

Political Islam and the War in Syria

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This paper argues that the war in Syria is partly the result of a global Islamist wave that contributed to fuelling conflict across large regions of Asia and Africa. Of course, the war that has consumed Syria since 2011 most certainly has multiple interrelated causes and driving forces, and any attempt to isolate one or even two or three runs the risk of advancing an overly simplistic interpretation of history. This essay, therefore, does not aim to offer an appraisal of the multiple variables that contributed to the war in Syria. Instead, it zeroes in on how political Islam came to impact Syria and its people. In doing so, it demonstrates how competing varieties of political Islam represented leading causes of conflict. Indeed, different Islamist movements contributed to the outbreak of the war in 2011, fuelled the conflict for years on end, and to this day represent major obstacles to the achievement of sustainable peace. Four broad Islamist currents are especially relevant to the case of Syria: the Muslim Brotherhood; the Shia revivalist movement at the nexus of the alliance between Iran, Hezbollah, and Syria; Salafi jihadism and its volatile and fractious underworld of competing armed groups, from Al-Qaeda to the Islamic State; and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's market-friendly Islamism, which induced Turkey to intervene in Syria's civil war.

Keywords: Syria, Muslim Brotherhood, Hezbollah, Islamic State, Turkey

Introduction

Many contemporary civil wars involve armed Islamist movements. According to a recent study, out of a total of 50 civil wars unfolding worldwide in 2015, a majority (28) involved Islamists.¹ The scholarly literature on civil wars has long debated whether civil wars involving Islamists are different.² Duffy Toft, for instance, argued that *jihad* is a structural feature of Islam and that that is one reason why so many contemporary civil wars feature Islamists.³ Yet, such claims fail to recognize that civil wars involving armed Islamists are in fact a relatively recent phenomenon. Indeed, as recently as 1975, none of the world's civil wars featured fighters espousing an Islamist ideology.⁴ Moreover, the demographic diversity of Syria and other countries in the Middle East serves as a living testament to the fact that in centuries past many Muslim-majority societies were in fact far more open and tolerant of religious and ethnic diversity than Christian Europe.⁵ Kalyvas offered a more fruitful approach to the question of whether civil wars involving Islamists are in fact different, drawing parallels between Islamist fighters and previous historical examples of revolutionary militants, most notably communist rebels.⁶

Despite a somewhat crude understanding of the distinct ideational currents of political Islam and their history,⁷ Kalyvas does make several important points. As in the case of communist revolutionaries of decades past, contemporary Islamists act based on strong and seemingly unshakable ideological convictions, asserting that they can provide a viable alternative to liberal capitalism. Islamists also rely heavily on international and transnational sources of support and, in the pursuit of their objectives, readily take advantage of safe havens in countries with governments that are sympathetic to their cause—just as communist

¹ Desirée Nilsson and Isak Svensson, "Mapping Armed Conflicts over Islamist Claims: Exploring Regional Variations," in *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, SIPRI Yearbook 2017: Armaments, Disarmament and international security* (London: Oxford University Press, 2017), 58–65.

² Monica Duffy Toft, "Getting Religion? The Puzzling Case of Islam and Civil War," *International Security* 31, no. 4 (2007): 97–131. Monica Duffy Toft, "Islamists and Nationalists: Rebel Motivation and Counterinsurgency in Russia's North Caucasus," *American Political Science Review* 109, no. 2 (2015): 222–38. Stathis Kalyvas, "Jihadi Rebels in Civil War," *Daedalus* 147, no. 1 (2018): 36–47.

³ Duffy Toft, "Getting Religion?" 97–131.

⁴ Nilsson and Svensson, "Mapping Armed Conflicts over Islamist Claims," 2. See also Desirée Nilsson and Isak Svensson, "The Intractability of Islamist Insurgencies: Islamist Rebels and the Recurrence of Civil War," *International Studies Quarterly*, 65, no. 3 (2021): 620–632.

⁵ For more nuanced analyses of the concept of jihad and the laws of war in Islam, see Majid Khadduri, *War and Peace in the Law of Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1955). And Bassam Tibi, "War and Peace in Islam," in *The Ethics of War and Peace: Religious and Secular Perspectives*, ed. Terry Nardin, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁶ Kalyvas, "Jihadi Rebels in Civil War," 38, 44.

⁷ Kalyvas, for example, erroneously conflates the Muslim Brotherhood with Salafism. He also appears to believe that the Taliban fought the Soviet Union in the 1980s, whereas the Taliban movement arose several years after the 1989 Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, in the context of the subsequent civil war. See Kalyvas, "Jihadi Rebels in Civil War."

militants used to do during the Cold War. Another similarity between contemporary Islamists and communist revolutionaries is that both uphold narratives that emphasize the armed struggle of the weak against the strong, to be carried out through guerrilla warfare and other forms of asymmetrical combat. If communists once championed the examples of Cuba and Vietnam, Islamists may draw instead inspiration from wars of resistance in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, or Palestine.

This paper examines the case of Syria in light of this conceptual framework. It argues that Islamist militancy is not unique but that, much like communism in the twentieth century, it should be understood as part of a global ideological trend liable to stoke political polarization and armed conflict. Of course, the war that has consumed Syria since 2011 most certainly has multiple interrelated causes and driving forces and any attempt to isolate one or even two or three runs the risk of advancing an overly simplistic interpretation of history. This essay, therefore, does not aim to offer an appraisal of the multiple variables that contributed to the war. Instead, it zeroes in on how political Islam came to impact Syria and its people. In doing so, it will demonstrate how competing currents of political Islam contributed to the outbreak of the war in Syria in 2011, fuelled the conflict for years on end, and to this day still constitute a major obstacle to the achievement of sustainable peace.

Four broad and distinct currents of political Islam are especially relevant to this analysis. One is the Muslim Brotherhood, which encompasses the Syrian branch of the organization, as well as a broader international and transnational network of affiliated groups and institutions. There is then the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the broader Shia revivalist movement that serves as the focal point of the alliance between Iran, Hezbollah, and Syria. Salafi jihadism represents yet another strand of political Islam, which in recent decades has given rise to a uniquely volatile and fractious underworld of competing armed groups, from Al-Qaeda to the Islamic State. Finally, under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey has become a powerful Islamist actor in its own right, dedicated to the promotion of various Islamist causes and the pursuit of policy influence over the Islamic world. These four broad currents are the most important to consider to understand how political Islam has become a leading cause of conflict in Syria.

The Muslim Brotherhood and the Rise of Modern Political Islam

The Muslim Brotherhood's repeated bids for power long represented a major source of turmoil in Syria, particularly in the context of its struggles with the Baath Party.⁸ The Arab

⁸ On the history of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, see Dara Conduit, *The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 19–133. Joshua Teitelbaum, "The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, 1945–1958: Founding, Social Origins, Ideology," *The Middle East Journal* 65, no. 2 (2011): 213–233. Hanna Batatu, "Syria's Muslim Brethren," *MERIP REPORTS*, 12, no. 110 (1982), 12–36. Raymond A. Hinnebusch, "The Islamic Movement in Syria: Sectarian Conflict and Urban Rebellion in an Authoritarian-Populist Regime," in *Islamic Resurgence in the Arab World*, ed. Ali Hilal Dessouki (New York: Praeger, 1982), 138–168.

Socialist Baath Party of Syria was part and parcel of the Pan-Arab nationalist tide that swept across the Arab world in the years that followed World War II.⁹ Especially radical in its revolutionary determination to undo the legacies of European rule and forge a new socialist society, the Baath readily dismissed conservative Islamist movements such as the Brotherhood as backward and reactionary.

When the Baath first seized power in Syria, in 1963, Sunni political Islam—and in particular the Muslim Brotherhood—already constituted a redoubtable source of ideological opposition. (Similarly, other regimes of Pan-Arab nationalist inspiration, including Gamal Abdel Nasser’s in Egypt, would have to contend with the Brotherhood’s enmity.)¹⁰ The Baathist government of Syria thus outright banned the Brotherhood, as it sought to cement its hold on power.¹¹ In response, some Brotherhood militants took up arms. They went on to launch an uprising in the city of Hama, in 1964, but the Syrian military repressed it with overwhelming force, using tanks and artillery against the densely populated neighborhood and mosque where the armed rebels had established their strongholds.¹² It was the first major case of Islamist rebellion in modern Syria and its bloody suppression foreshadowed future cycles of violence that would pit the Baathist state against the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist organizations.

