation and redressal of historic wrongs has proven to be a potent tool in the face of ethnic tensions and fractured states. While the current state

[2] The Day After (TDA) is a Syrian non-profit organisation which has been working in support of democratisation and anti-authoritarianism in Syria. It focuses, in particular, on the rule of law, security sector reform, transitional justice, and constitutional design, among other fields. (Syrians' Perceptions, 2022).

is fragmented and the trajectories of the various groups deeply divisive, this report's research seeks to illuminate potential pathways toward peace for the Syrian people.

The significance of our research is even more timely considering that the only comprehensive surveyed analyses of Syrians' outlook on the questions of peacebuilding, decentralisation, and democratic self-administration were conducted by the Syrian organisation The Day After (TDA) in 2016, 2018 and 2022, with the latter study solely focusing on the concept and implementation of decentralisation in the country.

Finally, in line with the aforementioned research objective, the research is guided by three interlinked areas of focus:

1. Understand how Syrians perceive peace in different areas, both normatively and practically. These perceptions lay at the heart of substantive propositions for institutional change, constitutional, governance and/or electoral reforms.
2. Gain a deeper understanding of these different perceptions by situating them within respective historical trajectories and claims to statehood.
3. Comprehend the role played by international and regional actors in shaping peacebuilding narratives in Syria, while juxtaposing these dynamics with 'what peace' is for different Syrian actors.

Structure of the Report

This report will first discuss the methodology and research design by expanding upon the study's data collection methods and process of analysis, as well as highlighting any limitations, and challenges, which came up whilst producing this report. The next four sections will focus on the synthesised research findings. It must be noted that among these, the first three will combine in-depth overviews of existing literature with interview responses, in turn shedding light on the three aforementioned focus areas. The fourth section, entitled '*The Future of Syrian Peace Negotiations*', will be grounded mainly in the analysis of respective interviews, since it evolves from the other research findings and provides key insights for the future; it was not the primary focus of our study of the existing literature. Finally, this report will conclude with a summary of the findings, key recommendations, a bibliography, and appendices.

Methodology and Research Design

Given the key objectives of the project, an in-depth desk-based literature review, and informant, semi-structured interviews, were employed in parallel to each other. The subjects of analysis of our desk-based research included relevant academic and grey literature, news articles, as well as media sources. A major emphasis was also placed on secondary sources which fed into our analysis of the existing literature on the topic. These were specifically tailored to the three key areas relevant to our research, notably: historical trajectories and respective claims to statehood of different actors within the Syrian context; perceptions of peace in different geographical areas of control, and their translation into concrete institutional realities; as well as the role of international and regional actors as vehicles for the promotion of particular peacebuilding frameworks, and the extent to which such foreign blueprints converge with local post-conflict narratives. Furthermore, some of the important keywords which guided our in-depth literature review included, among others, "peacebuilding", "perceptions of governance", "administrative and executive reforms", "power-sharing", "decentralisation", and "foreign-led/sponsored peace-building".

After conducting our desk-based research, we began the interview process, which was grounded in semi-structured, informant interviews with actors from/experts on different areas of control, as well as members of the Syrian diaspora. It must be noted, however, that since the majority of the Syrian policymakers were themselves experts in the field, it would have been impractical for us to separate the interviewees into two distinct groups. In choosing the interviewees, we relied mainly on the list provided by our partner organisation, which was subsequently expanded after the submission of our initial report to capture a larger sample of individuals. Furthermore, we also added to the sample based on our engagements with several academics at IHEID and following our in-depth literature review, which allowed us to familiarise ourselves with leading scholars in the field of Syrian peacebuilding.

The interviews were conducted based on a questionnaire, which was formulated by the researchers, shared with the partner for approval, and ultimately adjusted according to the individual(s) being interviewed. The questionnaire included five broad questions, which, in effect, mirrored the three research questions of the project, whilst also touching upon the future of the ongoing official Syrian peace talks and mediation efforts, as well as the prospect of any future peacebuilding consensus among the actors on the ground. Ethical guidelines were also drafted

following the Graduate Institute's Research Ethics regulations, with the interviewees, therefore, being provided with debriefing and consent forms which they were asked to read, sign, and return to the research team. The majority of the interviews were recorded (if consent was provided in advance) and transcribed for transparency and reliability of data. The full transcripts are only accessible to the research team, and the report only references interviewees by their names if prior consent was obtained. Otherwise, the interviewees are anonymised for protection reasons. A full list of the interviewees can be found in the appendix. Due to the sensitivity of the topic and other security reasons, the name of our partner organisation has also been anonymised.

The interview process was conducted in two stages. Firstly, the research team interviewed academics and university scholars from research institutions, specifically IHEID, that is individuals who possess either academic expertise and/or practical experience concerning the topic. This allowed us to gain a prior grounded understanding of the scholarly debates and outlooks on the three research questions underpinning our report. The second stage of our data collection focused on interviews with representatives of the Syrian diaspora, local experts, and those specialising in West Asia. The semi-structured nature of the interviews provided us with the needed flexibility to adapt and build upon our questions depending on the responses we were given, as well as leaving room for the interviews to be conducted on either oral and/or written basis, depending on the availability and demands of the interviewees.

We analysed the interview transcripts through open coding, specifically by identifying cross-cutting themes and concepts across varying responses which correlated with our three research questions. The in-depth desk-based literature review, and further secondary sources, were used to both compare and substantiate the themes and concepts emerging from our primary data collection, ultimately enabling us to produce a coherent research findings' framework.

Challenges and Research Limitations

There are a number of challenges and research limitations which must be addressed before expanding upon the research findings. Firstly, while some objective data does exist regarding perceptions of peace, and a wealth of secondary literature supports a detailed understanding of group/geographical trajectories over time, this study has sought to base its conclusions regarding definitions of peace on certain subjective assumptions, namely that a concept as far-reaching as peace, and conditions for peacemaking, can be assigned to any one group. During our research

process, we recognised that within any group there will be some normative and practical disagreements as to what conditions constitute peace, and, in turn, how the concept can be formulated on a more institutional level. Therefore, it was agreed among the researchers that this study will seek to offer general prescriptive findings, without assuming that it can ascribe universal definitions for peace to any one group within Syria.

Secondly, during the data collection process, some political messaging was noted by the research team, which included statements and endorsements made by the interviewees in light of their conflicting visions of Syrian peacebuilding. Corroborating the interview responses with each other, as well as with the desk-based research, helped to identify, and reduce, the proliferation of this subjective messaging in our data collection and results.

Thirdly, one of the most recurrent practical limitations which arose throughout our research was the language barrier, especially since most of our interviews were conducted in English. Although this limitation was mitigated, to an extent, by the fact that one of the researchers spoke fluent Arabic, it nevertheless was a hindrance to those interviewees who preferred to communicate in other languages, such as French. As such, when it came to the compilation of the interview transcripts, the research team amended some of the grammar and sentence structure of the interviewees' responses, whilst simultaneously taking great care to not accidentally alter the essence of their reflections and thoughts.

Lastly, one of the most important limitations of our research is arguably the narrow sample size of our interviewees. Although we did have the opportunity to engage with academics, members of the Syrian diaspora, local experts, and individuals specialising in the politics and peacebuilding dynamics of West Asia, this sample was not as expansive, or as substantively reflective of the local debates on the ground, as we would have hoped at the start of the data collection process. For example, we were unable to engage with any individuals who shared the regime's convictions for Syria's future peacebuilding trajectory, any representatives of Kurdish-leaning civil and political groups, mainly discerning this information from insights provided by academics, or those aligned in their convictions with the opposition. Similarly, there was also a clear gender disbalance in our sample, which further hindered the representative nature of our research findings.

Research Findings

Part 1: Historical Trajectories and Claims to Statehood

Literature Review

Syria's Alawite Minority

Although Damascus officially promotes secular politics, historical sectarian strife, and the role played by the Alawite minority, have figured as "major structural feature[s] of the current conflict" (Lund, 2018, 43-44). The Assad dynasty has inherently fed into sectarian solidarity throughout its time in office, and during the war, effectively relying on the Alawite community's deep-seated, historical insecurity vis-a-vis the Syrian Sunni majority to retain its hierarchically centralised grip on power (Baltacioglu-Brammer, 2013). Scholar Jihad Yaziji has noted that even to this day, many within the minority, which comprised around 7- 13% of Syria's pre-war population, see their fate as being linked directly to the longevity of the GoS, fearing that any potential federalisation of the country would see the resurrection of the community's sectarian fears (Kodmani, 2019, 7-8).

Such fears are intrinsically steeped in a history of oppression of the group. Although the Alawites see themselves as occupying a separate branch of Shia Islam, they have been historically perceived as 'heretics' by many Sunnis, leading to extensive, and violent, persecution under the Umayyad, Abbisid, Mamluk and Ottoman states (Trivedi, 2016). Therefore, the minority historically aspired for self-determination, a reality which made them a prime target of France's colonialist 'divide-and-rule' strategy (Ibid.). Arguably, the Alawites gained the most from the Mandate than any other Syrian ethnoreligious group, ultimately achieving political autonomy in the form of an Alawite State in 1922, which enabled the community to "escape Sunni control" in the short-term (Fildis 151-152, 2012).

The historical Alawite over-representation in the military, which enabled Hafez al-Assad to seize power in a 1970 coup, also had its roots in the Mandate period, with their "depressed economic conditions" forcing many Alawites to view the army as a vehicle for social mobility (Ibid.). With the rise of the Assad family, the wider community became "heavily invested in the

state, [the Baath] party, the army, [and the economy]" as sources of employment, social advancement, influence and protection, resulting in 61% of all leading officers between 1970-1997 coming from the minority, a trend which continues to this day (Lund, 2018, 42-43). It must also be noted that as the "strongest and most organised" force within the Ba'ath Party, the Alawites made major political gains due to the Party's pan-Arabic ideological narrative, which appealed to Sunni Muslims and other communities as a vehicle through which "sectarian, regional, and tribal ties" could be transcended (Fildis, 2012, 154-155).

