



Regional Conflict Complex Theory and the Syrian War: A Conflict Analysis and Resolution Perspective

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The Syrian War has been described as complex and intractable and this is due to the increasing number of actors involved in the conflict and their differing aims. This paper uses regional conflict complex theory to break down the complexity and identify the incompatibilities between the actors involved in the conflict. This is essential for future attempts at resolving the conflict through mediation and negotiation.

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1. Introduction

This paper analyses the Syrian War in the context of Regional Conflict Complexes (RCCs), a concept from conflict resolution, and identifies the incompatibilities central to the conflict, which are essential to understanding the nature of the war. The conflict is referred to as the 'Syrian War' throughout, as to call what is a multifaceted battle space with overlapping conflicts a civil war does not adequately convey its nature. It began as protests, was then an uprising, became a civil war over the governance of Syria, then evolved into a war in which four distinct groupings are contesting territory within Syrian national borders, supported and influenced by regional and global actors. The four are the Syrian government and its allies, the opposition (broken down into moderates, Islamists and jihadists), the Kurds, and ISIS, all of which have fought each other at some point, with intra-Opposition fighting complicating the picture further. This is the bare minimum that the actors internal to Syria can be broken down to, but in doing so the incompatibilities of the Syrian War can be identified and its complexity broken down. This chapter begins by introducing the theoretical base of RCCs, examines the Syrian War using the theory, then addresses the incompatibilities between the actors involved. The conclusion summarises what the analysis tells us about the future of Syria's war.

2. Towards a Regional Conflict Complex Theory (RCCT)

Our understanding of regional conflict complexes is as a conflict resolution concept. We begin with the formulation by Wallensteen & Sollenberg¹, which built on the early work of the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). Here, conflict situations in neighbouring countries have demonstrable linkages and changes in one can affect the other. The authors cite two such linkages: the first a trans-border incompatibility where an ethnic group straddles an international border; the second interaction and cooperation towards a government or group in another state. This has a distinct utility to the analysis of contemporary armed conflict, in particular Syria, as it already includes a trans-state perspective. As Wallensteen & Sollenberg specify that only two armed conflicts be required to make up a regional conflict complex it is no surprise that in their period of study dating from 1989 to 1997 fifteen regional conflict complexes were identified, accounting for 55% of 103 armed conflicts taking place in that period.² Wallensteen, in 2015, gives three regional

¹ Peter Wallensteen & Margareta Sollenberg 'Armed Conflict and Regional Conflict Complexes, 1989-97.' *Journal of Peace Research* Vol 35, No 5 (1998) pp 621-634.

² UCDP guidelines require that there be a minimum of 25 battle-related deaths in a year for it to be included in the dataset.

conflict complexes linked to Syria: Palestine, the Gulf region, and the Syrian and Kurdish complex. The third relates directly to the Syrian war, but all three of these are relevant to the Syria Crisis and they contain all of the regional actors involved in the Syria conflict.³ It should be noted that a conflict complex is not a static phenomena and its nature changes with events as conflict complexes are dynamic and so subject to change.

The usage of the description 'regional conflict complex' requires clarification as while it refers to the idea of a regional relationship of separate conflict situations that impact on each other the idea of a cluster of interrelated conflicts in a given region that influence each other is not new and has been addressed from the perspectives of international relations and peace and conflict studies.⁴ The international relations literature leans towards a nation-state perspective with an emphasis on security, although the national, regional and international levels are considered. This is a top-down approach, whereas the contributions from peace and conflict studies have a contrasting bottom-up approach better suited to understanding the dynamics of conflict at the transnational level.⁵ The alternative perspective would be the international relations orientated 'regional security complexes' (RSCs), as conceived by Buzan, which is more concerned with security in an anarchic environment and are part of a comprehensive framework working at the domestic, regional, inter-regional and global levels.⁶ In later work the security complexes still worked at all levels as a 'security constellation' but were centred on the RSCs and remained security based with every state being involved in an RSC, but with RSCs being mutually exclusive and contingent on the security practices of the state actors.⁷ RSCs have two key components. The first is the patterns of amity and enmity within it, with indifference and/or neutrality in between. The second is the distribution of power amongst the principal states, changes in which would mean that the RSC would need a redefinition.⁸

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) is a clearly defined theory that explains and predicts RSCs in the state security context, but is less suited to understanding the dynamics of armed conflict, which a regional conflict complex (RCC) does. RSCT is concerned with security, from conflict formation through to the development of a security community, while a RCC perspective looks at the linkages in the clustering of armed conflicts in a geographical space and how these can be resolved to the point where there is no armed

³ Peter Wallensteen *Understanding Conflict Resolution 4th Edn* (Sage Publications Ltd: London: 2015).

⁴ Nadine Ansorg 'How does militant violence diffuse in regions? Regional conflict systems in international relations and peace and conflict studies' *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* Vol 5, No 1 (2011) pp 173-187. There is a tendency in literature outside of Peace Studies and Conflict Analysis and Resolution to group the two together under 'Peace and Conflict Studies'.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Barry Buzan *People, States and Fear* (Harvester Wheatsheaf: London: 1991). A more accurate attribution would be Security Studies.

⁷ Barry Buzan and Ole Waever *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2003).

