3 *Ceasefires in the Syrian Context*

3.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 offers an abductive theoretical framework to classify ceasefires and Chapters 5 through 7 enable more in-depth empirical analysis of the statebuilding implications of ceasefires during the Syrian civil war. This chapter therefore presents the opportunity to offer some context around the primary case study of this book – the Syrian civil war. It does this by elaborating more fully on two broader topics – on the one hand, a historical overview of the Syrian regime and the onset of the revolution, and on the other, a summary of the major ceasefires used during the civil war. These two subjects are, of course, inexorably interconnected. By providing an overview of some of the important aspects of Syria's recent political and social history, we gain a better understanding and appreciation of two themes of relevance for this book: firstly, the nature of the Syrian state, in particular, the structure and essence of the Assad regime; and secondly, the ramifications of this for how ceasefires have played out during the Syrian civil war.

I use the term regime in this book, rather than government, to describe governance in the Syrian context. Firstly, because Syrians themselves generally refer to how they are governed as *al-nizaam*, literally the system or regime. Secondly, it is also more analytically correct to use the word regime to describe the system of rules that operate within the territorial area known as Syria because, as Juan Jose Linz suggests in his definition of authoritarian regimes, 'a leader exercises power within formally ill-defined limits but actually quite predictable ones'.[1] This chapter will explain in more detail how the Syrian regime has been configured like a tornado that pulls all other forms of authority and governance towards it, in the process co-opting, swallowing and emptying them of much of their original meaning. In this asphyxiating environment, many local and indigenous sites of pre-regime authority either lay dormant, were subsumed by the tornado or (if they proved too great a threat to the regime) were violently eliminated. However, as Daniel Brumberg has observed, 'to endure they [authoritarian leaders] must implicitly or explicitly allow some opposition forces certain kinds of social, political, or ideological power – but things must never reach a point where the regime feels deterred from using force when it deems fit'.[2] During the civil war, as the regime became unable to exercise this force within certain areas that had fallen outside its control, these other forms of authority began to (re)emerge, negotiate and contest relationships and systems.

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[1] Juan Jose Linz (2000), *Totalitarianism and Authoritarian Regimes* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner), 159.

This chapter hopes to elucidate some of these dynamics, particularly by looking at the way the regime in Syria has been built and how ceasefires interject into certain processes. It also foregrounds the pictures of local authority and wartime order presented in subsequent chapters by firstly, explaining the environment they grew out of; and secondly, how this relates to the so-called conflict resolution processes. However, in the battleground of ideas and the construction of knowledge in an ongoing and volatile political environment such as Syria's, any attempts at getting to the purportedly 'true' nature of the war and a book in large part devoted to better understanding Syrian civil war narratives remain somewhat of an enigma. Therefore, in this contested environment, it is unsurprising that different authors and discourses prioritise different names and understandings of relationships and events. Some have pointed the finger at Syria's religious and cultural diversity to explain the dynamics, and brutality, of the war.[3] Others have given majority weight to agency and missed political opportunities by the opposition or the Syrian president for reform.[4] For example, Tayyib Tizini suggests that the opposition, 'wanted all or nothing …. They wanted to storm the Bastille'.[5] Still others have pointed to the structure of the Syrian Ba'ath party and the Assad regime, as well as its socio-economic policies, as having played a role in creating the fractures in society that in 2011 boiled over, first in protests, and then in armed revolt.[6]

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[2] Daniel Brumberg (2002), 'Democratization in the Arab World? The Trap of Liberalized Autocracy', *Journal of Democracy*, 13.4, 58.

[3] Cyrus Malik (pseudonym for Nir Rosen), 'Washington's Sunni Myth and the Civil Wars in Syria and Iraq', *War on the Rocks*, 16 August 2016. Available at: https://warontherocks.com/2016/08/washingtons-sunni-myth-and-the-civil-wars-in-syria-and-iraq/

[4] Carsten Wieland (2012), *Syria: A Decade of Lost Chances: Repression and Revolution from Damascus Spring to Arab Spring* (Seattle: Cune Press).

[5] As quoted in Wieland, *Syria: A Decade of Lost Chances*, 107.

In accounts of civil war, narratives of violence are often prioritised. However, this book aims to challenge the 'hegemony of violence' by presenting a picture of Syria's war as not only about military confrontations.[7] Instead, it attempts to delve deeper into how the structures and dynamics of armed conflict blend with the rise (and often fall) of other centres of order beyond the state that necessitates prioritising localised issues, relationships and power structures. In doing so, my suggestion is that no one issue operated in isolation as the only or even the primary driver for what became the Syrian civil war. There are many more intersectional problems and disputes at play. Inevitably, for any one of Syria's pre-war population of 23 million, what those drivers, motivators and inevitable choices were before, during and after the war are individual. My point is that the social markers of gender, class, education, wealth, religion and more have shaped one's experiences of the war, often in surprising ways. Therefore, asking a wife and mother from Daraa in southern Syria about the reasons for the war and their experience of it will elicit a categorically different response from a wealthy Sunni businessman from Aleppo or Damascus. In this vein, this chapter is no more or less just one other way of understanding and interpreting the period from 2011 until 2021 in Syria.

Ultimately, as William Faulkner famously put it, 'the past is never dead. It is not even past'.[8] As Section 3.2 argues, the means of formation of the Syrian state and the nature of the Assad regime have had a direct bearing on why and how the conflict began. Section 3.3 then offers more discussion on the trajectory of the war itself and the different conflict resolution processes attempted therein, including ceasefires. Finally, in Section 3.4, I tie together both these histories with the literature discussed in Chapter 2, particularly if we consider ceasefires as being able to influence more than just levels of violence to include how they create particular types of wartime order that affect statebuilding.

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[6] Nikolaos Van Dam (2017), *Destroying a Nation: The Civil War in Syria* (London and New York: I. B.Tauris), 24–63.

[7] Stephen C. Lubkemann (2008), *Culture in Chaos: An Anthropology of the Social Condition in War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 12–15.

[8] William Faulkner (1951), *Requiem for a Nun* (London: Random House), 73.

3.2 Context to the Syrian Civil War

After decades of living under repressive authoritarian rule, at the end of 2010, large swaths of frustrated, educated and vastly unemployed youth began to protest across the Middle East. Spurred on by social media, their own grievances (entrenched and aggravated for years by the policies and prejudices of the political and wealthy elite) and the profound moral and ethical justice of their cause, thousands took to the streets of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya to demand minimal levels of dignity and respect for the most basic of human rights. The Syrian variant of the uprisings began just a few months later, in early 2011. Gathering confidence and solidarity from the various protest movements they saw erupting in their regional backyard, non-violent demonstrations for social and political reform also began in southern Syria and then subsequently spread across the country. What were initially peaceful demonstrations were met, in short course, with the heavy-handed violence of the Syrian regime. As the months and years rolled on, the opposition movement became increasingly internationalised and militarised. This was in large part a result of the fighters, money and resources that had begun moving across Syria's borders in attempts at geopolitical influence by a range of actors, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the Gulf States, Russia and the United States. Over ten years later, the depth and dearth of destruction, range of actors involved and existential fear continue to complicate efforts at any political resolution to the crisis. But to better understand the Syrian war itself and how 'ordinary men and women unlearned fear' and began an uprising against one of the Arab world's most absolutist and ruthless regimes, initially not demanding its overthrow but instead 'Dignity! Freedom! Bread!', it serves us well to first explore more of Syria's history.[9]

Geographically located in the historical Fertile Crescent, the land now known as the Syrian Arab Republic has for millennia been an important trading hub linking the Caravan Route of the Middle East with the Silk Road of the Far East. Over 2,000 years ago, in the first-century BC, the Greek poet Meleager of Gadara described the land of Syria as, 'one country which is the whole world'.[10] This was largely

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[9] Rania Abouzeid (2018), *No Turning Back: Life, Loss, and Hope in Wartime Syria* (New York: Oneworld), xvii.

[10] As quoted in Charles Glass (2016), *Syria Burning: A Short History of a Catastrophe* (London: Verso), 76.

