EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ongoing civil war in Syria is plagued by a set of structural factors that make the termination of this conflict a far-off prospect. The fragmentation of opposition forces along ethnic and sectarian lines and high levels of violence mean that negotiations have a low probability of success. Additionally, the Assad regime is unified and receives kinetic support from Iran and Hezbollah and a steady stream of weapons from Russia, while Western and other states’ support for opposition forces through shipments of weapons and other supplies has less of an impact. This polarization of outside actors and their willingness to provide arms and other forms of support has fueled the conflict. Finally, all sides still believe they can win and feel little inclination to give away concessions through negotiation. Together, these factors indicate that the Syrian civil war will not end soon.

In this context, we sought to learn lessons from previous conflicts that exhibited similar complicating factors. The historical cases we analyzed provide insight into the possible future developments of the Syrian civil war and suggest key trends in civil war termination. The research was guided by the following question: What lessons can be drawn from civil wars of the past 40 years, especially regarding their termination, that will inform our understanding of possible future developments in the Syrian civil war?

In pursuing answers to this question, we compiled a dataset containing 42 cases of civil war since 1974, which were evaluated based on 49 variables regarding causes, conflict structure, turning points, and termination. These cases were analyzed in parallel with Syria, which suggested that it is the structure of the conflict, not causes, that most influences the available pathways (turning points) to termination. Here, “structure” refers to those issues and conditions that drive and shape a conflict, including the nature of the groups involved, their fighting tactics, and other features. In Syria, the conflict is structured by ethnic and religious tensions, rebel fragmentation, and foreign involvement by state and non-state actors. Using these factors, seven cases of particular relevance to Syria were identified and selected for in-depth qualitative analysis: Afghanistan, Bosnia, Iraq, Lebanon, Mali, Sudan, and Tajikistan.

The lessons learned from these seven historical cases, as well as the larger set of post-1974 civil wars, led to the formulation of an overarching conclusion: The most prevalent factor in ending civil wars is foreign involvement; however, when the recipient of the foreign involvement is a fragmented force, it will be ineffective in terminating the war.
Introduction

Substantial scholarly and government research has sought to understand how civil wars terminate. In the current Syrian conflict, ethnic and religious tensions, fragmented opposition, and foreign involvement make the question of civil war termination especially difficult to answer. With over 125,000 deaths in the conflict to date, the price for finding a solution to the ongoing violence continues to rise. The research conducted for this study sought to lend a historical perspective to efforts attempting to bring the Syrian civil war to its conclusion by asking the following question: What lessons can be drawn from civil wars of the past 40 years, especially regarding their termination, that will inform our understanding of possible future developments in the Syrian civil war?

We investigated seven cases of civil war that exhibited factors similar to those present in Syria using both quantitative and qualitative methods. These case studies included civil wars in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Iraq, Lebanon, Mali, Sudan, and Tajikistan. Each conflict demonstrated structural factors that fundamentally shaped the processes that led to their termination. From analysis of these factors, we conclude that the most prevalent factor in ending civil wars is foreign involvement; however, when the recipient of the foreign involvement is a fragmented force, it will be ineffective in terminating the war.

Literature Review

The factors identified as being the driving forces of the Syrian civil war are ethnic and religious tensions, opposition fragmentation, and foreign involvement. Each of these factors has been examined extensively in the literature on civil wars, so we provide a brief summary of the relevant theories to frame the challenges facing Syria.

Effects of Religious and Ethnic Divisions: Much of the existing literature on civil wars argues that conflicts structured around religious and ethnic divisions will be prolonged and violent. Monica Toft, of Harvard’s Kennedy School, explains that political elites can purposefully frame conflicts in religious terms by escalating religious radicalism. Elites seek to counter threats while attracting money, weapons, and fighters—a process Toft refers to as “outbidding.” Religiously motivated violence limits the ability of parties to bargain because of the absolutist nature of their positions.

Similarly, Barbara Walter, as well as Karl DeRouen and David Sobeck, argue that ethnic wars last longer than other civil wars because differing identities make cooperation and reconciliation more difficult. Further, Paul Collier, Anke Hoeffler, and Måns Söderbom contend that the relationship between the number of ethnic groups and the duration of civil wars is non-linear. Specifically, conflicts tend to last longest when society has two or three large ethnic groups because social cohesion within factions is at its peak.

Effects of Opposition Fragmentation: The ability of the opposition to maintain cohesion throughout a civil war has a dramatic effect on the structure and termination of the conflict. Opposition fragmentation leads to swifter government victory, due to the ability of a unified government to settle with opposition groups individually.

In addition, Paul Staniland argues that cohesion emerges from the society that existed before the civil war and is built upon vertical and horizontal linkages in society. The domination of vertical linkages, a characteristic of authoritarian societies, generally results in atomization of the opposition around parochial networks.

Effects of Intervention: The effects of foreign involvement on the structure, duration, and termination of civil wars are largely contested. While many scholars view foreign involvement as a variable that unnaturally prolongs a conflict, Regan and Aydin posit diplomatic intervention (implemented at the correct time) can shorten a conflict and reduce the level of violence. Similarly, Collier, Hoeffler, and Söderbom conclude the same is true of assistance on behalf of rebels if the assistance is continually increased over time. Other scholars argue that the greater the support for one side, the shorter the conflict.

Negotiations: The literature also identifies two means by which civil wars can terminate in negotiated settlements. The first is when all veto players involved have agreed to stop fighting. The greater the number of veto players involved in a conflict, the more difficult it is to reach an agreement to which all veto players can agree.

The second means to bring about a negotiated settlement is an intervention that enforces a settlement. According to Walter, the “critical barrier” to resolution is ensuring the settlement’s terms are enforced in the long run. The greater certainty that parties have that a peace treaty will be enforced, the more likely they are to sign an agreement.

Successful agreements have historically divided political power among combatants based on their respective positions on the battlefield. Additionally, such agreements include a third party that is willing and able to enforce the terms of the settlement during demobilization and disarmament.
Spoilers, like veto players, have interests in extending a conflict and will often block settlements by committing acts of indiscriminate violence to increase distrust between negotiating parties. The impact that spoilers have can be mitigated by international actors, however, and peace in these instances has generally proven sustainable.

