

The Syria Civil War (2011–2024): A Conflict Mapping Analysis of Structures and Actors

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Abstract

Since 2011, the Syrian conflict has evolved from a domestic uprising into a fragmented and protracted civil war shaped by overlapping local, regional, and international interventions. The shifting patterns of territorial control, the proliferation of armed non-state actors, foreign military involvement, and inconclusive diplomatic efforts have transformed Syria into a multilayered conflict arena. This article employs conflict mapping as a relational analytical framework to examine the Syrian civil war. Drawing on Bartos and Wehr's conflict mapping model and a qualitative analysis of secondary sources, it analyzes the conflict across four interconnected dimensions: context, actors, issues, and dynamics. It further traces shifts in the relationships among primary, secondary, and tertiary actors across key phases of the conflict between 2011 and 2024. The article argues that the persistence of the Syrian conflict cannot be explained solely by proxy competition or sectarian polarization. Rather, fragmented domestic authority structures have enabled external interventions, which in turn have deepened fragmentation and impeded conflict transformation. By foregrounding this recursive interaction, the study offers an alternative framework for understanding the durability of the conflict. The findings indicate that the war has been sustained through the interaction between fragmented local governance and layered external interventions, resisting resolution despite shifting configurations of power. In the absence of a shared political vision among the parties, the conflict is likely to persist in altered forms, transitioning from open warfare to low-intensity instability. Syria thus represents a durable no-resolution equilibrium, where neither decisive military victory nor comprehensive political settlement has proven attainable.

Keywords: Syrian Civil War; Conflict Mapping; Third-Party Intervention; Internationalized Conflict; Civil War Dynamics

Introduction

The popular uprisings that began in Tunisia in 2011 and spread across the Middle East followed a distinct trajectory in Syria, where they escalated into one of the most devastating and protracted internal conflicts in the nation's modern history.¹ Peaceful demonstrations demanding political reform, freedom, and democratic representation rapidly descended into violence following the regime's harsh repression. The confrontation between Bashar al-Assad's government and anti-regime groups subsequently evolved into a full-scale civil war, driven by attacks on civilians, the militarization of

opposition forces, and the increasing involvement of external actors. Over time, the conflict moved beyond a conventional state–opposition struggle, developing into a multilayered arena shaped by ethnic, sectarian, and ideological cleavages. This shift enabled the proliferation of armed actors advancing competing territorial and political claims. From 2012 onward, the emergence of groups such as the Free Syrian Army, PYD-affiliated forces (including the YPG and later the SDF), Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, and ISIS led to the effective fragmentation of Syrian territory.

As state authority deteriorated and domestic fragmentation deepened, the Syrian conflict expanded beyond a national crisis into a key arena of regional and global competition. At the regional level, actors such as Türkiye, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar supported different factions in line with their security interests and ideological orientations. At the global level, Russia and the United States played decisive roles, with Russia's military intervention in support of the regime and the United States' backing of Kurdish-led forces in northern Syria further entrenching the conflict's internationalized and proxy-driven character. Meanwhile, the European Union and the United Nations have largely focused on humanitarian assistance, diplomatic mediation, and refugee management. However, structural power asymmetries and competing geopolitical interests have constrained efforts to achieve a durable political settlement.²

This configuration has rendered the Syrian civil war both a domestic state conflict and an internationalized internal conflict. Its persistence has been driven by enduring structural conditions, including weak state institutions, entrenched authoritarian governance, economic inequalities, and deep social polarization. Although the Sochi, Astana, and Geneva processes initiated after 2017 produced limited ceasefire arrangements, they failed to establish a durable and comprehensive political settlement.

Conflict mapping is a method for analyzing the structure of a conflict, the involved parties, and their relationships through a visual and analytical framework.³ It clarifies both the visible manifestations of conflict and the underlying causes that sustain it. Paul Wehr's approach enables conflict to be analyzed not through a chronological sequence of events, but as a systematic and dynamic process shaped by interrelated elements.⁴ It is used to examine the relationships among primary, secondary, and tertiary actors. Using conflict mapping as its analytical framework, this article argues that the protracted nature of the Syrian civil war is best understood through the interaction between domestic fragmentation and external intervention, rather than through proxy warfare or sectarian polarization alone.

This study analyzes the Syrian civil war through the framework of conflict mapping to explain how the conflict evolved, which actors shaped its course, and why it has remained resistant to a lasting settlement. It addresses how the conflict has been shaped by internal and external dynamics, how different categories of actors have become involved, and how this multilayered structure has influenced the trajectory of the war. The Syrian case represents one of the most complex conflict settings of the recent period, involving domestic, regional, and international actors simultaneously. The study examines the conflict from its outbreak in 2011 up to the military offensive launched by Syrian opposition groups on 8 December 2024, which led to the collapse of regime control in Hama, Aleppo, Homs, and Damascus, focusing on its context, actors, issues, and dynamics.

Specifically, by examining the dynamics of regional rivalry and the impact of third-party interventions on the duration and character of the conflict, the study contributes to the field of peace studies. It addresses three central questions: (a) What are the fundamental issues driving the Syrian conflict? (b) How have different forms of intervention shaped its trajectory? (c) Given regional and global power interests, is sustainable peace in Syria attainable? Taken together, these questions seek to explain how the interplay between fragmented domestic actors and multilayered regional and international interventions has transformed the Syrian uprising into a self-sustaining system of

conflict.

In line with these questions, the study adopts a qualitative approach based on secondary data sources such as reports, news, and documents. It outlines the methodological foundations of conflict mapping and examines the conflict's contextual background, key actors, and core issues through fact-based, interest-based, and value-based classifications.⁵ In doing so, it provides a process-oriented analytical framework that moves beyond static and one-dimensional approaches by analyzing conflict dynamics across domestic, regional, and international levels.

