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Starvation in Syria: A Political Marketplace Analysis

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About the Conflict Research Programme

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1. Introduction: The Impact of the Syrian Civil War 10 Years on

The conflict in Syria has been ongoing for a decade and the humanitarian needs continue to be extraordinarily high. Although guns have fallen relatively silent since the ceasefire of March 2020, the threat of renewed hostilities still persists. The Syrian government has vowed to regain control over all of Syria and Turkey and continues to threaten Kurdish-controlled SDF's areas, where anger is brewing due to oppression against Arab tribes and political opponents. The relative calm on the country's remaining battlefields has not translated into better conditions on the ground as the country's economy continues to deteriorate due to years of conflict, mismanagement, displacement and destruction of the infrastructure as well as the imposition of increasingly suffocating sanctions by the United States.

The COVID-19 pandemic combined with the banking crisis in Lebanon have exacerbated the country's economic woes and taken a severe toll on the economy and population. Precautionary COVID-19 measures (e.g. closure of border crossings), and loss of billions of dollars of Syrian businessmen in Lebanese banks led to an unprecedented devaluation of the Syrian pound, and an acute shortage of foreign currency.¹ Within five months, the cumulative effect of these shocks has led to an estimated 200,000 to 300,000 job losses² and the permanent closure of 15 percent of small and medium businesses. Precautionary COVID-19 measures and exchange rate volatility have also forced humanitarian actors to either temporarily suspend operations and/or redesign their budgets, leading to delays in the delivery of life-saving assistance.³ The economic and humanitarian deterioration has been further worsened by sanctions.⁴

U.S. sanctions, and the EU to a lesser degree, are not only partly responsible for hindering the recovery of the economy by targeting investments in strategic sectors such as oil, gas, and construction, but they have also complicated the work of

¹ Al-Khalidi, Suleiman. (2020). 'Syria's Assad says billions locked in troubled Lebanese banks behind economic crisis.' *Reuters*. 4 November. Accessed 2 March 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/article/syria-crisis-assad-deposits-int-idUSKBN27K2W4>.

² OCHA. (2021). Humanitarian Response, Syrian Arab Republic: 2021 Needs and Response Summary, 22 February. Accessed on 1 March 2021. <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/whole-of-syria/document/2021-needs-and-response-summary-syrian-arab-republic>.

³ OCHA, 2020. Syrian Arab Republic: Covid-19 Humanitarian Update No. 18, 17 September, 2020. Accessed on 20 September 2020. <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-covid-19-humanitarian-update-no-18-17-september>.

⁴ Ghisn, Ziad. (2020). 'How economic sanctions negatively affect the health sector in Syria: a case study of the pharmaceutical industry.' 16 April. Accessed 19 September 2020. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/crp/2020/04/16/how-economic-sanctions-negatively-affect-the-health-sector-in-syria-a-case-study-of-the-pharmaceutical-industry/>.

humanitarian organizations, despite the fact that the humanitarian sector is officially exempt from the sanctions regime. These sanctions have had a cumulative effect on humanitarian operations due to their chilling effects and the difficulties in securing waivers to allow aid imports (including for example for education purposes)⁵ and bank transfers.⁶ Meanwhile, sanctions on oil imports, and threats against those that facilitate them, have led to shortages of fuel supplies to the country and limiting electricity supplies and fuel for heating, agriculture, and industry.⁷

The confluence of these factors, among others, have contributed to increased food insecurity in the country as well as the increased adaptation of irreversible coping strategies,⁸ such as the selling of properties to support livelihoods, and a spike in acute malnutrition levels,⁹ all of which are happening in a context of a collapsing health sector. Approximately 70 percent of qualified health workers have left the country and only half of the public hospitals are operating at full capacity.¹⁰ According to the United Nations, the poverty-stricken country, which had previously attained a unique position in the Middle East as a self-sufficient and wheat exporting country, is at risk of famine,¹¹ and for the first time in its history has introduced a limit on bread distribution.¹²

The emergence of the humanitarian crisis and its subsequent deepening is, however,

⁵ Nebehay, Stephanie. (2020). 'Big powers urged to freeze sanctions on Syria, Iran, Venezuela during virus.' *Reuters*. 28 April. Accessed 20 September 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-health-coronavirus-sanctions-idAFKCN22A2TK>.

⁶ Daher, Joseph. (2020a). 'Invisible Sanctions: How over-compliance limits humanitarian work on Syria: Challenges of Fund Transfer for Non-Profit Organizations Working on Syria.' *Impact*. Accessed on 19 September 2020. https://impact-csr.org/reports/Invisible_Sanctions_IMPACT_EN.pdf.

⁷ Al-Khalidi, Suleiman. (2020). 'Syria says U.S. sanctions behind acute crisis.' *Reuters*, 16 September. Accessed on 20 September 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-fuel-shortages-idUSKBN26730G>; U.S. Department of the Treasury. (Undated). 'Syria Sanctions.' Accessed on 1 March 2021. <https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/financial-sanctions/sanctions-programs-and-country-information/syria-sanctions>.

⁸ Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO). (2020). 'Syrian Arab Republic Situation Report,' Accessed on 20 September 2020. <http://www.fao.org/emergencies/resources/documents/resources-detail/en/c/1295916/>.

⁹ OCHA, (2020). 'Syrian Arab Republic: Covid-19 Humanitarian Update, No. 18.' 17 September. Accessed 20 September 2020. <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-covid-19-humanitarian-update-no-18-17-september>.

¹⁰ Gharibah, Mazen and Mehchy, Zaki. (2020). *COVID-19 Pandemic: Syria's Response and Healthcare Capacity*. Policy Memo. Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK. <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/103841/>.

¹¹ United Nations News. (2020). 'As famines of "biblical proportion" loom, Security Council urged to "act fast."' 21 April 2020. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1062272>.

¹² Syrian Arab News Agency. (2020). 'Decisions of Council of Ministers.' 15 September 2020. Accessed 20 September 2020. <http://www.sana.sy/?p=1219715>.

is not only the consequence of the conflict and deteriorating economy but also the result of the interventions and policies of actors involved in the conflict. Direct policies and interventions of conflict actors, some of which will be discussed below, have contributed and shaped some of the worst episodes of humanitarian crisis throughout the conflict.

Political Marketplace Framework and Analysis

This paper provides an analysis of starvation in Syria through the prism of the Political Marketplace frame (PMF). It assumes a working knowledge of the basic principle of the framework¹³ and while it does not aim to offer policy recommendations, it seeks to provide a detailed analysis to inform future policy addressing food security in Syria.

The paper begins by tracing the evolution of the political economy in Syria under the Ba'ath Party and Assad Senior, a period in which the country operated as a highly centralized authoritarian political system based on patronage (Section 2). The paper then proceeds to discuss the first decade of Bashar al-Assad's reign, a period that witnessed a change in the nature of the political system from a highly centralized authoritarianism to a centralized kleptocracy. The section further elaborates on the main economic and political configuration during this period.

The following sections focus on how multiple political marketplaces emerged in the context of the civil war in Syria (Section 3) and the changing political economy during the conflict (Section 4). This is discussed through four phases: political mobilization, militarization, civil war, and subsequent shift to a proxy war. During the conflict, the political system shifted towards a deregulated form of free competition only to shift again into a system that is dominated by rivalrous oligopolies supported by international actors.

The fifth section of the paper provides a political marketplace analysis of the conflict and the role of siege warfare and subsequent starvation. The paper argues that the humanitarian crisis that resulted from siege warfare was not motivated by a PMF logic, but rather a war/military logic. This applies to all actors who deployed the strategy. This section also briefly addresses the impact of the conflict on the

¹³ The Political Marketplace Framework comes from de Waal, Alex. 2015. *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War, and the Business of Power*. Cambridge: Polity. For additional work on political marketplace analyses, see the Conflict Research Programme at LSE: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/projects/conflict-research-programme/> and World Peace Foundation: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/political-markets-justice-and-security-program/>.

agricultural sector, including dynamics that impact its recovery, and the subsequent impact on the food security of the country.

The paper concludes with a discussion of the unprecedented level of the humanitarian crisis and how urgent action to improve food security in Syria is critical. This will require domestic and international actors to pursue policies that depoliticize access to food and prioritize the interests of the Syrian people.

2. A History of Syria's Political Economy

The current Syrian political system has its roots in the mid-1950s, the short-lived Syrian-Egyptian union, and in the early 1960s when the Ba'ath Party took power in Syria in a bloodless coup in 1963. The legacies of these periods have shaped the evolution of the Syrian state and economy through today. This section will address the main characteristics of the Syrian political system and economy in the period between 1963 and 2020.

In the initial years of its reign, the political elite of the Ba'ath pursued radical agendas for political, economic, and social transformation under the banner of 'socialist transformation.'¹⁴ This entailed large-scale nationalisation, especially in the industrial and financial sectors, along with land reforms¹⁵ aimed at securing national economic independence and food sufficiency.¹⁶ The scale and scope of these policies, however, was a source of contention between two rivalrous factions within the party; a Marxist-leaning and a pragmatist-leaning faction. This rivalry led to heightened political competition over power and control, culminating in a 'duality of power' in the late 1960s. This changed, however, when Hafez al-Assad (Assad Senior) assumed control after a bloodless coup in 1970.

Assad Senior built a highly centralized and patronage-based authoritarian political system with the armed forces and coercive apparatuses as its backbone. Assad Senior and his regime employed neo-patrimonial strategies and the regime was infested with corruption, clientelism, and favouritism.¹⁷ In building his regime, Assad

¹⁴ Van Dam, Nikolaos. (2017). *Destroying a Nation: The Civil War in Syria*. I.B. TAURIS, 41.

¹⁵ Abboud, Samer N. (2018). *Syria*. Second Edition. Policy Press, 33.

¹⁶ Hinnebusch, Raymond. (2011). 'The Ba'ath Agrarian Revolution (1963-2000)' in *Agriculture and Reform in Syria*. Hinnebusch, Raymond et al (eds), St. Andrews Papers on Contemporary Syria.

¹⁷ Van Dam 2017, 47.

Senior depended on his Alawite co-religionists in a 'Ba'athized army'¹⁸ and linked the political system to society through bureaucratic and party-corporatist institutions that cut across sectarian and urban-rural divides and spanned the middle class and the peasantry.¹⁹ The coalition was not static, and, in the face of challenges and developments, it expanded to accommodate different constituencies, including the former bourgeoisie.

Notwithstanding the importance of the coercive apparatuses, the Ba'ath Party, the bureaucracy, and corporatists organizations, such as women's and farmers' unions, which were created in top-down initiatives,²⁰ also constituted important pillars for the regime. Although the party gradually lost political power, it was coterminous with the state and by the mid-1980s the Ba'athist Party's budget was equivalent to that of the Ministry of Finance.²¹ Members of the Ba'ath Party and leaders of corporatist institutions came to constitute the new state-bourgeoisie or a class of state functionaries.²² Meanwhile, public sector employment was one of the main instruments through which the regime exercised patronage. The sector employed major segments of the middle and working classes,²³ amounting to 25 percent of employed Syrians in the 1980s.

While patronage was an important pillar of the Assad regime's power, the backbone was its coercive apparatus. In addition to its military missions, the armed forces were endowed with the task of participating in economic and social development by building up the socio-economic infrastructure.²⁴ The armed forces hence developed complex and substantial economic interests, ranging from road infrastructure to housing construction at the national level, and became an integral part of the economy. Like the party, the military became an important instrument of penetrating and integrating society.²⁵ Patrimonialism was prevalent and personalism pervaded

¹⁸ Hinnebusch, Raymond and Tina Zintl. (2015). 'Introduction' in *Syria from Reform to Revolt. Political Economy and International Relations*. Hinnebusch, Raymond and Rina Zintl (eds), Volume 1. Syracuse University Press., 03.

