

# The War on Syria: The Major Political Players, Humanitarian Crisis

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*Foreign intervention has only worsened the situation in Syria.*

*In May 2014, the Syria Centre for Policy Research in Damascus [released a report](#) on the economic and social conditions in Syria. Its findings were staggering. More than half the country's population lives in extreme poverty. Most school-age children no longer attend school, and 45 percent of its public hospitals are out of service.*

By the time the report was published, almost 3 percent of the Syrian population had already been wounded or killed in the conflict. The carnage has only increased since.



As the human toll of the Syrian catastrophe spirals ever higher, one detail on which everyone can agree is that the situation is an ongoing tragedy. And the specter of humanitarian crisis has compelled every stripe of policymaker and pundit to call for some form of action — the need to do something.

But far too often the demand to “do something” sidesteps what has already been done — there is a foundational assumption that the ruin and bloodshed of this terrible war have been produced by *inaction*.

Take <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/08/syria-civil-war-nato-military-intervention/> as an example. Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, heads of the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Denver. Their edited collection, [The Syria Dilemma](#), hopes to present an “array of contending perspectives [reflecting] the profound dilemma that Syria confronts us with.”

What perspectives have they set into contention with one another? Most are united by a call for some projection of American power. Familiar interventionist tropes are presented. Responsibility to Protect ([R2P](#)) receives frequent mention. The book cites the [Bosnia example](#) at least eight times, along with mentions of Rwanda.

This isn't unique to discussions about Syria. Policy wonks, such as Michael O'Hanlon of the

Brookings Institute, see the example of Bosnia — indeed, of the total breakup of Yugoslavia — as a sound precedent for American policy goals in Syria. In a [paper](#) dated June 2015, O’Hanlon places Bosnia alongside Afghanistan and Somalia as a desirable model for the fragmentation he recommends for Syria.

In addition to a “confederate” Syria that could entail all-out partition, O’Hanlon calls for increased intervention in the form of guns and training provided to selected Syrian opposition outfits, protective safe zones governed by US troops, and the demolition of the existing government air force. For O’Hanlon, the problem with US policy in Syria is that it hasn’t gone nearly far enough.

Or, to try another example, there is Robert Kaplan’s [recent article](#) in *Foreign Policy* proclaiming that the violence in which the Middle East is currently mired comes as the result of a “demonstrably hands-off approach” to recent events in the Middle East by an Obama administration that has neglected its role of “organizing and stabilizing the region.” News sources like CNN have, as late as August 2014, been [asking why](#) the US has not yet intervened in Syria as it has in Iraq.

All these narratives share either explicitly or implicitly a history of the Syrian conflict that simply does not hold up under critical scrutiny. Indeed, the official chronology of events in these pro-intervention narratives — about a peaceful revolution turned reluctantly to arms, and thus in need of a military savior — eclipses the actual, far more complicated one.

### **The Tropes of Interventionism**

Indeed, calls for increased intervention have a long history in Syria. These appeals in the US press have long been tied to calls made within the Syrian opposition. They began early, [within the first year](#), and often [rather vociferously](#). But the signals regarding intervention from what was then the most influential exile opposition outfit, the Syrian National Council (SNC), were in the first year of the uprising muddied.

On the one hand, they claimed to oppose military intervention, but on the other, called on the “international community” to “[protect the Syrian people](#).” Still, this SNC line was always clearer than any of their other demands, suggesting that intervention was for many a crucial piece of the vision for what they and its local Syrian allies called the Syrian revolution.

Another claim which reality complicates is the frequent one of how, when, and where the revolt turned to arms. The popular narrative in the United States, [promoted by](#) the US State Department, is one in which a people in the face of state repression turned to violence only when they had to. But that is not quite true. [Violence](#) and [militarization](#) from the opposition on the ground [began quite early](#) — during the [first month](#) of the uprising.

Joshua Landis, director for the Center of Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma, for example, [published](#) information in April 2011 contradicting claims made in the Western press about nine Syrian soldiers shot and killed in Banyas. News outlets had [reported](#) that the soldiers were shot by Syrian Army officials for refusing to shoot on protesters.

Among the pieces of evidence that Landis brandished was testimony from Col. ‘Uday Ahmad, who claimed that the soldiers, driving in a moving truck, were shot at from two directions — from a rooftop and from “behind the cement median of the highway.” Video footage corroborated the story.

Normally to bring forward such facts is to invite the suggestion that one is offering apologetics for the government of Bashar al-Assad. In fact, that has been a consistent leitmotif of Western and Arab debate over the conflict. As a result, that debate has gone forward without the necessary information to understand what exactly has been going on in Syria over the past four years.

That undigested information includes even the true extent of US involvement in Syria. When [reports first emerged](#) that the United States was sending troops to the Jordan-Syria border, the general response of the US left was a collective shrug. More [reports emerged](#) that the US has been using its new Jordan base as a [staging ground](#) to train elements of the armed opposition. And from there, US arming of rebels [has only increased](#) in recent years.

