

Syria: federalism as the way forward?



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After Syria's government agreed to a ceasefire deal on the 22nd of February 2016 which seems to hold until now, questions are raised on how the country should proceed if it wants to become a unified country once again. The discussion is now more important than ever as for the first time since the Syrian insurgency plummeted into civil war in 2012, there is a chance of forming a lasting peace, although the fundament for this peace is still fragile. A strengthened inclusive Syrian state not only provides military steadfastness against the Islamic State but can additionally improve the political structure and tackle the social and economic deficiencies in the region. A unified inclusive Syrian state is therefore one of the necessary conditions for a solution to a multitude of problems, including the current refugee crisis that the European countries now face.

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The escalation of the Syrian insurgency laying the basis for civil war

The escalation of the Syrian insurgency led to disunity, resulting in the divergence of different social groups that opposed the government and sometimes each other. The first protests that indicated the start of the "Arab Spring" erupted in Syria on the 26th of January 2011. On the 6th of March, several Syrian security forces apprehended demonstrating children in the city of Daraa in southern Syria for writing anti-government slogans on walls. After residents found out that their boys were being beaten and tortured in prison, the protests grew larger and people started to oppose the Ba'athist government of President Assad. Although there had been different uprisings in Syria before like that of the Druze people in 2000 and a Kurdish rebellion in 2004, the "Arab Spring" proved to be a contagious chain of events that gave people hope for change¹. After protests erupted against the

children's arrests on the 18th of March, security forces started acting more violently and at some point opened fire, killing four protesters, which led to other cities joining in the revolt. Although the children were later released, the protests had already spread to other cities and a speech by President Assad on the 30th of March only provoked the people further, leading to weekly anti-government demonstrations throughout Syria and the demand for the removal of the President. The government finally started a full-scale siege against protesters on the 25th of April which can be said to have laid the roots for the civil war to break out.

President Assad attempted unsuccessfully to employ the same counter-insurgency strategy as his father had used in earlier uprisings in the later decades of the 20th century. Only the most trusted military units were deployed and pro-regime militias were raised to drive the insurgents out of the major urban areas use force to quench the uprising. The fact Assad had to rely on those kinds of tactics to limit the chances of defection immediately shows that Syrian support has not been stable from the start. Politically reliable special forces were carefully selected to pair with conventional forces and various security agencies were

¹ Sterling, J. (2012, March 1). Daraa: The spark that lit the Syrian flame. *CNN*. Retrieved from <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/03/01/world/meast/syria-crisis-beginnings/index.html>.

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used to identify and replace questionable military commanders².

After the Syrian army brought in tanks in April 2011 to lay siege to Daraa, hundreds of people were killed and civilians were cut off from basic necessities, telephones and electricity for two weeks. When these methods were also applied in other cities, the opponents to the regime started to organize themselves into armed brigades³. In July of that year, Assad's army started to defect and a part of the army announced the formation of the Free Syrian Army, a coalition of locally based militias without much coordination. Additionally, the Syrian National Council was established in Turkey as the government-in-exile, recognized by the United States, Turkey and the Gulf Cooperation Council but having little legitimacy within Syria.

The divergence of Syria's people leads to fragmentation into different political groups

From the end of 2011, many opposition groups were established under which many moderate or apolitical groups but also Islamist groups such as Ahrar ash-Sham, al-Tawhid and Jaysh al-Islam and additionally those that have produced IS fighters such as Jabhat al-Nusra. Although there are definitely sectarian lines in the conflict, many opposition groups and other parties have seen various ethnic and religious groups within their organization. For convenience it is possible to divide the parties to the conflict over four comprehensible categories, the governmental forces and its supporters, the opposition parties against the Assad regime that can be both moderate or more extreme, the Kurdish people in the north and finally the Islamic State. To understand how those different groups fit into these categories and in the context of the Syrian conflict, it is convenient to do a small chronological process analysis.

² Holliday, J. (2013). The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War. *Middle East Security Report 8*. Washington, D.C.: Institute for the Study of War.

