ANALYSIS OF THE CURRENT SITUATION IN SYRIA:
SITUATION OVERVIEW, PILLARS OF SUPPORT AND POSSIBLE OUTCOMES
1. INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Syrian Civil War began as a branch of the 2010 Arab Spring revolutions that shook the Middle East and North Africa. Successful protests brought regime change in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen, and analysts were hopeful that this new wave of pro-democracy enthusiasm would topple the authoritarian regime of Syria. The country suffered from a severe drought from 2007-2010, which displaced rural populations and exacerbated poverty, increasing tension and frustration among the population. Assad responded to the first outbreak of protests with vicious authority, detaining activists immediately to stop an insurrection.

When major anti-regime protests spread into Damascus, Homs, and Hama, the government ordered the military to fire on protesters. The international community condemned the Assad regime’s human rights violations, but did not provide further support to Syrian protesters. Chemical weapons were used to silence opposition forces by summer 2013. Sieges and bombardments target civilian populations to force rebel supporters to capitulate to government rule. Peaceful protesters responded to the deadly situation by taking up arms, hoping for international aid and intervention against the Assad regime. Military defectors formed the Free Syrian Army, and political activists formed the Syrian National Coalition, which was recognized by the US, Turkey, and the Gulf Cooperation Council as the legitimate government of the Syrian people. Increased military pressure from the government and internal disputes caused the movement to lose momentum and fracture.
By 2012, Syria was engulfed in chaos and was ripe for exploitation by Islamic extremists. Jabhat al-Nusra formed as al-Qaeda's Syrian branch while Al-Qaeda of Iraq formed Daesh (The Islamic State), which brought extremist rhetoric and violent warfare to a new high. Daesh expanded rapidly, recruiting new soldiers from existing extremist groups and from radicalized Muslims abroad. The Assad regime capitalized on the threat of terrorism to force international actors to choose between his authoritarian secular regime or the terrorist regime of Daesh, who have often appeared as the only viable military forces in the civil war.

Syria’s civil war became a battleground for regional rivalries. The Assad regime has collaborated with Iran and Russia. Iran’s Revolutionary Guard has advised Assad’s army and fought in combat against the FSA and Daesh. Russia has vetoed Security Council resolutions condemning the Assad regime, and in 2015, Russia used its air force to decimate Daesh and other extremist groups in Syria. The Assad regime exploited its ties to Shia groups, such as Hezbollah, to mobilize Iraqi and Afghan Shia fighters against both Sunni and secular opposition. This coalition of support has resulted in the landmark capture of Palmyra in March, as well as strategic victories against opposition forces in Aleppo and Damascus.

The Free Syrian Army received support from Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, and, allegedly, the United States’ CIA. United States and European forces have been hesitant to provide critical military support, such as anti-aircraft guns, to stop Assad regime air raids because of the chaotic situation and lack of popular support. Defections from the FSA weakened it severely, and internal divisions continue to plague the group.

The Kurds’ People’s Protection Units (YPG) consolidated Syrian Kurdish territory in northern Syria and defeated Daesh after receiving extensive arms and air support from the United States. Ties between the YPG and the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) has caused international tension. The PKK is labeled a terrorist organization by Turkey, the United States, and others, but the YPG believes that support for the PKK is necessary for the legitimization of Kurdish interests in the region. The Turkish government has launched airstrikes against Kurdish forces as a result of terrorist accusations. Entangled interests in Syria cause consistent conflict between the opposing Syrian forces and their international allies.
In 2016, reports confirmed that 250,000 Syrians have been killed in the conflict, and 11 million Syrians have been displaced from their homes. Russian forces withdrew from Syria after territorial gains were made by the Assad regime. Daesh is losing territory quickly, as it locked between the formidable Kurdish YPG and the Assad regime. In response, Daesh sponsored international terror attacks to deter the international funding and backing of anti-Daesh coalitions. The Free Syrian Army continues to struggle for regime change, but is largely overshadowed by the international war on terror. The Geneva III peace talks in March 2016 created the first ceasefire between the FSA and the Syrian regime, although this has crumbled over the 2016 summer.
Hafez al-Assad seized power in 1970 in a wave of Arab nationalist (Ba’athist) juntas and began the four-generation dynasty of the Assad family. The Assad regime of the past rooted itself in the Syrian military, a pattern reflected in the Assad regime of the present. Hafez al-Assad was a fighter pilot that fused his military and political leadership to build support for his 1970 military junta. The Al-Assad family comes from the historically persecuted Alawi sect of Shia Muslims, which gained political and economic power during the French rule of the Syrian mandate. From positions of power, the Alawi Syrians reversed cycles of historical discrimination. When Syria achieved independence from France, the al-Assad regime seized power under the secular nationalist Ba’athist party, which theoretically brought together the country under a banner of equality. However, the Assad regime continued ethnoreligious repression: the most notable incident was the 1982 military crackdown that killed 25,000 Sunni Muslim Brotherhood. Syria’s economy flourished, and Syrians lived peacefully so long as they didn’t oppose the Assad regime. The Assad regime and the Alawi sect maintained their power by favoring elite Sunni and Christian minorities and oppressing others.
CURRENT SITUATION:

BASHAR AL-ASSAD GOVERNMENT

Bashar al-Assad took power in 2000 when Hafez al-Assad died. Bashar al-Assad made concessions to his political opposition, but maintained his father’s authoritarian stance. The Syrian economy flourished at the pace of Middle Eastern countries such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Libya under his rule, despite Syria having less natural resources to employ. Syrian suppression of elections and its antagonistic relationship with Israel caused its isolation from the West. United Nations sanctions on Syria started as early as 2005 as a result of Syria’s alleged sponsorship of Hezbollah terrorists and its occupation of Lebanon. This came shortly before a devastating drought in Syria, which caused a socioeconomic crisis.