Nevertheless, although the Ba'ath period did bring about historically "unprecedented levels of sectarian [and] regional integration", it also fostered "painful frictions" (Baltacioglu-Brammer, 2013). The Alawites' "burgeoning [political and military] influence" (Ibid.) and sectarianism ironically "strengthened…the factors that [the Ba'athist ideology] claimed to abhor" (Van Dam, 2019, 63), in turn causing growing resentment among other groups within the country. Ultimately, such enmeshment of the state and the Alawite community, unsurprisingly, culminated in the infamous Battle of Hama in 1982. Hereafter, the "politics in Syria [became] dominated by sectarian divisions", with many within the Alawite minority fearing that the fall of the regime would result in reprisals against them, especially since some directly benefited from Assad's "predatory" capture of the spoils of power (Baltacioglu-Brammer, 2013), with many also actively taking up arms as part of the pro-government National Defence Force during the war (Trivedi, 2016).

Predictably then, in the 2016 TDA-led country-wide survey, as well as in a follow-up study two years later, it was the Alawite community which was the group most opposed to a greater decentralisation of Syria. In the 2018 survey, 91% of Alawite respondents argued against the devolution of administrative powers to local authorities (Survey: Which Constitution, 2018, 34-35), with a further 87% among the group wanting executive authority to remain solely in the hands of the president (Survey: Which Constitution, 2018, 21-22). Although TDA noted a shift in perceptions on the concept and implementation of decentralisation over the next four years, only 33% of Alawite respondents supported the reorganisation of the country's legislative apparatus (Syrians' Perceptions, 2022, 1-2), indicating that to this day, the regime has been successful at "cultivating its [sectarian] credentials as one of its [main] sources of legitimacy" (Kodmani, 2019, 7-8).

Sunni Majority and Muslim Brotherhood

Syria's Sunni majority made up roughly 85% of the country's pre-war population but, as noted prior, has been systematically oppressed both by the French and then by the Alawite minority. Scholar Nikolaos Van Dam notes that there were "strong feelings of hate" among the Sunni community, especially conservative Sunni Muslims, towards the Alawi-dominated Ba'th regime, both because of its repressive nature, but also because it was perceived as a corrupt "sectarian dictatorship" which exploited Ba'thist secularism to "cover-up for Alawi anti-Sunni sectarian suppression" (Van Dam, 2019, 64-65).

Consequently, opposition groups, particularly religious ones, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, have been important sources of organisation for members of the Sunni political opposition to the Alawite Regime since 1945 (Van Dam, 2019, 39-40), especially following the Ba'athist military coup in 1963. Through the Brotherhood's efforts to militarily oppose the coup and prevent the Alawite takeover of the Syrian government, it was able to establish itself as a viable way for some Sunnis, especially the more conservative urban base, to organise their resistance, even though the movement should not be equated with the whole majority, as that would be too simplistic, and would negate the aspirations of those who did not take part in the organisation (Baltacioglu-Brammer, 2013). In response to the threat that the movement presented to Hafez al-Assad's regime, the Brotherhood was officially outlawed in 1964, which led to almost two decades of strikes, protests, and political violence in the form of assassinations, terrorist attacks, and riots (Booysen, 2018, 157-158).

The Hama Massacre was the culmination of violence between the regime and the Brotherhood. Following a long series of increasingly common terrorist attacks and government retribution campaigns in the late 1970s and early 80s, the Brotherhood successfully took over the city of Hama in early 1982 (Van Dam, 2019, 69-70). The regime's relentless bombing campaign ultimately enabled the Syrian Armed Forces to crush the Islamists (Rugh, 2019). While the Muslim Brotherhood was never able to develop a credible presence after that, its role in resisting Alawite oppression has kept many Syrians sympathetic to its cause.

Nevertheless, the "weakening" of the Islamic fundamentalist opposition did not mean that inter-communal relations eased, with Alawi-Sunni sectarian tensions growing ever more severe, with "feelings of revanchism" among the Sunni majority ultimately "burst[ing] out into the open" during the uprisings of March 2011 (Van Dam, 2019, 81). As such, this long history of sectarian violence at the hands of the Alawites has left many Sunnis seeking a complete reformation of the government, which, at best, is representative and grants them control of the country proportionate to demographics (Survey: Which Constitution, 2018, 16-17). As a predictable result of the conflict and the country's post-colonial historical trajectory, many among the Sunni majority seek justice for current and historical wrongs committed by the Assad family and Alawites generally (Van Dam, 2019, 70-71). While this is not to say that Syrian Sunni ideology is somehow aligned with the anti-Alawite sentiment, the sectarian nature of the present conflict, and historical strife between these two groups, has left many Sunnis viewing democratic reform, decentralisation, and prosecution of leading Ba'ath/Alawite figures as conditions for peace (Survey: Which Constitution, 2018, 53-55).

The Kurds and Kurdistan: The Invisible State

Kurdistan has been the weakest link in the system established by the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire (Halhalli, 2018, 27). Consequently, since the Kurds were divided among the four newly formed states of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, the nationalist movement developed in different forms in each country. There are estimated to be 30 to 40 million Kurds, making it the biggest 'nation' without a state (Manzinger and Wagner, 2020, 16). The population of the Syrian Kurds, who are predominantly Sunni, is estimated to be between 2 and 2.5 million, which equals 11–12% of the Syrian population. These numbers demonstrate that the Kurds are the biggest non-Arab minority in Syria, concentrated in one area – the north and east of Syria, or *Rojava*, a Kurdish term meaning 'West' (Halhalli, 2018, 29).

While an independent Kurdish state almost became a reality on several occasions, the issue was never seriously considered after the Treaty of Sevres of 1920, particularly due to the geopolitical complexity of the region (Manzinger and Wagner, 2020, 17). While the Kurds in Turkey have been actively involved in a conflict against the state, Kurds in Syria have resisted any claims for independence (Küçük and Özselçuk, 2016, 189). Sean Lee points out that there is a lack

of consensus among Syrian Kurds outside Syria about the location of Rojava except in terms of state borders (Gurses et al., 2020, 82).

Most of the Syrian Kurds are descendants of those who fled Turkey in 1925 after a Kurdish rebellion was crushed by the newly created Republic of Turkey. This made it an area of anti-Turkey Kurdish activity; however, the then-acting French administration (1920-46) discouraged any political or military move against the northern neighbour. Yet, the French strengthened the minority's identity to weaken Syria's Sunni Arab majority (Manzinger and Wagner, 2020, 18). The Kurdish population refused to join the Arab rebellion against the French Administration, as they feared that an Arab nationalist government in Damascus would further add to their marginalisation (Phillips and Kouchner, 2015, 68). The independence and formation of the Syrian Republic only meant more struggle for the group, manifesting in physical and cultural repression, involving forced Arabisation, deprivation of citizenship and property, and violent removal (Halhalli, 2018, 28).

Additionally, the Kurds have been closely intertwined with the Pan-Arab movement. While state marginalisation of the Kurds in neighbouring countries led Syria to implement similar measures, the regime's aspiration for regional hegemony made even Kurdish groups an instrument of state policy. Hafez al-Assad effectively supported the PKK (Graeber, 2014), and other Kurdish groups, as a means to coerce Ankara and consolidate his geopolitical interests. The PKK, which had good relations with Syria, managed to direct the attention of Syrian Kurds to Turkey and Iraq so much so that in 1996 "PKK-leader Öçalan openly declared that Syria had no Kurds of its own and those living there were all refugees from Turkey" (Manzinger and Wagner, 2020, 19–20). This explains the differentiated trajectory of Kurdish nationalism in Syria. However, as Syria-Turkey relations improved, Assad discarded his relations with the Kurdish groups in 1988 (Hoffmann, 2021, 968).

Moreover, Kurdish political parties in Syria "have never managed to establish … a generalised movement capable of expressing [the minority's] political demands" (Gurses et al., 2020, 104-105). Over the 1980s, PKK sought to "decolonise" Kurdistan and establish an independent state by encompassing the territories from the four regions (Ibid.). In the early 1990s, however, the organisation's negotiations with Ankara led to a "radical shift from the idea of

independence to the idea of autonomy" (Ibid.). Indeed, with a rapprochement between Turkey and Syria, Damascus banned the party, and Öçalan was arrested by the Turkish authorities. PKK's rhetoric changed again, and its political framework shifted to "Democratic Confederalism", which emphasised self-governance and co-existence with the state (Ibid.; Dinc 48).

A fight over a football match in March 2004 in the city of Al-Qamishli between Kurdish and Arab supporters resulted in the death of nearly 36 Kurds while more than 2000 Kurds were tortured in detention (Halhalli, 2018, 32). Despite growing protest, nearly fifteen Kurdish political parties in Syria attempted to mobilise the Kurdish population but given the lack of cohesiveness among them, and in-fighting within the PKK, they "divided rather than united Syrian Kurds" (Gurses et al., 2020, 104). Moreover, a lack of constitutional or legal framework, effectively meant that these organisations, and their political participation, were considered illegal.

Table 2: Literature Summary of the Impact of Historical Trajectories on Claims to Statehood

The table below provides a summary of the impact which various historical trajectories of Syria's different ethnoreligious groups have had on their respective claims to statehood.

Syria's Alawite Minority	● Having been historically marginalised, the Alawites now see their survival as dependent upon the continuity of the regime. ● The minority solidified its political and military control over the country first during the Mandate period, and later under Hafez al-Assad. ● The TDA surveys indicate that the Alawites are the primary Syrian ethnoreligious group which wants to retain the institutional status quo.
Sunni Majority and Muslim Brotherhood	● Syria's Sunni majority has been subjected to systematic oppression under the Alawi-dominated Ba'th regime. ● Since 1945, the Muslim Brotherhood has played a significant role in the organisation of the Sunni political opposition. ● Many Sunnis are seeking a full reformation of the government in line with demographic proportionality.
The Kurds and Kurdistan	● The Colonial and the post-colonial drawing of boundaries divided Kurds into four countries making them the biggest 'nation' without a state. ● Accounting for 11-12% of Syria's population, the minority has been subjected to historically rooted marginalisation. ● The ability of the group to mobilise politically has been complicated by the complex and changing relations with the state.

