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## Unpacking the Regional Conflict System surrounding Iraq and Syria

### ***Part III: Implications for the Regional Future: Syria Example of Actor Interests, Resolve and Capabilities Analysis***

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**NB:** This is Part III of a larger study exploring the dynamics of the central Middle East conflict system. Part I described the system and why it is critical to assess US security interests and activities holistically rather than just in terms of the conflicts (e.g., defeat of ISIL) in which the US is most interested. Part II described the analytic approach used to assess regional dynamics and regional futures based on the alignments and conflicts among three critical drivers: actor interests, resources and resolves. Part III illustrates the analytic process applied to 20-plus actors for five conflicts. It uses the Syrian Civil War as a use case.



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# Unpacking the Regional Conflict System surrounding Iraq and Syria

## ***Part III: Implications for the Regional Future: Syria Example of Actor Interests, Resolve and Capabilities Analysis***

This section presents the analysis of the Syrian Civil War to illustrate the analytic process that was applied to 20-plus actors over five regional conflicts in and around Syria and Iraq: 1) The Syrian Civil War; 2) the battle to Defeat ISIL in Syria; 3) the battle to Defeat ISIL in Iraq; 4) the Iran-Saudi Regional Rivalry; and, 5) the conflict over domestic control among the Shi'a hardline, Kurds, Abadi Government and Sunni tribal leaders. It looks in detail at the actor interests involved in the Syrian Civil conflict and includes the top-level findings assessment, characterization of the conflict based on the interests at stake, description of the posited outcomes, a summary of the preferences over those outcomes for each participating actor and a discussion of the implication of actor resolve and capabilities.

### **Syrian Civil War:**

- *Many regional actors have incentives to continue the conflict in Syria even if ISIL is out of the picture there. Thus we should expect continued conflict and instability in Syria even with the defeat of ISIL. Moreover, significant US capabilities would be required to impose an opposition leadership over a unified Syrian state;*
- *Conflict will continue in Syria with or without US involvement; in fact, if agreement can be reached with Hezbollah/Iran to avoid Israel, US interests are well-served by their actions;*
- *Given the number of actors whose interests are served by continued conflict, and the Syrian government's, Iran's and Russia's high resolve to avoid defeat of the regime, we should expect Syria, Iranian and Russian stalling and provocation regarding ceasefires and be skeptical of any negotiated settlement.*

## Nature of the Syrian Civil War

The Syrian Civil War is one fought over the opportunity to control territory and people, the most commonly shared interests among stakeholders in the Civil War are those that involve national security or the safety and security of a population where there is no nation. Moreover, the survival of four of the actors -- the Assad regime and loyalists, ISIL, Syrian opposition, and Syrian Kurds is in some way threatened by the outcome of the war. For ISIL its survival is not dependent on the outcome of this conflict but it represents an opportunity for solidifying its gains.

### Syrian Civil War

	NATIONAL SECURITY; POPULATION SAFETY	PRESTIGE AND INFLUENCE, IDENTITY (OUTSIDE AREA)	DOMESTIC POLITICS / CONSTITUENT SUPPORT	ECONOMICS	IDEOLOGY
<b>Al Nusrah Front</b>	Removal of oppressive Assad regime  Retain ability to operate; access to external material support, e.g., via AQ, others		Retain popular support and Islamist recruits; reform apostate Syrian govt  Maintain position as main Islamist org in Syria; dominate rivalry with non Islamist forces and ISIL		
<b>FSA</b>	Removal of oppressive Assad regime	Coordinate and manage fight in Syria as recognized legitimate authority in exile	Govern unified Syria (excluding jihadis and leftist Kurds)		
<b>Assad regime and Loyalists</b>	Regime survival - Defeat opposition forces, insurgents Kurds and Islamists in Syria  Retain support (e.g., Iran, Russia) necessary to preserve rule	Maintain "Syrian identity" defend against "western domination"	Retain political legitimacy with and support from Alawi, westernized Sunni, Christians, etc.		
<b>Hezbollah</b>	Defend population against Sunni Islamist threat  Preserve links to funds, weapons from Iran through Syria  Minimize losses to avoid diluting fighting force	Retain legitimacy/ identity as anti-Western, anti-Israeli resistance org., champion of Arab and Lebanese interests	Maintain political position in Lebanon esp. among Lebanese Shi'a; Keep fighting away from Shi'a areas		
<b>Iran</b>	Dominate/sustain Sunni-Shi'a balance of power; mitigate threat from Israel, Saudi Arabia, US	Increase Iranian influence in region	Defend economic assets (e.g., in Syria); gain foothold in post-conflict economy	Defend economic assets (e.g., in Syria); gain foothold in post-conflict economy	
<b>ISIL</b>	Maintain ability to operate, e.g., by attracting acolytes; holding territory	Cleanse the faith; defeat opponents (Sunni infidels; Shi'a)	Consolidate territorial control and expansion of Caliphate		Consolidate territorial control and expansion of Caliphate
<b>Syrian Kurds</b>	Safety of the population; defend integrity of Rojava Cantons against military threats from ISIL, nationalists, Turks, others	Defend way of life and Kurdish identity including by establishing int'l diplomatic relations	Govern autonomous Rojava as collectivist, "democratic confederation"		
<b>Russia</b>	Access to Mediterranean; retain safety of port, intel post  Stymie spread of extremism into central Asian states; weaken/	Enhance international/ regional influence at detriment to US; strengthen ties with Iran	Demonstrate Russia still has the power to act as a global player		

