

## II. External intervention in the Syrian civil war, 2015

SAM HELLER

The Syrian Government's brutal response to the domestic protest movement which began in 2011 pushed the country's opposition towards militarization and sparked an all-consuming armed confrontation. Since 2012, the country has been ravaged by a civil war that has also served as a proxy battlefield for competing external powers. The year 2015 marked a dramatic escalation in third-party intervention in Syria's war, as the country witnessed a series of increasingly assertive interventions and counter-interventions by external powers on behalf of their Syrian state and non-state allies and proxies (see figure 4.4). This section examines the significant developments and dynamics of two dimensions of external intervention in the Syrian civil war in 2015: the armed conflict itself and the negotiations to end the conflict.

At the outset of 2015, Syria had already effectively been divided into a number of interlocking enclaves and zones of control (see figure 4.5).<sup>1</sup> President Bashar al-Assad's Syrian Government and its paramilitary and foreign allies controlled much of western Syria, including most of the country's economic centres and population.<sup>2</sup> The Syrian opposition—which ranges from nationalist or less-ideological rebels to transnational jihadists—held much of the south-west and north-west of the country, in addition to pockets of control within the regime-held western corridor. The Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) held three non-contiguous enclaves strung along Syria's northern border with Turkey. With air support from the US-led Global Coalition to counter the ISIL [Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant], the YPG had managed to hold out against an assault on its central enclave, Kobani, by the jihadist organization that calls itself Islamic State (IS).<sup>3</sup> IS, however, controlled large sections of the thinly populated centre and the eastern part of the country, which includes much of Syria's oil resources.<sup>4</sup>

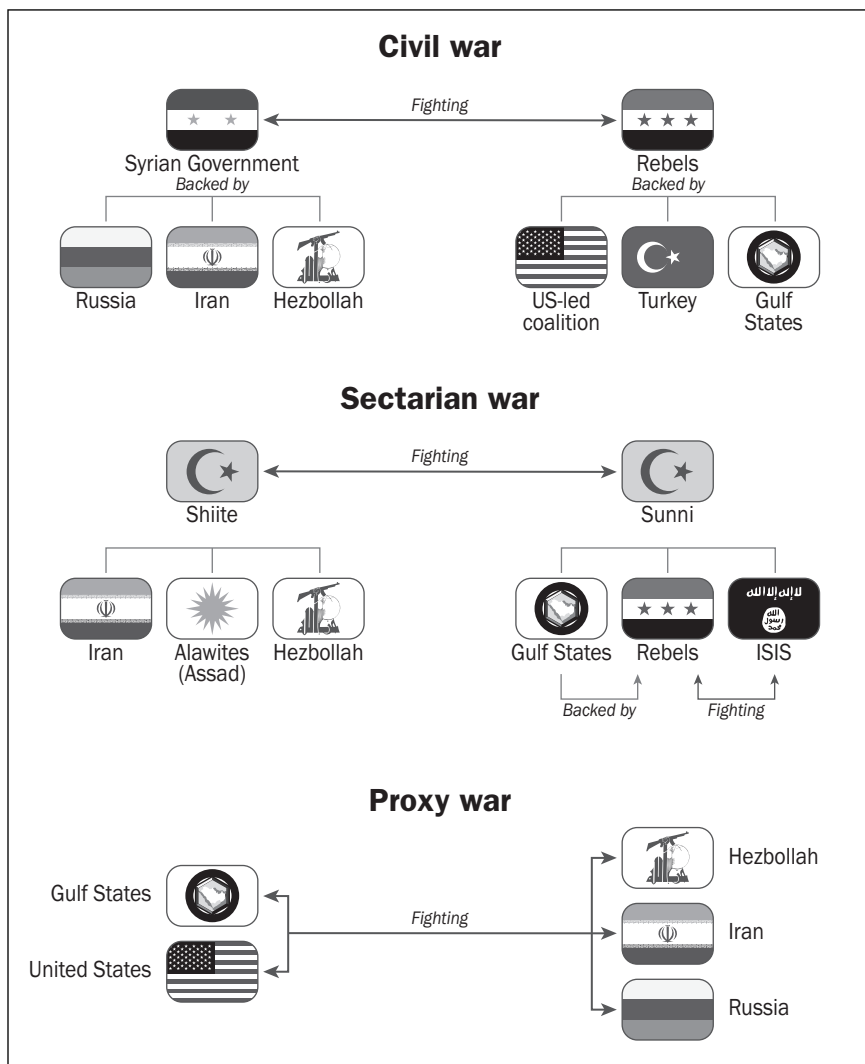
Although territory within and on the periphery of these zones changed hands during 2015, the central dominions remained mostly intact as the primary camps vied for control of the country. With the exception of IS, each

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the Syrian conflict in 2014 see Lund, A., Yaha, A. and Wezeman, P. D., 'The armed conflicts in Syria and Iraq', *SIPRI Yearbook 2015*.

<sup>2</sup> In this context, 'paramilitary' refers to the Syrian Government's all-volunteer auxiliary militias, which were initially called the 'shabbihah' but have since been semi-regularized in the National Defence Forces.