**Methodology**

In pursuing answers to our question, we compiled and analyzed 42 cases of civil war since 1974 (or that were ongoing in 1974) from the Correlates of War Project’s Intra-State War Data set. We limited the definition of civil wars to conflicts in which most of the fighting occurs within the political borders of a single state and in which the government is vying for political legitimacy against one or more rival groups. Additionally, we excluded conflicts that saw fewer than 1,000 battle deaths and/or fewer than 100 battle deaths on each side.

The post-1974 period was chosen for several reasons:

- Civil wars since 1974 are recent enough to exclude anti-colonial struggles, which have a different dynamic than modern civil wars.
- It is a period that is long enough to capture a wide geographical breadth and depth of conflicts, particularly civil wars with religious overtones.
- Many of the same technologies employed in these conflicts are still in use today.

We analyzed these conflicts against 49 variables concerning the causes, structure, turning points, and termination of each conflict. This analysis was conducted in parallel with our analysis of Syria, and the results of this process suggested that it is the structure of the conflict that most influences the available pathways to conflict termination.

Structure, for the purpose of this study, is defined as the issues and conditions that drive and shape a conflict, including the nature of the groups involved and their fighting tactics. In Syria, we concluded that the conflict is structured by the following:

- religious and ethnic tensions
- rebel fragmentation
- foreign involvement by both state and non-state actors.

Figure 1 provides a graphical depiction of this process by showing how analysis of Syria’s structural challenges in the context of other cases of civil war led to this report’s conclusions.

**Quantitative Analysis**

Using Syria’s structural factors as selection criteria, quantitative analysis identified seven conflicts within our data set that exhibited similar features. These civil wars are those that occurred in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Iraq, Lebanon, Mali, Sudan, and Tajikistan.

Quantitative analysis of the entire set of 42 cases revealed how the civil wars terminated, their turning points, and the types of foreign involvement. As shown in Figure 2, 41 percent of the 42 civil wars examined ended in either a government or rebel victory, while 16 percent terminated through negotiation of a power-sharing agreement.

Analysis identified several major structural factors that influence civil war termination, including:

- a government policy change
- loss of support for the government
- economic destabilization
- foreign involvement
- loss of support for the rebels
- change of power
- decisive military victory.
The most prevalent factor in terminating civil wars is foreign involvement, which served as the decisive factor that led to the termination of conflict in 50 percent of the cases studied (see Figure 3). Foreign involvement can take many forms, and is not limited to the deployment of troops to the area of conflict. The types of foreign involvement in the data set included

- mediation
- kinetic support
- economic aid
- material assistance
- non-state support
- peacekeeping

The most common type of foreign involvement that served as a factor leading to civil war termination was kinetic support, present in 10 of the 32 conflicts that had some form of foreign involvement (21 percent).

**Syria’s Structural Challenges**

As of April 2014, the factors most fundamentally shaping the direction of the Syrian civil war are structural, and they include the following:

1. sectarian divisions
2. ethnic tensions
3. factionalism and infighting among rebels groups
4. foreign involvement in support of both the rebels and the regime.

A brief explanation of each factor is provided below, with emphasis on how these factors may shape the termination of the conflict.

First, **sectarian divisions** have increasingly shaped the Syrian civil war since it began in 2011, even though the conflict was not initially caused by religious tensions. Divisions arose largely due to President Bashar al-Assad’s tactics in fighting the rebels. While the Syrian military contained a large number of Sunni conscripts in 2011, many defected in protest of the regime’s treatment of Syrian civilians. The remaining forces form a smaller but extremely cohesive military core that is fiercely loyal to the regime and is made up primarily of Alawites. A significant portion of Assad’s counterinsurgency strategy has been to clear contested urban areas of both rebels and (mostly Sunni) civilians. Methods primarily include the use of heavy artillery and blockades of supply routes followed by occupation of reclaimed areas by Alawite troops. Assad’s strategy has resulted in the creation of sectarian enclaves throughout the country and has increased the sectarian polarization of the population.

External support has also exacerbated factionalism. Iranian and Hezbollah support has been directed toward Assad’s Alawite regime, due to their shared Shi’a faith. Saudi Arabia and the other Sunni Gulf monarchies have been directing money and supplies to rebel groups (including al Qaeda affiliates, such as Jabhat al-Nusra). Widening divisions within Syrian society and among these international stakeholders makes full termination of the conflict unlikely in the next several years.

Second, long-standing tensions between Syria’s Kurdish minority and the Arab majority are a major source of
**ethnic tensions.** Kurdish rebels control a pocket of territory in northeastern Syria—an enclave of relative stability compared to surrounding areas—and have attempted to declare autonomy from Damascus. The Assad regime has largely withdrawn from the region to concentrate its resources around Damascus, Homs, Aleppo, and small areas of Qamishli.\(^{22}\) Clashes between the Kurds and other rebel groups (including the Islamist State of Iraq and al-Sham [ISIS]) are common as the regime and neighboring states, such as Turkey, seek to play Kurdish and Sunni rebel groups against each other as part of a strategy to challenge the Kurds’ ability to establish a stable autonomous region.\(^{23}\) Any future settlement will be challenged to account for the level of autonomy Syrian Kurds have achieved, despite the enclave not being a current focus of the regime.

Third, **rebel fragmentation** has become the most notable feature of the Syrian conflict since 2013 and it weakens the opposition’s ability to counter Assad. Numerous groups have splintered from the Western-backed Syrian National Council (SNC) and Free Syrian Army (FSA). Acceleration of this process has occurred due to the rapid influx of foreign fighters.\(^{24}\) In September 2013, several of the FSA’s most effective fighting units broke away to form the Islamic Front, a coalition of Islamist rebel groups that includes Jabhat al-Nusra, al Qaeda’s sanctioned affiliate in Syria. The Islamic Front explicitly rejects the authority of the FSA, as well as the SNC, and is estimated to be the largest, most effective opposition force.\(^{25}\)

Fragmentation of rebel groups has strained the regime’s resources by forcing it to fight on multiple fronts. However, this advantage has failed to produce a more systematic military campaign that translates into political leverage for the rebels over the regime. Any comparative advantage of a decentralized opposition has been lost due to escalating rebel infighting since late 2013.\(^{26}\)

Finally, **foreign involvement**, in the form of kinetic support to both the regime and the rebels, has shaped the war since its inception. Arms supplied by Russia and direct military support from Iran and Hezbollah have been decisive in Assad’s ability to capture and hold territory and counter rebel forces.\(^{27}\) Conversely, material support to the rebels from various external powers may sustain their ability to continue fighting, but it has not been sufficient to bring about significant gains against Assad.\(^{28}\) The difference is primarily due to the different levels of cohesion between the regime and rebels.

