Syria: a state of imbalance and war
A case study of the civil war in Syria

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Abstract

This paper attempts to answer the question of why the war in Syria has been particularly long and violent. To do this, it draws upon the explanatory value of Benjamin Miller’s theory of regional war and peace (2007). The main claim here is that state weakness, a mismatch between state boundaries and national identities, and great power competition in the area can explain why the war has been particularly long and violent. The study concludes that the following major factors and their interacting effects have had a major role in protracting and exacerbating the war: weak Syrian nationalism; extreme Islamism; weakness of the Syrian state; competition between the West and Russia; and to a lesser extent, Kurdish presence and acts of relative disengagement by the United States.

*Keywords:* Syria, civil war, state-to-nation imbalance, nationalism

*Word count:* 15,298 (pages 1-38)
1 Introduction

1.1 Problem area

Following the protests of 2010 in Tunisia, the so-called Arab Spring swept Northern Africa and the Middle East. This wave of demonstration caught almost everyone, including scholars studying the region, by surprise (Matthiesen 2012). In many places these events produced much violence and suffering. Today, five years later, most of the countries that experienced the Arab Spring have somewhat stabilised. It is puzzling to see, however, that in some of these states, war persists. Among these cases of protracted civil war, the one in Syria stands out (Heydemann 2013, p. 61). Over two hundred thousand people have died and more than half of the Syrian population has been displaced. Against this backdrop, the present study asks the seemingly straightforward question:

– Why has the war in Syria been particularly long and violent?

The Syrian war has been given much media attention. It is perhaps understandable, then, that a wide array of literature on the subject has followed. In some forums, the global nature of the war has been discussed. Syria has notably been described as a "display window of the world’s conflicts", and it has been pointed out that the relation between the United States and Russia strongly influences how the war develops (Ahmad 2013; Abrams 2013; Price 2013; Gardette 2015). Regional aspects of the war have also been underlined, and it has been observed how the rift between Saudi Arabia and Iran is heavily affecting outcomes in the war (Carpenter 2013; Lawson 2014; Hughes 2014). Moreover, certain scholars have stressed domestic factors to explain the war; some have pointed to the great diversity of religious groups inside the state as the main problem (Dostal 2014), while others have underlined the Syrian regime (Bagherpour 2012; Heydemann 2013), extremism (Jones 2013; Lister 2015), or the economic situation (Dahi & Munif 2012) as the primary trouble.

In sum, there are many analyses that in different ways contribute to explaining the longevity and scope of the civil war in Syria. Some focus their attention to issues of global or regional nature, such as the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, or that between the United States and Russia, while others emphasise domestic problems, such as the diversity of communities inside the state or extremism. What seems to be missing, however, is a theoretically framed analysis that takes into account factors from all levels – global, regional, and domestic. This is the gap in the literature that this study seeks to bridge.
1.2 Research objective and contribution

The study intends to explain why the war in Syria has been particularly long and violent. In doing so, it aims to contribute to a more holistic understanding of the war by bridging parts of the divide that exists between domestic, regional and global explanations to the war’s longevity and scope. The study also aims to contribute to answering the overall puzzling question of why some states struck by the Arab Spring have plunged into long periods of violence, while others have stabilised relatively quickly. Focusing on the case of Syria, the study will, by examining how the war has been prolonged and aggravated, contribute to the knowledge of the phenomenon civil war following the Arab Spring. In the words of Alexander George and Andrew Bennett (2005, pp. 17-18), this is the "class of events" that will be studied. The results of this study could then be coupled with knowledge of how other states that have experienced the Arab Spring have reached a state of war or peace. This would contribute to a deeper explanation of variation in outcomes among states that have lived through the Arab Spring. However, it is important to underline that the Arab Spring is not the main concern of this study, which also means that the outbreak of the war will not be examined, but rather its aftermath. The aim of this endeavour is to find out why the war has been particularly long and violent compared to other states that have experienced the Arab Spring.

To reach these objectives, the study will use Benjamin Miller’s theory of regional war and peace (2007). Although the name of the theory indicates a strong focus on regions – and thus interstate war – the theory does not lack in explanatory value regarding civil war. In fact, by adopting a regional perspective and using variables that explain both interstate and civil war, the theory helps to bridge the divide in the literature between the two types of war (Miller 2007, p. 3). The theory draws upon domestic, regional and global factors to explain war. Seeing that several analysts have noted that factors from multiple levels seem to have influenced the situation in Syria, such an all-encompassing framework seems advantageous to use in this case.

The theory’s explanation of war is centred around two concepts: state-to-nation balance and great power involvement. It posits that a lack of state-to-nation balance (a state-to-nation imbalance) is the main underlying cause of war. This imbalance occurs when there is a lack of congruence between state boundaries and national identifications, and at least some of the states in the region are weak (Miller 2007, p. 2). In turn, the way great powers are involved in a region can affect the outcomes to some extent. The theory states that when state-to-nation balance is low and great powers compete or disengage in a region, war is a likely outcome (Miller 2007, p. 66). Because the state-to-nation balance in Syria has been noted as low (Miller 2014a, p. 15) and seeing that Russia and the US (and to some extent European states)

\[1\] For one example, see Carpenter 2013.
appear to have been competing over influence in Syria, the theory seems apt to accurately explain the violent developments in the country.

The theory makes no explicit claim on being able to thoroughly explain why some wars are longer or more violent than others. Yet the author of this study believes that the theory can be useful also in this regard. Accordingly, the main claim of the study is that state weakness and a mismatch between state boundaries and national identities, in combination with great power competition in the conflict, can explain why the war in Syria has been particularly long and violent.

The aim of this study is twofold. On the one hand, it wants to bring clarity into the Syrian war’s longevity and scope, and say something about how domestic, regional, and global factors have interacted to produce this outcome. On the other hand, it wants to try how well Miller’s theory can explain not only why wars tend to break out (as it claims to do), but also why certain wars are particularly long and violent. Still the empirical aspect (that is, the former aim), and not the theoretical, is the main concern of the study. This also makes the study what George and Bennett (2005, p. 75) call a "disciplined configurative case study".

1.3 Literature review

Much has been written about the war in Syria, and most of it seems to be focused on explaining the war’s outbreak. Yet there is much literature that tell us important things about why the war has been particularly long and violent. Many analyses of the war in Syria are built around a realist logic of reasoning. The roles that the US and Russia have played in Syria have been of interest to some (Ahmad 2013; Abrams 2013; Price 2013). Some scholars have notably pointed to the US’ disengagement from the region as a crucial factor in the war’s protraction and exacerbation (Ignatieff 2015). Additionally, power and security dynamics among regional actors (e.g. Saudi Arabia, Iran) and their respective relationships to more powerful actors, such as the US and Russia, have been described as important factors influencing the war (Carpenter 2013; Lawson 2014). Some have bluntly described the war in Syria as a proxy war (Hughes 2014). Discussions have also been held regarding intervention by Western powers, and the consequences that this would have on the situation (Asseburg 2011; Eivazian-Tabrizi 2012). Although many of these analyses successfully explain why certain actors have gotten involved in Syria, and the impact that this has had on the conflict, they largely neglect domestic factors that appear to have exacerbated the war.

Some researchers have pointed to issues related to climate and environment – notably the drought that preceded the political unrest – to explain the war. In this regard, some scholars have underlined bad policies of the regime (Kelley et al 2015), while others have focused on the economic implications of the drought (Gleick 2014). It has also been stated that economic

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2 For an example, see Wall Street Journal, 14 June, 2013.
liberalisation is likely to have caused discontent in the population and led some people to take drastic measures (Dahi & Munif 2012). Certain analysts, focusing their attention to the authoritarian regime, have investigated how the state regime has clung to power, and underlined this as a cause of the violent developments (Bagherpour 2012; Heydemann 2013). Others have focused their attention to Kurdish forces within Syria, and discussed how their presence has influenced the war (Egin 2013; Barkey 2014; Ahmedi 2015; Lund 2015). Certain researchers have studied the opposition closely and made important contributions to understanding the dynamics of extremism and radical ideology in Syria (Holliday 2012; O’Bagy 2012; Jones 2013; Lister 2013; Lister 2014; Lister 2015). Some have stated that the conflict in Syria is essentially socio-economic and urban-rural; that it is a classical example of poor people on the countryside rising up against an exploitative central government (Lund 2012, p. 7). Others have underlined the sectarian nature of the Syrian conflict as an important factor that has worsened the war (Carpenter 2013; Heydemann 2013; Lawson 2014; Dostal 2014).