<sup>3</sup> See the discussion on Islamic State in Chapter 2, section II, in this volume. Islamic State is also referred to by its former names—the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)/Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)—and in Arabic as *Dawlat al-Islamiyah f'al-Iraq wa al-Sham* (Daesh), which translates as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant/Syria.

<sup>4</sup> Lund, A., 'The political geography of Syria's war: an interview with Fabrice Balanche', *Syria in Crisis*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 30 Jan. 2015.



**Figure 4.4.** Syria's intersecting conflicts

*Credit:* Hugo Ahlenius, Nordpil, <<https://nordpil.se/>>.

*Source:* Gilsinan, K., 'The confused person's guide to the Syrian civil war: a brief primer', *The Atlantic*, 29 Oct. 2015.

of the political-military blocs operating in Syria has enjoyed its own set of relationships with international patrons. Over the course of 2015, each was both the beneficiary of and vector for international intervention that drove the year's most significant developments on the battlefield. Even as some of these political camps joined negotiations over a political settlement to the

war, in practice these negotiations only provided another forum for competition between these actors and their respective external sponsors.

### **External intervention on the battlefield**

#### *Sunni regional powers back Jeish al-Fateh*

The first important battlefield development was the swift advance of the Jeish al-Fateh (Army of Conquest) rebel alliance in north-west Syria in early 2015. This coalition was announced in March 2015 by seven Islamist brigades, chief among them the Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra and the Salafist brigade Ahrar al-Sham.<sup>5</sup> Following a series of quick victories led by Jeish al-Fateh, rebels occupied nearly all of north-west Idlib province by mid-2015.<sup>6</sup> Further gains in central Hama province put the alliance within striking distance of the Assad regime's stronghold in the coastal provinces of Lattakia and Tartous.<sup>7</sup> The success of Jeish al-Fateh reportedly stemmed, at least in part, from newly coordinated and generous backing from the regional Sunni Muslim powers: Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.<sup>8</sup>

Previously, the three powers had sponsored rival blocs in Syria's political and armed opposition, which had been polarized between Saudi and Qatari influence. Among Syria's exiled political opposition, Saudi Arabia had backed tribal figures and secular intellectuals to balance the Muslim Brotherhood and their political allies, which it perceived to be close to Qatar.<sup>9</sup> On the ground inside Syria, Saudi Arabia had attempted to buttress nationalist rebels who could counterbalance Qatari-backed Islamists. Saudi Arabia backed several initiatives to centralize the command of 'Free Syrian Army' rebels under Syrian military defectors, as opposed to the civilians who led many Islamist factions.<sup>10</sup> After these attempts to institutionalize rebel forces were thwarted, Saudi Arabia conspicuously invested in specific nationalist rebel factions such as the Syrian Revolutionary Front, only to see it and others defeated or subordinated by Jabhat al-Nusra in late 2014.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>5</sup> [Jeish al-Fateh announces Idlib's greatest battle is near], *Zaman al-Wasl*, 24 Mar. 2015 (in Arabic).

<sup>6</sup> Lund, A., 'Syrian rebels capture Idlib, by Aron Lund', *Syria Comment*, 28 Mar. 2015; and Al-Khalidi, S., 'Rebels capture last Syrian town in Idlib province', *Reuters*, 28 May 2015.

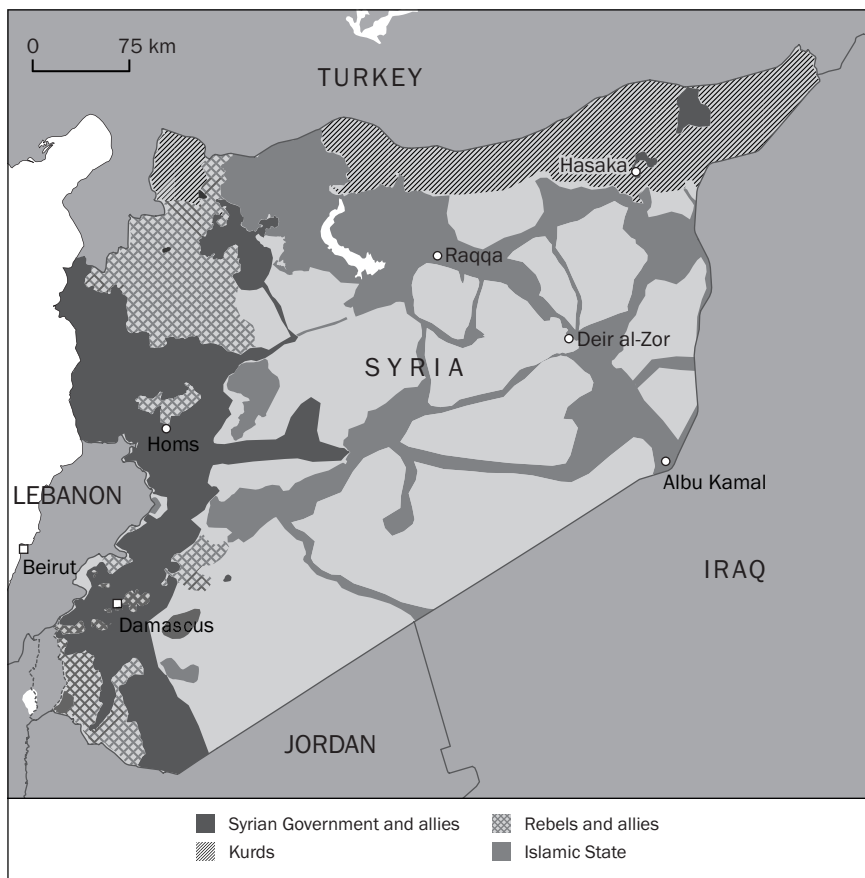
<sup>7</sup> Karouny, M., 'Islamist fighters seize Syria's Jisr al-Shughour, army says redeploys', *Reuters*, 25 Apr. 2015. For an example of rebels threatening to march on the coast see Heller, S. (@AbuJama-jem), 'With fall of Jisr al-Shughour, rebels making threatening noises about striking into Lattakia's Alawite heartland', *Twitter*, 25 Apr. 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Sengupta, K., 'Turkey and Saudi Arabia alarm the West by backing Islamist extremists the Americans had bombed in Syria', *The Independent*, 12 May 2015; and Ignatius, D., 'A new cooperation on Syria', *Washington Post*, 12 May 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Pierret, T., 'External support and the Syrian insurgency', *Foreign Policy*, 9 Aug. 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Pierret (note 9).