When Arab Spring protests began in 2010, the Assad regime cracked down with military force. The Assad regime reaffirmed its military and economic alliances with Russia, Iran, and Lebanese Shiite forces and escalated the peaceful conflict into a civil war. Opposition forces formed out of moderate Sunni Muslims, pro-democracy activists, and radical Sunni Muslims. The opposition’s turn to violent conflict put the Assad regime at a major advantage: Elite Assad regime soldiers deployed the full capacity of the Syrian army to defeat unorganized militias. Hezbollah fighters and foreign Shia supporters fight on the side of the Assad regime with the train-
ing of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. The anti-Assad coalition fought back with its own foreign support and domestic momentum, causing a stalemate. In 2013, the Assad regime deployed chemical weapons against their opposition until international pressure caused them to stop; regardless of this, the Assad regime has used equally brutal force with conventional weapons, such as barrel bombs.

The brutal rise of Daesh (ISIL) and the formation of Kurdish independence forces opened more fronts against the Assad regime, which struggles to handle the multiple military threats. Russia intervened to support the Assad regime in 2015 and 2016, using its air force to suppress both Daesh and the Syrian opposition forces. The Assad military made substantial territorial gains during this time, but lost ground after Russians withdrew support.

In 2016, the Assad regime has progressed in its goal of securing Aleppo and Damascus. While the Assad regime made offers of stalemates to the Free Syrian Army, the opposition refuses to surrender until there are major structural changes in the Syrian government. The Assad regime has little incentive to surrender power as it makes steady military gains. Furthermore, the political forces behind the Assad regime are too inflexible to decentralize their power or appease scattered, moderate opposition. The civil war has become a nearly-intractable conflict that deeply threatens the security of those who are defeated: The Syrian government and its minority supporters fear vicious retribution if they capitulate.

While the West once viewed the Assad regime as the penultimate villain of the Syrian conflict, that focus has shifted toward Daesh. Experts have suggested that the West must work with Russia and the Assad government to combat the greater evil of Daesh. These complicated circumstances have caused the current stalemate that Syria faces today.
In 2012-2013, Sunni extremist forces coalesced around Daesh leadership, which formed out of the Iraqi branch of al-Qaeda. Sunni attackers explicitly targeted the Shiite population of Iraq. Expanded campaigns against the US-backed Iraqi government resulted in the enthusiastic recruitment of seasoned military forces from Saddam Hussein’s Sunni Baathist military. Once ample territory in Iraq was seized, the leadership of Daesh expanded its war against the Assad regime’s Shiite forces. The early, decisive military successes of Daesh lured in many Sunni extremists and foreign fights. Furthermore, Daesh forces provided stability and resources to Syrian civilians who were caught in the middle of the civil war and in desperate need of societal structure. Daesh has a robust propaganda machine that targets foreign, disenfranchised Muslims with the ideas of apocalyptic destiny.

Daesh thrives on its reputation for brutality. Daesh supporters publicly execute their enemies through beheadings, commit suicide attacks against civilians, and enslave and rape captured civilians. These attacks against civilians are unprecedented, and few terrorist groups have displayed such pride in their violent methods of rule. Daesh-organized attacks against civilians are common in the Middle East, but lone wolf terror attacks are also a major part of their international strategy. Daesh’s reputation of violence impacts the effectiveness of soldiers fighting against them; anti-terrorist forces fear the costs of defeat. Civilians have often surrendered and resorted to supporting Daesh, fearing retribution if they choose to resist.
Daesh roots its geopolitical and social practices in an extremist interpretation of Islam. The major geopolitical aim of the organization is the establishment of a pan-Islamic caliphate that ignores current political boundaries and unites all Muslims under the radical Daesh ideology. The caliphate directly interprets the Koran, such as enslaving and/or crucifying apostates. Daesh believes its interpretation of Islam is the most correct and that other Muslims are apostates for their liberal interpretations; because of this, moderate Muslims are the primary targets of Daesh’s brutal attacks. In addition, Daesh welcomes confrontation with international militaries believing that it will cause apocalyptic religious interpretation. While Daesh gained substantial momentum during 2013 and 2014, international outrage caused military airstrike campaigns from foreign powers. Russia committed extensive resources to the Assad regime to help weaken Daesh and allow for government forces to win key ground battles. Likewise, the United States invested in a failed program to train Syrian rebels against the government and Daesh and has lead numerous airstrikes against Daesh military targets. The northern Kurdish forces succeeded in securing and defending their territory from Daesh. After the cessation of Russian airstrikes in 2016, Daesh reclaimed lost territory, and other states have struggled to dedicate their resources to the fight. The fight extends beyond Syria, and Daesh has a critical power base in their Iraqi strongholds. As different parties in the Syrian Civil War dispute how to deal with terrorism, Daesh has room to recover.

In June, the United Nations released a report on Daesh’s genocidal campaign against 400,000 members of the Yazidi minority in Syria and Iraq. Daesh fighters slaughtered Yazidi men and boys and buried them in mass graves. Women and female children were subject to rape and sexual abuse. Slavery and torture were also common in Daesh-owned provinces with Yazidi minorities.
III SYRIAN OPPOSITION

1. FREE SYRIAN ARMY

The FSA formed as an alliance of anti-Assad government forces, including government military defectors, pro-democracy activists, moderate Muslim fighters, and extremist Muslim fighters. This coalition held together in the early years of the Syrian Civil War, but the long, destructive fight exacerbated disputes between the different parties. For example, the Jabhat al-Nusra, an Islamist anti-Assad organization, started to take FSA defectors and receive more resources and funding. Anti-Assad forces include a large number of al-Qaeda-backed Islamist militant groups besides Jabhat al-Nusra. By 2014, FSA fighters were defecting to Daesh as well, willing to fight the Assad regime by any means necessary. The dwindling secular, pro-democracy characteristics of the Free Syrian Army have caused international forces to turn away their economic and military support from the coalition. By 2016, there are major questions about whether the Free Syrian Army coalition still exists or the individual factions have completely splintered away into larger anti-government factions, such as Jabhat al-Nusra and Daesh.