In sum, all of these analyses make important contributions to our understanding of why the war in Syria has been particularly long and violent. Yet a theoretically framed analysis that ties together domestic, regional, and global factors seems to be missing. Along these lines, Miller (2014a) has compared outcomes in states that have lived through the Arab Spring. He has done this by examining the state-to-nation balance of each state (drawing upon the explanatory value of both domestic and regional factors) and then noted how well this variable can account for the different levels of violence that states have experienced as a result of the Arab Spring. Gravely simplified, states with a high state-to-nation balance tend to have gone through the Arab Spring more peacefully than those with a low state-to-nation balance. Regarding Syria, Miller has noted a low state-to-nation balance that can explain the extraordinary violence within the state. This study wants to go deeper. It wants to examine if the state-to-nation imbalance noted by Miller can account also for the protraction and exacerbation of the civil war, and see how great power involvement has affected the outcomes.

1.4 Structure of the paper

The paper will begin by describing the essential concepts of Miller’s theory: state-to-nation balance and great power involvement. Following this, the study will introduce its research design that aims to craft an explanation to the war’s scope and longevity. The results will then be presented in three parts dedicated to domestic, regional, and global factors respectively. The parts dedicated to domestic and regional factors will deal with how the state-to-nation balance has affected the war, while the global part will discuss the effects of great power involvement. Lastly, a discussion of the results and the utility of Miller’s theory will be presented along with suggestions for future research.
2 Theory

Miller’s theory of regional war and peace (2007) uses the explanatory value of the two major IR schools of thought, realism and liberalism, to explain variations in outcomes of war and peace. The extensive theory adopts a regional perspective to do this. Yet adopting a regional perspective does not mean that the theory is less able to grasp outcomes in individual states such as Syria. In fact, the theory states that "[v]ariations in the same causal factors that account for the differences between one region and others should also account for variations between … various locales in the same region" (Miller 2007, p. 83).

It should also be noted that although much of the theory concerns outbreaks of war, this is not of interest in this study. Instead this study wants to examine how a war has been exacerbated and protracted. Accordingly, only the parts of the theory deemed relevant to this objective will be set forth in this section.

2.1 Independent variables

The theory has two sets of independent variables: regional/domestic and global. The global variable is great power involvement, while the relevant regional/domestic variable in this study is the state-to-nation balance. The theory is not interested in the sources of these independent variables, but rather in the combined effects that these variables have on regional outcomes (Miller 2007, p. 53).

State-to-nation balance

The theory is built mainly around the state-to-nation balance concept (Miller 2007, pp. 54-61). The state-to-nation balance determines the basic war-proneness of any given region, and has two dimensions. The first dimension refers to the strength or weakness of concerned states (also called the “hardware” of state-building). The second refers to the extent of congruence or compatibility between political boundaries and national identifications (also called the “software” of nation-building).

The "software" of nation-building. The extent of congruence is determined by the ratio between existing geopolitical boundaries and the national aspirations and identities of people. In other words, it is a measure of how well state boundaries reflect national affiliations. High congruence means that there is a strong identification of the people in the region with existing

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3 The second domestic/regional variable "liberal compatibility" has been excluded because for it to exercise its effects, a fairly high amount of state-to-nation balance needs to be present, and the major states involved need to be liberal (Miller 2007, p. 61), which has not been the case in Syria (Miller 2014a, p. 15; Miller 2014b).
states, and that they accept these states’ existing boundaries. Such an acceptance must not be based only on ethnic homogeneity in a state, but can also be based on civic nationalism.

*The "hardware" of state-building.* The strength of states is determined by the institutions and resources available to them. Weak states lack effective institutions and resources to implement their policies and fulfil key state functions. Most notably, they lack effective control over the means of violence in their territory and an effective law-enforcement system. Weak states thus face difficulties maintaining law and order and providing security in their territory. Strong states, on the other hand, control the means of violence in their sovereign territory and possess an effective set of institutions.

Miller (2007, p. 2) states that there is a state-to-nation imbalance when "there is a lack of congruence between states and national identifications and at least some of the regional states are weak states".

**Great power involvement**

Great power involvement is the second independent variable. Here the distinction is made between the following four types of involvement (Miller 2007, pp. 62-63, 212-216):

*Competition* means that the great powers focus on balancing each other in order to exclude one another from an area or at least prevent the emergence of the rival as a hegemon in a place where they have important interests. Small regional allies are the key for achieving the great powers’ goals.

*Cooperation* means that the great powers agree on common goals in the region and work together to promote them.

*Disengagement* means that the great powers are not involved diplomatically, and definitely not militarily, in the regional conflict, apart from intervention on specific and limited grounds such as to rescue their citizens.

*Hegemony* means that one great power alone completely dominates the region.

**2.2 The theory: a consolidated overview**

The theory essentially deals with two types of actors – local actors and great powers – and two types of balances (Miller 2007, pp. 13-18). The local actors are part of the region in which a given conflict takes place and thus experience more acute proximity, while the great powers are external to the region. The great powers are superior to local actors in overall resources. The local actors, however, have superior stakes in a conflict in which they are direct participants, while the distant great powers typically have less than vital interests in these conflicts. Even if the great powers have important stakes in a certain region (e.g. because of geographical proximity or the location of important allies there), these stakes will still be
lower than those of the local participants directly involved. In other words, the balance of interests almost always favours the local actors, while the balance of capabilities clearly favours the great powers. This also means that the great powers may affect the capabilities of local actors (e.g. through supplying or withholding arms and economic aid). However, changing the basic motivations or objectives of local actors is beyond the ability of actors external to the region (and is instead determined largely by the present state-to-nation balance).

Against this backdrop, Miller (2007, p. 15) makes the distinction between hot and cold outcomes, and states that local actors are responsible for the hot outcomes, while great powers are responsible for the cold outcomes (see figure 2.1). Because a war is being analysed, the differences in outcomes of peace will not be set forth here. Miller (2007, p. 44) makes the distinction between two types of war: hot war is a situation of actual use of force aimed at destroying the military capabilities of adversaries, while cold war is a situation of a mere absence of hot war in which hostilities may break out at any time.

**Figure 2.1** (Miller 2007, p. 15)

Local actors are responsible for hot wars because they initiate fighting due to basic motivations grounded in a state-to-nation imbalance in the area (see process 6 in figure 2.2). The great powers cannot make them initiate fighting because they are incapable of changing the basic motivations of local actors. The great powers are instead responsible for producing cold war (see process 1 in figure 2.2). In other words, great powers may change a situation of hot war into a situation of cold war, in which there is no actual fighting.
Great powers produce cold wars according to the following logic. Under great power competition, as fighting drags on in a war, the balances of interests and capabilities tend to shift in favour of the great powers in two ways (Miller 2007, pp. 16, 215-216). First, the balance of interests might shift in favour of the great powers because of rising threats to their own important interests in the region. This notably happens when great powers risk "losing" an important ally who is about to be defeated militarily and the probability grows of being drawn into the regional hostilities on behalf of this ally; something that might lead to a direct confrontation among great powers. Second, the balance of capabilities changes in the great powers’ favour towards the end of local wars. This happens because, owing to the depletion of stocks and material during the war, the regional states become more dependent on the great powers. Miller explains both of these shifts as follows:

[1]In times of regional war between the allies of competing great powers, whenever there is a serious danger to the survival of the regime of a major ally because it faces a strategic defeat, the great power patron of the defeated ally may threaten to intervene on its behalf. Because such intervention can lead to a counter intervention by the other power on behalf of its ally, and consequently to an escalation of the local conflict to the global level, the great powers have an incentive to cooperate, at least tacitly, in terminating the regional war before any local party is decisively defeated. The dependence of the local allies on their great power patrons also rises at the stage of war termination because of their depleted weapons stocks; therefore the local allies are unlikely to defy great power wishes at this stage. (Miller 2007, 215-216)

Miller’s theory thus predicts that, under great power competition and because of a shift in balances of both interests and capabilities, hot wars will end relatively quickly.

Moreover, Miller (2007, p. 20) distinguishes between underlying and proximate causes of war. The underlying cause of war is state-to-nation imbalance, which leads to and worsens security dilemmas and power rivalries among local actors (Miller 2007, p. 83). These power and security considerations, derived completely from the realist school of thought, are the
proximate causes of war; they affect the timing and context of the occurrence of specific wars and their conduct (Miller 2007, p. 199). In turn, great powers may affect the intensity, scope, and duration of wars (Miller 2007, pp. 20, 83-84).