¹⁹ Hinnebusch, Raymond (2012b). 'Authoritarian Upgrading and the Arab Uprising: Syria in Comparative Perspective', *BRISMES* conference, London, March, 06.

²⁰ Hinnebusch, Raymond. (2005). 'Political Parties and Trade Unions.' in *A Companion to the History Of The Middle East*. Choueiri, Youssef M. (ed). Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 349.

²¹ Ziadeh, Radwan. (2011). *Power and Policy in Syria. Intelligence Services, Foreign Relations and Democracy in the Modern Middle East*. New York: I. B. Tauris and Co., 13-15.

²² Perthes, Volker. (1991). 'The Bourgeoisie and the Baath,' *Middle East Report* 170. May/June.

²³ Hinnebusch, Raymond. (2012a). 'Syria from authoritarian upgrading to revolution?' *International Affairs*, No. 1: 96.

²⁴ Ali, Mohammad Hussein Al-Haj. (2012). *Syrian Arab Army: From Corrective Movement until Now*. Accessed 14 April 2021.

https://riadi.alwehda.gov.sy/_archive.asp?FileName=89899049520120501005608.

²⁵ Stacher, Joshua. (2012). *Adaptable Autocrats: Regime Power in Egypt and Syria*. Stanford University Press, 65.

staffing decisions.²⁶ Trusted members of the military, and security agencies established their own network of social (tribal, sectarian, religious) clients.²⁷

To maintain support and loyalty among the armed forces and security apparatuses, corruption and illicit economic activities of (high-ranking) officers were tolerated by the regime.²⁸ By incriminating the inner circle and allowing such criminal behaviour, the regime was able to clamp down on any figure that constituted a political or security threat. Further, a comprehensive crackdown on these figures, especially on high-ranking officers, would have undermined inter-regime power dynamics and destabilised the regime. Key officers thus benefited and were involved in a variety of contraband activities in Syria and Lebanon. In Syria, these military officers created a 'military-mercantile complex' with the rehabilitated merchants and old bourgeoisie and benefited from state contracts; while in Lebanon, they openly invested in Lebanese industrial, commercial, and service ventures along with Lebanese businessmen. This was extremely beneficial during the reconstruction period in the mid-1990s.²⁹

Economic and Regional Developments and their Impact on the Structure of Assad Senior's Regime

The initial years of the reign of Assad Senior coincided with an increase in rents driven by the increase in oil prices, technical and financial support from the Soviet Union due to superpower competition, and the flow of aid from Gulf states, given Syria's role in the fight against Israel as one of the 'front line' states in the region.³⁰ During the 1970s, GDP per capita (at constant prices) grew at an annual rate of 6 percent.³¹ The Assad Senior regime used these rents to expand its military, co-opt the middle class, and create a large state bureaucracy.³² This led to what Ayubi³³

²⁶ Hinnebusch 2012a, 97.

²⁷ Saouli, Adham. (2018). 'The tragedy of Ba'athist state building' in *The Syrian Uprising. Domestic Origins and Early Trajectory*. Hinnebusch, Raymond, and Omar Imady (eds). London: Routledge, 23.

²⁸ Haddad, Bassam. (2012). *Business Networks in Syria. The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience*. Stanford University Press, 99-100.

²⁹ Matar, Linda. (2016). *The Political Economy of Investment in Syria*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 97-98.

³⁰ Hinnebusch, Raymond. (2009). 'Syria under the Ba'th: the political economy of populist authoritarianism' in Hinnebusch, Raymond and Soren Schmidt (eds) *The State and the Political Economy of reform in Syria*. St Andrews Papers on Contemporary Syria. St. Andrews University Press.

³¹ Matar 2016, 2.

³² Hinnebusch, Raymond. (2020a). 'State, Revolution and War: Conflict and Resilience in MENA's State and State System.' in *The Routledge Handbook to the Middle East and North African State and State System*. Hinnebusch, Raymond and Jasmine Gani (eds). London: Routledge, 34.

³³ Ayubi, Nazih N. (1996). *Over-Stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East*. London: I.B. Tauris and Co.

called an 'overstating' of the state or as Hinnebusch³⁴ argues, as the overdevelopment of the state relative to its economic base.

Meanwhile, Assad Senior maintained a political narrative focused on Ba'athist ideology. However, in practice, Assad Senior incrementally reversed the policies that were introduced in the initial years of the Ba'ath Party. The policies, which had made the state directly responsible for capital accumulation and were implemented at the cost of private commercial and industrial sectors,³⁵ were indirectly substituted through 'mild loosening of government controls on private economic activity'³⁶ in what represented a state-business rapprochement.

Nonetheless, economic liberalization was slow, limited, and conducted in selective and tailored ways according to the ruling elites' political calculations in order to avoid threatening the core political structure.³⁷ Syria remained a middle-income welfare state and the stability of the ruling elites, including the stability of the party, security sector, and corporate interests, was central to the stability of the country's political economy. Economic instability at home and regional developments were catalysts for further liberalization and reorganization of the economic order in Syria.

From the mid-1970s onward, the country suffered from political unrest and witnessed an armed insurgency waged by affiliates of the fighting vanguards of the Muslim Brotherhood movement. Violence was sporadic and targeted against Ba'athists as well as military and security forces. The authorities responded harshly, and violence peaked in 1982 when the city of Hama was attacked. Approximately 20,000 people were killed, the vast majority of whom were innocent civilians.³⁸ During the month-long attack, government forces deployed siege tactics (similar to those used after 2011) cutting off food and energy supplies, initially to the whole city and subsequently to the old city neighbourhood where insurgents had taken refuge.³⁹ Instability at home, which further worsened in the early 1980s due to intra-regime strife over power, was accompanied by shifting regional dynamics emanating from the outbreak of the Iranian revolution, Egypt-Israel peace treaty, first Gulf War, and the Israeli invasion and subsequent occupation of Lebanon in 1982. These

³⁴ Hinnebusch 2012a.

³⁵ Heydemann, Steven. (1999). *Authoritarianism in Syria: Institutions and Social Conflict, 1946–1970*. Cornell University Press, 106.

³⁶ Haddad 2012, 92-93.

³⁷ Matar 2016, 93.

³⁸ Van Dam, Nikolaos. (1979). *The Struggle for Power in Syria. Politics and Society Under the Ba'th Party*. London: I.B. Tauris and Co, 111-116.

³⁹ Seale, Patrick. (1988). *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*. University of California Press, 333.

challenges, compounded by the failure of the statist developmental policies and decreased rent from the Gulf countries, resulted in an economic crisis in the mid-1980s.

The crisis culminated in the fiscal and liquidity crisis of 1986, but the preceding era was marked by severe shortages in consumer products, producers' means of production, and raw materials. At this time, smuggling with Lebanon and Turkey was rife and black markets flourished.⁴⁰ Real GDP growth dropped to 1 percent in the late 1980s⁴¹ and inflation increased by approximately 70 percent.⁴² Consequently, the government in Damascus shifted to austerity and a wave of selective economic liberalization, nonetheless mediated ones, were introduced and they culminated in the introduction of Investment Law Number 10 of 1991.⁴³ This 1991 law opened the door to reintegrate the private sector into the economy under the banner of 'economic pluralism', but this limited rearrangement failed to revitalize the Syrian economy. Following the Gulf War in 1991, rents derived from oil and Gulf monarchies became the main source of government revenues.⁴⁴

Father to Son: Assad Junior and the Remaking of Syria's Economy

In July 2000, Bashar al-Assad, hereunder Assad Junior, was 'elected' as president after his father's death. Assad Junior had no previous history in party politics and initially depended on the incumbent elites to rule.⁴⁵ He had to share power with the 'old guards',⁴⁶ which resulted in a revival of the Ba'ath Party and of a balance of power between the presidency and the party.⁴⁷ The personal style of rule under Assad Senior gave way to a revival of institutions, such as the cabinet. At the time, Assad Junior was popular due to his image as a reformer,⁴⁸ and his ascension to power created great expectations of structural reforms.⁴⁹ This was epitomized by the 'Damascus Spring', a short period in late 2000 and early 2001, during which political

⁴⁰ Haddad 2012, 93-97.

⁴¹ Matar 2016, 102-103.

⁴² Hinnebusch 2011, 7.

⁴³ Matar 2016, 102-103.

⁴⁴ Matar 2016, 15.

⁴⁵ Hinnebusch, Raymond. (2015). 'President and Party in Post-Ba'athist Syria. From the Struggle for Reform to Regime Deconstruction' in *Syria from Reform to Revolt. Political Economy and International Relations*. Hinnebusch, Raymond and Rina Zintl (eds). Volume 1. Syracuse University Press, 26-27.

⁴⁶ Hinnebusch 2012a, 98.

⁴⁷ Hinnebusch 2015, 26-27.

⁴⁸ Lesch, David W. (2005). *The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar Al Asad and Modern Syria*. Yale University Press.

⁴⁹ Pinto, Paulo G. (2015). 'God and Nation: The Politics of Islam under Bashar al-Asad' in *Syria from Reform to Revolt. Political Economy and International Relations*. Edited by Hinnebusch, Raymond and Rina Zintl. Volume 1. Syracuse University Press, 154.

forums and salons flourished, and intellectuals, as well as members of the secular and liberal opposition, were permitted to engage in public matters.⁵⁰

The first half-decade under Assad Junior was also marked by major regional and international developments, including the Global War on Terror and the U.S. occupation of Iraq. The latter was considered a first step towards more 'regime change' in the region and hence it was voraciously opposed by the Syrian government. In the years before the occupation of Iraq, the importance of Iraq, as an economic partner and a destination for Syrian goods, had grown. In the early 2000s, Syria allowed Iraq to smuggle oil through the Kirkuk-Banias pipeline in violation of international sanctions. This was lucrative for Syria, which benefited from the returns of Iraqi oil and in return exported its goods to Iraq. Associates of the Syrian regime were among the main beneficiaries. In March 2003, Assad Junior declared that Iraq War would be met with resistance. In the years that followed, Syria hosted approximately two million Iraqi refugees as well as members of the Iraqi opposition.

The US responded to Syria's actions with sanctions and political pressure applied through Congressional acts and United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions in 2003 and 2004.⁵¹ In February 2005, pressure on the country mounted further as the Syrian government was accused of assassinating the Lebanese prime minister, Rafiq al-Hariri. Subsequently, on 26 April 2005, the last Syrian troops withdrew from Lebanon, a historical sphere of Syrian influence and the lung through which the Syrian economy breathed.⁵² Lebanon played a very important role in the facilitation of Syrian businesses due to sanctions on the Syrian economy and banking system. It also represented a market for low-skilled Syrians. Notwithstanding the withdrawal, strong economic links persisted between the two countries as they had been codified in the 'Fraternity, Friendship, and Cooperation' treaty.

These national and regional developments, combined with socio-economic grievances resulting from rapid population growth, rural-urban migration, dwindling oil resources,⁵³ widespread discontent in the party bases and society at the

⁵⁰ Al-Om, Tamara. (2018). 'Emergence of the political voice of Syria's civil society: The non-violent movements of the Syrian Uprising' in *The Syrian Uprising. Domestic Origins and Early Trajectory*. Edited by Hinnebusch, Raymond and Omar Imady. London: Routledge, 159-160.