2. THE COMBINED JOINT TASK FORCE ALLIES

Small pro-democracy military factions in Syria are fighting with the support of the international Combined Joint Task Force, which includes regional and world military powers such as the United States, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, France, and the United Kingdom. These countries regularly adjust their support for the scattered opposition groups-- the CJTF has accidentally given arms to brutal Islamist factions without proper intelligence and then withdrawn support. International intelligence and economic support fluctuate rapidly as rebel groups rise, fall, and change their ideologies and tactics.
As early as 2012, the Kurds’ People’s Protection Units (YPG) and the Iraqi Peshmerga (Kurdish) forces of northern Syria organized to fight against the Assad government for their independence. While Daesh, the Free Syrian Army, and the Assad government battled amongst each other, the Kurdish forces based out of Rojava are exploiting Syria’s military chaos to consolidate a de-facto independent state. The Kurdish forces excelled in their fight against Daesh and gained the full support of the United States, Russia and the allies of the CJTF, except for Turkey. In 2015, the YPG and the democratic remnants of the FSA formed together as the Syrian Democratic Forces and launched a successful offensive against Daesh. Recruitment efforts brought a relatively limited amount of foreign fighters to the Kurdish-led military effort.

In 2016, the Kurdish forces halted their military efforts against Daesh due to political concerns about their international recognition and legitimacy. Turkey, the northern neighbor of the Rojava border and a major component of the anti-ISIS coalition, refuses to legitimize Kurdish claims to northern Syria because it views the YPG as an extension of the Turkish PKK, a Kurdish political party labeled as a terrorist organization for its attacks on civilians. Other international supporters of the Syrian Democratic Forces, such as European Union states and the United States, are supportive of the Syrian Kurdish movement, but still condemn the Turkish PKK as a terrorist organization. The Syrian Democratic Forces understand that the war against Daesh will not be won without capable ground forces, and they believe that international forces will not uphold a promise for an autonomous Kurdish region or the legitimization of the Turkish PKK. American negotiations in Syria attempt to reconcile the political needs of Kurdish forces and the international desire to destroy Daesh to stabilize Syria.
The Syrian Civil War devastated the country’s economy. Most importantly, the human cost of the war ranges from 250,000 to 470,000 people, a number obfuscated by the lack of credible sources from the country. Nearly a tenth of the Syrian population has been wounded or killed by the conflict, and the life expectancy of the average Syrian person has dropped by 15 years as a result of the war. Between six and eight million Syrians are displaced as a result of the conflict. Many of them seek refugee status in neighboring Middle Eastern countries or, if possible, in Europe. Children are disproportionately affected by the conflict and deprived of key health and educational facilities during a critical period of their development. Attacks on civilian facilities, such as hospitals, are been used as a key tactic by the Assad government and Daesh to break the will of their enemies. In the end, these attacks hurt innocent civilians more than enemy militaries.

In 2016, Syrians are becoming poorer as the Syrian pound rapidly devalues and the cost of everyday goods steadily rises. Goods are scarce, resulting in increasing reliance on a black market, although the Syrian government threatens stores which participate in unregulated economic activity. To obtain the necessary income to survive, Syrian families pull their children out of school to work, rely on remittances for relatives abroad, and tap into their savings. The infrastructure of all sides of the Syrian conflict are reliant upon international fund-
ing to maintain their status. In search of security and a basic infrastructure to provide food, health, and shelter, many Syrians are willing to switch sides to whichever military force is willing to provide, regardless of whether they agree with their political beliefs. Daesh exploited this to gain many desperate supporters. Many Syrians find economic survival so difficult that they prefer to leave the country, as so many political refugees have over the past years.

After measuring the human costs and the immense damage to Syrian infrastructure, the greatest conundrum of the Syrian conflict after achieving peace will be arranging for the reconstruction of the country. Who will return to rebuild the country? Refugees have little incentive to resettle where they will not have access to basic needs. Syrians in-country continue to die as long as the brutal conflict continues. In addition, the infrastructure will take an immense effort to repair.

As of now, international NGOs and many generous countries are addressing the future of Syria by providing as much as possible to assist Syrian refugees and prepare them to return to their country with a proper education. Education and support for refugees will give them a greater capacity to change Syria once the country achieves peace and stability. Planning for Syrian reconstruction now may also turn Syrians away from Daesh and unite moderates around peace deals. Ceasefires give civil society the stability to resume economic activity and humanitarian aid. If international NGOs are allowed to work in Syria in safe zones for all civilians, they can also disseminate information about the future and motivate supporters of different political ideologies to create peace. Once peace is achieved, international organizations can commit to development aid as long as Syrians honor their peace compromises and treaties.
C. INTERNATIONAL RESPONSES TO THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

I PRO-ASSAD INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

1. RUSSIA

Russia has been a solid supporter of the Assad regime since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, providing military, economic, and political support as the Syrian government fought against rebel forces and Daesh. Russia used its veto position in the UN Security Council to end internationally-backed resolutions condemning the Assad regime’s use of chemical weapons and excessive force. Growing international fear of Daesh and other terrorist organizations offered a political opportunity for Russia to intervene with military force in Syria. Starting in October 2015, airstrikes, Russian special forces and direct military aid allowed the Assad government to make major military gains against Daesh and Syrian rebels. Following Russia’s military struggles in Ukraine and economic struggles, their military success in the Syrian Civil War strengthened Russia’s geopolitical position in the Middle East.

In 2016, the Russian government began the withdrawal of its main military force from Syria in March, reflecting the positive military momentum for the Assad government. This momentum has not been carried into the summer of 2016, as the Assad government has been rolled back from its territorial gains by Daesh forces and rebel forces. Moscow can use the failure of the Assad regime to blame the opposition, who can be seen as traitors to the anti-terrorist cause by opposing the Syrian government. The country has fallen back into a painful stalemate between deeply divided forces, but Russia achieved its objective of legitimizing the Assad government as a stable, anti-terrorist force in Syria.
Iran and its network of Hezbollah allies from Lebanon have been long-standing geopolitical allies of the Assad regime. The alliance is held together by ethno-religious solidarity against Sunni and secular forces which threaten Shia populations in the Levant. Iran provided intelligence and riot-gear to the Syrian government during the protest phase of the civil conflict, and military aid, advisors, and ground troops once the conflict transformed into a civil war.