When Hafiz al-Assad took the helm of the Syrian state following his 1970 coup, he initially sought accommodation with Islamist forces. Assad undoubtedly understood early on that political Islam was becoming a force to be reckoned with. For this reason, in the early years of his presidency, he made a point of publicly honoring prominent Sunni religious figures, even arranging for the mufti of the republic and the mufti of Aleppo to sit in parliament.¹³ He likewise raised the salary of imams and made other well-calculated public moves to woo moderate Islamists. As an Alawi, he was of course eager to dispel the accusations of heresy that radical Islamist zealots regularly hurled against him and his coreligionists, and to that end, he prodded Alawi religious leaders to issue a formal statement asserting their allegiance to Islam and the Quran.¹⁴

At the same time, Assad also readily responded to the overtures of prominent Shia

⁹ On Pan-Arabism, see John F. Devlin, “The Baath Party: Rise and Metamorphosis,” *The American Historical Review* 96, no. 5 (1991): 1396–1407. Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 260–323.

¹⁰ The works of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood ideologue Sayyid Qutb greatly contributed to the development of militant forms of political Islam the world over. See Sayyid Qutb, *Ma’alim fi Al-Tariq [Milestones]* (Cairo: Maktabat Wahbah, 1964) [In Arabic]. Several English translations exist. See, for example, Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones* (Kuwait: International Islamic Federation of Student Organizations, 1978). The Egyptian authorities executed Qutb in 1966, for his alleged role in a plot to kill Nasser. See also Gilles Kepel, *Le Prophète et le Pharaon* (Paris: La Decouverte, 1984).

¹¹ Conduit, *The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria*, 52.

¹² Hinnebusch, “The Islamic Movement in Syria,” 157. Radwan Ziadeh, *Power and Policy in Syria* (London: I.B. Tauris), 138.

¹³ Hanna Batatu, *Syria’s Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 260–261.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 261.

figures advocating the recognition of Alawis as Shia Muslims.¹⁵ One such leader was the Iranian-born cleric Musa Al-Sadr, who had relocated to Lebanon in 1959 to support and organize its largely poor and marginalized Shia community.¹⁶ In towns and neighborhoods where support for communism was well entrenched, Sadr dedicated himself to popularizing a new form of political Islam that drew inspiration from the ideological developments then underway in Iran and Iraq.¹⁷ There the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and others had reinterpreted many of the traditional narratives of Shia discourse, such as grievance against injustice. Khomeini infused these religious narratives with leftist revolutionary principles and militant anti-imperialism in the context of opposition to governments aligned with Israel and the United States, and as part of an effort to find a “third way” between American capitalism and Soviet communism.

As Assad and Sadr established closer ties, the two struck a consequential political arrangement in 1973, by virtue of which Sadr issued a *fatwa* recognizing Alawis as Shias, and therefore Muslims.¹⁸ Assad then went on to reinstate the constitutional clause requiring the president of Syria to be a Muslim, which had long been a primary policy concern of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists.¹⁹

Assad’s outreach to Islamist forces, however, failed to assuage the most zealous Sunni activists. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, in particular, was too dogmatic to accept a Pan-Arab president and an Alawi at that. Assad would thus confront major challenges. Following the outbreak of Lebanon’s civil war, in 1975, and Syria’s intervention in that conflict on the side of the beleaguered Maronite-led government the following year, a militant faction of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood that called itself the Fighting Vanguard initiated a well-coordinated campaign of political assassinations across Syria. Its victims were by and large government officials and members of the security forces of Alawi background, as Fighting Vanguard militants deliberately aimed to frame their deeds as part of a Sunni Muslim uprising against a heretical regime.²⁰ Initially, Assad showed restraint, out of concern that harsh repression tactics could further invigorate the insurgency. But as the years went by, and

¹⁵ On the Syria-Iran nexus, see Yvette Talhamy, “The Syrian Muslim Brothers and the Syrian-Iranian Relationship,” *The Middle East Journal* 63, no. 4, (2009): 561–580.

¹⁶ On Musa Al-Sadr, see Ajami Fouad, *The Vanished Imam: Musa al Sadr and the Shia of Lebanon* (London and Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 159–190.

¹⁷ Ruhollah Khomeini fled Iran in 1964 and thereafter lived in exile in Iraq until 1978. For a primer on Shia revivalist ideology, see Ruhollah Khomeini, *Governance of the Jurist: Islamic Government* (Tehran: The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini’s Works). (The year of publication is left unspecified but the book is based on a series of lectures Khomeini gave in Najaf in 1970.) See also Ruhollah Khomeini, *The Ashura Uprising in the Words & Messages of Imam Khomeini* (Tehran: The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini’s Works, 1995).

¹⁸ On Musa Al-Sadr’s close personal relations with Hafiz al-Assad, see Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 352. On the significance of Al-Sadr’s fatwa recognizing Alawis as Shia Muslims, see Yvette Talhamy, “The Fatwas and the Nusayri/Alawis of Syria,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, 46 no. 2 (March 2010), 175–194.

¹⁹ Batatu, *Syria’s Peasantry*, 261.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 266.

assassinations and riots intensified across Syria, the security apparatus progressively stepped up its repressive counter-insurgency measures.

It was in this context that Muslim Brotherhood militants carried out a massacre of army cadets in the Aleppo Artillery School, in June 1979. The attack had clear sectarian connotations, as the victims appeared to be nearly all Alawi. According to the Syrian government, the official death toll was 83—but it may have been as high as 200.²¹ The Syrian government sought to downplay both the attack and its sectarian motives and framed the perpetrators as religious fundamentalists bent on attacking the Syrian state rather than as Sunni Muslims killing Alawis. In any case, violence across Syria greatly intensified thereafter, particularly in poor and densely populated urban areas where the Brotherhood maintained its strongholds. It was the most intense and sustained case of armed insurgency since Syria's independence but Assad's security apparatus remained cohesive in its determination to suppress it, regardless of the human toll involved. The Syrian military and the intelligence agencies thus began to routinely engage in arbitrary arrests, disappearances, secret detentions, torture, and extrajudicial killings, all in an effort to quell the Islamist uprising. Still, the Brotherhood carried on its armed struggle.

The 1979 revolution in Iran then shook the geopolitical balance of power of the Middle East in profound and unexpected ways. On a superficial level, the secular Baathist government of Syria, engaged as it was in the repression of the Muslim Brotherhood, may not have appeared ideally positioned to muster support from the newly established Islamic Republic of Iran.²² Yet, the governments of Syria and Iran were both in dire need of allies. Aside from the Brotherhood insurgency, Assad had to contend with the consequences of the international realignment of Egypt under Anwar Sadat, which soon thereafter brought about the 1979 Camp David Accords and the first peace treaty between an Arab state and Israel. Egypt would go on to recover Sinai, whereas Syria found itself increasingly isolated in the Arab-Israeli conflict and in its quest to recover the Golan Heights. Meanwhile, Iran had to grapple with post-revolutionary turmoil and, from 1980 onward, a ruinous war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Against this backdrop, Assad's early contacts with revolutionary Iranian clerics, which he had established and cultivated in previous years through the mediation of Al-Sadr,²³ enabled Baathist Syria to forge an improbable alliance with the Islamic Republic.

Syria's realignment with revolutionary Iran, in any case, did not stop Assad from pursuing an increasingly brutal counterinsurgency against the Muslim Brotherhood. In response to an attempt on Assad's life in 1980, Syria's Defense Brigades—under the leadership of Assad's brother, Rifaat—stormed the Tadmor (Palmyra) prison and gunned down over 700 unarmed

²¹ See Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry*, 266. Raphaël Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 74–75, 125. Conduit, *The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood*, 35.