⁵¹ Scheller, Bente. (2013). *The Wisdom of Syria's Waiting Game: Foreign Policy under the Assads*. London: Hurst and Company, 121-149.

⁵² Matar 2016, 97.

⁵³ Zintel, Tina. (2015). 'The Co-option of Foreign-Educated Syrians: Between Legitimizing Strategy and Domestic Reforms' in *Syria from Reform to Revolt. Political Economy and International Relations*. Edited by Hinnebusch, Raymond and Rina Zintl. Volume 1. Syracuse University Press, 13.

corruption of the leadership,⁵⁴ and institutional decay and inefficiency catalysed reforms intended to guarantee the survival of the regime. However, the old guard of Assad Senior's regime resisted reforms, leading to a struggle between the new president and the old guard. This would continue until the 10th Ba'ath Party Congress in 2005, when Assad Junior brushed aside the old elites, including the Vice President, Abdul-Halim Khadam, and replaced them with his own confidants.⁵⁵ This did not, however, translate into a change in the structure of the ruling elites. The newly installed confidants, mostly foreign-trained technocrats who were children of the old guard, simply disguised and continued the old clientelistic relationships that Assad Junior sought to challenge. These new confidants were recruited to help drive reforms in the country, yet they left the same people in charge of the state and reform decisions thereby undercutting Assad Junior's attempts to restructure the elite.⁵⁶ The people changed, but the dynamics did not.

In 2005, Assad Junior introduced this blueprint for economic reforms under the title of 'Social Market Economy'.⁵⁷ This model aimed to increase the role of the private sector while maintaining the position of public sector.⁵⁸ The state under Assad Junior was to '(re)position [itself] as the guardian of social stability and welfare,' and not the provider of them.⁵⁹ The market was accepted as the primary means of distributing resources and wealth, and a critical partner of the state for economic development.⁶⁰ The remaining restrictions on (international) investments were eliminated with the introduction of amendments to Law No. 10. In 2000 and 2007. These reforms entailed 'silent privatization' of the Syrian economy,⁶¹ in which services were privatized, but not the public assets. The intensive package of economic liberalization served the political interests of the state bourgeoisie, who were eager to transform themselves from state capitalists to private capitalists.⁶²

During the first decade of Assad Junior's rule, the 'state bourgeoisie' and members of the military-mercantile complex, which had formed formal and informal economic

⁵⁴ Hinnebusch 2015, 26-27.

⁵⁵ Hinnebusch 2012a, 99.

⁵⁶ Zintl 2015, 124.

⁵⁷ Hinnebusch 2012a, 99.

⁵⁸ Abboud, Samer N. (2015). 'The "Social" in the Social Market Economy' in *Syria from Reform to Revolt. Political Economy and International Relations*. Edited by Hinnebusch, Raymond and Rina Zintl. Volume 1. Syracuse University Press, 48.

⁵⁹ Abboud 2015, 49.

⁶⁰ Abboud and Lawson 2013, 333.

⁶¹ Fadilah, Abed. (2010). *The Problem of Public-Private partnerships and the Social Dimensions of Development* (in Arabic). Syrian Economic Society.

⁶² Matar 2016, 109.

networks,⁶³ started to gradually transmute themselves from a class of state capitalists to one of private capitalists. State-run monopolies were replaced by private tycoon-run monopolies and quasi-monopolies. In the years prior to the uprising, the dominant private capitalist or property-owning individuals belonged to this group. They leveraged their close ties to the regime to exploit economic reforms and initiate their own profitable business ventures that added to their private wealth. Rami Makhlouf, a cousin of Assad, was said to control 60 percent of the economy through a group of business projects and virtual monopolies in telecommunications, oil, gas, real estate, construction, banking, and duty-free imports/shops.⁶⁴ Other tycoons included the Tlases and Sulimans, descendants of military and security barons. The increased inequality resulting from these reforms festered hostility against the 'elites' and the ruling family.⁶⁵

Economic reforms and structural changes accelerated in the second half of the first decade of Assad Junior's reign and citizens started to feel the impact of structural adjustments as subsidies were gradually reduced. In 2008, the prices of bread and animal fodders increased by 75 percent, while fuel prices went up by 350 percent.⁶⁶ The acceleration of reforms was accompanied by rounds of droughts that hit the country from 2006 onward. By the late 2000s, drought had forced almost 300,000 peasant families to move to cities in search of work, and Syria began receiving international aid to address the crisis.⁶⁷ At the time, UNOCHA said this was one of the 'largest internal displacement in the Middle East in recent years.'⁶⁸ The regime, however, was slow to respond to these dynamics, only establishing an emergency programme in 2009.

Reforms under Assad Junior also included administrative and political reforms in addition to economic structural adjustments. Critically, the party's role in governance was reduced, and its patronage network was limited.⁶⁹ Corporatist organizations such as workers', peasants', and women's unions were further affected by these reforms as they lost their privileged power positions.⁷⁰ Members of these unions and

⁶³ Haddad 2012.

⁶⁴ Matar 2016, 105-110.

⁶⁵ Hinnebusch 2012a, 101-102.

⁶⁶ Ababsa, Myriam. (2015). 'The End of a World. Drought and Agrarian Transformation in Northeast Syria (2007-2010)' in Hinnebusch, Raymond and Rina Zintl (eds) *Syria from Reform to Revolt. Political Economy and International Relations*. Volume 1. Syracuse University Press, 206.

⁶⁷ Ababsa, Myriam. (2011). 'Agrarian Counter-Reform in Syria (2000-2010)' in Hinnebusch, Raymond et al (eds) *Agriculture and Reform in Syria*. St. Andrews Papers on Contemporary Syria, 83.

⁶⁸ Ababsa 2015, 43.

⁶⁹ Hinnebusch 2015, 32-42.

⁷⁰ Hinnebusch 2015, 43.

corporatist organizations were blamed as the culprits responsible for the economic stagnation and were labeled 'the new reactionaries.'⁷¹ In addition, new laws were passed to end the 'overprotection' that was granted to workers.⁷² The reforms also extended to the military and security forces. According to Said, the regime was not able to continue financing the sweeping and generous privileges of the military, and the reforms affected the economic activities of the military-owned enterprise.⁷³ For example, Assad's regime stripped many of the military-run public companies that were operating at a financial loss, due to corruption or ill-management, thereby cutting off the military from their benefits.⁷⁴

During the first decade under Assad Junior, the authoritarian bureaucratic state was drifting toward a centralized kleptocracy. From the outside, the Syrian state resembled an authoritarian bureaucracy, but internally, a centralized kleptocracy led by a small elite was emerging. Parallel to this process, and without an evident link to it, the structural changes in the Syrian economy, the withdrawal of the welfare state, slow response to drought, and reduction of international aid (at one point by one third due to international pressures) led to increased cases of malnutrition, deprivation, and hunger, especially in north-eastern governorates.

3. The Outbreak and Evolution of the Conflict in Syria

In the few years preceding the Syrian conflict, the ongoing transformation of Syrian politics, society, and economy was accelerated. Although these transformations were intended and planned, their outcomes were not always favourable to the regime. Assad Junior was set to navigate the new decade with, as Hinnebusch argues, a weakened capacity to sustain power over society.⁷⁵ His rhetoric and

⁷¹ Sottimano, Aurora. (2015). 'Nationalism and Reform under Bashar al-Asad: Reading the "Legitimacy" of the Syrian Regime' in Hinnebusch, Raymond and Rina Zintl (eds) *Syria from Reform to Revolt. Political Economy and International Relations*. Volume 1. Syracuse University Press, 81.

⁷² International Labour Organization (ILO). (2010). *Labour Codes, General Labour and Employment Acts*. 12 April. Accessed 25 March 2020.

⁷³ Said, Salam. (2018). 'The Uprising and the economic interests of the Syrian military-mercantile complex' in Hinnebusch, Raymond and Omar Imady (eds) *The Syrian Uprising. Domestic Origins and Early Trajectory*. London: Routledge, 65-67.

⁷⁴ Said, Salam. (2018). 'The Uprising and the economic interests of the Syrian military-mercantile complex' in Hinnebusch, Raymond and Omar Imady (eds) *The Syrian Uprising. Domestic Origins and Early Trajectory*. London: Routledge, 65-67.

⁷⁵ Hinnebusch 2012a, 99.

occasional implementation of reform gave some social actors hope that the authoritarian government was slowly being dismantled.⁷⁶ However, despite the hope for change, Syria remained a highly centralized kleptocracy for the first decade of the 21st century.

With the outbreak of the popular uprising, the Syrian political system increasingly operated as a political marketplace⁷⁷ in which political power was commodified and monetized. Politics became increasingly transactional and run based on personal transactions with political loyalties and services sold to the highest bidder according to the laws of supply and demand. The new system would come to be run according to the 'political budget', 'the price of loyalty', and the political business models and skills of politicians, warlords, and rebel leaders. Formal institutions and rules rarely constrained the conduct of politics and violence was pervasive. The government's inability to maintain its political and security grip led to the lowering of the barriers of entry into politics and the system began to shift towards a deregulated form of free competition as the political and military opposition fragmented for a variety of reasons including the support of international actors as well as ideology. As the conflict progressed, the system shifted again towards a rivalrous oligopoly.

In March 2011, popular protests broke out in response to the brutality of security forces. The security forces' continued heavy-handed response led to more victims and further ignited protests across the country. Initially, central authorities attempted to use local actors and mediation to contain popular resentment.⁷⁸ Further, and in a bid to win over the protesters and calm the situation, it also offered to make political and economic reforms. Economically, distancing itself from the structural adjustment of the 2000s, the state reasserted its role as the provider of economic security. It revoked some of the old policies and introduced new reforms.⁷⁹ Politically, these included lifting the state of emergency, allowing the establishment

⁷⁶ Salamandra, Christa and Leif Stenberg. (2015). 'A legacy of Raised Expectations' in Salamandra, Christa, and Leif Stenberg (eds.) *Syria from Reform to Revolt, Culture, Society and Religion*. Volume 2. Syracuse University Press, 19.

⁷⁷ For more on the political marketplace framework, see de Waal 2015.

⁷⁸ Daher, Joseph. (2019). *Syria After the Uprisings. The Political Economy of State Resilience*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 191-224.

⁷⁹ Economic reforms included the reinstatement of subsidies, the introduction of a pay rise for public sector income tax relaxation, expedited loans, and grants to the poor and students, full employment status to temporary public workers as well as fines waivers to farmers were also granted. Subsidy cuts on fuel and electricity were scrapped. Source: Declaration of the Spokesperson of Syrian Government on 24 March 2011. (Video in Arabic) BBC News Arabic, accessed on 8 April 2020. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XC9ldpVvS4w&feature=youtu.be>)

of parties, the introduction of a new constitution, and a national dialogue.⁸⁰ Socially, however, the government and cronies with links to the authorities organized several 'national demonstrations', during which employees of the public sectors and crony-owned companies, as well as students, were forced to participate in support of the state. Media activism by the opposition was further mirrored by loyalists of the Syrian government and the national media was used to denounce the protest movement.

Despite the Syrian government's efforts to end the protests, they continued unabated. This period marked the emergence of the political marketplace as the government lost its monopoly over politics and violence with various opposition and rebel groups challenging the state through both political and violent means. Politically, initial calls from Syrians in exile for an uprising were soon met by local actors who organized protests against the regime. Groups of close-knit activists formed what later came to be known as the Local Coordination Committees (LCC).⁸¹ Calling for national unity and democracy, organizing political campaigns, and issuing political statements, among others, these groups challenged the political narrative and sovereignty of the Syrian government.