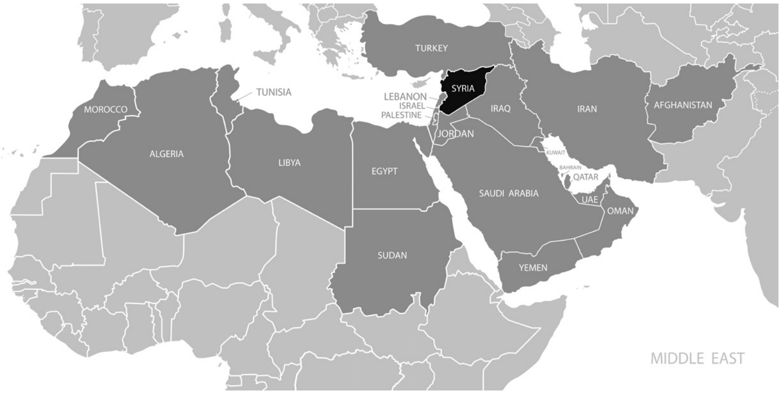
TURKEY
SYRIA
TUNISIA
LEBANON
ISRAEL
PALESTINE
IRAQ
IRAN
AFGHANISTAN
MOROCCO
JORDAN
ALGERIA
LIBYA
EGYPT
KUWAIT
BAHRAIN
QATAR
SAUDI ARABIA
UAE
OMAN
SUDAN
YEMEN
MIDDLE EAST

Figure 3.1 Map of Syria and the broader Middle East.

due to the diverse range of religions and cultures that have inhabited the area for millennia (Figure 3.1). Even before the start of the revolution in 2011, Syria's population comprised a diverse mix of cultures and religious affiliations. About 65 per cent were Sunni Arab and 10–12 per cent Alawite Arab. Christians, Assyrian, Chaldean and Armenians constituted another 10 per cent. There were also Druze, Ismailis, Twelver Shia, Turkmen, Bedouin and Kurds.[11] Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shami suggest that, 'Social differences often count a great deal, but sometimes don't matter at all'.[12] Therefore, perhaps Syria is better thought of as a collection of individuals with experiences and political opinions as diverse as anywhere else, even if they were unable to be publicly expressed much in the fifty years prior to the outbreak of the war.

The Ottoman Empire ruled this multicultural area from 1516 until 1917, first as a thriving Caliphate and later as the 'sick man' of Europe. Despite the longevity of the Ottomans, the Sultan cast a relatively light shadow over the everyday lives of most people living within the Empire, except, of course, when it was time to pay taxes or when he was in need of conscripts. Everyday governance during this period was predominantly local and traditional, grounded in one's cultural and/or religious affiliation. However, the end of World War I brought with it new, more contested identities and forms of governance. While correspondence between Sharif Hussain of Mecca and Sir Henry McMahon appeared to grant British support for ‘the freeing of the Arab peoples’ in exchange for their armed assistance in overthrowing Ottoman rule,[13] Arab independence was stymied by the Sykes–Picot Agreement that effectively carved up much of the territory newly vacated by the Ottomans into British and French zones of control.[14] The territory of Syria and Lebanon went to the French, while Iraq and Palestine were controlled by the British.

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[11] Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shami (2016), *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War* (London: Pluto Press), 2.

[12] Ibid., 3.

The Sykes–Picot Agreement, a fundamentally colonial document that in many ways serves as a keystone to current events throughout the Middle East – from the Arab–Israeli conflict to the war in Iraq – fundamentally disregarded the wishes of local populations for independence and local nationalism and instead went about dividing the region between pseudo-autonomous puppet governments in cities like Aleppo and Damascus all under the ultimate authority of the French. Because ‘the truncated postcolonial state had no historical legitimacy, Syrians tended to affirm either more local identities or supra-state allegiances – to *bilad al-sham*, or the Arab Nation, or the global Islamic community’.[15] This foundational trauma at the heart of the nation-state known as Syria is rooted in the deceit perpetrated by the British and French.[16] This has meant that firstly, like the citizens of many other states in the Middle East, there is a general lack of attachment to the state-entity and also, that allegiance to the artificially fabricated state needed to be constructed, in the Syrian case, primarily through economic and political incentives, violence and coercion.[17] Furthermore, this particular history has entrenched a deep sense of suspicion in many people from the region regarding the motives and trustworthiness of external powers.

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[13] The McMahon-Hussein Correspondence, 14 July 1915 to 10 March 1916. Available at: www1.udel.edu/History-old/figal/Hist104/assets/pdf/readings/13mcmahonhussein.pdf

[14] Sykes-Picot Agreement, World War I Document Archive, 15 and 16 May 1916. Available at: https://resources.saylor.org/wwwresources/archived/site/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/HIST351-9.2.4-Sykes-Picot-Agreement.pdf

[15] *Bilad al-sham* refers to a quasi-administrative unit under the Ottomans containing the current states of Syria, Lebanon, Israel–Palestine, Jordan and parts of southern Turkey. Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami, *Burning Country*, 5.

[16] Raymond Hinnebusch (2008), ‘Modern Syrian Politics’, *History Compass,* 6.1, 263.

[17] Salwa Ismail (2018), *The Rule of Violence: Subjectivity, Memory and Government in Syria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Along with the unnatural political and territorial divisions came French economic policies deliberately designed to stunt local economies. One of the few winners from this divide-and-rule strategy were the Alawites – a religious group that had been persecuted for centuries by Sunni Muslims on account of their esoteric version of Shi'a Islam.[18] To escape hostility, around 300,000 Alawites had congregated in the mountainous region of Latakia on Syria's north-western coast. In its self-designated role as the protector of minorities, this area was earmarked as an Alawi pseudo-state by the French. Under the Ottomans, it was the Sunnis who had grown rich on the back of Alawi labour but under the French, much to the chagrin of both the Sunnis and Christians, the Alawis (along with other 'reliable minorities', such as Circassians and Armenians) were given preferential access to wealth and privileges. These included employment opportunities in a special army serving under French forces. This army was then used to suppress dissent elsewhere in the territory. This situation continued until the eventual evacuation of the French twenty-eight years later in April 1946.[19] The duplicitous British–French division and subsequent hostile French occupation are two reasons why, as veteran Syrian analyst Patrick Seale suggests, 'Most Arabs blame their fragmentation on the malevolent interference of foreigners. In Syria, this feeling is particularly acute'.[20] The partisan treatment of the Alawites by the French, and their subsequent rise to power, is also one element that underwrites current sectarian fears and the real persecution of minorities in Syria. As a Syrian Alawite political prisoner put it, 'The regime sees all Syrians as people it can oppress, but it only sees Sunnis as people it can exterminate.'[21]

The immediate ejection of the French, however, also paved the way for more political control by nationalist elite landowners, who had themselves benefitted under the French Mandate and were generally as unresponsive to the needs of the Sunni peasant class as the French had been.[22] Through the late 1940s and 1950s, coup followed coup, until the Ba'ath party (founded in 1947), itself a hybrid entity of Arab nationalism and socialist fervour, assumed power in 1963. However, it wasn't until November 1970 that the power struggles within the Ba'ath party itself were settled through an internal coup known as the Corrective Movement led by the country's then Alawi Defense Minister Hafez al-Assad. Through a unique blend of pragmatism and ruthlessness, Hafez al-Assad set about building an authoritarian regime with power centralised in the presidency and underwritten by the army and security forces.[23] He stacked these with co-religionists and others who he knew would be loyal, mainly because of the economic and political incentives he offered.[24] Henceforth, 'Assad's Syria' has forcefully dominated virtually all aspects of the social, political and cultural life of the country for over fifty years. Other forms of opposition or local authority were either kept on a tight leash, went into exile, hiding or were destroyed. In their new social contract, Syrians were the recipients of political stability if not freedom; basic living standards in exchange for public acquiescence to undemocratic governance. Many Syrians liken their country as being akin to the dystopian reality of Airstrip One depicted by George Orwell in his novel *1984*. A Syrian friend of mine in Jordan told me in early 2020 that when he read *1984*, he thought that George Orwell was speaking specifically about life in Syria. Likewise, Fadi, a theatre specialist from Hama told Wendy Pearlman, 'A Syrian citizen is a number. Dreaming is not allowed.'[25]

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[18] Albert Hourani (1946), *Syria and Lebanon: A Political Essay* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 51.