²² The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood actually attempted to reach out to revolutionary Iran, to convince its government that its support for the Baathist government of Syria was misguided and that it should support the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood instead. See Umar F. Abd-Allah, *The Islamic Struggle in Syria*. (Mizan Press, 1983).

²³ Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, 352–353.

Islamist inmates while they were trapped in their cells.²⁴ That same year, Assad passed a law that made membership in the Muslim Brotherhood punishable by death, in the context of major violence in Aleppo, where for several weeks between March and April 1980 most of the city remained out of government control.²⁵ The conflict between Assad's security state and the Muslim Brotherhood would ultimately come to a head in February 1982, in Hama, where the Syrian military ravaged entire neighborhoods with artillery and helicopter gunships, killing between 10,000 and 25,000 people in less than one month to suffocate the Islamist uprising.²⁶ Thereafter, the Syrian regime still carried out over 100,000 arrests and some 17,000 disappearances in an unforgiving drive to thoroughly eradicate the last few Islamist holdouts.²⁷ The brutality of this repression caused profound fissures in Syrian society and likewise generated a widespread sense of fear and insecurity among the entire population, to the point that the collective memory of what had happened in Hama would serve as the state's most reliable tool for social control for decades to come.

Meanwhile, Assad's deepening ties with the Islamic Republic of Iran were set to give new impetus to the civil war in Lebanon and to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Indeed, after Israel intervened in Lebanon in 1982, in an effort to dislodge Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian Liberation Organization from Beirut, Assad developed a covert program to sponsor guerrilla actions against the Israeli Defense Forces, with the support of revolutionary Iran. Assad also allowed Iranian Revolutionary Guards to set up a base in the Bekaa Valley, at the time under Syrian occupation. There, the Iranian Pasdaran indoctrinated, trained, and equipped local Shia militias and established the original nucleus of what would later become Hezbollah. While Hezbollah did not officially exist until 1985, in previous years the same organization operated under different names and allegedly carried out several major attacks, including the 1982 and 1983 bombings of the Israeli military headquarters in Tyre; the bombings of the Beirut barracks in 1983, targeting U.S. and French peacekeepers; and the bombing of the U.S. embassy in Beirut in 1984.²⁸ Guerrilla warfare proved effective, and in subsequent years the Hezbollah-Syria-Iran axis would come to constitute the most redoubtable source of opposition to Israel and the United States in the entire region. Just as the star of Pan-Arabism dimmed, the partnership between Baathist Syria and the Islamic Republic of Iran thus revived the Arab-Israeli conflict, this time through the vector of political Islam.

Assad's populist statist model, meanwhile, began to show the first clear signs of economic strain. In the 1980s, the Syrian budget was overstretched, largely as a result of high

²⁴ Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, 532–523. See also Ziadeh, *Power and Policy in Syria*, 144.

²⁵ Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry*, 269.

²⁶ There is no sure count of the death toll in Hama. Batatu estimated the death toll to be 10,000 to 25,000. Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry*, 273–274. Amnesty International estimated the Hama massacre resulted in the deaths of approximately 25,000 people. Amnesty International, "Syria: 30 Years on, Hama Survivors Recount the Horror," February 28, 2012, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2012/02/syria-years-hama-survivors-recount-horror/>. Some have claimed even larger numbers. Raphaël Lefèvre, for instance, estimated the death toll of the Hama massacre to range anywhere from 25,000 to 40,000. See Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama*, 59, 128.

²⁷ Ziadeh, *Power and Policy in Syria*, 29.

²⁸ Augustus Richard Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 71, 80.

military expenditures and inefficient state-owned industries, and Syria was heavily dependent on foreign aid and oil rents.²⁹ At this time, the Soviet Union was already in difficulty, as the costly war in Afghanistan and the expenses connected to the arms race with the United States compounded the structural weaknesses of its state economy model. The drop in global oil prices in 1986 then dealt a new blow to all state-dominated economies. Soviet aid to revolutionary governments and movements dwindled, and so did the funds that oil-rich Gulf monarchies accorded Syria and other resource-poor Arab states to buy influence. Syria's economy was hit particularly hard.

The Post-Cold War Surge of Political Islam

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union further complicated Assad's already difficult position. As communist and socialist systems the world over lost popular appeal, many authoritarian governments came under intense pressure to undergo democratic transitions. But whereas in Eastern Europe, Latin America, and large parts of Africa and Asia the struggles between those who supported capitalism and those who wanted to resist it in the name of communism or socialism had receded, in the Arab and Islamic worlds popular opposition to the United States coalesced around a broad set of ideologies loosely based on one variety or another of political Islam.

The forces of political Islam emerged from the end of the Cold War seemingly victorious.³⁰ Iran had withstood the war with Iraq. Hezbollah had already established itself as one of the most powerful actors on the Lebanese political scene, capable of providing social services to the poor and of strong-arming the government into upholding the squatter rights of internally displaced Shias. Its armed insurgency against Israel, in turn, had crossed sectarian lines, galvanizing Palestinian Sunni Islamist movements such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Significantly, Assad would once again seize the opportunity to leverage the forces of political Islam against Israel, and to that end, he offered Syria's support to Hamas, even though it was an offshoot of the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. His explanation for this seemingly incongruous policy was that "different forces... each with its own view... can be friendly, and cooperation is possible, when there is something in common."³¹ From Assad's standpoint, Hamas and Hezbollah—unlike the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood—were engaged in a war against Israel and were worthy of Syria's support.

Another strand of political Islam was meanwhile gaining prominence in the Arab world. It was Salafi Islam, and it appeared to offer clear social benefits to its adherents, including access to patronage networks linked to wealthy donors from the Gulf, greater financial and material security, and for the most committed even the prospect of gaining

²⁹ Raymond Hinnebusch, "The political economy of economic liberalization in Syria," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 27, no. 3 (1995): 307–312.

³⁰ See Gilles Kepel, *Jihad. Expansion et déclin de l'islamisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000).

³¹ Patrick Seale, "Interview with Syrian President Hafiz Al-Asad," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 22, no. 4 (1993): 117.

social status, as religious leaders and organizers.³² It should be noted that Salafi Islam, as a form of religious revivalism seeking to bring Islam back to its most traditional form, may be completely apolitical. And even in its political manifestations, Salafism is not necessarily violent. Yet, a radical undercurrent within Salafi Islam was set to take center stage in the politics of the Islamic world. Known as Salafi jihadism, it originally drew inspiration from the example of the *mujabedeens* in Afghanistan—and from secretive networks such as Osama Bin Laden’s Al-Qaeda. Salafi jihadi ideas spread rapidly in the 1990s, particularly in poor and marginalized Sunni Arab communities where the homecoming of the veterans of the Afghan jihad popularized Salafi social mores and militant worldviews.³³ And slowly but steadily, Salafi jihadi varieties of political Islam acquired momentum in the Islamic world’s opposition movements.

In 2000, less than one month after Hezbollah’s tenacious insurgency against Israel forced the latter to withdraw from southern Lebanon, the ailing Hafiz Al-Assad died. His son Bashar succeeded him and in his first year in office, he presided over a limited political opening, known as the Damascus Spring, which involved the release of numerous political prisoners, including members of the Muslim Brotherhood. For the first time since the coming to power of the Baath, Syrian authorities also appeared to become more tolerant of political and social debate. Much has been said about the so-called Damascus Spring of 2000–2001 and whether it signaled a real intention to restore a measure of political freedom or was just window-dressing, aimed at improving the Syrian president’s image in the context of international trade negotiations with the West.³⁴ In any case, the brief Damascus Spring came to an abrupt end with 9/11. In the wake of Al-Qaeda’s attacks in New York and Washington, Salafi jihadism made a forceful entry into media and popular discourse all over the world, and the Bush administration adopted an uncompromising stance toward Syria and other states known to support U.S. designated terrorist organizations. In response, the Syrian security apparatus swiftly clamped down on all manifestations of political pluralism.