⁸ Buzan, op cit.

conflict and a state of peace. The two perspectives are not completely exclusive to one another and can be described as complementary but they cannot be treated as the same, as they are analysing two different things, the methods are different, and the answers that they produce will differ.⁹ Where RSCT theory works towards the development of security communities that will improve security and so reduce fear and enmity, conflict resolution seeks to dismantle RCCs as a source of perpetuating conflict. A key difference is that RCCs can (and will) overlap as they are dependent on the linkages between conflicts.

The outline of RSCs given above does, however, allow us to consider the incorporation of additional levels of analysis in order to explain RCCs as part of a more comprehensive framework. In a conceptual move Wallensteen has moved towards the consideration of the impact of global conflict complexes on regional conflict complexes, giving as examples the Cold War and the 'Global War on Terrorism' (GWOT), which invariably brings the global powers into regional conflict complexes.¹⁰ It is a natural step to then consider the levels below, which we will term the national, and is in line with the idea that conflict resolution works at multiple levels.¹¹ This is not a new theory but the development and application of an existing one, and while there are now three levels, it is the regional level that remains the source of interest. The incorporation of new levels of analysis also changes how the analysis is done as the actors at the global level will have a major influence on states at the national and regional levels, but will generally not border them, so not have trans-border incompatibilities. Also, by assessing conflict complexes at the national level a move has been made towards intra-state violence (something which RSCT would miss).

Before continuing we need to consider what constitutes a conflict complex at the three levels of analysis in a conceptual framework.

National Conflict Complexes (NCCs)

A *national conflict complex* (NCC) can be described as a core ongoing conflict of an intra-state nature where there is a contradiction in terms of governance and/or territory. The most common type of conflict since the end of the Cold War is intra-state conflict where a challenger group or groups is vying for more representation, autonomy, or independence.¹² Examples of this are India and Myanmar, two very different countries that have historically faced numerous insurgencies, with many still ongoing, and all related to the relationship

⁹ Acknowledged by both Buzan and Wallensteen.

¹⁰ Wallensteen, op cit.

¹¹ It would also be productive to explore the amity and enmity between actors, which impact on how actors in a regional conflict complex perceive and act towards each other, but is outside the boundaries of the current paper.

¹² James D Fearon & David D. Laitin 'Ethnicity, insurgency, and civil war.' *American Political Science Review* Vol 97, No 1 (2003) pp 75-90.

between the region and the state.¹³ These occur because of a specific discontent between the local population and state, whether they be political, ethnic, religious or otherwise, and while there may be links to neighbouring countries this does not become a regional conflict complex unless there is a trans-border incompatibility or a regional actor is involved. NCCs are the most difficult of the levels of analysis to gain data on, analyse, and explain, as will be seen below.

Regional Conflict Complexes (RCCs)

A *regional conflict complex* (RCC) is closer to the concept of the regional conflict complex as conceived by Wallensteen and Sollenberg but expanded beyond trans-border incompatibilities, which remain the primary source, when there is an ethnic or religious connection between the actors at the national level and regional powers.¹⁴ This does not reject the findings from UCDP data, but it does allow for the ‘regional narratives’ that inform the geographical region they are located in and where they act as the drivers of conflict. Here we will focus on two regional conflict complexes that have impacted directly on Syria and the Middle-East. The first is the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the gulf region, manifested in differences over governance and the politicisation of the Sunni-Shia divide. Other states and sub-state actors in the region identify with either of the two parties who are able to deploy military assets and national finances in pursuit of their aims and goals. Saudi Arabia and Iran are the major players in a regional cold war in which they do not directly confront one another but pursue their aims and interests abroad, supporting rival factions in other countries or intervening militarily.¹⁵ The second is what has been described as the ‘Arab Spring’, followed by the ‘Arab Winter’ but what may be more accurately described as the ‘Arab Awakening’. The outcome has been a combination of reform, governmental change and conflict and this major transformation has not finished and may prove to be a transition of the highest order in the long term. It has seen the departure of secular dictators, yet the Arab monarchies have survived, but have had to make concessions. It is the breakdown of the ruling bargain where personal freedom was exchanged for prosperity and security and an addressing of the question of equal representation and opportunity and how it can be achieved, what the nature of the state should be and the role of Islam in this. Driven by social media, it is a compressing of the

¹³ For India see: Namarata Goswani “Insurgencies in India”, in: PB Rich & I Duyvesteyn (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency* (Routledge: New York: 2014); for Myanmar see: Timo Kivimäki & Paul Pasch *The Dynamics of Conflict in the Multiethnic Union of Myanmar: PCIA - Country Conflict-Analysis Study* (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Division for International Cooperation: Berlin: 2009).

¹⁴ RCST Theory (Buzan and Waever) assumes the presence of regional powers as part of a regional security system. Here the regional powers and/or narratives are relevant only if they are contributing to conflict.