Simultaneously, and in addition to the grassroots groups, three other groups challenged the government: the traditional or 'internal' opposition represented by (leftist) parties in Syria; the external opposition represented by members of the outlawed Syrian brotherhood and exiled politicians; and lastly, a third group centred around religious opposition to the regime encompassing Salafists and other religious movements. These different groups, while united in their opposition to the Syrian government, differed in how they sought to change the regime as well as their political aspiration for the future of the country. They were further divided across their alliances, as they became recipients of financial aid from competing regional and international actors.

While the traditional or 'internal' opposition formed a coalition that opposed international intervention, the LCC and exiled opposition individuals and movements formed the National Council, a political umbrella for the Syrian opposition abroad. The council was announced in Turkey in October 2011, but it only lasted until late

⁸⁰ Other reforms included the release of all prisoners as well as the formation of a committee to investigate and bring to justice anyone who had committed unlawful acts, including government soldiers and personnel as well as reforms to the judiciary and the formation of a committee to fight corruption.

⁸¹ Carnegie-Middle East Center, (undated). 'Local Coordination Committees.' *Diwan* [blog]. Accessed 10 March 2020. <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/50426?lang=en>.

2012 when in a bid to broaden the representation of the Syrian opposition, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces was announced in Doha, Qatar. The coalition established many offices/structures in Turkey, which were politicized and polarized according to personal interests and partisan agendas and were backed by rival regional sponsors particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar. In December 2015, the Higher Negotiation Committee was established by the coalition to spearhead the negotiations with the regime.⁸²

Table 1: Main Political Actors 2011 - 2015

Syrian Government/Regime	Opposition
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Syrian Government was supported by the Ba'ath Party as well as new formations linked to leftist parties and Palestinian factions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grassroots activists / Local Coordination Committees. Traditional or internal opposition parties (Leftists and Kurdish parties). Exiled opposition (a variety of small groups and the Muslim Brotherhood). Syrian National Council (Formed in October 2011, the council operated as an umbrella bringing together the vast majority of Syrian opposition including the aforementioned three). National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces; successor of the Syrian National Council.

Militarily, the government was challenged by a plethora of new military formations. Concomitant to early protests, several armed attacks against security forces were reported, though these were limited and scattered. Observers argue that the excessive use of force in the government's response was the driver of widespread militarization, which quickly escalated. While (counter) violence by the opposition was starting to emerge toward the end of May and the beginning of June, these attacks remained unclaimed. The first significant incident was in June 2011, when scores of regime forces were killed. As incidents increased in volume and sophistication, the government moved from the 'security-focused' to a 'military'

⁸² Abboud 2018.

solution and armed forces were deployed in cities against insurgents and protesters equally. Unwilling to engage unarmed protesters, army recruits and conscripted soldiers defected in increasing numbers.⁸³

In July 2011, defected army officers established the Free Syrian Army (FSA), vowing to protect protesters. Initially, the FSA was popularly embraced and widely supported. It consisted partly of defected soldiers, but the vast majority of its fighters were civilians who had taken up arms. As it grew, the FSA represented a common umbrella that loosely gathered locally organized insurgents and rebels were only active in their hometowns and lacked unity and centralization. The majority of brigades and formations that were formed in the autumn and winter of 2011 under the FSA adopted religious names, which allowed the Syrian authorities to paint them as religious extremists.⁸⁴ There were several failed attempts to unify these groups, but they fractured along ideological and regional alliances lines creating a market for the highest bidder.

In addition to FSA forces, the majority of whose affiliates claimed to favour a democratic transition and to have inclusive aspirations, fundamentalist groups with Salafist leanings emerged and expanded in late-2011 and early 2012. These included groups such as Ahrar al-Sham and the Islam Army. Through mergers, infighting, or end of (regional) support, some of these groups dissolved, grew stronger or were absorbed by bigger formations. Jihadist groups such as the al-Nusra Front, an al-Qaida linked group, also joined the conflict early on. Al-Nusra announced its formation in late 2011 and carried out suicide bombings in Damascus in December 2011 and in Damascus and Aleppo in 2012.

In response to the rapid militarization of the uprising, the regime deployed its elite armed forces in support of the stretched security forces. Since the regime lacked trust in the regular army, whose members were conscripts and were increasingly defecting, the regime relied on republican guards and other units of almost completely Alawite composition, such as the 4th Division that operated under the command of Assad Junior's brother. The regime further increased the cohesion of its military and security institutions by abandoned the 'Trinity of Leadership' approach. This approach was previously used as a sectarian balancing act in these institutions under Assad Senior, and populated Senior positions with Alawi loyalists. Al Mustafa shows how the 40 most powerful and Senior positions of the armed and

⁸³ Abouzeid, Rania (2018). 'No Turning Back: Life, Loss and Hope in Wartime Syria,' W. W. Norton.

⁸⁴ Daher 2019.

security forces were occupied by Alawite officers.⁸⁵

Furthermore, the regime established and increased its dependence on paramilitary groups. Üngör argues that paramilitarism became a prominent feature of the Syrian conflict and that its use was a key aspect of the Assad regime's repression.⁸⁶ These paramilitary forces or the so-called "Shabbiha," a catch-all category for irregular, pro-government militias dressed in (semi-) civilian gear and linked organically to the regime, became gradually formalized beginning in 2012, first in the Popular Committees, and then in the National Defense Forces (NDF). The term Shabbiha dates back to the late 1970s and early 1980s and referred to associates of criminal groups that were linked to high-ranking officers and members of the Assad family. These groups were involved in illicit activities and human rights violations against the opposition at the time.

While initially the state deployed and financed these individuals, this changed once they were formed into groups and became formalized in paramilitary formations. Cronies associated with the regime such as Assad Junior's cousin, Rami Makhlouf, financed the creation and operations of these groups. Throughout the conflict, however, these groups operated officially under the control of the regime and within its prescribed space. The regular army was the central platform for coordinating and providing logistical support to these groups, notably by sourcing and distributing weapons.⁸⁷ While recruits came from all backgrounds, some groups maintained a distinctly sectarian identity. However, none of these groups challenged the central authority. Commanders who were rumoured to deviate from the prescribed line, were quickly neutralized without any impact on the overall strategy or military strength of the regime. Finally, as of 2013, the Syrian authorities allowed the formation of private security companies, which were (in)directly attached to the security apparatus of the state.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Al Mustafa, Muhsen. (2020). *The Most Powerful Positions within the Syrian Army "Alawite Approach"*. Omran Center For Strategic Studies.

⁸⁶ Üngör, Uğur Ümit. (2020). 'Shabbiha: Paramilitary groups, mass violence and social polarization in Homs.' *Violence: An International Journal*. 1(1): 59-79.

⁸⁷ Daher 2019, 80.

⁸⁸ European University Institute. (2020). 'Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria: Private Security Companies in Syria.' <http://medirections.com/images/dox/Security%20Companies%207282020-last.pdf>.

Table 2: Main Actors 2011 – 2013

The Syrian Government	Opposition (including Islamists)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Syrian Government (armed forces, security forces, and paramilitaries) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Syrian opposition (Free Syrian Army and rebels) Islamist groups (Islam army, Ahrah al-Sham, among others) Al-Qaida linked al-Nusra front

Table 3: Source of Funding 2011 – 2013

The Syrian Government and Allies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Syrian institutions, and cronies Hezbollah directly received funding from Iran.
Opposition forces (including Islamists)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regional countries (Qatar, UAE, KSA, and Turkey), Lebanese politicians, Syrian diaspora, and donations.
Jihadists / al-Qaida	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Donations (Gulf and Syrian diaspora) and support from international Jihadists

From Local Protests to Internationalization: Civil and Proxy War

Regional and international support to the conflict parties escalated violence and prolonged the conflict, which was declared a civil war in July 2012.⁸⁹ Two dynamics drove the characterization as civil war: escalation of violence and territorial contestation.⁹⁰ As the conflict escalated and the government lost its monopoly on violence, it gradually withdrew from the far east of the country leaving much of the country's grain-growing areas and oil resources to opposition factions. Benefiting from safe havens in Turkey and external arming and financing from the US, France, UK, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE, the Free Syrian Army, various rebel groups, and increasingly Jihadists managed to drive the government forces away from strategic areas, such as border crossings, which came under the control of various factions.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Nebehay, Stephanie. (2012). 'Exclusive: Red Cross ruling raises questions of Syrian war crimes,' *Reuters*. 14 July. Accessed on 14 April 2020. <https://reut.rs/3ldp5X9>.

⁹⁰ Hinnebusch, Raymond. (2020b). 'The Battle Over Syria's Reconstruction', *Global Policy* Volume 11. Issue 1. University of St Andrews.

⁹¹ Phillips, Christopher. (2016). *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in The New Middle East*. Yale University Press.

The retreat of the government forces and increased prowess of the opposition led to the creation of 'liberated areas,' in which competitive political systems and state-building projects were attempted by the opposition and rebels.⁹² Notwithstanding the international support, and at times due to its fragmentation and diverging agendas, the Syrian secular and moderate opposition did not introduce a viable governance system, which enabled Salafist and Jihadist movements to move in and fill the void. Salafist movements such as Jaysh al-Islam in the countryside of Damascus, as well as Jihadist movements such as Tahrir al-Sham and ISIS, produced the most robust attempts at local governance. The latter announced the establishment of a caliphate in the territories it controlled in Syria and Iraq prompting the creation of an international coalition led by the US to fight it, while the Jihadist Tahrir al-Sham would grow later in the conflict to become the dominant force in Idlib.

Meanwhile, the combination of external support (financial, military, and logistics) and increased number of fighters on the side of the opposition forces, threatened not only the regime's control of main cities, including the capital but its very existence. This prompted the Assad Junior regime to look to regional and international allies for support. The Syrian regime relied politically and militarily on Russia and China, although to a lesser degree. It further benefited from the military and financial support of its allies Iran and Hezbollah, both of which provided fighters as well as training on crowd control, urban warfare, and insurgent tactics.⁹³ These groups each had distinct agendas but operated within the overall sphere of the Syrian regime. Recruited by Iran, Shiite militias from Iraq, Pakistani and Afghan refugees in Iran also operated within this military system.

As the conflict progressed, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (YPG), a sister organization of the Turkish Kurdistan Worker's Party, consolidated its power in the oil- and grain-rich parts of eastern Syria. The party, which had assumed power in the region after an agreement with the retreating government forces, announced an autonomous administration in the north and east of Syria in January 2014.⁹⁴ While initially dependent on support from the Syrian government, the party's armed wing or the People's Protection Unit (YPG) became the recipient of direct U.S. support when it was chosen as the U.S. partner in the fight against ISIS. The party further

⁹² Hinnebusch, Raymond. (2019). 'What went wrong: understanding the trajectory of Syria's conflict' in Matar, Linda and Ali Kadri Syria (eds.) *From National Independence To Proxy War*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

⁹³ Heydemann, Steven. (2013). 'Tracking the "Arab Spring": Syria and the Future of Authoritarianism', *Journal of Democracy*, 24(4): 67.

