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.
Characteristics of the Syrian Civil War
- Ethnic tensions
- Religious tensions
- Fragmented groups
- Foreign involvement

Data Set
1974 to present
42 civil wars
49 variables

Featured Case Studies
1. Afghanistan
2. Bosnia
3. Iraq
4. Lebanon
5. Mali
6. Sudan
7. Tajikistan

Lessons Applied to Syria

Findings
- Negotiations will fail
- The Assad regime will stay in power
- Even if the Assad regime is removed, the civil war will continue
- Termination is a long way off