¹⁵ Curtis Ryan ‘The New Arab Cold War and the Struggle for Syria’ *Middle East Report* Vol 42, No 262 (2012); F. Gregory Gause III *Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War* Brookings Doha Analysis Paper No 11 (July 2014).

timescale of social revolution in countries whose governments are ill-equipped to embrace change.¹⁶

Global Conflict Complexes (GSCs)

A *global conflict complex* (GCC) is essentially a grand narrative, a meta-narrative even, which is dominated by the interests of the more powerful states with global reach, which are primarily, though not exclusively, the five countries with permanent UN Security Council membership.¹⁷ The key strength of the permanent UNSC members is that they all have the power to veto UN Security Council resolutions and are the only countries that are able to do this. Of these, the US is the superpower and generally aligned with France and the UK, with Russia and China as challengers. Here two grand narratives are presented. The first is what I will refer to as a new Cold War Dynamic. This is the effective end of US dominance as China has become the major power it has been predicted to be and is asserting itself as the regional power in South-East Asia, bringing it into competition with the US and her allies.¹⁸ Russia has become increasingly assertive, intervening in Georgia and Ukraine in reaction to EU and NATO expansion and in Syria to support Assad. While Russia and China cannot be described as allies they are able to work together in pursuit of their interests, use their veto power in the UN Security Council, form temporary alliances, and pursue their interests abroad. This has led to a US-Russia/China axis and is essentially a reinvigoration of an unresolved Cold War, which never truly went away¹⁹: they will avoid direct military confrontation, but work through proxies and provide military, diplomatic and financial support. The second is the 'terror wars', which, for the West, began after the 9/11 attacks and set the US and its allies on the path of major interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq in pursuit of the threat posed by Al-Qaeda.²⁰ The ongoing war against ISIS is the latest stage of these ongoing wars, to which any country can participate in the global cause of fighting terrorism.²¹ Commonly understood as the Global War on Terror (GWOT), as envisaged by the Bush administration, the terror wars have dominated US foreign policy and military deployments. As a consequence, the impact has been global, and while the West has

¹⁶ Marc Lynch 'The big think behind the Arab Spring' *Foreign Policy* No 190 (2011) pp 46; Martin Beck & Simone Hüser *Political Change in the Middle East: An Attempt to Analyze the 'Arab Spring'* GIGA Working Papers, No. 203 (2012).

¹⁷ The United States, United Kingdom, France, Russia and China. (The 'victor states' from the Second World War). The EU and Japan also have considerable influence due to their 'soft' power (socio-economic).

¹⁸ Paul Kennedy *Preparing for the Twenty-First Century* (Harper Collins Publishers: London: 1993); James Kyngge *China Shakes the World: The Rise of a Hungry Nation* (Phoenix: London: 2007).

¹⁹ Colin S Gray *Another Bloody Century* (Phoenix: London: 2006).

²⁰ From an extensive literature see: Paul Berman *Terror and Liberalism* (W.W.Norton: New York: 2004); Fawaz A Gerges *The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda* (Oxford University Press: Oxford: 2011). Commonly referred to as the Global War on Terror (GWOT), which is misleading and does not adequately convey when it began or the actors involved due to being US-centric.

²¹ Wallensteen includes the GWOT at the global level. The understanding here is different (see note 21).

suffered terrorist attacks and military casualties, it is unmistakable that the majority of the damage has occurred in the Middle East, Asia and Africa.²²

In concluding the first part of this chapter we have introduced conflict complexes from a conflict resolution perspective and distinguished between three levels: the national, regional and global. It should be noted that the separation of local, regional and global complexes is an analytical tool and they will overlap and be present across all of the timeline of a given conflict. The analysis of conflict complexes using a multi-level framework allows for the vertical and horizontal linkages in a conflict to be understood holistically and the analyst to identify the incompatibilities present in the conflict, allowing for mediation and negotiation towards the peaceful ending of an armed conflict.

3. Syria and the conflict complexes

The Syria crisis has had a dramatic and tragic effect on Syria and neighbouring countries, but with the violence centred on Syria itself and regional and global actors contributing to its development and continuation. These include those that have trans-border linkages (e.g: Palestine and the Gulf) and those presented above where there are regional trends, but without trans-border linkages. A multi-level analysis allows for the RCCs to be understood better, but will also point the analyst to the national and global levels, as the possibility that one of these is the primary driver of conflict and the regional level the secondary or even tertiary driver of conflict cannot be discounted.²³

Conflict in Syria at the National Level

There are currently four distinct internal actors who hold territory in Syria and are active in fighting on the ground with other internal and external actors who have a military presence due to their support for a faction(s) or opposition to them. The internal actors are outlined here as the Syrian government, the opposition, the Syrian Kurds, and ISIS. These are the minimum number of actors that can be defined while at the same time accounting for the incompatibilities of the actors within the Syrian war. While the Kurds and ISIS are opposed to the government, they are distinctive actors in their own right, unique as an identity group, and have long term goals separate to that of the 'opposition'.

The internal actors on the government side are the Syrian Armed Forces, the part-time National Defence Forces (NDF) formed in November 2012, the predominantly Alawite

²² The concepts of both the GWOT and Terror Wars are Western. The actual scope of the violence and its drivers are global.

²³ A complete conflict analysis would include a historical account of the conflict in Syria. The following sources have been used in the author's research on Syria and inform the analysis: David W Lesch *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad* (Yale University Press: New Haven: 2013); John McHugo *Syria: A Recent History* (Saqi Books: London: 2015); Reese Erlich *Inside Syria: The Backstory Of Their Civil War And What The World Can Expect* (Prometheus Books: New York: 2016); The Independent *Syria: Descent into the Abyss 2011-2014* (Independent Print Limited: London: 2014). Any inaccuracies are the authors own.