These reports point not only to general conclusions, but also to specific questions: how large is the US base in Jordan and what exactly goes on there on a day-to-day basis?

Nowadays, fewer guesses are necessary as to the size and scope of this project. On June 12, the *Washington Post* published a [story](#) about “budget cuts” facing the CIA program for Syria. Shoehorned into the story was the disclosure that the initiative “has become one of the agency’s largest covert operations” to the tune of nearly \$1 billion dollars a year, with “Syria-related operations [accounting] for about \$1 for every \$15 in the CIA’s overall budget” and the CIA having “trained and equipped nearly 10,000 fighters sent into Syria over the past several years — meaning that the agency is spending roughly \$100,000 per year for every anti-Assad rebel who has gone through the program.”

In other words, the United States launched a full-scale war against Syria, and few Americans actually noticed.

Another major assumption driving calls for interventions is a belief that interventionist action and local Syrian revolutionary action are complementary. In order to stage this argument, commentators tend towards assuming rather than demonstrating that a revolution has been underway in Syria since 2011. Perhaps the core of this incoherence lies in the dedication of Hashemi’s and Postel’s book: “To the Syrian People.”

The abstract embrace of this people, in itself belying the concrete conditions of a four-year war, is connected to another leitmotif of Syria discussions: any refusal to replace analysis of the situation within the country and its relationship with broader international politics with a neat, generalized “will” of the people narrative is to deny Syrian “agency.”

Hashemi’s and Postel’s project stands with the Syrian people. But with which Syrian people exactly? Syria is gripped by war, and it is clear that large sectors of the lower classes, particularly those among the country’s ethnic and religious minorities, are still with the government.

The [popular narrative](#) of the People versus the Dictator — one piece in Hashemi’s and Postel’s book describes it as a conflict between “a dictatorship” and “a democratic opposition” — elides the reality of varying classes and sects with various social roles and politics.

This narrative is, in other words, a cartoon. More than that, it is a cartoon that overshadows [the central contradiction](#) currently at play in the Syrian situation: one between

imperialists and various resistance movements, as well as the states supporting them.

This is not to say that works like *The Syria Dilemma* deny the internal divisions of Syria altogether. The reality of sectarianism is too obvious to ignore, and no responsible discussion of sectarianism in Syria can ignore the sectarian flavor of much of the Syrian opposition — the most powerful factions of which, from Jabhat al-Nusra to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, either pledge allegiance to al-Qaeda formally or, [even in the case](#) of portions of the US-backed “moderate” armed opposition, adopt many of its main attitudes and beliefs.

Discussing a US and Saudi-supported commander of the Syria Revolutionaries Front, Matthew Barber calls attention to his insistence on justifying opposition to ISIS on the grounds of anti-Shi’ism.

Barber insists that the problem with this justification is twofold: “first, no one has targeted Shiites with more violence than al-Qaida, and second, one of the defining features of al-Qaida’s immoral character is the intolerance that typifies their ideology.” Barber goes on to state that such logic demonstrates that “even the rebel enemies of ISIS are more influenced than they’d like to admit by the intolerant outlook of al-Qaida itself.”

The armed opposition groups that hold the most territory are like-minded. Large swaths of central and eastern Syria are [ruled by](#) the Islamic State. Highly influential in Idlib and Aleppo are groups like Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda’s affiliate in Syria, and Ahrar al-Sham, [now being marketed](#) in mainstream US publications such as the *Washington Post* as a “moderate” organization worthy of US support. The two organizations [work together routinely](#).

In Idlib particularly, Ahrar al-Sham delegated responsibilities for governance of Druze villages to Jabhat al-Nusra, which proceeded to massacre at least twenty Druze. The *BBC* [has reported](#) that “activists in Idlib have reported that Druze in Idlib have been subjected to religious persecution by al-Nusra with several hundred forced to convert to Sunni Islam.”

These dynamics present only one of the major challenges to anyone making claims of a Syrian revolution. The most politically determinant parties in war are, after all, armed actors. If the armed revolt in Syria is part of a revolutionary movement, why are the most powerful and influential actors among the armed forces bigoted?

Now, the sectarian question has always in one way or another exposed the domination of liberal academics in Middle East Studies through the sheer preponderance of opinions assuming sectarian conflict to be a permanent feature of the region.

Hashemi’s and Postel’s book may ultimately avoid this crude and popular determinism, but only to end up trading one major misbelief for several others. To begin, a piece in the book by Michael Ignatieff declares the Syrian government the sole cause of sectarianism when he calls it Assad’s “poisonous gift to Syria,” presumably because of the high representation rates of Alawis — the minority sect to which the Assad family belongs — throughout the Syrian government.

Ignatieff’s strategy is popular, wherein sectarian tensions in Syria are laid at the doorstep of the historically repressed Alawi minority sect — the target nowadays of [open calls for genocide](#) from segments of the armed opposition — and the Syrian government, with both

entities treated as one another's means of enforcement.