Methodology: Conflict Mapping Technique

The prolonged and multi-dimensional nature of the Syrian civil war requires a reassessment of analytical approaches within the field of conflict resolution. This study employs the conflict mapping technique developed by Otomar J. Bartos and Paul Wehr, which provides an effective framework for examining complex conflicts such as Syria.⁶ The method enables the analysis of not only the visible dynamics among the parties but also the deeper structural and contextual dimensions of the conflict. As Wehr notes, “even the simplest conflict consists of numerous elements; a conflict involving multiple actors and encompassing organizational and societal levels becomes extraordinarily complex.”⁷ Accordingly, in a context like Syria where multiple actors, ideological divisions, and external interventions intersect the conflict mapping approach provides both a conceptual and visual means to understand the conflict's intricate nature.

This study adopts a qualitative research design, as qualitative methods aim to interpret the meaning of social phenomena within their contextual settings. Such an approach is particularly suitable for examining the underlying causes of the Syrian civil war, the interactions among its various actors, and the constraints on peace initiatives.⁸ Data were compiled from reliable secondary sources, including academic publications, reports by international organizations, and institutional analyses of the conflict. The temporal scope spans 2011 to 2024. Data were collected through a literature review on the historical development of the Syrian civil war, its actor structure, and forms of intervention, and then coded into categories of context, actors, issues, and dynamics via qualitative content analysis. The unit of analysis comprises documented patterns of actor intervention, inter-actor relations, and shifts in conflict dynamics across major phases of the war, with actors classified as primary, secondary, or tertiary based on their position and level of intervention.

While Wehr's conflict mapping model provides a structured tool for analyzing conflict components, Lederach's perspective enriches this framework by emphasizing the relational, process-oriented, and transformative nature of conflicts. It highlights that conflicts extend beyond competing interests and visible actors to encompass broader relationships, perceptions, and social processes that sustain or reshape them over time. Integrating the insights of Wehr and Lederach enhances the analytical foundation of conflict mapping, facilitating a more multidimensional interpretation of complex conflict settings. This approach offers a more comprehensive understanding of the Syrian crisis, encompassing not only its military and political dimensions but also its socio-economic, ideological, and diplomatic aspects. Moving beyond conventional descriptive analyses, it enables a systematic examination of the conflict's multi-actor structure. Wehr's model thus functions as an effective analytical tool for interpreting these complex interrelations, combining theoretical depth with the capacity for visual representation.⁹

The dataset comprises academic publications, reports by international organizations—including the United Nations, the International Crisis Group, and UNDP—and selected field-based analyses. Source selection was guided by three criteria: (1) academic or institutional credibility, (2) temporal relevance to the 2011–2024 period, and (3) the capacity to provide a multi-perspective and

analytically balanced account. Accordingly, the corpus includes peer-reviewed studies, United Nations documents, and institutional or policy reports that offer empirical insight into actor configurations, intervention patterns, territorial control, and mediation processes.

The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Texts on the Syrian civil war were first thematically coded and then organized under four analytical categories: context, actors, issues, and dynamics. In line with the conflict mapping framework, each actor's role, interaction type, and level of intervention were systematically identified during the coding process. Sources were further coded according to actor type, intervention type, territorial objective, and conflict effect, the latter assessed in terms of escalation, stabilization, fragmentation, and mediation failure. This procedure enabled both systematic textual interpretation and the construction of visual representations of the conflict structure. The figures presented in the study are derived from these coded relationships, intervention patterns, and shifts in alignment across the conflict's main phases.

In the second phase of analysis, actors were classified into three levels according to Wehr's model. Primary actors comprise local entities directly engaged in the conflict, including the Assad regime, opposition groups, and Kurdish forces. Secondary actors refer to regional powers operating at the level of neighboring states, such as Türkiye, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. Tertiary actors denote global actors with diplomatic, military, or institutional intervention capacity within the international system, including the United Nations, the European Union, the United States, and Russia. This classification is based on three criteria: the degree of direct involvement, the scale and form of intervention, and the functional role in sustaining, managing, or attempting to transform the conflict. This framework clarifies how conflict dynamics are shaped by differentiated levels of actor intervention. In addition, Jeong's typology factual, value-based, interest-based, and unrealistic is employed as a complementary scheme to categorize the core dimensions of the conflict.¹⁰

Within this framework, fact-based issues capture divergent perceptions between the regime and the opposition, while value-based issues reflect ideological and identity-driven divisions, and interest-based issues concern struggles over power and resource allocation. Unrealistic issues, by contrast, relate to the psychological and emotional dimensions generated and sustained by the experience of war. Wehr's conflict mapping model comprises five sequential stages: (1) identifying the historical context, (2) categorizing actors, (3) defining core issues, (4) analyzing interaction dynamics, and (5) identifying potential pathways for resolution and transformation.¹¹

This study follows the same sequential structure. In the first stage, the historical and political context of Syria marked by authoritarian governance, economic inequality, and sectarian polarization is examined, following Hinnebusch.¹² The second stage classifies actors according to the three levels outlined above, while the third stage codes the core issues thematically. The fourth stage analyzes conflict dynamics, focusing on escalation patterns, intervention modalities, and diplomatic processes. The fifth stage assesses potential peace scenarios and the effectiveness of mediation efforts. Within this framework, the Astana, Geneva, and Sochi processes are evaluated as institutional mechanisms of conflict transformation.¹³ Lederach's perspective further informs the analysis by emphasizing the relational and processual dimensions of conflict, particularly how repeated interactions, shifting perceptions, and failed mediation efforts contribute to the persistence of violence.

Validity and reliability are ensured through a multi-source comparison strategy embedded within Wehr's conflict mapping framework. This model analyzes conflict across the interrelated dimensions of context, issues, actors, and dynamics, enabling a multidimensional rather than purely chronological interpretation of complex conflict settings. It is particularly well-suited to the Syrian case, as it captures both observable manifestations of violence and the underlying structural conditions, actor relationships, and evolving interaction patterns that sustain the conflict over time. Empirical material was cross-verified across academic publications, international reports, and credible datasets to assess

consistency and recurrence, with each finding supported by at least two independent sources to reduce subjectivity in qualitative interpretation. Although the author conducted field visits to Syria including Idlib, Azaz, Afrin, Latakia, Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, and Homs in 2022 and multiple times between 2024 and 2025, engaging with opposition members and security officials, these interviews were not systematically recorded and are therefore excluded from the analysis. Accordingly, the study relies primarily on secondary data for empirical validation. This systematic cross-comparison enhances methodological reliability, while the analysis remains limited to sources published up to 2024. The study is interpretive rather than predictive, focusing on identifying relational patterns, mechanisms of conflict reproduction, and the interaction between domestic fragmentation and external intervention, without claiming statistical generalizability or direct causal inference.