⁹⁴ Federici, Vittoria. (2015). 'The Rise of Rojava: Kurdish Autonomy in the Syrian Uprising', *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, 35 (2): 81.

received support from several European countries as well as Saudi Arabia and the UAE. As the conflict progressed, and under pressure from the US, the party created the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) with the aim of incorporating non-Kurdish elements into its ranks.⁹⁵

Table 4: Main Actors 2011 – 2020

Actors	Source of Support
Syrian government (armed and security forces as well as paramilitary groups) and its allies, including Shiite militias such as Hezbollah and various Iraqi and Afghan militias as well as Iranian forces	State institutions, cronies, Iran, and Russia. Paramilitary groups associated with the government were engaged in illicit activities including pillaging and looting, trafficking of drugs and artefacts as well as abduction for ransom (although arguably for personal enrichment and not for military purposes).
Opposition forces (including Islamists)	Regional support (Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and UAE), international support (UK, France, and the US), illicit activities including trafficking of drugs, humans, and artefacts as well as racketeering and levying taxes.
Al-Qaida	Donations, racketeering, taxes, illicit activities, including abduction for ransom, and trafficking, oil smuggling.
ISIS	Donations, taxes, illicit activities including trafficking, abduction, and oil smuggling.
Democratic Union Party (YPD)	Syrian government (initially) and international support (US, UK and France; later on, UAE and Saudi Arabia), oil smuggling and (human) trafficking.

The Syrian conflict entered a new dimension with the direct intervention of

⁹⁵ Abboud 2018, 114-119.

international actors such as the US,⁹⁶ Russia,⁹⁷ and Turkey,⁹⁸ which directly intervened in 2014, 2015, and 2016, respectively. The same period witnessed increased direct Israeli intervention, albeit via airstrikes which according to an Israeli official exceeded 200 attacks within two years by 2018.⁹⁹ These interventions, characterized by reliance on national proxies, changed the realities on the ground and contributed to the creation of internal borders as well as the emergence of three distinct zones of control: eastern Syria under the control of the US and Kurdish-dominated SDF; Idlib, northern Aleppo, and parts of northern Syria under Tahrir al-Sham and opposition forces respectively with the support of Turkey; while the rest of the country fell back under the control of the Syrian government with Russian support. The internal borders have been dynamic, and crossline fighting,¹⁰⁰ as well as competition over land and resources,¹⁰¹ has repeatedly erupted threatening to further complicate and further internationalize the conflict. Another consequence of the international intervention in Syria has been the use of Syrian proxies in regional conflicts, such as Libya, where Turkey¹⁰² and Russia¹⁰³ have both deployed members of their Syrian proxies to fight along with their respective allies. Syrian Kurds were further reported to die fighting Turkey in Iraq.

⁹⁶ U.S. Department of State. (Undated). 'The Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS.' Accessed 19 September 2020. <https://www.state.gov/bureaus-offices/bureaus-and-offices-reporting-directly-to-the-secretary/the-global-coalition-to-defeat-isis/>.

⁹⁷ Osborn, Andrew and Phil Stewart. (2015). 'Russia begins Syria air strikes in its biggest Mideast intervention in decades.' *Reuters*. 30 September. Accessed 19 September 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia/russia-begins-syria-air-strikes-in-its-biggest-mideast-intervention-in-decades-idUSKCNORU0MG20150930>.

⁹⁸ Van Veen, Erwin. (2019). *Syria: foreign interventions and the revenge of realpolitik*, Clingendael Institute. Accessed 25 August 2020. <https://spectator.clingendael.org/en/publication/syria-foreign-interventions-and-revenge-realpolitik>.

⁹⁹ Reuters, Williams. (2018). Israel says struck Iranian targets in Syria 200 times in last two years, 4 September 2018. Accessed on 21 July 2021. <https://cutt.ly/xm2Fzr8>.

¹⁰⁰ Kucukgocmen, Ali and Ellen Francis. (2020). 'Turkey strikes Syrian planes and airports, escalating Idlib fight,' *Reuters*. 1 March. Accessed 19 September 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-turkey/turkey-strikes-syrian-planes-and-airports-escalating-idlib-fight-idUSKBN2001KN?il=0>.

¹⁰¹ Reuter, Christoph. (2018). 'The Truth about the Russian Deaths in Syria.' *Spiegel International*, 2 March. Accessed on 19 September 2020. <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/american-fury-the-truth-about-the-russian-deaths-in-syria-a-1196074.html>.

¹⁰² McKernan, Bethan. (2020). 'Exclusive: 2,000 Syrian fighters deployed to Libya to support government,' *The Guardian*, 15 January. Accessed 25 August 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/15/exclusive-2000-syrian-troops-deployed-to-libya-to-support-regime>

¹⁰³ Reuters. (2020a). 'Exclusive: Russian hiring of Syrians to fight in Libya accelerated in May,' *Reuters*. 7 June. Accessed 22 August 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-syria-russia-exclusiv/exclusive-russian-hiring-of-syrians-to-fight-in-libya-accelerated-in-may-idUSKBN23E06H>.

Table 5: National Actors and International Supporters

National Actor(s) (in some scenarios a proxy)	International Supporter(s)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Syrian Government and allies. Syrian Government and its institutions are not to be considered a proxy of Russia, although the latter does enjoy strong links with the military and security institutions. 	Russia
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SDF and a small number of FSA in the Tanf area 	US (UK and France)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> National Army Tahrir al-Sham 	Turkey

4. The Political Economy of the Syrian Conflict

Prior to the conflict, Syria's economy was among the most diversified in the Middle East. It relied on a mix of sectors including energy, agriculture, trade, transport, and manufacturing.¹⁰⁴ However, the direct and indirect consequences of the conflict have created an economic crisis. Overall, the conflict generated 530 billion USD in total estimated economic losses, of which GDP accounts for 79 percent of the total loss.¹⁰⁵ GDP dwindled from \$60.2 billion in 2010 to around \$21.6 billion in 2019. In the same period, public expenditure dropped substantially from 28.9 percent of GDP in 2011 to 13.3 percent in 2019 and current expenditure fell from 21.6 percent of GDP in 2011 to 10.5 percent in 2019. Public subsidies also witnessed a consistent decrease as a percentage of the current GDP from 20.2 percent in 2011 to 4.9 percent in 2019. In 2021, public spending will be 82 percent of the planned budget, which is estimated at \$2.7 billion.¹⁰⁶ Meanwhile, foreign and domestic public debt

¹⁰⁴ Eaton et al. (2019). 'Conflict Economies in the Middle East and North Africa,' Chatham House. June. Accessed on 23 July 2021. <https://cutt.ly/Ym4poQE>

¹⁰⁵ Dahi, Omar. (2020). *Conflict Economies in Syria: Roots, Dynamics, and Pathways for Change*, Development Policy Forum, Syrian Center for Policy Research. June. Accessed 24 August 2020. <https://www.scpr-syria.org/conflict-economies-in-syria-roots-dynamics-and-pathways-for-change/>

¹⁰⁶ Mehchy, Zaki. (2021). 'The interactions between state budget and political budget in Syria,' Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics and Political Science. London. 2 February. Accessed on 2 March 2021. <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/108592/>.

increased from 30 percent of GDP in 2010 to 208 percent in 2019.¹⁰⁷ The conflict has reduced export receipts, created a foreign currency crisis, fuelled inflation, and created a scarcity of basic goods. With the purchasing power contracting approximately 93 percent,¹⁰⁸ combined with paralysis of the economy, unemployment, poverty, and dependence on international aid have increased.

The conflict has also fundamentally changed the organization and structure of the economy. It destroyed existing business and trade networks while encouraging a major expansion of illegal and informal activities and networks. Simultaneously, financial resources were diverted from the formal into the informal economy.¹⁰⁹ Warlords and war crony capitalists were the main beneficiaries. Increased unemployment and disruption of normal economic life made life more precarious and pushed young men to join various military formations and militias, where they became dependent on salaries from armed groups dominated by localized warlords who resorted to smuggling, kidnapping, and taxation of goods at checkpoints as well as external funding which therefore had an incentive to keep the fighting going. Predatory activities such as the looting of conquered territories became widespread.¹¹⁰

War crony capitalists, on the other hand, thrived on sanctions-busting or acted as middlemen between the various fighting actors. This included oil and cereal smuggling, among others. As the conflict progressed, these individuals were increasingly integrated into the formal economy by laundering their money through the formation of formal companies in government-held areas as well as other zones of control. Meanwhile, crony capitalist businesspeople and elites already affiliated with the regime largely maintained and expanded their operations within the country. Their sustained support allowed them the opportunity to enrich themselves by gaining preferential access to industries and economic sectors that were abandoned by competitors, who fled the country. They are further set to benefit from the deepening of neoliberal reforms and 'reconstruction opportunities.'¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ Nasser, Rabie, Ramia Ismail, Omar Dahi, and Nabil Marzouk. (2020). 'Justice to Transcend Conflict: Impact of the Syrian Conflict Report, 2016-2019' *Syrian Center for Policy Research*. May. Accessed 19 September 2020. <https://www.scpr-syria.org/justice-to-transcend-conflict/>.

¹⁰⁸ Daher, Joseph. (2020b). 'Between Control and Repression: The Plight of the Syrian Labour Force,' *Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria (WPCS)*, European University Institute. Accessed on 27 August 2020.

https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/67858/RSCAS_2020_11.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

¹⁰⁹ Eaton et al. 2019.

<https://cutt.ly/Ym4poQE>.

¹¹⁰ Hinnebusch 2020b, 115.

¹¹¹ Daher 2019.

While transformations and distortions of the Syrian economy may be traced back to a compilation of conscious actions, policy choices and discreet interventions by different actors,¹¹² the physical fragmentation into different zones of control and creation of internal barriers has played an important role in the deterioration of the economy and humanitarian situation in the country. This fragmentation, among other considerations such as the lack of a political solution, continues to shape and shadow the discussion on reconstruction. The reconstruction process, replicating the main characteristics of the geopolitical struggle within the country, has turned into a battle over power, territory, and resources among rival local, national, and international actors.¹¹³ The reconstruction process has so far been fragmented, uncoordinated, and only catered for the interest of the parties involved in the armed conflict, including warlords and cronies, instead of the needs of the population that were affected by the conflict.¹¹⁴

Meanwhile, the conflict and deteriorating economy have culminated in one of the worst humanitarian situations of the 21st century. More than half of Syria's population is internally or externally displaced. As of 1 March 2021, approximately 13.4 million people representing 75 percent of the population were in need of humanitarian assistance.¹¹⁵ Within this, 12.4 million people were food insecure, 1.9 of whom were severely food insecure, an increase of 4.5 million people from 2020.¹¹⁶ In addition, 1.8 million were at risk of falling into food insecurity.¹¹⁷ In March 2021, the Syrian pound reached its highest rate on record and was traded at 4600 per dollar, nudging more people into poverty, with two million living in extreme poverty. A 236 percent increase in the average price of the food basket in December 2020 was reported in comparison to December 2019, 29 times the pre-conflict cost.¹¹⁸ Another impact of the pandemic has been the decrease in remittances sent by Syrians abroad, a main source of income for many families in the country.¹¹⁹ The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded the situation further and led to further deterioration in the living conditions of the vast majority of people as measures were

¹¹² Dahi 2020.

¹¹³ Hinnebusch 2020b.

¹¹⁴ Asseburg, Muriel, and Alexander Akseneok. (2020). 'Economic Reconstruction in Syria—an area for EU_Russia selective engagement?' EU-Russia Experts Network on Foreign Policy (EUREN). July. Accessed on 2 March 2021. <http://eu-russia-expertnetwork.eu/en/analytics/euren-brief-16>.

¹¹⁵ OCHA, 2021.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ World Food Programme (WFP). (2021). 'Syria Situation Report #1, January 2021' 11 February. Accessed 2 March 2021. <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/wfp-syria-situation-report-1-january-2021>

¹¹⁸ OCHA 2021.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

enforced to stem the spread of the virus.