Certainly major positions in the Syrian state have long been occupied by Alawis. One reason dates back to the French colonial period, when Alawis — long kept from the levers of power — were encouraged to join the armed forces. Another dates back to the ascendancy of the [Ba'ath Party](#) in the 1960s, when rifts between Sunni party members opened up positions to Alawi officers. (Many Alawis, who were peasants, had been attracted to the Ba'ath Party for its emphasis on the peasantry.)

But for the claim that sectarianism was injected into Syria by Assad to stick, it must be proven that regular Alawis generally benefitted *uniquely* from the government's rule. The evidence for this claim does not seem to exist, and at any rate Ignatieff does not seem in a hurry to provide it.

Likewise, the sectarianism cannot be pinned on Syria-supporter Iran, governed by a Shi'i Muslim government, which continues to negotiate its ties to the [Sunni Islamic Jihad of Gaza](#) (albeit, in an increasingly complicated environment) and sends arms and funds to the leftist [Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine](#).

But these realities are often ignored, while Salafi supremacist sectarianism within opposition ranks in Syria is explained away: it exists, in the words of Hashemi's and Postel's introduction, at once "due to funding from Islamic charities in the Persian Gulf," and due to "the *absence* of significant support from the international community for the opposition's more democratic elements . . ."

In other words, sectarianism among the opposition exists both because of intervention and because of a lack of intervention. Once again, perhaps then the wisdom of intervention in Syria may be judged by the intervention that has already occurred: not only have "Islamic charities" armed and funded the opposition, but so have [entire states](#), including [Saudi Arabia](#), which exploits sectarian Wahhabi ideology to dubious ends while maintaining rather [amenable geopolitical relations](#) with Hashemi's and Postel's "international community," i.e. the United States.

Alternatively, the sectarian elements that dominate the armed opposition in Syria are, according to one writer in *The Syria Dilemma*, Afra Jalabi, the result of a revolution "hijacked" by outside forces.

This is not entirely accurate, although to draw the relationship between local Syrian forces and outside imperial connivance has at times invited the charge of "conspiracy theory" — another leitmotif tossed at anti-imperialists in the course of debates about Syria.

Here it must be said that while international connivance against Syria — one involving varying degrees of coordination between the United States, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, [Turkey](#), and other parties — has played an important role in the tragedy before us, the ruin of Syria is really a product of these powers' relationship with reactionary forces in Syria and elsewhere.

To be more specific, Saudi Arabia, which has intervened with [sectarian propaganda](#) years in advance of 2011 and also with arms and funds, has certainly accelerated the sectarianism seen now among opposition ranks, but it did not single-handedly create the class base for it. Rather, conspiracy proved successful precisely because imperialist forces had a local social base with which to work, even before troves of sectarian fighters began invading Syria

from other countries.

Even the (by far) strongest entry in *The Syria Dilemma*, an anti-intervention effort from Asli Ü. Bâli and Aziz Rana, fails to delineate the politics of the rebels in Syria. This particular article does prove an exception in the book, containing real strengths.

It states, against the spirit of the book's introduction, that "it is intervention, not its absence, that fuels the blood-letting in Syria." It endorses a negotiated political settlement with elements of the Syrian government as a path to peace.

All of this is to say that one cannot comprehensively understand the imperialist assault on Syria without undertaking a thorough analysis of Syrian society and recognizing who is who. Any serious review of recent events in Syria must attempt to grapple with the class basis of this armed insurgent movement: that is, both with the conditions that led to its creation and its general vision for Syrian society.

Therefore, a historical corrective is in order — one which gives justice to the dynamics of Syrian society, but also places them into the context of global capitalism.

### **The Major Political Players**

Before a specific study of the origins of the armed sectarian insurgents in Syria can be advanced, a general analysis of the currently contending forces in Syrian society outside of the armed insurrection must first be set down.

The 2011 revolt was launched in three major layers: the protests in towns like Dara'a, Idlib, Homs, and Hama; the exile organizations in dialogue with the United States, namely the Syrian National Council (and [now](#) the [National Syrian Coalition](#)); and the violent agitations against the Syrian state, which eventually evolved into a total insurrection.

The protests began in the southern city of Dara'a, [where anger stirred](#) against the local head of security (a relative of Assad's) following the arrest of children writing anti-government graffiti. In response to the abuses extending from the state's harsh security response to protests, the Syrian Communist Party [backed calls](#) for investigations into the state's harsh crackdowns on protestors and called for reforms to reverse "the trend toward economic liberalization," such as the full nationalization of several industries to prevent further infiltration of "private monopoly capital."

In the case of both Syrian Communist Parties, historically victims of state repression in Syria, there was a call to oppose imperialist machinations against Syria, to oppose civil war, and for the implementation of economic and political reform.