The 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq provided yet another opening for Islamist forces. Indeed, the collapse of the Iraqi state, and the power vacuum and political instability that followed, provided the ideal conditions for the proliferation and growth of militant armed groups of Islamist inspiration.³⁵ Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, a hardened Jordanian militant only loosely associated with Bin Laden’s network, understood early on the potential for a new Al-Qaeda franchise in Iraq.³⁶ Indeed, in a 2003 letter to Bin Laden, Al-Zarqawi described the significance of Iraq in the following words: “God graced the Muslim nation with jihad in the

³² On Salafism, see Bernard Rougier, *Qu’est-ce que le salafisme?* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2015).

³³ For a discerning selection of seminal Salafi jihadi texts, in English translation, see Gilles Kepel, Jean-Pierre Milelli, and Pascale Ghazaleh, *Al-Qaeda in Its Own Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

³⁴ For a critical perspective, see Alan George, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2003), 30–63.

³⁵ See Ali Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 304–312.

³⁶ On Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and his influence, see Fuad Hussein, *Al-Zarqawi: Al-Jeel Al-Thani lil-Qaida [Al-Zarqawi: The Second Generation of al-Qaeda]* (Beirut: Dar Al-Khayal, 2005) [In Arabic].

land of Mesopotamia. You know that this battlefield is unlike any other. [...] This is jihad in the Arab heartland, a stone's throw away from the lands of the two sanctuaries [i.e. Saudi Arabia] and from Al-Aqsa [in Jerusalem]."³⁷ Relying on his own ties with militant groups in the Levant, Al-Zarqawi went on to orchestrate a vicious insurgency, recruiting foreign suicide bombers and relentlessly targeting Shia civilians, to engulf Iraq in civil war, so that widespread violence and societal breakdown would force its vulnerable Sunni communities to accept jihadi rule.³⁸ From Iraq, Al-Zarqawi then planned to expand the war to the Levant, Arabia, and beyond.

The Sunni insurgency in Iraq diligently followed Al-Zarqawi's lead and so did thousands of foreign volunteers hailing from all over the Arab world. Iraq thus became the global epicenter of Salafi jihadi violence. The war likewise inflamed an archipelago of Salafi jihadi hotbeds across the Levant and North Africa, just as Al-Zarqawi had presciently predicted. These islands of militancy were for the most part densely populated but socioeconomically marginalized spaces across the region, such as the Ayn Al-Helweh and Nahr Al-Bared refugee camps in Lebanon, the Yarmouk district in Damascus, Zarqa in Jordan, and Derna in Libya.³⁹ Some notorious prisons likewise became crucibles of militancy: the Sednaya military prison in Syria, Roumieh in Lebanon, Jwaideh and Swaqa in Jordan, and the U.S.-run Camp Bucca detention center in Iraq. In some cases, a period of incarceration in a notorious detention facility became a source of credibility and respect for released Salafi jihadi militants, as the experience set them apart from less seasoned fighters and made them more apt to assume command positions.⁴⁰

A U.S. airstrike killed Al-Zarqawi in June 2006, in a rural area of the Diyala governorate of Iraq. However, his organization survived him and under a new leadership adopted the name of Islamic State in Iraq. Several years later, the very same organization would capitalize on its networks across the Levant to open a new front in Syria and launch an ambitious bid for statehood.

The Islamic Republic of Iran, for its part, outdid itself to make the U.S. presence in Iraq exceedingly costly. To this end, it followed the same playbook it had employed in Lebanon since the 1980s, that is it sought to advance its foreign policy agenda through the vector of Shia political Islam, both in government, through political parties and elected officials, and in

³⁷ Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, "Letter to Bin Laden and Al-Zawahiri," in eds. Kepel et al. *Al-Qaeda in Its Own Words*, 251-268.

³⁸ The blueprint for statehood of Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia (later renamed Islamic State) is detailed in Abu Bakr Najj, *Idarat Al-Tawahush* [The Management of Savagery] (Online, Public Domain, 2004) [In Arabic]. For an English translation, see William McCants, *Translation of 'The Management of Savagery'* by Abu Bakr Najj (Cambridge: John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies at Harvard University, 2006).

³⁹ On the rise of Salafi jihadism in Lebanon, see Bernard Rougier, *L'Oumma en fragments: Contrôler le sunnisme au Liban* (Presses Universitaires de France, 2011).

⁴⁰ Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, who was to become the leader of the Islamic State, was once incarcerated in Camp Bucca, and so was Abu Mohammad Al-Joulani, leader of Jabhat Al-Nusra (and later Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham). Former Sednaya inmates included Zahran Alloush, later commander of Liwa Al-Islam; Hassan Aboud, a founding member of Ahrar Al-Sham; and Abd Al-Rahman Suwais, future commander of Liwa Al-Haq.

the streets, through charities providing services to the poor and militias recruiting local youth. The Iranian Pasdaran thus indoctrinated, financed, trained, and armed Iraqi militias, to bleed the United States and its allies, and to secure a measure of street power in the new political order.⁴¹ These policies enabled the Islamic Republic to secure great political and military clout in Iraq and represented yet another facet of how the rising tide of political Islam was contributing to fuelling conflict across the Middle East.

Turkey was meanwhile experiencing the pull of yet another strand of political Islam, which Recep Tayyip Erdoğan adroitly leveraged and developed in his stunning rise to power. In his early years in politics, Erdoğan faced tremendous pushback, from traditional political and military elites, as well as from social segments disdainful of his working-class origins and Islamist leanings. But in time Erdoğan managed to forge a new model of political Islam, seemingly distancing himself from the principles of Sayyid Qutb and other uncompromising firebrands to embrace the “patriotic capitalism” of the religiously conservative provincial bourgeoisie. Erdoğan’s party still employed classic Islamist strategies, such as distributing free meals and offering services to the poor, and likewise condemned authoritarian rule and extolled democracy, as Islamist movements often did for tactical purposes. But unlike the Islamists of old, Erdoğan advocated at once conservative religious values *and* neoliberal economic reforms. Following this unorthodox formula, Erdoğan established his own party and from the early 2000s onward scored one electoral victory after another, slowly but surely replacing the old Kemalist establishment with a new political and business elite of Islamist orientation.

In foreign policy, Erdoğan went on to embrace the neo-Ottoman vision of his one-time ally Ahmet Davutoğlu, further infusing it with Islamist ideas.⁴² In fact, Erdoğan came to believe that Turkey should establish a vast sphere of political, economic, and cultural influence, in former Ottoman domains and more broadly in all Muslim societies.⁴³ On the basis of such principles, relations between Ankara and Damascus at first improved. Bashar al-Assad even visited Ankara in 2004, where he met Erdoğan, still prime minister at the time. It was the very first official visit of a Syrian head of state to the Turkish capital and it heralded a period of deepening economic integration. Cross-border trade flourished, and so did Turkey’s foreign investment in Syria. Assad’s eagerness to pursue economic reforms that would not threaten his power and Erdoğan’s quest for influence over neighboring countries, regardless of their government’s faults, sustained for a time harmonious bilateral relations. However, a temporary

⁴¹ Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, 304-312.

⁴² Davutoğlu’s idea of neo-Ottomanism was that Turkey should seek to establish a vast sphere of political, economic, and cultural influence, in all the former domains of the Ottoman Empire and even more broadly in all the territories populated by large Muslim communities. See Ahmet Davutoğlu, “The clash of interests: An explanation of the world [dis]order,” *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs* 2, no. 4 (1997/98), 1-17. And Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik* (Istanbul: Kure Yayinlari, 2001) [In Turkish]. See also Cenk Saraçoğlu, “Akp, Milliyetçilik Ve Dış Politika: Bir Milliyetçilik Doktrini Olarak Stratejik Derinlik,” *Alternatif Politika* 5, no. 1 (2013): 52-68 [In Turkish].

⁴³ Hakan M. Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire: The Politics of Neo-Ottomanism* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 144–202.

alignment of interests ultimately could not reconcile profound ideological differences. Assad was keen on remaining in power and forestalling possible Islamist challenges. Erdoğan's market-friendly Islamism drew inspiration from Hassan Al-Banna, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, and Abul Ala Al-Mawdudi, founder of Jamaat-e-Islami, further infusing their ideas with imperial ambitions and re-packaging them in the politically correct discourse of democratization and free markets. The belief systems of Assad and Erdoğan thus remained fundamentally at odds—and their honeymoon could not last.

