

TALLINN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

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**DECENTRALIZATION: A PATHWAY TOWARDS  
SUSTAINABLE PEACE IN SYRIA?**

Bachelor's Thesis

Programme International Relations

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## **ABSTRACT**

Decentralization has become a repeatedly proposed solution to the deadlock in the Syrian peace process. According to its advocates, it has a higher probability of brokering a compromise between the al-Assad regime and the opposition in Geneva than the current centralized power-sharing agreement. They also argue that by replacing the centralized, exclusive, and suppressive pre-conflict governance, decentralization could prevent future cycles of violence and hence a renewed civil war. By examining the country's recent history and the prevailing dynamics on the ground, this thesis aims to critique and update this view. It applies a deductive qualitative analysis to investigate changes in governance before and after the eruption of the protests in March 2011, eventually building on existing theoretical framework on decentralization in Syria. The paper concludes that an achievable and sustainable decentralization agreement needs to consider the interest of the al-Assad regime on the one hand and the society's deep-rooted socioeconomic inequality on the other. From that perspective, large-scale political decentralization in a fragmented country is not only unattainable but also detrimental to Syria's stability. At the same time, a small degree of administrative and fiscal decentralization could reduce regional inequality and facilitate the country's post-conflict recovery as well as prove to be more acceptable to the regime.

**Keywords:** Syria, decentralization, governance, socioeconomic inequality, Syrian peace process

## **INTRODUCTION**

To this day, the centralized power-sharing agreement that remains at the core of the Syrian peace process in Geneva has failed to bring an end to the conflict and its far-reaching consequences. According to the United Nations estimates, the civil war has led to the death of more than 400,000 Syrians. About 6.3 million people have become internally displaced while another 5.5 million have sought refuge in neighboring states or Europe, making it the continent's biggest refugee crisis since WWII. (Refugees...2017) This influx of refugees has become a significant financial and socioeconomic burden to the adjacent countries and escalated the already existing ethnosectarian tensions in the region (Natali 2017; Salloukh 2017). Also, the extremist groupings that permeate opposition areas, such as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS), pose a serious terrorist threat that reaches beyond Syria and the Middle East. Today, ISIL may be losing ground, but this effectively leaves them with fewer restraints to conduct attacks elsewhere. Thus, concluding a diplomatically negotiated settlement within the Geneva framework would be a considerable step towards ending the war and its consequences. However, establishing a sustainable peace requires not only a conclusion of the settlement, but also a longer-term strategy for the country's future governance.

Yet the main parties to the peace negotiations – the al-Assad regime and the opposition as most recently represented by the High Negotiations Committee (HNC) - have so far been unable to agree on a comprehensive vision of post-conflict governance. Moreover, the recent military success of the regime and its supporters (e.g., Russia, Iran, Hezbollah) has eroded their incentive to negotiate a political settlement with the opposition. This essentially renders the centralized power-sharing agreement – based on which the representatives of both sides would be able to participate in the central government (Bakke 2015, 7) - unattainable and the negotiations deadlocked. Therefore, decentralization (i.e., devolving power, responsibilities, and resources from the central to subnational administrative units) as a way to resolve the conflict and achieve long-lasting peace and stability in Syria has increasingly become an object of scholarly debate. According to its proponents, decentralization serves as a more feasible compromise between the

two sides. It enables the regime to maintain its position at the top of the government, provides the opposition members with a modicum of authority, and turns the rigidly centralized and exclusive pre-war governance more flexible and sustainable (Hanna 2015; Yazigi 2016; Lesch 2017).

While the discussion on decentralization in Syria has become more frequent, the amount of academic work on the subject remains somewhat limited. Thus, the purpose of this graduation thesis is to contribute to the discussion by analyzing and critiquing the application of decentralization as a conflict resolution and peacebuilding mechanism in Syria. The hypothesis tested in this paper is that decentralization helps to overcome the deadlock in the Syrian peace process and foster long-term peace and stability in the country by preventing a recurrence of another civil war. To test this hypothesis, the paper relies on a deductive qualitative analysis (DQA) or, in other words, a theory-guided research approach. In DQA, a prior theoretical framework is established in order to develop and test an initial hypothesis. The end goal is to contribute to the existing theory and hypotheses by updating them based on the findings that have emerged during the research. (Gilgun 2008) The theoretical framework in this paper draws on academic and non-academic literature on the history of, political economy, governance, decentralization, and conflict in Syria. In particular, different secondary sources, including a number of books, research papers, articles, and reports are used to conduct a literature review, frame the discussion and draw conclusions regarding post-conflict governance in Syria.

The paper is divided into four chapters. Chapter one provides an overview of the conflict and the Intra-Syrian Peace Process in Geneva. It also establishes a theoretical framework on decentralization and introduces some existing work on implementing the process in Syria. Finally, it investigates decentralization's track record in internally divided and conflict-ridden societies and shows how each case requires an individual approach. Chapter two examines the changes in Syrian governance from the end of former President Hafez al-Assad's rule until the eruption of the protests under his son and successor Bashar al-Assad in 2011. More precisely, it will look at the old social contract which was developed by Hafez al-Assad to maintain his regime's stability and its collapse under Bashar al-Assad. This will help to understand what gave rise to the protests and the civil war in the first place. Chapter three looks at the dynamics on the ground to establish its effects on governance in opposition and regime areas after 2011. This is a crucial part of the research as it provides hints on what could be done to reconstruct a stable country. Chapter four includes a critical discussion on future governance in Syria based on previous observations. Finally, in

consideration of the discussion, some conclusions are drawn to update the existing theory on decentralization in Syria.

In short, the paper concludes that under certain conditions, decentralization can form a potential basis for a peace agreement between the negotiating parties in Geneva as well as foster Syria's long-term peace and stability. This hypothesis appears to be valid when the nature of the process is appealing enough to maintain the regime's will to negotiate on the one hand and address the deep socioeconomic inequality as one of the conflict's root causes on the other. More specifically, excluding the political dimension from the process increases the possibility of achieving the decentralization agreement with the al-Assad regime. It also prevents further fragmentation and incitement of ethnosectarian rhetoric which contradicts the arguments of decentralization proponents. At the same time, a slightly higher level of administrative and fiscal decentralization could help mitigate the socioeconomic grievances and reduce regional disparities. However, it needs to be borne in mind that any form and level of decentralization cannot be implemented in the absence of adequate accountability mechanisms without which the process could worsen the dire humanitarian situation and lead to continued instability.

The paper is subject to two limitations. Firstly, as the war activity persists, the developments on the ground can change and thereby affect the conclusions drawn in the paper. For this reason, the period under observation extends to the end of November 2017. The second limitation concerns the Kurdish question. The Democratic Union Party (PYD) - the leading political party in the Kurdish-controlled northeastern region of Syria (Rojava) - has an influential role in the conflict which suggests that any lasting peace agreement requires the involvement of this party. At the same time, their relative strength and *de facto* autonomy mean that solving the Kurdish question in Syria calls for a more thorough approach which is beyond the scope of this thesis. In other words, Kurdish autonomy is a specific problem that needs to be handled separately from this research. Thus by referring to the opposition, the author means, depending on the context, the HNC or the armed rebel forces in the majority Sunni Arab areas and not the PYD, ISIL or JFS, all of whom have been excluded from the ongoing peace process.

# **1. BACKGROUND**

## **1.1. Overview of the conflict and peace process**

The Syrian conflict erupted in the context of the “Arab Spring” - a wave of anti-regime protests engulfing the Middle East and North Africa in 2010 and 2011. Millions of people took the streets in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Iraq, Yemen, Oman, Bahrain, and Syria to express political, economic, and social grievances and demand reforms. Four entrenched authoritarian leaders were overthrown in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. This, however, was not the case in Syria where the demonstrations eventually developed into a civil war. The Syrian “Arab Spring” began in March 2011 when protests broke out in the country’s southern city of Deraa. The protests were a response to the arrest and torture of a group of schoolboys accused of writing “The people want the fall of the regime” on a public wall. At first, they were quite limited in scope as the residents demanded a trial for the perpetrators and resignation of the governor. However, as the regime’s troops responded with violent means, the initially peaceful demonstrations developed into a mass civil uprising calling for President Bashar al-Assad’s departure. In this sense, the nationwide scale of the movement, inspired by the wider “Arab Spring,” reflected the citizens’ deeper dissatisfaction with the country’s political and socioeconomic situation. (Glass 2016, 35)

The uprising soon escalated into a civil war between the government and the armed opposition which, despite the attempts to organize itself, remains fragmented, localized, and comprises small pockets of territory across Syria (Appendix 2). At the same time, the involvement of regional and international actors has turned the conflict into a proxy war between the supporters of the Syrian government - Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah - and those of the opposition - the United States, its western allies (mainly Britain and France), the Gulf States (Saudi Arabia and Qatar), and Turkey. The uprising also transformed into a religious war between Sunni and Shia Islamists. As early as in April 2011, the uprising was starting to show a religious dimension as Sunni fundamentalists were joining the demonstrations to protest against what they perceived as an “apostate Alawite” regime. As the conflict escalated, this majority Sunni opposition became armed and radicalized.