Also active early on, as something of an alternative to the SNC, was the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change (NCC), chaired by Hassan Abdel Azim. The NCC, unlike the SNC, maintained a staunch position against militarization of the Syrian opposition and against foreign intervention.

As a [Ya Libnan report](#) from 2012 makes clear, the pro-revolution online voices launched a sustained campaign to paint the NCC, an organization with members [who have been among](#) the Syrian leftists jailed in government prisons, as capitulators.

The report noted that the NCC "rejects all forms of foreign military involvement, including

arming the FSA” and that “it is common to see activists online charge the NCC and jihadist groups with the same unforgivable crime: collaboration with the mukhbarat, Syria’s hated internal intelligence services.”

A major component of the NCC’s prescience regarding the effects of foreign intervention was not only its theoretical rejection of militarization as a plan easily exploited by outside powers, but also its rejection of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) — the initial name for military opposition in Syria — as an entity. The outfit was not, the NCC stated, representative of the country’s best interests.

In 2012, the NCC [released a statement](#) on conclusions reached at an opposition conference in Cairo. In addition to blaming the government for fomenting sectarian violence and declaring solidarity with Syrian Kurds, the statement emphasized that the FSA was not subject to checks within the opposition, betraying opposition groups and declaring itself sole representative of the opposition; that it destabilized the country with violence, opening up space for sectarianism; allowed for infiltration of foreign and jihadist groups; opened itself up to splintering and factionalism; and lacked the power to carry out its fight, allowing it to be easily co-opted.

The NCC does not deserve dismissal, as it is, unlike the exile SNC, Syria-based; it must live with the material consequences of whatever political path it decides to pursue. From the beginning, it has forwarded conditions for dialogue with the Syrian government, a prescience that has now been extended into a path for a war-ending solution. Dialogue is no less the route to a solution today.

The NCC and the SNC were defined by a larger split between leftism and liberalism, with the latter speaking exclusively of liberal human rights and a “[civil state](#).” Expressing an anti-capitalist politics, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party ([PYD](#)), which developed in 2003 amid intense repression from Syrian security forces and out of a history of Ba’athist denial of Kurdish national claims, tentatively took the side of the Syrian state against [the opposition movement](#).

This early decision is an important example of how exactly the question of intervention, and the related issue of Syrian sovereignty, formed the primary bases for the dawning divisions of the war.

The PYD’s decision was an immediate matter of survival, made in partial response to the SNC’s decision to deny Kurdish requests for autonomy to appease Turkey, the historic enemy of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), of which the PYD is an affiliate.

Here the call for intervention entailed an exclusivist vision, one that illuminates one of the many threats intervention posed: between its implementation and anti-Kurdish racism, one went with the other.

In stark contrast, the PYD has [forwarded](#) an inclusive vision — a commune — for Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, Turkmen, Chaldeans and others. The space for this revolutionary project was created in opposition to the movement that was labeled revolutionary in Western media, including [the Free Syrian Army](#).

Amid the brutal sectarian strife across Syria and the Middle East, the PYD’s project in Rojava has over the past year understandably appeared as a spark of hope to many leftists in the

West. Their admiration is not misplaced.

But it must still be said that the future of Rojava very much rests on how much room the PYD decides to give to the United States as it considers exploiting the party to deepen divides in Syria. If that room is too spacious, the PYD will compromise more than its anti-imperialism.

The position of tentative support for the state was also generally adopted by both ethnic and religious minorities, including [Armenians](#), Alawis, and [Christians](#). As Joshua Landis has [commented](#), Bashar al-Assad “very much has a power base. The core constituency, of course, are Alawite Syrians, about 12 percent of the country, 3 million people, give or take. Christians, another 5 to 6 percent, support him but are not carrying a lot of water. So [are] the Druze and other religious minorities that make up 20 percent of Syria.”

According to the thesis of *The Syria Dilemma*, the chief blame for these decisions would fall on these minority groups for following the sectarian logic of the Syrian government. Consider another possibility: these people knew things about the armed revolt that others did not.

Any understanding of the ways in which these events — the armed insurgency, the protests, the calls for intervention — and political bodies interacted with each other cannot be separated from the structural elements that produced them. These elements existed within the overlapping realms of politics and religion at once, with class at the core of it all.

## **The Origins of Revolt**

The Ba’ath Party, in its initial years, organized along class lines with a broadly populist program and, more so than is the case now, was staunchly secularist.

Although capitalist classes increased their influence in Syria after Bashar’s financialization of the country’s economy, and before that with Hafez’s liberalization in the early 1990s, the Ba’ath Party established its legacy in the countryside. The Arab Socialist Party, which would merge with the Ba’athists in 1952, was the first organization to politically organize the rural territories of Syria.

This policy did not make the Ba’ath Party socialist in any meaningful sense — it never opposed private property or carried out deep structural reforms, even though it did redistribute wealth and, in the words of [a report](#) by Raymond Hinnebusch, “block the bourgeoisie from reasserting control over the bulk of the agrarian surplus which in part was retained by the peasantry.”