[19] Patrick Seale (1988), *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 18.

[20] Ibid., 14.

[21] As quoted by Thomas Pierret. Available at: https://twitter.com/ThomasPierret/status/1129371096367665153

Hafez al-Assad achieved political stability, and in the process, consolidated his own power by broadening the relatively narrow base of the Ba'ath party through accommodation with Sunni clerics (by reiterating the Islamic identity of the Corrective Movement) and with wealthy Sunni and Christian bourgeoisie (through more liberal economic policies).[26] He also initially endeared the party to a cross-sectarian peasant constituency by redistributing land and improving rural conditions through Soviet-style five-year plans.[27] Party membership increased to half a million members, at least in name. By the 1980s, one in every five workers in Syria was employed in the state bureaucracy or public service.[28] At the same time, a savage purge of the party occurred of those deemed not loyal, or not loyal enough, to Assad, and a cult of personality, potentially unsurpassed in the Arab world where there is no shortage of personality cults, was also systematically established around the almost omnipotent figure of Hafez al-Assad as 'the father', 'the leader forever'.[29] Lisa Wedeen writes that, 'In Syria … it is impossible not to experience the difference between … a charismatic, loyalty-producing regime and its anxiety-inducing simulacrum',[30] meaning that Syrians are all too well aware that they must simultaneously subscribe (or at the very least pay lip service) to a supreme authority underpinned by sublime violence if they want to survive.

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[22] Albert Hourani (1946), *Syria and Lebanon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press); Philip Khoury (1987), *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Nationalism 1920–1936* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).

[23] Wendy Pearlman (2017), *We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled: Voices from Syria* (New York: Custom House), xxxiii. See also Ismail, *The Rule of Violence*.

[24] Nikolaos Van Dam (1981), *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Sectarianism, Regionalism and Tribalism in Politics, 1961–1980* (London: Croon-Helm).

[25] As quoted in Pearlman, *We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled*, 3.

At the same time as maintaining the cult through symbols and threat of violence, liberalisation policies in response to debt crises and the entrenchment of a crony capitalist elite meant that by the late 1990s 'an upper class emerged both greater in number and wealthier than the bourgeoisie of the pre-Baathist era'.[31] When Hafez al-Assad died in 2000, his son Bashar inherited a regime that had been purposefully structured in order to coup-proof itself with the support of this specially grafted-on upper class, who had benefitted grandly over the decades from its nepotism and clientelism. However, while the inception of the Ba'ath party was based on a social contract of progression with rural Syrians, its socialist-sympathetic policies had been increasingly undermined by its investment in this section of wealthy society, predominantly based in Damascus and Aleppo. Progress for Syrians working in rural areas and the urban poor was further undermined by economic reforms, drought and an atrophying of the distribution of wealth as part of a raft of liberalisation policies known as the ‘Damascus Spring’ initiated by Bashar al-Assad in the early years of his presidency.[32] Despite allusions to a social and economic rebirth under the new president and ideas of ‘authoritarian upgrading’ that would purportedly innoculate Syria from the events of the Arab Spring in 2011,[33] the regime’s enduring existential fears and reliance on its security and military apparatus to protect its authority translated to few meaningful political and social freedoms or economic benefits for a large part of the populace.[34] Reforms, which were initially thought to herald some level of increased social and political liberalisation, were inevitably undermined by self-reinforcing structures of cronyism and suspicion that Hafez had established and Bashar nurtured.

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[26] International Crisis Group (2011), Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VI): The Syrian People's Slow Motion Revolution, *Middle East/North Africa Report* No. 108.

[27] Hanna Batatu (1999), *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press); Habib Abu Zarr (2013), 'Die Geiseln des Löwen', *Zenith, Zeitschrift für den Orient* ('The Lion's Hostages', *Zenith, Magazine of the Orient*), 4, 18–26.

[28] Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami, *Burning Country*, 12; Volker Perthes (1992), 'The Syrian Economy in the 1980s', *Middle East Journal*, 42.1, 39.

[29] Lisa Wedeen (1999), *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1.

[30] Ibid., 3.

[31] As quoted in Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami, *Burning Country*, 13.

Even before the events of 2011 that began the civil war, overt opposition to the Assad regime had generally come in two forms: those that were able to be economically controlled and those deemed a real challenge that were brutally suppressed. While there are many other examples of the regime’s use of repression and violence to crush political dissent, the massacre and destruction of Hama in 1982 that left up to 40,000 dead and the Old City razed came to epitomise the regime’s determination to wield ultimate authority over any meaningful political opposition. Assad’s growing number of secret police, the *mukhabarat*, made fear a constant in an increasingly surveilled society.[35] Within this environment of repression and economic disparity, watching the events of the Arab Spring unfold in Tunisia and Egypt on cable television and the internet became a lightning rod for a variety of latent forms of opposition. As Dara Conduit writes, ‘even though Syria’s state-driven economic system had formed a major part of the Syrian social contract, it became unsustainable’.[36] In March 2011, the grander narratives of the revolutions spreading across the Middle East met these dormant localised grievances, resulting in ‘an irresistible force clashing with an immovable object’ and the first public protests Syria had seen for decades.[37] The initial demonstrations demanded ‘God! Syria! And only freedom!’.[38] As a ‘late-riser’ in terms of the other Middle East uprisings but also determined to avoid Libya’s fate of external intervention, the Syrian regime nevertheless quickly opened fire on unarmed protesters, killing many.[39] Despite this, the rallies spread quickly across Syria and grew in size. However incongruent their supposed involvement may seem – from Sulieman, a businessman from a prominent family with regime ties in Rastan in Homs,[40] to Um Khaled, a mother from Aleppo city now living in Tripoli in Lebanon[41] – by the summer of 2011, just a few months after protests had begun in the southern governorate of Daraa, every Friday after prayers across Syria tens of thousands were chanting ‘The people want the downfall of the regime!’[42]

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[32] Sharif Abdel Kouddous (2011, September), ‘A Lifetime of Resistance in Syria’, *The Nation*; Amal Hanano (2011, October 31), ‘Portraits of a People’, *Jadaliyya*.

[33] Raymond Hinnebusch (2012), ‘Syria: From “Authoritarian Upgrading” to Revolution?’, *International Affairs*, 88.1, 106.

[34] Steven Heydemann (1992), ‘The Political Logic of Economic Rationality: Selective Stabilization in Syria’, in *The Politics of Economic Reform in the Middle East*, ed. Henri Barkey (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 11–39.

[35] Raymond Hinnebusch (2008), ‘Modern Syrian Politics’, *History Compass*, 6.1, 269.

Decades of preferential treatment through financial and military incentives by the regime of minorities (predominantly Alawis and other quasi-Shiite groups) and the benefits given to the mercantile Sunni and Christian establishment now paid off in spades.[43] These historical policies meant that these groups had a vested interest in the continuation of the regime, just as Assad Senior had envisaged. As Italians under Mussolini used to say, ‘The problem is not the big dictator. The problem is all the little dictators.’[44] Meaning that, like wartime Italy, while ultimate authority is focused at the centre (in Syria’s case, around the person of President Assad), an army of smaller dictators has been authorised to protect the centre from any opposition to it at more localised or diffuse levels. As such, the enablement of a wealthy elite with close ties to the regime has meant that the alarmingly contagious opposition to Assad’s rule was never able to reach a tipping point.

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[36] Dara Conduit (2016), ‘The Patterns of Syrian Uprising: Comparing Hama in 1980–1982 and Homs in 2011’, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 9; Joshua Landis (2013), ‘The Syrian Uprising of 2011: Why the Asad Regime is Likely to Survive to 2013’, *Middle East Policy*, 19.1, 72–84.