	defeat Chechen and other extremist fighters				
<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	Dominate/sustain Sunni-Shi'a balance of power; mitigate threat from Iran and proxies  Quell non KSA Sunni extremism, secularism, Muslim Brother influence at home and abroad	Expand regional leadership and influence	Manage domestic support, expectations for government services, pay-outs	Retain oil and other product export/ revenue	
<b>Shi'a Militia</b>	Contain and defeat threat from Sunni extremists, ISIL in Syria and Iraq  Retain external material support (e.g., from Iran) while diminishing US influence in Iraq/ region		Protect Shia Shrines		
<b>Turkey</b>	Stem Kurdish separatism; Kurdistan; deny terrorist safe havens	Quell Iran's regional influence; promote Turkey's Position as regional leader; exemplar of moderate Islamist government		Maintain access to crude oil and natural gas	

Table 1. Interests by Type, Syrian Civil War

Actors' interests at stake in the Syrian Civil War are summarized by type in Table 1.<sup>1</sup> Note that the cells show only the interests of a given actor not the salience of these interests or the actor's resolve to pursue them. National security interests most typically involve the idea of immediate or potential loss or security threat. As a result, it is not surprising that each participant has some security or safety interest at stake in the outcome of the Syrian Civil War. What may be less apparent however is the prevalence of domestic politics or constituent support issues. This reflects to degree to which the civil conflict in Syria is an issue of control over territory, in a way that for example the battle against ISIL in Syria is not.

## Syrian Civil War Outcomes

Historically militarized conflicts arise between a status quo power or bloc and a challenger to its authority. This is the case in the Syrian Civil War where the actors' interests and preferred outcomes align with their basic satisfaction with the status quo. Five general outcomes over the next three to five years are posited. These range from the success of the Assad regime to its fall. Each of the notional outcomes is discussed in more detail below.

- **Assad regains control of Syria:** This outcome refers to the success of the Assad regime in regaining control over most or all of Syrian territory. It is presumed that this outcome is likely to be accompanied by repression and murder of significant numbers of Assad opponents in order to restore governance and control over areas beyond the regime's strongholds around and northwest of Damascus. Given the years of destruction in Syria significant state re-building would be required even for a re-emergent Assad regime to restore order. As the former is the

<sup>1</sup> Definitions and more detailed discussions of each actor's interests appear in Appendix A.

condition that began the civil war in the first place, there is little to suggest at this point that even if fighting ceased for a time that it would not return;

- **No resolution (current condition):** A no resolution outcome refers to partial regime control e.g. in western Syria along with continued fighting with opposition and other forces vying for control of territory. If no actor emerges as significantly stronger than the others this outcome continues as a war of attrition, displacing additional persons and further destroying Syrian infrastructure needed for governance.
- **Assad regime falls; conflict continues between ISIL and Opposition:** This outcome describes the capitulation or other removal of Assad and regime loyalists from the fighting and their loss of control of resources in all but a minor portion of what was Syria together with continued fighting among opposition and ISIL forces. Without the prior emergence of a strong opposition leadership that can consolidate power and rein in militias it is presumed that the fall of the regime likely would increase conflict among regime opponents now seeking the spoils of war, namely control over territory and assets. At present the groups in place with the most stable leadership and fighting capacity are ISIL and Hezbollah. However if Assad has fallen it is likely that Iran and Russia have demurred, and Hezbollah has been neutralized or left the fight – leaving ISIL to make a strong bid against remaining FSA, Kurdish and militia fighters.
- **Assad regime falls; ISIL gains control of much of Syria:** This outcome describes the situation where the Assad regime has lost all claim to control of the vast majority or all of Syrian territory and resources to ISIL. It is presumed that for this outcome to have emerged, Iran and Russia have downplayed their interests in the regime’s survival and likely withdrawn and some temporary accommodation or ceasefire has been reached with the Kurds.
- **Assad falls and Opposition forms new Syrian government:** Here the regime has fallen and the non-Islamist Syrian opposition has formed a government to replace it. Again, a precondition for this outcome is the emergence of a leader or leadership coercive or legitimate enough to rein in the proliferation of militias and competing coalitions active in Syria. It would also have to rebuild Syrian state and quickly convince the Kurds that their minority rights would be respected.

