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**FISSURES AND FAULTLINES:
A STUDY OF COMPETING DYNAMICS AMONGST SYRIA'S
PATCHWORK OPPOSITION**

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"Ah, Mr. President! You don't know what you have taken on. You have taken on people of whom every one believes he is a politician. Fifty percent consider themselves national leaders; twenty-five percent of them think they are prophets; and at least ten percent believe they are gods. You have taken on people of which there are those who worship God, and there are those who adore fire; and there are those who idolize the devil."[1]

Syrian President Shukri al-Quwatli (1958)

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[1] Brands, Henry Williams. The Specter of Neutralism: The United States and the Emergency of the Third World, 1947-1960. Columbia University Press, 1990, p. 291.

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2 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Set against a backdrop of deep societal divide, the Assad regime has ironically become a linchpin of stability in Syria's prolonged conflict; even as the state security apparatus continues to execute coordinated attacks against its own people. The regime's ability to maintain kinetic superiority and control over strategic urban centers has, in essence, preserved its ability to remain in power. The capacity of the regime to impose its will throughout Syria has given the collective opposition – jihadist, militiaman, and civilian alike – a common enemy and objective around which to coalesce.

The regime's perceived loss of kinetic superiority and control over large swaths of territory to armed opposition elements has created a myriad of power vacuums vulnerable to prevailing influences. Inside of these power vacuums exist a milieu of competing dynamics that inspire, fuel, and define conflict, resulting in further division amongst Syria's patchwork opposition. It is the opinion of the author (and the assumption of this report) that the gradual weakening of Syria's centralized authority and state institutions will lead to a further escalation of Syria's already cataclysmic civil war. Given that the ability to appropriately respond to conflict is based on the capacity to understand it, this report seeks to identify existing faultlines amongst Syria's fragmented opposition as well as key trends and centers of influence in Syria's evolving conflict landscape.

This report concludes that conflict amongst the country-level opposition is defined along three distinct faultlines:

1) Ideology – the belief system that informs actors' set of goals, expectations, and actions.

2) Primacy – the ability to enact these goals, expectations, and actions upon others, either through the use of force or peaceful means.

3) Primordial ties – connections to ethnic identity, sect, family, and/or clan.

These faultlines are best observed through the interactions of the various cooperating and competing forces that comprise Syria's fragmented internal opposition. These forces include the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and affiliated brigades, unarmed civilian elements such as Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) and Local Administrative Councils (LACs), and Islamic extremist groups like Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, and Jabhat al-Wahda al-Tahrir al-Islamiyya. The interactions detailed in this report are becoming increasingly tenuous and divisive which is indicative of a worsening conflict.

This report draws upon two case studies from two countries with similarly highly fragmented societies who have experienced complex crises – Iraq and Somalia. In Iraq, the inability of the central government to decentralize service delivery resulted in systemic frustration amongst Iraqis and continues to be a driver of instability. In Somalia, fear of Islamic extremism resulted in the forceful removal of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) from Mogadishu and with it moderate Islamic leaders responsible for restoring peace in the area for the first time in 16 years.

Analysis of the conflict and competing dynamics amongst Syria's patchwork opposition have been used to inform the following set of policy recommendations:

1) Acknowledge that a unified Syrian opposition is unlikely to emerge.

2) Accept a Syria that is decentralized and ruled by local realities.

3) Adopt an aggressive rapid assistance delivery strategy geared toward marginalizing Islamic extremists.

These policy recommendations should serve as the basis for a new response framework that addresses the evolving conflict inside Syria.

3   RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY

The Arab Awakening has created a demand from policymakers, practitioners, and the general public for clear and concise analysis of the events taking place in a rapidly changing Middle East and North Africa. That demand has only grown with the outbreak of an internationalized conflict in the heart of the region. The U.S. has long been a proponent of strong central authorities in the Middle East in order to preserve national interests. This report seeks to challenge that position. As is often the case, the twenty-four hour news cycle has overly simplified Syria's highly complex conflict by promulgating a false narrative of a unified indigenous opposition fighting against a unified regime. Dispelling this narrative is in part the impetus for this report.

The complexities of Syria's conflict present equally complex policy challenges for all nations who have interests in the region. Crafting a response whether in the defense, diplomacy or development "cone", requires a certain level of understanding of realities on the ground. Although the likely outcome in Syria is still a matter of debate amongst experts, the notion that things will get worse before they get better is widely accepted. Identifying existing faultlines amongst Syria's patchwork opposition and constructing a framework to understand them will prove invaluable to policymakers and practitioners seeking to assist Syrians in restoring stability.

As with most evolving conflicts, access to quantitative data is limited, if not entirely absent. As such, this report relies exclusively on qualitative data to inform the research, craft recommendations, and reach conclusions. The sources used can be placed into two categories – primary and secondary. Primary sources include news articles, social media (YouTube and

Twitter), and personal interviews. These sources were used to construct the background of this report and to identify faultlines amongst Syria's patchwork opposition. In addition, the author relied on primary sources for local context. Secondary sources, including academic articles and personal interviews, were used to construct the case studies of Iraq and Somalia. Qualitative fieldwork entailed a total of 7 interviews with U.S. government officials, policy experts, academics, and Syrian activists. Interviews were conducted over the span of two months, from 19 March 2013 to 9 April 2013 and were carried out exclusively in the United States.

Given the security risks and limited access associated with travel inside Syria, field research was limited to the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Area. Recognizing that this may draw criticism from some, the author welcomes those critics to reference the list of interviews with Syrian activists and refugees, many of who were the leaders in the early days of the revolution and maintain close contact with sources inside Syria. One gap that should be acknowledged up front is the lack of analysis of tribal grievances and leadership structures amongst the civilian opposition. Much of that data is either unknown or too difficult to collect given the current environment inside Syria. As a result, the author has made a judgment to consider that data to be outside the purview of this report. In addition, the author has not included an analysis of regional actors and regional gamesmanship in order to keep the focus on completing dynamics inside Syria amongst the internal opposition. The opinions in this report are those of the author and author alone unless noted in the footnotes; they do not represent the views of any agency, public or private.