The Context of the Conflict

The Syrian civil war began with protests in Daraa in March 2011, which rapidly spread across the country and reached major urban centers such as Homs, Hama, and Aleppo. What initially emerged as peaceful demonstrations escalated into armed conflict following the regime's violent repression and refusal to implement political reforms.¹⁴ These developments transformed the uprising into a protracted war with far-reaching domestic and international implications.

The evolution of the Syrian conflict between 2011 and 2024 can be divided into distinct phases reflecting shifts in military control, authority, legitimacy, and external involvement. The 2011–2012 period marked the transition from peaceful protests to armed confrontation, during which local councils and opposition structures began to emerge, alongside the formation of the Syrian National Council (SNC) as an early attempt to institutionalize the opposition. Between 2012 and 2014, the regime intensified military operations, frontlines multiplied, and de facto territorial fragmentation became increasingly evident. The 2014–2016 phase constituted a critical turning point with the rise of ISIS, whose “caliphate” declaration triggered international coalition intervention and U.S.-led airstrikes, while Russia's direct military intervention in September 2015 shifted the balance of power in favor of the regime. The 2017–2020 period was defined by the Astana and Sochi processes and the establishment of de-escalation zones, during which Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) consolidated its dominance in Idlib, while the SDF/YPG expanded its territorial control in the east. Despite partial ceasefires, these arrangements failed to produce a durable political settlement. In the post-2020 phase, Syria has experienced deepening economic collapse, institutional degradation, and an increasingly Türkiye-centered security configuration in the north. The stagnation of the Geneva process has entrenched a tripartite de facto territorial order consisting of regime-held, SDF/YPG-administered, and opposition/HTS-controlled areas.

In the early phase of the conflict, efforts by opposition groups to establish a unified political structure were undermined by the proliferation of armed factions aligned with competing external sponsors, eroding centralized coordination and political cohesion. At the same time, allegations of chemical weapons use in 2013 intensified debates over international intervention and expanded the conflict's diplomatic dimension, as Russia's initiative led Damascus to accede to the Chemical Weapons Convention and introduced formal mechanisms for investigating chemical attacks.¹⁵

Since 2014, the rise of ISIS particularly in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor has transformed the Syrian conflict into a regional and global security challenge. Coordinated air operations by the U.S.-led coalition, combined with its partnership with the SDF/YPG, led to ISIS's expulsion from Raqqa in 2017.¹⁶ In parallel, Russia's air campaign, supported by regime and allied ground forces, enabled the Assad government to regain control over key fronts, including Aleppo, Eastern Ghouta, and the Qalamoun.¹⁷ Following the 2017 Astana and Sochi negotiations involving Russia, Iran, and Türkiye,

a framework was established to reduce hostilities in selected areas. The introduction of de-escalation zones and observation posts temporarily lowered violence but failed to produce a comprehensive political settlement.¹⁸ The March 11, 2020, agreement between Türkiye and Russia brought relative stability to the Idlib front; however, the continued dominance of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and persistent fragmentation among opposition factions have sustained the fragility of the situation.

In October 2019, Türkiye's Operation Peace Spring, together with the gradual withdrawal of U.S. forces from northeastern Syria, reshaped the border security architecture. Coordination between Russia and Türkiye, alongside intermittent contacts between Damascus and the SDF, produced a hybrid governance structure in the northeast characterized by overlapping zones of military and political influence.¹⁹ The 2021 elections, conducted under authoritarian conditions and excluding large segments of the population, reinforced the Assad regime's authority rather than enabling meaningful political participation. Concurrently, Syria experienced severe economic deterioration, including fuel and food shortages, corruption, and the spillover effects of regional financial crises, which further deepened social vulnerability. Despite limited diplomatic re-engagement such as the reopening of embassies by the UAE and Bahrain in 2018 and Oman's restoration of ambassadorial representation in 2020—these steps did not lead to substantive political normalization. Structural constraints, including mass displacement, the war economy, and international sanctions, continue to impede the prospects for a durable settlement.

Overall, the Syrian conflict reflects the interaction of multiple structural factors, including a stalled political transition, weak institutional capacity, and layered external interventions. This configuration has shaped not only the trajectory of the conflict but also the emergence, positioning, and interaction of actors across domestic, regional, and international levels. Geneva-centered negotiations have yielded limited progress on issues such as constitutional reform and prisoner exchanges; however, a comprehensive political settlement has remained elusive due to entrenched military balances and competing regional interests.²⁰ From a conflict-mapping perspective, the Syrian war is best understood as a multi-layered and evolving process rather than a linear progression from protest to civil war. Institutional collapse, territorial fragmentation, and external intervention have interacted over time, transforming the conflict into a complex and protracted crisis.

Actors in the Syrian Conflict

Explaining the Syrian civil war solely in terms of internal dynamics is insufficient to capture its complexity. What began as popular protests in 2011 evolved into a multi-layered war as anti-regime movements shifted toward armed struggle and external actors became increasingly involved. Regional and international interventions transformed the conflict into a multi-actor arena in which local rivalries were embedded within broader strategic competition.²¹ This transformation not only expanded the number of participants but also restructured the conflict by linking domestic dynamics to regional and global power struggles, thereby constraining the prospects for a negotiated settlement. Within this framework, the Syrian conflict can be understood as an arena where intersecting national and international interests shape both actor behavior and conflict outcomes. Accordingly, the following section examines the primary, secondary, and tertiary actors that structure the war's dynamics.