As Islamist forces continued to gain prominence in the first decade of the twenty-first century, Syria experienced a powerful buildup of interrelated problems, stemming from poor governance, excessively rapid demographic growth, and environmental challenges. The latter included most notably three consecutive years of unprecedented droughts, which hit Syria beginning in the winter of 2006-2007. As a result, about 1.3 million people living off of agriculture suffered devastating losses, and of these more than 800,000 completely lost their livelihoods, according to the United Nations.⁴⁴ As entire agricultural communities collapsed, hundreds of thousands abandoned the countryside to move to overcrowded urban slums. Syria's socioeconomic woes only deepened as a result, amid rapidly rising popular discontent towards a regime that had failed to deliver on its promises of development.

How Rival Streaks of Political Islam Tore Apart Syria

When the Arab Spring protests swept through Syria in March 2011, Assad proved determined to violently suppress them. The brutality of the Syrian security apparatus against unarmed protestors, however, only inflamed Sunni Islamist militancy. Turkey soon threw its weight behind the uprisings, considering that Assad's downfall would have likely empowered the Muslim Brotherhood or a like-minded organization. A Sunni Islamist government in Damascus, in turn, would have regarded Erdoğan's Turkey as its most natural ally and patron. Following a new onslaught of Syrian military repression, which unfolded in June 2011 near the Turkish border, Erdoğan thus accused the Syrian army of "savagery" and said Turkey would keep its doors open to refugees.⁴⁵ It soon became clear that Turkey's doors were wide open for Syrian rebels as well. In July 2011, Riad Al-Asaad, a Syrian colonel who had defected to the opposition, announced the formation of the Free Syrian Army from the safety of the Reyhanlı refugee camp, on Turkish territory, just opposite the Idlib governorate

⁴⁴ "Syria: Drought pushing millions into poverty," Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), September 10, 2010, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-drought-pushing-millions-poverty>. On Syria's 2006-2009 droughts, see also Myriam Ababsa, "The End of a World: Drought and Agrarian Transformation in Northeast Syria (2007–2010)," in *Syria from Reform to Revolt: Political Economy and International Relations*, eds. Raymond Hinnebusch and Tina Zintl (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2015), 199–226.

⁴⁵ Erdoğan is cited in "Turkish PM: Syria Crackdown Inhumane," *Al Jazeera*, June 10, 2011, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2011/6/10/turkish-pm-syria-crackdown-inhumane>.

of Syria.⁴⁶ Erdoğan's government not only recognized the presence of the Free Syrian Army in Reyhanlı but also deployed security forces to the area to ensure the safety of its leaders and fighters.⁴⁷ That Turkey would openly offer shelter and protection to an armed opposition group bent on overthrowing the government of a neighboring country plainly revealed that its government had embraced a policy of regime change in Syria.

Turkey would also become the host of another opposition organization, the Syrian National Council (SNC). Founded in Istanbul in October 2011, the SNC was made up of exiled Syrian dissidents, many of whom had not set foot in Syria in years. Its first president was a professor of political science at the Sorbonne, Burhan Ghaliun, who advocated ending Assad's rule and establishing a democratic system of government in Syria. But several members of the SNC were more or less openly affiliated with the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood and the organization's Islamist tendencies made it controversial from the start, even among the supporters of the Syrian opposition.⁴⁸ In any case, the SNC's choice of Istanbul as its headquarters once again showcased the extent of Turkey's support for the opposition.

The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood thus re-emerged as the single most influential political organization in the fragmented circles of the Syrian opposition, at least in the early stages of the war.⁴⁹ After three decades in hiding, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters managed to secure the largest number of seats in the Istanbul-based SNC and came to control its most strategic body, the "Assistance Committee," which was responsible for both humanitarian aid and the funding of the armed opposition in Syria, including the Free Syrian Army.⁵⁰ It was a remarkable comeback for an organization that appeared all but annihilated after the 1982 Hama massacre.

Salafi jihadi armed groups likewise flourished in the incipient civil war and became heavily involved in weapon-smuggling operations from across Syria's porous borders.⁵¹ In

⁴⁶ The name Free Syrian Army was a throwback to the Free French Army of Charles De Gaulle, which during World War II fought to liberate France from the Nazi-aligned Vichy government. Even the flag of the Free Syrian Army and that of the Syrian revolution dated back to the French mandate and the pre-1958 period. But the Free Syrian Army did not do away entirely with Pan-Arabism. One important faction, for instance, called itself the Free Officers, just like Nasser's clandestine organization in pre-1952 Egypt.

⁴⁷ Liam Stack, "In Slap at Syria, Turkey Shelters Anti-Assad Fighters," *The New York Times*, October 27, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/28/world/europe/turkey-is-sheltering-antigovernment-syrian-militia.html>.

⁴⁸ Michael Weiss, "Turkey's Hand in the Syrian Opposition," *The Atlantic*, October 26, 2011, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/10/turkeys-hand-in-the-syrian-opposition/247330/>.

⁴⁹ Liz Sly, "Syria's Muslim Brotherhood is Gaining in Influence Over Anti-Assad Revolt," *The Washington Post*, May 12, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/syrias-muslim-brotherhood-is-gaining-influence-over-anti-assad-revolt/2012/05/12/gIQAtfoJLU_story.html.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ David E. Sanger, "Rebel Arms Flow is Said to Benefit Jihadists in Syria," *The New York Times*, October 14, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/15/world/middleeast/jihadists-receiving-most-arms-sent-to-syrian-rebels.html>. For a first-hand account of the activities of smugglers in the borderlands of Syria and Iraq and additional context on the rise of Salafi jihadi organizations in these areas, see Yosri Fouda, *Fi Tariq Al-Aza* [In

Iraq and Lebanon, in particular, well-established Salafi jihadi networks seized the opportunity to launch a new war in the Levant. Jabhat Al-Nusra first emerged in this context and rapidly spread throughout Syria. Unbeknown to most at the time, Jabhat Al-Nusra was actually a front for the Islamic State, consisting of Syrian members of the organization tasked with sowing the seeds of civil war in Syria and winning over vulnerable Sunni communities. With its seasoned fighters and heavy weapons, Jabhat Al-Nusra soon established itself as one of the most effective groups in the divided ranks of the Syrian insurgency. Opposition forces, in turn, generally welcomed Jabhat Al-Nusra, just as they would later welcome the Islamic State, at least for a time, for the simple reason that the fighters of these organizations were the most proficient on the battlefield. The 2012-2013 siege of the Menagh airbase, in the governorate of Aleppo, offers an example of this trend: it was a rebel coalition that encompassed the Free Syrian Army, Ahrar Al-Sham, Jabhat Al-Nusra, and the Islamic State that eventually succeeded in taking over the base in August 2013, underscoring unity of purpose and cooperation in the rebel camp. Thus, as increasingly radical Islamist groups came to dominate the opposition, much of Syria turned into the dystopian realm of Islamist armed groups, making it a magnet for aspiring jihadists the world over.⁵²

The Gulf states, most notably Saudi Arabia and Qatar, also supported Salafi jihadi organizations in Syria, including Jaysh Al-Islam and Ahrar Al-Sham.⁵³ Saudi Arabia supported government change in Syria to limit the ideological influence of Iran. Qatar, on the other hand, backed the Syrian opposition out of an unwavering commitment to all Islamist causes.⁵⁴

Harm's Way] (Cairo: Dar El-Shorouk, 2015) [In Arabic].

⁵² On the Islamic State's manipulation of the concept of *hijra* to attract foreign volunteers to its territories in Syria and Iraq, see Matan Uberman and Shaul Shay, "Hijrah According to the Islamic State: An Analysis of Dabiq," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 8, no. 9 (2016): 16–20.