In addition, Hezbollah has sent thousands of fighters to support the Syrian government’s fight against rebel forces and Daesh. Hezbollah acted an Iranian proxy force for Shia interests in Lebanon in the past.

Recently, the Iranian government has shown flexibility with their position on the Assad regime. Russian intervention in Syria has weakened the Iranian negotiating position, and this has caused friction between the two countries. So long as Russia secures a dependent Syrian government that will permit the country military access, it will be satisfied regardless of the geopolitical and ethnic consequences for other actors. Iran prefers to maintain a Shia-friendly regime and is willing to change position on Assad if it means maintaining their ethno-religious ties in the Levant. Furthermore, Iranian military forces have sustained a worrying amount of casualties in the Syrian fight, causing them to focus their military assistance on mobilizing Shites in other countries (Iraq, Afghanistan) to fight in support of the Assad government. The half-committed approach has resulted in deaths of Iranian soldiers without securing the Iranian position in the region. Consequently, the current policy debate revolves around whether Iran should commit full military forces to Syria or abandon its Syrian goals and let the conflict unfold without intervention.
Since the start of the conflict, between 27,000 and 31,000 people traveled from abroad to support Daesh and other Islamist extremists in Syria and Iraq. Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Jordan, and Turkey are sending the most foreign fighters to Daesh, but headlines are dominated by the 6,000 Europeans who have travelled to fight in Syria. Major propaganda campaigns target disenfranchised and unsatisfied youth to find their meaning and purpose in radical Islamist ideologies; at the behest of many, these campaigns have had unprecedented success. As a result, both international fighters and international financiers play a major part in the military success of Daesh.

As Daesh focuses propaganda campaigns on foreign fighters, the international community in the Middle East and Europe search for ways to combat the Islamist propaganda campaign and to deal with returning foreign fighters. Security forces track and arrest donors to Daesh, and use banking information to find Daesh cells abroad. Immigration and assimilation programs seek to highlight the positives of life in Western countries and counter the Daesh propaganda campaigns. Intelligence sharing between countries is increasing, to allow for accurate and effective coordination in counter-terrorism activities. While these policy decisions seem logical and easy, their implementation is bureaucratic, complicated, and difficult. In 2016, fighters continue to flow to a resurging Islamic State or act independently by committing Daesh-inspired terrorist attacks abroad. Even after the Syrian conflict reaches a resolution, the civil war has served as an incubator and a training ground for future extremists once they return home.
After over five years of civil war, the Turkish government publicly supported the normalization of ties with the Syrian government. These new statements contradict private comments and the historical rivalry of Turkish Sunni interests with Syrian Shia interests in the Middle East. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan had once called for Bashar al-Assad to step down. Some believe that this policy shift was made in fear of the growing military gains and international support for the Syrian Kurds, who are tied to the Turkish Kurdish opposition party. The Turkish government believes that combating Kurdish rebels is integral to international counter-terrorism efforts, while other countries in the Combined Joint Task Force disagree about labelling Syrian Kurds as terrorists.

In 2016, Turkey is reevaluating its national foreign policy as a result of past conflicts with Russia and new tensions with the United States. The country is preoccupied with upheaval and disorder as a result of the summer 2016 attempted coup, including throwing accusations at the United States for sheltering the alleged instigator of the coup, Fethullah Gulen. Gulen is seeking asylum elsewhere as the United States considers extraditing the cleric to back to the country of their NATO ally. Tensions are still high as Turkey vies to restore the pre-2011 status quo of the Kurdish minority in Syria, even if it means allowing the Assad regime to persist.

The United States and European Union allies supported moderate, democratic opposition to Bashar al-Assad since the beginning of peaceful protests in 2011, calling repeatedly for Assad to step down. US policymakers assumed the conflict would end as early as 2012 as a wave of rebel supporters pushed through the country. The Assad regime’s use of chemical weapons and brutal conventional methods crossed the United States’ “red line,” however, the United States lost credibility when it did not intervene. American war hawks still criticize the United States for not intervening further in Syria. The United States has provided and withdrawn military aid, humanitarian assistance, and diplomatic support to and from moderate groups as they shift their political stances and violent methods of combat. The moderate Syrian opposition is complicated and ever-shifting. Consequently, the United States turned to the northern Syrian Kurds as their ally against Daesh; however, the Kurds are refusing to take more losses and push into Daesh territory without political and diplomatic guarantees for their autonomy.
The US and NATO are receiving growing criticism for the passivity on Syria. In 2016, fifty American diplomats submitted a complaint about US policy in Syria. These diplomats called for further military commitment as Daesh, the Assad regime, and other actors use barrel bombs, bomb medical infrastructure, and refuse UN food aid to civilians in enemy territory. The US government is still unwilling to escalate further and become involved in the complicated Syrian quagmire, especially with the context of interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Saudi Arabia collaborated with Western forces in the fight against Daesh by forming a Muslim anti-Daesh coalition in December 2015. This is seen as a major step for the Saudi government to distance itself from the radical Sunni ideology of Daesh, which is claimed to reflect the radical Wahhabi religious teachings present in Saudi Arabia. Daesh-related attacks in Saudi Arabia also inspired the government to fight against the terrorist state. The Saudi government has worked with the United States to support anti-Assad moderate and Sunni Islamist activists. Saudi escalation in post-Arab Spring conflicts is in opposition to Iranian Shia influence in the region, such as their presence in the Yemeni Civil War against pro-Iranian forces.