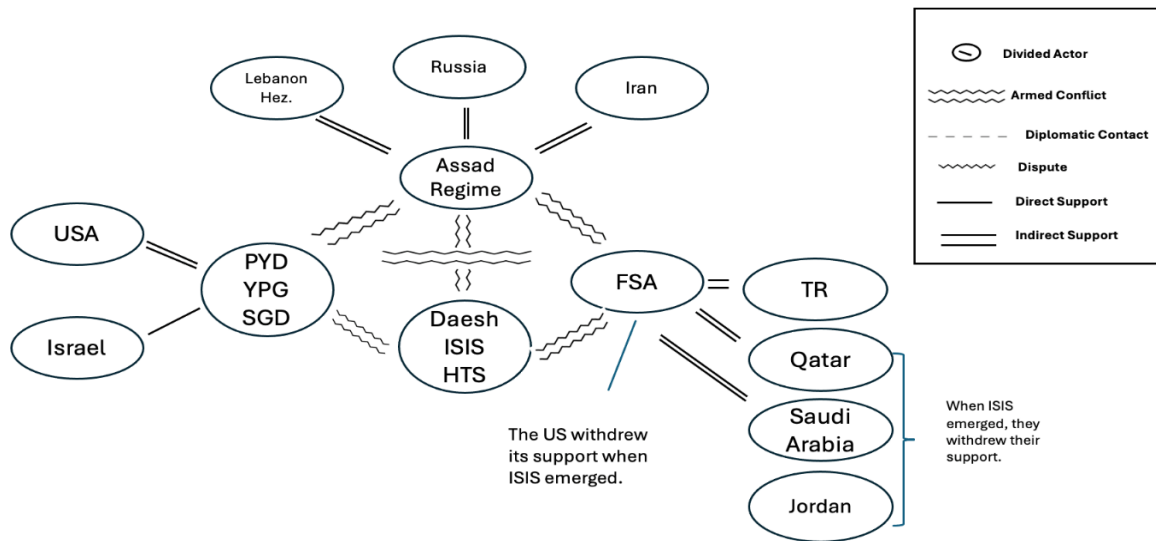


Figure 1: Syria Conflict Map.

Sources: Created by the authors.

Note: Actors and relationship networks are derived from research findings.

Primary Actors

Primary actors in the Syrian conflict did not operate in isolation; their strategies and territorial control were shaped by external sponsorship, internal fragmentation, and shifting battlefield dynamics. In this sense, they functioned not only as participants but also as conduits through which external intervention reshaped domestic power balances. At the onset of the war, the Assad regime, rooted in the Ba’athist state apparatus, constituted the dominant authority controlling most of the country. It conducted extensive military operations against opposition forces through the Syrian Arab Army and intelligence services. Over time, Russian air support and Iran’s network of allied militias significantly strengthened the regime’s position on the battlefield, enabling it to regain control over key strategic cities such as Aleppo and Hama. This external backing shifted the regime from a position of relative vulnerability to one of strategic advantage, reducing incentives for compromise and reinforcing a military rather than political logic of conflict management.

Opposition groups initially coalesced under the umbrella of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) as they took up armed struggle against the regime. Over time, however, they became increasingly fragmented along both ideological and organizational lines. ‘Islamist’, secular, and local militia factions emerged, often aligning with different external sponsors.²² This fragmentation undermined the opposition’s ability to function as a coherent political and military counterpart to the regime and complicated negotiations by multiplying actors, agendas, and chains of command. External support thus operated as a double-edged mechanism: while it enhanced the operational capacity of anti-regime forces, it simultaneously deepened internal divisions and weakened the prospects for a unified bargaining position.

Kurdish autonomous structures established a self-governance model in northeastern Syria under the leadership of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), operating within a demographically mixed region that includes Arab and Turkmen populations. The People’s Protection Units (YPG), the PYD’s military wing, was later reorganized into the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which incorporated Arab, Syriac, and Turkmen components. The SDF subsequently emerged as ‘a key local partner’ of the U.S.-led coalition, particularly in operations against ISIS.²³ This partnership elevated Kurdish-led

structures from a localized defensive force to a strategic actor within the broader conflict, while simultaneously intensifying tensions with Türkiye and segments of the Syrian opposition. As a result, the anti-ISIS campaign generated an additional axis of conflict, further complicating the war's structure and undermining the prospects for a unified anti-regime front. The most prominent radical actors in the Syrian conflict are ISIS and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). ISIS declared a caliphate in 2014 and seized extensive territory across Syria and Iraq, but was largely territorially defeated by 2019. HTS, the successor to the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Al-Nusra Front, has maintained significant influence in and around Idlib.²⁴ The rise of these groups transformed the conflict from a predominantly regime–opposition confrontation into a fragmented and securitized war characterized by multiple layers of threat perception. Their presence enabled external actors to prioritize counterterrorism objectives, displacing demands for political transition and contributing to the marginalization of comprehensive conflict resolution efforts.

Secondary Actors

Russia's military intervention in 2015 fundamentally altered the trajectory of the Syrian civil war. Operating from Hmeymim Air Base in Latakia and the Tartus Naval Base, Russia enabled the Assad regime to regain substantial territorial control. From Moscow's perspective, Syria functions as a strategic hub for consolidating its military presence in the Mediterranean and projecting geopolitical influence across the Middle East.²⁵ This intervention not only reshaped battlefield dynamics but also reconfigured the conflict by converting the regime's prior vulnerability into a bargaining advantage, thereby narrowing the space for compromise as Damascus approached negotiations from a position of strength. On the other hand, Iran has supported the Assad regime since the outset of the conflict for both ideological and geopolitical reasons, maintaining a sustained presence through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Lebanese Hezbollah, and allied Shiite militias. This involvement positioned Syria as a central component of Iran's regional strategy, particularly within the "axis of resistance."²⁶ Iran's intervention thus extended beyond regime preservation, embedding the Syrian conflict within a broader regional confrontation and linking domestic dynamics to transnational ideological and geopolitical rivalries. This process of regionalization further constrained conflict resolution by making Syria's trajectory contingent on external strategic calculations.