<sup>11</sup> See Giglio, M., 'This rebel commander is fighting extremists in Syria: is it enough to get US support?', *BuzzFeed*, 21 Feb. 2014; and Sly, L., 'The rise and ugly fall of a moderate Syrian rebel offers



**Figure 4.5.** Control of Syrian territory by armed groups, December 2015

*Credit:* Hugo Ahlenius, Nordpil, <<https://nordpil.se/>>.

*Source:* Syria Live Map, <<http://syria.liveuamap.com/en/time/03.01.2016>>, Accessed 27 Apr. 2016.

Saudi Arabia seemed to revise its Syria policy after King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud acceded to the throne in January 2015, which also appeared to engender a broader rapprochement with Turkey and Qatar.<sup>12</sup> With some of its most important Syrian rebel allies marginalized or defeated, Saudi Arabia seems to have set aside its suspicions of armed Islamists and instead prioritized the defeat of Iran and various Iranian proxies in Syria.

lessons for the West', *Washington Post*, 5 Jan. 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Lund, A., 'Are Saudi Arabia and Turkey about to intervene in Syria?', *Syria in Crisis*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 24 Apr. 2015; and Tattersall, N. and Coskun, O., 'Regional crises push Turkey, Saudi closer despite ideological rift', *Reuters*, 8 May 2015.

The three Sunni powers—in parallel and alongside the USA and various European partners—continued to back less hard line rebels, mostly Free Syrian Army nationalists.<sup>13</sup> The weaponry supplied as part of this parallel arms programme allowed these nationalists to demonstrate their continued relevance alongside more powerful Islamist units.<sup>14</sup>

### *Russia and Iran stabilize the Syrian Government*

Jeish al-Fateh's gains put the Syrian Government under renewed military pressure, prompting speculation about regime collapse.<sup>15</sup> The government's Syrian Arab Army had become increasingly brittle, in part due to the difficulty in replenishing its ranks from within the government's narrow loyalist base.<sup>16</sup> In a rare admission of weakness, Bashar al-Assad acknowledged in a July speech that the regime was obliged to prioritize the defence of its most strategically vital territory.<sup>17</sup> The Syrian Government's visible weakness seems to have prompted Russia and Iran to launch a coordinated intervention on behalf of their ally.<sup>18</sup>

Russia launched an air campaign against the Syrian Government's rebel enemies on 30 September 2015.<sup>19</sup> Despite Russian protests to the contrary, Russian airstrikes overwhelmingly focused on mixed rebels in western Syria, not IS positions further east.<sup>20</sup> Rather than to target a single enemy (IS) the strikes seem to have been planned more to support government forces, for which non-IS rebels are typically the more proximate enemy.<sup>21</sup> The Syrian military's multi-front, Russian-backed offensive initially failed to recapture substantial territory.<sup>22</sup> However, it did stabilize Syrian Government territorial control and subsequently began to produce real gains.

<sup>13</sup> Entous, A., 'Covert CIA mission to arm Syrian rebels goes awry', *Wall Street Journal*, 26 Jan. 2015; and Mazzetti, M. and Apuzzo, M., 'US relies heavily on Saudi money to support Syrian rebels', *New York Times*, 23 Jan. 2015.

<sup>14</sup> See Chulov, M. and Shaheen, K., 'Syrian rebels hail fall of Jisr al-Shughour as sign of growing strength', *The Guardian*, 27 Apr. 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Sly, L., 'Assad's hold on power looks shakier than ever as rebels advance in Syria', *Washington Post*, 26 Apr. 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Barnard, A. et al., 'An eroding Syrian Army points to strain', *New York Times*, 28 Apr. 2015.

<sup>17</sup> al-Assad, B. [This battle belongs to a complete axis that represents independence and dignity . . . we are in a fateful state, in which there are no halfway solutions. . . we will never be slaves, we will independent masters over our country, our resources, and our rights], Video, Syrian Arab News Agency, 26 July 2015 (in Arabic).