4   BACKGROUND

The following section provides a comprehensive narrative of the current situation, key actors, and phases of conflict, in order to construct a foundation on top of which analysis and recommendations will be layered. The following narrative is in no way exhaustive but rather deliberately crafted to provide information relevant to achieving the aforementioned objectives.

4.1   Current Situation

As this report goes to press, Syria's civil war has claimed the lives of an estimated 70,000 individuals since its onset in March 2011.[2] There are an estimated 3.6 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) inside Syria and approximately 1,245,570 refugees living in neighboring Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and Egypt.[3] The governorates of ar-Raqqah, al-Hasakah, and those areas closest to the Turkish border in Aleppo and Idlib governorates (see 11.1 – Disputed Areas Map) are effectively under the control of opposition elements although the regime continues to have influence there through its ability to pay civil servants. The Assad regime has tightened its control over Damascus, Homs, and the coast.[4] It is important to note that the military superiority of the regime continues to challenge the collective armed opposition. The use of aerial attacks makes it possible for the regime to not only inflict devastating damage but also regain control of most areas as it chooses. The regime's inability to hold these areas for an extended period of time is due to the insurgent tactics and capabilities of the armed opposition on the ground.

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[2] United Nations. "Daily Press Briefing by the Office of the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General." 19 February 2013. United Nations. 26 March 2013 <http://www.un.org/News/briefing/doc/2013/db130219.doc.htm>.

[3] Humanitarian Information Unit. "Syria: Numbers and Locations of Syrian Refugees." 5 April 2013. U.S. Department of State. 10 April 2013

[4] Holliday, Joseph. The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War. Institute for the Study of War. Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2013.

4.2   Key Actors

In order to understand Syria's conflict dynamics at the country-level, it is imperative to identify those actors who are perpetuating and transforming the conflict on the ground. Each actor plays a significant role in shaping and responding to competing ideologies, political primacy, and primordial ties. It is from their ranks that future drivers and mitigators of both conflict and stability will rise to define Syria's future.

4.2.1   The Assad Regime

Bashar al-Assad remains the leader of the Arab Republic of Syria despite repeated political pressure from nations and violent attempts from the internal opposition to remove him from that duty. The Arab League's recent awarding of Syria's seat to Moaz al-Katib, President of the National Syrian Coalition, a conglomerate of political opposition factions, is more symbolic in nature; a move to show that Arab leaders stand in solidarity with the Syrian people.[5] Not surprisingly, opposition forces have largely failed to bring the fight to Assad. The insular structure of the regime coupled with a shared Alawi (followers of the Twelver school of Shia Islam) identity, have resulted in the upper echelons remaining almost completely intact.

The regime's extensive patronage networks of civil servants and business elites (many of whom are Sunni) have also kept the regime intact. Reporting regarding this support is mixed with some claiming Sunni elite support for the regime still strong while others claim it has severely dissipated.[6,7] Minority groups like the Kurds, Druze, Assyrians, and Turkmen, though

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[5] Opposition takes Syria seat at Arab League. 26 March 2013. Al Jazeera. 27 March 2013 <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/03/20133262278258896.html>.
[6] Kajjo, Sirwan. Journalist and founder of the Kurdish Review. Personal Interview. 29 March 2013.

not explicitly supporting the regime, have been reluctant to join the opposition in large part out of fear of persecution at the hands of the Sunni Arab majority.[8] The Alawite history of a persecuted minority has resonated with these segments of the population and their relative "neutrality" is viewed as tacit approval for the regime.

Assad has relied on the use of the state's robust security apparatus to not only insulate himself, his family, his inner circle, and his sect but also to carry out coordinated attacks against armed and civilian opposition in mostly every corner of Syria. The Syrian Armed Forces (SAF) is considered to be one of the most powerful militaries in the Arab world.[9] Its organization is modeled after Soviet-era doctrine and trained to project regional power while protecting the state from invasion. Rather than protecting Syria, the SAF has traditionally been used to insulate the regime from the Syrian people and as a force to deter fighting amongst its fragmented society.

Coordinated air campaigns executed by Syria's Air Force have been extremely effective in inflicting damage; whether rooting out the armed opposition from urban landscapes or targeting civilian protests, breadlines, and hospitals.[10] The regime has also utilized the *mukhabarat* (military intelligence service) and its *shabiha* (loyalist armed gangs) to carry out more concentrated attacks on Syrian opposition and civilians. These coordinated attacks include raids, arrests, and targeted killings. The *shabiha* are comprised of Alawites, and as such, their loyalty to Assad is unwavering and their methods most egregious.

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[7] MacFarquhar, Neil. "Syrian's Defection Signals Eroding Support for Assad." 6 July 2011. New York Times. 21 April 2013 <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/07/world/middleeast/opponents-of-syrias-president-gather-in-paris.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0>.

[8] "Fearing Change, Many Christians in Syria Back Assad." 27 September 2011. New York Times. 10 April 2013 <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/28/world/middleeast/fearing-change-syria-christians-back-bashar-al-assad.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0>.

[9] Holliday, Joseph. The Syrian Army: Doctrinal Order of Battle. Institute for the Study of War. Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2013.

[10] Human Rights Watch. Death from the Skies: Deliberate and Indiscriminate Airstrikes on Civilians. Human Rights Watch, 2013.