³ Laub, Z. (2016, March 18). Syria's War: The Descent into Horror. *Council on Foreign Relations*. Retrieved from [http://www.cfr.org/syria/syrian-civil-war-five-years/p37668#1/](http://www.cfr.org/syria/syrian-civil-war-five-years/p37668#/).

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From Al-Qaeda in Iraq to Al-Nusra in Syria

As the origins of the Islamic State go a while back, it makes sense to start here. While the group officially only adopted this name in the summer of 2014, its roots lay much earlier within the sphere of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). The withdrawal of U.S. forces after the war left the country with a sectarian insurgency between a 20% Sunni minority opposing the 80% majority of Shiites and Kurds. A discriminatory policy by Iraq's Shiite Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki left the Sunnis disillusioned and distrusting their government. Already in 2004, a former al-Qaeda recruit named Abu Musab al-Zarqawi discussed the idea of creating an Islamic caliphate to which both al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden objected for it being too premature. Additionally Zarqawi was claimed to be too radical and violent, killing many Shiites and deterring moderate Sunni Muslims.

After U.S. airstrikes killed Zarqawi in June 2006, his followers declared in October that year that AQI would from now on go on as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), although this

would remain a controversial issue for AQI's members for some time⁴. In its wake, the sectarian war caused many unwanted violence and casualties. Sunni tribal leaders that had often occupied positions in the Iraqi army reacted to this extremism by establishing a U.S. funded counter-rebellion called the Awakening. This group however started combatting al-Qaeda in general, overlooking warnings about the less known ISI supporters. While ISI only slumbered at this time, the Sunni rage kept it alive long enough until it gained more support after Shia Prime Minister Maliki's 2010 "re-election" which was supported by the United States. From this point onwards, ISI waged a ruthless war, with the Shia population being the main goal of its attacks but also assassinating many Sunni tribal leaders from the Awakening movement, killing 1345 of its members between 2009 and 2013 while documenting and publishing videos of these acts online. The Shiites and the officials in both Baghdad and Washing-

⁴ Mahnaimi, U. (2007, May 13). Al-Qaeda planning militant Islamic state within Iraq. *The Sunday Times*. Retrieved from <https://web.archive.org/web/20110524071632/http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/iraq/article1782088.ece>.

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ton seemed to be looking the other way. As the domestic conflict continued, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had become leader of AQI on 16 May 2011 and had, to a large extent, transformed it into a local operation, now officially rebranding it into the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), giving it more legitimacy under the general Sunni population⁵. After parts of the former Iraqi military joined its ranks, forming ISI into more of a conventional army, attacks were increasingly aimed at government- and army institutions.

As Syria had been struck by its own civil war that involved an opposition that was largely disorganized within a society with a large sectarian division, the opposition was susceptible to so-called "proto-jihadist" influences. When al-Baghdadi started sending his troops into Syria in August 2011 to fight Assad's predominantly Alawite led army (that in his view disfavoured Sunnis), this susceptibility led to many opposition members joining Baghdadi's fight against

Syrian Alawites and Shiites in general, turning the largely secular civil war into a partly sectarian conflict. Baghdadi's troops would organize themselves into Jabhat al-Nusra in January 2012, recruiting fighters and establishing cells throughout the country and growing rapidly into a capable fighting force⁶.

The regime's continuous dominant position

During the first quarter of 2012, the Assad regime started focusing its forces mainly on provincial capitals to control the urban population centres. This strategy resulted in Assad's inability to control the whole country or end the insurgency but increased his chances of continuing the fight and holding ground. It can also be said that this strategy has led to Assad securing his place in a prolonged conflict and having a good chance to stay there after possible peace negotiations. This is evidenced by the fact

⁵ Ghosh, B. (2014, August 14). ISIS: A Short History: The terrorist group's evolution from fervid fantasy to death cult. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/08/isis-a-short-history/376030/?single_page=true.