[37] Fouad Ajami (2012), *The Syrian Rebellion* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press), 9.

[38] Hugh Macleod and a reporter in Syria, ‘Syria: How it all began’, *GlobalPost*, 23 April 2011. Available at: www.pri.org/stories/2011-04-23/syria-how-it-all-began

[39] André Bank and Mirjam Edel (2015), ‘Authoritarian Regime Learning: Comparative Insights from the Arab Uprisings’, *GIGA Working Papers*, No. 274, 15.

[40] Abouzeid, *No Turning Back*.

[41] Wendy Pearlman (2017), *We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled: Voices from Syria* (Custom House).

[42] Fouad Ajami (2012), *The Syrian Rebellion* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press), 11.

[43] Haian Dukhan (2014), ‘Tribes and Tribalism in the Syrian Uprising’, *Syria Studies*, 6.2, 1–28.

Adjectives used in newspaper reporting and op-eds to describe the Syrian civil war inevitably highlight the depth and dearth of violence and destruction. Exact figures are difficult to account for,[45] but it is clear that over half a million have died and many millions have been displaced or remain disappeared.[46] It is no exaggeration to say that whether they be supporters of the regime or the broader opposition movement, no family in Syria has escaped loss of some kind or another. However, the emphasis of this book is not so much on the causes or rationales for violence but rather on how the dynamics discussed above have played into the use of violence and how other sites of authority and power beyond the regime have emerged and evolved over the course of the war. Since coming to power fifty years ago, the Assad regime has worked hard to secure its monopoly over authority and violence in Syria. The war has disturbed its domination, and in the process, other actors – both old and new – have sought to negotiate and construct their own particular versions of ‘the state’. It is these fundamental changes in the landscape of how power and authority are dispersed between state and non-state actors in Syria that has, in large part, made attempts towards a negotiated political solution to the conflict difficult to find. These conflict resolution efforts, particularly how ceasefires have been envisaged and utilised, are discussed in more detail now.

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[44] As quoted in Glass, *Syria Burning*, 20.

[45] The UN stopped counting the death toll in Syria in 2014 when it estimated the total number of deaths to be 400,000. Somewhat bizarrely it began to estimate the death toll again in September 2021 beginning with a lower estimate of 350,209. See, for example, Megan Specia (2018, April 13), ‘How Syria’s Death Toll Is Lost in the Fog of War’, *New York Times* and ‘Syria War UN Calculates New Death Toll’, *BBC*, 24 September 2021.

[46] UNOCHA, The Syria Crisis in Numbers. Available at: www.unocha.org/story/syria-crisis-numbers

3.3 Ceasefires during the Syrian Civil War

In important ways, better understanding the history of statebuilding in Syria helps to illuminate the regime's responses to conflict resolution attempts during the civil war. In essence, the Syrian uprising represented attempts by Syrians to assert their mark on the politics of their own country and in the process destabilise the state as it was currently configured. Sadly, this won the opposition movement little support from Western powers 'motivated by their preference for order, stability and protection of "the state"'.[47] The conflict, however, has enabled both centrifugal and centripetal dynamics. On the one hand, growing opposition to it has focused all the resources the regime has to hand on its own survival, in the process pulling and subsuming actors and institutions towards the eye of the tornado. On the other, the war has meant the regime no longer has the ability to quite so omnipotently enforce order throughout the land. This has enabled particular societal actors, structures and customs – some new and others that pre-date the war, the space to operate outside the regime's encompassing authority. As such, conflict resolution attempts have needed to contend not only with violence but with much more complex and competing actors and dynamics (Figure 3.2 and Table 3.1).

Arab League Peace Plan

After the regime deployed its military to quell the protests in southern Syria and occupy other rebellious cities and towns, the opposition movement began to organise politically in the form of the Syrian National Council and militarily (at this stage) primarily in the form of the Free Syrian Army. The Arab League emerged as a principal early player in initiatives to address the escalating crisis. Despite the misgivings of many other autocratic Arab League member states regarding regime change and potentially trying to capitalise on Syria, and Syrians, special place within broader Arab society, an initial 'peace plan' was agreed to by the Arab League and the Syrian regime on 2 November 2011.[48] The agreement's six main operational points,

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[47] Yassin al-Haj Saleh (2017), *The Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy* (London: Haymarket Books), 11.

[48] Müjge Küçükkeleş (2011), 'Arab League's Syrian Policy', *Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research*, Brief No. 56, 4.

Table 3.1 *Major ceasefires in the Syrian civil war*

Year	Ceasefire	Where	Main parties to agreement
2011/2012	Arab League peace plan	Whole country	Arab League, Syrian regime
2012	Kofi Annan's six-point peace plan	Whole country	UN, Arab League, Syrian regime
2012–2016	Local ceasefires	First truce in Old Homs, 2016 'freeze zone' in Aleppo	UN, Syrian regime, Russia, local authorities
February 2016	Cessation of Hostilities (Geneva peace process)	Whole country	US, Russia
2016–ongoing	Reconciliation agreements	First in Daraya, hundreds subsequently	Syrian regime, Russia, local authorities
March 2017	Four-towns agreement	Zabadani, Madaya, Fu'ah and Kafraya	Syrian regime, local authorities (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham/ Ahrar al-Sham), Qatar, Iran
May 2017	De-escalation zones (Astana–Sochi peace process)	Four demarcated territorial zones	Russia, Turkey, Iran

among other things, call on the Syrian regime to 'cease all violence and protect its population', attesting to the primary focus of ceasefires being to stop violence.[49] This ceasefire proved 'unsuccessful' by conventional measures when ten days later 300 more protesters were killed by the regime. Shortly afterwards, Syria's membership of the Arab League was suspended when it continued to blatantly violate the terms of the agreement.

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[49] S/2012/77 UN Security Council Report, 4 February 2012. Available at: www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Syria%20S2012%2077.pdf

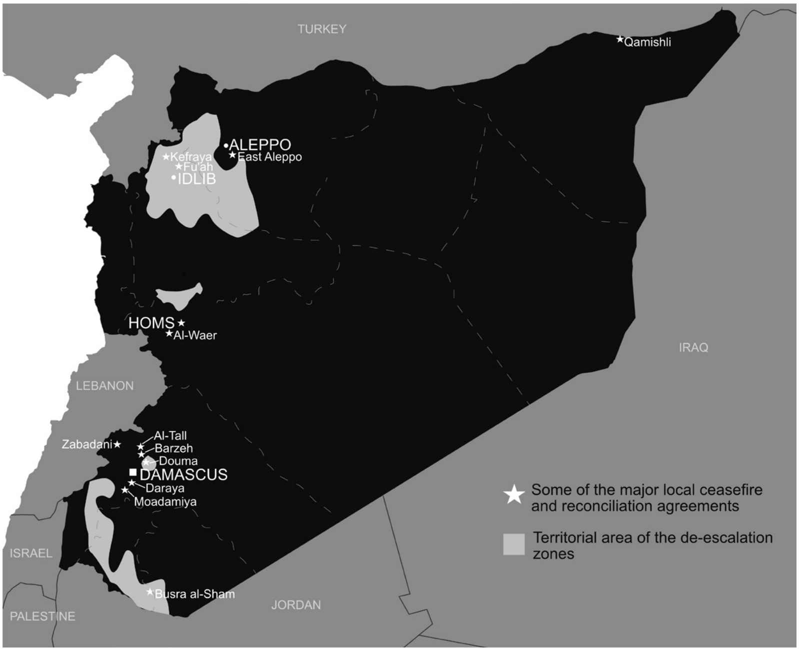
TURKEY
Qamishli
ALEPPO
East Aleppo
Kefraya
Fu'ah
IDLIB
HOMS
Al-Waer
IRAQ
LEBANON
Zabadani
Al-Tall
Barzeh
Douma
DAMASCUS
Daraya
Moadamiya
ISRAEL
Busra al-Sham
JORDAN
PALESTINE
★ Some of the major local ceasefire and reconciliation agreements
Territorial area of the de-escalation zones

Figure 3.2 Map of Syria showing the territorial areas covered by different ceasefires.