The theory can in sum be captured in the following sentence. Two different independent variables (the state-to-nation balance and great power involvement) affect two different types of balances (balance of interests and balance of capabilities) of two different types of actors (regional actors and the great powers), which in turn produce different outcomes (Miller 2007, p. 206).

### 2.3 Criticism of the theory

The theory has attracted some general criticism for its presumptions grounded in the traditional realist and liberal thinking (Engel 2010). It has also received critique for assigning excessive importance to history. In the words of Stephen Saideman (2008, p. 468), "Miller notes that all sides can use history to whip up grievances, but, as a result, he cannot really explain why some groups choose to secede or why some secessionist efforts are violent". As a response to this, Miller (2008, p. 477) has especially pointed to and discussed the state strength component of his state-to-nation balance concept. Moreover, Stefan Wolff (2008, p. 474) has suggested that the theory’s logic regarding national identity may accredit excessive importance to territorial issues, and that it could be complemented by other dimensions of identity.
3 Research design

To guide the study in explaining why the war in Syria has been particularly long and violent, the following question has been formulated in accordance with the theory.

**Q:** How can state-to-nation balance and great power involvement in Syria explain the longevity and scope of the war?

**Independent variable 1 (IV-1):** State-to-nation balance

**Independent variable 2 (IV-2):** Great power involvement

**Dependent variable (DV):** The war in Syria

Miller’s theory focuses on the outbreaks of war, and makes no particular claim on explaining how hot wars can be prolonged and exacerbated. Yet the theory clearly indicates how this can happen in some ways. In accordance with the logic of the theory, these "hints" have been used to formulate the following hypotheses and processes linked to them. The main purpose of introducing these hypotheses is to provide guidance and structure; it divides the analysis into three distinct parts (domestic, regional and global factors) and sets forth, in broad terms, what the study is interested in.

**Hypothesis 1 (domestic factors)**
State-to-nation imbalance in Syria has led to clashes between domestic groups, and between domestic groups and the state, which has protracted and exacerbated the war (Miller 2007, pp. 59, 103).

**Process 1**

- State-to-nation imbalance —>
- Clashes between different domestic groups (and the state) —>
- Protraction and exacerbation of the war

**Hypothesis 2 (regional factors)**
State-to-nation imbalance in Syria produced/intensified regional actors’ temptations for profit and fears of insecurity. This led regional actors to become involved in Syria, which has protracted and exacerbated the war. (Miller 2007, pp. 101, 110, 123)

**Process 2**

- State-to-nation imbalance —>
- Temptations for profit and/or fears of insecurity —>
- Regional actors’ involvement —>
- Protraction and exacerbation of the war
Hypothesis 3 (global factors)
Great power competition in Syria has led the great powers to assist local antagonists. This has enabled these local actors to persist in their fighting and even intensify it, which has protracted and exacerbated the war. (Miller 2007, pp. 67, 213-214, 371)

Process 3
Great power competition —> Assistance to local actors —> Protraction and exacerbation of the war

These processes will help to guide the collection of evidence and structure the analysis. Yet this framework alone is believed to be insufficient to capture a holistic understanding of the conflict, which is the aim of this study. Therefore, to grant more flexibility but still make sure to stay within the confines of the theory, the questions below have been formulated in accordance with the theory. These questions will further guide the collection of evidence and in this way complement the previous set forth processes. The questions regarding state-to-nation issues – linked to hypotheses 1 and 2 – have been formulated in accordance with Miller’s (2007, pp. 89-100) list of destabilising forces that weaken the state-to-nation balance (see right hand column of table 3.1). Regarding great power involvement – linked to hypothesis 3 – two questions have been formulated in accordance with Miller’s relevant categories of great power involvement (Miller 2007, pp. 62-63).

Question 1: How have "nations without states" in Syria protracted and exacerbated the war?

Question 2: How have "states without nations" in Syria protracted and exacerbated the war?

Question 3: How have "stateless refugees" in Syria protracted and exacerbated the war?

Question 4: How have "weak states" in Syria protracted and exacerbated the war?

Question 5: How have "illegitimate states" in Syria protracted and exacerbated the war?

Question 6: How have "pan-national unifiers" in Syria protracted and exacerbated the war?

Question 7: How have "irredentists" in Syria protracted and exacerbated the war?

Question 8: How have "settlers" in Syria protracted and exacerbated the war?

Question 9: How has "great power competition" in Syria protracted and exacerbated the war?

Question 10: How has "great power disengagement" in Syria protracted and exacerbated the war?
The answers to these questions have been sought when reading the texts chosen for analysis. By answering these questions, the study will examine the presumed processes through which state-to-nation imbalance and great power competition/disengagement led to the protraction and exacerbation of the war in Syria, and also find evidence that either supports or discredits the above-mentioned hypothesised processes. If certain questions do not render substantial and relevant answers to how the war has been protracted and exacerbated, these parts (e.g. "settlers") will not be included in the analysis. The results of this whole endeavour will then be used to draw conclusions regarding how factors on the three levels (domestic, regional and global) have interacted to produce the outcome in Syria.

Moreover, although processes hold a relatively central role in this study, no claim is made on using a process tracing method. The study will not trace specific processes. Instead, it wants to examine the general processes derived from the theory of how the two independent variables led to the exacerbation and protraction of the war, and see how well these processes can

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4 For a thorough account on process tracing, see Bennett & Checkel 2015; Beach & Pedersen 2013.
account for what actually occurred in Syria. In other words, what sets this study apart from process tracing is that it seeks to capture the broad strokes of the phenomenon in question, rather than the specifics of a certain mechanism or chain of events. This decision has been made because Miller’s theory does not describe any specific processes through which a hot war can be protracted and exacerbated.

Because the study seeks to explain how a war has been prolonged and exacerbated (something the theory does not claim to do), the study can to some extent be seen as theory developing by asking the question: *can the theory explain also the protraction and exacerbation of already ongoing wars?*

### 3.1 Empirical evidence: material and analysis

An explanation to the longevity and scope of the whole war is sought. Therefore, due to limitations in space and time, the explanation will be less specific and detailed in some regards; only the parts judged most relevant will be included in the analysis. Limitations in time also mean that there will be no possibility to collect evidence from primary sources when crafting the explanation. This is however not a grave problem because there exists plenty of previous research on the war in Syria, and the study only seeks to map out the broader context of the war. As such, the study will rely exclusively on previous analyses.

The study will rely mainly on research from academic fields relevant to the phenomenon of study (e.g. demography, international relations, war studies). If needed, other sources will nonetheless also be used to fill gaps in the crafted explanation. These sources include official statements, reports, articles, and texts from the involved actors, researchers, think tanks and other well-informed institutions. Priority has been given to peer reviewed articles.

The chosen texts have been analysed using qualitative text analysis. This means that when studying a given text, the researcher reads it carefully as a whole and in parts, and takes into account the context in which the text appears (Esaiasson et al. 2007, p. 237). One way to organise such an endeavour is to ask specific questions to the text material when reading it (Esaiasson et al. 2007, p. 243), which is what has been done in this study (see questions 1-10 on page 12).

Previous analyses will not be taken as given truth. They will be scrutinised critically and weighted against other analyses on the same issue, when such materials have been found. This process of evaluating information sources can be summarised in the following quote:
"Given A’s possible motives, how much should I trust what he or she says?" (Bennett & Checkel 2015, p. 24-25).

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5 In practice, searches have been conducted in the databases provided by the Anna Lindh Library in Stockholm, in Google Scholar, and in Google. Searches were limited in time (2011–today), and conducted with relevant word constellations (e.g. "war in Syria", "Syrian demography", "Russia and the Syrian war").
Bennett and Checkel (2015, p. 28) state that "a researcher should stop pursuing any one stream of evidence when it becomes so repetitive that gathering more of that same kind of evidence has a low probability of revising their estimate of the likely accuracy of alternative explanations". Accordingly, evidence has been collected roughly until frequent repetition occurred.

3.2 Delimitations

The study seeks to understand the broad contours of the war in Syria. To avoid excluding vital parts when crafting the explanation to the war’s longevity and scope, no temporal delimitation will be made when collecting evidence. It may seem as if this renders the endeavour of the study too large. However, because the study will not go into details (e.g. by examining decisions made by individual policy makers) and instead look at the bigger picture by relying on previous analyses, this is considered less problematic. Also, the study has no intention of creating a clear chronological understanding of the Syrian war. Studying the war in its entirety thus seems feasible. Accordingly, no specific delimitation will be made regarding time. The Syrian war will be studied from the outbreak of the first major violence in March 2011, until the time of writing, which is November 2015.