(Glass 2016, 26, 142-143) In addition to the smaller armed opposition factions, the more dominant extremist Sunni groupings ISIL and the al-Qaeda-affiliated JFS have both been fighting for a cause that does not coincide with the dissidents' original demands for a more democratic Syria.

The primary internationally recognized platform for resolving this conflict is the Intra-Syrian Peace Process facilitated by the UN in Geneva. The negotiations between the government and opposition have so far been indirect as both delegations communicate through a team led by the UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura (Heller 2017). Unlike the diplomatic representatives of the regime, the opposition has varied throughout the peace process. Today, it largely comprises the HNC - an umbrella group comprising 21 members – and the „Cairo“ and „Moscow“ platforms - anti-rebellion dissident groups supported by Russia. Other parties to the negotiations involve 20 regional and international actors referred to as the International Syria Support Group (ISSG). The ISSG first convened in Vienna at the end of 2015 bringing together different stakeholders in Syria, including Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, Turkey, the US, the European Union, and the Arab League.

At the core of the negotiations lies the Geneva Communiqué – a document adopted in June 2012 that sets out principal guidelines for the peace process. Since its adoption, the Communiqué has been a basis for every round of intra-Syrian talks. (Lundgren 2016, 276) In December 2015, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2254 which complemented the Communiqué by putting in place a concrete timeline for establishing “credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance“ (Resolution...2015, 2) within six and drafting a new constitution and organizing UN-supervised elections within 18 months (Ibid.). Regardless of the parties' failure to abide by the timeline, the resolution continues to be the focal point of the peace talks. Also, both documents stress the importance of „sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity“ (Ibid., 1) of Syria. This indicates that avoiding the country's division is essential to both, the opposition and the government which, as it will be discussed later, needs to be taken into account when addressing any governance-related issues.

Today, the opposing parties continue to pursue a comprehensive political settlement, but to no substantive avail. The most significant obstacle to reaching the settlement arises from an impasse over the position of Bashar al-Assad as well as the opposition members in the government of post-war Syria. According to the Communiqué, the “key steps [of a transition in Syria entail] the establishment of a transitional governing body [exercising] executive powers [and including] members of the present government and the opposition ... on the basis of mutual consent” (Final

Communiqué...2012, 4). Adding the clause “mutual consent” to the document means that both, the opposition as well as the regime, need to agree with the composition of the “transitional governing body,” effectively giving both sides the power of veto. Since the opposition does not see a place for al-Assad in the new government and the regime refuses to surrender any authority, the negotiations have resulted in a deadlock (Perry, Balmer 2017). This remains the case regardless of the substitution of the term “transitional governing body” for a more elusive “credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance” in Resolution 2254.

The recent military advances made by the regime and its supporters have further reduced the probability of al-Assad’s departure from the government. Due to Russian military intervention in September 2015 and the assistance provided by Iran, Hezbollah, and other Shia foreign fighters, the government forces have regained a significant amount of territory from the armed opposition (Appendices 1 and 2). The regaining of Aleppo in December 2016 means that together with Damascus, Homs, Hama, Tartus, and Latakia, they are now in control of the country’s largest cities. The string of military victories and the resulting consolidation of control have served to strengthen the regime’s leverage in the peace talks, rendering al-Assad’s resignation highly unlikely. What is more, the approaching military victory could decrease regime’s political will to negotiate a political settlement with the opposition which can, in turn, put the entire peace process at risk (Heller 2017).

Acknowledging the struggle of achieving a centralized power-sharing agreement and, at the same time, the need for a change in governance, several scholars have come up with alternatives to change this heavily centralized, exclusive, and suppressive system of governance. One of the most commonly proposed alternatives is decentralization [i.e., “the restructuring of authority so that there is a system of co-responsibility between institutions of governance at the central, regional and local levels according to the principle of subsidiarity” (Work 2002, 1)]. In order to discuss the effectiveness of decentralization in Syria, it is necessary to define and inspect the concept, provide a brief overview of some of the proposals that have been made so far as well as investigate the process’ track record in other post-conflict societies.

## **1.2. Theoretical framework**

### **1.2.1. Explaining decentralization**

The concept of “decentralization” is generic, comprising different modes and dimensions. There are three primary dimensions of decentralization: political, administrative and fiscal. Political decentralization, sometimes also referred to as federalism, is the transfer of decision-making powers over at least one policy area from the central government to the citizens or their representatives on the lower level (regional or local governments). The term “decision-making powers” means that subnational administrative units can legislate in their area(s) of competence. (Brancati 2009, 6) Administrative decentralization entails the allocation of responsibilities and resources to the regional and local administrative units for the purpose of public service delivery. Fiscal decentralization involves the redistribution of decision-making authority, responsibilities, and resources as regards to revenues, expenditures, and borrowing. (Braun, Grote 2000, 3; Decentralization in...2008, 4) All of them are interconnected, and the process of decentralization is usually a mix of these dimensions each of which is applied to a varying degree. (Choudhry, Stacey 2015, 23) Moreover, one dimension is usually dependent on another. For example, insufficient fiscal decentralization will probably render administrative decentralization ineffective since regional and local governments would have limited access to resources required for adequate public service delivery (Bakke 2015, 255).

The modes of decentralization - deconcentration, delegation, and devolution - determine the level of authority exercised by subnational governments. Deconcentration is the most limited form of decentralization, meaning that responsibilities are distributed within the lower levels of the central government (its regional or local branch offices) whereas officials are usually appointed, not elected (Bird, Vaillancourt 1998, 3; Siegle, O’Mahony 2006, 2). In that case, the central government retains a considerable share of authority or even consolidates it while regional and local governments’ influence on policies continues to be highly limited. (Jari 2010, 25). Delegation, on the other hand, enables subnational governments to seize a modicum of authority in addition to the responsibilities, but remain accountable to the central government since the latter decides over the degree of power allocated. (Ibid.; Decentralization in...2008, 4) Finally, the most extensive form of decentralization – devolution – entails distribution of authority, responsibilities, and resources to the semiautonomous or autonomous subnational governments. In that case, the regional or local governments also receive some political autonomy and become accountable to the local citizens. (Ibid.; Choudhry, Stacey 2015, 24)

In general, the aim of decentralization is to improve the state's responsiveness to the local needs by bringing the decision-making process closer to the citizens. For this reason, decentralization is most commonly associated with enhanced public service delivery. Local governments are usually better informed about local concerns and priorities and can thus respond to them more effectively and with less delay (Ibid.). Also, shifting decision-making powers towards lower levels of governance enables the central government officials to spend more attention on policy-making. (Braun, Grote 2000, 4). It can also serve as an instrument for reducing regional disparities in economic and social development through a more equal distribution of resources. Another potential benefit of decentralization is an increase in local decision-makers' accountability to the citizens and hence the strengthening of citizenship participation. This is especially so when the citizens are able to elect their representatives (Decentralization in...2008, 3).

Decentralization has, however, produced mixed results. One of the main disadvantages that may occur is an increase in corruption and patronage networks since without strong accountability mechanisms local elites can take advantage of their position and capture a share of public resources (Decentralization in...2008, 5). In addition, when a state transfers decision-making authority and responsibilities to local governments with weak financial, human, technical and organizational capacities then the latter will be unable to provide high-quality services to the community (Nikolov 2006, 8-10). Therefore, when certain conditions, such as local accountability mechanisms, capacities or sufficient level of fiscal decentralization, are absent, then devolving powers away from the central government can become counterproductive and lead to poor public service delivery (Sow, Razafimahefa 2015).

There is also another side-effect that may accompany decentralization which has received less attention. According to a study conducted by Steve Hess (2011), decentralization can, in authoritarian countries, improve the existing leadership's resilience. By examining the cases of Kazakhstan, China, Taiwan, and the Philippines, he argues that allocating authority, responsibilities, and resources from central to lower levels of governance essentially creates a structural barrier between the national government and civil unrest in the form of empowered local officials. When the latter has enhanced decision-making powers and resources and is accountable to the local population, then whatever grievances might emerge, they will be directed towards the subnational authorities. This, in turn, prevents the discontent from reaching higher levels and bringing the entire system of governance into question. As a result, the unrest remains localized and does not develop into a nationwide uprising. Consequently, the idea of decentralization has

become more attractive for authoritarian leaders who can use it as means to further consolidate their power.