Analysis of Interviews

Since the formation of the Syrian state, there has been historical oppression and injustice towards minorities, as stated by most of our interviewees. According to Dr Soeren Keil, the Academic Head of the International Research and Consulting Centre at the Institute of Federalism, Syrians have been living in oppression with "no real experience with democracy, nor with a functioning state apparatus that is based on the rule of law".[3] As such, their historical trajectories are key in understanding today's conflict, because "history [has formed] the actors' preferences and choices".[4] Moreover, another interviewee mentioned that there is a big difference between the past and the present which can be conceptualised through the lens of colonialism:

> "The difference between now and ninety years ago is that there was a central authority that would somehow deal with all parts [of the country]. In that case… French power managed the coastal region, Aleppo, Damascus, Jazeera…Today [after eleven years of war] we don't have such a central authority, and that is something we must keep in mind".[5]

When it came to the Alawites, many of the interviewees united around the notion that they had been historically marginalised, so their receipt of power was the beginning of their revenge against the Sunni majority. Therefore, the regime's trajectory, considering its historical origins, has been directly focused on a return to pre-war Syria, both institutionally and territorially, including the recapture of northern areas of the country currently controlled by Turkey. While Russia's assistance has turned the tide of the war in the Alawites' favour, it appears "highly unlikely" that the GoS will be able to deploy a force capable of retaking the North and North-Eastern areas currently controlled by opposition councils, as noted by one of the respondents.[6]

Thus, the trajectory of the Syrian government has been tied either towards the possibility of a constant conflict until Syria is reunited within its pre-war boundaries, or a mediated peace enforced

[3] Dr. Soeren Keil, Interview by authors, Video platform, July 2022.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Scholar at a public policy think tank, Interview by authors, Video platform, August 2022.
[6] Scholar working in a Swiss research centre, Interview by authors, Video platform, July 2022.

by Russia. While the regime itself does not necessarily have an interest in such a peace, major players like Ankara, Washington, and Moscow do want to stabilise the situation as soon as possible, with Dr Sara Hellmüller, a Senior Researcher at the Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP), noting that Russia has had a track record of "[pressuring] and convincing Assad to send his delegation to official negotiations".[7] The aforementioned dynamics have been succinctly summarised by Joel Veldkamp, an International Communications Officer working at Christian Solidarity International, who noted that the "Alawi community's vision of peace" is inherently linked to their historical trajectory, in that it "excludes a return to second-class status".[8]

When it comes to the opposition, Faruq Mistefa, the Editor in Chief of the Bercav Center for Media and Freedom, has noted that there is a clear "historical dimension [to the opposition's] current trajectory and demands", which has been spurred on by their "historical oppression…and injustice [which they have faced]... since the formation of the state of Syria".[9] Nevertheless, although some of the interview data suggest that the opposition would prefer to define their state along pre-war boundaries as well, the reality on the ground is further complicated by the fact that even within the Sunni majority there are "[historically] fragmented visions of what Syria could be", especially between Islamist and secular groups,[10] a dynamic which is further compounded by the lack of military capabilities to decisively fight back Assad and unify the Western and Southern areas of the country. While the TDA surveys do indicate a desire to return to a unified Syria, even if under a greater degree of decentralisation (Survey: Which Constitution 38-39), the preconditions relative to the prosecution of Assad and other Alawite leaders will prevent meaningful progress toward unification.

Furthermore, within Syria, the Kurds have been an identifiable minority which has experienced structural and institutional marginalisation throughout its history; as one of our interviewees noted, many within the community "were [historically] hidden… they were not really citizens [of the state], and their culture and language have [never] been recognised".[11] The vast majority of the interview data suggests that at the current moment, the Kurds are facing two realities: fearing a further Turkish invasion of their areas in light of prior violations that they suffered during Ankara's assaults on Afrin and Ras Al-Ain, and the possibility of returning under the historical

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[7] Dr. Sara Hellmüller, Interview by authors, Video platform, July 2022.
[8] Joel Veldkamp, Interview by authors, Written response, July 2022.
[9] Faruq Mistefa, Interview by authors Video platform, September 2022.
[10] Scholar at Swiss research centre, Interview.
[11] Professional working in a Syrian NGO, Interview by authors, Video platform, September 2022.

control of Damascus, which would, in turn, be viewed as a reluctant acceptance of the central government's continued tyranny. As such, the fate of the autonomous administration is unknown.

In addition, many of the Kurds' current claims to statehood are not explicitly linked to a particular area in Syria, and instead imagine a Kurdish state along its historical boundaries, which, arguably, only includes a minor section of North-Eastern Syria. Ultimately, the interviewees have also noted that the current Kurdish trajectory is further questionable given that major interventionist powers are either "antagonistic towards them" - such as Russia and Turkey - or have "withdrawn" their support - like the United States. [12]

Part 2: Contemporary Syrians' Perceptions of Peace and Their Practical Manifestations

Literature Review

Regime-Controlled Zones

The Syrian regime, despite being hollowed-out by years of war and sanctions, has now come to control close to 63% of the nation's territory (Figure 2). Nevertheless, independent observers have found it hard to garner the perceptions of Syrians living within regime-controlled areas regarding questions of peacebuilding and institutional reform, instead mainly being confronted with the official position exposed by Damascus. The TDA survey of May 2016, including the follow-up studies from 2018 and 2022, nevertheless can be seen as the last comprehensive analysis of such views.

In both the 2016 and 2018 surveys, the majority of respondents in regime-controlled zones, that is 65.5% (Syria: Opinions and Attitudes, 2016, 1-2) and 65.3% respectively, opposed the prospect of decentralising the political system in favour of granting local authorities "broader" administrative powers (Survey: Which Constitution, 2018, 34-35). Although the 2022 study indicated that 76% of those living under the regime did not oppose empowering elected governorate councils with some degree of autonomy, these numbers were considerably lower compared to other areas, such as the AANES (Syrians' Perceptions, 2022, 1-2). This trend was

[12] Faruq Mistefa, Interview.

also reflected when it came to the question of diluting executive authority between the parliament and the president, with only 36% of those living under the GoS leaning towards a parliamentary-presidential system (Survey: Which Constitution, 2018, 21-22), a reality which could be a byproduct of both the government's "pull factor" of "maintaining its institutional centrality in an otherwise anarchic environment", as well as Assad's ability to preserve, and reinforce, Syria's coercive apparatus (Lund, 2018, 39-40).

If anything, Syria's political system has seen little changes since 2011 "beyond cosmetic reforms", with the government seeking to retain the current "heterarchical order" (Ibid.). Although Assad tried to appease the opposition in August 2011 by implementing Law 107 on Local Administration, which, in theory, sought to grant more rights to local governing bodies, the result was more "symbolic of a centralised governance system with nominal deconcentrated and delegated powers", providing, for example, the President with the ability to dissolve any local councils (Kahf, 2021, 224-225). Furthermore, since 2018, the regime has sought to put an end to local governance structures in recaptured opposition territories (Kodmani, 2019, 5), instead implementing its own 'Government of Syria' model, under which the level of local autonomy has "reached its bare minimum" (Kahf, 2021, 216).

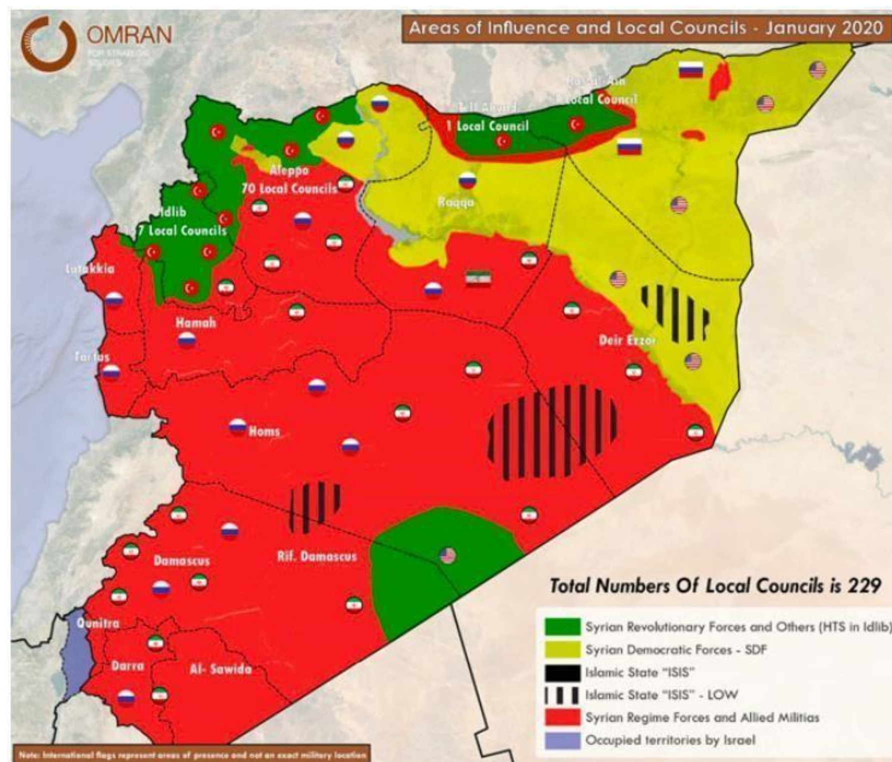


Figure 2: ***Syria's Fragmented Geography & Local Councils, January 2020 - OMRAN Centre for Strategic Studies*** (Kahf, 2021, 218)

The case studies of the recaptured cities of Al-Tal and Tafas indicate this reality. In both cases, the powers of the LACs were quickly replaced with "top-down", regime-leaning committees, which were further stacked with Assad loyalists after the September 2018 local elections, and whose funding has been inherently tied to "[direct] transfers from the central government" (Haid et al., 2020, 26-27). Accountability relations in both cities, therefore, have become hierarchical, with the local population having "no power to monitor the councils' work or hold [them] accountable" (Ibid.).

Similarly, by adhering to a 'destruction and consolidation' approach, Damascus has been reluctant to "positively engage in any serious [official] negotiations" (Hatahet, 2020, 3-4), since, according to scholar Jasmine El-Gamal, it is not that "the regime is incapable of providing peace; it's that it just doesn't want too", since Assad is not interested in "reconstructing [a] society which, in his eyes, was the cause of the war" (El-Gamal, 2019, 58-59). Therefore, even in the case of the CC, there is a real prospect of Assad "indefinitely stalling" the process while consolidating his military gains, in that the regime perceives any dialogue with the opposition as a "direct threat to its legitimacy" (Hatahet, 2020, 4-5). Such an approach has also translated into the Government's desire to employ physical reconstruction, and the syphoning off of humanitarian aid, to create a Syria that is "entirely beholden to the regime" (El-Gamal, 2019, 57). Law 10 of 2018 on redevelopment zones, as well as the continued strangling of foreign aid to opposition-held areas, have all been indicative of Assad's coercive empowerment of clientelist and loyalist power networks (Daher, 2020, 24-25).