As with the other regional powers present in the Syrian conflict, the Saudi government faces a difficult choice about whether or not to intervene in the Syrian conflict to better achieve their strategic goals in the country.
D. SYRIAN PEACE PROCESS

Efforts to reach either short-term or long-term peace in Syria started as early as 2012, as different international actors attempted to contain the outbreak of a civil war. Diplomacy has proven incredibly difficult. From the beginning of the war, both the Assad government and the Syrian rebels viewed their conflict as an existential struggle. The immediate goals revolved around dismantling or preserving the Assad regime in Syria. If either side capitulated, they feared that their political position would be compromised and their supporters would face imprisonment and death. Rebel forces, comprised of a coalition of many different groups, also struggled to negotiate as a unified group because of their differing visions for the future of Syria. International intervention in the conflict and the rise of Daesh and the Kurdish forces added new layers of complication to the conflict and negotiations. As a result, each of the four major sides (Daesh, Assad regime, Syrian opposition, and the Syrian Kurds) have fought to a stalemate and continue to fight, fueled by economic and military aid from their larger military allies. As previously mentioned in other sections, each side has ambitious positions and little incentive to compromise with others.
The diplomatic process in Syria achieved minor success in 2016: the tenuous Geneva III ceasefire. By late February, the Syrian government and Syrian opposition reached a ceasefire. Desire to weaken Daesh drove both Syrian parties as well as their international supporters to reach an agreement to fight what is perceived as a “greater evil.” A major, controversial condition to the Geneva III talks was the exclusion of the Kurdish PYD due to the demands of Turkish diplomats. The decrease in combatant and civilian deaths was significant, and diplomats hoped to maintain the peace. The peace held strong for the first few months, small violations of the agreement slowly ramped up to new military clashes between government and rebel forces. The Assad regime offered an olive branch to opposition forces, allowing amnesty for those who surrender their arms and return to supporting the government. Nearly no opposition soldiers accepted this deal, which is perceived as a trap set by the Assad regime to punish confessing rebels.

In August 2016, the ceasefire is collapsing, and the international community is slow to create a new peace plan to preserve the ceasefire in Syria. Without renewed agreements between conflicting members International Syria Support Group, such as the United States, Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, it is likely that levels of violence will return to pre-ceasefire levels. Regional violence in Aleppo has already escalated to all-out war. Actors on opposing sides of the domestic and international conflict blame their opponents for the decay of the temporary peace agreement.
E. REFUGEE CRISIS

The status of Syrian refugees and internally-displaced peoples dominates international headlines. As of 2016, approximately 4,800,000 refugees fled the war-torn country and 6,600,000 people are displaced internally in Syria. The countries bordering Syria, such as Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq have been the primary destinations of refugees. Refugee camps in these countries are underfunded, unable to provide adequate nutrition, clean water, and medical services. In these countries, Syrian refugees are treated with second-class legal status. The four border countries are implementing further border security to prevent entry of refugees. As a result of these difficulties, many Syrian refugees have sought out “third country migration” and undertaken the tumultuous journey to Europe by land or sea. Discussions about allowing refugees have been especially divisive in Europe, where border controls tightened to limit refugee entry. In 2016, Daesh-inspired attacks from second and third generation Muslim migrants throughout the world have increased skepticism of Syrian refugees. The negative outlook for the Syrian conflict and stifling numbers of refugees is causing a standstill of international aid, as countries contemplate whether more money will remedy the conflict. At the time of this report, the international community has reached less than half of the recommended funding for UN programs in 2016 and many countries are struggling politically to reach agreed refugee quotes.
The Assad regime’s efforts to suppress rebel activity is marred with attacks on civilian targets as well as military targets. It is clear that government forces are willing to destroy their opposition using any means necessary. Beyond normal means of using riot police and more violent use of military force, the Assad regime allegedly deployed chemical weapons (sarin gas, chlorine bombs) throughout 2013 and 2014 to destroy rebel settlements. After the United States increased diplomatic and military pressure, the Assad regime suspended use of chemical weapons and switched to equally brutal convention methods. Human Rights Watch reports that chlorine bombs were used again in 2015, despite past agreements. The Assad regime has been recorded using barrel bombs, unguided mass explosives filled with shrapnel to cause maximum damage to unarmored civilian targets. These are also banned by the United Nations, but the Assad regime doesn’t acknowledge their use by the government military.
2. REFUSING INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN AID: “SURRENDER OR STARVE”

The Assad regime carries out massive sieges of population centers in Syria that cut off civilian populations from food and water sources. As of late 2015, approximately 400,000 Syrians lived under siege in cities such as Homs and Daraya. During these sieges, civilian targets such as schools and hospitals are targeted to decrease civilian morale. In addition, the Assad regime violates international agreements to allow neutral humanitarian aid organizations to assist civilian populations. These efforts are part of the “surrender or starve” military campaign of the Assad regime against rebel forces, intended to undermine violent opposition by targeting sympathizers and innocent civilians.

Opposition protesters in Assad regime territory still face mass detention and military-grade violence. Both domestic and international activists are arbitrarily searched and detained. Children, women, and elders are regularly detained as well. Prisons are substandard and diseases spread quickly, causing many deaths in custody. Political prisoners and suspects are violently tortured by their captors.

II DAESH VIOLATIONS

1. YAZIDI GENOCIDE

In June, the United Nations declared that Yazidi populations in Syria faced genocide from their Islamic State captors. Nearly 400,000 members of the Yazidi ethnoreligious minority in Syria have been subject to mass atrocities. Daesh soldiers used genocidal methods including forced conversations, rape of young women, enslavement of women, forced conscription of Yazidi children, torture of prisoners, and mass killings. Attacks on the Yazidi minority are ongoing, and the United Nations is still waiting for a unified response from the P5 members of the Security Council in response to the claims of genocide, who are obligated to act under the UN’s 1948 genocide convention.
2. ATTACKS ON CIVILIANS AND IMPLEMENTATION OF LAW

Daesh has deliberately attacked and targeted civilians as part of its military campaigns across Syria. Kidnapping civilians, unlawful detention, torture, and forced evacuation based on sectarian claims is common. Mass executions and public executions occur regularly for accusations of adultery and homosexuality. Domestic and foreign activists are publicly executed, sometimes via crucifixion. Young girls are sold into sexual slavery and forced to marry Daesh fighters.