Regime cohesion, combined with direct foreign military support, has turned the tide of the conflict in Assad’s favor. Although the various rebel groups may continue to fight for several years, the level of division within the rebel movement will prevent them from turning battlefield victories into a sustained military advantage.

**Figure 4. Syria’s Structural Challenges**

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<th>Ethic/Religious Tensions</th>
<th>Foreign Involvement</th>
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<td>Fractured Opposition Groups</td>
<td>The Civil War in Syria</td>
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**Structural Influences on Civil War Termination**

Based on our analysis of Syria’s primary structural challenges, seven civil wars that exhibited the same features were selected from the data set to serve as case studies. Analysis of these cases revealed several lessons about the influences that ethnic and religious tensions, rebel fragmentation, and foreign involvement have on the course of civil wars. Again, these cases are

1. Afghanistan (1980–present)
5. Mali (2012–present)
In-depth qualitative analysis of how each structural element manifested in these cases informs our understanding of the likely future of the Syrian conflict.

**Ethnic and Religious Tensions**

Ethnic and religious tensions generally define the structural divisions between combatants and inflame hostilities within states. Tension along these lines prolongs conflict by encouraging fear of the loss of power and representation in negotiated settlements, especially in cases that feature a dominant minority group. These tensions frequently occur and contribute to violence in post-colonial states formed with little, if any, regard for the historical differences among populations encompassed by new borders.

**Afghanistan**

Afghanistan, for example, has been described as a “patchwork of 21 distinct ethnic groups, further subdivided by linguistic, tribal, religious, and clan affiliations, and broken into small physical—hence political—units by the geography of steep mountains and isolated valleys.”

Political alliances formed along ethnic lines and minority groups have often been marginalized throughout various regimes. Omar Farooq Zain notes, “All potential forces of disruption—ethnic, sectarian, and tribal—are casting ominous shadows which could lead to disintegration of the country.”

When the first phase of the Afghan Wars began in 1978, the mullahs and ulama generally did not support the Islamists in Pakistan. Instead, they looked toward moderate or royalist parties. The shift away from tolerant Islam was due to religious “outbidding,” or a race to become more purely Muslim. The race toward purity was abetted by Pakistani and Saudi encouragement and restrictions of funding to only Islamist parties. “The radicalization of Afghans came as a result of the war, refugee camps in Pakistan, and the ideology of the seven political parties or “seven dwarves.” This fed into the rise of the extremist Taliban in the 1990s.

As the war progressed into the 1980s, the parties in Peshawar divided along ethnic and religious lines. The Sunnis Tajiks slaughtered Shi’a Hazaras near Kabul. Mazar-e-Sharif in northern Afghanistan experienced massacres of the Taliban by the Hazaras in 1997, followed by ethnic cleansing of Hazaras by the Taliban and Uzbeks in 1998. The line between ethnic and religious strife was blurred in all these cases.

Religious violence became a major factor in Afghanistan in the period between when the Soviets withdrew in 1989 and when the United States and the international community intervened in 2001. Furthermore, this religious violence, when tied to ethnic violence, accelerated when foreign presence was limited to material non-kinetic support. Afghanistan’s government has been relatively stable since the post-9/11 invasion. Despite lingering challenges to security, intense third-party involvement by the United States and NATO has brought parties together to work past ethnic divides.

**Bosnia**

Bosnia’s civil war erupted among the states of the former Yugoslavia. In June 1991, both Croatia and Slovenia proclaimed their independence from Serbian-dominated Yugoslavia. Bosnia followed, passing a referendum for independence proposed by the majority Muslim government, but a significant majority of Bosnian Serbs opposed this move and preferred to remain part of Yugoslavia. Violence flared as both sides scrambled to control as much territory as possible for their ethnic faction.

Bosnia was largely split into two factions: the Serbs versus the Croats and Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims). While the majority of the republic’s population was Bosniak, Serbs made up a powerful minority due to the support of the Yugoslav regime. Serbs established the Serbian Republika of Srpska within Bosnia’s borders and began a series of attacks on Bosniak towns with the backing of the Yugoslav People’s Army (JNA). Soon after the United States and the European Community recognized Bosnia’s independence in May 1992, Bosnian Serbs launched their offensive with bombardment of the capital city of Sarajevo, attacks against eastern Bosnia, and the expulsion or killing of Bosniak civilians. The Republic of Srpska and the JNA erected concentration camps for forcefully displaced Croats and Bosniaks. With their superior weapons, courtesy of the Serbian regime in Yugoslavia, Bosnian Serbs took control of 70 percent of Bosnian territory in early 1993.

The conflict did not take on a religious overtone until the Bosnian Croats aligned themselves with the Serbs against the Bosniaks. Realignment prompted the war to be portrayed under a new paradigm as a conflict between Christians and Muslims. Furthermore, Croatian and
Serbian parties regularly excluded Bosniak officials from negotiation attempts.

**Iraq**
The civil war in Iraq was characterized by violence fueled by decades of ethnic tensions between Iraqi Arabs and the Kurdish minority in the north. During the 1980s, Saddam Hussein's regime massacred thousands of Kurds with chemical weapons due to their suspected ties to Iran. Violent targeting of Kurds by Arabs reemerged as the stability of the country deteriorated during the civil war in the 2000s.

The civil war was also fought along religious divisions between Shi’a and Sunni Muslims. Violence increased markedly in 2006 after the al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) bombing of the Shi’a Askariya Shrine, which prompted a wave of retaliatory Shi’a militia attacks on Sunnis. Sunnis further degraded stability by exploiting extreme Salafism to attract support. Extremist Arabs from neighboring countries, such as AQI, worsened the conflict through the encouragement of Salafist doctrine. Such groups were accredited with driving the majority of the conflict-perpetuating sectarian violence.