Opposition-Controlled Zones

Alongside the same depressed economic and security situation around the rest of the country, the humanitarian situation in opposition-controlled areas is particularly severe. While the UN has ordered humanitarian assistance to be delivered to these areas, the regime or Moscow often stops these deliveries before they can reach the civilians who need them most. In Idlib Governorate alone, over 4.1 million people require humanitarian assistance, a number which has grown by 20% since last year, yet have received only five humanitarian convoys over the previous two years (Syria: Why Humanitarian Aid, 2021).

The 2018 TDA survey showed that residents of self-administered and opposition-controlled areas live in a constant state of war. They are the principal focus of strikes by the regime and its allies. Despite the Astana agreements, in which certain armed factions took part at Turkey's demand, the regime went on with its plans to retake these areas and drive out numerous residents. Hence, 92.7% of Syrians in the opposition-controlled areas chose 'ceasefire' as their main priority, followed by 'release of detainees', with 'discussions about a new constitution' coming second last with only 15.1%. (Survey: Which Constitution, 2018, 9-10).

On the other hand, regarding the creation of a two-chamber parliament, 78.6% of Syrians in opposition-controlled areas supported the proposal (Survey: Which Constitution, 2018, 15-16). This may suggest several potential conclusions regarding opposition-controlled zones' perspectives on institutional peacebuilding. Firstly, respondents believed that countries with two parliamentary chambers were more representative. Secondly, it can be argued that decentralisation has become more popular, with a second chamber being viewed as necessary to protect local interests, as well as maintain a balance between regional needs and demands and those of the national legislative body. Thirdly, this dynamic indicates that the idea of local government has been successfully implanted within these areas during the last eleven years, and an awareness of local interests and demands that may be met through a second chamber was established as a result of the regime's withdrawal from regions of self-administration (Ibid.).

While the characteristics of Turkish and Kurdish-Arab opposition zones are considerably different, their trajectories are relatively similar. For Turkey, its zones of control create an essential buffer along the Syrian-Turkish border, which supports not only Ankara's security interests but also long-standing economic ties to the region (Siccardi, 2021, 2). Indeed, many of these areas are already connected to Turkey's electrical grid and have even begun using the Turkish Lira as an official currency. These zones serve as a place of relative safety for Syrian Sunnis as they are free from Assad's persecution, and protected by Turkey's military and political strength. Thus, their trajectory is to retain this independence - in most respects; these areas are being assimilated, *de facto*, into Turkey. The Kurdish-Arab opposition zones similarly seek independence and have worked hard to build economic, political, and military self-rule from the rest of Syria - seeking instead to become autonomous safe-havens for Kurds and some Sunni allies alike (Halhalli, 2018, 29). However, unlike

the Turkish-controlled areas, these zones have been systematically starved of resources since the withdrawal of US forces in 2019 (Laub, 2021).

Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES)

After the withdrawal of the Syrian Government from northeast Syria (NES) in 2012, the vacuum was swiftly filled by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which was founded in 2003, at a time when the PKK, with whom the PYD remains closely affiliated with, was undergoing its ideological and organisational reforms. Since 2018, the Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria (AANES) was set up with a social contract that has changed from rejecting the traditional idea of statehood to "respect(ing) the internationally accepted borders of Syria" (Syrian Democratic Council, 2022). The Government, confronted with growing unrest, decided to placate the Kurdish groups which performed complementary functions by providing security along the border with Turkey without challenging the territory of the state, as well as helping "to crack down on Kurdish anti-regime demonstrators in Afrin in early 2012… [which] coincided with [the interests] of the regime" (Gurses et al., 2020, 108; Manzinger and Wagner, 2020, 28).

AANES has come to encompass the regions of Afrin, Kobani, and Cezire, as well as Raqqa, and parts of Deir-ez-Zor, which were incorporated after the victory over IS, while the areas of Afrin, Tal Abyad, and Ras al-Ain were eventually lost to Turkey (Asseburg et al., 2022, 49). The US presence in Syria has also played an important role in AANES, as the Administration is supported by Washington, and several of its allies were part of the global coalition against IS.

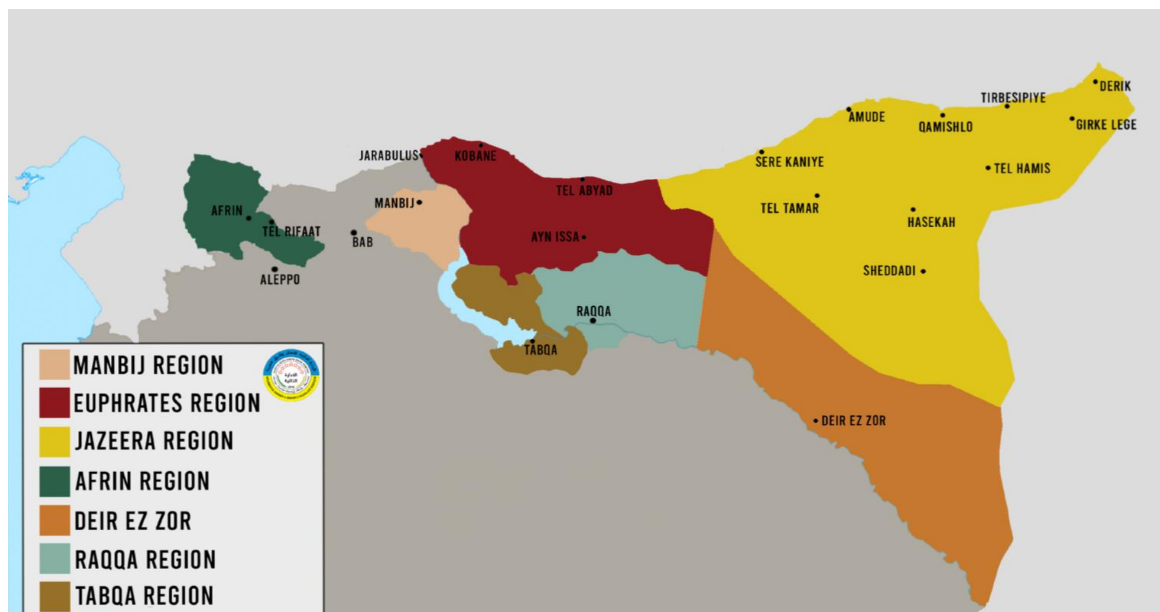
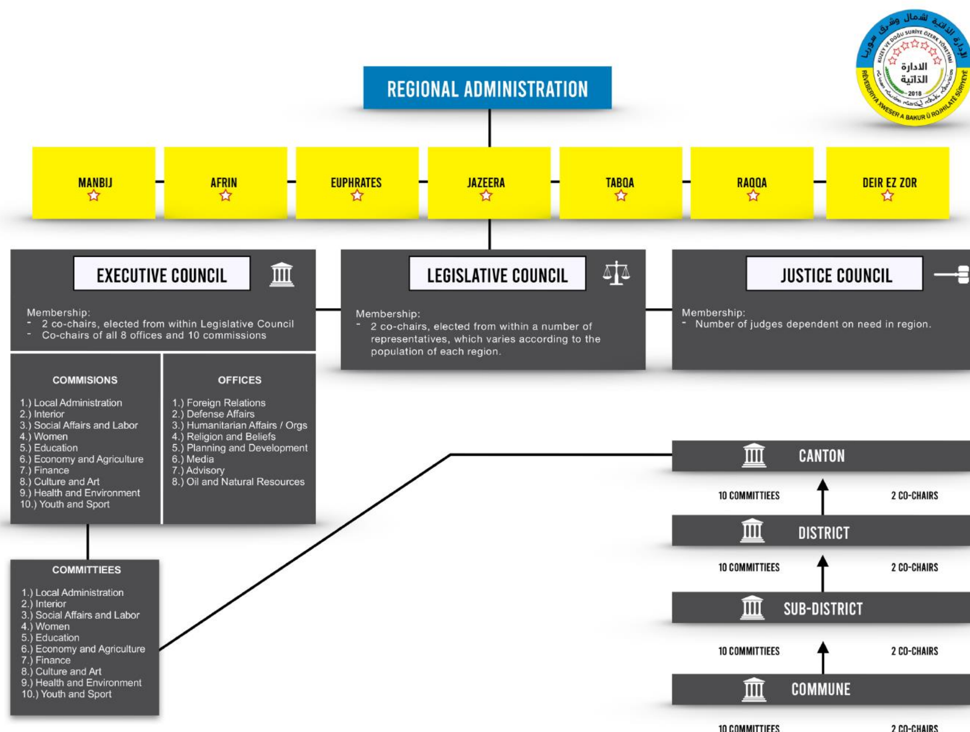


Figure 3: ***The seven regional administrations of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, 2018 (AANES)*** (Syrian Democratic Council, 2022)

While AANES is mostly considered a Kurdish project, it sees itself as a grassroots self-government within Syria and seeks to remain within the country but as a federal, self-governed territory. For instance, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), created by the YPG in 2015 as the official defence group of AANES, are a multi-ethnic and multi-religious alliance of Kurdish, Arab, Assyrian, Armenian, Turkmen, and Circassian militias (Dinc, 2020, 21). The main political force of AANES is the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM), a multi-ethnic, leftist coalition, in which the PYD has a crucial role, but which includes Arab, Turkmen, and Assyrians, albeit they are all allied with the PYD.

Therefore, even though AANES is built on the principles of inclusion and equality, the PYD maintains centrality over the decentralised institution as well as the SDF (Haid, 2020, 39; Dinc, 2020, 23). According to the 2016 TDA survey, this has divided Kurds over the idea of democratic self-administration as, of the total Kurds who opposed it, nearly 50% considered it to be a "private project of the PYD, [whom] they didn't find particularly trustworthy", while 40.6% opposed it due to the PYD's "repressive practices" (Syria: Opinions and Attitudes, 2016, 21). On the other hand, there exists a significant gap between Kurds and other groups, as 69.8% of Kurds



supported the notion, whereas 78.1% of the other ethnoreligious groups opposed it.