A month later, in December 2011, the Syrian regime signed a similarly worded deal with the Arab League that also allowed for the dispatch of Arab League observers into the country in order to monitor the regime's commitment to the ceasefire.[50] What was clear in hindsight was that despite agreeing to both Arab League ceasefire proposals, the Syrian regime saw itself as being under existential attack and had no intention of undertaking any of the ceasefire's terms. Continued aggression by the regime against predominantly unarmed protesters and the burgeoning armed opposition were in effect the first realisation of the 'Assad or we burn the country' slogan that became public, and popular, later in the war with regime supporters, which, as the Syrian author and intellectual Yassin al-Haj Saleh suggests, is 'shockingly honest, incredibly obscene, and strikingly extremist'.[51] The reaction is also no different from the regime's historical repression of dissent (in the Hama massacre, for example) and the existential fears that drive these reactions. Within weeks of their deployment, the Arab League suspended its mission. As the dominant narrative put it, 'Syria was too dangerous for peace'.[52]

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[50] al-Haj Saleh, *The Impossible Revolution*, 79.

[51] Ibid., 149.

Kofi Annan's Six-Point Peace Plan

A similar story played out two months later in March 2012 when the Syrian regime agreed to joint UN–Arab League envoy Kofi Annan's six-point peace plan. The plan prepared by Annan and underpinned by Security Council resolutions 2042 and 2043 attempts to establish a cessation of armed violence and an inclusive Syrian-led political process. It also mandates the United Nations Supervision Mechanism in Syria (UNSMIS) to monitor the plan's implementation. While the Syrian regime was initially thought to be complying with the terms of the agreement, journalist Rania Abouzeid points out, 'Assad said he backed Annan's initiative, even as Syrian troops stormed Saraqeb and other towns in Idlib province.'[53]

The UN supervision mechanism, ostensibly deployed to monitor the cessation of hostilities between Syrian regime forces and the opposition, was quickly overshadowed by broader strategic tensions between three of the Security Council's five permanent members, notably the United States, Russia and China.[54] These related predominantly to Security Council Resolution 1973 that effectively authorised the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-led intervention in Libya by explicitly calling for the establishment of a no-fly zone and enabling Member States to 'take all necessary measures … to protect civilians and civilian populated areas'. This resolution was considered by Russia and China as giving the UN too broad a mandate for external intervention and negating the principle of sovereignty. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin called the resolution on Libya 'defective and flawed …. It allows everything. It resembles mediaeval calls for crusades'.[55] Both Russia and China clearly did not want a repeat of the events in Libya in Syria (or within their own borders). As such, the terms of Annan's six-point plan were similarly vague in scope to the Arab League's initial ceasefire proposals and were also deliberately kept unactionable. One term of the plan asks the parties to 'cease violence in all its forms' but gives no obligations, responsibilities, coordination or notification procedures that could help the parties achieve this.

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[52] Abouzeid, *No Turning Back*, 98. [53] Ibid., 133.

[54] Neil MacFarquhar (2011, October 5), 'Rare Double UN Veto on Syria, Russia and China Try to Shield Friend', *New York Times*.

[55] Maria Golovnina and Michael Georgy (2011, March 21), 'West in "Mediaeval Crusade" on Gaddafi, Putin Says', *Reuters*.

At best, Annan's six-point peace plan potentially succeeded in creating both a short-lived optical win for the players and at worst, through the illusion of an ongoing peace process, concealed the escalation of violence by the parties on the ground and the emergence of other sites of power beyond the regime. These ranged from pro-regime militias, a quickly diversifying armed opposition as well as more localised forms of public authority such as tribal leaders and local coordination committees. Lacking a robust mandate, passive rules of engagement and statements that did not translate well to field realities, the 300-member UN peacekeeping mission lasted less than two months in-country.[56] Through its masterful use of official obstructionism and targeted violence, the regime managed to frustrate the mission's mandate and confine the monitors to the Dama Rose Hotel in Damascus.[57] It is easy to mock the UN as bloated and inefficient, but 'this time, the monitors, who wanted to be in Homs and Zabadani doing their job, were tethered to a hotel. They were on the fringe of a war they were unable to navigate or stop'.[58] The head of the mission Norwegian Major General Robert Mood said later that, 'The parties we met in Syria seemed to seek support and arguments through our presence and activities, and they sought to confirm the validity of their respective narratives rather than implement Annan's proposal.'[59] Barely a month after Robert Mood and the UNSMIS monitors left Syria for good in August 2012, the Syrian regime began to drop bombs on bread lines. This use of violence is perhaps grim testament to the fear the regime felt for a population it had only ever governed through the use or threat of violence and which now, increasingly, sought to defy it directly through protests and force of arms. Kofi Annan perhaps comes close to understanding what lies at the heart of the regime when, upon his resignation from his post at the UN, he described Bashar al-Assad as 'a man… willing to employ any means to retain power'.[60]

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[56] Richard Gowan and Tristan Dreisbach (2015), 'United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS)', in *The Oxford Handbook of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations*, eds. Joachin A. Koops, Thierry Tard, Norrie MacQueen and Paul D. Williams (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 845.

[57] 'UN Suspends Monitoring Activities in Syria Amid Escalating Violence', *UN News Center*, 16 June 2012.

[58] Janine Di Giovanni (2016), *The Morning They Came for Us: Dispatches from Syria* (New York: Liveright), 8, 9.

[59] Robert Mood (2014, January 21), 'My Experiences as Head of the UN Mission in Syria', *Syria in Crisis* (Lebanon: Carnegie Middle East Center).

Local Ceasefires and the Aleppo 'Freeze Zone'

After Annan's resignation, his replacement at the UN, veteran diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi, also had minimal success in implementing any of the political demands of the UN-led Geneva peace process. Despite opposition fighters and the Syrian regime agreeing to a brief ceasefire over the Eid al-Adha holiday in 2012, the violence barely subsided. Like Annan before him, Brahimi quit at an utter loss over what to do in May 2014. In July 2014, the third Special Envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura was appointed. An Italian-Swedish diplomat, who had formerly worked in Afghanistan and Iraq, he became enamoured with a strategy promoted by controversial analyst and mediator Nir Rosen and White House National Security Council member Robert Malley known as local ceasefires or 'incremental freeze zones'. These were envisaged as a way to secure specific territorial areas through local truces and, using these as a pre-requisite, work towards a nationwide peace agreement.[61] In theory, these local ceasefires aimed to buy time for opponents to come to a grander political bargain.[62] While Chapter 6 shows that I am very critical of the way these types of local ceasefires have been utilised during the war, at least they took into account the increasing reality of the fragmentation of power away from both the regime and the umbrella opposition movement and attempted to deal with more localised arenas and actors.

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[60] al-Haj Saleh, *The Impossible Revolution*, 13.

[61] The text of the report is available at: www.scribd.com/document/385329881/Nir-Rosen-s-influential-2014-paper-on-Syrian-conflict-de-escalation. It is worth highlighting that Nir Rosen has played a dubious, even controversial role as a journalist, analyst, advisor and unofficial envoy of the Syrian regime. A detailed character analysis of Nir Rosen was written by Armin Rosen (2019, September 19), 'A Reporter from Hell', *Tablet*.

[62] Hassan Hassan (2014, January 22), 'Hope Springs in Syria?', *Foreign Affairs*; Samer Araabi and Leila Hilal, *Reconciliation, Reward and Revenge: Analyzing Syrian De-Escalation Dynamics through Local Ceasefire Negotiations*, Berghof Foundation, 2016.