Despite the continuance of conflict, post-war Iraq now contains a semi-autonomous Kurdish region that maintains a relationship with the central government in Baghdad. While the future of this relationship is uncertain—due to disputes over income distribution and economic rights—Iraq knows more stability and peace under this system than in years past. Fighting still occurs, as is evident by the recent offensives by al Qaeda to gain control over Fallujah and Ramadi; however, the violence is not nearly on the level that it was during the civil war.

**Lebanon**
The Lebanese civil war also saw both ethnic and religious violence, but as a mostly Arab state, ethnic tensions played a relatively small role. The primary source of ethnic conflict came from the large population of Palestinians, whose presence since the creation of Israel in 1948 contributed to a destabilizing shift in the country’s demographics.

Religious tensions played the largest role in driving divisions within the Lebanese civil war. The National Pact, established in 1943, created a political system that linked representation to point-in-time demographics of Christian, Sunni, and Shi’a communities. Most of the political power was in the hands of the Maronite Christians, followed by the Sunnis; the Shi’a had the least representation. The structure of the government became increasingly disproportionate as the growth rate of the Christian community was outstripped by that of the Muslims. By the 1970s, the distribution had reversed; the Shi’a were the demographically dominant sect in Lebanon. However, despite these changes, no alterations were made to the existing political structure codified by the National Pact. Political domination by Christians, economic distress, and spillover from the Israel-Palestine conflict led to the outbreak of war in 1975.

The initial Christian-versus-Muslim character of the war broke down into both inter- and intra-sectarian violence. Sectarian groups formed alliances of convenience with rivals against common enemies, only to later break allegiance and resume hostilities. Additionally, some groups were eliminated by others of the same sect in bids for control of larger movements. For example, the Maronite Phalangist militia led by Bashir Jumayyil attacked and destroyed its rivals the Marada Brigade in 1978 and the Tigers in 1980. These dynamics persisted throughout the conflict, as alliances and the distribution of power shifted frequently.

Years of intense fighting resulted in a redefined power-sharing arrangement. Lebanon remains a religiously divided state, as these differences and tensions have not been truly rectified. The government remains organized along religious and sectarian lines. Therefore, it is likely tensions will flare up again as a result of new demographic shifts and changes in relative power and capabilities of various groups.

**Mali**
The civil war in Mali serves as yet another example of a conflict in which religious and ethnic differences played a major structural role. The rebellion began as a separatist movement by the historically marginalized Tuareg ethnic minority, who make up roughly 10 percent of the population. The National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), a secular Tuareg separatist group, led this rebellion as the initial opposition force. Tuareg and Malian Arab Islamist groups seeking to turn Mali into an Islamist state joined the MNLA against the government. A unified command structure was never established, as this was a union based on military necessity. The Arab Islamist, Tuareg Islamist, and secular Tuareg rebel groups split after taking control of northern Mali, largely as a result of ideological differences.

The majority of Malians practice the Sufi tradition of Islam, rather than the strict Salafist interpretation espoused by the Islamist rebels. The attempt by Islamist rebels to impose Sharia was incompatible with
the MNLA’s secular vision of Tuareg independence. Disagreement caused the alliance to break down along ethnic and sectarian lines.

The future of Mali is uncertain. Ethnic and religious divisions continue to plague both the rebels and the government and may prevent the cohesion necessary to terminate the civil war.  

Sudan

The Second Sudanese Civil War saw ethnicity play an important role in the outbreak of conflict in 1983. The predominantly Muslim Arab north, which controlled the government, wanted to Arabize the black Christian south. Throughout the 1980s, the conflict was divided along ethnic and racial lines. The primary rebel force, the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA), was comprised of black southerners of different ethnicities. The loss of Ethiopian support for the rebels in 1991 exacerbated internal dissension within the SPLA and led to infighting between commanders. By August 1991, the SPLA had fractured along ethnic lines into smaller rebel factions. One was comprised of Dinka fighters, the other of Nuer. A variety of other, much smaller ethnically defined rebel factions emerged as well. These fought one another in addition to the Sudanese government.

The Sudanese conflict was also characterized by religious tensions. The war began following the government’s declaration of Islamic revolution, which included the national imposition of Sharia. This was a stark departure from the 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement that had limited Sharia to the north. The south resisted the extension of Sharia and fought to re-secularize their region. The government’s policy remained a key point of contention between the rebels and the north throughout negotiations from the 1980s to the 2000s.

Tajikistan

The Tajik civil war contained deep regional divides based largely on tribal and clan identities that stemmed from ethnic and religious identities. For example, the Gharmi ethnic group is one of the original groups of Tajiks and comprised the Gharm (or Karotegin) region. A deeply religious people, the Gharmis practiced Sunni Islam. Another region—the Gorno-Badakhshan region—was primarily composed of the Pamiri ethnic group and the territory’s major religion was Ismaili Islam. Tajikistan’s mountainous geographical features preserved strong local identities, thus exacerbating the divisions between ethnic and religious groups. Moreover, the Tajik infrastructure reinforced the isolation of each region by leaving territories largely disconnected from one another. This separation augmented the strong sense of loyalty people had to their respective regions, not in terms of territory, but in terms of clan belongings, which were largely based on ethnic and religious identities.

While regional, ethnic, tribal, and clan identities were certainly causes of the Tajik civil war, they also became a primary structural factor. During the escalation of the conflict in 1992–1993, the moderate attitudes of the opposition members started to radicalize toward ethnic nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism. Also, the trans-regional Renaissance People’s Movement was overtaken by clan rivalries when the group’s leader joined the United Tajik Opposition. Violence was much more acute in areas with a high regional mix, especially in the diverse Qurghonteppa region of southern Tajikistan, and ethnic groups were targeted for murder, disappearances, kidnapping, and the burning and looting of their homes.

The conflicts in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Iraq, Lebanon, Mali, Sudan, and Tajikistan illustrate the all-too-important roles ethnic and religious tensions play in defining the structure of civil wars. Long-standing rivalries between groups can allow existing tensions to erupt into all-out war and contribute to the virulent fragmentation of rebel groups.