The Ba’ath’s empowerment of the peasantry challenged the stakes of some of the largest landowners. Underneath that broad conflict, a struggle ensued *within* the Ba’ath Party from 1963 to 1970 between Hafez al-Assad and Salah Jadid. The [battle](#) between these two men is often described as one between a pragmatist (al-Assad) and an ideologue (Jadid). Indeed, Jadid’s government was likely the most radical in Syrian history, described by historian Sonoko Sunayama as “menacing pro-Western Arab regimes.”

But both men, Assad and Jadid were pragmatic when it came to internal politics. Jadid made calculations according to political necessity. In the 1960s, for instance, Jadid, then head of the Ba’ath Party, cracked down on the left-wing Armed Workers’ Battalions, which had even acted as an unofficial enforcement wing for the government during periods of political



turbulence. He had tacitly allowed for the battalions' formation only a few years prior.

The significance of Assad and Jadid's disagreements rested in the fact that they appealed to slightly different social bases. Jadid sought to deepen socialist gains within the countryside, while Assad gained tentative support in the cities. In 1970, Assad, then defense minister of the party, launched a coup against Jadid and his loyalists. Jadid would go on to die in Syrian prison in 1993.

In the immediate aftermath of the coup, urban merchants, in an account offered by Hanna Batatu, "sent demonstrators into the streets of the big cities with banners that read: 'We implored God for Aid—*al-Madad*. He sent us Hafiz al-Asad!'" The manner in which Assad came to power, and the classes he sought to buttress in order to make it happen, would prove a good predictor for the ways in which classes would ultimately shift and change under his rule.

When examined in aggregate, these conflicts — the ideological and class tensions tied into the inter-Ba'ath rifts — can offer some idea of the Syrian Ba'ath Party's place in Middle Eastern political history. Formed against the backdrop of Pan-Arabism and popular support for the independence and postcolonial state-building that movement represented, Ba'athism was part of a progressive wave, even as it stomped out political parties more progressive than itself.

In this sense, the Syrian Arab Republic has historically embodied both the innovations and the limitations of the nation-state itself, increasing literacy rates in the countryside through centralization of political power while co-opting and repressing the more radical social movements that made literacy a priority in the first place.

The CIA at one point [even backed](#) the Ba'ath Party as part of an anticommunist push. Given that the Ba'ath Party has historically found itself in conflict with both communists and feudal landowners, and the United States supported Ba'athists against communists, it would be safe to assume the any movement the US backs *against* the Ba'athists would be more akin to feudal landowners, with all of the political and economic baggage that class carries.

In other words, this devolution of Syria is necessarily an objective as well as subjective, economic as well as social, material as well as ideological phenomenon. In turn, the lack of working-class participation in the state as it mediated social change through the management of capital ensured the solidification of bourgeois regimes under the Arab socialist project. Nonetheless, the military incursions of the West have historically decreased, rather than increased, working-class participation in the state.

## **Class**

The social base for the armed insurgency in Syria arose out of a meeting point between revanchist resentment harnessed by the old bourgeoisie in the aftermath of populist land reform; the increased loss of class position for the old bourgeoisie against the creation of a financial elite; and the emergence of a poor, mostly Sunni, rural migrant class from the breakdown of the government's social pact with the countryside.

According to [Volker Perthes](#),

"the roots of Syria's old bourgeoisie can be traced back to the 'landowning

bureaucratic class' of the late Ottoman period, those influential families of local notables and Turkish officials that owned estates, and were active in commerce and government and in the religious establishment."

Later,

"the land reform law of the United Arab Republic (uniting Syria and Egypt) struck the first blow against the old bourgeoisie, limiting its property and influence in the countryside. When the Baath took power in a 1963 coup, the new rulers, whose origins were mainly middle-class, pushed the old (socially conservative and religious) bourgeoisie out of government."

As Bassam Haddad [adds](#), the Syrian state under Hafez al-Assad reached out to select businessmen as a way of making inroads with old Sunni elites, a tactic that "bore political fruit in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the regime faced a revolt led by the Muslim Brothers. Asad had enacted a series of policies that harmed the interests of the Brothers' cadre and constituents in the traditional *sوق*(market) and other small traders and artisans."

These alliances became doubly important as the Ba'athists implemented more policies that "caused especially profound resentment in the conservative Sunni quarters of Syrian cities" and escalated "tensions between the state and small business owners with Sunni Islamist leanings."

This tension produced kernels of sectarianism before 2011. Quoting Haddad on changes in societal attitudes before the 1970s:

Big business, notably merchants and religious groups, was most affected [by early Ba'ath policies]. Antirural and anti-Alawi attitudes and jokes proliferated in the private popular culture of the cities, signaling the beginning of a shift in the perception of the nature of the conflict — especially from the perspective of hardliners within and outside the regime — from a class-oriented to a socio-communal conflict.

