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Understanding Syria's Many Conflicts

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The conflict in Syria has been going on since the Arab Spring began in 2011, and shows no sign of coming to an end either through military or through diplomatic means. An important reason for this is that the ongoing war there is not just one conflict, but several conflicts which interact with one another.

Like other Arab Spring revolutions, the conflict in Syria began as one between the authoritarian Assad regime on the one hand and its many internal opponents on the other. While a desire to end authoritarian rule may have been more important in motivating opposition to Assad than sectarian differences at first, the conflict quickly acquired an Alawite vs. Sunni dimension. The Alawites are the minority community which the Assad regime is primarily based on while Sunni Arabs are Syria's oppressed majority. The Assad regime was able to rally support from Alawites (not all of whom have been happy under it) and Syria's other minority communities through raising the fear that if a regime based on the Sunni Arab majority ever came to power, it would deal savagely with all the minorities.

But while they all oppose the Assad regime, various Syrian opposition movements also oppose each other. Just among Sunni Arabs, there are "moderate" groups supported by various regional powers as well as (and to a lesser extent) by the US, and there are more extreme jihadist groups such as ISIS and what was up until recently an Al Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra.

Syria has also been an arena of conflict between Iran on the one hand and Saudi Arabia on the other. Shi'a Iran strongly supports the Alawite (which is related to Shi'ism) Assad regime because it allows Tehran to support the anti-Israeli Lebanese Shi'a movement, Hezbollah. If the Assad regime falls, then Tehran's ability to support Hezbollah (as well as Hezbollah's strength) could decline significantly, thus dashing Iran's larger regional ambitions. Saudi Arabia, though, sees itself as in an existential struggle with Iran, and so wants to bring about the downfall of Assad and his replacement by a Sunni Arab dominated government in Damascus in order to deprive Tehran of an ally (and hopefully gain one for itself).

The collapse of governmental authority in Syria as well as the rise of Kurdish nationalism in the region has allowed Syria's Kurds to gain control of predominantly Kurdish regions of the country along the border with Turkey. The Syrian Kurds are increasingly at odds with Turkey, which fears that they are linked to Turkey's Kurdish opposition.

Finally, Russia and the United States are also involved in the Syrian conflict. Moscow has long provided arms to the Assad regime, including after the start of the conflict there in 2011. Russia stepped up its support through directly intervention there beginning in September 2015, launching a bombing campaign predominantly with its air force against the Assad regime's opposition. This Russian intervention may have saved the Assad regime from being overrun or driven back to the Alawite stronghold along the Mediterranean coast. The Russian intervention also served to deter external intervention against the Assad regime. While the US, for its part, has indeed called for the departure of Assad, Washington has focused its military efforts on attacking ISIS in Syria—a mission strongly related to its efforts to weaken ISIS in neighboring Iraq as well.

The different parties to the conflicts in Syria have had different priorities in terms of who each see as its principal opponent. For the Assad regime, for example, this has been the non-ISIS opposition which threatens it most. For Turkey, this has been the Syrian Kurds. For Saudi Arabia, this has been Iran. For Russia, this has been the United States—though less for what the US has been doing there than for preventing it from doing more. For America, despite its calls

for the departure of Assad, the focus of its efforts has been the defeat of ISIS. The list could go on.

In order to weaken those whom they regard as their principal opponent, the different parties to the Syrian conflicts have often entered tactical, or just tacit, alliances with other parties against their more threatening common enemies. Seeing the non-ISIS opposition as a common enemy, both the Assad regime and ISIS have tended to target it—and not each other. Because ISIS has been a common threat to the Kurds and to American interests both in Syria and in Iraq, Washington has allied with the Kurds against ISIS. But where the Kurds and the Assad regime have seen non-ISIS Arab opposition forces as a common enemy, they have worked with each other against them. Because Saudi Arabia and Qatar see Iran as the greater threat, they have reportedly supported Sunni jihadists—even though these have hostile intentions toward the Arab Gulf monarchies. When Russian-Turkish relations deteriorated sharply after Turkish forces shot down a Russian warplane flying in the vicinity of the Syrian-Turkish border, Russia stepped up support for the Syrian Kurdish opposition.

These “enemy of my enemy is my friend” alliances, though, often do not last. This can occur when the common enemy becomes weaker, or if two sides that were enemies become friendlier (if not friends), and so the previous friend against it becomes disposable. For example, up until recently, the Assad regime and the Syrian Kurds have reportedly been cooperating against the non-ISIS opposition in northwestern Syria. But now that the non-ISIS opposition there has become weaker, Assad regime and Syrian Kurdish forces have been directly clashing with each other. In addition, when the Erdogan government in Turkey prioritized both the downfall of Assad and keeping the Syrian Kurds in check, it reportedly allowed ISIS to cross back and forth over the Syrian-Turkish border. But now that ISIS has become weaker, Turkish forces have intervened in northern Syria against it to prevent Syrian Kurdish forces from taking over what had been ISIS territory. Further, as Ankara has become increasingly fearful of the Syrian Kurds and ISIS is no longer useful for keeping them in check, Erdogan seems to have become more tolerant of the Assad regime—especially now that it too is acting against the Syrian Kurds.

The collapse of these “enemy of my enemy is my friend” alliances gives rise to questions about whether other such alliances are also vulnerable. If, for example, the pro-Assad coalition defeats all or most of its opponents, will Russia and Iran share the same vision of the future of Syria, or will they compete with each other over which will have predominant influence in Damascus? Similarly, if the Assad regime either collapses or is driven to the Alawite stronghold along the Mediterranean coast, will Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and America be able to agree on what should come next, or will there be rivalry among them over which groups and leaders to support?

These questions, of course, will not come to the fore unless and until either the Assad regime and its allies are on the point of vanquishing their opponents, or those opponents are on the point of overthrowing the Assad regime. Until then, a more urgent question may be whether the Syrian conflict can be prevented from spreading or negatively affecting other countries? While it has not yet spread, it has obviously affected others negatively through causing a massive refugee outflow to neighboring countries as well as to Europe.

Is there any hope for conflict resolution? Russian and American diplomats are in talks about this. But even if these two are acting in good faith (and there are questions about whether Russia is in particular), it is doubtful that they can either convince or coerce the protagonists inside Syria to stop fighting so long as regional powers such as Iran and Saudi Arabia continue supporting them. And since Saudi-Iranian rivalry is highly likely to persist, neither Tehran nor Riyadh seem likely to cease supporting their respective allies inside Syria.

President Obama was criticized for warning Russia that its intervention in Syria could lead it into a quagmire there. Russia, it has been pointed out, has avoided sending large numbers of troops to fight the ground war and has limited itself to a bombing campaign which it manages with a relatively small contingent. Yet even if Russia avoids a quagmire for itself that does not mean that it can prevail there either. Indeed, Syria itself may well have already become a quagmire in which nobody can win but everybody can lose.