### **1.2.2. Decentralization in Syria**

Different dimensions and modes of decentralization have also been proposed as a conflict resolution and peacebuilding tool in Syria. For example, Michael Wahid Hanna (2015, 14) writes that “overly centralized outcomes will only perpetuate grievance [and] ensure that current crises are institutionalized.” He thus proposes some form of decentralization as a compromise between the al-Assad regime and the opposition groups. According to him, devolving authority to subnational administrative units accommodates the conflict’s long-lasting effects of fragmentation and ethnosectarian division and thereby contributes to a sustainable peace. While not elaborating on the form and level of autonomy, it can be deduced that he suggests decentralization to a relatively high degree (compared to pre-war governance) by referring to a bottom-up process and taking into account “the country’s radically altered shape” (Ibid., 19). In a situation where the regime lacks in resources, troops, and legitimacy to rebuild a strong centralized state, he sees decentralization as the best possible option for post-war reconstruction and achieving a political settlement.

Jihad Yazigi (2016) has a similar perspective but provides a more detailed account of decentralization in post-war Syria. He also considers political, geographic, and ethnosectarian fragmentation as a persisting problem and demonstrates it with an overview of the multiple new power centers and their diverging systems of governance. For that reason, he argues that the state cannot remain as centralized as it was before the conflict. At the same time, he acknowledges the strong links between different parts of the country and the resulting wish of the majority of Syrians to live in a unified state. However, his proposition is more specific as he recommends some level of political decentralization whereby subnational units (provinces and districts) become political actors. The central government would remain responsible for matters of national importance, such as money supply, foreign relations, and defense. In addition, he proposes a fairer redistribution of the state’s resources, including oil, public sector jobs, and investments which would act to reduce the regional inequalities in economic development. This, along with decentralization, would foster reaching a political solution, rebuilding the country as well as avoiding renewed violence and partition.

Finally, David W. Lesch (2017) contributes to the discussion over future governance in Syria by proposing four possible models of decentralization. Similarly to Hanna and Yazigi, Lesch argues that the regime will not be able to rule the entire country while, at the same time, recognizing the high probability of Bashar al-Assad continuing as the country's leader. Therefore, the political settlement should entail a vision of post-conflict Syria that would be acceptable to both, the opposition as well the regime that needs to surrender at least a modicum of power to satisfy the minimum requirements of the former. In his view, some type and level of decentralization could be part of that vision. He brings out four potential models of decentralization, starting from the one involving the lowest level of autonomy: a centralized unitary state with administrative decentralization, decentralized unitary or federal state with administrative and political decentralization, decentralized unitary state or federal state with asymmetric decentralization, and a highly decentralized federation of regions. These models are not mutually exclusive, meaning that one could, after some time, develop into another (e.g., from only administrative to a political decentralization of powers).

In sum, all three authors have similar viewpoints as regards to conflict resolution and rebuilding a sustainable form of governance. They argue that post-conflict Syria cannot become centralized to the extent it was before the eruption of protests in 2011 regardless of whether the al-Assad regime will continue holding on to its power. This is because the reality of fragmentation will make ruling the whole state highly challenging and risk with further tension and conflict. Decentralization thus serves as the most realistic solution that can accommodate the country's fragmentation while preserving its unity and preventing partition. It is noteworthy that each author has implied to or even highlighted the strength of Syrian national identity and importance of territorial integrity which is in line with the provisions presented in both the Geneva Communiqué and Resolution 2254.

### **1.2.3. Decentralization as a peacebuilding mechanism in internally divided and conflict-ridden countries**

Using decentralization to get the major stakeholders to the negotiating table and conclude a formal peace settlement is one thing, but applying it in a post-conflict setting to foster long-lasting peace and stability is quite another. Decentralization reforms have been applied in several countries that, similarly to Syria, are experiencing conflict due to deep internal cleavages ranging from ethnic and sectarian divisions to political and socioeconomic polarization (e.g., Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Uganda, and former Yugoslavia). The rationale

behind these reforms is that they help to mitigate the divides by providing a higher level of autonomy to the “subnational challengers,” (i.e., “territorially concentrated groups” pursuing higher autonomy from the state) (Bakke 2015, 5) and thereby reduce or even prevent future conflict. However, there still exists a division in academic literature since the debate between the proponents and opponents of applying decentralization as a peacebuilding tool remains inconclusive.

In general, one of the main arguments for decentralized governance largely coincides with that of Hanna, Yazigi, and Lesch in that it serves as a compromise between central governments trying to maintain the state’s unity on the one hand and the subnational challengers pursuing greater autonomy in their own political, economic, and social affairs on the other (Brancati 2009, 3-5). By protecting the challengers’ interests and diffusing tensions that might otherwise arise, this compromise helps to mitigate conflict. In contrast, those arguing against decentralization tend to stress the fact that it has, in some post-conflict societies, had a destabilizing rather than a peace-preserving effect by turning the nationwide conflict into a localized struggle. One of the most frequently cited reasons for this failure is that the contenders for power (regional or local elites) may interpret decentralized power-sharing as a weakness and start pursuing more autonomy from the central authorities. This, in turn, causes additional tensions between the center and periphery. (Siegle, O’Mahony 2006, 10) Another reason is that the empowerment of subnational authorities can strengthen regional and local identities which can, in the worst case scenario, lead to secession and state disintegration. (Ibid., 8; Faguet et al. 2014, 9)

However, as scholars themselves have remarked, decentralization’s capacity to foster long-term peace and stability varies. By relying on ten case studies, Bird and Vaillancourt (1998) argue that generalizations based on the experience of fiscal decentralization in one country cannot be applied to another while expecting a similar outcome. They write that “[t]he essence of decentralization is that it does not occur *in general* but rather in a particular country – in a country with its own history and traditions and its own specific institutional, political, and economic context” (1998, 2). Brancati (2009, 2-5), in her turn, discusses the ability of political decentralization to prevent ethnic conflict and secession and admits that the performance of decentralized governance in terms of conflict deterrence has been mixed. Bakke (2015) maintains that both, the proponents as well as opponents of decentralization present valid theoretical claims supported by empirical evidence. She eventually concludes that there is no optimal level of decentralization that can ameliorate internal divisions and that finding the most suitable level of autonomy even within a single country

can prove highly challenging since regions differ from each other as regards to economic, social, and cultural characteristics. Finally, by differentiating between ethnic and civil conflict, Siegle and O'Mahony (2006) claim that the latter involves fewer factors that can explain decentralization's conflict mitigation effect, suggesting to a certain case specificity.

The mixed track record implies that determining the ability of decentralization to build peace in a divided society like Syria requires a case-by-case approach and a closer look at the country-specific societal factors. These factors include political, economic, social, and cultural characteristics, both past and present that may affect decentralization's peace-preserving capacity (e.g., history, political economy, distribution of wealth, ethnic and sectarian makeup). By taking these factors into account, the paper scrutinizes the propositions above, especially when it comes to Syria's post-war fragmentation presented by the three authors as a factor that calls for decentralization. While agreeing that Syria cannot remain as centralized, exclusive, and suppressive as it was before the conflict, the paper disagrees with the high levels and forms of decentralization suggested. As it will be explained later, they interfere with the peacebuilding process and divert attention away from addressing the socioeconomic heart of the problem that provided the background for the conflict. Without due attention, this heart of the problem could lead to a renewed conflict, violence, and perhaps even to another civil war.



## **2. GOVERNANCE IN PRE-CONFLICT SYRIA: THE COLLAPSE OF THE OLD „SOCIAL CONTRACT“**

The Syrian Arab Republic is a highly authoritarian state with a society that is kept under strict control by the regime. Its structure of governance has essentially remained the same since the seizure of power and passing of the emergency law by the Baath Party in 1963. Radwan Ziadeh (2011, 14-19) describes this structure as a “pyramid-like presidential system” where the head of state is at the top while the three most important state institutions – the administration, the Party, and the military and security structures – are placed below him. Due to the wide powers conferred upon him by the constitution, the President controls all of these institutions. He is the secretary-general of the Party and the commander in chief of the armed forces. He also has the right to dissolve the parliament, appoint, promote, and dismiss, among others, the prime minister, his deputies and other ministers, vice presidents, senior officers of the army, and security chiefs of the intelligence services. (Ibid.; Hinnebusch 2011, 111-112) In general, these three institutions constitute an instrument for the regime to implement its policies and, more importantly, control and contain the society in all of its aspects (Ibid.).

In return for the renunciation of political activity, the late President Hafez al-Assad (ruling from 1970 to 2000) ensured the state’s presence in the people’s lives. The state under his rule became the main employer, investor (e.g., in industry and infrastructure), and a provider of free basic services (e.g., healthcare and education) as well as agricultural and energy subsidies (Azmeah 2014, 8-10). He acknowledged that avoiding poverty and marginalization, especially among the lower strata of the society was crucial as it constituted the regime’s original power base. To that end, he sought to secure the peasants’, the working class’, and the public sector employees’ – mostly based in suburbs and rural areas - interests (Khaddour, Mazur 2013, 4; Elvira, Zintl 2014, 344). One way to mobilize these particular constituencies was through the Baath Party and its mass organizations. Being a member of the Party provided the middle and lower classes with access to the decision-makers to whom they could voice their concerns as well as a social ladder to the senior positions within the state apparatus. (Ziadeh 2011; Hinnebusch 2011) By developing what the academic

literature refers to as a “social contract” which rests on “the state’s provision of social welfare and development in exchange for the population’s renunciation of political participation,” (Elvira, Zintl 2014, 330) he ensured his regime’s stability and contained the civil unrest.