Accompanying the state-assisted creation of a new bourgeoisie, a budding business elite in Damascus and Aleppo that was dependent on the influx of international capital into nascent markets, was a breakdown of the government's traditional pact with the countryside.

As the Syrian Center for Policy Research's important paper "Socioeconomic Roots and Impact of the Syrian Crisis" [states](#), "Within Syria, poverty was more concentrated in the Eastern and Northern regions, and especially in the rural areas." The text goes on to say that reduction in arable land brought on by drought, which roughly occurred between 2006 and 2010, was a major contributor to this poverty .

Post-2011 sanctions only made matters worse for Syrian workers:

The sanctions led to a shortage in diesel and fuel gas for home use, and to surge the prices of oil derivatives by about 200 percent. Using input/output model to simulate the impact of the oil derivatives prices increase due to sanctions, the report estimated a reduction in the real GDP by 6 percent, a reduction in the private consumptions by 10.7 percent, and an increase the CPI by the same percentage. Prices increase harmed the real expenditure of the

households unequally; since the negative impact on the poorest was higher than the richest . . . This increase in prices affected mainly the basic goods which formed a major part of the vulnerable and poor households' consumptions weakening their food securities and standard of livings.

The countries that have participated in the sanctions against Syria include the US, whose first sanctions were inflicted in 2003, the European Union, Australia, Canada, and most of the Arab League. In other words, Syria has been starved by the very international community that Danny Postel [calls on](#) to save it from starvation by military force.

On account of the harsh economic realities faced by Syrians, protests broke out in 2011, primarily among the rural poor and recent migrants from rural areas to cities in the south of the country. But the protests faced a problem that never came close to any resolution: they lacked a vision and, therefore, any revolutionary agent.

Haddad, highly critical of the Syrian government, pointed this difficult reality out when he wrote an "[idiot's guide](#)" to opposing both Assad and military intervention: "First, I must admit that the tenor of the position elaborated in [my argument] lacks a clear agency (e.g., an institution, party or movement) that might convert [the uprising] to a real and actionable path."

The consequences of this omission has been that the imperialist forces long setting on Syria — as put by Haddad in the same article, those forces that saw "taking out Syria . . . would weaken Hizballah and isolate Iran, the big prize" — have succeeded in achieving some rather horrifying goals.

## **Religion**

The fact that the influence of the Sunni 'ulama has increased in Syria since the revolt of the 1980s — and it has — is not as important as the fact that the influence of Salafi and Gulf-backed rhetoric has specifically increased.

Important members of the Syrian clerical class have long held relationships with the state of Saudi Arabia, although the 'ulama of the early twentieth century depended primarily on Syria-based private capital derived from the merchant class to fund their activities.

When the Ba'ath Party first came to power in 1963, it generated the resentment of *both* the merchants and the clerical classes. It was simultaneously adverse to the profits of the industrial class, which it frustrated with its nationalizations, and to the merchant-linked Sunni clerical class, which it frustrated with its steadfast secularism.

For instance, in her account of Syria-Saudi relations, Sunayama notes that the Ba'ath Party's earliest reforms resulted in a "Syrian community in Saudi Arabia who had immigrated in thousands since the 1960s."

These immigrants "consisted mainly of traditional landowners and entrepreneurs" who "suffered material losses" due to Ba'ath nationalization as well as political repression for their affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood. These exile Syrians funded religious opposition movements in Syria through "private donations."

One consequence of the Ba'athists' initial refusal to incorporate preachers into its political processes was that any institutionalization of religious activity happened outside the direct

control of the state.

The Ba'ath Party felt it necessary to reverse these trends later on, to incorporate a preacher class within its mainstream institutions after the late 1970s and early 1980s, after an armed uprising against the state occurred. The forces that orchestrated this uprising represented the vanguard of the right-wing attitudes, turning class tensions into sociocultural ones, operating within Syria.

The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood traditionally stood as the most politically organized expression of these attitudes, but it was always but one expression, that is, one aspect of a larger political current. The activities of the Brotherhood have often overlapped with those of other conservative religious currents.

For example, Issam al-Attar, the leader of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood from 1961 to 1980, took up an expressly Salafi line of thought, which has proved highly influential in the current armed Syrian opposition ranks.

These currents are by no means interchangeable, although they have historically coordinated in Syria in anti-government campaigns.

During the period of turmoil from 1979 to 1982, the group through which 'ulema and "lay Islamists" united, according to Thomas Pierret's *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution*, was called the Islamic Front in Syria. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood was part of this outfit, which was established in Saudi Arabia.

Eventually the Muslim Brotherhood engaged in violent confrontation with the Syrian state after events spiraled into open warfare, but the organization that headed most military operations was called the Fighting Vanguard, funded by supporters of the fundamentalist Marwan Hadid. Its first attack was carried out in June 1979, when it massacred eighty-three Alawis at Aleppo Artillery School.