3.3 Limitations

This study relies only on open sources, which is problematic because actors are not always outspoken about their actions. In some of his own studies of coercive diplomacy, Alexander George (1991, p. 59) examines state action and writes: "[t]he interpretation is necessarily provisional, as it is based almost entirely on open sources". Because this study also relies exclusively on open sources, it has to be stated also in this study that the results are provisional because information about other action and motives can surface in the future.

The fact that no temporal delimitation is made makes the study more fit to attain the set forth objective by granting flexibility. At the same time, it produces a shortcoming because it does not allow for an in-detail examination of the processes of interest. This, in turn, might leave important gaps in the explanation. Yet the author believes that previous analysts will have carried out studies relating to these processes, upon which the present study may rely. The fact that the study relies exclusively on previous analyses is also somewhat problematic. It opens up for a risk that gaps of evidence will produce themselves in the crafted explanation (i.e. if no analyses treat a sought issue). Also, biases inherent in these previous analyses may work their way into this study.
4 War in Syria

The following analysis is structured into three sections: domestic factors, regional factors, and global factors. Every section will end with a discussion in which the gathered evidence is put in relation to the theory’s predictions.

4.1 Domestic factors

Fighting has taken place in Syria between many different actors. But what motivated these actors to persist in and intensify their fighting? My answer is that this can largely be explained by the following manifestations of a state-to-nation imbalance in Syria.

Syria: a state without a nation – subnational ties

Syria’s population can be categorised as follows: Sunni Arabs (almost 60 % of the population); Christians (~10-12 %); Alawites (~10-12 %); Druze (~6 %); the rest of the population consists of other, mostly Sunni, ethnic minority groups such as Kurds and Armenians (Carpenter 2013, pp. 1-2). This underlines the fact that ethnic affiliations and state borders do not overlap in Syria which means that ethnic nationalism cannot act as a unifier, reinforcing state-to-nation congruence. Yet civic nationalism can counteract ethnic incongruence by making citizens identify with the state despite ethnic differences. This would essentially mean that the Syrian identity trumped others; that people would feel more Syrian than, say, Sunni or Kurdish. This is clearly not the case in Syria (Miller 2007, p. 142; Tabler 2013, pp. 98-99; Miller 2014b). Because of the weakness of both ethnic and civic nationalism, Syria is in accordance with Miller’s theory (2007, pp. 89-90, 96) categorised as a state without a nation.

The absence of sufficient Syrian ethnic and civic nationalism to counteract other strong identities among the population has allowed for both subnational and transborder ties to exercise important effects on the situation in Syria. In this part, dedicated to domestic factors, the effects of ties among people inside the state (or subnational ties) will be addressed, while the effects of ties among people in different states (or transborder ties) will be discussed in the next section.

 Majority, minority, and sectarian tension

For more than four decades, the ruling Alawite Assad family has based its ruling on a loose alliance with the Christians, the Druze, and sometimes with one or more of the smaller ethnic groups; mostly secular Sunnis (Lund 2012, p. 9; Carpenter 2013, p. 2). Some state that an important aspect of the 2011-2012 uprisings was a Sunni Arab bid to overthrow this coalition
of minorities (Carpenter 2013, p. 2). Other have pointed out, however, that Sunni Muslims in Syria for a long time have identified with their tribe or region rather than with their religion (Tabler 2013, p. 98-99). Yet this does not exclude the possibility that sectarian affiliations have played an important role in exacerbating and protracting the war in Syria. Indeed, this appears to be the case.

Religious ties appear to have had an especially important impact on different groups’ feelings of security in Syria. Especially important here, as has been pointed out by many scholars, is the minorities’ fears of the majority. The ruling regime is made up mainly by the minority Alawites (an offshoot group of the Shia branch of Islam) that has ruled with the support of Christians, Druze and other minority groups. As noted earlier, Sunni Muslims constitute a clear majority in Syria. This Sunni majority is also by far the largest group that has taken part in the rebellion, while the religious minorities have generally remained supportive of the regime (Lund 2012, p. 8).

During the initial phases of the uprising, the regime violently attempted to repress the rebellion. This failed, however, and it is even likely that it had a boomerang effect with the uprising spreading fast to other places (ICG 2011a, p. i). The regime continued to carry out extraordinary violent acts against its population, and when populations took up arms to defend themselves, the regime escalated its violence to large-scale military offensives (Heydemann 2013, p. 62). The regime has notably made use of its Shabihha militia from Assad’s own Alawite sect (Phillips 2012, p. 67).

As the conflict continued, the minorities that largely supported the Alawite regime became afraid that they had made themselves "guilty by association" for the actions of the Assad regime (Hughes 2014, p. 528). In other words, the Christians, Druze, Alawites, and others, were afraid that if the Sunni population gained power, it would use it against them out of anger over the Assad regime’s actions, regardless of the fact that these minority groups had not backed the regime collectively (ICG 2012b, p. 4; Phillips 2012, p. 73; Tabler 2013, p. 94; Hughes 2014, p. 528).

These fears based on ethno-sectarian affiliations have been continually reinforced by the Assad regime (Heydemann 2013, p. 70). Christopher Phillips (2012, p. 76) explains that "it was the regime’s Shabihha that was deliberately stirring up ethnic violence to scare the minorities and those that feared civil war into backing the regime". The mass killings committed by the regime-affiliated Shabihha militia have inflamed sectarian tensions by pitting the Sunni majority against Assad’s own Alawite community (Hughes 2014, p. 23). As was noted in 2012, "a large portion of the Alawite community now feels it has no option but to kill or be killed" (ICG 2012c, p. ii). In other words, the Alawite community has closed ranks behind the regime not because of loyalty, but because of the sectarian prism through which they view the

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7 International Crisis Group.
protest movement (ICG 2011a, p. i). Essentially, the same goes for the security forces, the elite troops, and the Shabihha, whose mindsets have been described as "quasi-nihilistic"; they want to preserve the regime at all costs (ICG 2011a, p. ii; ICG 2012b, p. 5). Taken together, the regime used sectarian mobilisation to reinforce solidarity among the core groups supportive of the regime (Monshipouri & Weiger 2014, p. 153).

Although the Syrian people have in many regards been resistant to sectarian tendencies, defying the regime discourse of confessional strife (ICG 2011b, p. i), it is clear that the conflict eventually took on a very sectarian nature (Lawson 2014, p. 1351, 1364). Forces close to the opposition are believed to have carried out many violent attacks, such as bombings in Alawite-majority areas (ICG 2012b, p. 4). Moreover, anti-Alawite and anti-Shia sentiment appeared to be resurfacing in groups opposing the regime already in 2012 (ICG 2012c, p. ii). As a clear indication of this, Phillips (2012, p. 76) has pointed out that protest slogans went from "all the Syrians as one" to "Sunni blood is one" and "exterminate the Alawites" (ICG 2012b, p. 5). Accordingly, the fears of the regime-backing minorities appear to have been largely justified in light of indications that the Sunni majority hardened its attitude towards the Alawites and others, and thus increased the likelihood that a regime overthrow would be followed by sectarian-based violence (Phillips 2012, pp. 67-68; Hughes 2014, p. 528).

An important effect of this is that it increased support in the minority populations for continued and intensified regime repression. By early 2012, following violent coercive measures from the regime, pressure was building from both the regime’s social base and armed forces to step up repressive action even further (ICG 2012b, p. 3).

Moreover, sectarian divides brought to the surface by the regime’s violent actions, are likely to have allowed extreme Islamist groups, such as Jabhat al-Nusra and Daesh, to pose as defenders of the majority Sunni population and thus gain strength and support (Lund 2012, p. 12; ICG 2012c, p. ii). This brings us to the next point.

**Radical Islam: pan-identity and extremism**

*Extremism in the opposition*

Islamic extremists have played an important role in the war in Syria. Many analysts have noted that the opposition was an initially secular movement against autocracy, but as the war continued, radical Islamic tendencies grew within their ranks (Lund 2012, p. 5: O’Bagy 2012, p. 6; Phillips 2012, p. 75; Carpenter 2013, p. 3; Lister 2015).

Islamic extremism in the opposition has helped the regime to maintain the support of its coalition of minorities. Again, this is grounded in a fear among the minorities that the extremists would use any increased power to hurt them (ICG 2012d, p. ii; O’Bagy 2012, p. 6). This presence of Islamic extremists has also brought legitimacy to the narrative championed by the
Assad regime saying that the opposition is unfit to govern because of radicals in their ranks, and that repression is necessary (ICG 2012d, p. i; O’Bagy 2012, p. 6).