Türkiye's intervention, by contrast, followed a security-centered logic shaped by border threats and large-scale migration pressures. While Ankara initially supported reform and opposition forces, it became directly involved militarily as the conflict escalated. After 2016, Türkiye established *de facto* control zones in northern Syria through successive cross-border operations—Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, and Peace Spring—thereby reshaping territorial and security dynamics along its southern border.²⁷ Türkiye's primary objectives have been to contain PKK-affiliated groups along its southern border and to manage irregular migration flows generated by the conflict. Its military presence, however, did more than open new fronts; it reconfigured territorial and political arrangements in northern Syria. By supporting opposition actors while simultaneously managing shifting lines of contestation among Ankara, PKK-affiliated forces, and regime-aligned actors, Türkiye contributed to the consolidation of a complex yet relatively stabilized multi-front conflict structure.

The United States initially supported opposition groups, including the Free Syrian Army, and assumed leadership of the international coalition against ISIS in 2014. Through air operations and military assistance to the Syrian Democratic Forces, it enabled significant advances in areas such as Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor. U.S. intervention did not aim at regime change but instead prioritized counterterrorism and the containment of Iranian influence. This selective strategy reordered the

conflict's hierarchy of priorities, facilitating ISIS's territorial defeat while leaving the core political confrontation between the regime and its opponents unresolved.²⁸

Saudi Arabia and Qatar sought to counterbalance Iran-aligned forces by providing financial and logistical support to anti-Assad factions. This assistance, particularly between 2013 and 2017, enhanced the operational capacity of opposition groups, especially in northern Syria.²⁹ However, it also fostered factional competition and uneven dependency patterns, undermining centralized leadership and reducing the coherence necessary for effective negotiation. Hezbollah, the Lebanon-based Shiite organization, provided direct military support to the Assad regime and played a significant role in key operations, particularly in Homs and Aleppo. Operating under Iran's strategic guidance, Hezbollah became a central actor in the regionalization of the conflict.³⁰ Its involvement underscored the transformation of the war from a domestic confrontation into a transnationalized conflict sustained by cross-border armed networks, which both intensified military escalation and deepened regional entanglement.

Third-Party Actors

The United Nations (UN) has sought to establish a diplomatic framework for resolving the Syrian conflict since the 2012 Geneva Communiqué. The Astana process, launched in 2017 under the leadership of Russia, Türkiye, and Iran, emerged as a parallel—rather than merely complementary—mechanism to the UN-led Geneva platform.³¹ While the UN has played a facilitating role in ceasefire negotiations and Constitutional Committee discussions, competing global interests and power rivalries have prevented the emergence of a durable political settlement.³² This outcome suggests that third-party diplomacy operated within, rather than above, the conflict structure, as mediation efforts remained constrained by the same geopolitical dynamics that sustained the war. Consequently, the Syrian conflict has evolved beyond a conventional civil war into a theatre of regional and global power competition.³³

The distinctions between regime and opposition, as well as between state and non-state actors, have become increasingly blurred.³⁴ As these boundaries eroded, the conflict grew more resistant to regulation through conventional peace frameworks, given the simultaneous expansion in the number of actors, forms of intervention, and overlapping agendas. Although the Assad regime reasserted control over most of the country during the 2020s, Kurdish and opposition forces have continued to hold territory in the north and east. Concurrently, military operations by regional actors such as Israel and Iran, alongside those of global actors like the United States, have sustained the conflict at a low-intensity level.³⁵ This pattern suggests that, rather than moving toward resolution following the decline of large-scale frontlines, the conflict was reconstituted as a fragmented and enduring system of localized and externalized confrontations. The Geneva Talks constitute the longest-standing diplomatic initiative addressing the Syrian conflict. Initiated in 2012 and continuing under successive UN special envoys between 2014 and 2023, the process aimed to establish a direct negotiation channel between the regime and the opposition. However, deep-seated mutual mistrust prevented meaningful progress. Despite this, the Geneva platform provided a minimal yet essential framework for diplomatic engagement. While the Astana process largely reflected military coordination, Geneva remained central to efforts aimed at a political settlement. Its limited impact, however, revealed a structural constraint: diplomatic processes remained detached from battlefield realities, where military gains and external patronage more decisively shaped actor preferences than negotiation incentives.

The Astana Process, jointly conducted by Türkiye, Russia, and Iran, has operated in parallel to the UN-led Geneva initiative since its launch in 2017.³⁶ It has achieved limited progress in technical domains, including ceasefire arrangements, the establishment of de-escalation zones, and the facilitation of humanitarian access. However, no consensus has emerged on core political issues such as power transition, constitutional reform, or the future of Assad regime.³⁷ While the Astana platform contributed to the consolidation of de facto control zones, it remained insufficient in addressing the structural drivers of the conflict. In this sense, Astana functioned primarily as a mechanism of conflict management rather than resolution, regulating violence in selected areas without resolving the underlying political incompatibilities and external rivalries. International and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have also operated as third-party actors in the Syrian conflict. Organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) provided humanitarian assistance and documented violations of international humanitarian law, thereby increasing global awareness.³⁸ However, the deterioration of security conditions after 2014 significantly constrained their operational capacity. As a result, while these actors played a critical role in mitigating human suffering, their impact remained structurally limited in shaping the strategic calculations of armed actors or altering the broader dynamics of militarization and fragmentation.

Overall, third-party interventions have produced a hybrid environment in which military and diplomatic processes operate simultaneously but without strategic convergence. The UN-led Geneva process and the Astana framework, although formally complementary, have failed to generate a comprehensive peace architecture. Successive UN Special Envoys—Kofi Annan, Staffan de Mistura, and Geir O. Pedersen—have sustained channels of dialogue through continuous diplomatic engagement; however, divergent regional interests and persistent great-power competition have prevented these initiatives from producing a durable resolution.³⁹ Conflict mapping indicates that no single actor has exercised decisive control over the war's trajectory. Instead, the Syrian conflict has been shaped by overlapping and at times contradictory interventions that stabilize certain fronts while destabilizing others. This configuration has precluded both outright military victory and comprehensive political negotiation. Rather than generating a linear pathway toward settlement or transition, the interaction among primary, secondary, and third-party actors has produced a self-reinforcing pattern of fragmentation, external dependency, and constrained diplomacy. In this context, actor competition has not only multiplied the number of stakeholders but also redefined the core issues of the conflict, shifting them from a regime–opposition confrontation to a broader struggle over territory, security, authority, and external influence.