4.2.2 The Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Armed Opposition

The Free Syrian Army (FSA) is an umbrella structure that is made up of a variety of provincial military councils. In December 2012, the Supreme Military Council was created in an attempt to bring the provincial military councils under one organization and to facilitate cooperation with civilian counterparts.[11] Though more organized from the onset of the conflict, the FSA is still not a unified force. Its ranks are made up of defectors from the SAF as well as normal Syrian citizens with varying degrees of training and combat experience. These armed opposition groups are constantly joining, dissolving, splintering, and re-forming.[12] The motivations of these opposition militias vary, ranging from the desire to see a Syria free of Assad to monetary incentives to the necessity of self-defense and preservation. In February 2013, Secretary of State John Kerry announced the U.S. would provide non-lethal aid to the Supreme Military Council as an incentive to solidify the ranks and encourage coordination with the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC).[13] This assistance was doubled on 20 April 2013.[14]

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[11] MacFarquhar, Neil. "Rebel Groups in Syria Make Framework for Military." 7 December 2012. New York Times. 10 April 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/08/world/middleeast/rebel-groups-in-syria-make-framework-for-military.html>.

[12] Abdul-Ahad, Ghaith. "How to Start a Battalion (in Five Easy Lessons)." London Review of Books 35.4 (2012): 13-14.

[13] Keleman, Michele. "U.S. Offers Additional $60 Million to Syrian Opposition." 28 February 2013. NPR. 11 April 2013 <http://www.npr.org/2013/02/28/173181451/u-s-offers-additional-60-million-in-humanitarian-aid-to-syria>.

[14] DeYoung, Karen. "Kerry says U.S. will expedite new aid to Syrian opposition". 21 April 2013 New York Times. 22 April 2013 < http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/kerry-says-us-will-expedite-new-aid-to-syrian-opposition/2013/04/21/91461f40-aa8f-11e2-a8b9-2a63d75b5459_story.html>.

4.2.3   The Unarmed Civilian Opposition

The unarmed opposition is understandably the most diverse actor in the conflict unified not by religion or ethnic identity but by a common desire to see a Syria free of Assad. Mapping the civilian opposition would be akin to mapping the entire societal makeup of Syria itself. For the purposes of this report, how the civilian opposition has organized themselves in the fluid environment of the conflict is the most important factor.

Two elements of organization exist amongst the unarmed opposition – Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) and Local Administrative Councils (LACs).

Local Coordination Committees (LCCs)

LCCs were the earliest drivers of peaceful revolution and calls for reform from the onset of the crisis in Syria. Its ranks are mostly comprised of young, educated democratic activists who were proponents of democracy in Syria well before March 2011.[15] Their success has stemmed from an ability to remain decentralized, work in secret and fashion their message in the most nationalist of terms through the use of the Internet.[16] In many ways, the LCCs represented the best of peaceful intentions of the early revolution in Syria since the principle purpose of LCCs was to organize peaceful protests around the country. The first committee arose in Daraya, a suburb of Damascus, and eventually spread to Homs. It quickly became an umbrella organization with members from most cities and many smaller towns across Syria.[17] The LCCs also serve as an informal news agency reporting the activities of the Assad regime on the ground. In the starkest example of their ability to adapt to conditions on the ground and the needs of Syria, the

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[15] Kajjo, Sirwan. Journalist and founder of the Kurdish Review. Personal Interview. 29 March 2013.

[16] Shadid, Anthony. Coalition of Factions From the Streets Fuel a New Opposition in Syria. 30 June 2011. New York Times. 29 March 2013 <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/01/world/middleeast/01syria.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0>.

[17] About the LCCS. 29 March 2013 <http://www.lccsyria.org/about>.

LCCs have developed a Relief Bureau to collect external and internal donations that are then distributed to local coordination groups based on need.[18]

Local Administrative Councils (LACs)

In the absence of a legitimate centralized authority, communities throughout Syria have organized informal pseudo-governing institutions largely geared toward service delivery. These institutions are referred to as Local Administrative Councils (LACs). LACs are being established and serve as local representatives of the people. The success of these LACs is not just determined by their performance but rather by the communities whom they serve. The LACs in Syria are highly fragmented and their effectiveness varies. It is yet to be seen whether or not these LACs will be viable governing structures. Unlike LCCs, LACs are loosely connected at best and are often competing with one another for limited resources.

4.2.4 Foreign Fighters and Islamic Militants

The absence of a legitimate centralized authority combined with a protracted civil war has created an environment that is ideal for foreign fighters and Islamic militants to take root and flourish. Their presence and participation has further complicated the opposition's makeup while introducing confessional dynamics into the conflict.[19] The insertion of these groups has marked a shift from a revolution defined largely by secular principles to a war guided by extreme Sunni Islamic principles. When Assad claims that he is fighting a war against foreign elements and Islamic jihadists, there is some truth to those statements.[20]

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[18] "The Relief Bureau report, Local Coordination Commitees in Syria, July 2012." 12 August 2012. <u>Local Coordination Commitees</u>. 29 March 2013 <http://www.lccsyria.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/july-for-publish.pdf>.

[19] Abdulhamid, Ammar. Syrian Activist. Personal Interview. 20 March 2013.

[20] Almuqdad, Omar. Syrian Activist. Personal Interview. 19 March 2013.

Jabhat al-Nusra (an Al-Qaeda affiliated militant organization with heavy Salafist influence), Ahrar al-Sham, and Jabhat al-Wahda al-Tahrir al-Islamiyya have filled the power vacuums created by the conflict. In the beginning, these groups gained momentum not through popular support from among the Syrian people but from media outlets exaggerating their presence, influence, and abilities.[21] Such attention increased their stock as viable actors to the conflict resulting in the channeling of external resources to these groups. Although their popularity amongst the Syrian people is hard to measure, they experienced increased support over time due to their ability to provide Syrians with what they cannot provide for themselves – security and commodities.[22] Additionally, Islamic militants have gained popular support based on their willingness and ability to fight on behalf of the Syrian people.[23] The groups have also orchestrated some of the most decisive attacks against the Assad regime, most notably the July 2012 bombing in Damascus that killed high-level security officials.