⁶ Abouzeid, R. (2014, June 23). The Jihad Next Door: The Syrian roots of Iraq's newest civil war. *Politico*. Retrieved from http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/06/al-qaeda-iraq-syria-108214_full.html#.VxENxPmLSUK.

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that even now in 2016, Assad still controls large pieces of territory within Syria, is backed by a reasonable part of the population, has support from a recognizable portion of what is left of the Syrian Army and its militias and has a strong position at the negotiating table in Geneva. Assad used the tactic of trying to separate the general population from the insurgents through massive shelling of parts of cities and using airstrikes to create massive displacement movements and depopulate the rebel-held areas. Specifically this strategy within the conflict has caused the displacement of more than 50% of the Syrian population (over 10 million people) and a death toll of over 250,000 people⁷. Pro-regime militias, supported by the Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite militias have helped with this and there have been various UN reports of predominantly Sunni villages that have been ethnically cleansed, seen as both cause and effect of sectarian polarization⁸. Over time, pro-

regime paramilitaries such as the Shabiha and the Popular Committees have become an integral part of Assad's forces and they began performing the same tasks and manning the same checkpoints. They consist mostly of Alawite groups, however pro-Assad Sunni tribes have also contributed. While not all of the Alawite communities support Assad and while the religious leaders of the sect have officially proclaimed to be independent of the regime, the sectarian divide is pushing people into simplified sectary groups out of fear that opposing religious groups will ultimately not reconcile with them Assad would be gone from Syria's political platform.

Syria's opposition struggles between secular, moderate and extremist groups

From July 2012 onwards, ill-discipline and infighting weakened the opposition Free Syrian Army and the general population lost their trust in them. In the meantime, jihadists rose from within the ranks and additionally started coming from foreign countries, entering Syria through Iraq and Turkey to fight in the conflict. It can be said that the emergence of extremism was in part caused by Assad himself as evidence shows that his regime released hundreds of Islamist

⁷ Amnesty International. (2016, February 3). Syria's refugee crisis in numbers. Retrieved from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/02/syrias-refugee-crisis-in-numbers/>.

⁸ Holliday, J. (2013). The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War. *Middle East Security Report 8*. Washington, D.C.: Institute for the Study of War.

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militants as a political strategy to bring the rebellion into discredit for the outside world⁹. At this point, the country was in disarray and provided a hospitable atmosphere for extremist groups such as Al-Nusra to establish itself firmly.

In November 2012, the Syrian National Council (the Turkey-based government-in-exile) transformed into the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (also known as the National Syrian Coalition), allowing direct representation of rebels from Syria, including the Free Syrian Army and the Kurdish groups in the north, into a political organisation. It was rejected by the more extreme Islamist groups and also by Russia, China, Iraq and Lebanon but seen by the majority of the international community as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people.

As Assad tried to discourage the opposition of fighting and organizing further, various reports were made of his use of the chemi-

cal Sarin gas between March and August 2013. The gravest allegations were made on the infamous chemical attack in Ghouta on 21 August where up to 1.700 people would have died. It was nevertheless not proven that the government was responsible in this case although there is evidence for its use of the weapons in other cases. It must be said that the opposition parties have also been accused by the U.N. of using chemical weapons however¹⁰. After the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) destroyed the weapons and the facilities under a U.N. mandate negotiated by the U.S. and Russia end 2013, international intervention by U.N. Member States was avoided. For a long time, Russia has kept the U.N. from interfering in the conflict through these kinds of deals and veto's, presumably for their own strategic interests in the country.

⁹ Salloum, R. (2013, October 10). From Jail to Jihad: Former Prisoners Fight in Syrian Insurgency. *Spiegel Online*. Retrieved from <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/former-prisoners-fight-in-syrian-insurgency-a-927158.html>.

¹⁰ McElroy, D. (2013, May 6). UN accuses Syrian rebels of chemical weapons use. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10039672/UN-accuses-Syrian-rebels-of-chemical-weapons-use.html>.