However, the maintenance of this social contract that strived for social stability rather than economic growth was costly and unsustainable especially given that it was funded by the decreasing oil reserves (Azmeah 2014, 10). The state experienced an economic recession that had already begun in the second half of the 1980s and that eventually led to outright stagnation. Syrians’ purchasing power and standard of living went down. As the population was growing rapidly, the unemployment rates increased among young people struggling to enter the labor market. (Baroutt 2011, 7) In addition, the state apparatus was outdated, bureaucratic and inefficient while widespread clientelism, nepotism, and corruption hindered competition, transparency and hence economic development (Ziadeh 2011; Khalaf 2015, 43). What is more, while the regime’s original power base was weakening, an increasing number of members of the Baath Party used it as means to enrich themselves leading to the emergence of a wealthy bureaucratic class dominating the top positions of the state apparatus. (Batatu 1999, 230-232; 123; Baroutt 2011, 6-11) Regardless, the limited political and institutional reforms, promised by the President in 1989, were suspended, contributing to the gradual disintegration of the social contract (Ibid., 14). Consequently, the Syrian political and socioeconomic situation became highly unstable.

Thus when Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father in 2000, he was faced with a country in crisis. Overcoming this crisis required urgent political, economic, institutional and developmental reforms. During the transitional period, he pledged to conduct these reforms as well as to modernize the state, and provide more political freedom. This even led to the “Damascus Spring” – a sociopolitical debate within the civil society and the emergence of political forums. The problem, however, was that these reforms and the ensuing political liberalization might have threatened the pyramidal structure developed by his father and therefore the regime’s authority. It was especially alarming for the “old guard” – the old bureaucratic elite who maintained their position after the death of Hafez al-Assad – who kept resisting Bashar al-Assad’s reform agenda. Conversely, not implementing them would have only worsened the situation and again, become a security risk for the regime. (Hinnebusch 2011, 123; Khalaf 2015, 43) Eventually, al-Assad conducted reforms in a distorted manner by liberalizing the economy, but not making any immediate political, institutional, nor developmental changes. He also retained the loyalist networks with privileged access to political and economic opportunities (Haddad 2011).

As a result, Syria's transformation from central planning to the social market economy was accompanied by several negative implications for large segments of the society. After the adoption of the tenth five-year plan in 2005, the regime decided to implement policies that further strengthened the private sector's role in the economy. However, without any other reforms and due to the persistence of patronage and corruption networks, liberalization brought about a concentration of increased economic activity and wealth in Damascus and other urban centers. What is more, the state began to sideline resulting in cuts in benefits and subsidies and reducing responsibility for providing services and welfare. Based on the changes in the field of charities in Syria, Elvira and Zintl (2014) argue that in order to cut expenditures on social welfare, the regime not only authorized but encouraged the expansion of apolitical charities and thereby outsourced its pro-poor policies. At the same time, a significant amount of loyalist "government-organized nongovernmental organizations" (GO-NGOs) were established to assist in providing social welfare. However, the GO-NGOs prioritized activities that guaranteed some return, such as financing start-ups or training and capacity-building programs. This, in turn, led to the exclusion of the less privileged from their initiatives and left the charities increasingly responsible for poverty alleviation. Although the latter partly managed to mitigate social unrest, the lower classes remained nevertheless underserved.

So instead of improving the standard of living of Syrians from all social classes, the economic reforms and privatization benefitted the higher middle-class, business elites, the urban population as well as those affiliated with the regime (Haddad 2011; Elvira and Zintl 2014). This was mainly the outcome of well-connected people having privileged access to the new opportunities generated by the liberalization and thus capturing a high proportion of the gains. As a result, the wealth gap and socioeconomic inequality between the rich and poor increased, leading to the marginalization of the latter. While there may have been social polarization taking place under Hafez al-Assad, it never occurred to the extent it did during the rule of his son. (Haddad 2011; Khalaf 2015, 45, 60) As Elvira and Zintl bring out, the process of polarization was illustrated by the spatial distribution of the demonstrations that affected small towns and suburbs (e.g., Deraa) before spreading to larger urban centers (e.g., Damascus and Aleppo) (2014, 336). Furthermore, these dynamics help to explain why parts of Syria that were on the margins before 2011 coincide with opposition-held areas while the core of the country remains under government control (Yazigi 2016, 2).

In short, the society under Bashar al-Assad remained suppressed, the difference being that the state withdrew from its traditional role at the expense of the social and economic welfare of important

constituencies - peasants, workers, civil servants, and more generally, people living in suburban and rural areas. This was coupled with a rapid population growth, years-long drought, mismanagement of the water-supply system, and the resulting migration of people from rural to the already overpopulated urban centers as well as high unemployment (Haddad 2011). As a result, the old social contract that had already started to disintegrate at the end of Hafez al-Assad's rule collapsed. This collapse, in turn, helps to explain how the localized unrest transformed into countrywide protests in 2011.

### **3. GOVERNANCE IN POST-CONFLICT SYRIA**

#### **3.1. Governance in opposition-held localities**

Today, governance in non-regime areas is highly fragmented and localized. The opposition has never had an effective central governing body and has thus been unable to form a strong united front. Instead, within each locality, both civilian and military leaders have emerged applying their own, often diverging, methods of governance. This has led to the emergence of independent power-centers in opposition-held areas across Syria. (Khaddour 2017) These divisions are further entrenched by the competition for the funding provided by foreign donors as opposition localities receive the majority of non-UN international aid (Yazigi 2016, 7). Also, the use of extreme force by the government and its supporters has contributed to further Islamization, radicalization, and militarization of the opposition. This, in turn, has given rise to constant infighting among the latter. (Heydemann 2013, 69) Another, perhaps a deeper reason for the opposition's inability to cooperate and govern was the civil society's oppression and depoliticization before the conflict. Consequently, it lacks the necessary experience to organize itself. (Khalaf 2015, 44-45)

The attempts to establish a central governing body have so far been unsuccessful. According to field research and studies on locals' perceptions, the political umbrella groups, such as the National Coalition of the Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (the Coalition) or the Syrian National Council (SNC), have practically no authority nor legitimacy on the ground (Heydemann 2013, 69; Turkmani et al. 2014; Khalaf 2015; Hajjar et al. 2017). For instance, Khalaf argues that Syrians perceive the Coalition as a corrupt entity accountable to and dependent on international donors, such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, it receives its support from. Moreover, given that the Coalition includes Saudi Arabian or Qatari members, it is seen as a tool used by both countries to compete for power in Syria. According to other reports, the political opposition delegations are unaware of the situation on the ground which makes them inadequate to represent the local interest (Turkmani et al. 2014; Hajjar et al. 2017). This is illustrated by a civilian representative in Homs who summarized the failure of the SNC to broker a ceasefire agreement with the government and

secure humanitarian access to the city as follows: “[The members of the SNC] benefit Homs with nothing whatsoever” (Turkmani et al. 2014, 47).

Without an effective centralized leadership, the localities outside the regime’s control have been compelled to fill the governance vacuum to address their residents’ needs. This role has been taken up by different actors, the most dominant ones being the revolutionary Local Administrative Councils (LACs) that have proliferated across opposition-held areas. The first LAC was formed in 2012 in the city of Zabadani in western Syria. This was soon followed by the formation of hundreds of other similar structures in different localities across Syria, including Deraa, Idlib, Homs, and Aleppo. Most councils have turned out to be ineffective and short-lived as was demonstrated by the decrease in the number of LACs from approximately 900 in 2014 to around 395 in 2016. There are some examples, however, that have proven to be relatively successful alternatives to the absent state institutions, such as the councils in Idlib and Aleppo. (El-Meehy 2017, 7) The ones that still exist have, throughout the war, become structurally more institutionalized, professional, and specialized as well as expanded their fields of activities (Hajjar et al. 2017).