## Outcome Preference Summary

The following table summarizes the best, second best and worst outcomes from the individual participant matrixes. The complete listing of individual actor matrixes for the Syrian Civil War from which these are derived appears in Appendix B.

<b>Syrian Civil War</b>	Assad regains control	No resolution; conflict continues; various factions holding territory	Assad falls; conflict continues; ISIL and Opposition remain in Syria	Assad falls; ISIL gains control of much of Syria	Assad falls; non-ISIL opposition controls Syria
<b>participants</b>	<b>Unified</b>	<b>De facto Frag</b>	<b>De facto Frag</b>		<b>Unified</b>
Al Nusrah Front/AQ	Worst	1	2		
FSA/ Opposition	Worst		2		1
Assad regime and Loyalists	1	2		Worst	
Hezbollah	1	2		Worst	
Iran	1	2		Worst	
ISIL	Worst		2	1	
Jordan	1	2		Worst	
Syrian Kurds (PYD)	1	2		Worst	
US	2	2	2	Worst	1
Saudi Arabia			1	Worst	2
Shi'a Militias	1	2		Worst	
Turkey	Worst	Worst		2	1
Russia	1	2			Worst

Table 2. Outcome Preferences, Syrian Civil War

The outcome summary table indicates that there is some convergence on what actors perceive as the worst outcomes – either Assad regaining control or Assad falling and ISIL moving in in a big way – both of which are relatively more unified options, i.e., there appears to be significant resistant force in the direction of a more unified outcome in Syria. On the other hand, the de facto fragmentation outcome and continued conflict are either the first or second best outcomes for each of the actors. In game theoretic terms these dominate the other outcomes suggesting some type of equilibrium. In short, under current circumstances most actors are incentivized to continue to engage in conflict.

### Interest, Resolve & Capability

What does the interest analysis tell us about the likely path of the Syrian Civil War? Table 3 shows the expectations once we consider the resolve and capability behind the interest preferences. The actors with high resolve are underlined. The size of the actor's name indicates

Assad Control RESOLVE & CAPABILITY	Conflict Continues RESOLVE & CAPABILITY
Assad regime (r= .33)	FSA (r= .33)
Hezbollah (.44)	<u>ISIL</u> (.66)
Iran (.33)	<u>Al Nusrah</u> (.66)
Russia (.33)	Turkey (.43)
Shi'a Hardline & Militia (.33)	US (.25)
	Saudi Arabia (r = 0)

Table 3. Actor Resolve and Capability over Assad Victory v. Continued Conflict

its capability to impact the outcome of the civil war. Grey font indicates that the actor is indifferent between the two outcomes.

In this case, Saudi interests line up so that it is indifferent between continuation of hostilities in Syria and the victory of the Assad regime: both are equally unfavorable. All other actors but the Shi'a hardline and militia in Iraq have some capability – whether it is employed or not -- to impact whether the regime is victorious or hostilities continue. However, only ISIL and Al Nusrah have both the capability to push the conflict toward one outcome or the other and the resolve to do so. In other words, we see that not only do ISIL and Al Nusrah have the ability to continue conflict; they have the will as well.

Contrast this with the US. Clearly in terms of total coercive capacity available, if the US had the will and little concern about the impact on its other interests, it likely could impose its stated preferred outcome (Assad loss replaced by opposition government). However, in the event that this was advisable or politically possible for the US, notice the weight of the opposing interests – even if the US did succeed in strengthening some Syrian opposition force to govern Syria, all else being equal, only Saudi Arabia and the opposition force would have achieved their best outcomes and would actually benefit more (per their interests) from restarting conflict.

### Selected Actor Interest Matrices

Reviewing the details of individual actor interest matrices can help explain, for example, why we do not see the same resolve from the Assad regime as we do from ISIL and Al Nusrah.

**Resolve Score**  
[Scale = 1 complete resolve; to 0 complete indifference]

Syrian Civil War		SECURITY	DOMESTIC POLITICS	DOMESTIC POLITICS	SECURITY	SCORE (rank, 1=best)
Al Nusrah Front		Removal of oppressive Assad regime	/CONSTITUENT SUPPORT Retain popular support and Islamist recruits; reform apostate Syrian government	/CONSTITUENT SUPPORT Maintain position as main Islamist org in Syria; dominate rivalry with non Islamist forces and ISIL	Retain ability to operate; access to external material support, e.g., via AQ, others	
Assad regains control of Syria	5	4.5	3	5	17.5 (5) Equal weighting <b>worst</b> outcome	
Fragmenting: No resolution; conflict continues with various factions holding territory	4	1.5	1	1	7.5 (1) Equal weighting <b>best</b> outcome	
Fragmenting: Assad falls; ISIL and Opposition remain in SY	2	1.5	3	2	8.5 (2)	
Fragmentation: Assad falls; ISIL gains control of much of Syria	2	4.5	5	4	15.5 (4)	
Assad falls; non-ISIL opposition governs Syria	2	3	3	3	11 (3)	