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The formation of Islamic State through extremism in Syria

In March 2013, Al-Nusra had taken over the Syrian city of Raqqa in the north-east as the first provincial capital to fall under rebel control. Some analysis claim that Assad had allowed this because he needed to show the importance of his own regime to tackle Muslim extremism¹¹. On the 8th of April, ISI leader Al-Baghdadi claimed in an audio statement that Al-Nusra had been an extension of ISI for a long time and that the two groups would hereby merge into the new Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS) with the ambition to cover the whole historic area of "Greater Syria". A problem was that Al-Nusra's focus was more on fighting the Assad government while ISIS wanted mainly to establish its Islamic State. Aided by the disapproval of Al-Qaeda, these differences in goals led to a power struggle that would last until June 2014

when Al-Nusra finally split, with some members pledging allegiance to ISIS, hereby letting the organization firmly set foot in Syria¹². Al-Qaeda had at this point severed ties with ISIS as it strongly objected against the targeting of the local Sunni population and the fact that ISIS did not share Al-Qaeda's goal of uniting all Muslims. The ease with which ISIS had established itself in Syria is furthermore induced by the inconsiderate foreign policies of the surrounding countries. Analysts for instance indicate that Turkey's southern border checks were for a long time not substantive enough, leading to a large influx of extremist Islamists fighters from the region and also from Western countries. Additionally, regional disputes between Iran and the Gulf states had led to a proxy war within Syria where Iran had send Shiite Lebanese Hezbollah fighters to help Assad's government against Sunni militias funded by Saudi Arabia and Qatar. These kinds of sectarian divides have proven to be a breeding ground

¹¹ Ignatius, D. (2015, October 29). How ISIS Spread in the Middle East: And how to stop it. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/how-isis-started-syria-iraq/412042/>.

¹² Abouzeid, R. (2014, June 23). The Jihad Next Door: The Syrian roots of Iraq's newest civil war. *Politico*. Retrieved from http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/06/al-qaeda-iraq-syria-108214_full.html#.VxENxPmLSUK.

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for extremism and were utilized for recruiting by both Al-Nusra and ISIS. Finally on the 29th of June 2014, the so called caliphate was proclaimed by Al-Baghdadi as a theocratic state for all Muslims in the world (that happened to be extremely religious, specifically Sunni and did not shun violent executions and torture) with himself as the "caliph", branding it the "Islamic State" (IS). The persistent violent conquest that IS has unleashed upon its victims in both Syria and Iraq as well as the extreme theocratic oppression of its own people, has led to the establishment of the international coalition of the Combined Joint Task Force in October 2014, under which many Western countries as well as Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates participate in airstrikes against IS.

The opposition tries to organise itself into a realistic political front

While the opposition groups have had trouble organizing over the span of the conflict, with many opposition groups allying themselves back and forth between more moderate or more extremist groups, from 2014 onwards there are increasingly indications of a more unitary approach. In the beginning of 2014, The Southern Front was

established from parts of the Free Syrian Army, operating as a well-organized moderate Islamist rebel group which controls over 70% of command rooms in southern Syria and is funded by the West. In the north, the so called Syrian Revolutionary Command Council was established in August 2014 as a military organisation from remnants of the Free Syrian Army there and the Islamic Front (consisting of several Islamist groups since 2013; changed into Levant Front in December 2014). The Syrian Revolutionary Command Council consists of 72 factions and uses regional fronts led by councils to control their territories. The group did not include the Al-Qaeda allied Al-Nusra, the moderate (secular) Syria Revolutionaries Front coalition and the Syrian Kurds. By the inclusion of certain extremist groups such as Islamic Front, it has excluded itself from support from the West, nevertheless keeping the opportunities for funding from the Gulf States that already supported the Islamic Front¹³. Another opposition faction based

¹³ Masi, A. (2014, December 5). Syria's New Super-Opposition Coalition Unites Moderates, Islamists -- And Leaves US With Limited Allies. *International Business Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.ibtimes.com/syrias-new-super->

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mostly in the north that is worth mentioning here is the Army of Conquest that was formed in March 2015 as a military platform for the more extremist rebel groups and is supported by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey. It is directly connected to Al-Qaeda and does not denounce IS although from 2016 onwards, multiple groups such as Al-Nusra have left it due to Islamic law interpretations being to moderate.