The Gulf countries of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait, due to the groups' Islamic and specifically Salafist aspirations, have supplied Jabhat al-Nusra and its Sunni affiliates with seemingly unlimited resources.[24] They are well trained and have experienced conflict before. Their successes have proven to be a powerful recruiting tool. In addition to notable attacks against the regime, al-Nusra has been accused of stoking sectarian divides throughout Syria and

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[21] Kajjo, Sirwan. Journalist and founder of the Kurdish Review. Personal Interview. 29 March 2013.

[22] Chulov, Martin. "Al-Qaida in Iraq admits links to Syrian jihadist fighters." 9 April 2013. The Guardian. 11 April 2013 < http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/apr/09/alqaida-iraq-admits-jabhat-alnusra>.

[23] Almuqdad, Omar. Syrian Activist. Personal Interview. 19 March 2013.

[24] Abouzeid, Rania. "Syria's Secular and Islamist Rebels: "Who are the Saudis and Qataris Arming?". 18 September 2012. Time. 21 April 2013 <http://world.time.com/2012/09/18/syrias-secular-and-islamist-rebels-who-are-the-saudis-and-the-qataris-arming/>.

imposing restrictions on those communities that they preside over.[25] Tensions run high amongst these communities and Syrians have resulted in clashes with these groups as seen in Saraqib in January 2013.[26,27] In summary, Islamic jihadists will remain a key actor in Syria as their influence and support continues to grow by the day.

4.3   The Transformation of Syria's Conflict

Over the span of the last twenty-four months, Syria's conflict has undergone a variety of transformations from the early days of a peaceful revolution. This report will now detail three phases of the conflict in order to illustrate the evolving role and capabilities of the aforementioned key actors in relation to the conflict.

4.3.1   Phase One – Peaceful Protests and Localized Conflict

The conflict in Syria began with localized protests in the capital city of Damascus on 15 March 2011, spreading a few days later to the southwest city of Dera'a, where demonstrators clashed with government security forces.[28] As protests moved north to Homs, Idlib, and Aleppo, the regime deployed heavy military assets to discourage further protests.[29] The establishment of the

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[25] Sly, Liz. "Islamic law comes to rebel-held Syria." 19 March 2013. New York Times. 31 March 2013 <http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-03-19/world/37840878_1_al-nusra-deir-aleppo>.
[26] Mourtada, Hania and Barnard, Anne. "Jihadists and Secular Activists Clash in Syrian". 26 January 2013. New York Times. 22 April 2013 <
http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/27/world/middleeast/syria-war-developments.html?_r=0>.
[27] Almrsds. ‏"الثورة علم بتمزيق تقوم اسلامية كتائب عناصر – سراقب"‏. 8 February 2013.
YouTube. 22 April 2013 < http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=R_1xdQX33pM>
[28] McEvers, Kelly. "Revisiting the Spark that Kindled the Syria Uprising." 16 March 2012 NPR.
11 April 2013 <http://www.npr.org/2012/03/16/148719850/revisiting-the-spark-that-kindled-the-syrian-uprising>.
[29] Almuqdad, Omar. Syrian Activist. Personal Interview. 19 March 2013.

FSA in July 2011 marked an attempt to formalize Syria's internal insurgency.[30] FSA brigades and its affiliates adopted a military campaign aimed at expelling regime forces from areas throughout the country. The fighting quickly evolved from localized to nationalized conflict.

4.3.2   Phase Two – From Localized Conflict to Civil War

As of June 2012, Syria's maturing insurgency had successfully carved out defacto safe zones in the northern and central countryside of Syria.[31] The regime's loss of these areas was due in large part to their lopsided allocation of military resources in and around the urban centers of Damascus, Idlib, and Homs. The consolidation of resources around these urban centers marked a change in the calculus of the regime. By asserting dominance over these areas, the regime expressed confidence in its ability to remain in control over all of Syria from key urban centers.

In July 2012, the International Committee of the Red Cross declared the conflict had reached the level of civil war.[32] The declaration meant that international humanitarian law now applied throughout the country, and was the responsibility of all parties, whether opposition or government. The same week, a blast in central Damascus killed several in Assad's inner-circle, including Deputy Defense Minister Assef Shawkat. This attack marked a decisive moment in the conflict by exposing the regime's vulnerability to coordinated attacks amongst its most loyal cadre.

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[30] Landis, Joshua. "Free Syrian Army Founded by Seven Officers to Fight the Syrian Army." 29 July 2011 Syria Comment. 16 April 2013 <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/free-syrian-army-established-to-fight-the-syrian-army/>.

[31] Holliday, Joseph. Syria's Maturing Insurgency. Institute for the Study of War. Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2012. pp. 7.

[32] Goh, Melissa. Red Cross Declares Civil War in Syria. 15 July 2012. NPR. 31 March 2013 <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2012/07/15/156808427/red-cross-declares-civil-war-in-syria>.

4.3.3   Phase Three – Stalemate

An analysis of the conflict in Syria conducted at the superficial level tells us that the regime and, what is collectively referred to as the opposition, have reached a stalemate. According to Middle East scholar Bassam Haddad, "the battle has been constructed as a zero-sum game from the very-beginning, increasing the stakes tremendously for all parties involved, most notably for the regime".[33]   What makes this stalemate so precarious is that both the regime and opposition continue to possess the capabilities to inflict significant damage upon the other. The financial and material contributions of outside entities provide both the regime and the opposition the means necessary to prolong this conflict for some time. The longer this conflict rages on, the more confessional it becomes. Such conditions benefit jihadist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra, while placing unarmed civilian opposition at increased risk. With each passing day, the peaceful principles that defined the revolution in the early days are lost and will be harder to retrieve.[34]

5   EXPLORING THE FAULTLINES

As the Assad regime consolidates its influence around strategic urban centers, swaths of territory in Syria are becoming increasingly autonomous. The political, economic, and security vacuum left behind has created an opening for certain groups to assert influence. Within these semi-autonomous regions, competing ideologies, aspirations for primacy, and increased significance of primordial ties will undoubtedly shape Syria's future. Identifying existing and emerging dynamics in Syria's semi-autonomous regions will offer insight into forthcoming challenges.