Rebel Fragmentation

As previously discussed, the Syrian civil war is characterized by a large number of fragmented rebel groups. Fragmentation tends to lengthen the duration of conflicts by diminishing the ability of belligerents to reach termination points short of total annihilation of the enemy, even with foreign intervention.

Afghanistan

The Afghan civil war in the 1990s displayed significant disunity among factions opposed to the Taliban’s rule. Infighting within the Northern Alliance contributed substantially to the eventual Taliban victory. Zalmay Khalilzad, a future U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, argues that the Taliban were only able to emerge due to “unhappiness with the infighting and perceived corruption of the existing mujahedin parties.” Militias that were forced out of Kabul continued operating under a loosely unified command structure, but personal and ethnically driven objectives prevented a unified force against the Taliban from emerging. It was not until the U.S. invasion in 2001 that a semblance of cohesion emerged.

This failure to come together bled into the Karzai administration, and continues to create problems repre-
Fragmentation diminishes the ability of belligerents to reach termination points short of total annihilation of the enemy, even with foreign intervention.

sentative of underlying structural tensions. As noted by Kathy Gannon, “Although Karzai has said that ordinary Taliban and the country’s Pashtun majority have nothing to fear from the new regime, the disproportionate influence still wielded by the Tajik- and Uzbek-dominated Northern Alliance has spread fear throughout the country.”

The ethnic fears that helped cause fragmentation have somewhat subsided, but still play a role in current Afghan politics. The war will continue if that fragmentation persists in Afghan national politics.

Bosnia
In the Bosnian conflict, the Yugoslav-backed Serbian Republic of Srpska rebelled against the Bosnian government of Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats. The Serbs’ demographic strength meant they were not beholden to a coalition and were able to act with unity of purpose. Yugoslav material and kinetic support was thus unfiltered and cohesive. As a result, Bosnian Serbs occupied 70 percent of Bosnia by 1993.

Divisions emerged within the other ethnically organized combatant parties. For example, the Croat political parties and militias split on the matter of cooperation with the Bosnian government. In May 1992, Croatia and Yugoslavia held a secret meeting and agreed to cooperate. The leader of the pro-cooperation Bosnian Croat party was subsequently killed and the militaristic party took over. Bosnian Croats, who had been fighting alongside Bosniaks, switched sides to secure a Croatian enclave in Bosnia and the conflict entered a phase of violent ethnic cleansing. The fragmentation of the Bosniak-Croat coalition extended and intensified the war. Grievances multiplied and the resulting distrust made negotiations more difficult.

Iraq
The civil war in Iraq began with an estimated 50–74 autonomous rebel militias with 20,000–50,000 total fighters. Eventually, the insurgency consolidated around five main groups: the Islamic Army in Iraq, the Partisans of the Sunna Army, the Mujahadeen’s Army, Muhammad’s Army, and the Islamic Resistance Movement in Iraq. Political parties themselves were also fragmented. Shi’a, for example, comprised a minimum of four major parties. The Mahdi Army was plagued by tension as well, as independent cells formed and followers broke away from the command of Moqtada al-Sadr. Iraqi politicians and Western officials alike observed the Mahdi Army’s splintering and lack of coordination, noting the emergence of death squads and army forces not controlled by Moqtada. This level of fragmentation among groups created an obstacle for U.S. forces in Iraq; as the civil war evolved, U.S. troops were unable to trace the perpetrators of violence back to a single unified opposition.

Lebanon
The Lebanese civil war quickly devolved from a fight between Christians and Muslims into one comprised of Maronite, Druze, Sunni, Shi’a, and Palestinian factions. Partisan struggle was not contained to these core groups, as each devolved into multiple smaller parties that frequently engaged in intra- and intergroup conflict both politically and militarily.

Over the last six years of the war, the Syrian military forces that occupied Lebanon acted largely as a peacekeeping force and became a major actor in Lebanese politics. Syria attempted to consolidate warring factions through its proposed 1985 Tripartite Agreement, which brought together several of the major factions. This effort failed and conflict between factions continued.

Factional conflict from 1988–1990 generally persisted among geographically defined regions controlled by sectarian groups. Geographic consolidation allowed for future dialogues as factions were more capable of representing major population groups and regions.

Mali
The Malian civil war has also been characterized by a fragmented rebel movement. The initial alliance between Tuareg and Islamist groups split due to ideological divisions, a process accelerated by French intervention. The rebels were temporarily able to unite to capture territory from the Malian Army while the government was weakened by the March 2012 coup. However, they never fought under a unified command structure or shared a vision for how territory would be governed once captured. This led to frequent infighting throughout the life of the alliance. The MNLA separatists had a secular agenda fundamentally incompatible with the Islamists’ strict interpretation of Sharia. The MNLA have since declared support for the French intervention against Islamists in hopes that the Tuaregs will be given some level of autonomy through participation in peace talks.
The French intervention force successfully exploited the weak ties between Tuareg and Islamist rebels to hasten the breakdown of the alliance.

Fragmentation has also plagued the Malian government. The Malian military lost confidence in the government’s handling of the rebellion after a series of rebel victories. Consequently, the military executed a coup d’état in March 2012. Additionally, the Malian military’s operational capacity has been limited, as it remains divided over conflicting loyalties to the current and deposed presidents. Divisions within the government and military have continued unabated as European Union forces have only focused on training the Malian military. Lingering fragmentation makes full cessation of the conflict unlikely.

Sudan

The Second Sudanese Civil War was characterized by a relatively unified rebel movement fighting against the Sudanese government for the first eight years of the conflict. The war’s structure changed fundamentally in August 1991, when internal dissension and infighting among rebel commanders in the SPLA resulted in splinter groups. Disagreements over goals for the outcome of the war sundered the rebel faction. Some rebel commanders sought to unify a secular Sudan, whereas others wanted to secede from the north and create a separate state. Another reason for the split was that some rebel commanders accused SPLA leader John Garang of running the rebel movement dictatorially since its inception in 1983.