The Syrian Kurds get more involved in the conflict

When IS pressed onwards and laid siege to the Kurdish city of Kobani in the fall of 2014, this was the first point where the Kurdish people gained international attention. The so called Kurds' People's Protection Units (YPG) proved to be highly effective in their fight against IS as the main armed service of the Kurdish Supreme Committee which is the government of their self-proclaimed province of Rojava (Western Kurdistan) encompassing the northern three provinces of Syria. With support from the U.S. it managed to expel the IS fighters

from Kobani and regain control of the city. The coalition of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, consisting of a multitude of regional ethnic groups, aims to create a democratic confederate Syria from the perspective of their Rojava Revolution. This however also means that they predominantly protect their own region of "Western Kurdistan" without fighting far beyond that. An additional complication in alliances with the Kurds is the fact that Turkey considers at least the YPG as associates of the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers' Party, seen by both Turkey and its NATO ally, the U.S., as a terrorist organization. The Syrian Democratic Forces however seem to be effective in their control of the region and enjoy large support under the population. On 10 December 2015, they established the Syrian Democratic Council (a.k.a. Council for Democratic Syria), declaring Rojava an autonomous zone in Syria and working towards implementing a federal system in the country. The Syrian Democratic Council will consist of thirteen members from the Democratic Autonomous Administrations in northern Syria and additionally twenty members from various

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religious or ethnic minorities and important social groups¹⁴.

The interplay of external major powers during the struggle for peace

As has been made clear in the earlier parts of this analysis, outside forces have played a large role in the conflict. As the government army was weakening over time, it has relied on the backing of countries such as Iran and Lebanon with their interest in a Shiite victory while the opposition has received support from Sunni countries and the Combined Joint Task Force which also helped out the Kurdish forces. An actor with a major interest in a stable Syria under Ba'ath rule is Russia with its military assets in the country. President Putin has from the beginning of the conflict provided President Assad with much needed diplomatic support and has withhold international intervention for a long time under the argument that interference went horribly wrong before in

Libya with the ousting of its dictator Colonel Gaddafi¹⁵ and should therefore not be an option. In September 2015 however, Russia deployed its troops to Syria to fight the extremist groups in the country under the pretext of targeting IS while in reality attacking many opposition groups that were seen as moderate and legitimate insurgents. The six month Russian campaign in the country until March 2016 has provided Assad's government with the necessary support to again have a realistic chance of holding its ground and thereby securing Russian interests in the Syria.

After safeguarding its own interest and gaining the image of protecting the Middle East, Russia now tried together with the US to invoke a peace process to regain stability in the country. Above all else, it can at least be said that it is a major come-through that both Western and Russian interests of stability are now more aligned and that this collective effort realistically strengthens the potential for peace to succeed. This most recent peace initiation, under the name of

¹⁴ Ekurd Daily. (2015, December 10). *Kurdish-Arab coalition in Syria creates political wing*. Retrieved from <http://ekurd.net/syria-kurd-arab-political-wing-2015-12-10>.

¹⁵ Malloy, A. (2016, April 11). Obama admits worst mistake of his presidency. *CNN*. Retrieved from <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/04/10/politics/obama-libya-biggest-mistake/>.

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Geneva 3, followed a series of failed ones throughout the 5-year civil war. Opportunities that stood out throughout these five years were for starters a failed Arab League plan in the end of 2011 after which the Arab League called for international pressure. In the beginning of 2012, Russia tried to force talks between the Syrian government and the opposition which was then the Syrian National Council (the Turkey-based government in exile). Both options failed mainly due to the opposition not wanting to allow President Assad within either the talks or within a broader peace plan. Later in 2012, the Friends of Syria group was established which involved countries from the Middle East, the West and furthermore the new National Syrian Coalition that included the Kurdish groups. Veto's within the UN Security Council by both Russia and China however obstructed any real solution to be made. In June 2012, the Geneva 1 conference was first initiated and there was an agreement within the UN Security Council on the formation of a transitional government body in Syria with full executive powers until new elections. The problem here was however that there was no agreement on the role of President Assad within this body. The same problem arose during Geneva 2 which lasted from 22 until 31 January 2014 without significant results.