**Pan-Islam and Daesh**

Most, if not all, of the Islamist groups that have been active in Syria subscribe to the pan-Islamic identity of an Islamic umma (or "nation"), and contend that this nation should have a political authority of its own. Several extremist groups, such as al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra, have transnational goals and want to create a caliphate beyond Syria’s borders (Jones 2013, p. 56; Tabler 2013, p. 98).

These groups that subscribe to pan-Islamic ideology have played an important role in the Syrian war; it all culminated, however, in 2013 with the proclamation of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, Daesh (more commonly known as IS, ISIS, or ISIL). Daesh’s leaders see themselves as the beginning of a transnational uprising that will sweep away existing states (Walt 2015, p. 44). This makes this organisation a good example of a "pan-national unifier" (Miller 2007, p. 89).

Not only has Daesh waged war in both Syria and Iraq; it has also been ruthless against religious communities that have fallen into its hands (Lawson 2014, p. 1352). This is highly likely to have deepened sectarian divides, forced local communities to take up arms to defend themselves, and destabilised proximate areas (Walt 2015, p. 44). Taken together, it is clear that Daesh has had both an exacerbating and protracting effect on the war.

**The Kurdish people: a nation without a state**

The Kurdish people are an ethnically and linguistically distinct group. In Syria they generally live close to the Turkish and Iraqi borders (ICG 2013a, p. i). As the rebellion in Syria started, many young Kurds joined in (ICG 2013a, pp. i-ii). However, due to the fact that the regime has largely left the Kurdish population alone, most Kurdish forces have remained in the background, assuming a sceptical approach toward the opposition that it viewed as overly Arab nationalist and Islamist (ICG 2013a, pp. i-ii). This opposition has also alienated Kurdish groups, and as ethno-sectarian tension built up in Syria, clashes between opposition groups and Kurds have taken place (ICG 2013a, p. ii).

The Kurdish nation has played an increasingly important role in the war, notably in fighting Daesh (Ahmedi 2015). It has also been pointed out that the shift towards ethno-sectarian violence in Syria, especially during winter 2013-14, led the previously quiescent Kurdish community to mobilise and defend itself against radicals (Lawson 2014, pp. 1352, 1364-1365). The violent clashes in which the Kurdish people have taken part are believed to have had reinvigorated the community’s demands for autonomy (Heydemann 2013, p. 69).

As the regime’s security forces withdrew from certain predominantly Kurdish areas, Kurdish groups stepped in to establish zones of influence, protect Kurds, provide basic services, and
ensure an improved status for Kurds in post-Assad times (ICG 2013a, p. i). Notably, in July 2012, Kurds took advantage of the security forces’ withdrawal and ousted government officials from municipal buildings and replaced Syrian flags with their own (ICG 2013a, p. ii). Kurdish forces have also been accused of committing war crimes and contributing to sectarian tension (Amnesty International 2015).

**Weakness of the Syrian state**

The gradual weakening of the Assad regime during the war has been noted by many (Lund 2012, p. 12; Jones 2013, p. 68; Lawson 2014, p. 1354). As the war continued, the Syrian state was increasingly incapable of controlling its periphery (Lund 2012, p. 12); a number of autonomous zones emerged in these areas, which also meant that the state was unable to control its borders (Lawson 2014, p. 1354). It is clear that the Syrian state has not maintained effective control over the means of violence. In addition, it has been noted that the vacuum left by retreating state institutions, along with violence and sectarianism, has offered extreme Islamists hospitable terrain in Syria (ICG 2012d, p. i). Taken together, the weakness of the Syrian state appears to have acted as permissive factor that allowed violence to play out, territories to be grabbed, and extremist forces to proliferate.

Yet one output of state weakness seems to have protracted and exacerbated the war directly: regime-backing forces that became increasingly autonomous. Firstly, the Syrian security forces were given "a relatively free hand" by the regime that in turn became dependent and indebted to hardline elements in the security forces. Estimates have been made that this makes the regime less capable of actually carrying out any actions that compromises with the opposition might entail, even of it truly wanted to (ICG 2011b, p. i). Secondly, Syria has seen the emergence of local "warlords" (ICG 2011a, p. i; Belhadj 2015). As the turmoil spread in Syria, the state, out of lack of resources, had to use local army reservists to control parts of its territory. These army reservists in turn established a certain autonomy, and have occasionally fought their own wars. State weakness has thus led to the empowerment of local warlords (that wage war) and hardline elements in the security apparatus (that might prevent the state from implementing any concessions it makes in case of compromise).

**Discussion: domestic factors**

These excerpts of Miller’s theory allowed me to formulate the initial hypothesis that guided this part of the study:

The weakness of incoherent states permits the violent actions of revisionist groups and encourages other groups trying to defend themselves. Such moves trigger a cycle of escalation which the weak state is unable to contain because it is unable to defeat or bribe the insurgents. (Miller 2007, p. 103)
As soon as the central authority gets weaker, demands for secession are likely to emerge and generate clashes between different national groups and the state or among competing national groups with competing nationalist claims to the same territory. (Miller 2007, p. 59)

Following the violent repression by the regime, many protesters took up arms to defend themselves. The regime responded to this by escalating its violent efforts (Heydemann 2013, p. 62). Here, weak Syrian nationalism (civic and ethnic), underlying sectarian ties, and radical Islamism can contribute to the explanation of how the regime was able to stay in power and continue its violent repression. The regime, using violence and scare-tactics, played on sectarian ties and pitted the Sunni majority against its own coalition of minorities. This struck fear into the minority groups who believed that in case the Sunni majority, and extreme Islamist elements more specifically, gained power, it would use it against them. This tightened the regime’s grip on core groups that supported it, and consolidated support for its coercive measures, which allowed the regime to continue its violent repression and even intensify these efforts.

The cycle of escalation that followed had devastating effects on the situation in Syria. It struck even more fear into minority groups, further reinforced support for the regime’s repressive violence, and radicalised the opposition (ICG 2012b, p. 4). From this chaos, and the ensuing weakening of the state, different militia groups emerged. Initially, these groups were mostly opposition groups that organised locally to defend themselves against the regime’s violent crackdowns. They were however soon accompanied by Kurds who proclaimed autonomous territory, radical Islamist groups, and local warlords, all contributing to a great diversity of local rule around the country. Although these groups are not perfectly divided along sectarian or ethnic divides, the emergence of most local groups can be explained by the weakness of Syrian nationalism, radical Islamist ideology, Kurdish nationalism, and state weakness.

Notably among these groups are the ones of extreme Islamist ideology – Daesh and Jabhat al-Nusra in particular – who have used sectarian divides and the violence carried out by the regime to pose as defenders of the Sunni majority. This has consolidated support for these extreme organisations and allowed them to persist in their fighting. These extreme organisations have been particularly violent and shown ruthlessness towards minority communities in areas that have fallen into their hands. All major groups, however, have been involved in fighting. And as the theory predicts, these different local forces have taken advantage of state weakness when possible.

Furthermore, analysts have noted that the initial violence carried out by the Assad regime is most likely the primary reason behind the protest movement’s growth and radicalisation (ICG 2011, p. i). So clearly, the decision by the regime to respond violently seems vital to explain the scope and longevity of the war; had the regime decided to not use violence as its main response, the country is unlikely to have experienced such a long a violent civil war. Yet the
current framework of the study does not, at least in a direct sense, explain this decision. It could be explained by the theory as a fear in the Alawite rule that it would suffer in case of the Sunni majority coming to power. But it is more likely, as has been pointed out, to have been grounded mainly in a will of the regime to stay in power, and a regime-appointed committee’s conclusion saying: "if we let the protesters continue their demonstrations as in in Tunisia and Egypt, the uprising will spread further" (Heydemann 2013, p. 62). The current framework does, however, in an accurate manner, account for how the regime was able to continue these violent efforts, and how this radicalised the opposition and worsened the war more generally.

4.2  Regional factors

Analysts seem to agree on that regional intervention has plunged Syria into a protracted civil war (ICG 2013b, p. i; Monshipouri & Weiger 2014, p. 152-153). In other words, it is clear that the involvement of regional actors has protracted and exacerbated the war. But what led regional forces to get involved in Syria? My answer is that this can largely be explained by the following manifestations of a state-to-nation imbalance in Syria.