<sup>18</sup> Bassam, L. and Perry, T., 'How Iranian general plotted out Syrian assault in Moscow', Reuters, 6 Oct. 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Cooper, H. et al., 'Russians strike targets in Syria, but not ISIS areas', *New York Times*, 30 Sep. 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Stubbs, J., 'Four-fifths of Russia's Syria strikes don't target Islamic State: Reuters analysis', Reuters, 21 Oct. 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Russia has struck IS where it poses an immediate threat to Syrian Government territory, as in the Homs countryside. See Sputnik, [Syrian Army takes strategic village Mahein in Homs], 23 Nov. 2015 (in Arabic).

<sup>22</sup> Bassam, L. and Perry, T., 'Saudi support to rebels slows Assad attacks: pro-Damascus sources', Reuters, 6 Nov. 2015.

Thanks in large part to overwhelming Russian airpower, government forces achieved a number of strategic and symbolic victories, including breaking IS's two-year siege of Aleppo's Kweiris base.<sup>23</sup> These wins positioned the government and its allies to make further inroads into territory that had been in rebel hands for many years.

Russia's intervention had the second-order effect of deterring involvement by other actors. After Turkey shot down a Russian combat aircraft that had allegedly crossed into Turkish airspace on 24 November 2015, the threat of Russian retaliation against Turkish aircraft and new Russian air defences effectively grounded Turkey's Air Force over Syria.<sup>24</sup> The 'safe zone' Turkey had advocated in eastern Aleppo province, which would have been policed in part by Turkish jets, suddenly seemed impossible.<sup>25</sup> After the loss of its jet, Russia only intensified its bombing of Turkey-backed rebels and population centres in opposition-held northern Syria.<sup>26</sup>

Jordan, meanwhile, seemingly adapted more quickly than Turkey to Russia's new role in Syria. Jordan had scaled back its support for rebels in southern Syria after the June 2015 failure of 'Southern Storm', an offensive that was intended to take the provincial capital of southern Dara'a province, Dara'a city.<sup>27</sup> After Russian intervention, however, Jordan cut support for southern rebels still further, allegedly as part of a reciprocal arrangement with Russia in which Russia would not bomb Western-backed rebels or allow Iranian-backed militias to advance south.<sup>28</sup>

The Syrian Government's gains during the year were also possible because of the large-scale involvement of foreign Shiite ground troops mustered by Iran.<sup>29</sup> Although Lebanon's Hezbollah and various Iraqi Shiite militias continued to fight alongside the regular Syrian Arab Army, some government offensives—such as the push into the southern Aleppo countryside—seem to

<sup>23</sup> Loveluck, L., 'Russia and Iran-backed offensive helps regime break Isis's two-year siege on Syrian airbase', *Daily Telegraph*, 10 Nov. 2015.

<sup>24</sup> MacFarquhar, N. and Erlanger, S., 'NATO–Russia tensions rise after Turkey downs jet', *New York Times*, 24 Nov. 2015; and Marcus, J., 'Russia S-400 Syria missile deployment sends robust signal', BBC News, 1 Dec. 2015. Turkey has acknowledged publicly that Turkish jets have been unable to fly over Syria since the downing of Russia's jet in November. For example, see the remarks by Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu in 'Turkey hits ISIL targets in Syria, Iraq after Istanbul bombing', *Today's Zaman*, 14 Jan. 2016.

<sup>25</sup> DeYoung, K. and Sly, L., 'US–Turkey deal aims to create de facto "safe zone" in northwest Syria', *Washington Post*, 27 July 2015.

<sup>26</sup> Gutman, R., 'Russia has stepped up bombing since Turkey downed its aircraft', McClatchy, 5 Dec. 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Dagher, S. and Ma'ayeh, S., 'In Syria, Assad foes pay high price for failed offensive', *Wall Street Journal*, 13 Nov. 2015.

<sup>28</sup> Al-Khalidi, S., 'Jordan's King Abdullah to discuss war on Syria militants with Putin', Reuters, 22 Nov. 2015; Al Sharif, O., 'Has Jordan acquiesced to Assad regime offensive in southern Syria?', Middle East Institute, 12 Jan. 2016; Solomon, E. and Reed, J., 'Russia helps shift balance against rebels in southern Syria', *Financial Times*, 7 Jan. 2016; and Al Sharif, O., 'Why the fall of this Syrian city raises red flags in Jordan', *al-Monitor*, 8 Feb. 2016.