Finally on 23 October 2015, the until thus far most successful Vienna Peace Talks started that included 20 countries part of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) under which the U.S., Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, China and various European countries. On the 14th November of 2015, the efforts of the ISSG resulted in a peace plan that would be framed within a UN resolution. Within the frame of these talks, a meeting in Saudi Arabia on the 12 of December led to the opposition groups allying themselves as the High Negotiation Committee. While the group did not include the Syrian Kurds¹⁶ and some moderate opposition groups and was not acknowledged by Russia, it would represent the general opposition within peace talks from now on. For the first time however since the start of the civil war, the UN had now overcome the difficulties within the international debate and on the 18th of December unanimously passed a resolution for a peace plan

¹⁶ At the same time however as mentioned earlier, the predominantly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Council was established in the upper north of Syria on the 10th of December, providing a Kurdish political platform as well. This platform has up until now not been invited to any of the peace talks.

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with a timetable for formal talks. All members of the ISSG agreed on the need to destroy the extremist Islamic State and furthermore that other terrorist groups such as Al-Nusra would be excluded from any cease-fire.

On 29 January 2016, the official Geneva 3 UN peace conference started in Switzerland and after some struggles between the government and the High Negotiation Committee agreed on the 22nd of February on a ceasefire deal by all parties excluding the extremist Al-Nusra front and Islamic State. The agreement took effect on the 27th of February and both Russia and the US would be direct monitors of the cessation of hostilities within a co-chaired hotline with the power to block parties from the agreement if they would violate it. President Putin finally officially withdrew the majority of Russian forces in Syria on the 15th of March although some forces would stay behind.

While it would seem natural concerning they not only represent 15% of the Syrian population but are also the most dominant military force in northern Syria, the Kurdish people and many other ethnic groups in northern Syria are not included in the peace talks. The main reason for this would be that their Syrian Democratic Council would have links to the Kurdish Turkey-based

PKK, to which Turkey obviously objects as they are listed as a terrorist organization. While many Western powers strongly object against the Kurdish exclusion, they need Turkey to get other opposition groups to the table. At the same time, various opposition groups within Syria are opposed to the Syrian Democratic Council as they view them as being too much on the side of the Syrian government and that they should not represent the full Kurdish population. While there are other independent Kurdish dissidents within the High Negotiations Council, the exclusion of such a large force from northern Syria limits the chances of success and a stable Syria¹⁷. While the United Nations and Arab League Envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura has tried to get individual Kurds and other member of the Syrian Democratic Council to the negotiations as independent advisors and consultants, even these efforts were mostly blocked by the High Negotiations Council.

¹⁷ Lund, A. (2016, January 29). The Road to Geneva: the Who, When, and How of Syria's Peace Talks. *Carnegie*. Retrieved from <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=62631>.

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Conflicting visions on a future for Syria

From the peace talks onwards it increasingly becomes clear that there is a major cleavage between the parties within the conflict. Within Geneva 3, the Syrian government delegation is led by Bashar al-Jaafari, chief negotiator and Syrian ambassador to the U.N. The Syrian government of course has its own plan which would have President Assad stay in place. Parallel to the peace talks, the President hold "sham" parliamentary elections in April to pose as if he was not the main decision-maker but democratically shared power. Interesting here is the fact that the recent elections in Syria¹⁸ resulted in many different ethnicities and religions gaining seats within the Parliament. While some would claim this as being democratic, one must also notice that 200 out of the available 250 seats went to members of the Ba'ath party or its allies. While the idea of the political situation of Syria returning to its pre-civil war state is highly

unlikely and not supported by most parties within the Geneva 3 peace talks, the Syrian opposition's bargaining hand has definitely weakened on the battlefield after Russia's interference and ongoing fights with Al-Nusra and IS.