Conflict Issues

The Syrian civil war constitutes a complex, multi-layered conflict shaped by factual, value-based, and interest-driven dimensions. These dimensions are deeply interconnected and have continuously co-evolved throughout the conflict.⁴⁰ The depth of the crisis derives not only from a struggle for power but also from the interaction of governance failures, identity-based divisions, and competing strategic interests. As a result, the principal issues did not remain discrete and negotiable agenda items; instead, they became mutually reinforcing sources of incompatibility that intensified actor fragmentation and obstructed the emergence of a shared negotiating framework.

Factual Issues

The roots of the Syrian conflict lie in weak governance and limited institutional capacity. The dominance of security institutions in political life, the absence of effective accountability mechanisms, and the lack of judicial independence deepened public frustration. When nationwide protests erupted in 2011, the regime's refusal to implement reforms expanding political participation transformed the movement into a security-centered confrontation. This shift proved decisive, as it closed institutional channels through which grievances might have been negotiated, converting reform demands into a zero-sum struggle over authority and survival. Economic inequality and rising unemployment further exacerbated living conditions, particularly in rural areas. UNDP reports indicate a direct relationship between declining economic productivity and deteriorating human security in Arab states prior to the conflict.⁴¹ Similarly, EASO findings highlight how the erosion of state capacity increases security risks and disrupts public services.⁴² In this context, restrictions on political participation generated a widening sense of exclusion, pushing protest movements away from institutional avenues of resolution. Consequently, factual issues such as governance failure, socioeconomic deprivation, and state weakness did not merely constitute the background conditions of the conflict; they undermined confidence in peaceful redress and rendered subsequent bargaining significantly more difficult.

Value-Based Issues

In the later phases of the conflict, sectarian, ethnic, and ideological divisions became increasingly pronounced. Tensions between the Sunni majority and the Alawite minority aligned with the regime, alongside fractures among secular, Islamist, and Kurdish identities, reframed the conflict in value-based terms.⁴³ The efforts of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham to consolidate control in Idlib and the SDF/YPG's pursuit of autonomy in the northeast represent concrete manifestations of these identity-driven objectives. As the conflict became structured around sectarian and ideological cleavages, core issues were no longer perceived as negotiable political disputes but as questions of collective protection, recognition, and exclusion. This shift reduced the scope for compromise, as concessions increasingly came to be interpreted as threats to identity and survival rather than components of a political settlement. UNDP Human Development Reports emphasize that war generates "lost productivity," particularly among younger populations, while unemployment erodes social belonging.⁴⁴ In this context, identity-based polarization in Syria derives not only from sectarian divisions but also from patterns of socioeconomic exclusion. Siccardi further argues that Türkiye's security-oriented Syria policy has extended these identity-based divisions beyond national borders, giving them a transnational dimension.⁴⁵ Accordingly, value-based issues intensified the conflict by transforming political disagreement into entrenched communal boundaries and linking domestic cleavages to regional alignments and external security agendas.

Interest-Based Issues

Over time, the Syrian conflict has evolved into a struggle for power and influence among both domestic and external actors. For the regime, the primary objective has been the preservation of political authority and territorial integrity. Opposition groups have sought control over specific regions and political transformation, while the Kurdish movement has prioritized autonomy and the establishment of a security zone.⁴⁶ These objectives were not only diverse but structurally incompatible, as regime preservation, opposition-led transformation, and Kurdish autonomy implied distinct territorial and constitutional futures, leaving little scope for a shared bargaining framework. External involvement

transformed Syria into a proxy battleground. Russia consolidated a durable military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean through its bases in Tartus and Hmeymim, while Iran supported the regime to sustain its regional “axis of resistance” extending across Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Türkiye prioritized border security and the containment of PKK-affiliated groups, whereas the United States limited its engagement largely to counter-ISIS operations.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, the Gulf states and Israel pursued strategies to constrain Iranian influence. As these actors advanced divergent, often competing, strategic priorities, they failed to converge on a common political end state for Syria. Instead, their interventions selectively reinforced local actors, multiplied veto players, and reduced incentives for compromise among the principal parties. In this sense, the Syrian conflict can be understood as an internationalized war composed of interconnected crises.⁴⁸

Similarly, EASO reports indicate that the security situation varies significantly across regions, with conflict intensity in Idlib and the northeast remaining at high-risk levels.⁴⁹ This configuration of overlapping interests has narrowed the space for durable solutions and contributed to the consolidation of a self-perpetuating war economy. In this context, issues such as regime change, autonomy, counterterrorism, border security, and constitutional reform did not converge into a shared negotiation agenda, as each was embedded in distinct actor strategies and supported by different configurations of power. Rather than generating overlap, these issue clusters reinforced fragmentation and sustained the conflict’s multi-level character. From a conflict-mapping perspective, factual, value-based, and interest-driven issues do not operate independently; their interaction produces a self-reinforcing cycle of conflict reproduction. Governance failures fuel identity-based polarization, intensify identity divisions, and obstruct the integration of incompatible political claims into a unified peace process through interest-driven interventions. This recursive dynamic explains the persistence of the Syrian conflict, as the issue structure remained not only complex but structurally resistant to negotiated settlement. As governance failures deepened identity polarization and external interests reinforced competing agendas, the conflict evolved into a pattern of escalation, fragmentation, and diplomatic deadlock. In this sense, the configuration of issues directly shaped the broader conflict dynamics and helped explain the repeated failure of mediation efforts to achieve a durable political settlement.