Local truces were actually used in Syria even before Rosen's report. The first was in Barzeh, northern Damascus, and shortly afterwards came the local truce in Old Homs in February 2014.[63] Homs is Syria's third largest city and was under siege from May 2011 until May 2014 when a local truce was agreed to between opposition leaders (both civilian and military) and the Syrian regime under the auspices of the UN.[64] The local ceasefire began on 7 February 2014 and was envisaged to last three days but was later extended for a further three days. During the ceasefire, women, children (under 15) and elderly (over 55) were evacuated via a safe corridor monitored by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and the UN mostly to al-Waer, a suburb west of Homs city. After the first 24 hours of evacuations, food parcels and medical supplies were to be delivered to those that remained in the Old City via the UNHCR and the Red Crescent.[65] However, pro-regime militias shelled the evacuation site several times during the ceasefire and Damascus had to pressure the militias into compliance. During the ceasefire, estimates suggest that over 1300 people were evacuated and 500 food parcels were allowed in but in what has become a major embarrassment for the UN, hundreds of unarmed fighters, activists and civilians who were supposed to be granted free passage under the terms of the truce were also killed, imprisoned or disappeared.[66] After the ceasefire the regime regained control of the Old City and the local truce was viewed as a major defeat by the opposition. Noah Bonsey, a Crisis Group analyst said that 'in Homs, the ceasefire came as the result of a siege, and basically completed the regime's military victory in the city'.[67]

Despite the inequitable nature of the Old Homs truce, Nir Rosen's concept of local ceasefires being able to set the stage for broader negotiations was picked up by de Mistura, most notably with his promotion of a fighting ‘freeze’ in Aleppo.[68] De Mistura said at the time that, ‘It should be something that freezes the conflict in that area and gives an opportunity for some type of humanitarian improvement and for the people to feel that, at least there, there will not be this type of conflict’.[69] While the idea of local ceasefires seemed to initially hold more merit for a divided and suspicious Syria where a range of local actors were now wielding power over mini-fiefdoms than a ‘grand bargain’ type of agreement for the whole of the country, three main issues emerged. The first was that the Syrian regime never honoured any of the commitments. For example, after gaining Assad’s word that there would be a six-week freeze in Aleppo to allow humanitarian aid to pass into the besieged area, a few days later, on the morning of 17 February 2015 just as de Mistura was set to brief the United Nations Security Council in New York on the plans he had negotiated for a truce, regime forces launched a new offensive to cut off the main supply road to insurgents in Aleppo.[70] The second issue was that the local agreements gave no incentives for opposition fighters to lay down their arms and no reason why they could not just take them to another area that was not under a truce in order to keep fighting.[71] Finally, while purportedly offering a more fine-grained view of power dynamics the plans failed to take into account the ruthlessness of the Syrian regime and the violence it was willing to unleash in order to protect itself from challengers. Through what became a rather set playbook of besiege, starve and bombard, the regime was able to force opposition fighters and communities into accepting these local ceasefire deals. Around mid-2016, these local ceasefires, that were effectively strangle contracts that one side had little ability to refuse, were rebranded by Russia and the regime as ‘reconciliation agreements’.

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[63] Interview 66: Personal Interview with Conflict Analyst, Beirut, Lebanon, February 2018.

[64] Di Giovanni (2016), *The Morning They Came for Us*, 65.

[65] Rim Turkmani, Mary Kaldor, Wisam Elhamwi, Joan Ayo and Nael Hariri (2014, October 21), Hungry for Peace Positives and Pitfalls of Local Truces and Ceasefires in Syria, *LSE Report*.

[66] Khaled Yacoub Oweis (2015, May), 'Sieges and Ceasefires in Syria's Civil War. Lessons Learned as Regional Players Undermine New Approach by UN Mediator', *SWP Comments, German Institute for International and Security Affairs*, 2.

[67] Joe Dyke (2015, February 10), 'Briefing: Syria's "freeze zones" and Prospects for Peace', *RefWorld*.

February 2016 Cessation of Hostilities

At the end of 2015 and early 2016, despite the truces, ongoing conferences, action groups, informal talks, the convening of ‘groups of friends’, issuing of communiqués, debates and discussions, no road seemed to lead to a reasonable political solution. It was rare that the opposition movement and the Syrian regime would directly negotiate and when they did, it would inevitably not last long. In 2014, in the second round of the Geneva peace talks, the regime and the opposition both walked away after just 30 minutes of face-to-face talks. As conflict analyst Aron Lund puts it, one problem was that, 'all the rebel groups said whoever goes to Geneva is a traitor'.[72] Another was that despite the regime's presence at the negotiating table it arguably never had any real intention of negotiating, seeing all real opposition to its own authority as illegitimate.

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[68] Maks Czuperski, Faysal Itani, Ben Nimmo, Eliot Higgins and Emma Beals (2017), *Breaking Aleppo*, Atlantic Council.

[69] ‘UN Envoy Proposes Syria “fighting freeze”’, *Al Jazeera*, 31 October 2014.

[70] Di Giovanni, *The Morning They Came for Us*, 125.

[71] Samer N. Abboud (2018), *Syria* (Cambridge: Polity Press), 191.

In this atmosphere, Russia and the United States appeared to take matters into their own hands when they negotiated a bilateral cessation of hostilities that aimed to suspend violence across Syria beginning at midnight on 27 February 2016. The idea was that Russia would act as a guarantor for the regime and the United States for the opposition (that was by this stage in large part financially and militarily supported by Washington). However, the terms of the ceasefire explicitly excluded attacks against the Islamic State and armed factions linked to Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria at the time.[73] At this point in the conflict, it was virtually impossible to geographically separate Nusra from other elements of the opposition. Therefore, the wording of the ceasefire effectively enabled the Syrian regime to target whoever and wherever it wanted under the pretext that Nusra or Islamic State elements were in the area. Any meaningful monitoring or sanctioning of violations of the terms of the ceasefire also remained illusory.[74]

In this way, the terms of the February 2016 ceasefire could be used to justify diverse agendas. The lack of clarity allowed for the terms to be defined by the dominant conflict parties, at this time largely Russia and the regime, in ways that best suited their military and strategic goals. As will be discussed further in Chapter 5, while the ceasefire did succeed in reducing violence for a time at the national level, it simultaneously impacted and enabled more localised forms of governance. Because the opposition largely complied with the ceasefire, it allowed the Syrian regime and Russia time and space to refocus their military assets on regaining control over more strategically important areas. This included retaking rebel-held east Aleppo in late December 2016 (in what was a major blow to the opposition) and also better enforcing what it called ‘reconciliation agreements’, the first one of which was imposed on the community of Daraya on the outskirts of Damascus in August 2016. In creating a short-term break in overall violence, the cessation of hostilities also played a role in recalibrating the dispersion of power between local governance actors and economic networks, such as humanitarian aid and smuggling routes, as powerful actors at the local level jockeyed for position.

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[72] As quoted in Dyke, 'Briefing: Syria's "freeze zones" and prospects for peace'.

[73] Joint Statement of the United States and the Russian Federation, as Co-chairs of the ISSG, on Cessation of Hostilities in Syria, 22 February 2016. Available at: https://sy.usembassy.gov/joint-statement-united-states-russian-federation-cochairsissg-cessation-hostilities-syria-february-22-2016/

[74] Interview 54: Personal Interview with Diplomatic Corps, Amman, Jordan, March 2017.

Reconciliation Agreements

Since the agreement in Daraya in August 2016, hundreds of reconciliation agreements have been ‘negotiated’ across Syria.[75] Augmented by Russian man and airpower since September 2015, and impacted by the dynamics of the February 2016 ceasefire, the Syrian regime gained greater ability to enforce sieges, thus laying the groundwork for the current linguistic ubiquity of what it calls reconciliation agreements rather than local truces.[76] While the term reconciliation seems to imply some sort of amicable agreement between former foes, in the context of the Syrian civil war, both local truce and reconciliation agreements are, for the most part, not attempts at reconciliation in the sense of ‘making good again’.[77]

The majority of reconciliation agreements have a similar structure and include two important terms. The first enables the regime to resume control over the property of the area and the second details how citizens will be able to 'resolve their situation'.[78] Theoretically, this latter term gives people a choice about whether to stay or leave their community post reconciliation agreement. However, in practice, anyone that has been active in the rebellion actually has little choice other than to leave their community if they want to survive once the regime retakes control of the area.[79] This extends to anyone who was a member of the political opposition, humanitarian and civil society actors, members of armed groups or Syrians who have dodged their military conscription.