**Resolve = .66**

**Al Nusrah Front.** The most favorable outcome across each of Al Nusrah’s interests is continued fighting in Syria following the defeat of the Assad regime (row indicated in dark teal). This is consistent with Al Nusrah’s initial entry into the fight as regime opponents, and is echoed by the statements of its leader

Abu Muhamad al Julani. The group’s rivalry with ISIL as well as the familial ties between elements of the FSA and Al Nusra suggest that Al Nusra fighters might coexist with FSA leadership more so than with ISIL. Even a non-compensatory choice rule (eliminating the lowest scores on ousting Assad) leads to a preference for continued conflict (light teal). In fact, Al Nusra’s preferences simply show very little incentive for resolution. Even if Assad falls or is removed (i.e., outcomes 1 and 2 are removed) from the conflict, Nusra’s best option remains the same: continued conflict. While it may not have the capacity to defeat Assad, at present Al Nusra certainly has the capability to continue some level of conflict in Syria. Moreover, it shares with ISIL the highest resolve of all relevant actors (resolve = .66) to continue conflict rather than accept its worst or equally bad outcome across all interests: the current regime regaining control over Syria.

*Why would the Assad regime not have the same resolve over these two outcomes?*

**Assad Regime.** The Assad regime’s interests are in nearly perfect alignment making for a very simple matrix (almost no trade-off between interests). Regaining control of Syria is the clear best outcome on each interest

(i.e., it is dominant). This outcome dominance suggests a high resolve in pursuing this outcome where there is capacity to do so. However, the “no resolution” outcome is

Syrian Civil War Assad regime	SECURITY Regime survival - Defeat opposition forces, insurgents Kurds and Islamists in Syria	SECURITY Retain support (e.g., Iran, Russia) necessary to preserve rule	DOMESTIC POLITICS / CONSTITUENT SUPPORT Retain political legitimacy with and support from Alawi, westernized Sunni, Christians, etc.	PRESTIGE/IDENTITY Maintain “Syrian identity” defend against “western domination”	Score (rank, 1=best)
	Assad regains control of Syria	1	1	1	1
Fragmenting: No resolution; conflict continues with various factions holding territory	2	2	2	2	8 (2)
Fragmenting: Assad falls; ISIL and Opposition remain in SY	4	4	3	3.5	14.5 (3)
Fragmentation: Assad falls; ISIL gains control of much of Syria	4	4	5	5	18 (5)
Assad falls; non-ISIL opposition governs unified Syria	4	4	4	3.5	15.5 (4)

Resolve Score  
[Scale = 1 complete resolve; to 0 complete indifference]

Resolve = .33

bested only by achieving complete victory for the regime. In other words, the Syrian government’s interests stack up in a way to make continued fighting the reasonable second choice to victory. As a result Syrian resolve between these two outcomes is lower because the trade-off between its first and second best outcomes is less severe than Al Nusra’s choice between what from its perspective is the best versus its worst outcome. Another way to look at this: given the choice between regaining control over Syria and continuing hostilities, the pattern of Syrian government interests favors the former, but it can live with the latter too.

**Results**

Based on analysis of actors’ interests and preferences over posited outcomes we see:

- significant resistance toward outcomes that result in a more unified Syria;



- there is convergence against ISIL gaining significant control in Syria; it is the worst outcome across interests for 8 of the 10 actors;
- continued conflict accompanied by de facto fragmentation is the dominant result; the de facto fragmentation/ no resolution outcome, or the fall of Assad with continued conflict are either the first or second best outcomes for each of the actors;
- significantly, only Turkey's interest – driven by opportunities to expand its regional economic and political influence -- combine to suggest continuation of conflict as Turkey's overall worst outcome;
- we should anticipate that given the nature of the groups and interests involved, the conflict over governance in all or part of Syria will be a long one that is unlikely to be resolved even in the case of ceasefire.

The implications for the US include:

- Significant US capabilities would be required to impose an opposition leadership over a unified Syrian state;
- Conflict will continue in Syria with or without US involvement; in fact, if agreement can be reached with Hezbollah/Iran to avoid Israel US interests are well-served by their actions along with those of Russia without US presence;
- Given the interests involved, supporting negotiated fragmentation or federalization of current Syria involving the regime and loyalists, opposition forces and leaving out ISIL would best serve US interests in the civil conflict in Syria.