Shabiba who were present during the uprising, and Christian militias that formed locally at the outset of the conflict. These reflect the diversity of confessional faiths within Syria and the predominantly Sunni confessional opposition groups.²⁴ There is a fear of the Sunni dominated opposition amongst the other confessional groups in the country as the conflict has evolved into one which is distinctly sectarian in nature and where the Islamists and jihadists in particular are feared. This explains in part the support for the government in the government held areas of the country who fear reprisal if the territory is lost to the Islamists and jihadists whom may seek revenge on sectarian grounds. The government has external support on the ground from Lebanese Hezbollah, Iranian forces and Iranian backed militias of the Shia denomination, and Russia.²⁵

The nature of the 'opposition' is complicated as even with ISIS excluded they include what has been broadly categorised as moderate, Islamist and jihadist groups, whose alliances have fluctuated pragmatically over the course of the war.²⁶ 'Moderates' we can treat as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which has contained a number of locally based brigades. The 'Islamists' seek the defeat of the Assad regime and the establishment of an Islamic state in Syria, but have little ambitions outside of Syria. The 'jihadists' see the Syrian War as part of a larger struggle, one that does not end with the defeat of the Assad regime.²⁷ These are a far from unified opposition given that they have at times fought or allied with each other and there has been movement of fighters between groups. This has affected external support, in particular from the US, UK, and France, as they don't want arms and supplies to fall in the hands of proscribed terrorist organisations. The FSA, the sole opposition at the beginning of the conflict was backed by Turkey, the US, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. This number has gradually reduced as the Islamist and jihadist groups came to dominance. While the opposition is predominantly Sunni, there are a small number of other faiths, including Christian militias present, but there is an increasing consensus amongst observers of the Syrian war that the opposition is dominated by Islamist and Jihadist factions and groups, who have had better external support.

²⁴ This a generalisation that should be interpreted carefully, as there are a number of confessional groups allied with the groups in the north of the country and there are also Christian militias allied with the FSA.

²⁵ Actors outside of the remit of the Syrian Government's armed forces who support the Assad regime are numerous and changeable. Sources used are: Oytun Orhan *The Shiite Militias in Syria and Political Solution* Orsam Review of International Affairs No 26 (Orsam: Ankara: 2015); Cody Roche *Assad Regime Militias and Shi'ite Jihadis in the Syrian Civil War* (Bellingcat: 2016).

<https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2016/11/30/assad-regime-militias-and-shiite-jihadis-in-the-syrian-civil-war/> ; Uncredited 2# List of armed groups in the Syrian Civil War (World in War: 2016)

<http://www.worldinwar.eu/list-of-armed-groups-in-the-syrian-civil-war/>.

²⁶ Opposition actors are also numerous and changeable. Sources used are: Uncredited, op cit; Fabrice Balanche 'Status of the Syrian Rebellion: Numbers, Ideologies, and Prospects' PolicyWatch 2727 The Washington Institute for Near-East Policy (2016) <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/status-of-the-syrian-rebellion-numbers-ideologies-and-prospects>.

²⁷ Guido Steinberg *The New 'Lions of Syria'* (SWP Comments: Berlin: 2014). Steinberg treats ISIS as one of the Jihadist groups.

The Kurds in the north of the country have had a limited amount of fighting with government forces at the beginning of the war until the government withdrew to focus on its battles elsewhere. Since then Northern Syria has seen its own distinct battles involving the Kurdish YPG and the Islamists and jihadists, before entering into a brutal battle with ISIS. Their relationship with the FSA has seen them allied with some brigades and battling others. Since October 2015 the YPG have been part of the Arab-Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) which also includes other confessional faiths and ethnic groups. While there have been small battles with other opposition groups and Turkish forces, the primary focus of the SDF has been the advance on Raqqa. They have received air support from the US led coalition against ISIS. The Kurds seek to retain their territory as an autonomous region within Syria.²⁸

The status of ISIS is the one thing that almost every other actor, internal and external, in the Syrian War can agree on, although the attention that they have received has distorted how other countries view the war. Prior to their spectacular advance across Iraq in 2014 and their dominance in eastern and northern Syria they were mainly known for their presence in the Iraqi west and having an affiliate in Syria.²⁹ This changed from 2014 onwards as the group took swathes of territory and threatened the security of both countries and the ethnic groups within them. Akin to other Jihadist groups, there is little (if any) room for negotiation as their aims and goals are not linked to the nature of a future Syrian government but in the establishment and expansion of a caliphate. Along with their practices in the areas they rule, utter disregard for minorities, and the collision of their extreme form (Salafi-Jihadist) interpretation of Sunni Islam with other religious groupings, this aversion to any form of compromise marks ISIS out as a group excluded from negotiations over the future of Syria.

The four groups of actors at the national level have linkages to each other and to the regional conflict complexes outlined below. This can be understood as horizontal relationships at the national level and a vertical relationship with the regional level. Here we are concerned with the former. The four have been involved in a battle for territory, with waxing and waning allegiances and rivalries, but all four have fought all of the others at

²⁸ Martin Chulov 'Kurds see chance to advance their cause in ruins of Islamic State' The Guardian 24th June 2017 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/24/kurds-see-historic-chance-advance-cause-ruins-islamic-state> ; For two different perspectives on the Syrian Kurds see: Stephen Gowans (2017) 'The Myth of the Kurds in Syria YPG's Moral Excellence' Global Research <https://www.globalresearch.ca/the-myth-of-the-kurds-in-syria-ypgs-moral-excellence/5598751>; Till F. Paasche 'Syrian and Iraqi Kurds: Conflict and Cooperation' Middle East Policy Vol 22, No 1 (2015) <http://www.mepc.org/syrian-and-iraqi-kurds-conflict-and-cooperation>