The humanitarian crisis in the country is not exclusively an outcome of the conflict or the deteriorating economy. Motivated by the logic of emerging political markets, policies and interventions created or were intentionally subverted and consequently contributed to the rise of some of the worst humanitarian crises throughout the conflict. To understand the contexts in which these political marketplaces came to exist, this study focuses on the conflict economy at the sub-national level or conflict sub-economies. A Chatham House study of the political economy of the Syrian conflict outlines three distinct types of conflict sub-economies: a) capital cities, b) transit areas and borderlands, and c) oil-rich areas.¹²⁰ These sub-level economies emerged under different political actors with the first (mainly) in government-held areas, while the second and third in the areas under the control of the Syrian opposition as well as ISIS and Kurdish-dominated SDF, respectively. Currently, with the passage of time, and the hardening of internal borders with the latter actors taking control over cities, a similar sub-economy to capital cities is emerging. The actions and practices of local actors have shaped the nature of the war economies in these areas and contributed to the rise of different political markets across the country.

Table 6: Conflict Sub-Economies

Capital Cities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patronage authority: control of state institution, assets, and jobs. • Leveraging the legal authority of the state • Monetary and financial authority • Access to international organizations and international aid • Reconstruction (MK's addition)
Transit Areas and Borderlands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taxing the movements of goods within transit areas within the country and taxation at borderlands (sieges) • Arbitrage across internal 'borders' • Arbitrage across international borders
Oil-Rich Areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selling oil • Smuggling oil (full cycle of the supply chain including transportation and (refinery) processing) • Oil across international borders

Source: Eaton et al. 2019

¹²⁰ Eaton et al. 2019.

5. The Political Marketplace and Humanitarian Crisis in Syria

Multiple marketplaces emerged during the conflict, prolonging the conflict and leading to humanitarian suffering across the country. While all deserve further examination, this section will focus on the marketplace that emerged at the intersection of transit areas and borderlands with a particular focus on sieges. The war economy at this sub-level revolved around the taxation of goods and movements as well as arbitrage. As the conflict progressed, this led to several humanitarian crises in the country. All warring parties used food and water as a political and military tool to convince the population to remain loyal or to leverage political and military change on the ground. Siege warfare emerged as an effective strategy, and it was extensively used in the Syrian conflict. Although the Syrian regime and its allies were responsible for the majority of cases, opposition forces, ISIS, the local franchise of al-Qaida or al-Nusra, Kurdish-dominated SDF, and the international coalition led by U.S. forces all employed sieges against their enemies. An estimated 2.5 million Syrians lived under siege throughout the conflict.¹²¹

Early on, unable to defeat or roll back rebels, government forces deployed sieges as a counter-insurgency strategy aiming to isolate and contain sources of rebellion and to prevent them from spreading to key areas of strategic importance.¹²² Sieges were implemented using direct violence, including the bombing of exit areas, the deployment of snipers against civilians attempting to leave sieges, massacres, and the application of chemical weapon attacks, and, later, through the strategic use of starvation and deprivation of basic services and needs. The 'Starve or Surrender' strategy, as it would come to be known given the graffiti sprayed by soldiers close to checkpoints, included cutting off food supplies, water, electricity, gas, waste services, as well as medical care. Infrastructure and public projects, including agricultural ones, were further targeted to undermine the resilience of besieged communities and to prevent the formation of competitive or viable political opposition groups and structures. In addition to targeted attacks on bakeries,

¹²¹ Szybala, Valerie. (2019). 'Out of Sight, out of Mind: the aftermath of Syria's siege,' *Pax for Peace*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/siege-watch-final-report-out-sight-out-mind-aftermath-syria-s-sieges>.

¹²² Todman, Wil. (2017). 'Isolating Dissent, Punishing the Masses: Siege Warfare as Counterinsurgency.' *Syria Studies*, Vol 9, No 1. The Centre for Syrian Studies (CSS), University of St Andrews.

communal kitchens, and hospitals, besieged areas further came under occasional indiscriminate attacks on residential areas, which aimed to demoralize inhabitants, as well as attacks against any movement inward or outward, which brought normal economic life to a halt. The 'starve' component was aimed to subvert the support of rebels among the populace and to force the people of the regions under siege into submission.¹²³

The enforcement of sieges and their intensity varied across regions and their military and political objectives were subverted by the logic of a war economy that emerged soon after they were imposed. Islamists and ISIS were less effective in their use of sieges due to their lack of airpower, which the government forces and US coalition enjoyed. Furthermore, areas that were besieged by these factions did receive intermittent aid through airlift operations and hence opportunities for racketeering were less in comparison with government- or SDF-besieged areas. For the government forces and the SDF-led militias supported by the US, the main objective for these sieges was military. They were used to contain insurgencies in specific geographies, as demonstrated by the fact that no other consideration prevailed when the government forces or SDF forces were ready to recapture any of these areas. Rebels and Islamists had a different calculus. In addition to gaining political recognition and financial resources in the prevailing highly-polarized and sectarian context, Islamists and rebels besieging an area defined by its sectarian identity signalled a commitment to armed conflict defined along sectarian lines and a show of solidarity with other areas.

As the siege warfare created artificial scarcities and opportunities for windfall profits for those in control, a war economy logic prevailed and associates of the regime forces and its allied militias, as well as military opposition factions, took advantage of the situation to accumulate profit. This undermined the military objective of the siege and resulted in prolonging the conflict. Despite the negative impact of these practices on the overall war efforts, anecdotal evidence indicates that the revenues from the sieges were used to increase the government's foreign currency reserves. NGOs working within these areas were mostly dependent on international support, which arrived in hard currency and was exchanged in the local market at the time when the government had run out of hard currency. For the rebels, returns from the control of checkpoints enabled them to consolidate their control. Politically, these

¹²³ Aljaseem, Ali and Mohammad Kanfash. (2019). 'Accountability for Starvation Crimes: Syria,' Global Rights Compliance and World Peace Foundation, Tufts University.

<https://starvationaccountability.org/resources/publications/accountability-for-starvation-syria-policy-paper>

sieges were used to show the unviability of the opposition's political projects. In several areas, the government kept paying the salaries of public sector employees, and students were allowed to leave these areas to undertake exams in government-held areas, where food and residence were provided by the competent ministries. The sieges were also strategically utilized to consolidate alliances and reward crony businessmen who were given monopolies over transactions to and from besieged areas. Such transactions and contracts were rumoured to have been negotiated with the highest echelon of the Syrian regime. This was not limited to cronies, however, as the siege was associated with corruption and allowed lower-rank officials to engage in crossline deal-making with moneyed elites in the besieged areas with links to the rebels generating enormous profits. This underground economy helped some people survive who would not have without it. However, it also represented a massive transfer of resources from ordinary Syrians to a mafia-like network of war profiteers on both sides of the conflict.

The pro-regime forces established checkpoints at strategic entry points allowing for illegal war economy practices including taxation of goods and movement. Army and intelligence chiefs were said to be the main beneficiaries of the financial returns on the side of the government. Checkpoints were further reported to obstruct the work of humanitarian organizations. Aid obstruction and confiscation were permanent features of sieges as humanitarian aid was tightly restricted and controlled or entirely blocked. Meanwhile, these practices were mirrored by the opposition armed groups in the besieged areas. These groups operated and controlled checkpoints (in some cases tunnels too), which enabled them to levy taxes on goods and aid and to generate income that allowed them to sustain their control and extend their influence. When aid was allowed into besieged areas, it was often diverted from those most in need and manipulated to consolidate control and gain allegiance. Due to the significant gains from checkpoints, including the control of aid, infighting among rebel groups over control of strategic checkpoints and smuggling routes was reported throughout the conflict.¹²⁴

Despite the huge profits generated by these practices, armed groups offloaded the burden of governance to non-governmental organizations and charities, which sprang up and were supported by international donors.¹²⁵ Local and international organizations indirectly financed the warring actors by paying hefty sums to smuggle

¹²⁴ Lund. (2016). 'Into the tunnels, The Rise and Fall of Syria's Rebel Enclave in the Eastern Ghouta,' The Century Foundation. Accessed on 29 August 2020. <https://tcf.org/content/report/into-the-tunnels/?session=1>.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

their goods into besieged areas. Meanwhile, co-optation degrees of these organizations varied under various actors. Local Non-government organizations (NGOs) had little space to operate freely in areas under Islamist control, such as the countryside of Damascus, as opposed to areas controlled by the FSA in the same region. NGOs with culturally non-conformist programmes or with opposing political views were harassed, targeted, and/or banned from operating in certain areas, such as Douma in the countryside of Damascus. Meanwhile, international organizations, such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS), had a bigger margin for manoeuvre due to their massive funds, and for fear of attracting negative international attention.

The role of 'middlemen' was paramount in regions suffering from sieges. A selected group of traders and businessmen, mostly with origins in and connections to besieged areas, were among the main beneficiaries of the dire humanitarian situation. These traders and businessmen secured contracts and monopolies over the supply of goods into these areas. Using bribes and their connections on both sides of the siege, these middlemen managed to distribute their goods to local traders, who in their turn monopolized these goods and made enormous profits. For example, in late 2017, in Eastern-Ghouta, in the countryside of Damascus, the cost of one kilogram of bread was 1,150 percent more than in nearby Damascus.¹²⁶ From January 2017, bread and wheat flour prices increased by more than 174 percent and 390 percent, respectively, while sugar prices rose by more than 1,000 percent.¹²⁷ There are no reliable statistics of the number of deaths due to starvation and related diseases, despite strong evidence that starvation tactics are implicated in the overall number of civilian mortalities since 2012. Starvation-related deaths were reported in Madayya and Zabadani in the countryside of Damascus, while in Eastern-Ghouta the global acute malnutrition rate and stunting rate were estimated at 11.9 percent and 36 percent, respectively.¹²⁸

Despite rumours about the involvement at the highest level of the political elites, including by representatives of the president's brother, Maher al-Assad, and although the regime was said to benefit from the hard currency that was made available by

¹²⁶ Eassa, Abdulmonam. (2017). 'The Daily Realities of East Ghouta: A Mother of 6 Struggles to Provide,' The Syrian American Medical Society. 26 October. <https://foundation.sams-usa.net/2017/10/26/daily-realities-east-ghouta-mother-6-struggles-provide>.

¹²⁷ ACAPS, (2017). 'ACAPS briefing note: Syria: Conflict in Eastern Ghouta,' 15 November. https://www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/slides/files/20171115_acaps_briefin_note_syria_eastern_ghouta.pdf.

¹²⁸ Physicians Across Continents – Turkey. (2017). 'Nutrition SMART Survey Report: Eastern Ghouta,' November. Accessed 29 August 2020. <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/whole-of-syria/document/smart-survey-eastern-ghouta-november-2017-0>.

sieges, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that that profiteering was part of a wider political strategy by the Syrian regime. Throughout the sieges and across all areas, there were several episodes of negotiations with local elites and armed groups to end these sieges through reconciliation agreements; granting safe passage to rebels wishing to vacate or the option to regularize their legal status. Such attempts were reportedly foiled by hardliners on both sides, particularly the rebels who feared the return of the state and refused to leave their areas and homes. An analysis of the military strategy and attacks of the regime further shows that the main delays in recapturing these areas could be attributed to lack of military capacity and shortages of trusted personnel rather than the availability of profiteering opportunities. This further applies to SDF in areas such as Raqqa. The regime depended on a select group of elite forces that were deployed to the besieged areas separately and hence action against other areas was to wait. Furthermore, certain sieges, such as Madaya, on the border with Lebanon, are ought to be seen through their strategic importance to actors such as Hezbollah, to whom Syria and the border region represent a strategic depth, as well as the regime during the early stages of the conflict when the latter was retreating and talks about partitions along sectarian lines were on the table.