III REBEL VIOLATIONS

1. ATTACKS ON CIVILIANS AND HOSTAGE-TAKING

The Free Syrian Army and successor rebel groups have not strayed away from the vicious, civilian-targeted methods of other groups. Government fighters, sympathizers, and innocent civilians have also been captured, tortured, and executed en masse in rebel-controlled territory. Sunni Islamist groups have reciprocated sectarian violence, directing particularly cruel punishments at Shia and Alawite minorities in captured territory.

2. CHILD SOLDIERS

The Free Syrian Army and other rebel factions have desperately conscripted child soldiers to fight as infantry during the Syrian civil war.
IV KURDISH VIOLATIONS

1. ARBITRARY ARREST AND DENIAL OF DUE PROCESS

The Kurdish governing councils in Rojava have acted unitarily as judicial bodies, arbitrarily arresting civilians, violating due process clauses, abusing those detained, and refusing to comment on the alleged detention of missing peoples. Political rivals of the Kurdish party in Rojava have been arrested and detained. In response to international criticism, the Kurdish government has reiterated its commitment to human rights, although improvements have yet to be observed.

2. USE OF CHILD SOLDIERS

The Kurdish military forces are notorious for their use of both male and female child soldiers. After facing strong criticism from the United Nations, the Kurds demobilized a large number of child soldiers and banned both forced and voluntary conscription of child soldiers. It is to be seen whether or not these efforts have been implemented.
3. PILLARS ANALYSIS

A. PILLARS OVERVIEW

According to Gene Sharp, “Pillars of support are institutions and sections of the society that supply the existing regime with sources of power required for maintenance and expansion of its power capacity.” Nonviolent resistance movements analyze these power sources to identify the strengths and weaknesses of authoritarian regimes and democratic opposition. From this information, they may identify regime targets and develop effective opposition tactics.

Given the complicated nature of the Syrian conflict, the pillars analysis is separated into analysis on the Assad regime, Jihadist forces, Rebel forces, and Syrian nonviolence movements.

B. PILLARS SUPPORTING THE ASSAD REGIME

I SYRIAN ARMED FORCES AND DOMESTIC SECURITY FORCES

The turn to violent conflict heavily benefits the Assad regime, which held on to elite Alawite military units, superior firepower in tanks and aircrafts, and incredibly loyal troops fighting for sectarian survival. The Assad military gained an immediate advantage on the newly-armed rebels, who were fractured, unorganized, and lacking the military logistics to decisively defeat the Assad military. A key advantage of nonviolent action and political resistance is that the government always possesses the military advantage over pro-democracy rebel forces. The elite military infrastructure and leadership of Syria fights with the government, and will fight relentlessly with Assad unless he chooses to step down.
The loyalty of the Syrian core military cannot be underestimated as a key pillar of support for the Assad regime. The military leadership is tied to the Assad family by blood and has been greatly rewarded economically and socially for their historical allegiance to the Assad regime. As such, the military leadership will reap the spoils of Assad’s potential victory or be severely punished if Assad loses. Similarly, all members of the Shia/Alawite minority are inclined to fight with the government in the face of rising Sunni extremism and the prospect of even secular persecution of the Alawite minority. Retribution for historical injustices and the crimes of the civil war is possible if the Assad regime falls, so the Syrian Shia are willing to fight to the death if they believe imprisonment and executions are likely if they surrender as well.

Russia is heavily invested in the survival of the Assad regime as Russia’s primary military ally in the Middle East. The Assad regime has historically been dependent on trade and military support from Russia. In return, Russia maintains a key strategic ally that allows them basing rights and access to the Mediterranean Sea. While some speculate that Russia would choose another regime to back if it meant maintain Russian interesting, President Vladimir Putin doubled down on his commitment to Assad in 2015 by assisting the regime with direct military support including increased airstrikes and a small number of ground forces. Although forces were drawn down in 2016, Russia maintains its investment in the future of the Assad regime.
Iran was among the earliest supporters of the Assad regime, providing economic and military assistance throughout the conflict. Iranians find both ethnoreligious and geopolitical ties to the Shia Assad regime. Countering the influence of Sunni extremism in the Middle East is key for some Iranian Assad backers. Religious ties may be weaker than some perceive given the many differences between Iranian religion and the Syrian Alawite religion. Scholars now believe that the geopolitical ties between Iran, Syria, and Russia as anti-Western countries are key. The true purpose of maintaining the Assad regime is to prevent the rise of a puppet government under the influence of Saudi Arabia or Turkey, Iran’s primary geopolitical rivals. Iranian politicians and policymakers currently debate the costs and returns of their involvement in the Syrian civil war. As Russia increases its influence in Syria, Iranians fear that their interests may be diminished or diluted by Russian diplomats in future peace deals. Thus, Iran debates whether to commit more resources to military intervention in Syria or to abandon their interests as a result of lack of trust with Russian mediators.
Daesh, also known as the Islamic State, formed out of an al-Qaeda affiliated terror cell in Iraq traced back to as early as 2002. Centered around an extremist Wahhabi interpretation of Sunni Islam, the cell carried out terrorist attacks against United States military forces and Iraqi military forces and civilians. The cell expanded and reached Syria during 2012 and 2013, when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi expanded military operations and training into Syria. The organization split from al-Qaeda as a result of its ambitious expansion, but gained new resources in foreign donors and foreign fighters. Daesh funded its growing military through extortion of local businesses and seizing Iraqi oil facilities. Propaganda campaigns attracted disenchanted and radicalized foreigners to donate money to the Islamic State, which was also able to attract Sunni Syrians and converts by providing social services and a civil society when the Syrian government and rebels failed to do so.