Syria: a state without a nation – transborder ties

As discussed earlier, Syria is a state without a nation. This has allowed for transborder ties to exercise important effects on the situation in Syria. Many analysts emphasise that the war in Syria is of sectarian nature (Carpenter 2013; ICG 2013b, p. ii; Monshipouri & Weiger 2014). They underline that a Shia-alliance (centred around the Shia Alawite regime and supported by Hezbollah, Iran, and Iraqi Shias) is fighting a Sunni coalition (centred around opposition forces and supported by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the Persian Gulf states). However, to reduce the war to a strictly sectarian conflict is both counterproductive and faulty (Phillips 2012, p. 79; Phillips 2015). Yet, religious transborder ties appear to have played an important role in protracting and exacerbating the war in Syria.

Sectarian motivations are believed to have been particularly important in spurring external support for the opposition. A number of analysts have noted that support for the opposition is based on different power and security considerations that largely depend on the Sunni-ties that members of the anti-Assad camp (e.g. Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar) share with the opposition groups (ICG 2012a, p. 2; Phillips 2012, p. 77; Carpenter 2013, p. 5; Dostal 2014, p. 35; Monshipouri & Weiger 2014, p. 151).

Regarding assistance to the Assad regime, the link between sectarian Shia-ties and support is not as clear. It has been pointed out that Iran’s support for the regime is not ideological, and that the Shia population in Iran and Shia Alawites in Syria have very little in common (Phillips 2012, p. 79). This, however, does not necessarily mean that transborder religious ties did not play an important role in determining Iran’s position towards Syria. It has been under-
lined, for example, that Iran fears that Sunni forces with strong ties to Saudi Arabia, which is a longstanding "enemy" of Iran, will take control in Syria (Phillips 2012, p. 79). It is also likely that Iran would have had a harder time legitimising its support to the Assad regime if it had been predominantly Sunni. Iran’s support for the Assad regime appears to have been particularly important in exacerbating the war. The regime has been especially reliant on Iran’s militias and their military know-how concerning repressive tactics (Heydemann 2013, pp. 62-63; ICG 2015, p. i)

Furthermore, non-state actors in the region have played a role in aiding local actors in Syria. Fred Lawson (2014, p. 1353) explains:

[T]he accelerating ethno-sectarianization of the civil war, along with the political mobilization of almost all of Syria’s minority communities, has prompted members of these ethnic and religious minorities who reside in neighbouring countries to intervene directly in the conflict.

A key example is the Shia non-state actor Hezbollah that normally operates in Lebanon. Hezbollah has, likely due to fears that it will be caught between Lebanon’s Sunni community and a Sunni regime in Syria (should Assad be overthrown), offered the Assad regime all-out political support (ICG 2011c, p. 4), and later intervened directly in Syria.

Radical Islam: pan-identity and extremism

It is clear that regional forces have played a role in strengthening and supporting extreme Islamist forces in Syria. Saudi Arabia specifically, whose rule is based on a strict interpretation of Sunni Islam (Miller 2007, p. 386), and the Gulf states more generally have played a big role in this respect. One major example is the financial and arms-support that the Gulf states have extended to the al-Qaeda affiliated group Jabhat al-Nusra (Jones 2013, p. 55). This type of support nonetheless appears to have been extended by and to many different actors in the region (ICG 2012d, p. i).

Private actors inside these states have also extended some support; private, wealthy, and for the most part religiously conservative people in the Gulf states have bolstered extreme Islamists’ coffers (ICG 2012d, p. ii). It has even been noted that certain parties in Syria have proclaimed extreme Islamist sympathies just to gain support from donors in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states (Hughes 2014, p. 528).

The Syrian conflict has attracted many foreign fighters from the region. Although not all have been jihadists, the majority have been radical Islamists, at least initially (Lund 2012, p. 21-22). The inflow of these foreign fighters is likely to have been spurred by pronounced support from religious leaders in the region. One example is when Egyptian Sunni-scholars issued a fatwa in 2013 saying that all Muslims should support the Syrian opposition (Jones 2013, p. 54, 68). Although this is not necessarily an extreme Islamist statement, it is likely to
have contributed to the influx of foreign fighters into the ranks of extreme Islamist movements in Syria.

The Kurdish people: a nation without a state

The transborder ties that Syrian Kurdish forces hold with other Kurdish groups – notably with the PKK, a major Kurdish organisation operating in Turkey (Gunter 2015) – is likely to have given the Syrian Kurds some power to persist in their fighting on the ground and thus prolonged the war. As an interesting side-note, the Kurdish presence seems to occasionally have had a calming effect on the war. Turkey, out of fear that weapons would end up the hands of Syrian Kurds and in turn be used in attacks on Turkish territory, initially abstained from providing weapons to the opposition (Phillips 2013, p. 75).

Weakness of the Syrian state

As the war continued, the Syrian state was increasingly unable to control its border areas (Lawson 2014, p. 1354). It is reasonable to believe that this weakness of the Syrian state has permitted the involvement of regional forces. Had the regime been able to control its periphery and borders, external actors, such as Turkey, the Gulf states, and non-state extremist groups, would not have been able to send weapons and equipment or intervene in Syria to the same extent. This is thus a contributing factor that explains how different actors inside Syria have been able to persist and intensify their efforts.

Discussion: regional factors

These excerpts of Miller’s theory allowed me to formulate the initial hypothesis that guided this part of the study:

[T]he presence of incoherent states produces regional insecurity through the effects of spreading transborder instability among a group of strategically interdependent state and nonstate actors. For example, failed or incoherent states produce regional instability because they provide targets for external intervention either from temptation for profit and expansion or due to insecurity and fear of instability spreading out of the incoherent states. (Miller 2007, p. 110)

[I]ncoherence within a neighboring state produces instability and thus fears about potentially destabilizing changes in its regime … Another concern [of local actors] is to preempt intervention of other neighbors because the instability creates temptations for making territorial or other profits at the expense of the incoherent neighbor(s). Such fears might lead to cycles of inadvertent escalation. (Miller 2007, p. 123)

The degree of state strength … exercises major effects on … the possibility of external intervention in the territory of the state. (Miller 2007, p. 101).

Transborder religious ties have been an important contributing factor in getting regional actors to lend their assistance to local actors fighting on the ground. States that have taken a stance against Assad appear to have been particularly motivated by fears of insecurity and temptations for profit based on the Sunni-ties they share with the majority population. These
ties have however also led non-state actors, such as Hezbollah, minorities in neighbouring countries, and foreign fighters to intervene directly in Syria.

Radical Islamism has also had a role in attracting financing and arms to Syria. The Gulf states and Saudi Arabia (and private actors in these states) have been particularly motivated to support certain opposition groups due to their extreme Islamist beliefs.

Moreover, the Kurdish transborder ties are likely to have led Kurdish actors in other countries – notably the PKK in Turkey – to support the Syrian Kurds in their fighting. Interestingly, Kurdish transborder ties have also occasionally had a soothing effect on the conflict.

Miller notes that the strength of a state largely determines whether external intervention takes place. Indeed it appears that the weakness of the Syrian state has acted as a permissive factor allowing external forces, such as radical Islamists, to cross into its territory without repercussion, operate in the country’s periphery, and wage war on domestic actors. It has also allowed the flow of weapons, fighters, and other resources into the country, which has allowed domestic groups to persist in their fighting. It is also likely that state weakness contributed to spread fear among regional actors that opposing actors could take advantage of the power-vacuum in Syria to further their interests. As an example, Saudi Arabian support to certain opposition forces is likely to have been spurred by fears that if it did not seize the moment to support the groups and exercise some influence, some other actor (e.g. Qatar), would have done it.

Lastly, some argue that regional actors’ involvement in Syria is due mainly to power and security considerations in the region, and not some underlying variable such as a state-to-nation imbalance. In other words, they subscribe exclusively to realist logic. Yet this is neglecting the underlying causes that exacerbate and create these power and security dynamics. For one, evidence shows that alliances among regional actors have occurred largely in accordance with sectarian divides, and that religious ties have served as a tool for governments to legitimise their support of co-religionists in Syria. As another example, realist logic would contend that Saudi Arabia has gotten involved in Syria to counterbalance and suppress Iran in the region (Dostal 2014, p. 35). This is a plausible explanation. Yet it appears that regional transborder ties can explain this particular wish to keep Iran in check. Saudi Arabia has a Shia minority that lives in a particularly oil rich area in the country; it has been observed that Saudi Arabia is afraid that increased Iranian influence in the Middle East could stir up rebellious sentiment in this population and in turn cause trouble for Saudi Arabia (Monshipouri & Weiger 2014, p. 154-155). Iran has tried to stir up rebellions in other countries before, especially after its own revolution (Walt 2015). However, because the present study is limited to study how the state-to-nation imbalance in Syria, and not in the region, has affected the war, this aspect cannot be taken into account in this analysis.
To be clear, this part of the study does not prove that all security and power considerations that led regional actors to get involved are solely based on a state-to-nation imbalance. What it does do, however, is point to important factors that have influenced the war, which are not fully captured by realist logic.