Figure 4: ***Structure of the regional administrations in AANES*** (Syrian Democratic Council, 2022)

However, AANES does not exist as a cohesive territory (Figure 3). Several areas within the core area are under the direct control of its enemies, such as Turkey, as well as the GoS, which controls parts of Qamishli, the former AANES capital (Erkmen et al. 4). The mutual interest in cooperation between the Administration and Damascus to minimise Turkey's influence in Syria (Dinc, 2020, 29), and PYD's perceived history (through the PKK) of co-existing with the regime, has placed a question mark over its credibility among the wider Kurdish and Arab opposition (Khalaf, 2016, 8). Similar to its relationship of conflict and cooperation with Damascus, PYD's ties to Moscow are dictated by Russia's complex relationship with Ankara, and subsequently between Ankara and Damascus.

Nonetheless, the legitimacy of the Administration is built on its effectiveness in providing basic resources and security, sometimes in parallel with the regime (Khalaf, 2016, 19). However, as has also been highlighted, Kurds are not the sole ethnic group in the area, and while PYD is dominant, the Kurdish population remains divided among three camps, with one side not aligning itself with any group (Khalaf, 2016, 24). The coexistence of different groups in AANES is highlighted by the 2016 TDA-led survey. Around 91.7% of all Kurdish respondents supported federalism, whereas this support, while still strong, fell to 79.6% in the self-administered areas (Syria: Opinions and Attitudes, 2016, 5). Therefore, 58.5% of non-Kurdish respondents from the self-administered areas opposed a federal restructuring of Syria, as opposed to 93.7% of Kurdish respondents who supported the move (Syria: Opinions and Attitudes, 2016, 22).

Table 3: Literature Summary of Contemporary Syrians' Perceptions of Peace and Their Practical Manifestations

The table below provides a summary of the key perceptions of peace, and their practical manifestations, as formulated by Syrians in different areas of control.

Regime-Controlled Zones	● Assad has sought to reassert his control over the country in the harshest manner possible. ● The regime has continued to adhere to a top-down governance approach, refusing to constructively engage with the opposition in talks. ● All three TDA surveys have indicated that general perceptions in regime-

	controlled zones are reflective of the position taken by the GoS.
Opposition-Controlled Zones	● The humanitarian situation in opposition-controlled areas is dire, with over 4.1 million people in need of aid. ● Areas under the opposition's control live in a constant state of war. ● The majority of Syrians in opposition-controlled zones are in favour of a ceasefire and the formation of a two-chamber parliament.
AANES	● A PYD-led local governance model was created soon after the war started, displaying, oftentimes, a mutually cooperative relationship with the GoS. ● SDF has proved to be a reliable partner for the US-led coalition against IS, benefitting from Washington's support. ● The TDA surveys highlight that, unlike other social groups in the AANES, the Kurds overwhelmingly support the federalisation of Syria.

Analysis of Interviews

The overwhelming narrative espoused by the majority of respondents has centred around the notion that contemporary Syrian's perceptions of peace, and, in turn, their institutional manifestations, are highly fragmented and non-convergent, a dynamic which is best captured by an interviewee who noted that "no amount of casualties in the past eleven years [have] persuaded either party… to move one inch" in their political visions for a future Syria.[13] This divergence in political priorities, apart from reflecting to a greater extent, the aforementioned literature review, can also be better conceptualised if one begins to distinguish between the so-called "normative level" of peacebuilding versus the more "practical, survival level",[14] as well as between the official political projects of decision-makers in different areas of control versus the aspirations of "average" Syrians on the ground. [15]

When looking firstly at the normative perceptions of the Syrian elites, it is evident from the interview data that their "political projects…contradict each other".[16] According to both Dr Keil and Dr Hellmüller, the regime has continued to "see itself as the [only] legitimate" political entity on the ground, believing that it is the crucial "anchor of stability" in the country and, therefore, is in no

[13] Syrian professional specialising in mediation, Interview by authors, Video platform, September 2022.
[14] Dr. Sara Hellmüller, Interview.
[15] Professional working in a Syrian civil society organisation, Interview by authors, Video platform, August 2022.
[16] Scholar at think tank, Interview.

position "to compromise with those who want to undermine [it]".[17] As such, the "might is right, victor's peace logic" has continued to serve as the focal centrepiece of Assad's normative peacebuilding approach, feeding directly into his empowerment of hierarchical, top-down institutions, and the complete rejection of decentralisation.[18] On the other hand, the aspirations of both the opposition and the Kurds stand in stark contrast to the platform espoused by the GoS. One interviewee noted that the priority for the opposition has essentially been the "political, economic, and administrative devolution [and democratisation]" of the state, both in the normative and institutional sense.[19] Such visions have been centred around not only the decentralisation of the executive apparatus, leading to the greater empowerment, for example, of the LACs but also in calls for reforms to the legislative machinery, in the form of enhancing the powers of the parliament at the expense of the current "presidential… system".[20]

Many of the respondents have pointed out that although the authorities within the AANES do share, to an extent, the opposition's focus on the need for a future institutional "power-sharing" arrangement, they diverge when it comes to the Kurds' normative desire of wanting to secure their cultural, linguistic, and religious identity in a future peacebuilding settlement.[21] The practical manifestation of such ideas is centred around the establishment of a "federal, or even a confederal, system where there would be a strong Kurdish autonomous region",[22] inherently rooted in extensive "political administrative decentralisation, the [protection] of [minority] cultural rights, and a [Kurdish] voice in the national government".[23] If anything, the TDA-led country-wide survey of 2018 has also noted this stark discrepancy between the opposition and SDF-controlled zones on the questions of religion, state identity, and language, with the Kurds, unsurprisingly, clashing with the opposition regarding Syria's Arabic and Islamic identity, as well as the recognition of Kurdish as the second language in the country (Survey: Which Constitution 52). Furthermore, such polarisation may also be attributed to the question of trust, or the lack thereof, especially since several interviewees have noted that the absence of a "foreseeable [convergent] solution" is also inherently built on the

[17] Dr. Soeren Keil, Interview.
[18] Dr. Sara Hellmüller, Interview.
[19] Syrian mediator, Interview.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Dr. Soeren Keil, Interview.
[23] Syrian mediator, Interview.

"lack of trust" between the local decision-makers, which, in itself, directly feeds into the continued failure of dialogue between the warring factions.[24]

When it comes to the "practical, survival level" of analysis,[25] the majority of respondents, including, for example, Dr Jerome Drevon, a Senior Analyst on Jihad and Modern Conflict at the International Crisis Group (ICG), have noted that Syrian decision-makers are solely focused on "short-term outcomes and [the] current stabilisation of their own territories" which, ironically, further prevents them from uniting in their normative and institutional perceptions of Syrian peacebuilding.[26] In turn, this inward-looking desire to "maintain their [respective] areas of control" under any circumstances,[27] has essentially, in the words of Dr Keil, given birth to an almost "frozen [conflict]".[28] Although the Academic Head has noted that this decline in violence may already be a "big achievement… [considering the violent] history of the country over the last decade", other interviewees have pointed out that the lack of any convergent political solution, and the continued prominence of "contradictory [peacebuilding] projects", may, in the end, help foster a "new, [and potentially even more repressive], cycle of conflict".[29]

When it comes to aspirations of "average" Syrians on the ground,[30] the general consensus among the interviewees is that normative discussions about "constitutional, governance, and electoral reforms", including their institutional manifestations, "have no real meaning", with Veldkamp noting that "daily survival… is of [utmost importance], not political organisation or civic participation".[31] Other respondents have also espoused similar ideas, noting that discussions around normative and institutional peacebuilding in post-conflict Syria are just an "*intellectual luxury*",[32] and do not reflect the fact that ordinary people on the ground are "out of hope" and, therefore, before anything else want an "end to any kind of military operations".[33]

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[24] Faruq Mistefa, Interview.
[25] Dr. Sara Hellmüller, Interview.
[26] Dr. Jerome Drevon, Interview by authors, Video platform, August 2022.
[27] Director of a Berlin-based NGO, Interview by authors, Video platform, August 2022.
[28] Dr. Soeren Keil, Interview.
[29] Scholar at think tank, Interview.
[30] Professional at Syrian CSO, Interview.
[31] Joel Veldkamp, Interview.
[32] Scholar at think tank, Interview.
[33] Professional at Syrian NGO, Interview.

Dr Ammar Kahf, the Executive Director of the Omran Centre for Strategic Studies, has noted, in turn, that this dynamic is symptomatic of the fact that there is a "clear disconnect between public opinion, local elites, and [domestic and foreign] decision-makers", with local communities' views being "marginalised and not considered seriously in the political process".[34] Several respondents have also highlighted the fact that in light of the convergence on the primacy of daily survival, the majority of Syrians across varying areas of control desire a "strong state" which would ensure their daily needs and security.[35] Similarly, they are almost "unanimous in their views that the Constitution is *not* the cause of the crisis", subsequently believing that starting the "political process [off with the CC]" is wrong, since it ultimately "dilutes societal demands and positions", leaving a lot of grievances unaddressed.[36] This information corresponds directly with the findings from the TDA report of 2018, which has noted that across *all* the areas of control, the top three priorities for respondents on the ground were a ceasefire, polling at 91.5%, the release of detainees, at 67%, and the lifting of the siege, at 55.2% (Survey: Which Constitution 7-8). Discussions over the new Constitution placed at the very end of the list, at just 18%, clearly indicating that the highest priority for average Syrians is an "end to the bloodshed even if under the premise of a ceasefire" (Ibid.).

Part 3: International and Regional Actors' Peacebuilding Agendas & Their Normative and Practical Convergence with Local Narratives

Literature Review

Russia

After the Russian intervention in Syria in September 2015, Moscow began to view the country almost as a "laboratory" for the application, and testing, of its own - *Pax Rossica* - conflict management model, which has come to be defined by the complete rejection of the liberal peacebuilding framework (Lewis, 2022, 652-653). Instead, the Kremlin has sought to build a "vertical model of peace enforcement" (Ibid.), which decries liberal norms and pluralistic politics as "destabilising and insecure" (Lewis, 2022, 659-660). Although the emergence of this 'authoritarian peacebuilding' framework is still in its early stages, it still possesses many common

[34] Dr. Ammar Kahf, Interview by authors, Video platform, September 2022.
[35] Scholar at think tank, Interview.
[36] Dr. Ammar Kahf, Interview.

features (Ibid.).