Syrian Agriculture and Food Security: Crises within the Crisis

The end of siege warfare and its accompanying food insecurity, hunger, and starvation did not mean that these areas witnessed much improvement. The deterioration of the agricultural sector along with other dynamics continue to have a severe impact on Syrians and their food security. Prior to the conflict, agriculture was one of Syria's main economic sectors and the country had the most thriving agriculture sector in the Middle East. The sector was prioritized as a part of the Ba'athist governments' strategy to achieve food sufficiency and economic independence. It was further a part of a wider quest to garner and maintain support from the rural constituency of the Ba'ath party.¹²⁹ The state developed extensive irrigation projects, provided direct and indirect subsidies through the Agricultural and Cooperate Bank, and laid out an elaborate administrative structure, including the Farmer's union, cooperatives, and local associations.¹³⁰ Strategic crops, wheat, in particular, were at the heart of this strategy. The state intervened in planning, pricing,

¹²⁹ Hinnebusch 2011.

¹³⁰ Khaddam, Mounzer. (2011). 'Syrian Agriculture between Reality and Potential,' in Hinnebusch, Raymond et al (eds.) *Agriculture and Reform in Syria*. St. Andrews Papers on Contemporary Syria.

and marketing policies, and was among the main customer of the country's crops.¹³¹ These efforts culminated in Syria achieving food sufficiency in 1994.¹³²

This achievement, however, came with a high price to the national budget, due to corruption, clientelism, and ill-management. For example, in 2000, the benefits of all state farms in one of the biggest projects in eastern Syria were estimated at 25.5 million SYP, whereas the production costs reached 645 million SYP.¹³³ Environmental degradation was another cost of this strategy, which led to the exhaustion of groundwater and soil resources. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, repeated droughts and fluctuation of the rainfall levels compounded the situation and accelerated the government's policies to shift away from self-sufficiency towards a policy of import. This entailed an overhaul of the agricultural sector and a reduction of subsidies for agricultural inputs. Subsequently, agriculture's contribution to GDP decreased from 27 percent to 18 percent between 2001 and 2007.¹³⁴ In comparison, before 2000, the agricultural sector accounted for up to one-third of the GDP and employed up to a third of the working population.¹³⁵

The conflict hit the agriculture sector hard and the fragmentation of the country into different control zones disturbed its activities. Throughout the conflict, violence to capture agriculture has been deployed regularly to control valuable farmland, harvests, or to deny such resources to adversaries.¹³⁶ Arson (including threats of) and targeted attacks on crops and workers were reported throughout the conflict.¹³⁷ The main regions of agricultural production were scenes of war including the Jazira in eastern Syria, the center of wheat production, the Ghouta, the Al Ghab plain, vegetables and fruit production areas, and Idlib, where wheat and olives are grown. During the conflict, the sector entered a vicious cycle with displacement as well as farmers' rural migration to cities, destruction of irrigation facilities, lack of seeds and fuel as well as basic supplies and pesticides to keep the harvest healthy.¹³⁸ The

¹³¹ El El-Hindi, Atieh (2011). 'Syria's Agricultural Sector: Situation, Role, Challenges and Prospects' in Hinnebusch, Raymond et al (eds.) *Agriculture and Reform in Syria*. St. Andrews Papers on Contemporary Syria.

¹³² Advani, Rohan. (2021). 'Sowing Scarcity: Syria's Wheat Regime from Self-Sufficiency to Import-Dependency.' *Jadaliyya*. 16 February. Accessed 14 April 2021. <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/42366>.

¹³³ Ababsa 2011, 94-95.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ababsa 2011, 83.

¹³⁶ Linke, Andrew M. and Brett Ruether. (2021). 'Weather, wheat, and war: Security implications of climate variability for conflict in Syria,' *Journal of Peace Research*, Volume 58(1): 114-131.

¹³⁷ Kanfash, Mohammad, and Ali al-Jasem. (2019). 'Syrians are watching their crops burn. These crimes of starvation must end,' *The Guardian*. 11 July. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/jul/11/syrians-are-watching-their-crops-burn-these-starvation-crimes-must-end>.

¹³⁸ Ababsa, Myriam. (2019). 'Syria's Food Security: From self-sufficiency to Hunger as a Weapon' in Matar, Linda and Ali Kadri (eds.) *Syria From National Independence to Proxy War*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

weaponization of (access to) water and losses of livestock due to conflict, diseases, and lack of fodders have further exacerbated the woes of the sector and agricultural community. The creeping involvement and interests of warlords and war cronies looking to invest in legitimate businesses have come at the cost of small owners and may generate further problems in the future.¹³⁹

Moreover, environmental degradation resulting from the conflict and lack of effective governance has had its toll on the sector and remains a very serious threat looming over the future of the sector and its potential recovery. This is especially true in northwest and northeast Syria, where the decade-long war has left a 'toxic environmental legacy.'¹⁴⁰ Illegal oil refineries, which dot(ted) the area and represent a major source of income to local communities and de facto authorities, have contributed to unprecedented soil, air, and water pollution. There are numerous reports about farmland tarred with crude and rivers swirling with pollution. In 2019, and after years of draughts, heavy rains flooded wheat fields with oil-contaminated water reducing the quality of the harvest. The negative impact of pollution is not only limited to crops as livestock and their products are said to also be heavily impacted.¹⁴¹

Despite all these challenges, agriculture continued to play the role of an economic protection network during the conflict, providing job opportunities and food sources amid tragic conflict conditions.¹⁴² The share of the sector in the GDP has increased, although statistics show that the sector has overall contracted to approximately 40 percent. In 2016, according to the World Food Programme, the losses of the agricultural sector in Syria since the beginning of the conflict were estimated at

¹³⁹ 'Armed businessmen made large profits and started investing in legitimate businesses and lending money to war-drained agricultural producers. These warlords own large processing and supply-chain businesses, which control local producers' access to the market. Despite not being involved in the production process per se, they have become major players in the agriculture sector.' See Madi, Nizar. (2019). 'Cultivating a Crisis: The Political Decline of Agriculture in Syria.' *Wartime and Post Conflict in Syria* project (WPCS), European University Institute. Accessed on 25 August 2020. <http://middleeastdirections.eu/new-publication-wpcs-cultivating-a-crisis-the-political-decline-of-agriculture-in-syria-nazier-madi/>.

¹⁴⁰ Hincks, Joseph. (2021). 'How Syria's Decade-Long War Has Left a Toxic Environmental Legacy,' *Time*, 15 March 2021. Accessed 12 April 2021. <https://time.com/5946800/syrian-war-environmental-impact/>; PAX, (2020). 'A river of toxic waste flows through Syria,' *Pax*, 1 July 2020. Accessed 12 April 2021. <https://paxforpeace.nl/news/overview/a-river-of-toxic-waste-flows-through-syria>.

¹⁴¹ Hincks 2021; Gaafar, Roba. (2021). 'The Environmental Impact of Syria's Conflict: A Preliminary Survey of Issues,' *Arab Reform Initiative*, 7 April. Accessed on 14 April 2021. <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/the-environmental-impact-of-syrias-conflict-a-preliminary-survey-of-issues/>.

¹⁴² Ismail, Ramia, Rabie Nasser, Nabil Marzouk, Zaki Mehchy, and Ali Rustom. (2019). *Food Security and Conflict in Syria*, SCRP, May 2019. Accessed on 14 April 2021. <https://www.scpr-syria.org/launch-of-food-security-conflict-in-syria-report/>.

approximately \$16 billion.¹⁴³ Still, the confluence of these developments impacted the overall food security of the country and the crisis is evident in that the country, which was self-sufficient, has become increasingly dependent on wheat imports and humanitarian aid.

The deterioration of wheat production is illustrative of the impact of the conflict on agriculture. Syria has had drastically lower output compared to before the conflict erupted. In a good year, Syria used to produce 4 million tonnes and was able to export 1.5 million tonnes. However, domestic wheat production is estimated to have halved in the first six years of the conflict forcing the government to import between 40 and 50 percent of the domestic consumption needs.¹⁴⁴ Of the 140 wheat collection centres that were in operation in Syria before 2011, only 40 remained in 2017, and four out of five yeast factories in the country have completely shut down.¹⁴⁵ Control over wheat production and its main infrastructure areas changed hands throughout the conflict and two-thirds of the wheat production areas have come under the control of ISIS and the Kurdish-controlled SDF, which enabled both parties to consolidate their power and shape the economy around this sector.

In addition to a reduction in production, wheat purchase and transportation were politicized, and a war economy developed around it. This economy involved ISIS, the Kurdish-dominated the SDF, and the Syrian government. Middlemen, such as the Qaterji brothers in Aleppo, who is associated with the Syrian government, and Fouad Fayez Mohammad, who is known as the Prince of Eastern Syria and is reported to have close relations with the SDF, operated as traders between the various actors. Qaterji and local traders working across lines bought up wheat, and oil, from Raqqa and Deir ez-Zour and gave 20 percent to ISIS.¹⁴⁶ After SDF came to control the area, business continued unabated until the US pressed to end the arrangements in place. Increasingly deploying sanctions and prohibitions as a tool of economic warfare to realize regime change, the US pressed the SDF to stop working with the regime's middlemen,¹⁴⁷ and hence the Kurdish-dominated SDF prevented the selling of wheat to government institutions charged with collecting the harvest.

The deterioration of the agricultural sector and increased needs due to politicization,

¹⁴³ Daher 2019.

¹⁴⁴ Madi 2019.

¹⁴⁵ Advani 2021.

¹⁴⁶ Daher 2019.

¹⁴⁷ Faucon, Benoit and Nazih Osseiran. (2019). 'U.S.'s Syria Ally Supplies Oil to Assad's Brokers.' *Wall Street Journal*. 8 February. Accessed on 19 September 2020. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-s-syria-ally-supplies-oil-to-assads-brokers-11549645073>.

among other factors, have elicited responses from the various belligerents. The provision of food, especially bread, is seen as an indicator of reliable governance and opened the door to competition between all actors. The Syrian government sees the revival of agriculture as a prerequisite for the country to withstand economic pressure and has marketed it for strategic investment.¹⁴⁸ It further prioritized wheat for agriculture over other crops and encouraged its cultivation in new regions. In 2020, the government announced that 11 percent of the total budget would be allocated for the purchase of the local wheat harvest.¹⁴⁹ In continuation of its pre-conflict policies, the government has abstained from subsidising inputs and resorted to using price-support schemes to shape both production and the market, while compensating for shortages in local production with imports.¹⁵⁰ Other actors including the 'Interim Government', which operates in Turkish-controlled areas, the HTS-affiliated 'Salvation Government,' which is active in Idlib, and SDF de facto authorities that are in control of northeast Syria, have deployed farmers supported programmes and protectionist policies to prevent the sale of crops to the Syrian government.¹⁵¹

The government's efforts to regain control of and rebuild the agriculture sector have not gone unchallenged. Madi argues that a 'wheat war' broke out between the Syrian government and the Kurdish-dominated SDF.¹⁵² This war over the control of wheat plays out at different levels including prices, control of lands, roads, and border-crossings. Overbidding each other, both actors have attempted to purchase domestic productions. However, emboldened by U.S. support, and compounding on the inability of the government to stop the collapse of the Syrian pound, the Kurdish-dominated SDF raised its local wheat purchasing price and pegged it to the going rate of the dollar, which outbid the Syrian government. Furthermore, employing threats of confiscation, the Kurdish-dominated militias warned locals against any attempts to smuggle the crop outwards and declared its aim to stockpile 18 months' worth of supply and only open sales to government territories in the case of a

¹⁴⁸ Syrian Arab News Agency. (2021). 'Conference on Syrian Agriculture Sector: Challenges and Opportunities.' (in Arabic). 24 February. Accessed on 2 March 2021. <http://www.sana.sy/?p=1323478>.