<sup>29</sup> Bassam and Perry (note 18).

have been carried out almost entirely by militias comprised of foreigners, including Afghans recruited by Iran for the Syrian battlefield.<sup>30</sup> In an indication of the central role of Iranian officers on the battlefield, the Iranian Government increasingly acknowledged and mourned the deaths of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps commanders in Syria.<sup>31</sup>

*US-led coalition backs Kurdish YPG against IS*

For its part, the USA has progressively escalated its involvement in Syria as part of the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, a US-initiated alliance of 60 nations announced in December 2014.<sup>32</sup>

The main beneficiary of the coalition campaign has been the Kurdish YPG. The YPG is the armed wing of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is in turn the Syrian affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).<sup>33</sup> The coalition initially intervened more narrowly in defence of the Syrian–Turkish border town of Kobani, but it has since developed a close working partnership with the YPG across northern Syria.<sup>34</sup> With close air support from the coalition, the YPG was able to push outwards from Kobani to join its Kobani and north-eastern Syria cantons, thus taking hold of Syria's entire border with Turkey east of the Euphrates River and denying IS key supply routes through Turkey.<sup>35</sup> The YPG has since forged a multi-ethnic coalition with some Arab brigades called the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), but the SDF seems to be a politically convenient, YPG-dominated vessel for coalition support.<sup>36</sup> The politics of backing the YPG are complicated, as the PKK has been designated a terrorist organization by the USA, and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization ally, Turkey, is uncomfortable about the expanding territorial reach of its long-time separatist enemy.

The coalition has also formed partnerships against IS with non-SDF Arab rebels, but with less auspicious results. Overtaxed rebels in northern

<sup>30</sup> Morris, L. and Salim, M., 'Iran backs Assad in battle for Aleppo with proxies, ground troops', *Washington Post*, 19 Oct. 2015; and Dehghan, S. K., 'Afghan refugees in Iran being sent to fight and die for Assad in Syria', *The Guardian*, 5 Nov. 2015.

<sup>31</sup> Naylor, H., 'Iranian media is revealing that scores of the country's fighters are dying in Syria', *Washington Post*, 27 Nov. 2015; Dehghanpisheh, B., 'Iranian casualties rise in Syria as Revolutionary Guards ramp up role', Reuters, 22 Dec. 2015; and Rawsley, A., 'Inside Iran's secret war in Syria', *Daily Beast*, 13 Nov. 2015.

<sup>32</sup> US Department of State, 'Joint Statement issued by partners at the counter-ISIL Coalition ministerial meeting', Media note, 3 Dec. 2014.

<sup>33</sup> Lund, A., 'Syria's Kurds at the center of America's anti-Jihadi strategy', *Syria in Crisis*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2 Dec. 2015.

<sup>34</sup> Lund, A., 'Why the victory in Kobane matters', *Syria in Crisis*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 13 Feb. 2015.

<sup>35</sup> Hubbard, B. and Samaan, M., 'Kurds and Syrian rebels storm ISIS-held border town', *New York Times*, 15 June 2015.

<sup>36</sup> Hubbard, B., 'New US-backed alliance in Syria exists in name only', *New York Times*, 2 Nov. 2015.

Aleppo, for example, retook some territory from IS but were unable to make a sustained drive into the IS-held eastern Aleppo countryside.<sup>37</sup>

The USA's European allies such as the United Kingdom and France have also stepped up their participation in the military campaign against IS and have played a supporting role in Syrian diplomacy. Despite some dissent from these partners, the political and military initiative seems to sit with the USA.<sup>38</sup>

### **The qualified effectiveness of military intervention**

Each of the key episodes of third-party intervention in the Syrian Civil War in 2015—from regional backing for Jeish al-Fateh, to the Russian and Iranian intervention on behalf of the Assad Government and the US-led coalition bombing of IS—demonstrated the military effectiveness of intervention. In all these instances, intervention led to dramatic battlefield advances by local proxies.

These military gains also reset the terms of the international political debate over the war. Jeish al-Fateh's advance renewed speculation on the possible collapse of the Assad regime, while Russia's intervention shored up the regime and forced a new round of negotiations which the regime entered from a position of strength. The coalition campaign on IS, meanwhile, rehabilitated the PYD/YPG as a political actor.

Nonetheless, even though intervention achieved these military and political effects, it did not necessarily advance the overriding strategic aim of an end to the Syrian conflict. Assuming that these intervening powers have broader strategic interests that include a durable political resolution to the war, then their interventions do not appear to have furthered these larger goals.

When they intervened in Syria's war, these regional and international powers surrendered much of their political initiative to their respective local proxies. As of December 2015, these countries had become partially captive to the agenda of their proxies, which are, in turn, at odds with a political settlement to the conflict. This raises complicated questions of intent and agency, such as whether these countries were genuinely interested in a negotiated end to the war. Intentionally or not, however, in practice these countries' interventions empowered local actors to pursue parochial interests incompatible with a political settlement.

<sup>37</sup> Heller, S., 'Turkey is betting on Aleppo rebels to get Islamic State out of border area', *Vice news*, 22 Dec. 2015.

<sup>38</sup> See 'UK drops first bombs in Syria after MPs approve air strikes', *France 24*, 3 Dec. 2015; *France 24*, 'French warplanes strike IS group stronghold in Syria', 16 Dec. 2015; and 'Cumulative US and allied airstrikes in Syria', *Airwars.org*, <<http://airwars.org/data/>>, accessed 29 Feb. 2016.