These moments demonstrate that violence from the opposition in Syria did not begin in 2011. In fact, Hadid — [after whom](#) a rebel brigade that attacked Lebanon with rockets during the current strife was named — embraced selective assassination of state officials as a tactic as far back as the 1970s. This tactic [reappeared](#) in 2011. Likewise, leaders such as Adnan Sa'ad al-Din and Said Hawwa called for armed jihad against the government as early as the 1960s.

After the fighting in the early 1980s, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood increased efforts towards diplomatic relations with the state. With the outbreak of protests in 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood entered into more direct dialogue with the Western press, as its exiles [played](#) a substantial role in the SNC, formed in Turkey, along with liberals with an opportunist attitude towards the Muslim Brotherhood.

While the Muslim Brotherhood was slowly modifying its own role in Syrian politics, the influence of the Salafis within both Syria and the larger the Middle East quietly increased.

The growing capitalist economic base of Syria contributed to the creation of an internally displaced Sunni population that was in some quarters receptive to a Salafi ideology as a reaction to what Haddad describes as Syria's "socialist-nationalist superstructure."

This reactionary ideology, which claims itself "true Islam," achieves stark expression

whenever ISIS fighters [burn Palestinian flags](#) for the supposedly “un-Islamic” nature of Palestinian nationalism.

This ideology was distributed by, in the words of Pierret, “the spread of Egyptian Salafi journals... Wahhabi proselytizing through Syrian-Saudi trade networks . . .” As Pierret writes: “Now more than after, it has become impossible to seal [Syria] against the vehicles of Salafi conceptions — in particular, migrants returning from the Gulf and mass media such as the Internet and satellite channels.”

And so the available evidence suggests that as the conservative Muslim Brotherhood delved further into traditional politics, more reactionary elements were making gains on the ground, or, in the words of Pierret, “at the grassroots level.”

Some of those gains were militaristic in nature. When armed operations against the Syrian state finally caught the attention of Western media in 2011, they were carried out under a catchall title of “Free Syrian Army.”

The politics of those early brigades remain murky. As far as the FSA was an actual organized force, as the armed wing of the SNC, it [failed to proclaim](#) much of a political program beyond its promise to kill Bashar al-Assad in a manner reminiscent of the assassination of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya (along with its calls for foreign assistance, even as it operated within Southern Turkey).

[Now it barely exists](#) — and is more of an idea or umbrella heading than an actual organization. Among those groups that have replaced it in influence is the Nusra Front, formed in January 2012, which began as a branch of the FSA.

The bigotries of this social base gained more teeth from outside forces seeking to capitalize on internal divisions within the country. The reason why imperialists are willing to supply these forces is clear. As Amal Saad-Ghorayeb writes in [Hizbu'llah: Politics and Religion](#), they “view their local regimes as their immediate enemy,” in contrast to, say, Hezbollah, which “perceives Israel as the much greater threat.”

Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United States worked in conjunction to flood the country with guns, widen the specter of war, and halt the development of a country governed by an unreliable regime.

If it is true that Syria became a conduit for international finance and contained for a time a growing capitalist economic base, the question arises of what exactly makes it “unreliable” to imperialist powers . The answer lies, naturally, at both the levels of economics and politics.

In 2011, the encroachment of international finance capital into Syria was not complete. Haddad writes that “the lack of trust between the regime and the business community, based on deep-seated historical antagonisms,” prevented the kind of total union between the two interests that had come together in Middle East states such as Egypt.

This antagonism would allow for the Syrian government to honor at least some of its populist promises in ways that were not true of other Arab states. Among those promises is the cause of Arab resistance to Zionism and imperialism. For this reason Syria funded Hezbollah, [a Lebanese guerilla army](#) that proved in 2006 to be Israel’s most formidable military enemy in history.

The whole of these outside countries' investment in the destruction of Syria can quite plainly be called imperialism. *The Syria Dilemma*, with all of its invocations of intervention, never approximates an analysis of imperialism.

If intervention is cautioned against, it is only because it will not succeed in stopping the bloodshed or because the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan ended up disastrous. Intervention is opposed on pragmatic or cost-benefit grounds. The right of the United States to determine the affairs of others is never questioned.

### **What Can Be Done?**

Here is the latest news, as of this writing. [Israel bombs Syria](#) in [repeated attempts](#) to disrupt the organizational capacity of the Lebanese resistance movement [Hezbollah](#), which finds itself engaged in struggle against jihadists of the Syrian opposition.

Reports have emerged that Israel is [coordinating with](#) rebels and even operating [within and around](#) occupied Golan Heights under a tacit pact with al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra in an anti-Hezbollah push. In fact, the night the United States began bombing Syria, ostensibly to “degrade and destroy” ISIS, Israel [downed](#) a Syrian fighter jet using US-supplied Patriot missiles.