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[75] A definitive list of all the reconciliation agreements in Syria has not yet been compiled, but some of the more notable examples include al-Waer; Qudsayya; al-Hama; al-Tal; Khan al-Sheeh; Wadi Barada; Qaboun; Barzeh; al-Sanamayn; Eastern Ghouta including Douma; Talbiseh and Rastan.

[76] Interview 64: Skype Interview with Conflict Analyst, Greece, January 2018; Interview 65: Skype Interview with Human Rights Researcher, New York, USA, January 2018.

[77] Marika Sosnowski (2020), ‘Reconciliation Agreements as Strangle Contracts: Ramifications for Property and Citizenship Rights in the Syrian Civil War’, *Peacebuilding*, 8.40, 460–75.

Likewise, the use of a particular repertoire of violence that precedes these reconciliation deals – the creation of a siege environment coupled with military bombardment – means that negotiators in the rebel-controlled communities have very little bargaining power. Community negotiators can push for certain terms to be included in the agreement, for example, relating to freeing people who have been detained by the regime, but they have little leverage and therefore little ability to enforce or demand anything.[80] As will be discussed more in Chapter 6, in this quite ingenious and quasi-legalistic way, the terms of reconciliation agreements offer the Syrian regime the ability to reassert its authority over property in rebel-held territory and forcibly triage the population into those able to re-join the state (i.e. those able to resolve their situation) from those exiled from it.

Four-towns Agreement

After an initial attempt in 2015, what became known as the Four-towns agreements was brokered and implemented in late March/ early April 2017. According to Annabelle Bötcher, the agreement 'consists of extremely complex choreographed cascading movements in the Middle East, involving massive forced displacement-swaps of four besieged towns in Syria, the release of detainees from Asad-regime detention and the release of a group of kidnapped Qataris in Iraq'.[81] This is true, however, the essence of the agreement was that armed opposition groups (primarily Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham) would lift their siege of predominantly Shi'a fighters and civilians in the towns of Kefraya and Fu'ah, while at the same time the Syrian regime, Iran and Qatar would lift their besiegement of the predominantly Sunni towns of Madaya and Zabadani. This would allow for the complete evacuation of fighters and citizens from Kefraya and Fu'ah and fighters from Madaya and Zabadani.

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[78] *Taswiyat al-wadahum* in Arabic means something like 'sorting out affairs/ regularising/resolving status'; Interview 65: Skype Interview with Human Rights Researcher.

[79] Interview 68: Personal interview with humanitarian, Beirut, Lebanon, February 2018.

[80] Interview 47: Personal interview with cross-border organisation, Beirut, Lebanon, February 2018.

What makes the Four-towns agreement different from the majority of other local truce and reconciliation agreements in Syria is firstly that the final agreement was largely brokered by Qatar and Iran rather than Russia and the regime. The second anomaly was that the agreement is explicitly sectarian in nature with the well-being of Sunni citizens effectively being exchanged for Shi'a ones, adding to claims that the policy of such ceasefires is demographic engineering.[82]

In many ways, the Four-towns agreement is the culmination of decades of land and property mismanagement by the Syrian regime. Officially, land and property in Syria fall under two categories, private land and state land; however, in reality, the tenure system over much of the land of Syria is transacted using hybrid and customary arrangements. Customary and other unofficial forms of land tenure are most common in rural and informal peri-urban settlement areas, often regarded as slums. For example, prior to the uprising in 2011, approximately 40 per cent of the population of Damascus lived in informal settlements meaning they had no state-backed legal recourse to property rights.[83] This includes much of the property in towns like Madaya and Zabadani.

The drought that immediately preceded the Syrian war necessitated that many people who lived in rural areas and made their living from agriculture relocate to these peri-urban centres. Because of the particular socio-political history of Syria (as discussed earlier in this chapter), the human geography of the country became fundamentally linked simultaneously to both sectarian identity and economics. This meant that many of the communities that opposed the regime were located in rural areas or in the peri-urban fringe of Syria's larger cities and were also Sunni Muslims. The sectarian nature of the Four-towns agreement was facilitated by the particular anthropogeography of the country. The particular history of land rights in Syria means that Sunni's evacuated from strategic areas close to the capital like Madaya and Zabadani have little ability to reclaim their property rights.[84]

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[81] Annabelle Bötcher (2017, May), 'Large-Scale Forced Population Transfers in Syria: Details of the Recent "Four Towns Agreement"', *News Analysis Center for Mellemøststudier Syddansk Universitet*, 1.

[82] 'Syria Deal to Evacuate Shi'ites and Sunnis from Towns: Source, Observatory', *Reuters*, 29 March 2017.

[83] Housing, Land and Property (HLP), Emergency Response to Housing Land and Property Issues in Syria. Nairobi: UN Habitat Briefing Note 30, January 2013.

De-escalation Zones

Russia's military intervention in Syria in September 2015 marked a meaningful juncture in the overall direction the civil war appeared to be headed. Re-enforced by Russian man and airpower, battlefield dynamics once again began to favour the Syrian regime. At the same time, the UN-led Geneva peace process also stalled. The United States, one of Geneva's principal international backers, had shifted its focus away from the Syrian opposition towards what it now saw as its primary national security concern – the Islamic State. The United States' focus on IS in north-east Syria enabled Russia to assert its dominance over dynamics in the rest of the country as well as the machinations of the peace process. This manifested in the Astana-Sochi peace process. The Astana process changed the fundamental character of the political peace negotiations. Where Geneva had prioritised the removal of Bashar al-Assad (more forcefully in its early years) as a pre-requisite for peace, Russia's peace process was never linked to regime change.[85]

One of the most influential outcomes of the Astana process has been the creation of four territorially bounded ceasefires, called de-escalation zones.[86] One zone was in the south-west around Daraa and Quneitra; one in Eastern Ghouta; one in Northern Homs; and, one in Idlib. The concept of areas of deconfliction was not new.[87] However, what is novel, and will be discussed more in Chapter 7, is how Russia (together with Turkey and Iran) linked the creation of the four de-escalation zones to its calculus in Syria at both the local and international levels. In-line with traditional understandings of ceasefires, the de-escalation zones were successful in decreasing violence in the four zones initially. This consequently freed up Syrian and Russian man and airpower to focus on re-taking areas in the east of the country still held by Islamic State. However, this military aspect is just one element of the ceasefire calculus. Once military operations against IS were completed, the Syrian regime and Russia were in a better strategic position to dictate the terms of what they see as a political solution to the conflict on communities in the de-escalation areas.[88] These came in the form of reconciliation agreements. While predating the Astana peace process, reconciliation agreements go hand in hand with Astana.[89] This is because the primary aim of reconciliation agreements has been to offer a type of political solution to the conflict, however heavy-handed and one-sided it may be.

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[84] Valérie Clerc (2014), 'Informal Settlements in the Syrian Conflict: Urban Planning as a Weapon', *Built Environment* 40, No. 1.

[85] Interview 70: Skype interview with conflict analyst, Germany, September 2018.

[86] There is some debate as to whether all four zones technically come under the auspices of the Astana peace process. This was seen most prominently in the US-backed zone in the South.

[87] The United States had previously proposed setting up what it called 'buffer zones' in Syria. Interview 75: Skype interview with conflict analyst, Moscow, Russia, December 2018.

The reconciliation process for three of the four de-escalation zones was completed between March and July 2018 and in the spring of 2021 only the Idlib zone remained. The Eastern Ghouta zone was the first to surrender to the Syrian regime in March 2018. The Syrian regime's siege and bombardment of Ghouta, alleged use of chemical weapons coupled with the lack-lustre response of the international community effectively signalled to opposition authorities in the other de-escalation zones that no external help would be forthcoming.[90] Given this reality, the southern de-escalation zone and the smaller zone in Northern Homs were quick to accept reconciliation agreements with Russia and the regime, requiring relatively little military expenditure.