In Syria, the Kremlin has sought to prioritise "order over justice", in turn fully endorsing the use of "state coercion" and "hierarchical power structures" to swiftly stabilise the regime (Megoran et al., 2018, 490-491). Moscow's disregard for addressing the structural causes of the conflict, and internal sectarian disagreements, (El-Gamal, 2019, 59) can be explained by Russia's belief in the centrality of the state in conflict resolution, with the Russian establishment, ironically, placing great importance on the need to "achieve a reduction in violence through its constant use" (Lewis, 2022, 663-664). In addition, it must be noted that the Kremlin has highly geopolitically vested interests in Syria, wanting to gain a "strategic foothold in the Eastern Mediterranean… showcase its increased [military] capabilities… and enhance its prestige" on the world stage vis-a-vis the United States (Asseburg et al., 2022, 11-12).

From 2015 onwards, Moscow has been keen to skilfully intertwine coercive force, asymmetric mediation, and top-down negotiations to promote its peacebuilding approach (Wennmann, 2019, 47-48). Although Russian official discourse does not provide a detailed vision of a 'new Syria', the Kremlin still insists on the restoration of the country's territorial integrity under Assad, ultimately hoping to ensure that the regime becomes "internationally recognised, self-sufficient, and militarily more self-reliant" (Ibid.). As such, Russia has been eager to utilise both the Astana and Sochi tracks to not only "undercut" the Geneva Process, but also work through Resolution 2254 in a "controlled fashion" (Lund, 2018, 38-39), whilst attempting to "derail any attempts at uniting the rebels in a coherent opposition" (Lewis, 2022, 664-665). Diplomatic collaboration with both Iran and Turkey, as evidenced by, for example, the creation of four 'de-escalation zones' following the May 2017 Astana talks (Köstem, 2020, 804), can also be viewed as symbolic of Russia's pragmatic approach, since Moscow continues to perceive the West as a spoiler of its agenda (Asseburg et al., 2022, 11-12).

Even so, Assad's "intransigent attitude" to negotiations has become a source of frustration for the Russians (Lund, 2018, 38-39). The Kremlin has spearheaded the CC as a key framework for a political settlement in Syria, believing that it could reconcile Assad with the West both economically and diplomatically, as well as provide minimal concessions to the opposition, whilst simultaneously retaining the "authoritarian vertical of power" (Sukhov, 2020, 5-6). Nonetheless, the regime's aforementioned "uncooperative" approach has left Moscow in a paradoxical position:

knowing that political changes are necessary, but being at a loss as to how they could be implemented without endangering the stability of, and ongoing cooperation between, the GoS and the Kremlin (Ibid.).

Furthermore, Putin's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has cast doubt on Russia's ability to maintain its military presence in Syria (Adar et al., 2022, 5-6). Although Russian airpower has continued to reinforce pro-government control in the north of the country in recent months, analysts have expressed growing concern about the possibility of a Moscow-left "void" being exploited by other actors, such as Iran (Prasad, 2022). These dynamics have also put into question the future viability of multilateral cooperation between the West and Russia over Syria, having already bled over into the Geneva process, with the Kremlin calling in June for the upcoming July 2022 talks to be postponed (Syrian Talks Postponed, 2022). Nevertheless, the full extent of the Ukrainian war's impact on the Syrian context remains to be seen.

Iran

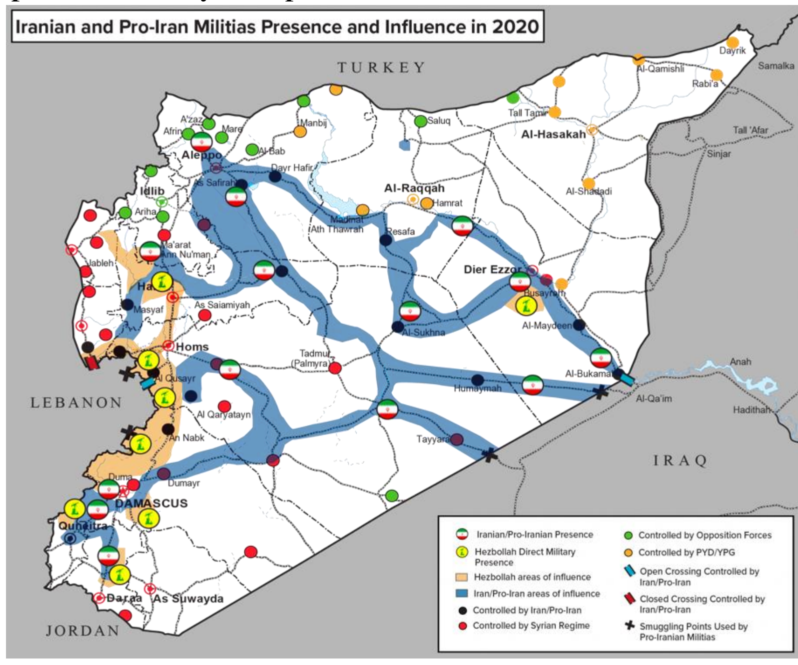
Iran also sees Syria as a militarily, politically, and economically strategic site, and has expanded its influence over the territory and its surrounding regions. It is unclear whether Iran has acted based on a 'peacebuilding agenda', but its approach may be viewed as sharing similar traits with Russia's 'authoritarian peacebuilding' model, especially when it comes to the emphasis on "order over justice" (Megoran et al., 2018, 490-491). The difference with Moscow is that Tehran pursues order by weaponising Shia Islam (Uskowi, 2018). Since 1979, when Ayatollah Khomeini founded the Islamic Republic, the nation has enlarged its military involvement and established Shia enclaves around the Middle East, including in Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq (Ibid.).

Although Tehran began its intervention under the guise of retaining its alliance with the regime, and simultaneously countering IS forces (Wastnidge, 2017, 153), the prospect of supporting, and strengthening, Hezbollah in its military operations against Israel soon began to figure greatly in Iran's decision-making (Yolcu, 2016, 47). In addition, Tehran and the GoS have shared a common interest when it came to their religiously-grounded anti-Sunni ideology (Ibid.). From a wider standpoint, Iran has sought to resist the US-backed Middle East order (Hokayem, 2014, 70), which also corresponds, to an extent, with the Kremlin's desire to undermine Western

influence in the Levant and exclude Washington from having any decisive sway in the peace talks (Asseburg et al., 2022, 11-12). Therefore, while Iran has closely collaborated with Moscow mainly in the military sphere, their agendas are different, especially since Tehran seeks to establish order through the strengthening of its Shia-centred credentials.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has played a major role in Iran's military involvement, and its influence within Syria has been tied to the political expansion of Shia Islam (Nukii). Tehran has actively recruited and trained fighters from Syria's Shia minority, and even from some Sunni clans (Saban, 2020). At the same time, by integrating Iranian fighters into the regime's military and security apparatus Tehran has attempted to gain a more significant standing vis-a-vis the GoS (Ibid.), ultimately expanding its influence across Syria (see Figure 5). Still, the incurred costs, uncooperative behaviour of Assad, and military incompetency of some local forces have frustrated Iranian officers, as well as those of Hezbollah, (Hokayem, 2014, 75-76), in turn indicating a growing strategic gap between Tehran and the Syrian government.

Iran has also recently focused on infiltrating the societal and economic affairs of Syria, especially since 2017 (Saban, 2020). Behind this shift was the unwanted visibility which Tehran's forces were garnering from Israel and the US, a reality which made Iranian militias an easier target on the ground (Ibid.). As such, Tehran's activities have centred around the establishment of affiliated Syrian private security companies, the restoration of health centres, as well as the building of educational facilities among other initiatives (Ibid.). Nevertheless, Iran's attempt to expand its economic influence in Syria has been hindered by endemic corruption within the GoS, extensive bureaucratic obstacles, growing competition with Russia and



the Gulf states, as well as economic sanctions imposed by Washington (Nukii, 2019, 108).

Figure 5: ***Iranian and Pro-Iranian Militias Presence and Influence in 2020. Atlantic Council, November 2020*** (Saban, 2020)

Turkey

The Turkish Government has a long history of conflictual relations with the GoS, and despite a stated policy of having zero problems with neighbours, it is unsurprising that Ankara has consistently supported opposition groups in the war. As the civilian opposition organisation, the SNC has received most of Turkey's attention since it represents a viable way to reduce conflict and secure Ankara's border area. Indeed, this approach follows the recommendations of many international organisations, who argue that working with local civilian councils to re-establish political and economic functions in the country is essential. Turkey has been central to this, notably by hosting the first major gathering of the SNC and helping organise LACs (Aljundi, 2014, 16). Following their creation, Ankara has provided them with extensive material support. This has taken the form of considerable economic and security assistance for the Northern Aleppo region, where Ankara has connected many settlements to its electrical grid, built schools and hospitals, as well as registered 500 local businesses for cross-border trade (Hall, 2022, 20-21).

On the other hand, Turkey's relationship with the FSA has been hesitant, as Erdogan has concerns that supporting armed groups will prolong the conflict and bring further instability to Turkey's critical border regions. Turkey's interest in supporting the FSA has been linked primarily

to ensuring that Assad does not regain power, while simultaneously continuing its military confrontation with the PKK. It is worth mentioning that Ankara did not actively engage in conflict with jihadist groups, as its primary interest was preventing the PKK and Iranian-supported formations in Syria's Eastern provinces bordering Iraq, from gaining any strategic advantages (Lund, 2018, 29-30).

In addition, Turkey launched two military operations in 2016 and again in 2018 to secure its aforementioned interests. This ultimately led to the establishment of a "safe zone" along the Turkish border, which is jointly enforced by the Turkish Military and the SNA - which is a renaming of the FSA (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). While Turkey has been willing to support and work with the FSA/SNA, this partnership has been controversial, and one which Ankara has used only in the limited context of accomplishing border security and countering the PKK.