²⁹ The material available on ISIS is substantial. For their origins see: David Kilcullen *Blood Year: Islamic State and the Failures of the War on Terror* (Hurst & Company: London: 2016); For works on the group: Patrick Cockburn *The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution* (Verso: London: 2015); Michael Weiss & Hassan Hassan *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (Regan Arts: New York: 2015).

some point. Success or threat between one pair has an impact on the others in a complicated and changing battle space. For example, the Syrian government had fought the Kurds in the early stages of the war, but then became focused on the threat from the opposition, who in turn had their own battles with the Kurds, who would later become involved in a bitter battle with ISIS for Kobane. It is unmistakable that all four groups have incompatible aims and goals, which bring them into conflict with each other, and would do so even without the contribution of external supporters.³⁰ What the war became was a multifaceted competition for territory and survival. No one is going to give up anything that has earned at great cost, whether it is the Syrian government's battle to reclaim territory, the myriad groups of the opposition and their ideas of what a future Syria will be, the Kurdish need for the security of an autonomous region, or ISIS and their Caliphate.

Syria and the regional conflict complexes

To understand the linkages at the regional level requires the inclusion of every state neighbouring Syria and the addition of non-neighbouring Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf States. In terms of Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Turkey and Syria itself, the key linkage of a trans-border incompatibility where an ethnic group straddles an international border is present in all. Sunni Muslims are present, as would be expected, in significant numbers in all six countries; Shia Muslims are present in significant numbers in Lebanon, Iraq, and Turkey; and the Kurds are present in significant numbers in Iraq, Syria and Turkey (and Iran). Bar Israel, every state has a plethora of ethnicities and minorities, some such as the Alawites mainly present in Syria and others such as Christian denominations across the region. While none of the countries could be described as having only one ethnicity or identity group, there are three countries that can be described as being multi-ethnic in that they have three or more ethnicities or identity groups in significant numbers within their borders, and these are Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. All three have survived as nation-states despite having experienced periods of major sectarian violence and the loss of central government control. There has been an overspill of violence out of Syria, limited for Israel and Jordan, but more so for Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey, and transiting of fighters and materials into Syria from every neighbouring country with the exception of Israel. The border between Iraq and Syria had been merely a line on a map prior to the rise of ISIS, whose establishment of a self-declared Islamic State effectively eliminated it as a boundary between the Sunni's of Iraq and Syria. Turkey's border has proved to be largely ineffectual with the transiting of foreign fighters and materials into Syria in support of the opposition and ISIS, and Turkey's own military incursion. Finally, it is notable that there has been a flow of refugees from Syria into Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Turkey.

³⁰ Without whom the conflict would not be as it is today.

As regards the interaction and cooperation towards a government or group in another state, a wider perspective that includes Iran, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf States is required as while these are not subjected to the consequences of a trans-border relationship with Syria, they have a substantial influence in providing resources to competing actors within Syria. This has affected the military fortunes of the government, the opposition, and also ISIS. While the UCDP Palestinian and Syrian-Kurdish RCCs illustrate the linkages between Syria and neighbouring conflicts well, the broader Saudi Arabia v Iran and Muslim Awakening RCCs provide a wider explanation within the context of the Middle-East.

Here we move to the first of the RCCs proposed earlier: the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran for regional dominance in the gulf region. This is one where the rivals do not engage each other directly but act against or support regional proxies, fuelling local conflicts in the process, as they jockey for dominance against each other. This rivalry can be seen in the Yemen civil war and the Qatari crisis as well as in the Syrian war. The clearest picture per Syria is the support from both sides that supports their own interests in the outcome. Iran is a major supporter of the Syrian government and has been instrumental in providing funding for the security forces, Hezbollah and the raising and support of Shia militias. Saudi Arabia has openly supported the opposition, to the extent of attempting the thankless task of uniting them as a negotiating group for the intra-Syrian talks. Iran's interest in the region extends to establishing its influence over Shia areas, including Shia-majority Iraq, and creating a land link from Iran to the Mediterranean. The country has invested heavily in the battle in Iraq against ISIS and in supporting the Syrian government.

The second of the RCCs presented earlier is one of non-state actors and their influence across the entire MENA region in the form of the 'Muslim Awakening'. For Syria the Arab Spring had a definitive impact as the uprising arose from local events that impacted nationally and the Syrian government's response was inadequate and repressive, enabling the transition to a civil war. The 'Arab Spring' became the 'Arab Winter' due to Libya, Egypt and Syria descending into violence and political instability, but what is notable is the rise of radical-Islamists and jihadists after the initial events in all three countries. The ruling bargain of exchanging freedom for security and prosperity broke down long before the Arab Spring triggered in Tunisia, and it is the non-state actors whom have benefited in the long term. The mobility of political and religious ideas across the borders of the MENA countries in the wake of technological change is matched by the ability of foreign fighters to be recruited and move between battle zones. For Syria, who once allowed foreign fighters to transit to Iraq and released its own jailed Islamists and troublemakers into the opposition ranks, the consequences of years of repression and the failure to reform at a pace matching revolutionary change has meant that the socio-political question of governance in Syria has also become a religious and political one.