Daesh finds its supporters through solidarity with Sunni Muslims who have faced discrimination from the Alawite Syrian government, as well as providing resources to desperate, moderate Muslims. Furthermore, the brutal tactics and fear-mongering can terrify and intimidate moderates to collaborate or ally with Daesh to save their own lives. The Islamic State exploits exaggerated media coverage in their propaganda to lure in young people with "adventure" and purpose through radical religious beliefs. While no state actors officially support Daesh, many non-state groups and radical Salafi and Wahhabi groups send money and fighters to Daesh.
Although the Islamic State broke away from al-Qaeda, the international terrorist organization maintained its position in Syria through Jabhat Al-Nusri. The group is a collection of Syrian Sunni Jihadists fighting against the Assad regime with the long-term goals of creating a Sunni Islamic emirate. Their primary strategies include recruiting new followers by providing services, avoiding the terrorist label, and focusing their fight on the Assad regime. The organization deviates from Daesh by fighting in allegiance other Jihadist and secular groups against government forces. Rather than immediately implementing sharia law and its strict punishments, Al-Nusra intends to gradually change the Syrian legal system and educate Syrians about it first. As a result of this more moderate approach, Sunni countries such as Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia directly supported the organization to protect Sunni interests until international powers labelled it as a terrorist organization.

After both US and Russian forces launched major air-strike campaigns against Al-Nusra, the group has allegedly broken its ties with al-Qaeda and rebranded to prevent being targeted further by anti-terrorist airstrikes. The new name of Al-Nusra is Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham; the United States, Russia, and Iran have already labeled the rebranded organization as a terrorist organization and will likely continue airstrikes regardless.
The Free Syrian Army began as a strong, centralized coalition of rebel groups fighting against the Assad government, but over years of armed conflict and desperation, the authority of the Free Syrian Army disintegrated. Syrian rebels fight in loose, changing alliances of smaller groups. In 2013, around 1,000 small rebel groups were fighting against the Assad regime. These groups may be united in their disdain for the Assad government, but their political vision for the future Syrian state vary from secular democratic to moderate Islamist to radical Islamist. As a result, no nations provide blanket support to the Free Syrian Army. Countries choose groups based on matching ideology, although this is not always accurate and effective. For example, the United States has been criticized for shipments of their weapons which pass from the hands of moderate rebels over to extremist groups. Widespread reports of human rights violations also dissuade international powers from supporting the FSA, as the entire organization’s reputation may be tainted by the actions of the few.

In 2016, the rebels lost momentum, and their pillars of support are collapsing; many groups have defected to fight with Daesh, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, and the Syrian Democratic Forces. The main bond of remaining Free Syrian Army bridges is necessity. For example, the Fatih Halab in Aleppo maintains an alliance to survive and potentially break the siege of their city by government forces. They have been able to resist the Syrian government, but it is unlikely that the FSA has the ability to defeat the government as it progressively weakens without resources or manpower.
The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) formed in late 2015 as a coalition between the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) and different Arab militias supporting the independence of the northern Kurdish region in Syria and a secular democratic future for Syria. The Kurdish YPG fought in Syria since 2013 to ensure the safety and security of the Kurdish minority. The chaos and political opportunity of the Syrian civil war allowed the Kurdish forces to receive massive support from the Combined Joint Task Force coalition against Daesh, excluding Turkey, which believes that the organization supports Turkish Kurdish terrorists in their country. The long-term goals of the SDF are a democratic, federated Syria which would allow the Kurdish minority an autonomous region and also satisfy the different ethnic groups of Syria with a multiethnic, cosmopolitan government. Some were skeptical about whether the SDF could integrate non-Kurdish forces into their military operations, but Arabs, Assyrians, and Turkmen militias have fought well alongside Syrian Kurds. These principles of secularism and diversity align with the United States’ vision for Syria, so the United States has been a major arms supplier and will likely continue to advocate for the SDF into the future.
Nonviolent efforts for Syrian activists in the country revolve around passive resistance, such as providing humanitarian aid and relief for displaced peoples and counter-propaganda campaigns. These efforts embody a necessary shift from the risky nonviolent political activism of the Arab Spring to the new survival activism of the civil war. New civil society organizations have formed out of Syrian nonviolence movements to fill the basic needs of populations. Resources are diverted to the war rather than the people. Activists in regional organizations organized hospitals and schools. Democratic local councils and women’s organizations are being formed. In these organizations, nonviolent activists bring together multiethnic and religiously diverse communities under the vision of a positive future. These organizations face resistance for their political messages, which clash with violent secularist, Islamist, and ethnonationalist messages of the government, the Free Syrian Army, and jihadist groups. It is key that inclusive pro-democracy provide necessities to civilians who might be otherwise persuaded to support violent organizations instead.

In addition to provided tangible goods, nonviolent activists in Syria have formed radio stations, newspapers, and digital media channels to provide unfiltered news to Syrians and the international community. These media outlets provide real data about military conflict and human rights violations going on in Syria, as all fighting forces deny or disclaim reports of their atrocities. These news campaigns provide unbiased insight into the living conditions of Syrians during the civil war. Retaking control of the media narrative about Syria is critical for nonviolent activists, so they can counter the propaganda narratives provided by the FSA, Syrian government, and Daesh, which are often used to gain international funding and to recruit foreign fighters.

Syrian nonviolence movements still face many obstacles in the achievement of their long-term political goals. NGOs are decentralized and disorganized; rather than support each other, the many civil society organizations compete with each other for resources. Unity among the nonviolent, pro-democracy activists in Syria will be key when the country stabilizes and forms new governments, regardless of how the civil war ends.
4. POTENTIAL OUTCOMES

A. POSITIVE OUTLOOK: PRESERVING PEACE IN SYRIA AND UNITING CIVIL SOCIETY

To achieve a positive future for Syria, it is necessary for activists, civil society organizations, and pro-democracy forces to believe that peace is possible. War in Syria destroyed infrastructure and deprived people of basic needs. Political progress cannot be made so long as Syrian civilians must fear for their lives. Consequently, it is important that political activists advocate for rescuing the ceasefire between the Assad government and the Syrian rebel forces. The 2016 ceasefire brought a drastic reduction of violence that decreased the number of civilian deaths and human rights violations. It brought economic stability that allowed Syrians to start rebuilding their country’s social infrastructure. Unfortunately, negotiations for peace in Syria only involve violent political factions and their international backers, so it is uncertain that activists can do much besides pressure national and international leaders with pro-peace media. In the future, it is critical that international authorities involve civil society leaders in the Geneva negotiations, as these people will bear the burden of rebuilding their country.