Although there is no functioning common authority as a result of which the LACs vary and operate independently, some generalizations based on existing research can be made. Despite the significant financial, technical, and other resource limitations, they all seek to deliver essential goods and services, such as water, food, waste collection, education, and healthcare to the local population as well as resolve and mediate conflicts and ceasefires. Some councils have even undertaken reconstruction projects. (Inside Syria...2016, 12; Hajjar et al. 2017, 13-16) They also represent a highly imperfect form of democratic governance. For example, in some localities, the residents can elect members to the councils. This was the case in Raqqa where around 600 people from the civil society elected a 50-member General Commission for the LAC (Khalaf 2015, 59). It is noteworthy, however, that several LACs tend to be exclusionary as their members mostly include local elites who are selected, rather than elected. Some segments of the society, including women, internally displaced persons, and the poor are often left out. Moreover, the councils’ lack of resources renders them dependent on external donors that can influence their policies. (El-Meehy 2017; Hajjar et al. 2017)

Other actors filling the vacuum include different civil society organizations (CSOs) – in addition to the aforementioned charities and GO-NGOs - whose multiplicity and active participation in the community life marks a significant revival of the civil society. Similarly to the LACs, their primary

task remains the delivery of basic services within localities to address the growing needs of the residents. At the same time, their fields of activities have expanded from charity – the main collective action authorized by the regime before the conflict – to other areas, such as educational, social, developmental, awareness-raising, rights-based, and even political work (Khalaf et al. 2014, 35-36). It must be pointed out that many organizations formed during the conflict are still relatively nascent with next to no experience as well as financial, human, and technical resources. They are also operating under extreme circumstances that are defined by different armed and jihadist factions and military tactics employed by the regime. (Syrian Civil...2017) Many CSOs have, however, effectively replaced the state institutions and are thereby challenging the formerly exclusive and undemocratic governance (Khalaf et al. 2014, 50). This is unprecedented in a country where civil activities have been under a strict control of the regime for decades.

Traditional community leaders, such as prominent families, religious and tribal figures, merchants, and other notables, constitute an additional group of local power-brokers. These power-brokers have been dominating the local political scene since the Ottoman times, and their bond with the rest of the community has persisted regardless of the regime's decades-long attempt to break it (Chatty 2010). While tribal bonds have weakened with time, they remain relatively strong and offer community members with "solidarity and cohesiveness" (Ibid.; 29; Baroutt 2011, 2). This continues to be the case during the conflict which has only served to strengthen these bonds. In addition to providing social cohesiveness, several local leaders have assumed the role of containing and resolving problems as well as mediating between different fighting groups (Inside Syria...2016, 7).

### **3.2. Governance in regime-held localities**

Governance in regime-controlled areas has not changed so radically and remains similar to that of the pre-conflict era. The state continues to be the leading employer, investor, a provider of goods and services as well as a guarantor of public security. It supplies residents in both, regime- and opposition-held localities with water, fuel, electricity, healthcare, education and other necessities. Also, around 50 percent of active labor force work in the public sector, meaning that their livelihoods depend on the government. (Yazigi 2016, 3-4) At the same time, the government officials have slightly changed their pre-war approach towards economic and social policy and adopted a more populist rhetoric. They have started to reassert the state's former role as "an agent of redistribution and provider of economic security" (Heydemann 2013, 68) and shift the blame

for the widespread unrest onto the economic liberalization reforms initiated in 2005. (Ibid., 62-8) The rationale behind this change is the idea that providing at least some normalcy and predictability, especially in the context of a war-time chaos and a dire humanitarian situation, has become one of the regime's primary sources of legitimacy and means to contain the population (Khalaf 2015, 44; Yazigi 2016,4).

However, the collapse of the country's economy and infrastructure as well as the depletion of resources has made it difficult to sustain this policy, pushing Bashar al-Assad to seek alternative sources of support. The regime has, throughout the war, relied on the support provided by Russia, Iran, and different international organizations. It has also started to subcontract local governance to different local actors. These actors include loyalist militias that often resort to criminal practices and the paramilitary - the National Defence Forces - that have been incorporated into the regime's security apparatus. Together they assist the regime in maintaining control and protecting its interests. (Heydemann 2013) Also, little has been written about the regime's networks of unofficial local intermediaries. According to Khaddour (2017), these networks were already developed under Hafez al-Assad who, in his effort to curtail the influence of the abovementioned traditional community leaders, offered them positions at local administrative structures. While not gaining any actual decision-making powers, these leaders became contact points between Damascus and their communities.

After the outbreak of the armed conflict, Bashar al-Assad has been seeking to expand these networks further. Yet due to the length and brutality of the conflict, their substance and the extent to which these intermediaries are allowed to make independent decisions have changed. This is because al-Assad would be unable to provide goods and services without their assistance. Khaddour illustrates this with the example of the city of Hama. Those living in Hama never witnessed the sort of violent government suppression that took place in several other localities, such as Deraa. Instead, from the beginning of the conflict, the regime has been trying to ensure the supply of goods and services in order to maintain control over this isolated city. The delivery of goods and services in Hama has mainly become the task of prominent and well-connected mercantile families who have always been at the center of the city's social structure. As a result, these intermediaries have been cooperating with the government's representatives in the city and thereby gained more decision-making authority as well as legitimacy, all of which would have been difficult to imagine before 2011.



## **4. DISCUSSION: DECENTRALIZATION AS A CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND PEACEBUILDING MECHANISM IN SYRIA**

### **4.1. No returning to the pre-conflict governance**

Taking into account the political and socioeconomic trends before the conflict as well as the current dynamics on the ground, some conclusions regarding the appropriate post-conflict governance in Syria can be drawn. Despite its military success, possession of more advanced state institutions and availability of resources when compared to the opposition, the al-Assad regime cannot afford a return to the *status quo ante*. This is because governance that fosters political and socioeconomic exclusion of large segments of the society would pose a long-term risk to its stability and sustainability. On the one hand, it can be argued that the regime's track record of conducting substantive structural changes is not promising as was proven by the suppression of the "Damascus Spring" in 2001 as well as not introducing any additional reforms to the economic deregulation measures in 2005. On the other hand, the circumstances under which the regime was making these decisions were entirely different. Today, the country is experiencing real political, economic, and social disintegration.

The physical destruction of the country's infrastructure (e.g., roads, bridges, wells, power plants, hospitals, and schools) has had a considerable negative impact on the country's economic indicators as have the international diplomatic and economic sanctions. For example, between 2010 and 2015, Syrian currency depreciated by more than 400 percent with one US dollar being worth more than 200 Syrian pounds. As a result of currency depreciation and high transportation costs, the inflation reached 58 percent in 2016. (The Toll of...2017) The unemployment rates have exceeded 50 percent as factories and businesses are being closed down, looted or destroyed completely (Cohen 2016, 18). By 2015, Syria's GDP has contracted by more than half (61 percent) when compared to what was in 2011 and given the length of the conflict it may take at least two decades for the country to regain its pre-conflict level of real GDP (Gobat, Kostial 2016; The Toll of...2017, 54). The GDP contraction is expected given the sharp decline in most of its components:

private consumption, capital investment, and net exports. In addition, an increase in public expenditures, especially on military spending, provision of goods and services, salaries and imports, and a simultaneous decrease in revenues has considerably escalated the budget deficit and public debt. (Ibid., Cohen 2016, 16-19)

Similarly, the war has severely hindered and reversed Syria's social development. Due to the economic recession accompanied by widespread unemployment, loss of property, as well as rising prices of food and nonfood necessities, millions of people now live in poverty. According to the Syrian Centre for Policy Research (2014), about 83 percent of people lived below the poverty line by the end of 2014, whereas this indicator was higher (nearly 90 percent) in conflict zones, such as Raqqa. Furthermore, primary school attendance has dropped by more than half mainly because of damaged and inadequate educational infrastructure, lack of staff, and security concerns. As a result, almost an entire generation of children are being left without proper education. (Ibid.) Also, an increasing number of hospitals and healthcare facilities are being shut down or destroyed and those still functioning are lacking in medical professionals, equipment, and medicines (Gobat, Kostial 2016, 8). Coupling that with limited access to food, safe drinking water, sanitation and outbreaks of diseases, then a five-year decline in life expectancy between 2010 and 2016 (Ibid.; The Toll of ...2017, 83-84) is not unexpected. The current life expectancy of 69.5 years was previously recorded three decades ago in 1988 (Ibid.).

The loss of lives and major demographic shifts cannot be overlooked either. Although determining the death toll is complicated and the number varies in different sources, then according to UN estimates, it exceeds 400,000 (Refugees...2017). The death toll is even higher when taking into consideration the casualties due to insufficient healthcare, such as deaths from heart attacks and chronic illnesses (The Toll of...2017, 47). Moreover, the demographic changes resulting from the war have led to the biggest refugee crisis since the WWII. Approximately 6.3 million Syrians have become internally displaced while another 5.5 million have escaped to neighboring countries (e.g., Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt) or Europe. (Refugees...2017). These trends will have severe implications for post-conflict Syria, especially when it comes to economic recovery. The continuation of migration on this scale will drain the country's (qualified) workforce which will, in turn, affect the economy's capacity to produce and consume (Cohen 2016). Making matters worse is the duration of a long-term exile for a large number of refugees that have stayed in their asylum countries for more than five years as is the case with many Syrians. This protracted refugee situation can last more than 20 years. (Global Trends...2017, 22)

This rudimentary overview of the conflict's main implications gives some idea of the current state of disintegration and the effects it will have on Syria for years to come. The loss of life, economic recession, labor shortages and brain-drain arising from mass migration, widespread poverty, and inequality, not to mention the continuation of insurgency and sectarian strife, are just some of the factors that will challenge the country's recovery. For this reason, the regime's military success or even victory should not be overestimated as it does not automatically ensure its survival in the long-run. A victory would only be one step towards consolidation of the power, legitimacy, and stability it once enjoyed. Further steps should include the reduction of political and socioeconomic polarization that contributed to the eruption of protests in 2011 and that the ensuing war has only served to exacerbate. Parasiliti et al. (2017, 10-11) argue that in order ensure the people's support for the transition process, they need to associate it with an improvement in their lives. It is thus essential that the millions of Syrians who are crucial for rebuilding the country, but who have become externally displaced, witness at least some improvement by the state in the aftermath of the conflict.