Syria and the global conflict complexes

Earlier two global conflict complexes were introduced: the new 'Cold War Dynamic' and the 'terror wars', which are grand narratives impacting on local and regional affairs, and which involve major powers. Both of these have had an impact on the Syrian War. Again, there are no direct trans-border issues, unless states neighbour each other.

The new Cold War Dynamic was introduced above and is characterised by a major power split along the lines of a US/France/UK v China/Russia division in the UNSC, but not forgetting the socio-economic powerhouses that are the EU and China. In the Syrian context, Russia is a long term partner of Syria and has two bases in the country, and together with China was suspicious of the motives of the Western powers in the UNSC, leading to a failure to authorise intervention in Syria against the Assad regime. This was in light of a UN resolution over implementing a no-fly zone over Libya becoming de facto NATO air support for the enemies of the Kaddafi regime and altering the course of the first Libyan civil war.³¹ Subsequently, Russian support for Assad and Chinese non-interventionism resulted in the veto against intervention in Syria. This did not prevent support from the US, France, UK, the EU, Turkey and Arab states for the Syrian opposition. Notably, this included US allies in the region, including Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, although Turkey, a NATO member opposed to the Assad regime and concerned about the Syrian Kurds, has since trod its own unique path. The primary US opponent in the region, including before the fall of Saddam Hussain, was and is Iran, a close Assad ally and opponent of the Arab states.³² These linkages therefore define the interests of the global powers in the Syrian war: on the one hand there is the US, EU, Saudi Arabia and Qatar who have at times supported differing parts of the opposition; on the other there has Russia (interventionist) committed to its interests in Syria in alliance with Iran and with support in the UN from China (non-interventionist). Turkey, which is nominally opposed to Assad and hosts the mainstream Syrian opposition, has become an actor which is in conflict with the US interest in supporting the Kurds, who have been supported in their battles by coalition airpower and seen as important in the battle against ISIS.

The grand narrative of the terror wars is that civilisation is in a battle with Islamist and Jihadist militants and thus any country which hosts or supports them is an enemy. Conversely, declaring against the Islamist and jihadist groups means that a country or sub-state actor is on 'the right side' in the terror wars, despite there being no consensus on which groups or states are 'terrorist(s)' or on when the terror wars actually began.³³ The

³¹ Yun Sun 'Syria: What China Has Learned From its Libya Experience' Asia Pacific Bulletin No 152 (2012)

³² Despite having a severely adversarial relationship the US and Iran have had to work towards the same goal of defeating ISIS, particularly in Iraq.

³³ One critical mistake is to adopt a western viewpoint and assume that the battle against Jihadists (and to some degree Islamists) began with the ongoing terror wars initiated by the US after 9/11. This belies an already existing conflict within the Islamic world over the nature and role of Islam and its place with regards to

wars against ISIS in Syria and Iraq by competing but unallied alliances (Syria/Russia/Hezbollah v ISIS and Arab-Kurd alliance/US Coalition v ISIS; Iraq/Iran/Kurds /US Coalition v ISIS) are a major part of this. The recruitment and transiting of Islamist and jihadist volunteers is another major part, swelling the ranks of opposition groups in Syria and bringing with them a militancy and ideology at odds with locals. Groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS are able to appeal and recruit globally, including experienced fighters from previous wars, particularly if either the US or Russia is present in a conflict. While the global powers are currently focused on ISIS in Syria, there has been confusion regarding the Islamist and jihadists elements of the opposition, some of whom would clearly qualify as 'terrorist' according to the understanding of the US and EU, yet are locked in battle with the Syrian Arab Army and its allies. The Assad regime has a very different and much simpler view: all its opponents are 'terrorists' and there is no need for a prevarication over where its enemies lay on the opposition spectrum. The opposite could be said of the western viewpoint of Hezbollah and Iranian raised foreign militias.

4. Incompatibilities and the Conflict Complexes

Understanding the relationships of the conflict complexes through RCCT theory allows us to understand the factors currently driving the Syrian War at all levels and the linkages between them. There has been a substantial change in the nature of actors fighting on the ground in Syria while attitudes of the regional and global actors have remained comparatively static in terms of who they want to rule Syria.³⁴ What has happened in the years since the uprising of 2011 has many authors, with Syria being both a victim of outside actors and an exporter of violence to its neighbours. What is unmistakable from the outline of national, regional and global conflict complexes given above is that there are rivalries and alliances with incompatibilities at all three levels and these are linked.

At the national level the Syrian government's forces and allied militias are in a protracted conflict with two of the major territory holders in Syria: the opposition (moderate, Islamist and jihadist) and ISIS (jihadist's whom are transnational and a distinct territorial entity). Conflict with the Kurd's is minimal, probably due to the battles with the opposition and ISIS, and while the general state of war exists there seems to be an acceptance of the Kurdish wish for autonomy.

At the regional level the government is supported by Iran, Hezbollah and other Shia militias, some Iraqi, with the connection between Syria and Iran being a long standing one and part of Iran's strategy for the region. Countries in the region that are neutral to Syria are

the nation-state, or even if the such borders mattered in the context of Islamic governance and jurisprudence. On this see: Dilip Hiro *War Without End: The Rise of Islamist Terrorism and the Global Response* (Routledge: London: 2002); Shiraz Mayer *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea* (Penguin Books: London: 2017).