⁵³ Jonathan Schanzer, "Saudi Arabia is Arming the Syrian Opposition: What Could Possibly Go Wrong?" *Foreign Policy*, February 27, 2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/02/27/saudi-arabia-is-arming-the-syrian-opposition/>. Roula Khalaf and Abigail Fielding Smith, "Qatar Bankrolls Syrian Revolt with Cash and Arms," *Financial Times*, May 16, 2013, <http://ig-legacy.ft.com/content/86e3f28e-be3a-11e2-bb35-00144feab7de>. Mark Mazzetti, C. J. Chivers and Eric Schmitt, "Taking Outsize Role in Syria, Qatar Funnels Arms to Rebels," *The New York Times*, June 30, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/30/world/middleeast/sending-missiles-to-syrian-rebels-qatar-muscles-in.html>. Hassan Hassan, "The Army of Islam is Winning in Syria," *Foreign Policy*, October 1, 2013, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/10/01/the-army-of-islam-is-winning-in-syria/>. Khaled Yacoub Oweis, "Insight: Saudi Arabia Boosts Salafist Rivals to Al-Qaeda in Syria," *Reuters*, October 1, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-jihadists-insight-idUSBRE9900RO20131001>.

⁵⁴ On Qatar's support for Islamist causes, see Elizabeth Dickinson, "The Case Against Qatar," *Foreign Policy*, September 24, 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/09/30/the-case-against-qatar/>. "Al-Nusra and its Gulf Financiers: The Political Cost of a Long-Running Alliance," Consortium Against Terrorist Finance, June 24, 2016, available on the Internet Archive Way-back Machine at <https://web.archive.org/web/20170313003157/http://stopterrorfinance.org/stories/510937020-al-nusra-and-its-gulf-financiers-the-political-cost-of-a-long-running-alliance>. "Funding Al Nusra Through Ransom: Qatar and the Myth of Humanitarian Principle," Consortium Against Terrorist Finance, August 18, 2016, available on the Internet Archive Way-back Machine at <https://web.archive.org/web/20160818035348/http://stopterrorfinance.org/stories/510652383-funding-al-nusra-through-ransom-qatar-and-the-myth-of-humanitarian-principle>. Robert F. Worth, "Kidnapped Royalty Became Pawns in Iran's Deadly Plot," *The New York Times*, March 14, 2018, <https://www.nytimes>.

The Obama administration was well aware of these developments—and from 2012 onward actually supported them, offering coordination and eventually training and arms to Islamist opposition groups in Syria.⁵⁵ This U.S. policy decision must be placed in the context of concomitant post-Arab Spring developments in the region: between late 2011 and early 2012, Ennahda and the Muslim Brotherhood had won elections in Tunisia and Egypt, respectively, and the governments of the United States and its allies had, for the most part, come to terms with them. In Libya, revolutionary forces had likewise seized power, Muammar Qaddafi had been killed, and nationwide elections were in the works, with Islamists once again playing a prominent role. Erdoğan's Turkey meanwhile positioned itself as an interlocutor and advocate for Islamist rule. Indeed, Erdoğan had long contended that political Islam, democracy, and free markets were fully compatible and at this time many Western leaders still appeared to believe his rhetoric.

In the Obama administration, the reasoning was that if the Syrian insurgency succeeded in toppling Assad then moderate Islamist groups could be co-opted to support a democratic transition, based on their desire to acquire funding from foreign governments and international organizations and to consolidate their power in the new political order. In this rather optimistic scenario, hardline Salafi jihadi factions were supposed to be sidelined in the early stages of the democratization process. For years, such desultory assessments informed U.S. policies such as Timber Sycamore and the Train and Equip Program, unwittingly fuelling Islamist violence in Syria.⁵⁶

com/2018/03/14/magazine/how-a-ransom-for-royal-falconers-reshaped-the-middle-east.html.

⁵⁵ Karen DeYoung and Liz Sly, "Syrian Rebels Get Influx of Arms with Gulf Neighbors' Money, US Coordination," *The Washington Post*, May 15, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/syrian-rebels-get-influx-of-arms-with-gulf-neighbors-money-us-coordination/2012/05/15/gIQAds2TSU_story.html. Jay Solomon and Nour Malas, "US Bolsters Ties to Fighters in Syria," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 12, 2012, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303410404577464763551149048>. Jay Newton-Small, "Hillary's Little Startup: How the U.S. Is Using Technology to Aid Syria's Rebels," *Time*, June 13, 2012, <https://world.time.com/2012/06/13/hillarys-little-startup-how-the-u-s-is-using-technology-to-aid-syrias-rebels/>. Eric Schmitt, "CIA Said to Aid in Steering Arms to Syrian Opposition," *The New York Times*, June 21, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/21/world/middleeast/cia-said-to-aid-in-steering-arms-to-syrian-rebels.html>. Mark Hosenball, "Obama Authorizes Secret Support for Syrian Rebels," *Reuters*, August 2, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-syria-obama-order/obama-authorizes-secret-support-for-syrian-rebels-idUSBRE8701OK20120802>. C.J. Chivers and Eric Schmitt, "Arms Airlift to Syria Rebels Expands, with Aid from CIA," *The New York Times*, March 24, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/25/world/middleeast/arms-airlift-to-syrian-rebels-expands-with-cia-aid.html>. David S. Cloud and Raja Abdulrahim, "U.S. Has Secretly Provided Arms Training to Syria Rebels Since 2012," *Los Angeles Times*, June 21, 2013, <https://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-xpm-2013-jun-21-la-fg-cia-syria-20130622-story.html>. Ernesto Londoño and Greg Miller, "CIA Begins Weapons Delivery to Syrian Rebels," *Washington Post*, September 11, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cia-begins-weapons-delivery-to-syrian-rebels/2013/09/11/9fcf2ed8-1b0c-11e3-a628-7e6dde8f889d_story.html.

⁵⁶ See Anne Barnard and Karam Shoumali, "U.S. Weaponry is Turning Syria into a Proxy War with Russia," *The New York Times*, October 12, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/13/world/middleeast/syria-russia-airstrikes.html>. On the Syria Train and Equip Program and how it may have indirectly strengthened Jabhat Al-Nusra, see Michael D. Shear, Helene Cooper and Eric Schmitt, "Obama Administration Ends Efforts to Train Syrians to Combat ISIS," *The New York Times*, October 9, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/10/>

The Islamic Republic of Iran and Hezbollah, meanwhile, rallied to Assad's defense, in the belief that a Sunni Islamist takeover of Damascus would have impeded the use of Syria's territory for the purpose of smuggling weapons and other goods from Iran to Hezbollah, severely weakening the latter's capacity to wage war on Israel. Hezbollah's involvement in the war in Syria likely began early on, though its secretary general Hassan Nasrallah offered the first hint about it only in October 2012, when battlefield losses in Syria became undeniable.⁵⁷ In any case, Hezbollah's role in Syria gradually intensified thereafter and a major offensive involving Hezbollah and the Syrian military began in early 2013, in Qusayr and along the Lebanese border. With the support of Hezbollah, the Syrian military managed to disrupt most rebel supply lines stemming from Lebanon, securing both its hold on Damascus and the south-north axis connecting the capital with the Mediterranean coastline, the mountains of Latakia, and Aleppo.

Despite the military support of Hezbollah and Iran's Revolutionary Guards, the Syrian government lost vast territories to the opposition between 2013 and 2015, and for a time Assad's military forces teetered on the edge of collapse. The tide of the war only shifted when Russia launched a direct intervention in Syria, in September 2015, based on Putin's resolve to counter U.S. foreign policy and uphold Russian interests in the Kremlin's historical sphere of influence. With the support of Russia, the Syrian military, Hezbollah, and Iranian-led Shia militias hailing from as far as Iraq and Afghanistan ultimately retook much of Syria from Sunni Islamist rebels, including Aleppo in 2016, Deir Al-Zor in 2017, and the suburbs of Damascus and the south in 2018.⁵⁸

Meanwhile, the United States gradually ended its support for armed opposition groups, considering them both a lost cause, from a military standpoint, and a political embarrassment,

world/middleeast/pentagon-program-islamic-state-syria.html. On Timber Sycamore, see Mark Mazzetti, Adam Goldman and Michael S. Schmidt, "Behind the Sudden Death of a \$1 Billion Secret CIA War in Syria," *The New York Times*, August 2, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/world/middleeast/cia-syria-rebel-arm-train-trump.html>. A three-year study that was funded by the European Union and the German government concluded in 2017 that efforts by the United States and its allies to supply arms to Syrian rebel groups "dramatically increased the quantity and quality of weapons" of the Islamic State. See "Weapons of the Islamic State," Conflict Armament Research, December 4, 2017, <https://www.conflictarm.com/reports/weapons-of-the-islamic-state/>.