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[33] Haddad, Bassam. "Syria's Stalemate: The Limits of Regime Resilience." <u>Middle East Policy</u> 19.1 (2012): pp. 85.

[34] Abdulhamid, Ammar, Syrian Activist. Personal Interview. 20 March 2013.

5.1 Jihadists and the Secular Opposition

Operating as an insurgency, Syria's various armed opposition elements possess varying levels of combat training, experience, and resources. Bound by a shared objective, such variables have created interdependency amongst groups who subscribe to competing ideologies and visions for a post-Assad Syria. As the conflict has evolved, these differences have come into focus creating tensions amongst cooperative forces. The relationship between Jabhat al-Nusra and the secular opposition personifies two of the aforementioned faultlines: ideology and primacy.

Like al-Qaeda, al-Nusra espouses an international message of Islamic jihad that does not mesh with the secular desires of most Syrians.[35] Establishing Syria as an Islamic state is in direct conflict with the democratic principles that the revolution was founded upon and what many are still fighting for today. In some communities where al-Nusra has established authority, attempts have been made to punish un-Islamic activities such as the sale of cigarettes or the unveiling of women.[36] Marriage, divorce, and vehicle licensing have also been subjected to extreme Islamic principles. To date, discontent with such practices has been expressed through protests though violent means should not be ruled out. In a Washington Post article published on 19 March 2013, a local opposition activist is quoted as saying, "I think the real war will start after toppling the regime".[37]

As a result, al-Nusra has made an attempt to downplay their desires for the explicit purpose of keeping other fighting groups like the FSA dedicated to overthrowing the regime. Learning from Iraq, al-Nusra has invested in winning the hearts and minds in Syria's semi-autonomous regions. They have been able to gain influence amongst Syrian communities based on their

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[35] Abdulhamid, Ammar, Syrian Activist. Personal Interview. 20 March 2013.
[36] Sly, Liz. "Islamic law comes to rebel-held Syria." 19 March 2013. New York Times.
[37] Ibid.

ability to provide security, procure commodities, and settle civil disputes. Their success and growing goodwill amongst the Syria people is a direct threat to the legitimacy of the FSA who see themselves as defenders of the Syrian people. Such competition will be based on primacy as much as it is based ideology. Given that Jabhat al-Nusra, the FSA, and FSA-affiliated brigades remain well armed and in loose control of pockets inside Syria, the potential for clashes over ideology and primacy are most concerning.

5.2 Armed Opposition and Unarmed Civilian Opposition

Differentiating between combatants and civilians is most difficult in the context of Syria because the armed opposition is comprised of both former military trained personnel as well as ordinary civilians. The preferred narrative of the armed opposition is a civilian revolutionary force "called to arms" because of the actions of the Assad regime.[38] The armed opposition has an incentive to protect civilians given that most units were formed as village defense forces and have personal ties to the communities they aim to protect.

A shift in more offensive measures has result in the armed opposition moving into areas where they lack acute local knowledge. This is an initial point of contention between the armed and civilian opposition. When rebel groups move outside their localities to liberate other areas, they sometimes fail to coordinate with locals adequately. In these cases local civilian opposition structures are generally weakened. This is what happened in ar-Raqqah where the local civilian council has been stripped of power by non-local rebel groups and no longer oversees governance

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[38] "Issue Brief: Civilian Protection in Syria." December 2012. <u>Center for Civilians in Conflict</u>. 2 April 2013
<http://civiliansinconflict.org/uploads/files/publications/Syria_Public_Brief_Dec_2012.pdf>.

in the city.[39] Civilian military relations are especially tense in areas where rebel groups have entrenched themselves in urban centers, and thus provoked heavy regime bombardment in retaliation.

Resources are proving to be another point of contention between the armed and civilian opposition. Stewardship and the distribution of resources in conflict environments can be both a driver and mitigating factor of tensions. For example, the ability to equitably distribute resources to a wider constituency is in itself a source of legitimacy. As armed and civilian opposition vie for political primacy at the local level their ability to institute control and favor will be tied to their ability to perform this service. As the value of the resource increases so will the tensions – those who control Syria's oil reserves are destined to gain significant influence in a post-Assad Syria.[40]

5.3 The Unarmed Civilian Opposition

Prolonged conflict in Syria has resulted in a transformation amongst the civilian (or unarmed) opposition from the early days of the revolution. As previously stated, informal governing structures have taken root in the absence of a legitimate centralized authority. Local Administrative Councils (LACs) and Local Coordination Committees (LLCs) are moving into this vacuum and filling the role of service providers. The success of these structures is based on their ability to provide basic services in an environment defined by competition over limited resources. The longer the conflict drags on it is likely that these structures will take on a more

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[39] O'Bagy, Elizabeth. "Governance in Rebel-held Syria." 28 March 2013. Institute for the Study of War. 6 April 2013 <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/governance-rebel-held-syria>.

[40] Wood, Josh. "Syria's Oil Resources Are a Source of Contention for Competing Groups." 20 March 2013. New York Times. 6 April 2013 <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/21/world/middleeast/syrias-oil-a-source-of-contention-for-competing-groups.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0>.

confessional dynamic relying on patronage networks, thus shifting attention to a part of the community rather than the whole.

Conflict amongst the unarmed opposition will be highly localized and could potentially have the same impact or repercussions as clashes involving Islamic jihadists and the secular opposition. An environment defined by limited resources and limited accountability may result in a further militarization of society to settle grievances. Such localized conflict is susceptible to confessional dynamics that in turn will reinforce the sectarian conflict narrative.