Realizing that internecine fighting limited their ability to fight the Sudanese government, Garang and splinter group leader Riek Machar met in Washington, D.C., in 1993. The meeting, organized by the United States Institute of Peace and the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, was designed to promote dialogue and mediate an agreement between the rebel factions. This effort failed as each side viewed itself as the singular legitimate voice of the rebel movement. Consequently, the rebel movement remained fractured throughout the 1990s.

The Sudanese government capitalized on rebel infighting following the failed 1993 agreement by supplying arms to Machar and six smaller rebel factions against Garang’s SPLA Torit faction. Cooperation ceased in January 2000 as Machar split from the Sudanese government, alleging that it did not honor a 1997 agreement. In January 2002, Garang and Machar merged their respective factions to increase pressure on the Sudanese government. While this did not restore complete rebel unity, it nevertheless joined together the two largest rebel factions against Khartoum.

The conflict in Sudan provides evidence of the ineffectiveness of fragmented rebel opposition in the face of united government forces. For nearly a decade, the SPLA Torit and SPLA United/Nasir factions fought each other as well as the government. By merging in 2002, the reunited SPLA was able to mount a stronger, more focused campaign against the government. Within two years of SPLA reunification, President al Bashir and rebel leader John Garang agreed to hold preliminary peace talks.

Tajikistan

In Tajikistan, the opposition consisted of the Renaissance People’s Movement, the Democratic Party (DP), and the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP). The IRP was further divided into two factions; the first was linked to the Muslim Brotherhood and received support from Ahmed Shah Masood in Kabul. The second was allied with then-Afghan Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

While they shared some common goals, the opposition parties remained relatively independent due to their ethnic-regional characteristics. For example, the DP, based in Moscow, consisted primarily of ethnic Pamiris, while the IRP, based in northern Afghanistan, was composed of Gharmis. During the escalation of the conflict, the moderate attitudes of some opposition members “started to radicalize toward ethnic nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism.” However, these rebel groups banded together in a united coalition, seeking strength in unity against their common enemy. The resulting alliance was the fundamentally moderate United Tajik Opposition.

Fragmentation of opposition tends to lengthen the duration of civil wars by making negotiation less feasible and government victory more likely due to rebels’ diminished capabilities and inability to cooperate. This is not to say that a cohesive rebel movement alone will necessarily achieve victory. On the contrary, governments that suffer civil wars are weakened by legitimacy issues almost by definition. Rather, in the absence of cohesion, any foreign involvement on behalf of fractured rebels will likely be unsuccessful.

Foreign Involvement

As seen in Figure 2, 50 percent of civil wars since 1974 have featured foreign involvement as the decisive factor leading to civil war termination. Success or failure of
external intervention is linked to the degree of fragmentation among recipient groups. This research suggests that, in conflicts similar to Syria, foreign involvement in support of splintered groups will not lead to the termination of the conflict. However, successful termination becomes more likely when foreign intervention either addresses fragmentation or occurs after the unification of recipient forces.

**Afghanistan**

The Afghan civil war experienced successful U.S. foreign intervention in the late 1980s to expel Soviet forces. Fragmented rebel groups, however, prevented the resolution of the civil war. The seven “dwarves” could not agree to govern together once U.S. involvement ended. Withdrawal of U.S. support in the 1990s perpetuated this disunity among the various factions in Afghanistan and contributed to the rise of the Taliban by 1996.

American intervention in Afghanistan after 2001 united rebel factions against the Taliban. Tentative alliances were formed between formerly competing warlords, militias, and political parties. Foreign involvement to this unified rebel force resulted in the collapse of the Taliban regime and influenced the creation of an inclusive government.

**Bosnia**

The Bosnian civil war also experienced successful foreign involvement that addressed fragmentation. In August 1993, Charles Redman, U.S. president Clinton’s personal envoy, brought Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks together and created the Croat-Bosniak Federation to counter the Bosnian Serbs of the Republic of Srpska. In March 1994, Croatia and Bosnia signed an agreement to restore military cooperation, known as the Washington Agreement. Following Operation Storm and NATO’s bombing of the Bosnian Serb Army’s missile sites, Bosnian Serbs agreed to come to the negotiation table. Even with all the parties at the table, U.S. Special Envoy Richard Holbrooke faced challenges due to the diversity of parties involved. To minimize the number of parties, Holbrooke encouraged the fragile Croat-Bosniak alliance and moved to aggregate the various Serbian groups, such as the Republic of Srpska and the Yugoslav regime. As a result, the Yugoslav regime became the representative of the Bosnian Serbs. American support led to the termination of hostilities through mediation and resulted in the Dayton Accords, which established post-war borders leading to the creation of the state of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

**Iraq**

The Iraqi civil war featured fragmentation that was actually worsened by the 2003 U.S.-led military intervention. Myriad small and disparate groups vied for political and material superiority while the American military experienced difficulty moderating Iraq’s internal security situation. Each group hoped to oust the U.S.-led Multi-National Force (MNF) to become the country’s dominant power. Fragmentation rendered the efforts of the MNF futile as the situation evolved. Sunni and Shi’a each experienced deep divisions within various levels of government. Shi’a parties experienced numerous intra-sect political disputes while Sunni groups suffered from a lack of organizational control and were divided along tribal lines.

MNF efforts to mitigate internecine violence between Shi’a and Sunnis found success as a result of two main factors. First, the United States supplemented the MNF with an additional 20,000 troops. Second, the Anbar Awakening encouraged greater cooperation with the MNF to moderate hostilities within Iraq. The Awakening began with a group of Sunni Sheiks who rejected al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Their opposition to AQI prompted their cooperation with the MNF. As the Awakening spread beyond the Anbar province, it encouraged large numbers of local populations to join the Iraqi Security Forces. The movement’s expansion allowed MNF forces to carry out more effective operations, thereby denying AQI access to critical bases in Iraq. Termination of the civil war eventually came as a result of the improved security situation prompted by the MNF’s greater effectiveness.

**Lebanon**

The civil war in Lebanon saw early foreign intervention efforts that failed to resolve the disunity plaguing warring factions. Syria, Israel, and multinational peacekeeping forces were focused on quelling violence rather than reconciling fundamental tensions. This omission overlooked the central forces driving the conflict and resulted in the persistence of sectarian and religious violence.