³⁴ The recent acknowledgment that Assad may remain in power in the short term is a pragmatic realisation on the part of the Western bloc, but is far from what they actually want.

Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq, although factions within Lebanon and Iraq do support either the Syrian government or its enemies and Jordan is a US ally, but what all three governments have in common is an earnest wish not to have Syria's war become their war. Opposed to the Syrian regime are Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and Sunni militias, whom have provided varying degrees of support to opposition groups, but have not actively committed themselves militarily against the Syrian regime. This places the Syrian war into the context of one of our two RCCs, the regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which manifests along the Sunni-Shia divide and affects alliances within the region. Israel, whom draws the ire of everyone else, we will discuss below.

At the global level, Russia has thrown itself into the Syrian war politically and militarily on the side of the Assad regime (and not simply the Syrian government), a regional ally and provider of military bases to Russia. The UK, US, France, and the EU, (the three western UNSC powers and a major 'soft power'), have been politically opposed to the Syrian government and have collectively provided training, support and arms to the moderate opposition, with some of this making its way to the Islamists and jihadists. China, the remaining UNSC member, has remained staunchly non-interventionist and has allied itself with Russia in the UNSC to prevent UN resolutions authorising western military intervention. This reflects the 'New Cold War' rivalry between the 'West' and Russia/China, exemplified by Russia's response to NATO/EU expansion and China's challenge to US dominance in the Pacific region.³⁵ This is one of the GCCs (the New Cold War Dynamic), permeating down to the regional level, with the western bloc having positive relations with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, and Russia/China having positive relations with Iran, and through it, to the national level, affecting both the battle space and attempts to mediate between the actors involved. The emergence of ISIS as a quasi-state and its impact in Syria and Iraq has ensured that the US led coalition has become involved in countering ISIS, meaning that the second GCC (the 'Terror Wars') is also applicable to Syria, exemplified by the separate support for forces in Iraq and Syria. The outright termination of ISIS is the one thing that every other actor in the Syrian battle space agrees on, hence the panoply of bitter rivals working separately towards a common goal.³⁶

We can, however, within the apparent complexity of the Syrian War, see two distinct tracks of relationships, which have impacted on the course of the war:

The Syrian Government and its militia allies (National); Iran, Hezbollah and other Shia militias (Regional); and, Russian political and military support, Chinese political support in the UNSC (Global).

³⁵ On this, see: Gray, op cit.

³⁶ The war against ISIS falls neatly into the 'terror wars' alongside the US war against Al-Qaeda but is a major global conflict of its own. Unlike Russia and the Western bloc China has not become involved but may do so if there is an exporting of Jihadist or Islamist ideology to its Xinjiang region due to ISIS influence.

versus:

The Opposition and the Kurds (National); Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Sunni militias (Regional); and, The US, UK, France and EU (Global).

This is the absolute minimum that the core incompatibility over the governance of Syria, between the Syrian government, and the opposition and the Kurds, can be reduced to, although it does also demonstrate a clear link between actors at all three levels who are divided over what the future government of Syria would look like and favour either the Assad regime or a transitional government. The intractability of the Syrian War stems from this basic incompatibility over governance, originating at the national level, but guided in its development by the interests of regional actors and their backers. While the fortunes of the government, the opposition, and the Kurds, has ebbed and flowed, and additional actors (including ISIS) have joined the fray, the question of who rules what and who is seen as legitimate and illegitimate by a divided international community remains. There are, however, four distinct factors that take the Syrian War beyond its central incompatibility over the governance of Syria. These supplementary incompatibilities make the Syrian War, which is no longer strictly a civil war, what it is today and point to what it will be in the future.

The first is the differences in the opposition that opposes the Assad regime. On the maps of the Syrian war presented in the media there are generally four territorial groupings: areas of government control, Kurdish territory, opposition held areas, and ISIS territory. The areas attributed to the opposition are contested by groups who to varying degrees are moderate, Islamist or jihadist, have fought each other, launched allied campaigns for territory, and whose fighters will transit between groups, changing allegiance as they go, joining groups whose affiliations and names change.³⁷ The balance of power between moderates, Islamists, and jihadists has changed significantly, and while the nominally moderate and Islamist groups hold territory and are still in combat with the Syrian Government and their allies, local agreements resulting in the movement of fighters and civilians and opposition infighting has left most of Idlib province under the control of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).³⁸ Formerly known as the Al-Nusra Front, the group was an Al-Qaeda affiliate, and once the Syrian government has finished its business with ISIS there is a strong possibility that its war with HTS will escalate. On the spectrum of opposition the FSA and HTS represent two poles, there is much in between, and the maps are misleading in this respect.³⁹

³⁷ For an idea of the sheer number of groups see: Uncredited, op cit. A more analytical account is given by Balanche, op cit.

³⁸ Mona Alami 'Hayat Tahrir al-Sham plots its next move in northern Syria' Al-Monitor August 7th 2017 <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/08/syria-idlib-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-agreements.html>

³⁹ This is despite excellent work done in mapping the war. An example is the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) who provide weekly updates on the course of the war: <http://www.understandingwar.org/>.