In the case of Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar's investment in Jeish al-Fateh, these countries have not stepped-up their military support in exchange for substantial political concessions from Jeish al-Fateh's members. On the contrary, it was these three regional powers that compromised by agreeing to back a military alliance led in part by an avowed al-Qaeda affiliate. Jeish al-Fateh was convenient in that it could pose a genuine threat to the Assad regime, thus dealing a blow to Iranian regional interests. Yet Jeish al-Fateh also advanced a project of sectarian Sunni rule incompatible with a pluralistic order in Syria. Support for the coalition also empowered member factions committed to international jihadist war beyond Syria's borders—including against 'impious' regimes in Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar—even if their immediate aims are local.<sup>39</sup>

Russia's September intervention was key to stabilizing the Syrian regime militarily, and Syrian Government officials and state media welcomed Russia's more hands-on role.<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless, Russia has not obliged the regime to change its strategic trajectory but instead allowed it to pursue its standing aims more effectively. In fact, Russian intervention may have relieved whatever pressure to seriously negotiate that the Syrian Government felt.<sup>41</sup> According to at least one account, when Russia attempted to convince the regime to make the concessions necessary for a settlement—that is, to make the case that Bashar al-Assad should step down—it was rebuffed.<sup>42</sup> Russia's intervention advanced other objectives. It served as a showcase for Russia's modern military prowess.<sup>43</sup> It also ended Russia's diplomatic isolation, obliging Western countries that had cut ties with Russia over the latter's role in Ukraine to reopen channels of communication and even partner it on Syria peacemaking. Finally, it established Russia as a power player in the Middle East, inviting closer coordination with traditional US allies such as Jordan.<sup>44</sup> What Russian intervention has not accomplished is to contribute to a stable end state in Syria that would allow Russia to comfortably exit the country.

<sup>39</sup> Some jihadist components of Jeish al-Fateh are already openly hostile to these three patron countries. See e.g. Jund al-Aqsa's outraged and threatening response to Saudi Arabia's Jan. 2016 execution of a number of prominent jihadists on Twitter, 8 Jan. 2016, <<https://twitter.com/almajd2000/status/685468000472985601>> (in Arabic). Jund al-Aqsa was a founder member of Jeish al-Fateh, but it withdrew from the coalition in Oct. 2015. See Heller, S., 'The end of the army of conquest? Syrian rebel alliance shows cracks', *World Politics Review*, 9 Nov. 2015.

<sup>40</sup> See e.g. [Al-Muallem: We have total confidence in the Russian position and President Putin on combating terrorism, video], Syrian Arab News Agency, 30 Sep. 2015 (in Arabic).

<sup>41</sup> Sly, L., 'Russian airstrikes are working in Syria: enough to put peace talks in doubt', *Washington Post*, 19 Jan. 2016.

<sup>42</sup> Jones, S. et al., 'Vladimir Putin asked Bashar al-Assad to step down', *Financial Times*, 22 Jan. 2016, <<http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/735b4746-c01f-11e5-9fdb-87b8d15baec2.html#axzz3yn-94yfsx>>.

<sup>43</sup> Sengupta, K., 'War in Syria: Russia's "rustbucket" military delivers a hi-tech shock to West and Israel', *The Independent*, 30 Jan. 2015.

<sup>44</sup> 'Russia, Jordan agree on military coordination in Syria', Reuters, 23 Oct. 2015.

The YPG, meanwhile, proved itself ready to combat IS along the Turkish border in battles that would link Syria's Kurdish enclaves. Thus far, however, it has been unwilling to push south into majority-Arab areas controlled by IS, such as Raqqa, the de facto IS capital in Syria. The YPG has also been reluctant to tolerate the growth of autonomous Arab forces that could emerge as rivals. In one example, the YPG encircled and besieged a semi-allied Arab brigade, Jabhat Thuwar al-Raqqa (the al-Raqqa Revolutionaries Front), in northern al-Raqqa province in late December 2015. Jabhat Thuwar al-Raqqa was forced to dissolve the tribal militia it had formed for a pending offensive on Raqqa and to publicly pledge its allegiance to the YPG-led SDF.<sup>45</sup>

The YPG has seemed more interested in driving west across the Euphrates River to capture the IS-held eastern Aleppo countryside, to link Aleppo's isolated Kurdish Afrin canton with Kurdish-held territory in the country's east. Although US policymakers told the YPG that crossing the Euphrates would be a 'red line', the YPG continued to flirt with an advance west.<sup>46</sup> The YPG and local Arab allies in Afrin also clashed repeatedly with adjacent Arab rebels in the northern Aleppo countryside, which were cooperating with the coalition in the fight against IS.

The US 'train-and-equip' programme, meanwhile, was probably the year's most notorious example of a foreign party trying and failing to impose its own agenda inside Syria. The programme was meant to set up a rebel force specifically to fight IS, but it suffered from lacklustre enlistment, as many rebels were unwilling to commit to fighting only IS or to leave their home towns for extended periods of training. When a part of the train-and-equip force, branded the 30th Division, was introduced to the northern Aleppo countryside, its members were quickly attacked and abducted by Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>47</sup> The train-and-equip programme was subsequently cancelled.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Hamou, A., 'Liwa Thuwar Raqqa on American military aid: "Nothing has reached us"', Syria direct, 24 Nov. 2015; [Al-Raqqa Revolutionary Front announces dissolution of 'Clans Army'], Al-Dorar, 4 Jan. 2015 (in Arabic); and [Al-Raqqa Revolutionary Brigade media office], Facebook, 7 Jan. 2016, <<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1747720115456772>> (in Arabic).