In summary, conflict amongst the country-level opposition is defined along three distinct faultlines: ideology, primacy, and primordial ties. This report finds ideology, specifically extreme Islamic ideology, to be most concerning given the lengths to which groups like Jabhat al-Nusra will go to promote, defend, and preserve it. As this ideology takes hold, it is challenging the secular principles espoused by most Syrians, sparking conflicts based on primacy. Absent systems of representation, primacy is inspiring new fronts in Syria's civil war. The shift to more localized conflict is the result of a retreat by Syrians to more primordial identities. This retreat is inspiring confession-based conflicts.

An analysis of these competing dynamics concludes that ideology, primacy, and primordial ties have a cyclical relationship and as a result are unlikely to trump one another. Furthermore, these competing dynamics are resilient and unlikely to be undermined by existential factors. The insertion of a central authority or the intervention of a foreign military may serve as a temporary force around which to coalesce but will ultimately agitate these dynamics as illustrated in the subsequent case studies.

6   GAPS AND CHALLENGES

In the course of conducting an analysis on Syria's current and evolving conflict, some significant gaps and challenges emerged. The most obvious gap is the inability to offer empirical data on the level of approval of Islamic extremists groups like Jabhat al-Nusra and its allies Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Wahda al-Tahrir al-Islamiyya. Whereas their growing influence is indisputable from accounts in the media and from first person interviews, it is impossible to determine their rate of growth and whether their popularity amongst the Syrian people is sustaining that trend. Such data would be useful in mapping their influence by locale. Furthermore, the open source material is not robust enough to conduct an organization mapping exercise or leadership analysis of these groups. Such data would to be critical in the identification of potentially more moderate factions or individuals. Absent this information, this report makes some baseline assumptions; specifically that the influence of Islamic extremist groups is on the rise. Furthermore, that extremist ideology is not unanimous throughout their ranks.

This gap is also present in the analysis of the FSA and FSA-affiliate brigades as well as the local governing structures like the LCCs and LACs. Absent this data it is difficult to grasp the exact capabilities of these subjects as well as an indication of how these groups are linked and interact. Such information would be paramount in constructing a needs assessment.

The above gaps present in the research are a result of the inherent challenges of analyzing a current conflict of this magnitude. Current events do not offer the luxury of retrospect. Dynamics are constantly in flux; the dynamics of yesterday are not the dynamics of today or tomorrow. This is part of the intrigue of analyzing current events; this is also the challenge. Conflicts of this magnitude present access challenges as well – extracting the necessary information requires a certain level of security.

Recognizing that certain gaps and challenges exist in this analysis, the report will now turn its attention to analyzing two case studies. There exist strong parallels between the dynamics in Syria and the dynamics in Iraq and Somalia. These case studies will be used to inform the policy recommendations offered in the conclusion of this report.

7   CASE STUDIES

Analyzing Syria's fragmented opposition and the drivers of conflict amongst this fragmented opposition allows for some well-informed assumptions to be made regarding a post-Assad Syria.

1) ***Absent a legitimate centralized authority, informal local governing structures take shape.*** These local governing structures reflect local dynamics whether along tribal, ethnic, or religious lines. Depending upon the influence of extremist groups like Jabhat al-Nusra or FSA-affiliate brigades, they may be the ruling force.

2) ***Informal local governing structures are unlikely to disappear once they are in place.*** The longer the conflict lasts, the less connection Syrians will have to central governing structures with increased reliance on primordial ties. Therefore, the political landscape in Syria will be decentralized. The burden of service delivery will fall on the shoulders of informal local structures like LCCs and LACs.

3) ***Extremist groups will continue to thrive in unstable environments due to their ability to remain unified, maintain security, serve as a moral authority, and provide basic needs and services to the local population.*** These groups will likely be a political force in a new Syria.

Having drawn these assumptions, an analysis of other conflicts amongst tribal-based societies will provide valuable lessons learned that should be considered when shaping a response framework policy towards Syria.

7.1 Case Study #1: Iraq

For fragile and post-conflict states, rebuilding governance is a key step toward stabilization, reconstruction, and ultimately the transition to socioeconomic recovery and growth.[41] There is some disagreement as to where this rebuilding should originate. One argument is that it should begin in the center. Centralized authorities have the expertise and resources to execute national initiatives. In the case of Syria, proponents of centralized authority are urging support behind the external political opposition, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC). As this report argues, an effort to establish the SOC as the central authority to preside over a fragmented Syria represents the wrong course of action.

As the state and formal national institutions break down, people tend to retreat towards more primordial identities that become the basis of mobilization and organization at the local level.[42] Informal governing structures like LACs in Syria illustrate this shift. Taking into account that informal local governing structures are unlikely to disappear once they are in place, the question becomes what is the utility of these structures, specifically in conflicts that are highly complex? This report will turn to Iraq (2003) to answer this question.

There exist some shortcomings in comparing Iraq and Syria. As noted by Brinkerhoff and Johnson, the single case of Iraq does not yield a test of hypotheses regarding the mix of

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[41] Binkerhoff, D.W. and Binkerhoff, J.H. "Governance Reforms and Failed States: Challenges and Implications'. <u>International Review of Administrative Sciences</u> 2002 68(4): 511-31.
[42] Jennings, Christopher. Democracy and Governance Advisor (USAID). Personal Interview. 27 March 2013.

centralized and decentralized features of the governance system.[43] In addition, conflict in Iraq still persists and the central and provincial governments are still very much sorting things out. That beings said, the fact that both the national and provincial governments have lost support due to weak performance offers some valuable lessons learned that can be applied to Syria.

The Case Against Centralization

The case for decentralization is predicated on three issues facing centralized authorities in fragile environments. First, prolonged complex crises weaken existing national governments. From a weak or weakened position, the inability of national governments to integrate regions and minorities into the larger polity is a key source of fragility and conflict between people and the state.[44] For example, Iraq's central government has incorporated sectarian-based political parties and strong regional identity of the Kurdish provinces with the hope of pulling the various elements into the center. However, competing interests at the national level have resulted in conflict at the local level. Additionally, some of Iraq's national leaders have spent much of their adult lives living in exile, and are not perceived as identifying with the everyday concerns of the common Iraqi. As is the case with Syria, the external political opposition has struggled to gain legitimacy inside Syria due in large part to their leadership lacking significant and legitimate ties to Syria.