The controversy over Turkey's support for the FSA/SNA comes from both the Erdogan government as well as from opposition parties. Internally, support for the FSA/SNA has been questioned because it has forced the country's military into confrontations either with US-backed Syrian Kurds or with the Russian-backed militias. While the increasing cooperation between Moscow and Ankara has helped Turkey in its efforts to weaken the PKK's presence in Syria-Iraq, the alienation of Washington has been a source of contention within Turkey. Opposition figures from the CHP, such as Ozturk Yilmaz, have used this, as well as the previous affiliation of FSA fighters with terrorist groups, to openly criticise Erdogan. That Turkey had allowed these fighters safe passage across its border added to the controversy (Tremblay, 2018). These developments are precisely why Ankara has been more open to supporting LACs through the SNC.

Turkey's priorities in Syria remain twofold: border security, and ensuring that the PKK does not gain a significant presence in the Northeast. Given the support for economic development and bi-lingual schools teaching Syrians Turkish, Ankara has sought to provide the Syrian population living along the border with economic incentives for cooperation, whilst simultaneously engaging the FSA to deal with Kurdish groups who operate within the area. (Laub, 2021). Ankara successfully established a buffer zone along its Syrian border through these agreements and prevented the PKK from connecting with Kurdish factions in Iraq.

While the long-term impact of Turkey's cooperation with Russia and withdrawal of support for the FSA remains to be seen, its clear motivation is to restore Syria's stability, whilst also "leveraging" the "management of refugee flows" over the EU (Siccardi 2). Though the preference of the Turkish government has been civilian development, it is clear that Ankara is aiming to secure its borders and prevent Kurdish consolidation.

The United States and The Western Coalition

While Western countries did not militarily intervene against the Syrian government, their engagement has been multifaceted. Their policy has undergone considerable shifts as they try different platforms (such as the Friends of Syria group, the Geneva Peace Process, and UNSC negotiations) to consolidate their interests and resolve the conflict. The US has trained and armed rebel fighters, while France and the United Kingdom have provided logistical and military support to different groups (Laub, 2021). Beyond the Syrian government, the Western coalition partnered with the SDF to eliminate IS (Asseburg et al., 2022, 19). Thus, the Coalition has continued to prioritise the neutralisation of jihadists, whilst also "stand[ing] with the Syrian people in support of a lasting political settlement in line with UNSCR 2254" (Al-Tanf, Syria, 2022).

Following the significant territorial defeat of IS in 2019, roughly nine hundred US troops continue to be stationed in the northeast, and at the al-Tanf garrison in the southeast. For the US, maintaining its regional influence, as well as countering Russian and Iranian activities in Syria, prove to be important strategic interests, and thus are centred around the removal of Assad (Michelle, 2015). Moreover, Washington had faced the dilemma of trying not to alienate either the YPG or Turkey, a NATO ally. But the US eventually chose Ankara, as it announced a sudden withdrawal of troops in October 2019 from near the Turkish border, leading to a Turkish military offensive against the Kurds (Laub, 2021).

While the EU shares the same concerns and objectives as their American partners, the conflict in Syria has led to a major refugee crisis for European states, making it a top regional and international priority along with the transfer of arms and the threat of returning jihadist fighters (Michelle, 2015). However, EU member states' participation in the war has been limited and has primarily focused on sanctions and humanitarian assistance. While the sanctions imposed by the US and its allies have been aimed at the Syrian government and military, they have had a detrimental impact on the economic and humanitarian situation in the country (Ford, 2020).

While the fourth Brussels conference pledged €4.9 billion to Syria, a major chunk is aimed at the neighbouring countries to aid with the influx of Syrian refugees (Ibid.). The US has also provided the most humanitarian assistance, amounting to over 13 billion US dollars from 2011 to 2021 (Asseburg et al., 2022, 19). Additionally, the US has supported LACs, particularly in DSA (Democratic Self-Administration, now AANES), since their establishment in 2012 in terms of capacity building, financial management, and electoral training (Kahf, 2021, 231). However, in a meeting of the United States, United Kingdom, France, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan in January 2018, the five countries proposed "stripping the Syrian government of many of its powers and creating two parliaments that will have limited powers" (Ibid.).

Nonetheless, Washington has also signalled its determination to continue isolating Damascus economically and diplomatically until the UN verifies that "a credible and irreversible political process is underway (Lund, 2018, 30). Similarly, it has been made clear— by an EU Commission on Syria—that the Union "will be ready to assist… only when a comprehensive, genuine, and inclusive political transition… is firmly underway" (Wennmann, 2019; Impact of EU, 2018). While the invasion of Ukraine does not change the strategic priorities and objectives of the Coalition, it could aggravate the humanitarian impact, as assistance and aid from Washington and the EU get redirected to Ukraine. Moreover, it dampens the possibility of the coalition working with Russia to find a political solution to the conflict (Adar et al., 2022, 3–4).

Table 4: Literature Summary on International and Regional Actors' Peacebuilding Agendas & Their Normative and Practical Convergence with Local Narratives

The table below provides a summary of the key peacebuilding agendas promulgated by foreign actors in the Syrian conflict, and any convergences between these agendas with those on the ground.

Russia	● Moscow has applied its practical, and opportunistic, 'authoritarian peacebuilding' model to its engagements in Syria. ● Russia has sought to stabilise the GoS, whilst simultaneously undertaking pragmatic diplomacy vis-a-vis Turkey and Iran. ● The Kremlin has clashed with the regime over the latter's intransigence at even a symbolic show of goodwill in official negotiations.
Iran	● While adhering to the 'authoritarian peacebuilding' agenda, Tehran has used Shia Islam as the cornerstone of its involvement in Syria.

	● Iran has infiltrated the regime's military apparatus, and there seems to be a growing strategic gap between itself and the GoS. ● Tehran has also attempted to expand its influence in the societal and economic affairs of Syria but has faced internal and external obstacles.
Turkey	● Ankara has sought to maintain a sufficiently developed, and stable, buffer zone between Turkey and Syria. ● The PKK and Ankara are bitter enemies, and a stable Kurdish state is an unacceptable outcome for Turkey. ● Furthermore, Erdogan has made significant investments in opposition groups in Syria, and, ultimately, seeks regime change.
The United States and the Western Coalition	● Avoiding a military intervention, the Coalition has pursued, and adhered to, multilateral and humanitarian processes, diplomatic negotiations, and sanctions. ● US personnel prioritised the elimination of IS, while also supporting the SDF. ● Western powers continue to assert the importance of UNSCR 2254 before further strengthening their engagement.

Analysis of Interviews

International and regional actors have their "own agendas, not necessarily in line with the local actors'... aspirations", according to a director of a Berlin-based NGO that works on fostering civil society engagement.[37] However, this does not imply that conflict has shifted to a peacebuilding stage. According to Dr Kahf, "there is a period of de-escalation, but not all actors are investing in peace… some [are] investing in conflict", which has created an endless political process, with negotiations "more focused on partial and segmented deals".[38]

For the US and its allies, the future in Syria has been rooted in the UNSCR 2254, argues the above-mentioned researcher, with Veldkamp insisting that "Syria will not have any economic recovery, reconstruction, or normalisation without a political settlement or accountability" (i.e., regime change)".[39] This has led to an endless struggle by the Syrian rebels even as the GoS continues to regain territory. On the other hand, the US and SDF have failed to converge in their respective objectives. According to Veldkamp:

[37] Director of German NGO, Interview.
[38] Dr. Ammar Kahf, Interview.
[39] Joel Veldkamp, Interview.

> "The SDF seeks 1) financial and material support, 2) maximisation of autonomy, 3) protection against Turkish aggression, and 4) a positive working relationship with the Syrian government. The US is willing to give it #1, with respect to #2 still insists on Syria's territorial integrity in public, actively refuses to give it #3, and actively obstructs #4. A telling example of the disconnect is that the AANES had to lobby [Washington] for nearly three years to grant them an exemption to the economic sanctions on Syria[40]."

On the other hand, an anonymous interviewee argued that Russia has a "shorthanded perception of peace" as it seeks to increase the territory controlled by the GoS and keep Assad in power whilst strengthening its regional influence.[41] Therefore, Moscow is "not investing in peace", but rather its support for the "regime [has] made it possible for Assad to continue to fight without making any compromises with his enemies".[42] The convergence between the GoS and Russia is also shared by Iran, as all three "actors are resolved [in] keep[ing] the … regime in power; exclud[ing] American and Western influence… and maintain[ing] Syria's economic and territorial integrity… This convergence is reflected in all three actors' discourse about the conflict and possible solutions to it".[43]

In the case of Tehran, "its use of Shi'ite jihadist rhetoric to motivate its proxies in Syria [has] added [a] religious dimension to the war, which [has] made useful peacebuilding narratives even more difficult to construct".[44] As opposed to the Western powers, Iran and Russia continue to stress that their current approaches "will re-establish stability, security, and, at the end of the day, peace".[45] However, for Tehran, there is a consensus among most of the interviews that its use of proxy groups has been linked to gaining limited economic benefits from investments, as well as socially and politically aligning itself with Shiism. Additionally, the relationship between, or among, different actors is not always very linear, with Dr Keil noting that "Iran and Russia will do everything to keep Assad in power, [whilst] Assad doesn't have to do anything to please Iran or Russia".[46]

According to one interviewee, there is a growing alignment between Russia and Turkey, as Moscow is attempting to bring Damascus and Ankara together. However, the "basis of [any] meeting

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[40] Ibid.
[41] Syrian mediator, Interview.
[42] Joel Veldkamp, Interview.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Scholar at Swiss research centre, Interview.
[46] Dr. Soeren Keil, Interview.

or agreement, will be security… it won't be building peace but securing the border and securing the regime in Damascus, securing the Turkish army".[47] As Russia (and consequently Damascus) and Turkey attempt to find a "modus operandi to at least accept each other's spheres of influence... they concur in their discourse that peacebuilding should not be about conflict transformation or conflict resolution, but rather about conflict management".[48] Thus, while Russia tries to maintain the "status quo", Ankara's focus is on the "Turkification of Northern Syria" and ethnographic change, using its NATO membership as a shield to negotiate with both the West and Russia. [49]

However, as Erdogan aligns himself with external actors, Turkey's relationship with proxy groups, such as the SNA and HTS, continues to diverge. Ankara maintains a differentiated relation with different groups as it seeks to inflict "maximum damage on Kurdish territorial aspirations and military capacit[ies], repatriating Syrian refugees, and maintaining its ability to play spoiler in any settlement to the conflict".[50] The protests in Turkish-controlled areas in Syria after a possible Ankara-Damascus rapprochement, and the subsequent Turkish crackdown on those protests, highlight the enormity of the disconnect at play.[51]