3.4 The Syrian Regime, Ceasefires and Statebuilding

Ten years after the beginning of the Syrian uprising in the spring of 2021, Russia was in the driving seat as far as the larger Syrian peace process is concerned. While Russia has stated that its aim is to ultimately bring the Astana process back under the auspices of Geneva, in the meantime they have succeeded in creating a reality on the ground that in some ways resembles a victor's peace. While the strategically crafted use of ceasefires has notionally allowed the Syrian regime to continue to reintegrate newly retaken areas, citizens and certain opposition fighters back into the state, the Idlib de-escalation zone presents a problem not only for Damascus and its backers Russia and Iran but also for Turkey. Idlib will inevitably have to be dealt with at some point if Bashar al-Assad is sincere (and there is no reason to doubt that he isn't) about his vow to retake control of the whole of the country.[91]

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[88] Interview 75: Skype interview with conflict analyst, Moscow, Russia, December 2018.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Interview 56: WhatsApp audio interview with conflict analyst, Beirut, Lebanon, December 2018.

While there was a time when the opposition did appear to have the upper hand militarily, Russia's military intervention in 2015 stymied any hopes the opposition may have had of conquering Damascus. Politically, the opposition movement has also been unable to find common ground. This is in large part a result of Syria's history as a suffocating kingdom of silence. Many of the post-2011 political opposition were intellectuals that had been in exile for decades as a result of their objection to Assad's rule. As such, they were charged by opposition figures within the country as being out of touch with current realities. Additionally, for over fifty years in Assad's Syria people had little ability to collaborate or negotiate in meaningful ways. This made coming to any common vision for Syria's political future a daunting, and ultimately elusive, undertaking. Under Assad it was 'the most cunning and sycophantic who prospered' and as such, 'before the revolution, there was no culture in the deep sense of the word, only a framework empty of meaning populated by hired intellectuals, with the exception of a very few real thinkers, who were marginalised'.[92] A Syrian from Aleppo explains the complicated relationship between the regime and the opposition movement when he notes that, 'the regime brought us up. It takes years to escape from this corrupting influence. The opposition's institutions have failed – but they themselves are the product of Assadism'.[93]

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[91] Ian Black and Kareem Shaheen (2016, February 13), 'Syrian President Bashar al-Assad Vows to Retake Whole Country', *The Guardian*.

[92] As quoted in Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami, *Burning Country*, 164 and 166.

[93] 'Zawraq Magazine', *Syria Untold*, 2 December 2014; see also, Bart Klem and Sidharthan Maunaguru (2017), 'Insurgent Rule as Sovereign Mimicry and Mutation: Governance, Kingship, and Violence in Civil Wars', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 59.3, 629–56.

It was far from clear in the early stages of the conflict that it would turn out this way. Opposition to Bashar al-Assad's rule was initially peaceful and it was hoped by many both inside and outside the country that Bashar, a British-educated ophthalmologist, would take a more moderate line. On the other hand, looking through the history of how the regime was built in Syria that the beginning of this chapter presents, gives us indications that while it would tolerate forms of opposition that it could tightly control, the Assad regime has always viewed any meaningful resistance to its monopoly of rule as an existential challenge to be met with violence. The Syrian regime has been purposefully constructed to withstand the type of uprising that it encountered from 2011 onwards, honing its strategy many times against dissent in the decades prior, not just in Hama but also in community-run street sweeping projects in Daraya or its response to the Qamishli riots. The history and nature of the regime make it understandable why and how it has treated opposition actors the way it has, from shooting live ammunition into unarmed crowds of protesters; targeting schools, hospitals and bakeries; perpetrating sieges and aerial bombardment with the draconian likes of napalm; the use of chemical weapons on civilian populations to the enforced strangle contracts of reconciliation agreements. While it does not mean that they did not exist, the regime has never tolerated real pluralism of authority or dissent.

This is firstly because the makeup and nature of the Syrian regime have predisposed it to viewing any significant opposition as an existential challenge. As al-Haj Saleh writes, 'The regime has never made room for politics or negotiations, precisely because it has engaged in an existential war. The regime views the revolution as an enemy that must be exterminated. The violence of the Assad regime is structural because it stems from its formation, and violence is preferential – a first choice, not the last'.[94] Ultimately, the regime's only abiding interest throughout the war has remained self-preservation and its history shows that the best way it knows to achieve this is either through co-optation or through repression and violence. Even the brief period of pseudo-political liberalisation in the early years of Bashar al-Assad's rule was in relatively short course heavy-handedly reconsidered. A common cry from pro-regime supporters during the uprising was 'Assad or we burn the country', attesting to their nihilist outlook.[95] The structure of the Ba'ath party and the Assad regime itself has been purposefully built to ensure its continuance no matter the collateral damage. This has involved resorting to foundational myths such as labelling any opposition to its monopoly of rule as 'a foreign conspiracy' or the work of 'terrorists',[96] while at the same time denying its use of chemical weapons[97] and the imprisonment, torture and killing of hundreds of thousands of political dissidents.[98] Recourse to a suspicious narrative of external involvement and the painting of the opposition movement as a foreign plot also plays on the historical disenfranchisement of colonialism.

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[94] al-Haj Saleh, *The Impossible Revolution*, 154.

In many of the above examples of ceasefires, I have sketched out how the involvement of external actors in conflict resolution attempts in Syria has been linked to the traditional way of understanding ceasefires as being about reducing overall levels of violence. What this book problematises, and illustrates more fully in the empirical Chapters 5 through 7, is that by focusing so squarely on how ceasefires reduce violence fails to take into account other salient dynamics. These are firstly, recognising the rationale for the Syrian regime's incapacity to negotiate and secondly, the reality of plurality of governance and authority beyond the state that was present before and during the conflict and how ceasefire's recalibrated this architecture. In focusing overwhelmingly on reducing violence, the ceasefires that were negotiated generally failed to take into account what was at stake for actors and systems, whether they be powerful militia leaders in Homs, local governance providers in Daraa, or access to smuggling networks around Syria's borders. Additionally, if we look at the chronological trajectory of how ceasefires have been used during the war, we can see that it is the Syrian regime and Russia that first took account of these dynamics in how they negotiated ceasefires and the terms they contained. Recognising the emergence of local governance and the plurality of sites of authority beyond the regime, while also understanding how the Syrian state is structured, has meant that they have been most successful in using ceasefires for their own statebuilding ends.

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[95] Emile Hokayem (2016, August 24), '"Assad or We Burn the Country": Misreading Sectarianism and the Regime in Syria', *War on the Rocks*.

[96] Anthony Shadid (2012, January 10), 'Syrian Leader Vows "Iron Fist" to Crush "Conspiracy"', *New York Times*.

[97] *Report of the OPCW Fact-finding Mission in Syria Regarding the Incidents in al-Hamadaniyah on 30 October 2016 and in Karm al-Tarrab on 13 November 2016*, S/1642/2018, 2 July 2018; German Public Policy Institute podcast (2022), *Nowhere to Hide: The Story of Chemical Warfare in Syria*.

[98] Anne Barnard (2019, May 11), 'Inside Syria's Secret Torture Prisons: How Bashar al-Assad Crushed Dissent', *New York Times*.

The purpose of this chapter has been to offer context to the history of statebuilding in Syria and an overview of how conflict resolution processes, primarily ceasefires, have influenced these dynamics during the civil war. Three of the ceasefires I have mentioned here are analysed in more detail in the chapters that follow. Chapter 5 delves deeper into the local dynamics of the 2016 cessation of hostilities in the south of the country, Chapter 6 looks at local truce and reconciliation agreements and Chapter 7 offers an assessment of the de-escalation zones. Besides being rigorous analytically, particularly in terms of broadening the current scope with which scholars and practitioners define, assess and examine the ramifications of ceasefires, it is also my hope that researching and writing about the realities of these ceasefires will go some way to informing humanitarian and political programs aimed at conflict resolution in Syria and beyond. However, before we get to these empirical examples, Chapter 4 combines the details of Syrian ceasefires together with over 180 ceasefire agreements from other civil wars to make the first tentative steps towards a theoretical typology of ceasefires.