The High Negotiation Committee finds itself therefore in a tough position¹⁹. The High Negotiation Committee ultimately aims for the ouster of President Assad after him having committed war crimes against its people. There are however some differences in demand within the High Negotiations Committee between the Syrian National Coalition, the Southern front and the more extreme members such as Ahrar ash-Sham. The Southern front mostly differs from the Northern opposition on matters concerning the state institutions in the sense that the north for instance wants a legitimate multi-party in place while the south aims for a return to the 1950 Constitution until a referendum will let the people decide on

¹⁸ Elections were only held in government controlled areas and were therefore not recognized by most other countries for being illegitimate and unrepresentative of the Syrian people.

¹⁹ Wintour, P. (2016, March 14). UN's Syria envoy warns of attempts to derail peace talks. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/14/uns-syria-envoy-derail-peace-talks-geneva-staffan-de-mistura>.

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Syria's future. The Islamist members however want an Islamic state²⁰ unified under Sharia law that allows for political parties so long as they are bound by the strictures of sharia²¹. The difficulty here is that the Islamist members of the opposition are scattered across Syria and a federal option is therefore still a troublesome solution. Some analysts have called for supporting the opposition groups that favor a unified, independent, and sovereign Syrian state based on a municipal political system, while marginalizing those that desire the creation an Islamic state based on Salafi principles. This option would however only create new chaos in a country that would then still be recovering from its civil war.

The Kurdish perspective on a post-civil war Syria is interesting. After not being included in the Geneva 3 peace talks, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its allies declared on the 16th of March 2016

that their region of Rojava, consisting of three Kurdish cantons in northern Syria, would from now on form a unified federal province. The PYD is not lobbying for an only-Kurdish region but rather wants many different ethnic and religious groups to be represented in loose provinces within Rojava and aims to extend this to a federal Syrian system. The move has clearly indicated that Syria's Kurds want some level of autonomy and separation in any post-war scenario²². According to some Kurdish leaders, this would be the best solution to protect the country from being divided up due to major distrust between different sides. While the Syrian regime logically opposes the establishment of the autonomous province and is thus far against the creation of a federal Syrian system, Russia has suggested that a federalized state could be a legitimate option for Syria's future and the U.S. State Department claims it would have to be established through the Geneva 3 peace talks.

²⁰ Not to be confused with the 'Islamic State' that sprung from ISIS.

²¹ Casagrande, G. and Cafarella, J. (2015, December 29). The Syrian Opposition's Political Demands. *Institute for the Study of War*. Retrieved from

<http://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/syrian-opposition%E2%80%99s-political-demands>.

²² Said, R. (2016, March 17). Syria's Kurds rebuked for seeking autonomous region. *Reuters*. Retrieved from

<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-federalism-idUSKCN0WJ1EP>.

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While many Arab states are rather unitary and have centralized systems, the Syrian case proves difficult with so many different factions and opinions on governance. Right now when the country seems to be falling apart into different sections and a partitioning into independent states is not far away, a decentralized government seems not to be so unrealistic. While both the current Syrian government and the opposition under the High Negotiations Council seem to be against, the map in Figure 1 clearly portrays the divide of the country. While the Islamic State still occupies large parts of its territory, it can be seen that various regions within Syria are divided by certain lines. It should be taken into account that these regions have views on Syria that range from Islamist governance to democratic multi-party systems, from unitary provinces to federal ones that opt for autonomous governance and that there is even a divide between the northern and southern opposition forces in their approach of institutional change. A federal system that administers certain conditions, guidelines and a general constitution could therefore be the most conceivable option for Syria to stay intact while keeping other political issues up to the people to decide. Of course there has to be a guarantee within the individual provinces that democratic voting systems are in place