Conflict Dynamics

The Syrian civil war, which began in 2011 as a revolution, has unfolded as a cyclical process characterized by alternating phases of relative calm, strategic reorganization, diplomatic engagement, and renewed armed confrontation.⁵⁰ Reciprocal adaptation between regime forces and opposition groups has shaped the conflict’s trajectory, as both sides continuously adjust their strategies to secure tactical advantage. Military campaigns in regions such as Aleppo, Eastern Ghouta, and Idlib produced repeated shifts in territorial control.⁵¹ Although the Geneva, Astana, and Sochi processes occasionally generated limited ceasefires, they failed to establish a durable foundation for peace. Consequently, the conflict evolved into a multi-layered and fluid structure in which shifting military balances intersected with ongoing diplomatic initiatives. Rather than following a linear progression from escalation to de-escalation, each phase emerged from the interaction between battlefield developments, external intervention, and incomplete diplomatic arrangements. The factual, value-based, and interest-driven dimensions outlined above did not remain static; instead, their interaction generated recurring patterns of escalation, fragmentation, and negotiation failure. In this sense, the dynamics of the Syrian war derived not only from military confrontation but from the cumulative effects of unresolved governance grievances, identity-based polarization, and competing internal and external agendas. Figure 2 illustrates this cyclical pattern by representing the conflict as a sequence of reconfigured stages: initial mobilization in 2011, escalation into large-scale conflict by 2014, a



Figure 2: Phases of Conflict Dynamics in Syria, 2011–2024.

Sources: Created by the authors.

Note: The figure summarizes the main phases identified through conflict-mapping analysis, showing the transition from uprising to hot conflict, to diplomatic-military reconfiguration, to low-intensity confrontation, and to an unstable, frozen-conflict phase.

As illustrated in Figure 2, the Syrian conflict evolved through shifting configurations of violence and negotiation, in which each apparent transition signified not resolution but the reorganization of unresolved tensions under changing military and political conditions.⁵²

In response to escalating violence in Syria, the international community pursued diplomatic initiatives most notably the Geneva, Astana, and Sochi processes—to promote political settlement and stability. Although these platforms aimed to contain the military dimension of the conflict, they failed to produce a durable resolution. Negotiations repeatedly reached impasses and were followed by renewed cycles of violence. Consequently, the Syrian civil war has remained dynamic, fluid, multi-layered, and persistent.⁵³ Since 2011, recurring waves of violence have imposed severe costs on regime forces, opposition groups, and civilians alike.⁵⁴ The repeated failure of negotiation efforts underscores a structural incompatibility between battlefield realities and the political objectives of the principal actors, which diplomacy has been unable to reconcile.

After 2019, the Syrian regime gradually reasserted control over most of the country. The relative ceasefire in Idlib in 2020 reduced the intensity of large-scale hostilities, and by 2021 the conflict had entered a phase characterized by limited clashes and fragile stability. This shift has often been interpreted as a transition from overt military confrontation to a low-intensity or frozen conflict.⁵⁵ However, the renewed opposition offensive in December 2024 challenges this interpretation. Reports of regime collapse and the subsequent consolidation of opposition authority indicate not a stable freeze but a reconfiguration of power, in which former opposition actors have transitioned into governing political actors.⁵⁶ From a conflict-mapping perspective, this episode underscores the latent instability inherent in existing actor constellations and territorial arrangements, suggesting that periods of apparent calm often conceal unresolved structural tensions rather than signal genuine stabilization. Accordingly, the 2020–2024 phase should be understood not as evidence of conflict resolution but as a temporary reduction in open confrontation produced by an unstable equilibrium of deterrence, territorial fragmentation, and external sponsorship. Before examining this phase in greater detail, it is useful to briefly revisit the key dynamics that shaped the early stages of the Syrian civil war.

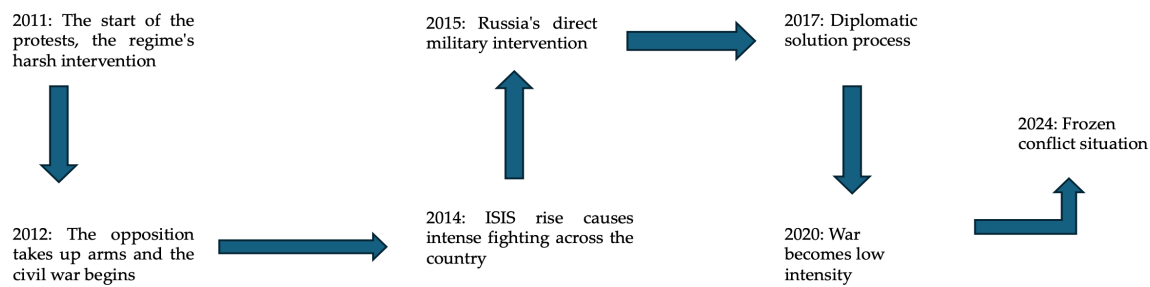


Figure 3: Key Turning Points in the Dynamics of Conflict and Violence in Syria, 2011–2024.

Sources: Created by the authors.

Note: The figure summarizes the principal turning points identified through conflict-mapping analysis, including the transition from protests to armed conflict, the rise of ISIS, Russia's direct military intervention, the emergence of diplomatic processes, the shift to low-intensity warfare, and the unstable frozen-conflict phase by 2024.

As illustrated in Figure 3, the Syrian conflict evolved through successive turning points in which domestic escalation, transnational armed mobilization, external military intervention, and limited diplomatic engagement repeatedly reshaped the form of violence without addressing its underlying drivers.

As noted earlier, the Syrian conflict began with local protests in 2011 and rapidly expanded nationwide, fragmenting the country into territories controlled by multiple power centers.⁵⁷ From that point onward, the intensity of the war fluctuated, yet no durable stability emerged. A central feature of this phase was the contest for control over state institutions. The regime sought to preserve dominance over the security apparatus and bureaucratic structures, while opposition groups pursued legitimacy in a “New Syria” through local councils, provisional administrations, and alternative civil institutions. This dual governance structure, particularly between 2012 and 2014, undermined state functionality and deepened administrative paralysis.⁵⁸ Consequently, the conflict extended beyond military confrontation into a struggle over competing claims to authority, representation, and institutional legitimacy. This competition reduced the prospects for negotiated coexistence, as both sides increasingly framed the future political order in mutually exclusive terms.