The second is the country that we set aside for now. Israel is unique in the Middle-East in that it has an adversarial with neighbouring Arab states and Iran. Both Syria and Israel have previously occupied Lebanon and a dispute over the Golan Heights remains as a reminder that the countries have fought wars against each other. The Shia Hezbollah were formed with Iranian backing during Israel's 1980's occupation of Lebanon and they have been in conflict with Israel ever since. The presence of Hezbollah and their supplies in Syria is anathema to Israel, who has launched numerous airstrikes into Syria as a consequence. The US is a staunch Israeli ally, while the UK and France are broadly sympathetic to Israel but critical of the plight of the Palestinians.⁴⁰

The third is the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. Turkey has undergone considerable political change since the beginning of the Syrian War but remains opposed to the Assad regime and while allowing opposition fighters to traverse its borders and taking in refugees has blocked the movement of Kurdish Peshmerga. The success of the Syrian Kurds in consolidating their territory against ISIS and maintaining a working relationship with the Syrian government has caused alarm in Ankara. Turkey's own war in its south-east with the Kurdish PKK has re-escalated, arguably as a consequence of ISIS and PKK actions within Turkey, and Ankara does not distinguish between the PKK and the PYG publically. The prospect of a contiguous Kurdish area on Turkey's southern border prompted a Turkish military incursion in 2016-17, which confronted ISIS but also ensured that territory did not fall under Kurdish control. The Turkish-Kurdish conflict is a major incompatibility that exists separately to the Syrian War but due to territorial changes and lack of government control in Syria has become part of it.⁴¹

The fourth incompatibility within the Syrian battlefield is ISIS, whose rise has many authors and whose demise has many more. This includes the two countries to which it has done the most harm, Iraq and Syria. The US and its coalition allies have put considerable resources into ensuring that ISIS is defeated in both Iraq and Syria while at the same time avoiding putting their own troops on the ground (excepting the usual advisors and Special Forces) until it was deemed necessary for the US to deploy forces to prevent fighting within the SDF and between the Kurds and the Turks and also to provide more robust ground support in the battle against ISIS. This can be understood as a continuation of the US-led 'terror wars'. Russia has also used its airpower against ISIS, but only in the context of supporting the Assad regime in its advance into ISIS territory. This accidental convergence of interests at the global level permeates down through the regional to the national levels, with the

⁴⁰ Peter Mansfield *A History of the Middle East 2nd edn* (Penguin Books: London: 2003); Donna J Stewart *The Middle East Today: Political, Geographical and Cultural Perspectives* (Routledge: New York: 2009).

⁴¹ The Turkish-Kurd conflict in Turkey's south-east had reached a ceasefire after decades of fighting but underwent a severe re-escalation in 2015. For the origins of the conflict see: Dogu Ergil "PKK: Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan" in: M Heiberg, B O'Leary & J Tirman (eds) *Terror, Insurgency and the State: Ending Protracted Conflicts* (University of Pennsylvania Press: Pennsylvania: 2007) pp 322-356.

commitment in terms of ground forces fighting to defeat ISIS increasing as the national level of analysis is reached.

This gives us four additional supplementary incompatibilities within the Syrian battlefield:

1. Factional fighting within the opposition with the incompatibilities falling on a spectrum that ranges from 'moderate', through 'Islamist', to 'jihadist' and addresses the role of Islam within the territory that is nominally Syrian.
2. Israel's strategic war with Hezbollah/Iran and consequential incursions into Syrian airspace.
3. The conflict between Turkey and the Kurds, which is linked to the intra-state Turkish-Kurdish conflict and the development of clearly defined quasi-autonomous Kurdish regions in Syria and Iraq.
4. The 'terror war' against ISIS, a trans-state entity, conducted in two distinct but overlapping battlefields and supported by a US led coalition in both cases.

All four of these additional incompatibilities, separate from the central government versus opposition incompatibility, have added to the complexity and intractability of the Syrian war, which has resisted the attempts by the UN to reach a mediated national solution.⁴²

5. Conclusion

The violence within Syria began over the question of representation, therefore one at the national level of analysis, and involving the Assad regime and a loosely formed opposition, which initially coalesced as the FSA. It became more complex due to the introduction of new actors on the battlefield and the involvement of external actors at the regional and global levels, which alone would make the Syrian War one that is multi-level and guaranteeing its continuation until there is either a mediated outcome (unlikely) or an outright victory by the Assad regime (very likely). Should the central incompatibility be resolved the supplementary ones will remain. As regards the first, what is now opposition territory is subject to the success and failures of the competing groups and their relationship with the Assad regime. The second of the supplementary incompatibilities (Israel versus Hezbollah/Iran) will continue to be a danger as long as Hezbollah remains on Syrian territory, while the third (Turkey versus the Kurds) is part of a wider question concerning the status of the Kurds in Iraq, Turkey, and Syria, and is arguably a more immediate threat to peace. The fourth, ISIS, will remain a concern so long as a diminished ISIS is able to maintain an insurgency in both Iraq and Syria, placing it in conflict with the other actors in Syria, while at the same time remaining a terrorist threat to the Western bloc. The demise of ISIS in Syria will free up the

⁴² This chapter does not cover mediation and negotiation, which has seen differing success at the local, national, and international levels. For accounts of this see: the CARIS Report on the Syrian War at www.turnerconflict.com and: Magnus Lundgren 'Mediation in Syria: Initiatives, strategies, and obstacles, 2011-2016' *Contemporary Security Policy* Vol 37, No 2 (2016) pp 273-288.

myriad forces opposing them to settle the question that the central incompatibility poses:
who will rule Syria and what territories will a future Syria cover?

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