Second, fragile states' inability to provide equitable and inclusive resource allocation and distribution fuels ethnic tensions.[45] For example, while trying to secure the necessary majority to form the new Iraqi government, central ministries were given to the various parties necessary to elect the Prime Minister and to form the Council of Ministers. As a result, ministers proved to be

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[43] Binkerhoff, D.W. and Binkerhoff, J.H.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.

more loyal to their party or faction leaders. Such loyalties presented complications in reaching an agreement on a revenue sharing formula to equitably distribute the resources from Iraq's oil reserves.

Third, in the case of Iraq, sub-national entities like tribes as well as ethnic or religious groups have proven to be sufficiently powerful to resist central authority and operate autonomously.[46] Though religion plays a strong role in defining party membership, public positions do not line up neatly with the religious beliefs that define most parties.[47] Efforts to construct an integrated sense of national identity prove to be difficult in such situations. Such impasses leave the nation lacking the necessary cohesion to equitably represent and defend its citizenry. As conflict is prolonged, these challenges become increasingly difficult to address.

The Case for Decentralization

Decentralization assumes, first and foremost, that local governments can address citizens' day-to-day needs and priorities because they are closer to the local populace.[48] A shift to local authorities or the creation of new sub-national entities seeks to address ethnic and/or regional inequities particularly in states that contain regional enclaves rich in oil or mineral resources. Local communities are better equipped to conduct dialogue, problem solving and conflict resolution that is concentrated around issues of communal concern by building upon customs and local bonds. Decentralization encourages opposition leaders to remain in government at the local level. From these positions, opposition leaders can provide a check on centralized, single-party dominance by creating new centers of influence. It is important to note that a rush to linking the local with the central privileges those who are most organized. Such a mistake leaves a national

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[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.

agenda vulnerable to the influence of identity based politics and militants.[49] In the case of Syria, the armed opposition would likely assume these roles in the immediate due to their ability to remain somewhat organized and exercise force. Furthermore, empowering the majority will put the minority at a disadvantage and may lead to a replication of oppressive actions carried out by the previous regime.[50] Targeting governance restoration at the local level increases the likelihood of cultivating newly emergent moderate leaders who have strong local ties.[51]

In the absence of a legitimate centralized authority, coupled with disruptions in basic-service delivery by central-based ministries, informal governing structures like the aforementioned LCCs and LACs have organized themselves to perform the tasks that the state cannot. These structures are unlikely to disappear as they mature and weave themselves into the communities in which they operate. The challenge, as seen in Iraq, will be connecting these local structures to a center. Given the actions of the Assad regime over the decades, a deep-seeded distrust for centralized authority exists amongst the Syrian people. This distrust is likely to remain even if the regime was to fall. Syria could see the creation of a centralized authority whose responsibilities are limited to distributing currency.[52] Arrangements would be based on a limited access order by which leaders of groups would agree to divide land, labor, capital, and opportunities while agreeing to enforce the others' privileged access to resources.[53] In essence, a

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[49] Jennings, Christopher. Democracy and Governance Advisor (USAID). Personal Interview. 27 March 2013.

[50] Katz, Dara. Senior Democracy, Governance, Peace and Security Advisor (USAID). Personal Interview. 21 March 2013.

[51] Jennings, Christopher. Democracy and Governance Advisor (USAID). Personal Interview. 27 March 2013.

[52] Kaplan Seth. Policy analyst on State Building and Development. Personal Interview. 28 March 2013.

[53] North, Douglas C., Wallis, John Joseph, Webb, Steven B., Weingast. "Limited Access Orders: An Introduction to the Conceptual Framework" 14, June 2010. Stanford University.11 April 2013

multitude of social contracts will be what ties together a fragmented Syria.[54] These assumed conditions parallel the realities of this report's next case study: Somalia.

7.2   Case Study #2: Somalia

Somalia offers an interesting comparative case study to Syria given its complex fragmented environment in which local communities are autonomous from a centralized governing authority. In Somalia, informal governing structures are based around clan allegiances. The presence of clan militias and Islamic extremist elements like al-Shabaab present parallels to the situation in Syria that are worth exploring further. Given the rising influence of local traditional *Shariah* courts in Syria and their permeation into the informal governance sphere it is fair to assume that they will play an important role in shaping Syria's future. This report will focus on the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in Somalia for some lessons learned.

Islamic Courts Union

In 2006, a variety of Islamist organizations, centered on a long-standing network of local Islamic or sharia courts in Mogadishu, had come together under an umbrella organization, popularly known in the Western media as the Islamic Courts Union (ICU).[55]   This new phenomenon had been slowly evolving to fill the gap left by the continuing absence of public law and order.[56]   Supported by local clan militias and business interests, the ICU became an alternative to the internationally recognized, but internally disputed, Transitional Federal

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<http://www.stanforduniversity.info/group/polisci/faculty/weingast/LAO_CUP_2_Intro2100614.pdf>.

[54] Kajjo, Sirwan. Journalist and founder of the Kurdish Review. Personal Interview. 29 March 2013.

[55] Barnes, Cedric and Hassan, Harun. The Rise and Fall of Mogadishu's Islamic Courts. Chatham House and the Horn of Africa Group. Chatham, House and the Horn of Africa Group, 2007.

[56] Lewis, Ioan M. Understanding Somalia and Somaliland. Columbia University Press: New York. 2008.

Government (TFG) and US-backed Counterterrorism Alliance. To the outside world, the Courts' sudden ascendance sparked concerns of an Islamization of Somalia. This would prove to be more perception rather than reality.