<sup>46</sup> Kahl, C. and Evans, R., 'The Obama Administration and the Middle East: an insider's view', War on the Rocks, 12 Jan. 2016; and Lund, A., 'Taking the October Dam: Syria's Kurds keep hitting the Islamic State', Syria in Crisis, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 28 Dec. 2015.

<sup>47</sup> Barnard, A. and Schmitt, R., 'Rivals of ISIS attack US-backed Syrian rebel group', *New York Times*, 31 July 2015; and Gutman, R., 'What really happened to the US train-and-equip program in Syria?', McClatchy, 21 Dec. 2015. Some other train-and-equip units have continued to operate in northern Aleppo and elsewhere in the country. See Heller, S., 'Syria's newest rebel army has its sights on the Islamic State', *Vice news*, 30 Nov. 2015; and Heller (note 37).

<sup>48</sup> Shear, M., 'Obama Administration ends effort to train Syrians to combat ISIS', *New York Times*, 9 Oct. 2015.

### **Negotiations: intervention by other means**

The escalating violence in Syria and the resulting humanitarian crisis, both locally and internationally, lent new urgency to international diplomacy aiming for an immediate settlement to the Syrian conflict. However, the participation of many international powers in these reinvigorated negotiations appeared to be less a good-faith attempt at mediation than an extension of their proxy competition on the battlefield. The adversarial fashion in which external powers participated in the negotiations process—working to empower their local allies and undermine the opposing party to the talks—seemed mostly intended to position their proxies politically to wage war inside Syria during and after negotiations.

The regime–opposition negotiations, often referred to as ‘Geneva III’, were ultimately held in February 2016, but 2015 saw extensive preparatory meetings among stakeholders, including an opposition conference in Saudi Arabia.

These new efforts to resolve the Syrian conflict were led by the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), an assemblage of regional and international stakeholders that includes among its members France, Iran, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the USA. After a number of October and November meetings, these countries outlined a negotiations road map in a 14 November 2015 statement that was subsequently codified in UN Security Council Resolution 2254.<sup>49</sup> The plan called for negotiations between the Syrian Government and opposition—that is, Geneva III talks—to be followed by a nationwide ceasefire and eventual elections.

After the ISSG’s November call for negotiations and ahead of the Geneva III talks, state patrons of the opposition took an active hand in convincing opposition members to attend Geneva III and preparing them to participate. In early December, Saudi Arabia convened a diverse set of opposition representatives to produce a single negotiating delegation and a unified negotiating platform for Geneva III. These opposition members included representatives of the National Coalition, which opponents of the regime have traditionally treated as the representative political body of the Syrian opposition, as well as smaller opposition organizations such as the National Coordination Bureau and the Building the Syrian State Party, which has maintained a political presence in regime-controlled Syria. Rep-

<sup>49</sup> The full International Syria Support Group is the Arab League, the European Union, the United Nations, China, Egypt, France, Germany, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom and the United States. UN Security Council Resolution 2254, 18 Dec. 2015; US Department of State, ‘Statement of the International Syria Support Group’, Media note, 14 Nov. 2015; and United Nations, Security Council, ‘Security Council unanimously adopts resolution 2254 (2015), endorsing road map for peace process in Syria, setting timetable for talks’, SC/12171, Meetings coverage, 18 Dec. 2015.

representatives of Syria's non-jihadist rebel brigades, including Jeish al-Islam and the Southern Front coalition, also attended.

The High Negotiating Committee formed by the end of the Saudi-hosted opposition conference—with encouragement from opposition backers—was the most broadly based opposition political structure to date. Its unprecedented incorporation of the armed opposition enabled it to join upcoming Geneva III negotiations with genuine leverage.<sup>50</sup> Backers of the opposition subsequently provided coaching and training on negotiating to opposition negotiators and their teams of alternates and advisers.<sup>51</sup>

Opposition backers seemed to be working to head off Russian attempts to meddle in the make-up of the opposition delegation. Saudi Arabia's inclusion of the National Coordination Body and the Building the Syrian State Party at the Riyadh opposition conference were seen as concessions to Russia's sensibilities; both parties had distanced themselves publicly from the armed opposition, rendering them more palatable to Russia.<sup>52</sup> After the opposition conference, Russia pushed for the further inclusion of its preferred 'opposition' interlocutors, which Russia publicly justified in terms of the need to make the delegation as representative as possible.<sup>53</sup> Many of these figures—such as the PYD leader, Saleh Muslim—have more ambiguous positions on Bashar al-Assad's Syrian Government and tense, even hostile, relationships with the mainstream Syrian opposition.<sup>54</sup> At the same time, Russia and Iran argued that influential Islamist brigades that had participated in the Riyadh opposition conference—specifically, Ahrar al-Sham and the major Damascus-area brigade, Jeish al-Islam—were terrorist organizations that should be excluded from the Geneva process.<sup>55</sup> As a result, the opposition's negotiating team remained in a state of perceived flux, unsettled by persistent questions over its make-up ahead of negotiations. The Assad regime's prerogative in selecting its own delegation went unchallenged.