One of the lessons learned from the collapse of the old social contract and the following uprising is that implementing superficial reforms that fail to address the widespread grievances undermines the regime's stability. As the management of problems and their consequences are postponed to the more distant future, they become difficult to resolve. For instance, while Syrian leadership continued to suppress political freedom and the socioeconomic conditions among the marginalized segments of the society worsened, a popular unrest became inevitable. As the unrest developed into a civil war, the regime lost control over the situation even when resorting to armed forces and heavy artillery. Therefore, unless genuine political and socioeconomic reforms are conducted, there will be no guarantee against another civil war. According to the 2011 World Development Report, 90 percent of the civil wars of the last decade was a recurrence of a previous one. Moreover, in many of these countries, the violence persisted even after the conclusion of a peace agreement. The report confirms that the primary driver of this renewed violence is often the inability of both state and nonstate institutions to provide security, justice, and economic welfare. (2011, 2-8)

That Syria has long needed genuine reforms is illustrated by Haddad who back in 2011 argued that the *status quo* was unsustainable already before the protests. He wrote that regardless of how the protests would end, the political and economic problems required urgent attention. He also added that even the seemingly defiant al-Assad regime could be undermined by the extent of the social

unrest. The regime may have secured its position for the time being, but the fact that the localized protests in Deraa quickly spiraled out of control and developed into a nationwide uprising threatening to overthrow the leadership only confirms this. Moreover, it proves that even if the protests had been suppressed, the regime would have still needed to implement not only economic but also administrative and legal policy changes to facilitate economic productivity and thereby secure at least some degree of social stability and legitimacy. The war activity and its effects should not overshadow the indispensability of these policy changes.

## **4.2. The challenges of decentralization**

While the compromise nature makes it an appealing alternative, decentralization as an effective conflict resolution as well as prevention strategy requires certain conditions. Hence the conclusion that this option is the most appropriate for the situation in Syria demands further scrutiny. On the one hand, the issues raised by Lesch, Yazigi, and Hanna, such as the infeasibility of re-establishing a highly centralized national government and fragmentation, are valid and call for urgent attention. Indeed, sectarian divisions have entrenched, and conflicts between different communities have become increasingly common through the course of the war. The influx of Shia and Sunni foreign fighters from across continents, the proxy war between regional powers - Iran and Saudi Arabia – as well as the prolonged violence that has been marginalizing and radicalizing people, have all contributed to this deeper polarization of Syrian society. Also, the high level of internal displacement has induced segregation and sectarian-motivated crimes within otherwise diverse communities (Heydemann 2013, 65). This rising sectarianism is summarized by Charles Glass who writes that “people who thought of themselves in 2010 as Syrians have become Sunnis, Druze, Christians or Alawites” (2016, 55).

On the other hand, it must be highlighted that these divisions are a symptom rather than a cause and that any adequate long-term solution cannot neglect the underlying factors that led to the unrest in the first place. As all three authors bring out, Syrians continue to have a strong sense of national unity. People from different sects and ethnicities – the Sunni Arabs, Alawi, Druze, and Ismaili Shiites, Sunni and Yazidi Kurds and Catholic and Orthodox Christians - have existed side by side since the Ottoman times. Living under authoritarian rule that has been imposing a single Arab identity has further strengthened this unity. More than six years of war and the accompanying sectarian strife has not induced any considerable secessionist sentiments either (Hanna 2015). What this indicates is that sectarian rhetoric is not inherent in contemporary Syrian society, but

something that occurs due to calamities. Mohammad Jamal Baroutt (2011), who analyzes pre-conflict Deraa, argues that while urbanization has severed traditional bonds within the community, they tend to reappear during difficult times and become capable of mobilizing people. These bonds provide the community members with a social safety net not ensured by the state. If this safety net were provided by the state, the society would not be so susceptible to widespread unrest and the resulting rise in sectarian incitement.

Similar logic can be applied to the events that occurred in the city of Hama almost three decades ago. In February 1982, the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood initiated a revolt aiming to induce a popular uprising, overthrow the al-Assad regime, and take power. The general notion is that the revolt pitted the Sunnis against the Alawites, threatening to escalate into civil war (Lefevre 2013). The rebellion was confronted as violently by the regime in 1982 as it was in 2011 with casualties amounting to around 10,000-25,000 people (Report from Amnesty...1983, 37). Yet unlike in 2011, the rebellion did not descend into an all-out civil war. While it can be argued that the state's response discouraged Syrians from taking any further action, the social contract might have also had its role in preventing the uprising from becoming widespread. As noted above, the contract kept Syrians from expressing dissent and provided them with a social protection mechanism in return. Although far from perfect, this arrangement ensured that unrest never became a mobilizing power and thereby an existential threat to the regime. The same, however, cannot be said about Bashar al-Assad under whose rule dissent was not only suppressed, but a big part of the society became more marginalized than ever. It was thus expected in 2011 for the society to be so vulnerable to large-scale discontent and sectarian strife.

The relatively high level of decentralization (devolution) can, however, undermine re-establishing this protection mechanism and thus compromise the country's post-conflict stability. While Hanna, Yazigi, and Lesch may be correct in arguing that decentralization accommodates the reality of fragmentation in Syria, it can also worsen it. As chapter three brings out, areas controlled by the opposition are fragmented and localized, and competition is prevalent not only between but within the localities. The reawakened civil society actors that are primarily responsible for filling the governance vacuum in these areas are lacking in necessary resources and experience. Although six years of conflict and the absence of government institutions have served to compensate for this missing experience, it often revolves around public service provision rather than inclusive and independent democratic governance and policy-making. Furthermore, the life in government areas may resemble normalcy, but this crucial source of regime's legitimacy rests on numerous local

leaders (militias, paramilitary, and civilian intermediaries). As all three authors point out, the regime's dependency on these local leaders has decreased its influence while empowered the latter. The conclusion that Bashar al-Assad will be unable to reassert his control is therefore valid, but this is not necessarily an argument for decentralization given that these fragmented and competing power centers with deficient capacities are going to be at the heart of the bottom-up reconstruction.

Khalaf et al. (2014, 28) argue that although decentralization is not a problematic process in itself, it becomes one when implemented without a robust system in place. Since there is no robust system outside regime control that would facilitate cooperation, localities in these areas may become increasingly competitive. This could lead regional and local authorities to lower the (labor) standards and mismanage public resources to attract capital investment to their localities. (Choudhry, Stacey...2015, 18) What is more, chapter one highlights that weak financial, organizational, technical, and human capacities result in the poor fulfillment of responsibilities (e.g., public service provision) and increase the risk of renewed conflict. Inadequate accountability mechanisms that enable local elites to capture a share of public resources and engage in corruption have the same effect. (Siegle, O'Mahony 2006, 52-53) Consequently, Syrians could start turning to informal networks – family, tribal and religious leaders – that replace the otherwise state-provided social protection mechanism as happened at the end of the 2000s (Elvira and Zintl 2014, 335). This, as noted earlier, erodes national identity and strengthens sectarian ones. So by excessively focusing on the implications and failing to address the underlying causes, decentralization in post-war Syria can further stir up the sectarian rhetoric and thereby create a downward spiral.

Finally, there remains the issue of reaching an agreement on post-conflict governance with the regime. From a realistic point of view, its strong will to maintain control and the current dynamics on the ground indicate that the probability of Syria becoming considerably more decentralized is marginal. The regime would only devolve power to the extent that does not threaten its central authority and fundamental nature (Samaha 2017). However, decentralizing governance to the degree it is often proposed, essentially means that it would have to give up more power than it is willing to. Yet given the government's and its supporters' gaining of momentum as well as its significant leverage at the peace negotiations, it is not forced to make any unprecedented concessions. It is therefore crucial that the opposition, its international backers, and policy-makers would recognize this reality and provide a solution that accommodates the diverging interests of

both sides. This requires a vision of future governance in Syria that would promote inclusiveness on the one hand and motivate the regime to negotiate on the other.