¹⁴⁹ The Syria Report. (2020b). 'Wheat Purchases Set at 11 percent of Government's Total Budget,' The Syria Report. May. Accessed on 12 April 2021. <https://www.syria-report.com/news/food-agriculture/wheat-purchases-set-11-percent-government%E2%80%99s-total-budget>.

¹⁵⁰ Madi 2019.

¹⁵¹ Syrian Interim Government Embassy in Qatar. (2020). 'The Ministry of Finance and Economy sets the price for purchasing wheat for the 2020 season,' (in Arabic). June. Accessed on 13 April 2021. <https://cutt.ly/vvtpZWk>; Eqtesad, (2020). 'Salvation Government commence receiving wheat in Idlib,' Eqtesad, (in Arabic). June. <https://www.eqtsad.net/news/article/30299/>; Focus Aleppo. (2020). 'Wheat harvest in Idlib: hazards and High Costs,' Focus Aleppo, June. Accessed on 13 April 2021. <https://cutt.ly/XvtaJoc>.

¹⁵² Madi 2019.

surplus, despite the fact that the country is suffering from severe shortages of wheat.¹⁵³

The war over wheat is taking place while the economic and food security conditions are continuously worsening and the need to ensure sufficient supplies of wheat to the Syrian population is becoming increasingly urgent. Although never experienced during the peak of the conflict, government-controlled areas are at risk of facing severe bread shortages,¹⁵⁴ and queues for bread have become the norm.¹⁵⁵ In response, the Syrian Government turned to the international market.¹⁵⁶ However, U.S. sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and a deepening financial crisis, including a lack of foreign currency reserve to access foreign markets, are among the main barriers that have occasionally rendered the Syrian Government's efforts fruitless. Several international tenders to buy wheat have closed without any contract being awarded.¹⁵⁷ War profiteers, and close associates of the Syrian Government, have filled the void for now, but with a higher cost for the state.¹⁵⁸ Although not in sight yet, however, given the country's dependence on aid as well as the secondary impact of the COVID-19, Syria's inability to obtain its needs of wheat might bring it closer to famine, as cautioned by a Senior WFP official.¹⁵⁹

The wheat crisis in Syria not only has implications for the food security of Syrians but also on the geopolitics of the conflict. As the crisis has intensified, Syria has become increasingly dependent on wheat supplies from Russia, which Russia has failed to fulfill deals on several occasions. This issue has been further exacerbated by an ambiguous deal signed in February 2021 with Russia and Turkey. The two countries are said to have agreed to supply the government-held areas with 100s of tons of wheat that were in the Raqqa province silos and were under the control of

¹⁵³ El Dahan, Maha, and Ellen Francis. (2020). 'Severe bread shortages loom for Syria as fresh U.S. sanctions grip.' Reuters. July. https://uk.mobile.reuters.com/article/amp/idUKKBN24A1LK?_twitter_impression=true.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Maher, Ahmed. (2021). 'The National News: Simmering rage and child poverty as Syrians queue for bread.' 2 March 2021. Accessed on 2 March 2021. <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/simmering-rage-and-child-poverty-as-syrians-queue-for-bread-1.1175152>.

¹⁵⁶ Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR). (2020). 'Desperate, Damascus issues new wheat tender aimed at the EU,' COAR, Syria Update, 31 August. <https://coar-global.org/2020/08/31/self-administration-steps-back-from-negotiations-as-attacks-step-up-across-the-northeast/>.

¹⁵⁷ The Syria Report, (2020c). 'Twin Oil and Bread Crises Highlight Depth of Economic and Social Challenges, State Dysfunction', The Syria Report. 23 September.

¹⁵⁸ Mehchy 2021.

¹⁵⁹ BBC. (2020a). 'Coronavirus: World risks 'biblical' famines due to pandemic-UN.' BBC. 21 April Accessed on 24 September 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-52373888>; BBC. (2020b). 'Syria faces mass starvation or mass exodus without more aid, WFP says.' BBC. 29 June. Accessed on 24 September 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-53218788>

SDF militias before Turkey captured the area.¹⁶⁰ Along with aid, which is provided by wealthy donors, the actions of Russia and Turkey highlight the increasing importance of external actors' role in guaranteeing the food security of Syrians.

Wheat control and destruction of the agriculture sector are not the only factors impacting food security for Syrians. Competition over energy supplies is taking shape and its outcome will be significant for the country's economy and its recovery. After the retreat of government forces from eastern Syria, the bulk of Syrian oil and gas al-Hassakah and Deir ez-Zor fell under the control of ISIS and the Kurdish-dominated SDF militias, both of which capitalized on the revenues to consolidate power and maintain control. Despite occasional bombardment and ongoing conflict, heavy and light crude oil production carried on, albeit in a reduced capacity due to lack of maintenance, technical skills, and deteriorating security situation.¹⁶¹ Lacking the means to process the oil, these actors operated with the Syrian government, which controlled refineries, as well as opposition and tribal forces, which controlled the routes, and a war economy emerged around oil trade,¹⁶² which was further reported to have reached buyers in Iraq and Turkey.¹⁶³

Money earned from these activities has directly financed the warring parties and prolonged the conflict, and the role of intermediaries and middlemen was integral to this process. The Qaterji brothers were the most prominent figures attracting international attention leading to their placement on the EU and U.S. sanction lists.¹⁶⁴ The arrangement continued until 2019 when the U.S. campaign to cut oil supplies to the Syrian government was able to pressure the SDF to significantly reduce and at times cease selling oil to the Syrian government.¹⁶⁵ This led to repeated oil shortages in government-held areas.¹⁶⁶ In response, the Syrian Government and its allies attempted to gain control over one of the oil fields, which unfolded in an incident that

¹⁶⁰ The Syria Report. (2020a). 'Turkey Agrees to Transfer Some Wheat to Damascus in Russia-Mediated Deal.' The Syria Report. 2 March. Accessed on 2 March 2021. <https://www.syria-report.com/news/food-agriculture/turkey-agrees-transfer-some-wheat-damascus-russia-mediated-deal>.

¹⁶¹ Hatahet, Sinan. (2019). The Political Economy of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. Wartime and Post Conflict in Syria project (WPCS), European University Institute. Accessed on 19 September 2020. <https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/65364>.

¹⁶² Eaton et al. 2019.

¹⁶³ Zaman, Amberin, (2019). 'Oil trail reveals Turkey funding Syrian Kurdish rivals.' Al-Monitor. 9 December. Accessed on 20 September 2020. <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/12/oil-money-syria-turkey-kurdish-sdf-sales.html#ixzz6YckrUMgc>.

¹⁶⁴ U.S. Department of the Treasury. (2018). 'U.S. Treasury Imposes Sanctions on Assad Regime's Key ISIS Intermediary and a Petroleum Procurement Network.' September. Accessed 19 September 2020. <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm474>.

¹⁶⁵ Faucon and Osseiran 2019.

¹⁶⁶ Al-Khalidi 2020.

involved the U.S. and Russian forces in Syria threatening to further complicate the conflict.¹⁶⁷ Soon afterward, the US announced that it was staying in Syria for the oil and an American company signed a deal with the Kurdish-dominated SDF militias to develop and export Syria's oil,¹⁶⁸ a deal that was dubbed illegal by the Syrian government.¹⁶⁹

As a consequence, government-controlled areas have become dependent on fuel and oil imports from Iran and Russia, oil procured through offshore companies in Lebanon and the UAE¹⁷⁰ as well as smuggled oil from Lebanon.¹⁷¹ However, U.S. sanctions on Iran, as well as shipping and insurance companies that may supply Syria, and the crisis in Lebanon have culminated in severe shortages within the country. This was further compounded by a series of attacks by Israel on Syria-bound oil tankers.¹⁷² In addition to weakening the whole economy,¹⁷³ these fuel shortages have had a direct impact on the agricultural sector across the country as farming has become more expensive leading farmers to abandon their lands or increase their prices. Food prices further increased due to increased transportation costs and production costs, such as electricity generation, another sector under sanctions, and water-pumping costs. Continuation of these measures, which are meant to pressure the Syrian government, will further stifle any meaningful recovery or the revival of the agriculture sector contributing further to the prevailing food insecurity in the country.

6. Conclusion

The conflict in Syria has been ongoing for a decade and although mass violence is no longer in the news, the humanitarian situation has deteriorated to unprecedented levels, and the country is in the midst of an ever-worsening humanitarian crisis. The

¹⁶⁷ Reuter 2018.

¹⁶⁸ Seligman, Lara and ben Lefebvre. (2020). 'Little-known U.S. firm secures deal for Syrian oil.' Politico. 8 March. Accessed on 19 September 2020. <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/08/03/delta-crescent-energy-syrian-oil-391033>.

¹⁶⁹ Reuters. (2020b). 'Syria says U.S. oil firm signed deal with Kurdish-led rebels.' 2 August. Accessed on 20 September 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-oil-usa-idUSKBN24Y0FD>.

¹⁷⁰ U.S Department of the Treasury 2018.

¹⁷¹ BBC Monitoring. (2020). 'Explainer: Why are Lebanese politicians talking about fuel smuggling into Syria?' 14 May. Accessed on 19 September 2020. <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c201pk3p>.

¹⁷² Lubold, Gordon, Benoit Faucon and Felicia Schwartz, (2021). 'Israeli Strikes Target Iranian Oil Bound for Syria,' The Wall Street Journal. 11 March. Accessed on 23 July. <https://cutt.ly/Tm4iDSf>.

¹⁷³ Lund, Aron. (2019). 'The blame game over Syria's winter fuel crisis.' The New Humanitarian. 5 March. Accessed on 19 September 2020. <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2019/03/05/blame-game-over-syria-s-winter-fuel-crisis>.

threat of hunger and deprivation looms over the weary population and severe food insecurity and the potential for a famine are among the most salient characteristics of the current crisis. This is not exclusively an outcome of the conflict or the deteriorating economy. Politically motivated policies and interventions created some of the worst episodes of humanitarian crises and continue to contribute to the current one. The weaponization of food, aid obstruction, destruction of agricultural infrastructure and crops, environmental degradation resulting from war economy activities, and international prohibitions and sectoral sanctions against the country are all politically motivated interventions, and had a different course of action been pursued, the outcome may have been significantly different, and the worst could have been avoided.

Admittedly, none of these policies can singularly be said to directly cause food insecurity, and hence the actor behind it, be it national or international, could argue against claims of culpability. However, the confluence of these policies and their continuation over time is threatening to further push the country into worse conditions. Any meaningful efforts to change the current realities will require all actors, national and international, to pursue different policies that prioritize the interests of civilians and depoliticize access to food. This includes, but is not limited to, the provision of unhindered access to aid agencies, an end to targeting agriculture, as well as harmonized and increased efforts to assist the recovery of the agricultural sector across the country, and an end to international sectoral sanctions and prohibitions.

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