The lead up to the Geneva III negotiations thus became another venue for competition between the Syrian Government and the opposition's interna-

<sup>50</sup> Hubbard, B., 'Syrian rebels form bloc for new round of peace talks', *New York Times*, 10 Dec. 2015; Heller, S., 'Syrian rebels took one very small step closer to negotiating an end to the war', *Vice news*, 12 Dec. 2015.

<sup>51</sup> Opposition member who attended such training, interview with the author, conducted over WhatsApp, 23 Jan. 2016.

<sup>52</sup> Lund, A., 'Riyadh, Rumeilan, and Damascus: All you need to know about Syria's opposition conferences', *Syria in Crisis*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 9 Dec. 2015.

<sup>53</sup> Hamidi, I., [Riyadh headquarters for Syrian opposition general body. . .and one-third of seats for fighters], *Al-Hayat*, 12 Dec. 2015, <<http://www.alhayat.com/articles/12716109>> (in Arabic).

<sup>54</sup> Hamidi (note 53); and Lund, A., 'The road to Geneva: the who, when and how of Syria's peace talks', *Syria in Crisis*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 29 Jan. 2016, <<http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=6263>>.

<sup>55</sup> See e.g. 'Moscow insists Jaysh al-Islam, Ahrar ash-Sham must be on list of terrorist groups in Syria', *TASS*, 31 Dec. 2015; Rozen, L., 'Zarif: Iran sees "mostly negative signals" from US', *al-Monitor*, 19 Dec. 2015; Heller (note 50); and Hamidi, I., [Jaysh al-Islam faces challenge of survival], *Al-Hayat*, 27 Dec. 2015 (in Arabic).

tional backers.<sup>56</sup> Russia in particular seems to have been attempting to provoke splits and defections within the opposition in order to cast the mainline opposition as hopelessly weak, divided or intransigent.<sup>57</sup>

The factions of the armed opposition are particularly sensitive to the make-up of the negotiating delegation and any ideological compromises in its platform. The perception that they had unacceptably surrendered on key revolutionary principles could provide popular cover for Jabhat al-Nusra or other jihadists to attack them, both rhetorically and literally. The participation of these opposition brigades is a necessary precondition for any de-escalatory steps on the ground, and their inclusion in the High Negotiating Committee was key to its relevance. Russia, however, has seemed less interested in securing the buy-in of key rebels into a political resolution than creating cleavages within the opposition and publicizing rebel participation in a supposedly united front against ‘terrorism’.<sup>58</sup>

### **The outlook**

Russian intervention on behalf of the Syrian Government has so far been effective enough that it may be if not hastening the end of the war, then at least providing a major turning point in the conflict as one of Syria’s four main military blocs is fatally weakened. The Syrian Government and its allies seem positioned to militarily defeat large sections of Syria’s divided opposition and neutralize other opposition forces under local political settlements, although this does not mean that a final military victory or a stabilizing political resolution are forthcoming.

At this point, international intervention is arguably required for any settlement in Syria. Syria’s most powerful jihadist factions—IS and Jabhat al-Nusra—are incapable of participating in a political resolution and unwilling to do so. They are explicitly committed to an everlasting war inside and outside Syria. Ultimately, they can only be defeated militarily. There seems to be no domestic actor inside Syria—on any side—that is capable of doing this without extensive support from an external patron.

Such a military victory would also require the political conditions that promise an inclusive alternative to jihadist control and allow for a stable

<sup>56</sup> Countries also applied pressure in the service of their own agendas. Turkey seems to have strenuously resisted the inclusion of the Kurdish PYD, proposed by Russia. Turkey eventually prevailed on the Geneva talks’ sponsors to formally exclude the PYD from negotiations. See Candar, C., ‘Under pressure from Turkey, UN excludes PYD from Syria talks’, *al-Monitor*, 29 Jan. 2016.

<sup>57</sup> Opposition members questioned the appropriateness of Russia’s key sponsoring role in negotiations as it escalated its military campaign against the Syrian opposition on the ground. See e.g. [Escalatory statements from Hijab: present moment is inappropriate for negotiations], *Orient News*, 22 Dec. 2015 (in Arabic).

<sup>58</sup> See Lund, A., ‘Media Maskirovka: Russia and the Free Syrian Army’, *Syria Comment*, 8 Nov. 2015.

post-conflict order. External intervention as pursued in Syria in 2015 does not admit for this possibility. One major reason why this political component is not attainable has so far been lost amid newly energetic 'Geneva III diplomacy': the Syrian Government may itself be fundamentally incapable of making the concessions required for a viable political settlement.

If the Syrian Government is unable to properly position itself for a political victory, then a partial Russian-backed military victory can only push Syria's conflict in new, unpredictable directions. New Syrian Government gains may irreparably radicalize opposition Syrians in even greater numbers and further embroil neighbouring countries as millions of Syrians in opposition areas, fearing Government retaliation, flee the Syrian Arab Army's advance. While a new counter-escalation by opposition backers could theoretically even the odds, by then the situation may have moved further towards a permanently broken country divided between extreme and mutually irreconcilable warring camps.