Furthermore, since, according to one anonymous source, Washington and its allies are continuing to assist Syrian civil society, this dynamic makes them a key supporting actor in the peacebuilding process, since it is civil society which is "largely shap[ing] [and] strongly influenc[ing] the narrative around peacebuilding and peace"[52]. Nevertheless, for Dr Kahf it is "no longer a Syria-Syria dialogue, since the main movers and shakers are outside actors",[53] with the process resembling "very neocolonial… very geopolitical, and 19th-century power politics".[54] Additionally, the Syrian agency has been "shrinking", as can be noted with the exclusion of Kurds from the peace process, and the negotiations between the Syrian opposition and Turkey.[55] However, even as civil society loses its agency in the "political equilibrium", an anonymous interviewee has argued that a genuine

[47] Scholar at think tank, Interview.
[48] Dr. Sara Hellmüller, Interview.
[49] Ibid; Syrian mediator, Interview.
[50] Joel Veldkamp, Interview.
[51] Dr. Jerome Drevon, Interview.
[52] Syrian mediator, interview.
[53] Dr. Ammar Kahf, Interview.
[54] Dr. Soeren Keil, Interview.
[55] Scholar at Swiss research centre, Interview.

peace process that "avoids… reconstruction failures that have happened in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Lebanon" can lead to real convergences among Syrians.[56]

Part 4: The Future of Syrian Peace Negotiations

Analysis of Interviews

Overall, collected interview data present pessimistic views on Syrian peace talks and mediation efforts. Not only is this viewpoint held by foreign and local researchers and practitioners, but Veldkamp has noted that a "prominent" local actor in Aleppo has also reportedly expressed his/her view that "there will be no peace deal, [and] there will be no liberalisation".[57] So far, negotiations have focused on the Geneva Process, the Astana and Sochi tracks, as well as the Constitutional Committee. However, all of these efforts have encountered internal and external challenges, which, in turn, have led to a stalemate in the negotiations.[58]

Although the "Geneva [Process] is a very important track", considering the involvement of not only Syrian actors but also delegations from different states and international organisations, it has not "led to anything concrete",[59] with Dr Keil noting that the "current negotiation framework reflects the situation from 6-7 years ago" rather than the ongoing realities on the ground.[60] Furthermore, this dynamic has been further complicated by the growing disinterest among foreign patrons. For example, the talks scheduled for July 2022 were cancelled by Moscow, which wanted to halt them for a while, with "even Western states [failing to] invest [time and resources] to overcome this impasse".[61]

At the same time, the goals of the Process seem to contradict those of the Astana and Sochi tracks, which have been facilitated by Russia, Turkey, and Iran. The Astana talks hold two major ambitions: "the return of the regime to control, and [the weakening of] the Kurds", whilst the Sochi

[56] Professional at Syrian NGO, Interview.
[57] Joel Veldkamp, Interview.
[58] Hellmüller; Veldkamp; Keil, Interviews.
[59] Scholar at think tank, Interview.
[60] Dr. Soeren Keil, Interview.
[61] Scholar at Swiss research centre, Interview.

track has tried to "[circumvent] the role of the UN".[62] This, in turn, indicates that the success of these tracks may negatively affect the efforts of the Geneva Process.

In addition, interview data has shown that currently there is "no space within the UN-led peace process for dealmaking".[63] On the ground, UN activities are marginalised compared to the roles of foreign actors, such as Russia and Turkey, which have stronger connections with Syrian domestic realities due to the "multipolar nature of the conflict".[64] Also, UN mediation efforts have been conceptualised as "biassed" since the Organisation's agencies reside in Damascus, and hire local employees mainly from the regime.[65] Ultimately, the institutional structure of the UN matters as well. Since "the UN is only as powerful as its member states", it is difficult for the Organisation to deal with a conflict both because "one of [its] protagonists is a member of [the UN]",[66] but also because the body is currently "blocked [due to] ongoing conflicts elsewhere, particularly in Ukraine".[67]

The Organisation initially tried to tackle four domains within the Syrian talks - that is governance and election reforms, counter-terrorism, and the constitution - but from 2018 onwards sought to focus only on the latter. Despite this, the CC has produced "no meaningful process so far".[68] Although the initiative was supported, and formed, with the help of Moscow and Ankara, the GoS has not acknowledged its delegation to the Committee as a 'representative' of the regime, but rather as "a delegation 'supported' by [Assad]".[69] Furthermore, the CC has also been criticised for not reflecting the "voices" and desires of the Syrian people themselves.[70] As a result, it has played "a very weak role [vis-a-vis] civil society groups", and has failed to "produce any ambitious content".[71]

Even outside of the Syrian conflict and the official negotiation process, international powers, such as the US and Russia, have been "locked in… [a] zero-sum struggle for power," with "all of the [foreign patrons involved] preferring to see the conflict continue rather than [have] their opponent[s]

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[62] Faruq Mistefa, Interview.
[63] Dr. Sara Hellmüller, Interview.
[64] Scholar at Swiss research centre, Interview.
[65] Professional at Syrian NGO, Interview.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Dr. Soeren Keil, Interview.
[68] Dr. Sara Hellmüller, Interview.
[69] Dr. Ammar Kahf, Interview.
[70] Dr. Soeren Keil, Interview.
[71] Faruq Mistefa, Interview.

benefit from a potential settlement".[72] In addition, domestically, even though the opposition has been willing to provide concessions, the GoS has continued to remain intransigent, believing that it has "won the war".[73] Therefore, it would be reasonable to argue that the current Syrian peace talks and mediation efforts have reached a deadlock and need alternative approaches, arrangements, and structural reforms.[74]

Conclusion & Recommendations

Conclusion

The Applied Research Project initially sought to research, and propose, concrete institutional frameworks which could potentially direct and facilitate the establishment and maintenance of peace within the Syrian context. This was based on an in-depth literature review, as well as a comprehensive set of semi-structured, informant interviews. By combining the two, the research team sought to tackle not only the normative and tangible peacebuilding arrangements and perceptions present among local Syrian actors and their foreign patrons, but also the extent to which such dynamics were born out of the historical trajectories of Syria's ethnoreligious groups, and, in turn, how they have fed into the official negotiation and mediation efforts.

However, extensive research has indicated that the possibility of establishing a lasting, equitable peace in the country is increasingly becoming slimmer, with the Syrian conflict slowly

[72] Joel Veldkamp, Interview.
[73] Dr. Sara Hellmüller, Interview.
[74] Hellmüller; Veldkamp; Keil, Interviews.

moving into a different phase, if it has not already. As has been articulated by Dr Keil, the local and foreign actors' diverging visions of Syria's future peacebuilding trajectory are themselves reflective of the increasingly "frozen" military situation on the ground. Each side is currently prioritising short-term stabilisation and consolidation efforts in the areas under their control, seeking to reinforce their power, while solutions to the country's rehabilitation, rebuilding, and reintegration process continue to draw silence. This reality has been further complicated by, and is to an extent, a by-product of, the historical, sectarian animosity among Syria's ethnoreligious groups. Ultimately, these dynamics have also poisoned the ongoing official peace talks, effectively giving birth to the current impasse in negotiations.

However, these findings should not imply that the prospect of a convergent peacebuilding narrative in Syria is doomed. By emphasising the deep fragmentation of the Syrian state, and the highly oppositional agendas of the conflict's various parties, this report can help facilitate more grounded discussions on the future of the Syrian nation. These debates should continue despite the current polarisation in international affairs, and ought to always be conducted from a position of optimism for the country's future, whilst ultimately also taking into account the positionalities of the Syrian people on the ground since only with their insights, and collaboration, can the academic and international communities truly illuminate sustainable pathways toward peace.

Recommendations

1. A greater focus should be placed on the concrete, convergent issues of concern to Syrians, such as a ceasefire. The international community should stop trying to circumvent these priorities by raising issues far removed from Syrians' needs and aspirations in the current phase of the conflict.

2. There must be a recognition that a uniform perception of peace, and, in turn, a confluent peacebuilding agenda, will be difficult to materialise. Academics researching the topic should be aware that such discussions are perceived as an '*intellectual luxury*' by Syrians, and as such future research must be more attuned to these practical and realistic dynamics.

3. Real fear exists that in light of the different actors' clashing agendas, Syria is on the way to becoming a 'frozen conflict', hastened further by a growing sense of fatigue among the international community. Therefore, the topic of Syria's future peacebuilding trajectory must continue to be discussed, researched, and debated, lest the conflict subsides and continues to simmer for years with no end in sight.
4. Given the multipolar nature of the war, and the complexity of international affairs surrounding it, research on internal and external relations of the foreign patrons involved in the country's affairs should be continuously kept up to date and taken into account. This will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the conflict's potential future direction(s).
5. To make the ongoing Syrian peace talks and mediation efforts more effective and efficient, continuous updates on their approaches, arrangements, and structural reforms should be sought among international and regional actors, civil society, civilians on the ground, academics, international organisations, and NGOs.

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Appendix

List of Interviewees

Interviewees are sorted alphabetically by their last names. Throughout the text, interviewees are referenced either by name or are anonymised (based on their prior respective preference).

Name	Position	Affiliation	Type of interview
Head of a Swiss-based NGO	NA	NA	Data collection
Fadi Dayoub	International Coordinator, President	LDSPS, ASPS	Data collection
Senior Analyst at an international NGO	NA	NA	Data collection
Syrian professional specialising in mediation	NA	NA	Data collection
Dr. Sara Hellmüller	Senior Researcher, Visiting Lecturer	CCDP, IHEID	Data collection
Director of a Berlin-based NGO	NA	NA	Data collection
Co-founder of a policy centre and think tank focused on Syria	NA	NA	Data collection
Dr Soeren Keil	Academic Head	Institute of Federalism	Data collection
Scholar at a public policy think tank	NA	NA	Data collection
Professional at a Syrian Civil Society Organisation	NA	NA	Data collection
Faruq Mistefa	Editor in Chief	Bercav Center for Media and Freedom	Data collection
Scholar at a Swiss research centre	NA	NA	Data collection
Joel Veldkamp	International Communications Officer	Christian Solidarity International	Data collection

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