### **4.3. Preliminary conclusions**

Based on the discussion above, this subchapter draws the following preliminary conclusions. Firstly, the approaching military victory and accompanying diplomatic leverage suggest that ending the conflict peacefully in the near-term requires concessions that would motivate the regime and its supporters to conclude a political agreement. Also, as explained above, decentralization to a high degree and reconstructing the state using bottom-up rather than top-down approach, could risk ineffective and inefficient public service provision. This could, in turn, foster instability. For these reasons, keeping Syria politically centralized appears to be the most reasonable option, at least for the time being. Once the country is more stable and recovering from the conflict, limited political decentralization (e.g., local elections) might serve as a helpful strategy to reduce the population's political grievances. Today, however, this option is not only unattainable but also detrimental to the war-torn society. Given that the absence of political decentralization enables the regime to retain its position and have significant political authority, this option may be unattractive for the opposition that continues to demand Bashar al-Assad's resignation. However, it can also be argued that at this point, any solution that brings the six-year-war closer to an end would make people better off than the prolonged conflict and its increasing human, social, and economic cost – a reality recognized by many Syrians themselves (Vohra 2017).

Secondly, the collapse of the old social contract and its role in the eruption of the uprising demonstrate the importance of addressing the issue of socioeconomic disparity. The civil war and its implications have led scholars to propose solutions seeking to accommodate wartime realities, such as political and ethnosectarian fragmentation. Although critical, it has directed attention away from the root of the problem. As discussed above, the state's inability to ensure that macroeconomic gains reach the entire population and not just some segments of the society was a major source of the country's social, and hence political instability. Yazigi himself points out the need for reducing regional disparities in socioeconomic development. He argues that the key to this will be a fairer distribution of the country's resources (e.g., oil, wheat, and cotton), public sector jobs and investment between its provinces. (2016) Also, chapter two shows how contributing to the social development and containing poverty is a historically important task of

the Syrian state, albeit its end goal of consolidating the regime's control. It could, therefore, be argued that reassuming this task and striving towards social acceptance could help re-establish the state's and thus the country's long-term stability.

The data provided in this paper suggests that gradual and limited decentralization could assist in achieving this task. Excluding the political dimension from the decentralization process does not rule out the possibility of administrative (the allocation of responsibilities, and resources for the purpose of public service delivery) and fiscal (the redistribution of decision-making authority as regards to revenues, expenditures, and borrowing) decentralization. Devolving a slightly higher degree of administrative and fiscal authority to subnational administrative units could have a positive impact on the country's socioeconomic development. As per chapter one, local authorities are in direct contact with the people which enables them to provide tailored responses to suit the local needs. Accordingly, decentralization is often associated with improved public service delivery. Effective and efficient public service delivery becomes even more relevant when considering the acuteness of the ongoing humanitarian crisis. Greater attention in the form of empowered local authorities could help contain this ever-worsening humanitarian situation and the reversed progress as well as fight the rising levels of poverty that today exceed 80 percent. In specific terms, this would require moving away from deconcentration and towards delegation (providing subnational administrative units with a modicum of authority while keeping them accountable to Damascus).

Thirdly, from a peacebuilding point of view, it is crucial to take into account that extensive decentralization could, counterproductively, lead to increased corruption and clientelism. When addressing this issue in Syria, it might be of help to consider it in an authoritarian context. Based on the study by Steve Hess (2011), devolving powers in authoritarian countries may strengthen the regime's resilience because any dissatisfaction is directed towards the empowered local authorities, as opposed to the central leadership. This essentially prevents small-scale unrest from targeting the central government and becoming nationwide. In short, the higher the level of decentralization, the more it protects the authoritarian ruler. This study indicates that lower level of decentralization may increase the al-Assad regime's accountability to the people. When the local authorities' power is constrained, the frustration would probably be directed towards the central leadership - a tendency proved by the events of 2011. The desire to maintain its stability would motivate the regime to ensure that the local authorities produce results in terms of economic and social development. In essence, this serves as an accountability mechanism preventing the



local elites from taking advantage of their position. Devolving powers to a large degree could, however, compromise this mechanism and hence the entire peacebuilding process.

Finally, the regime's strong leverage may render the achievement of the decentralization agreement challenging, but the influence of the opposition supporters cannot be underestimated either. The evidence illustrated by chapter three implies that the regime is aware that military tactics' alone will not ensure its long-term survival. The provision of goods and services, public sector jobs, and investments proves that obtaining the acquiescence of Syrians remains one of its key policies. This is the case regardless of its limited resources and rising public debt as a result of which local governance is increasingly outsourced to other actors. The high economic, social, and human toll inflicted by the war suggest that the state is likely to require significant foreign support to sustain this policy after the conflict. By taking advantage of this reality, opposition-supporting powers have the opportunity to use conditional aid and lifting of sanctions as leverage to overcome the deadlock in the peace talks as well as to ensure the implementation of necessary reforms. However, as argued above, when the opposition continues to demand Bashar al-Assad's departure and political decentralization of the country, this leverage could be undermined. Therefore, as long as the demands center on the administrative and fiscal decentralization that do not threaten the regime's authority, there remains room for negotiation and possibly concluding a political agreement.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis aimed to gain further insight into decentralization as a conflict resolution and peacebuilding mechanism in Syria. In March 2018, the civil war that has drawn in a variety of domestic and foreign actors and resulted in far-reaching consequences will enter its seventh year. Yet despite more than six years of conflict, the al-Assad regime and the opposition have been unable to reach a lasting peace deal, not to mention a vision of future governance. The centralized power-sharing agreement incorporated into the Geneva peace process has not only failed to gain traction but has also created a deadlock. Consequently, decentralization has become a frequently proposed alternative to replace this power-sharing agreement and facilitate reaching a compromise between the warring sides. The supporters of decentralization also see it as an instrument that enables to reconstruct the highly fragmented country while avoiding complete partition. By building on these arguments, this paper sought to determine the applicability of these ideas and tested a hypothesis according to which decentralization helps to break the impasse in the peace negotiations and achieve long-term peace and stability in Syria by preventing the recurrence of another civil war.

To understand why the localized unrest in Deraa escalated into a nationwide uprising, the paper looked back at pre-war governance in Syria. What appeared was a noticeable shift in the organization of the country's political economy starting at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and lasting throughout the 2000s. For three decades, Hafez al-Assad managed to retain control over the society by relying on a so-called compromise. According to the compromise, the society surrendered political participation in return for socioeconomic welfare. Yet the high cost and unsustainable funding of the welfare policies as well as bureaucracy, corruption, nepotism, and economic decline began to undermine this arrangement. His son and successor Bashar al-Assad saw economic deregulation, privatization, and outsourcing of welfare provision as the most appropriate way to tackle the resulting crisis. This step, however, turned out to be counterproductive since without any administrative, legal, and developmental changes the wealth concentrated into the hands of a privileged few. Thus, the gap between the rich and the poor increased while political exclusion

and suppression persisted. The “social contract” that had sustained the regime under Hafez al-Assad eventually came undone, and the Syrian “Arab Spring” came to reflect the grievances it caused.

Today, life in regime areas resembles somewhat pre-war governance, while territories controlled by the opposition where the state has, for a large part, withdrawn are witnessing the emergence of competing power-brokers (military and traditional leaders, Islamist groups, LACs, and CSOs). On the one hand, several actors in these opposition areas are challenging the formerly centralized, exclusive, and suppressing form of governance as well as experimenting with democracy. On the other, the absence of a functioning central leadership leaves these areas highly fragmented, localized, and incapable of effective cooperation. This is in addition to their lacking experience, resources, and capacities. At the same time, the regime may be ostensibly more resourceful and coordinated in its efforts, but it still depends on different foreign (Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah) and local players (militias, paramilitary, and intermediaries) to maintain authority and legitimacy. This indicates that the regime’s strength cannot be overstated. Its reliance on other actors and competition from the local leaders means that regaining control and ruling the whole of Syria after achieving a military victory is far from certain.

The observations derived from Syria’s recent history and postwar realities led to two partly conflicting conclusions. Avoiding renewed tension and civil war calls for less centralized and exclusive governance. In that regard, the author agrees with the advocates of decentralization. To secure Syria’s as well as the regime’s stability, people need to see that socioeconomic conditions are improving and that the macroeconomic gains from the country’s recovery reach the entire population. This would, of course, require additional administrative and developmental reforms. However, decentralization, especially when applied in a fragmented country, carries significant risks. Instead of helping to re-establish the much needed social safety net, empowering subnational administrative units to a great degree could, under current circumstances, worsen the socioeconomic plight and hence ethnosectarian violence. Thus the author disagrees with scholars who argue that substantial decentralization and accommodating the fragmentation as a lasting effect of the war will prevent new cycles of violence. Moreover, the outside support has led the regime to regain control over several opposition areas. The accompanying diplomatic leverage would make the opposition’s demand for decentralization a highly challenging objective.

These conclusions do not refute the hypothesis. They do, however, provide some adjustments. Decentralization could indeed form a potential basis for a peace settlement between the negotiating

parties in Geneva as well as establish long-lasting peace and stability in Syria, but only under certain conditions. Again, implementing large-scale political decentralization, such as devolution, is not only highly unlikely but also detrimental to the country's stability. What is more, a recent study claims that high levels of decentralization could, in fact, strengthen the authoritarian leadership's resilience and decrease its accountability to the citizens. At the same time, this does not rule out other forms and levels of decentralization. Over time when violence along with extreme fragmentation recedes, it is essential that post-conflict governance would address the socioeconomic inequality. In that sense, limited administrative and fiscal decentralization (e.g., delegation) as means to improve municipal authorities' responsiveness to the local needs and thereby reduce the gap between the wealthy and the poor could contribute to reconciling and reconstructing the country. This is provided that adequate accountability mechanisms exist. More generally, the entire process needs to be acceptable to the regime while also recognizing and handling the issue of polarization.