so that there people have a fair chance of electing their regional leaders but there should be room for provincial laws that can differ between states. These kinds of systems can for instance be found in the U.S. and may work for people that consider themselves to be part of a larger nation while favoring their own way ruling of certain issues. I realize that this still leaves the issue of the assembly of the greater Syrian government to be decided on, including the matter of President Assad. However, it may provide a solution to at least part of the issue and it can lead to the establishment of some kind of senate that represents each of the provinces and therefore has more legitimacy on the greater Syrian political level. In my opinion, if we do not want to let Syria be governed by totalitarian leadership and if we do not want to let certain minorities be left behind without a say but rather opt for everybody's involvement, federalism system is the way forward.

Alexander Grims

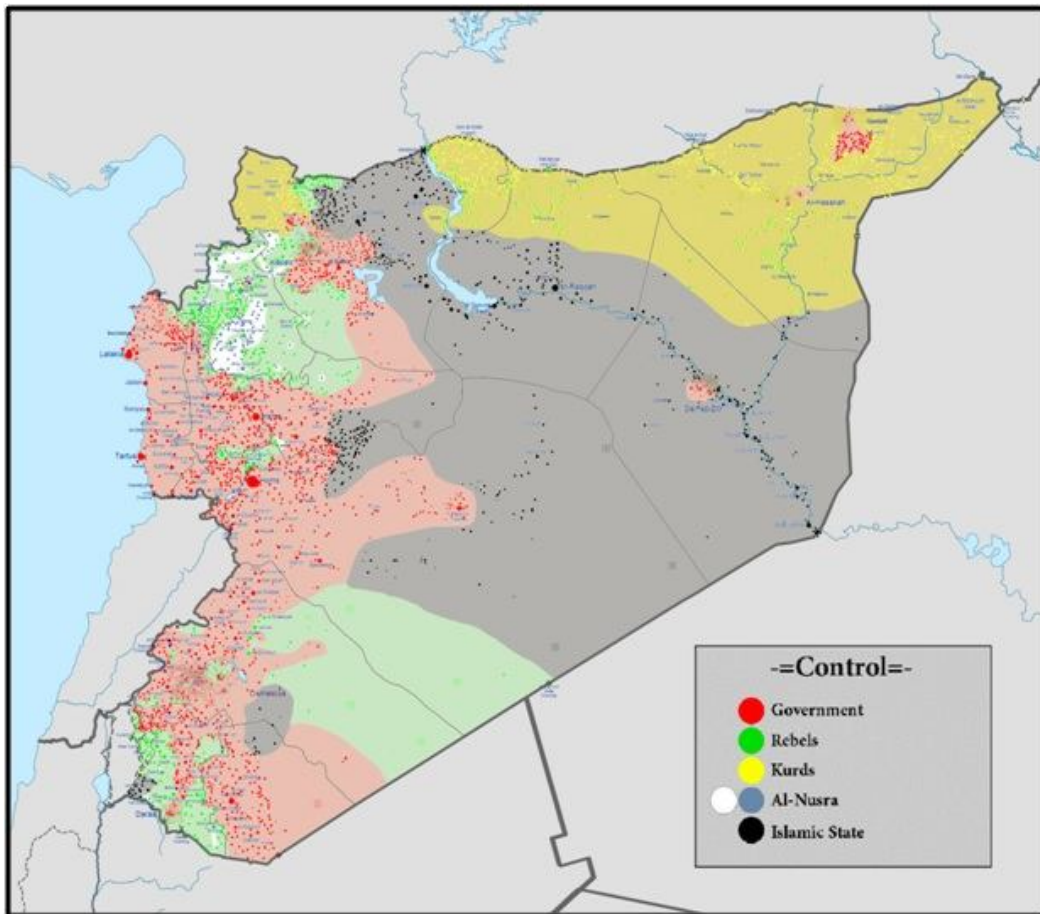


Figure 1: Military situation in the Syrian Civil War as of April 4, 2016.

Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Syrian_civil_war.png.

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