In the later stages of the war, however, Syria’s influence became a fundamental force that contributed to the consolidation of various factions. Syria initially failed...
to consolidate the warring factions through the 1985 Tripartite Agreement. However, by 1987, Syrian efforts gained traction through its alignment with authorities in Muslim-dominated West Beirut, who invited Syrian armed forces into the city to establish order and quell intra-militia violence. This marked the establishment of the Syrian alliance with the Muslim-dominated parties of the Lebanese government. As the Syrian alliance grew in size, factional conflict became defined by geographic regions divided along sectarian lines. This allowed reconciliation dialogues to begin to take hold, as factions were more capable of representing major population groups and regions.

Mali
The Malian civil war experienced a major turning point in the form of a French-led military intervention to reestablish immediate security in the country. The intervention expelled Islamist groups from northern towns in a matter of weeks. The MNLA later declared its support for the intervention and joined in peace talks with the government. It remains unclear whether the current level of stability will be maintained, as France plans to withdraw and hand control over to UN and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) forces. Additionally, the poor military capabilities of the Malian government may undermine gains in stability. The Malian Army has received training from several EU states but remains weak, divided, and unable to effectively control large amounts of territory outside Bamako. The current government also lacks the capacity to institute reforms that would be necessary to improve the conditions that initiated the conflict. This failure to address the fundamental causes of fragmentation on both sides of the conflict will result in the reescalation of violence upon the withdrawal of foreign forces.

Sudan
The Second Sudanese Civil War experienced conflict between different rebel factions as well as the government, following the division of the SPLA. The rebels received non-kinetic support and limited kinetic support while the government received non-kinetic support. Multiple foreign governments provided financial and military assistance to Sudanese opposition forces, but rebel infighting limited the effectiveness of this support. However, once John Garang and Riek Machar merged their respective factions in January 2002, they were able to mount stronger opposition to the government, which realized that its prospects for winning the war militarily had diminished significantly following the reunification of the SPLA Torit and United/Nasir factions. Consequently, Khartoum agreed to begin peace negotiations with John Garang in early 2002. The turning point in the negotiations came in July 2002 with the announcement of the Machakos Protocol, which outlined the broad principles of the eventual peace agreement. The peace process unfolded over several years, resulting in the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005.

Tajikistan
The Tajik civil war featured successful foreign intervention after the rebels united. Productive peace mediation efforts followed. Although there were numerous actors, such as the Commonwealth of Independent States, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and surrounding countries, the UN’s mandate from the Security Council facilitated the mediation process. In fact, the success of mediation was largely due to the ability of the UN to promote effective dialogues. Foreign involvement has various effects on conflicts and can take many different forms. As this research suggests, involvement is more likely to terminate civil wars if the supported recipients have achieved unity in pursuit of a singular goal.

Findings
Applying the lessons from the case studies to the current conditions in Syria, we expect the following:

1. Negotiations between the regime and the rebels will be ineffective at this point because of
   a. the number of rebel groups
   b. the incentives for internal and external groups to spoil any agreement
   c. the unwillingness of external powers to guarantee an agreement
   d. the perceptions on both sides that more will be gained through battle than negotiations.

The prevalence of civil wars terminated through negotiated settlements has increased since the end of the Cold War. However, a negotiated settlement is unlikely in Syria at this time due to the factors listed above.

The Syrian conflict contains myriad internal and external groups with incentives to spoil future negotiations. Radical Islamist groups will likely be excluded from any power-sharing agreement. Consequently, there is a strong possibility they would prolong the conflict as spoilers. ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra are currently among the most effective fighting forces on the rebel side, and
the potential for them to spoil negotiations is high. Similarly, external powers such as Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah have their own incentives to veto or spoil negotiations. A negotiated settlement would have to overcome extreme distrust between diametrically opposed combatants. Barbara Walter argues that most negotiated settlements require third-party enforcement to overcome the security dilemma and to provide security while forces on both sides demobilize. However, there is minimal political will within the international community to provide such an enforcement mechanism for any future agreement in Syria. Hence, any current negotiations will be ineffective.

Finally, both the Assad regime and the rebels believe they stand to gain more on the battlefield than through negotiation. The regime cannot offer a meaningful power-sharing agreement without implicitly accepting a minority position in the future government. A series of military victories between spring 2013 and April 2014 have further dissuaded Assad from negotiating. The regime likely feels its interests will be better served by continuing a war that has decisively turned in its favor. Meanwhile, the opposition feels they would not receive favorable terms in negotiations given their current weakness on the battlefield.

2. The Assad regime will likely stay in power because its forces are unified. Moreover, it receives various forms of assistance, including direct military support, from Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia.

Defections from the Syrian military in the early stages of the conflict temporarily hampered the regime’s ability to control the entirety of Syrian territory. The forces that remain are highly cohesive, loyal to the regime, and are composed largely of Alawites. They believe they are fighting to avoid massacre by jihadist rebel groups.

As seen in the case studies above, foreign support is most effective as a turning point in civil wars when the side receiving support is cohesive. This holds true in Syria. Assistance to the Assad regime from Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia has been critical to turning the war in the regime’s favor. Evidence came in June 2013, when Syrian forces recaptured the key strategic town of al-Qusayr from rebel forces. Assistance came in the form of unprecedented kinetic military support from thousands of Hezbollah fighters and forces from Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard.

Regaining control of al-Qusayr gave the regime access to key supply routes from Lebanon, as well as transpor-

tation corridors between Damascus, Homs, and Aleppo. The regime consolidated these gains in early 2014 by recapturing several key towns along the Lebanese border with direct Hezbollah military support. As of April 2014, the regime has cleared rebel forces from all but one major town in the southwestern Qalamoun region. In accordance with the thesis of this paper, the combination of regime cohesion and foreign military support has changed the course of the war. Ultimately, “victory” in Syria is a relative term: The Assad regime will likely win the civil war, but the Syria that results may look very different than it did in February 2011. The regime will likely be successful in capturing and controlling the area between Damascus and the Syrian coast that is essential to its survival, but will struggle to fully wrest areas in northern and eastern Syria from the hands of the rebels. While the Assad regime will maintain political power, the return to full security and stability in the whole of Syrian territory is unlikely for many years.