It remains to be seen which path Syria will actually take. However, the undeniably extensive fragmentation means that post-war governance will be more decentralized than prior to the conflict regardless of whether it will be *de facto* implemented or not. The key to a sustainable outcome is to knowingly manage the process and avoid the governance vacuum that has been and will continue to be filled by alternative actors many of whom resort to criminal or extremist practices. When neglected, this vacuum could not only contribute to the already widespread grievances and marginalization but also pose a security threat that extends beyond Syria and the Middle East. When carefully managed, decentralization could indeed constitute a pathway towards sustainable peace in Syria. In time, the process could develop further and become more than a compromise that leaves the society politically excluded. It could even empower the nascent civil society initiatives that have emerged during the war. Nonetheless, like any successful peacebuilding process, decentralization could only be implemented gradually and, more importantly, under suitable conditions.

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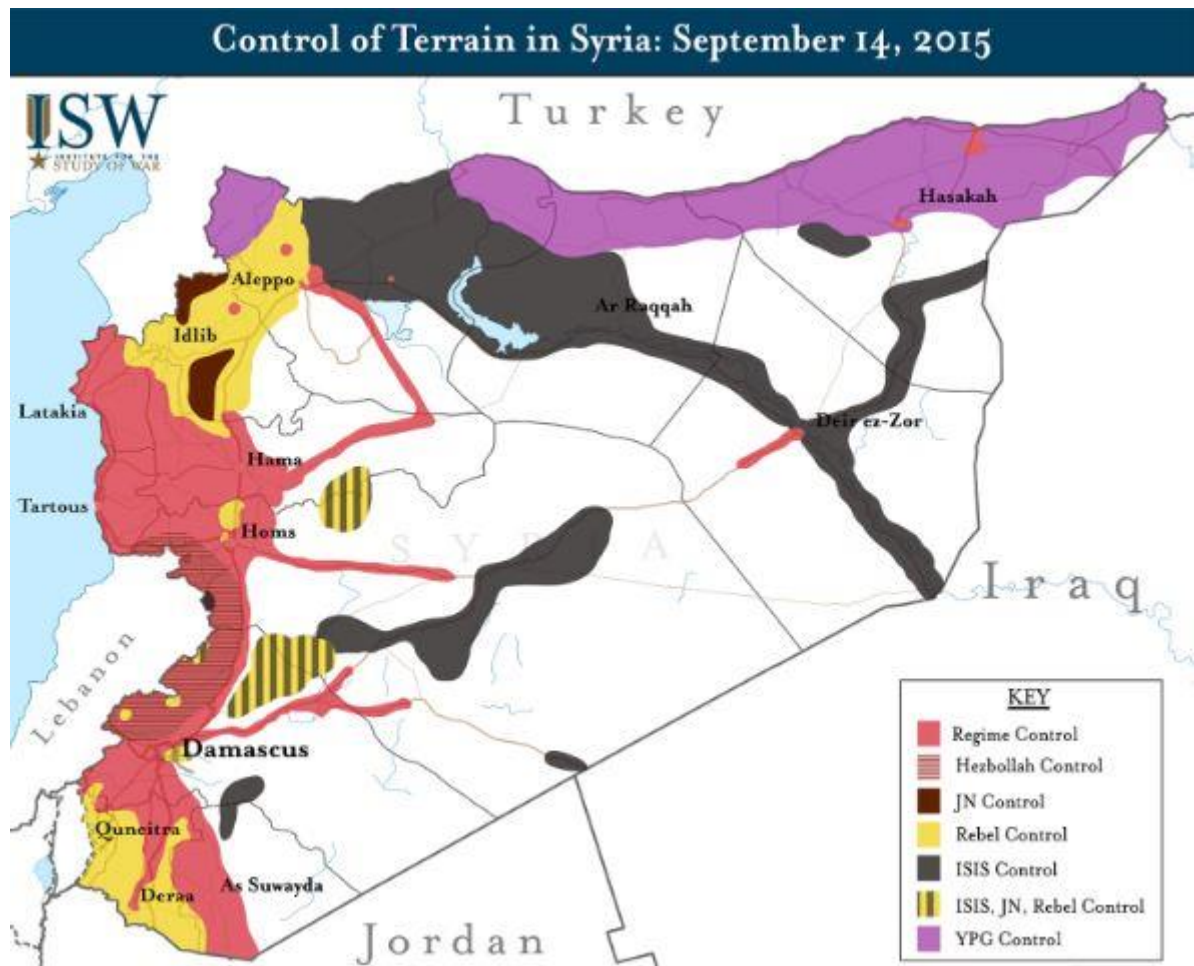
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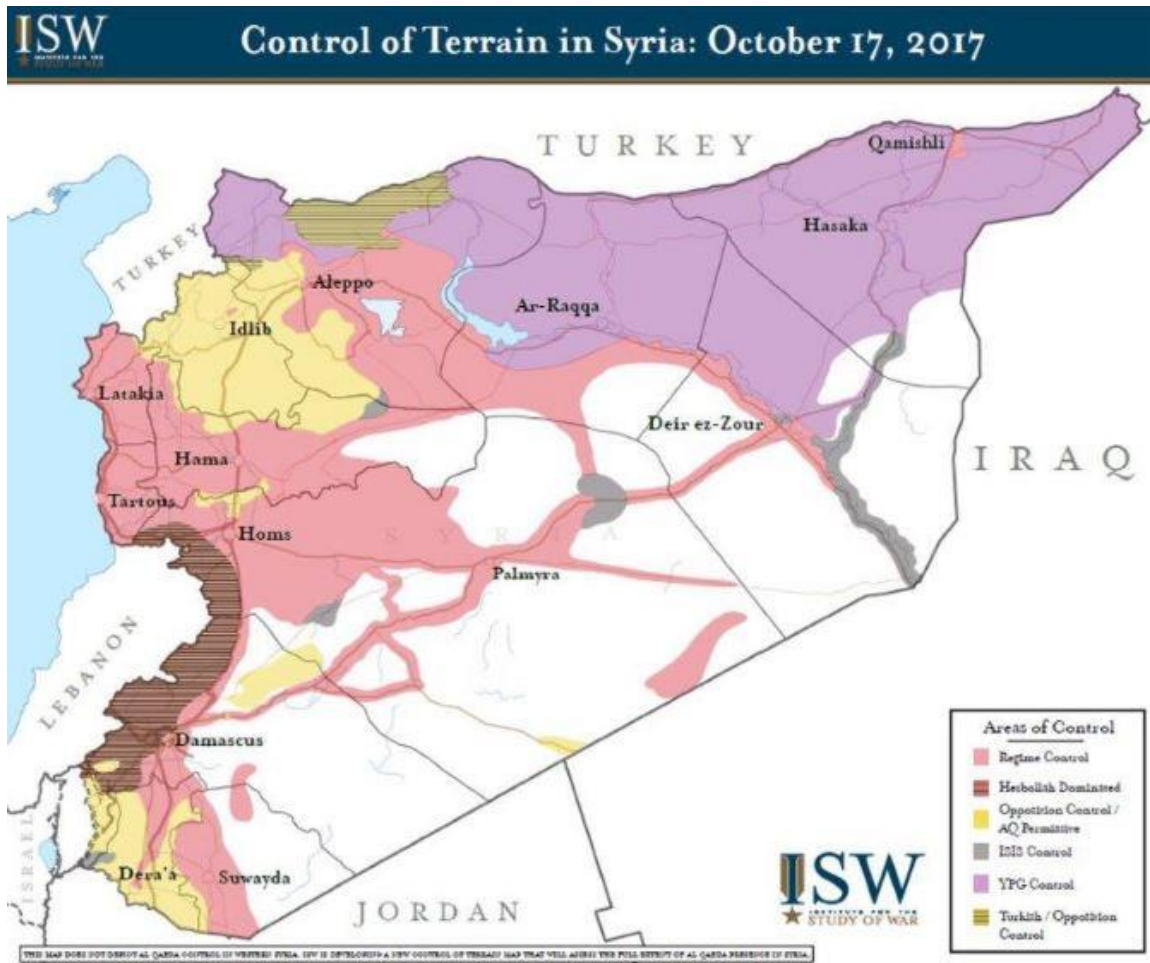
# APPENDICES

## Appendix 1. Control of Terrain in Syria: September 14, 2015



Source: Institute for the Study of War (2015)

## Appendix 2. Control of Terrain in Syria: October 17, 2017



Source: Institute for the Study of War (2017)