⁵⁷ Rumors about Hezbollah's involvement in the conflict in Syria first surfaced in 2011. Yet, up to late 2012 there was little concrete evidence. The first undisputable evidence emerged in October 2012, when Ali Hussein Nassif, reportedly the commander of Hezbollah's operations in Syria, was killed in Qusayr. See Nicolas Blandford, "Hezbollah role in Syria grows more evident," *The Daily Star (Lebanon)*, October 12, 2012, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2012/Oct-12/191121-hezbollah-role-in-syria-grows-more-evident.ashx>. Will Fulton, Joseph Holliday, and Sam Wyer, "Iranian Strategy in Syria," *Joint Report by AEI's Critical Threats Project and Institute for the Study of War*, May 2013, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/IranianStrategyinSyria-1MAY.pdf>.

⁵⁸ On Russia's intervention in Syria, see Nikolai Kozhanov, "Ozhivleniye v rossiysko-iranskikh otnosheniyakh," [Revitalization in Russian-Iranian relations] *Carnegie Moscow Center*, June 15, 2015, <http://carnegie.ru/2015/06/15/ru-60391/ia18>. And Dimitri Trenin, "Rossiya zastryanet v Sirii na dostatochno dlitel'noye vremya," [Russia Will Be Stuck in Syria for Quite a Long Time] *Carnegie Moscow Center*, 24 February 2018, <https://carnegie.ru/2018/02/24/ru-pub-75641>.

due to the many atrocities perpetrated by the jihadis in their midst.⁵⁹ The Gulf states likewise concluded that the rebels would never manage to overthrow Assad, and gradually disengaged from Syria. Concomitantly to these developments, the U.S. Department of Defense came to understand that Kurdish fighters in Syria were closer to democratic values than any Islamist group. The United States thus progressively increased its support for the People's Defense Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, or YPG), the leading Syrian Kurdish force battling the Islamic State. In 2015, the YPG then came to constitute the backbone of the Syrian Democratic Forces, a broader multi-ethnic and cross-sectarian alliance that included Arab militias, as well as Assyrian, Armenian, and Yezidi fighters. Between 2015 and 2019, U.S. support enabled these forces to wrest large territories from the Islamic State, in grueling military campaigns that cost thousands of lives. These developments enabled the growth and expansion of an autonomous administration with proto-democratic institutions in north and east Syria.

That the United States would support the YPG was however a source of great consternation for Erdoğan, who apparently had no problem with jihadis on Turkey's southern border but was greatly concerned about the YPG's ties to the Worker's Party of Kurdistan (Partiya Karkerana Kurdistan, or PKK). Turkey thus took it upon itself to singlehandedly revive the waning Islamist opposition. In the summer of 2016, Turkey formalized a rebel coalition that included Ahrar Al-Sham, Nour Al-Din Al-Zenki, and various Islamist factions affiliated with the Free Syrian Army, some close to the Muslim Brotherhood and others espousing Salafi jihadi ideology.⁶⁰ Their primary aim was not so much fighting the Syrian government, the survival of which Erdoğan was already coming to terms with, but the U.S.-aligned Syrian Democratic Forces. From late 2016 onward, Turkey-backed rebels, therefore, began seizing territories along Syria's northern border, establishing there a new type of administration, formally under the control of Syrian opposition forces but de facto under Turkish rule, with Turkish soldiers to boot. The presence of Turkish military personnel on Syrian soil would henceforth fundamentally alter the conflict's prevailing dynamics, for if the Syrian government and Kurdish militias could recover territory from Islamist rebels, they could do little against the far more powerful Turkish armed forces.

These developments resulted in a military stalemate in the second half of 2018 and, with respect to territorial control, few major changes have occurred since. (One important change was the Turkish takeover of the borderlands between Ras Al-Ayn and Tell Abyad, in October 2019, which followed a partial U.S. withdrawal from eastern Syria; another was the Syrian

⁵⁹ Nour Al-Din Al-Zenki, for instance, was one of the Salafi jihadi armed groups that received funding and arms from the United States, and went on to commit ghastly war crimes. See Nabih Bulos, "Syrian Rebels Once Supported by U.S. Appear to Behead Child in Video," *Los Angeles Times*, July 19, 2016, <https://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-syria-beheading-video-20160719-snap-story.html>. See also "Torture Was my Punishment: Abductions, Torture and Summary Killings Under Armed Group Rule in Aleppo and Idlib, Syria," Amnesty International, July 5, 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/4227/2016/en/>.

⁶⁰ The Euphrates Shield coalition also included factions that had previously received heavy weapons from the U.S. Department of Defense, such as Nour Al-Din Al-Zenki. At this stage of the war, however, the United States had already ceased supporting them and Turkey had become their leading patron.

government's recovery of the main highway connecting Aleppo to the rest of Syria, in early 2020). Yet, despite the progressive hardening of frontlines, many of which now constitute de facto internal boundaries within a fragmented Syria, the conflict is unlikely to subside in the near future. One major reason is that fundamental ideological struggles involving political Islam still divide Syria, its people, and some of the most powerful foreign actors involved in the conflict.

Turkey for one may have renounced its ambitions for regime change in Damascus, at least in the short-term, but alongside its Islamist proxies it remains determined to maintain control over a pseudo-republic of sorts in northern Syria, on the model of its long-term occupation of Northern Cyprus. Moreover, Turkey is likely to employ both diplomatic and military means to further enlarge the size of the Syrian territories under its sway, as the October 2019 offensive against the Syrian Democratic Forces tragically showcased.

Control over large territories in northern Syria serves several of Erdoğan's objectives. It represents, first of all, a limited accomplishment in Turkey's drive to bring about regime change in Syria. Assad may still be in power in Damascus but at least some parts of Syria are now under Sunni Islamist rule, and closely aligned with Ankara. These territories also constitute a foothold within Syria from where Turkish forces and their Islamist allies can fight the YPG and thwart the consolidation of Kurdish autonomy. They moreover represent a readily accessible resettlement area for Syrian refugees, whom Erdoğan has long weaponized, on multiple levels, including to extract concessions from a refugee-wary European Union, to consolidate Turkey's hegemony over northern Syria, and to dilute the Kurdish population in strategic borderlands. Finally, from Erdoğan's perspective, the parts of Syria under Turkish control also offer a dependable source of mercenaries, to deploy as needed in support of Islamist causes in Turkey's would-be sphere of influence, including in Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh.⁶¹

Turkey's support for Islamist rule in the parts of Syria under its control, however, has already set the stage for long-term conflict. To start, Turkey is still struggling with unruly and uncompromising jihadi elements, as well as with militia-linked criminal enterprises, dynamics that in recent years have resulted in frequent bombings, shootings, and assassinations in Al-Bab, Jarablous, and other towns under the control of the Turkey-backed Syrian opposition. The presence of militants and gangsters that do not wish to conform to Turkey's directives is likely to hamper the administration of these territories for years to come. Moreover, profound demographic changes and the institutionalization of Islamist rule and social mores have made the peaceful reintegration of these areas with the rest of Syria unlikely, to say the least. For minorities and secular-minded Syrians, in particular, it is as if these areas were now under the occupation of an oppressive foreign power. Nevertheless, the Syrian government will continue to claim sovereignty over all of its national territory, and tensions with Turkey will therefore remain high, making Turkish-controlled northern Syria an unmistakable flashpoint

⁶¹ On Turkey's use of Syrian mercenaries, see Elizabeth Tsurkov, "The Syrian Mercenaries Fighting Foreign Wars for Russia and Turkey," *The New York Review of Books*, October 16, 2020, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2020/10/16/the-syrian-mercenaries-fighting-foreign-wars-for-russia-and-turkey/>.

for future conflict.