4.3 Global factors

The first thing that has to be clarified here is which actors that have been taken into account in this analysis. The United States and Russia are the two main actors that have been involved in the Syrian conflict. However, China and European states, such as France and the United Kingdom, have also played minor roles and will thus be included in the analysis (ICG 2012b, p. 5; Heydemann 2013, p. 63, 67; Wiegel 2015). For analytical reasons, European states and the US will be labelled "the West".

**Great power competition: Russia and the West**

International mediation, notably through the UN-directed Geneva talks, has failed. This is due mainly to disagreement between Washington and Moscow about what the future should look like; the US demands that Assad and his accomplices leave Syria, while Russia insists that the regime stays in place (Tabler 2013, p. 92). It has been noted how the US and Russia do not appear to agree on anything else than measures to avoid mid-air collisions of their respective airforces operating in Syria (Rumer 2015).

Russia has since the 1970s been the Syrian regime’s primary source of arms (Hughes 2014, p. 523). This assistance to the Syrian regime has continued and increased during the war. Russia (with the unenthusiastic backing of China) has also provided Syria with diplomatic cover by vetoing UN Security Council sanctions (Heydemann 2013, p. 63). In 2015, Russia intervened directly in Syria, using air strikes and even deploying troops to support regime forces (Grand 2015). Some have stated that one of the main reasons for the Assad regime’s persistence has been the support provided by Russia (Monshipouri & Weiger 2014, p. 153). Also, some believe that the reason Russia intervened in Syria in 2015 was because the regime was close to its tipping point (Bujon de l’Estang 2015).

In the initial phases of the war, The West was reluctant to extend assistance to opposition groups. Along the way, however, things have changed and the West has stepped up its involvement (Phillips 2012, p. 75). For example, by 2013, the US had introduced economic sanctions against the regime and started to support certain opposition groups (Tabler 2013, p. 92). Notably, a substantial CIA delivery of weapons has been linked to a large ensuing escalation in violence (Dostal 2014, p. 35). Still, the West has largely shied away from military options and concrete ways of trying to get rid of Assad (ICG 2012b, p. 1). Instead the West has
pursued a strategy aiming to destroy Daesh, notably involving air strikes (ICG 2015, p. i). A very limited amount of actual troops on the ground, if any at all, have been deployed.\(^8\)

Taken together, it is clear that the involvement of both sides has exacerbated and prolonged the war. On the one hand, Russia has supported the Syrian regime in its violent efforts and gotten directly involved in the war by deploying ground forces, which is also likely to have spurred counter reactions from the forces in Syria. On the other hand, the West has also contributed to increased and continued violence; partly by air strikes, but mainly by propping up the opposition forces with weapons.

**The United States’ relative disengagement**

Following the uprisings in Syria, the US drew a "red line", indicating that if the Syrian regime used chemical weapons against its population, the US would punish the regime. In 2013, the Syrian regime nonetheless used chemical weapons against its people. With the US being reluctant about striking the regime, Russia stepped in and offered the US a way out by presenting a deal with Assad to remove the chemical weapons from Syrian territory under UN observation. The deal was accepted, and accordingly no US strikes on the Assad regime were carried out (Strategic Comments 2014). Many highlight this moment as decisive for the Syrian war, and see it as an indication that the US is reluctant to get involved in the Middle East (Filiu 2015). Following this act of relative disengagement, the numbers of recruits to extreme Islamist organisations in Syria and in the region increased considerably (Filiu 2015).

It has also been noted (Jones 2013, pp. 54; Tabler 2013, p. 92) that the US’ unwillingness in the initial phases of the war to arm opposition groups has led armed groups to seek support elsewhere – including from extreme Islamist funders in Kuwait, Libya, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. At times these groups have even proclaimed support for extreme Islamist ideology to gain this support (Hughes 2014, p. 528).

**Discussion: global factors**

First of all, it should be noted that the theory predicts that great power competition in an area of state-to-nation imbalance will prolong cold wars and make hot wars shorter (Miller 2007, p. 67). This study, however, supported by certain claims made by the theory, has played with the possibility that competing great powers may not only prolong cold wars, but also hot wars, by providing local antagonists with support that allows them to persist in and intensify their fighting. These excerpts of Miller’s theory allowed me to formulate the initial hypothesis that guided this part of the study:

> Great power competition tends to sustain protracted regional conflicts through the support that the great powers provide to the local antagonists who are their clients. (Miller 2007, p. 67)

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\(^8\) For a thorough account on US assistance during conflict, see Congressional Research Service 2015, pp. 15-17.
The assistance granted by the patrons to their regional clients shields these clients from the costs of the regional rivalry and thus reduces their incentives to make the concessions necessary for a diplomatic compromise. In other words, great power aid enables small states to persist in regional conflict and even intensify it. (Miller 2007, pp. 213-214)

Taken together, it is clear that no great power has dominated the region, nor have the great powers cooperated. Overall, mainly due to their disagreement about the future of the Assad regime, the great powers have competed, although vaguely (i.e. not always with clear protégés as during the cold war). Both the West and Russia have contributed to the protraction and exacerbation of the war by providing the different fighting sides in Syria with military and financial support. Both sides have also, to a different extent, intervened directly in Syria and taken part in the fighting.

The current framework of the study does not allow a much deeper analysis of great power involvement than this. It does however highlight the interesting fact that great power disengagement can lead to the surge of certain state-to-nation issues. The fact that the US decided not to carry out airstrikes against the Syrian regime after its use of chemical weapons can be interpreted as a sign of disengagement. As this happened, it has been noted how the numbers of recruits to radical Islamist organisations in Syria increased considerably. Also, the US initial unwillingness to fund opposition groups may have pushed certain groups towards extreme Islamist funders and increased these funders’ influence in Syria. Both of these events highlight a particular interaction between great power disengagement and the destabilising state-to-nation force pan-Islam.
5 Conclusion

This study asked the question of why the war in Syria has been particularly long and violent. In short, my answer is that the following four manifestations of the state-to-nation imbalance and two types of great power involvement have interacted to produce this outcome.

*Syria: a state without a nation.* Weak ethnic and civic nationalism has allowed subnational and transborder ties to exercise important effects on the war. Subnational ties have contributed to the endurance of the Assad regime and the intensification of its violent repression, which brought about a cycle of escalation that radicalised the opposition. Transborder ties have attracted support to local actors (which has contributed to the persistence and intensification of their violent efforts) and led non-state actors to intervene directly in Syria.

*Radical Islam: pan-identity and extremism.* Radical Islamists in the opposition have contributed to the endurance of the Assad regime and the intensification of its violent repression. Radical Islam has also brought about the emergence of Daesh that has waged war and been particularly ruthless toward religious minorities. Islamist extremism has also attracted foreign fighters and support to local actors in Syria, which has contributed to the persistence and intensification of their violent efforts.

*The Kurdish people: a nation without a state.* Kurdish forces have waged war and grabbed territory in Syria. They have also been accused of committing war crimes against other religious and ethnic groups in the areas they control. Ties between Syrian Kurds and Kurds in other countries are believed to have granted the Syrian Kurdish forces support that contributed to their ability to persist and intensify their violent efforts.

*State weakness.* The weakness of the Syrian state has acted mainly as a permissive factor that allowed violence to play out, territories to be grabbed, and external forces to enter its territory and proliferate. It has also led to the emergence of war-waging local warlords and granted own life to a violent security apparatus. Moreover, it has allowed the flow of weapons, fighters, and other resources into the country, which has allowed local actors in Syria to persist in and intensify their violent efforts.

*Great power competition.* Competition between the West and Russia has led both sides to lend their assistance to local actors. This has allowed these actors to persist in and intensify their fighting. The West and Russia have also directly contributed to the fighting by getting involved militarily; mainly through air strikes.