Since 2014, armed confrontations have rendered meaningful political reform virtually impossible. Regime-opposition polarization accelerated the nationwide economic collapse, as production and trade networks disintegrated, entrenching the downturn.⁵⁹ Within this context, local actors, such as YPG, profiting from the war economy, supported the perpetuation of the status quo to preserve their own interests. Militia groups controlling fuel, food, and humanitarian aid networks directly benefited from the persistence of conflict dynamics. Consequently, the ongoing political and economic instability has undermined Syria's capacity for civil and democratic governance, generating new lines of conflict at the local level. The country has thus evolved into a more fragmented structure defined by ethnic, sectarian, and regional divisions.⁶⁰ (see Figure 3). This meant that the conflict became self-reinforcing: violence eroded institutions, institutional collapse fostered informal and militia economies, and these economies in turn generated actors with a vested interest in obstructing de-escalation.

The Syrian civil war exhibits a complex structure in which local conflict dynamics and international interventions are deeply intertwined. Although the confrontation is often framed as a binary struggle between the regime and opposition forces, the reality on the ground is characterized by a proliferation of fragmented armed groups and localized actors. These actors have periodically

formed shifting alliances in response to changes in military capacity and regional power balances.⁶¹ This fragmentation has created a permissive environment for external intervention, enabling states such as Russia, Iran, Türkiye, and the United States to intensify competition by supporting opposing sides. In this sense, fragmentation was not merely a consequence of the conflict but also a mechanism sustaining it, as divided local actors became increasingly susceptible to external penetration, sponsorship, and strategic redirection.

As a result, interest-driven interventions by both domestic and external actors have sustained the Syrian conflict.⁶² The country's fragmented political structure enabled foreign powers to establish spheres of influence, turning the war into a proxy battleground where regional interests intersect. In the multi-layered environment that emerged after the Arab Uprisings, external financing, arms transfers, and the deployment of proxy and mercenary forces played a decisive role in prolonging the conflict. Within this framework, Russia, Iran, and Lebanese Hezbollah aligned with the pro-regime bloc, while Türkiye, the United States, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia provided varying degrees of support to opposition forces. The rivalry between these competing coalitions not only intensified the conflict but also embedded it within a broader regional power struggle. Because these interventions selectively reinforced local actors without generating a shared political framework, they reshaped local power balances while simultaneously entrenching incompatibilities among the parties. This dynamic helps explain why battlefield shifts repeatedly failed to translate into pathways toward conflict resolution.

In Syria, the regime's 2019 Idlib offensive and subsequent UN-backed political initiatives marked a new phase in the conflict. Building on earlier campaigns in Aleppo, Eastern Ghouta, and Daraa since 2016, the regime justified its operations in Idlib through narratives of "restoring national sovereignty" and "eliminating terrorist groups." However, this phase simultaneously intensified the humanitarian crisis and deepened the diplomatic deadlock. The significance of this period lies in the parallel trajectory of military consolidation and diplomatic stagnation. As the regime strengthened its territorial control, incentives for substantive political compromise declined, while external actors increasingly prioritized containment and zone management over a comprehensive political settlement.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the persistence of the Syrian civil war is best understood through the mutually reinforcing relationship between fragmented domestic authority and layered external intervention. These dimensions interact recursively, where fragmentation invites intervention, and intervention, in turn, reproduces and deepens fragmentation. This dynamic has not only intensified the conflict's complexity but has also structurally constrained the prospects for meaningful transformation. The findings reveal that actor interaction serves as the central mechanism through which the conflict's structure is continuously reconfigured. External support has selectively empowered certain local actors while undermining the emergence of centralized authority, causing military developments to translate into asymmetrical bargaining environments that reduce incentives for compromise and reinforce zero-sum strategic calculations. Consequently, battlefield shifts have entrenched existing divisions and recalibrated power balances in ways that prolong the conflict rather than pave the way for political settlement. Additionally, the analysis shows that diplomatic initiatives—such as the Geneva, Astana, and Sochi processes have primarily functioned as instruments of conflict management rather than resolution. While these mechanisms temporarily regulated violence and prevented large-scale escalation in certain phases, they did not alter the underlying relationship between military capability, external patronage, and fragmented local authority that sustains the war. Without addressing these structural dynamics, such initiatives have contributed to the conflict's persistence rather than its resolution. Ceasefires, humanitarian corridors, and limited institutional arrangements have mitigated

observable manifestations of violence but have failed to tackle the deeper relational and structural drivers of the conflict. Overall, the study concludes that the Syrian conflict has evolved into a multi-layered and self-reinforcing system in which domestic fragmentation and international intervention are not merely coexisting conditions but mutually constitutive processes. The persistence of the war should not be viewed merely as the continuation of violence over time but as the outcome of repeated interaction patterns that transform military shifts into political deadlock and diplomatic initiatives into limited instruments of containment. This perspective suggests that without a fundamental reconfiguration of actor relationships and intervention logics, the Syrian conflict is likely to persist in reconstituted forms, even in the absence of large-scale conventional warfare.

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⁶ Bartos and Wehr, *Using Conflict Theory*, p. 67.

⁷ Bartos and Wehr, *Using Conflict Theory*, p. 67.

⁸ Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, p. 19.

⁹ Bartos and Wehr, *Using Conflict Theory*, 68.

¹⁰ Jeong, *Understanding Conflict and Conflict Analysis*, p. 27.

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¹² Raymond Hinnebusch, “Syria: From ‘Authoritarian Upgrading’ to Revolution?,” *International Affairs* 88, no. 1, 2012, pp. 95–113.

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- ²⁴ Holtz, “Examining Extremism: Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS)”;
- Lister, *The Syrian jihad; Silencing the Guns in Syria’s Idlib*.
- ²⁵ Clark, *The Russian Military’s Lessons Learned in Syria*; Kaim and Tamminga, “Russia’s Military Intervention in Syria”;
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