The organizational structure of the ICU was essentially a loose conglomeration and informal collection of local traditional *Shariah* courts, initially mainly inside Mogadishu, and varied in the degree of fundamentalism of their sheiks.[57] Leadership structure was comprised mostly of ordinary Somali religious figures, some who had links with Saudi al-Ittihad radicals. Against popular belief, al-Qaeda was not responsible for the mobilization of Islamic fervor. Clan solidarity and the memory of anti-Ethiopian jihads proved to be enough of a mobilizing force. In addition, the ICU's ability to institute and preserve law and order gave the loose alliance moral authority. That moral authority was used to achieve the most positive developments in southern Somalia's wavering quest for governance.

The Courts achieved the unthinkable, uniting Mogadishu for the first time in 16 years, and re-establishing peace and security.[58] The Courts undertook significant and highly symbolic public works projects that led to increased popular support and legitimacy. Roadblocks were removed and regular trash pickup was organized. The main Mogadishu airport and seaport were reopened and rehabilitated for the first time in a decade. Squatters were ordered to vacate government buildings, illegal land grabs were halted, and special courts were opened to deal with the myriad claims for the restitution of property.[59]

The ICU was seen as a threat by Ethiopia who perceived their rise to power as a clear indication that they would be well positioned to rekindle relationships with ethnic insurgent

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[57] Ibid.
[58] Barnes, Cedric and Hassan Harun.
[59] Ibid.

groups and encouraging the radicalization of Ethiopia's sizeable Muslim populations. These concerns mirrored U.S. concerns about the rising tide of Islamic extremism. On 28 December 2006, Ethiopian and government forces marched into Mogadishu unopposed.[60] In the face of the Alliance, the ICUs' military and administrative presence dissolved almost immediately. Insecurity quickly increased in Mogadishu with the Ethiopians and TFG forces largely seen as outsiders.

The rise and fall of the ICU offers important lessons learned that should be applied to Syria. First, the ICU was a "broad mosque" or amalgamation of various moderate and extremist wings of political Islam.[61] Where it is certainly true that al-Shabaab became a significant component of the Islamic Court coalition – principally military – the author is of the opinion that their influence was grossly overstated. Close observation of the ICU shows that there were deep ideological divides amongst the broad-based movement. For example, most of the radically conservative polices were not popular amongst the majority of the population.

Second, the fear of Islam and Islamic extremism skewed the US-backed Ethiopian and Transitional Government's ability to distinguish between extremists and moderates amongst the ICU.[62] A smarter strategy by the U.S., Ethiopia, and TFG would have been to exploit the divisions between extremist elements and the moderates by recognizing that achievements were being made and peace was being restored. Finally, the use of Ethiopian and TFG forces to push out elements of the ICU reinforced a growing narrative criticizing Ethiopia and other outside actors for their role in Somalia's affairs. Extremist groups like al-Shabaab exploited this narrative in their recruitment campaigns. Although no empirical evidence exists, it can be

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[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Lemargie Lavaque, Marissa and Kaloides, Adam. Somalia Desk Officers (USAID). Personal Interview. April 3, 2013.

inferred that such action only aided in al-Shabaab's ability to recruit thus setting the stage for their build up in 2007 to its peak in 2010/2011.[63]

8   POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based upon the analysis of conflicting dynamics amongst Syria's patchwork opposition, the following recommendations serve as a basis for a new response framework that speaks to Syria's current and future challenges.

1) ***Acknowledge that a unified Syrian opposition is unlikely to emerge.*** Despite tireless attempts by the U.S. and partner nations, competing dynamics amongst Syria's patchwork opposition will inevitably inhibit unification. As a result, any decisions to use assistance as a means to foster unification should be reevaluated. Such applications of assistance delivery do not address systemic issues like lack of security and basic services that are drivers of internal instability.

2) ***Accept a Syria that is highly decentralized where local realities prevail.*** A decentralized Syria is not in and of itself an unequivocal threat to the region or U.S. national security interests. It becomes a threat only when local authorities cannot address citizens' day-to-day needs and priorities. Given the deep distrust of central authority amongst Syrians, any attempts to impose authority from the center should anticipate local-level resistance that in turn will fuel future instability.

3) ***Adopt an aggressive assistance delivery strategy geared toward marginalizing Islamic extremists.*** Jabhat al-Nusra's success has been predicated on their ability to aggressively respond to the immediate needs of the Syrian people. Informal local governing structures

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[63] Ibid.

like LACs are lacking the resources necessary to compete. As representatives of the communities in which they serve, well-resourced LACs are best suited to speak to local needs. Furthermore, their moderate voices will be essential in establishing future stability.

9   CONCLUSION

The classification of Syria's civil war as a dyadic conflict between a unified regime and a unified indigenous opposition is a false distinction. Such a classification ignores the country's history and complex societal makeup all the while distorting the realities on the ground. As a party to the protracted conflict, President Bashar al-Assad has effectively stripped himself vis-à-vis the regime of all ruling and moral authority through the use of the state security apparatus to suppress what had initially been peaceful calls for reform. The regime's violent response has resulted in numerous defections, primarily amongst the Syrian Armed Forces (SAF), most notably its elite cadre. The absence of a legitimate centralized authority has created numerous power vacuums that continue to challenge, strain, and alter Syria's historically tenuous society. Civilian and armed opposition alike vie for primacy as a once seemingly unified revolution adopts more divisive characteristics and strays from its initially peaceful principles.

This report concludes that conflict amongst the country-level opposition is defined along three distinct faultlines: ideology, primacy, and primordial ties. It is these competing dynamics that are inspiring, fueling, and defining conflict inside of Syria, resulting in the haphazard fragmentation of the state. As a result, policymakers and practitioners must take it upon themselves to address these drivers at the source. Channeling assistance to local communities, specifically informal governing structures like Local Administrative Councils (LACs), would create a viable alternative to Islamic extremist groups like Jabhat al-Nusra who seek to benefit

from the instability. In the case of Syria, aggressive and direct assistance delivery to local

communities is not only smart development policy; it is smart national security policy.

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