*Great power disengagement.* The US has occasionally shown signs of relative disengagement, which has been followed by a surge in violent Islamist elements and their influence in Syria.
To be clear, the study does not claim to have provided an exhaustive explanation to the war’s scope and longevity. It does however claim that in the absence of any of the above-mentioned manifestations of the state-to-nation imbalance, the war would have been shorter and at the very least less violent.

By describing how these different factors affected the war, the study highlights the importance of including factors of different nature when analysing war. Indeed, domestic, regional, and global factors all seem to have played an important role in protracting and exacerbating the war. At the same time, some factors appear to have played a more important role than others. Weak Syrian nationalism – and the linked subnational and transborder Sunni-ties – appear to have exercised major effects on the exacerbation of the war. This also appears to have interacted particularly with radical ideology to empower violent Islamist groups. On the other hand, Kurdish presence appears to have only had minor direct protracting and exacerbating effects on the war.

The study also promised to contribute to the answer of the overall puzzling question of why some states following the Arab Spring have plunged into long periods of violence, while others have stabilised relatively quickly. In this regard, the study has strengthened the claim deducted from the theory which states: in undemocratic weak states that host groups of different ethnicity, nationalism, and religious convictions, political unrest is likely to bring about particularly violent developments. Miller (2014a) has compared states that lived through the Arab Spring and concluded that states with a low state-to-nation balance tend to experience more violence. The results of this study supports this claim and also constitute a relatively detailed account on how a state-to-nation imbalance can protract and exacerbate a war. Doing so makes the study policy-relevant because it contributes to the generic knowledge of modern civil wars; knowledge that can help us predict when political unrest is likely to turn into long periods of war. To substantially help answer the overall question of outcomes following the Arab Spring, the study would need to be complemented by more extensive studies. One way to do this would be to conduct a comparative study of all states involved in the Arab Spring, such as the one initiated by Miller himself (2014a).

Assessing the theory and the study’s framework

Miller’s theory focuses on the outbreaks of war and only briefly discusses how a state-to-nation imbalance and great power competition can protract and worsen an ongoing (hot) war. It is therefore understandable that this study’s hypothesised processes, drawing upon the above-mentioned limited part of the theory, are insufficient to explain all important outputs and outcomes in the war. For example, the hypotheses set forth in this study cannot account for the emergence of Daesh, which has clearly played an important role in exacerbating the war. This was however expected, and the solution was to complement these processes by drawing upon the explanatory power of the state-to-nation concept more generally (see questions 1-10 on
In this way, Daesh, a clear example of a "pan-national unifier" in Miller’s words (2007, p. 89), was brought into the analysis. Accordingly, the results of the study shows that although the theory does not set forth specific processes that can account for all relevant developments in a hot war, it points us to the most important factors, and can thus account for the broad contours of the conflict. This shows the strength of Miller’s state-to-nation balance concept, and confirms that it cannot only account for the outbreak of wars, but also largely for the protraction and exacerbation of an ongoing hot war.

Yet, no theory can provide an exhaustive explanation of any case. And indeed, even with the adjustments made regarding Miller’s theory, the study misses certain elements to explain the longevity and scope of the war. For one, the dynamics regarding the Assad regime’s tactics have not been captured by the study’s framework; many state that the regime has intentionally let radical Islamists proliferate within its territory to legitimise its rule (Belhadj 2015). This cannot be explained by the state weakness concept because this concept comes with the logic saying that the state wants to prevent autonomous forces to act within its territory, which clearly has not been the case in Syria regarding extreme Islamist groups. This underlines the fact that Miller’s theory is not ideally made to study ongoing hot wars, but rather their outbreak.

Realist logic: a counter argument

The main argument that this study has had to face up to – and Miller (2007, p. 37) encounters the same issue in his case studies – is that realist logic alone seems to be able to explain states’ behaviour in the Middle East particularly well. Miller’s counter argument is that this "realist behaviour" of states is derived directly from the underlying state-to-nation imbalance. This study supports this argument by pointing out that security and power considerations can indeed largely be explained as grounded in a state-to-nation imbalance in Syria and the region more generally (see pages 25-26).

State-to-nation balance: a stable variable?

Miller (2007, p. 20) states that the state-to-nation balance is a relatively stable variable. Yet this appears to be untrue in an ongoing war such as the one in Syria. Not only has the state weakened fast as a result of the uprising, but also new destabilising state-to-nation forces, such as Daesh, have surged during the war and substantially lowered the level on state-to-nation congruence. A reasonable addition to the theory would thus be to say that hot wars can greatly and swiftly make the degree of state-to-nation balance shift.

Nations without states: an occasionally stabilising force

Turkey initially abstained from providing support to the Syrian opposition due to fears that arms might end up in Kurdish hands. This highlights the fact that nations without states (or transborder minority groups) residing in two proximate states X and Y, may occasionally
serve to curb the flow of arms from state X into state Y (where war is taking place) by inciting fear in state X that acquired equipment might be used against it. In this regard, although "nations without states" is generally a destabilising force, it may occasionally contribute to hindering the escalation of a war.

**Hot wars end quickly?**

The theory claims that under great power competition, the great powers tend to end hot wars relatively quickly. This happens because as one of the great powers’ protégés is about to be defeated, the great power backing the other local actor persuades its protégé to abstain from continued offensives. This is because the great power backing the winning side fears that if the winning local actor pushes the other close to defeat, the antagonist great power will intervene directly in the conflict to help it (see page 9).

This prediction has not come true in Syria. The reason for this is likely twofold. On the one hand, the US has not taken a firm stand and said it supports this or that opposition group completely. It has instead shown signs of disengagement. So when the regime has pushed a strong offensive against an opposition group, Russia has not nudged the Assad regime to stop its efforts because it does not believe that the US would step in if that group was about to be defeated – and indeed, the US has not. On the other hand, when the Assad regime has been about the falter – some believe this to have been the case before the Russian intervention in 2015 (Bujon de l’Estang 2015) – the opposition is unlikely to have been as dependent on the US for resources as the theory would expect under great power competition (the opposition has instead been funded by other regional actors); this thus made the opposition less willing to listen to any potential US’ urges for de-escalation. Another explanation would be that the US did not even try to nudge the opposition to stop its violence in 2015 because it did not know that the regime was close to its tipping point (Bujon de l’Estang 2015).

All this indicates that unless great powers compete to the extent that they coherently and firmly back local competing actors, Miller’s claim that hot wars end quickly is invalid. It also shows that Miller’s claim does not take into account the factor of imperfect information. In other words, great powers may be unaware that their side in a conflict is about to defeat its antagonist and thus fail to nudge it into composure.

**Methodology: limitations and problems**

A major shortcoming of this study has proved to be its scope in relation to the research objective. The Syrian war is extremely complex and has been raging on for almost five years. To explain why the war has been so long and violent thus calls for as extensive study. And indeed, this small study could have gone much deeper and mapped out many more details of the war, had there been more time. In practice, this has produced some flaws in the study. For one, the study fails to discuss less direct ways in which the war has been worsened. For ex-
ample, increased sectarian tension and Kurdish autonomy are both expected to have major hampering effects on future negotiations aimed at solving the conflict in Syria. Also, factors deemed less important to explain the war’s scope and longevity have been left out; one example is the fact that the discussion of foreign fighters was largely limited to radical Islamists, although foreign fighters have come to the aid of almost all camps.

Another problem in this study is that it has relied almost exclusively on previous research. This became problematic because issues not treated by other researchers had to be left out. As an example, discussions on regional and tribal affiliations in Syria appear to be largely absent in the literature explaining the war. It is nonetheless reasonable to believe that this factor has played a relatively important role; for one, it is likely to have led some rebels to create local militias instead of joining the popular "Sunni" rebellion and buy into sectarian discourse.

Moreover, studying the conflict as a whole and without clear temporal structure has led to an unintentional focus on the initial phases of the war. This is due to the fact that more research exists on these parts of the war. There is thus a slim risk that the study has overlooked some major factor that surfaced in the later stages of the period of analysis.

**Future research**

Studying the region as a whole would have been preferable. This would have allowed for a more in-depth analysis of why some of the regional actors actually got involved in Syria. This study treats only the state-to-nation imbalance in Syria and its effects on regional actors. There are however various other state-to-nation issues, such as Saudi Arabia’s Shia minority (see pages 25-26), that could explain why some actors are eager to get involved in Syria. The scope of the study could thus be broadened to take into account also regional state-to-nation imbalances and their impact on the war. Also, the study’s scope could be broadened more generally to discuss the effects of state-to-nation imbalance and great power involvement even further; as mentioned, this study has only captured the broad contours of the war.
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