Activists must not wait until peace to start rebuilding Syria, and many civil society organizations and nonviolent leaders already began building schools, hospitals,
independent newspapers, and other community-based organizations to help civilian populations. Independent and tolerant civil society organizations draw civilians away from the militarized civil society organizations of the Assad regime, Daesh, and the FSA, which serve to coerce civilians into joining their fighting forces. After many years of war, the Syrian people need these organizations to heal their communities. One struggle that they face is the sheer amount of NGOs working in Syria; the organizations compete for funding, manpower, and attention. Civil society organizations can increase their impact in Syria by forming alliances and merging regional organizations to tie together all of Syria. Calls to the international community for greater awareness and funding should be made, although it should be clear to Syrian civilians that international aid are conditional and come with selfish political concessions. Connections between diaspora activists and domestic activists can be a critical pillar of support, for example, because the diaspora is invested in returning to their home country. Syrians should remain as self-sufficient as possible when deciding the political future of their country, so that Syria doesn’t continue to be a regional battleground for neighboring countries to interfere in. In sum, civil society organizations are creating the foundation for a new Syria and should unify and expand their work together. Nonviolent, pro-human rights activism can also begin as soon as possible. There are many passive strategies which can unite Syrians rather than embrace the ethnoreligious divides that the warring parties seek. Syrian independent media organizations are already doing heroic work to provide fair news to domestic and international audiences. They counter propaganda campaigns that have been used to manipulate Syrians and international fighters. In addition, Syrians can continue to teach tolerance in their schools and build diverse activist networks that represent a cooperative political future in Syria. Humanitarian aid organizations should collaborate with independent media outlets to provide fair information with their services. Pro-democracy organizations can infuse their nonviolent perspective with the homegrown aid they provide to the Syrian people. All of these actions intend to create a foundation for peaceful discourse between Syrians and to gather the resources for the difficult rebuilding process in the country. Syrians will certainly disagree about the future of their society, and that is normal. Activists should strive to encourage nonviolence and unity rather than violence and discord, so that these important debates can happen productively and the Syrian reconstruction will not be interrupted by more violent conflict.
It is clear why the Syrian peace process is failing when one observes the many difficulties that international negotiators face. The intractable demands of the Syrian warring parties make peace incredible difficult. The Assad regime demands the preservation of the government, and the Syrian rebels demand that Assad steps down. The Syrian Democratic Forces will likely demand an autonomous Kurdish state. Daesh will not negotiate on their demands to create a Wahhabi Islamic caliphate. Historical and ethnic tension fuels these demands, and as a result, it is strenuous for these parties to negotiate with one another. As a result, coalition-building is also difficult because of the complicated, multi-dimensional aspects of negotiations. Syrians must decide the nature of their government (democratic or nondemocratic), the role of Islam in their government (Islamist or secular), and the role of the Kurdish minority (independent, included, or suppressed). The different warring parties may partially agree on these conditions, but very few of them agree on all conditions. International involvement also fuels the Syrian conflict by providing constant economic and military support to the different factions. Civil war negotiations are most successful when politicians and populations face war exhaustion, or the lack of manpower and resources to
continue fighting. Plentiful military supplies for each party means that they always have the financial means to continue the war. Regardless of this international aid, it is unlikely that any one of the four major fighting forces has the ability to defeat the other three. Without the ability achieve decisive victory, the Syrian civil war is fought in a series of sieges, assaults, and counter-assaults on disputed territory that results in major civilian casualties. Desperation for victory causes all sides to use internationally forbidden weapons and direct attacks on civilians to gain ground. International actors cannot collaborate with one another to withdraw their support in Syria because they don’t trust their opposition to also withdraw support. As a result, Syria is locked in an international stalemate.

A negative outlook for Syria in the coming years revolves around further escalation of violent conflict. In countries like the United States, Russia, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, politicians and policymakers are debating whether or not to withdraw their support or fully commit to military intervention. The best case is that all international forces withdraw support and collaborate with each other to pressure the Syrian factions into peace. This is unlikely, because the natural inclination of international rivals is to exploit the weakness of their rival. For example, if Iran withdraws all support from Syria, it is likely that Saudi Arabia will increase their support to move closer to a decisive victory in their favor. The absolute worst case would be that all international sides decide to escalate to military intervention. If Iran and Saudi Arabia both decided to go to war in Syria, it would cause massive international conflict in other parts of the world as well. While international politicians should cooperate together to create peace in Syria, the war may continue simply because of the complicated and difficult relationships between actors in Syria.
Hope for peace in the Syrian conflict is increasing because both international and domestic are fatigued by the intense, sustained violence. The United States and Russia, often diametrically opposed on foreign policy matters, collaborated in an attempt to save the 2016 Syrian ceasefire and to launch airstrikes against Daesh military targets. Regional actors are exasperated by the resources they have expended in the ongoing conflict; the idea of decisive victory for Iran, Saudi Arabia, or Turkey is unlikely now that larger superpowers intervened. They seek the preservation of the pre-war status quo to preserve their geopolitical positions in the region. As a result, Syrian domestic actors do not have the violent push of foreign supporters as they had in earlier years. Ceasefire between the Syrian government and Syrian rebels lasted for months, proving that future peace stability is possible, albeit difficult.

In these windows of peace and stalemate, it is possible for nonviolent actors to reinforce civil society organizations and encourage dialogue. However, these efforts will be plagued by random conflict as a result of the “no war no peace” tension between fighting factions. Activists can channel feelings of exhaustion with the war to persuade people to resist conscription or contributing to military efforts, which will increase pressure for peace. The cost-benefit to risking safety for peace activism should always be a consideration.
Activists shouldn’t be satisfied with peace based on war fatigue. International actors desire for a pre-war status quo which satisfies their geopolitical interests, but does not consider the needs of the Syrian people. Satisfactory peace for Syria will only be generated by the hard work of Syrians. Ceasefires bring only short-term respite from the conflict, and it is important that negotiators create long-term solutions to the underlying causes of the Syrian conflict. These gaps in fighting are opportunities that must be seized by activists to build coalitions, support civilians, and plan a course for the positive future for Syria.

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