Israel's activities in Syria have reignited tensions around an often neglected aspect of Israeli occupation — its military rule in southeastern Syria. In January 2015, Israel assassinated Hezbollah and Iranian commanders in Syria, rupturing the 1974 Agreement on Disengagement signed between Israel and Syria.

Hezbollah [has responded](#) by trying to formulate a military resistance against Israel in southern Syria. Israel, grounded as it is in settler-colonialism, will look to extending its grip in the Golan Heights and possibly even to expanding — [perhaps with](#) the protection of the Druze community in Golan from its own rebel proxies as a justification.

In the northern end of the country, Turkey withheld full cooperation with the US during the latter's bombing of ISIS approaching Syrian Kurdistan in February 2015. The US, in addition to dropping bombs, dropped aid finding its way both into the hands of the People's Protection Units (YPG), the fighting unit of the PYD, as well as ISIS.

Since that period, [evidence has mounted](#) of Turkey allowing ISIS fighters to flow into Syria while it cracks down on cross-border exchanges of men and supplies between Kurdish fighters and their non-Kurdish leftist comrades. This policy is in line with Erdogan's expressed fears of what he calls the Kurdish “terrorists” of the YPG as it makes gains on ISIS in the border town of Tal Abyad.

Turkey's policy of supporting armed revanchists in the Syrian war is long-standing: last year, [documents revealed](#) that Turkey assisted al-Qaeda organizations in their takeover of the predominantly Armenian town of Kessab.

This direct intervention, from the bombs to the aid, should be understood as a strategy for war that is, in effect, against Syrian society as a whole, though it is in aim a war against the Syrian Arab Republic.

These intentions continue to be made clear, even as the US bombs enemies of the Syrian state, for the US's [plan](#) for bombing those enemies involves the training of more “anti-

Assad” rebels in Saudi Arabia and [elsewhere](#). Not to mention, the US [continues](#) to make noise about the possibility of a no-fly zone in Northern Syria, which would require a defeat of Syrian air defense systems.

The implementation of such a plan would require compromise between the US and Turkey on the Kurdish question. Both parties will push to sever Kurdish leadership in Syria from the leftist Kurdish PKK in Turkey. If the PYD’s radicalism is sufficiently hollowed out, it is not at all outside the realm of possibility that NATO-aligned powers use the Kurdish movement to establish a military and economic base in Northern Syria, as they did in Iraq.

Alternatively, if the Syrian Army is destroyed, Rojava will be easily overrun by armed Salafi movements — a scenario the US could use to try to justify a military protectorate in Syria. Every such imperial contingency plan should be opposed.

With these developments in mind, it becomes clear that the war in Syria exists on two levels that interact with each other. There is a civil war based on divides between Syrians professing differing ideas for the future of the country. Then there is the imperial war on Syria designed to bring local social struggle to a screeching halt, and without the war on Syria, the civil war would never have got going.

The class basis for the armed insurgency has existed for a while now; the critical difference since 2011 has been the investments of empire.

To call these events “revolutionary,” rather than a set of depressing steps backward, is to insult the intelligence and integrity of anyone who prefers that word mean something. And it prevents an understanding of what should be done — the question of what to do is actually a question of what not to do, or what to cease doing. For local struggle of any kind to be restored, the US and its allies must stop what they have been doing proxy-style — arming reserve forces in the region — since at least 2011.

If the supplies to anti-government fighters can be cut off in Syria, negotiations for a political solution will be more meaningful. Leftists could actually find themselves in a position to agitate for the reforms demanded in 2011: more representation in government, deep political reform and civil rights, a negotiated settlement with the Syrian state for Kurdish political autonomy that maintains the current movement’s secularism and socialist economic program, and a renewed development pact between the state and the countryside that will, hopefully, serve to cut off support for reactionary movements.

In the United States, our main focus must be struggling against the intervention of our own government, drawing links between its actions in Syria and its broader agenda elsewhere.

Of course, such a solution cannot begin to recompense the heart-shattering extent of pain and loss Syria has experienced. The fact that such a solution is so devastatingly belated only adds to its urgency.

Towards these ends, the Western left shall be stuck with the tedious task of untangling the logic of amnesiac little books and Beltway policy papers discussing the carve-up of distant nations as if it were a trivial matter.

And the task does not end there. The Syria dilemma provides a lesson to the Western left. In a society run on marketing, the Left’s own words, such as “revolution,” can easily be gutted of all content, so all that remains is a rush, a haze, a feeling. Images of triumphant

demonstrators may mingle seamlessly with images of corpses, the spectacle flitting past like a ticker tape, billed in its totality as the news from Over There.

If those dubbing this spectacle a “revolution” happen to be capitalists, think twice — consider that these events might look much differently after the smoke clears. Think three times if the alleged culprit is a nominal enemy of the United States.

The obligation goes well beyond opposing intervention in name; it requires extreme skepticism at all times of official narratives to be able to unearth intervention as it actually and already exists. In other words, act as an actual anti-imperialist.

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