In Idlib, the situation is even more ominous. Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham, formerly known as Jabhat Al-Nusra, remains the single most powerful actor.⁶² An organization that was once part of the Islamic State and officially affiliated with Al-Qaeda will of course never manage to achieve international recognition, no matter how many times it changes its name. For all its attempts to rebrand itself as a moderate organization, Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham essentially remains an irreconcilable outfit of cutthroat Salafi jihadists. Moreover, it does not even enjoy a monopoly of power in Idlib, as other even more fanatical factions like Hurras Al-Din continue to hold some towns. Up to the time of writing, Erdoğan proved willing to defend jihadi rule in Idlib, both diplomatically and militarily, whenever the Syrian government and its allies launched a new offensive against it. But in the long run, even Erdoğan would much rather bring Idlib under Turkish hegemony than leave it to independent jihadi groups he cannot control. The violence and instability inherent in Salafi jihadi rule and competition between the governments of Turkey and Syria thus render Idlib another major flashpoint for conflict.

As for the areas of Syria that are under the control of the central government, as long as the regime remains in power they will be subject to punishing sanctions and international isolation. The crimes against humanity that the government of Syria and its allies perpetrated in their suppression of the insurgency effectively preclude any possibility of rapprochement with the West.⁶³ Moreover, Syria's government has become ever more dependent on the Islamic Republic of Iran and Hezbollah, in a dynamic that locks it in hopelessly hostile relations with Israel and the United States. Indeed, Assad and Syria's military elites are not in a position to renounce their most dependable allies, particularly since Western states are eager to bring them to trial for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Government-controlled Syria has thus become a new hermit state, mired in economic crisis, international isolation, and post-conflict exhaustion.

The best hope for stability and a semblance of democratization in Syria is actually the autonomous administration of north and east Syria, where a tenuous alliance between Kurdish and Arab militias under the aegis of the Syrian Democratic Forces and the U.S. military has enabled local elections to take place and led to significant improvements in the rights of women and minorities.⁶⁴ The example of this autonomous administration is also promising

⁶² Jabhat al-Nusra changed its name to Jabhat Fatah Al-Sham in July 2016. In January 2017, it then merged with other factions to form a new and larger organization called Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham, which also included other Salafi jihadi groups, such as Jabhat Ansar Al-Din, Jaysh Al-Sunnah, Liwa Al-Haq, and factions formerly part of Nour Al-Din Al-Zenki. For a detailed analysis of the evolution of the organization over the years, see Aymen Jawad Al-Tamimi, "From Jabhat al-Nusra to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham: Evolution, Approach and Future," *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung et Al-Nabrain Center for Strategic Studies*, June 29, 2018, https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=8cfa4cdb-e337-820d-d0bd-4cd998f38612&groupId=252038.

⁶³ See Anchal Vohra, "Assad's Horrible War Crimes Are Finally Coming to Light Under Oath," *Foreign Policy*, October 16, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/16/assads-horrible-war-crimes-are-finally-coming-to-light/>.

⁶⁴ See Ofra Bengio, "Game Changers: Kurdish Women in Peace and War," *The Middle East Journal* 70, no. 1

in that it showcases how large numbers of Syrian Muslims have no penchant for Islamist rule and support instead the equal treatment of men and women, the protection of minorities, and other democratic principles.⁶⁵ Indeed, Arabs from across Syria are still joining the Syrian Democratic Forces in large numbers and Arabs presently constitute a majority in the ranks of the organization.⁶⁶ However, these territories are wedged between the hammer and the anvil—with Erdoğan's Turkey and its jihadi proxies on one side, and Baathist Syria with its Shia Islamist allies on the other. Turkey's October 2019 takeover of the borderland territories between Tell Abyad and Ras Al-Ayn most certainly dealt the autonomous administration and the Syrian Democratic Forces a very heavy blow. According to the United Nations, the Turkey-backed jihadi rebels have since "engaged in widespread and organized looting and property appropriation" and subjected civilians to torture, sexual violence, and other war crimes.⁶⁷

Meanwhile, Assad and Putin gained new leverage in north and east Syria. Putin brokered the terms of the October 2019 ceasefire with Erdoğan, and Russian military police and the Syrian army have since patrolled important sections of the Turkey-Syria border, while the Syrian Democratic Forces had to retreat further south to avert new military onslaughts. Putin also repeatedly pressured the Syrian Democratic Forces to disband, give way to the Syrian Arab Army, and join local police or paramilitary forces, so as to buttress Assad's position and limit U.S. influence in Syria. But for the time being, the Syrian Democratic Forces have managed to maintain a cohesive command structure and a steadfast commitment to regional autonomy. The United States and its allies, of course, could help the Syrian Democratic Forces consolidate their hard-fought autonomy, through robust interaction with the autonomous administration and clear statements of diplomatic support aimed at preventing new military challenges. Yet, the U.S. government has thus far displayed limited and inconsistent political will to commit adequate resources and manpower to protect its most dependable allies in Syria, particularly in the face of Turkish pressure. The autonomous administration of north and east Syria thus remains on a precarious footing and is highly vulnerable to setbacks.

Conclusions

As Erdogan's Turkey, Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham, Hezbollah, and the Islamic Republic of Iran all continue to vie for a permanent foothold in Syria, power struggles involving rival streaks

(2016): 30-46. See also Wes Enzinna, "A Dream of Secular Utopia in ISIS' Backyard," *New York Times Magazine*, November 29, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/29/magazine/a-dream-of-utopia-in-hell.html>.

⁶⁵ Amy Austin Holmes, "Arabs Across Syria Join the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces," *Middle East Research and Information Project*, July 28, 2020, <https://merip.org/2020/07/arabs-across-syria-join-the-kurdish-led-syrian-democratic-forces/>.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ United Nations, General Assembly, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, A/HRC/45/31, August 14, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/A-HRC-45-31-en.pdf>.

of political Islam continue to effectively preclude the end of the conflict. In this sense, however, Syria's predicament is not unique. Across the Asian and African continents, several distinct varieties of political Islam contributed in recent years to ignite and fuel a number of protracted civil wars, including in Afghanistan, Somalia, and Yemen, and more recently in Libya, Mali, and much of the Sahel.

To put these developments in perspective, however, it is important to remember that just one century ago political Islam did not play a prominent role in the politics of most Muslim-majority societies. Even in the years that followed World War II and decolonization, it was not political Islam that captured the imagination of the masses in the Arab and Islamic worlds but rather secular leftist ideologies, such as Pan-Arab nationalism or even communism, which for a time enjoyed considerable support in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon. It was only from the 1970s onward that Islamist ideologies began to experience a surge in popularity. In the following decades, the global rise of several distinct currents of political Islam has led to the emergence of international and global networks devoted to promoting Islamist causes, including in the context of armed struggles. Just like communist and socialist revolutionaries leveraged the global popularity of their belief systems to secure financial and military support and convince civilian populations to take up arms, Islamist movements have often managed to internationalize their struggles and sustain asymmetrical war efforts for long periods of time. Indeed, the scholarly literature has established that civil wars involving armed actors espousing transnational ideologies—such as communism or political Islam—generally last longer and are less likely to be solved through negotiation and peacekeeping.⁶⁸ World history, however, is replete with countless examples of shifts in belief systems and worldviews, including with respect to political ideologies, religious fundamentalisms, and sectarian animosities.⁶⁹ Such shifts in belief systems are sometimes relatively rapid, as exemplified by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the global demise of communism as an ideology. Other times, shifts in beliefs unfold over decades—or even centuries. In time, even the tide of political Islam is thus likely to recede, possibly providing some respite to the numerous nations mired in extenuating struggles over the role of Islam in government and society.

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⁶⁸ See James D. Fearon, "Civil War & the Current International System," *Dædalus* 146, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 18-32. Laia Balcells and Stathis N. Kalyvas, "Revolutionary Rebels and the 'Marxist Paradox,'" un-published paper, 2015, http://cpd.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/MarxIns_4_15.pdf.

⁶⁹ On imagined orders, belief systems, and how they shift over time, see Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A brief history of humankind* (New York: Random House, 2014), 114–133.

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