3. A military intervention without rebel cohesion may topple the Assad regime, but is unlikely to terminate the civil war because parties on all sides will continue to fight.

Each of our case studies contain some type of foreign involvement. Where the intervention supported a unified force, it was more successful in ending the civil war. Conversely, foreign intervention on the side of a fragmented force was incapable of bringing about an end to the conflict.

Western military intervention on the side of the Syrian rebels would almost certainly be successful in toppling the Assad regime; however, it would be unlikely to fully terminate the civil war because parties on all sides could be expected to continue fighting. Intervention might receive moderate levels of support from certain rebel elements—such as the Syrian National Council and the Free Syrian Army—but opposition could come from Islamist groups such as ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, who are fundamentally opposed to Western involvement in the Middle East. An insurgency against an intervention and continued infighting among rebel groups seeking political and territorial control are both probable. Elements of the regime would also continue fighting against both the intervention force and the rebels.
4. If the Syrian opposition remains fragmented and there is no significant change in the balance of foreign support, the Syrian conflict will last for at least another five years.

In several of our cases, including Iraq, Afghanistan, and Lebanon, foreign attempts to arm fragmented rebel movements did not bring a decisive end to violence. Instead, intervention had the perverse effect of prolonging these civil wars. Our conclusions mirror the case in Syria. Here, multiple external parties are funneling arms to disparate rebel groups based on their own individual interests rather than a coordinated strategy. Unorganized foreign intervention has exacerbated divisions among opposition groups, making either an outright rebel military victory or a negotiated settlement unlikely.

The steady stream of foreign aid and weapons has sustained the rebels’ ability to fight, albeit in a highly disorganized and uncoordinated manner. Foreign weapons and fighters have allowed select opposition groups to capture fortified defensive positions. These will be difficult for the regime to reclaim in the near future, though it will eventually succeed. Foreign support to fractured rebel groups only serves to mitigate, rather than neutralize, the regime’s advantages. So long as the Assad regime enjoys cohesion and foreign kinetic support against a fragmented rebel force, it will emerge victorious.

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This study has concluded that although foreign involvement is the most prevalent factor in ending civil wars in general, foreign support of a fragmented force will fail to terminate the civil war. Unless groups opposing Assad are able to build a more cohesive coalition, negotiations will fail and the Assad regime will remain in power. Any intervention that merely removes Assad will not resolve the conflict.
Notes
1 Jenkins, 2014, p. 4.
7 Regan and Aydin, 2006.
10 Veto players have the ability to unilaterally block settlement of a civil war and continue fighting, even if others reach an agreement.
13 Walter, 2002.
14 Walter, 2013.
16 Stedman, 1997.
17 Correlates of War Project, 2010.
18 Holliday, 2013.
20 Holliday, 2013.
21 Holliday, 2013.
22 Solomon, 2013.
24 Heggehammer, 2013.
25 The Institute for the Study of War estimates there are as many as 1,000 distinct rebel groups currently operating in Syria, all with different external affiliations, capabilities, and ideologies. This suggests that the conflict is unlikely to end in the near future. Walter, 2013.
26 Schulhofer-Wohl, 2013.
27 Holliday, 2013.
30 Zain, 2006, p. 79.
32 Rashid, 2001, p. 84.

35 The “seven dwarves” were the Khalis faction, Hezbi Islami, Jamiat-i-Islami, the Islamic Union for the Liberation of Afghanistan, the National Islamic Front for Afghanistan, the Afghanistan National Liberation Front, and the Revolutionary Islamic Movement.
37 Kalyvas and Sambanis, 2005, p. 3.
40 Magnus, 2007, p. 27.
41 According to a 1991 census, Bosnia’s population of some 4 million was 44 percent Bosniak, 31 percent Serb, and 17 percent Croatian. Magnus, 2007, p. 14.
42 Magnus, 2007, p. 28.
45 Cordesman and Davies, 2008.
48 Palestinians did not have the right to vote but lent moral support to Muslim movements’ desires for political reformation. Maronites viewed Palestinian militia forces as disruptive and destabilizing allies of the Muslim factions. Specter and Zuhur, 2010, p. 722; Ghosn and Khoury, 2011, p. 383; Terdiman, 2010, p. 727.
52 See Mason, 1989, pp. 197–199.
53 Ghosn and Khoury, 2011, p. 381.
54 CIA World Factbook, 2014.
55 The MNLA seeks Tuareg independence from the central government. Unlike other rebel groups in Mali, the MNLA has a secular agenda.
56 Francis, 2013.
57 Francis, 2013.
58 “Mali Crisis: Key Players,” 2013.
60 The aim of Arabization by the Sudanese government was to impose Arabic customs, language, and culture on the non-Arab southerners.
Mayotte, 1994, p. 511.


LeRiche and Arnold, 2012, p. 32.


Akiner and Barnes, 2001.


Akiner and Barnes, 2001.


Akiner and Barnes, 2001.


Many stipulations of the Tripartite Agreement were adopted four years later in the Taif Accords.

“Mali Crisis: Key Players,” 2013.

Francis, 2013.

Francis, 2013.

Francis, 2013.

Croft, 2014.


European-Sudanese Public Affairs Council, 2002, p. 146. The 1997 agreement between the government and seven rebel factions provided for elections, a referendum on secession, a southern exemption from Sharia, equal representation, equitable sharing of natural resources, and southern reconstruction.


An Afghan political and military leader. He was a central figure in the resistance against the Soviet occupation between 1979 and 1989 and in the following years of civil war.


Wlodek, 2004, 81.

Lynch, 2001, p. 56.


With Bosnia's military assistance, Croatia launched Operation Storm and successfully took over the Krajina. Ramet, 2006, p. 464.


Francis, 2013. Ceasefires have been violated by both sides and there has been consistent low-level violence in northern Mali. The MNLA has also threatened to withdraw from the ceasefire on several occasions.


Abdullo, 2001; Goryayev, 2001; and Slim and Sanders, 2001.


Cunningham, 2013.

Cunningham, 2013.

Walter, 2002.

Walter, 2013.

Holliday, 2013.


Nassief, 2013.

Blanford, 2014a.

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tions-syria


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