

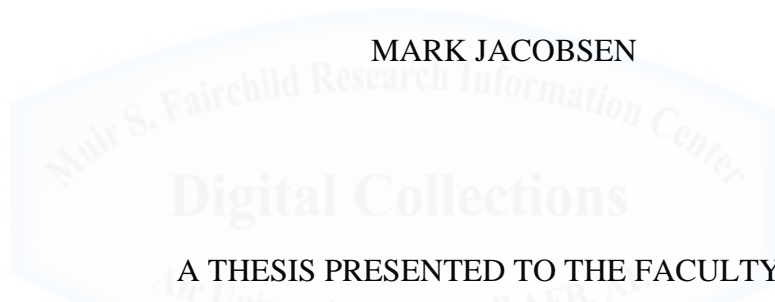
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STRATEGY IN FRAGMENTED CIVIL WARS:

IRAQ, SYRIA, AND THE CHALLENGE OF EXTERNAL INTERVENTION

BY

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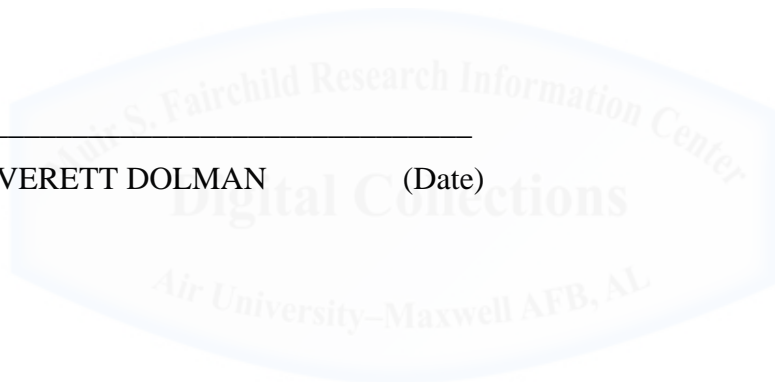
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the utility of external intervention in fragmented civil wars. I argue that existing models are inadequate for understanding such wars. Most strategists begin with Clausewitz's definition of war as a duel, but this definition and its consequent theory of victory imply two, comparable, unified actors. The duel model is misleading and even dangerous in wars where these assumptions do not hold. This thesis presents an alternative model for understanding war, which accounts for any number of actors, of any type, and accounts for processes of fragmentation, cohesion, and defection among them. Accordingly, human societies are best understood as complex adaptive systems, which are under continual, moment-by-moment renegotiation by actors. Renegotiation processes are usually peaceful, but when they become violent, the system can slide into war. War is best understood as a violent renegotiation on a large scale. Winning in a fragmented war requires bringing stakeholders to a favorable state of dynamic equilibrium, facilitating the cessation of violence and a return to nonviolent means of renegotiation.

Achieving equilibrium in a fragmented social system requires a cumulative strategy of coalition-building among stakeholders. This is a difficult, costly, and nonlinear endeavor. External interveners can augment this process using both military force and positive incentives, but the extreme difficulty and unpredictability of such a project make such interventions unattractive. External powers may be better served by non-winning strategies. These are limited strategies in pursuit of limited ends, which seek to manage violence and its effects rather than solve it. However, adherence to such strategies is difficult because they do not bring wars to a decisive conclusion.

A case study illustrates the challenges the US faced in bringing post-2003 Iraq to a new state of dynamic equilibrium. It demonstrates the shortcomings of the duel model, and serves as a cautionary tale to single actors which hope to win in a fragmented war. A second case study illustrates a broad range of strategies employed by actors in the Syrian civil war. Although President Obama has wisely tried to avoid the impossible task of winning in Syria, many Americans perceive his limited, non-winning strategy as a failure. This case illustrates the difficulties of adhering to a strategy that does not deliver a decision. While such strategies often make strategic sense, they are difficult to sell in democracies.

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## Introduction

In this thesis, I analyze the utility of external intervention in fragmented civil wars. I define fragmented wars as wars in which more than two actors employ violence in the pursuit of political goals, and in which fragmentation, cohesion, and defection among actors are militarily and politically significant. These dynamic processes among multiple actors are typically assumed away by simplified models underlying both military theory and the academic literature on civil war. This thesis puts these processes under a microscope. Do existing theories of war adequately account for fragmentation? If not, how should academic methodology and military doctrine account for it? What are the implications of fragmentation for political and military strategy? Ultimately, this thesis seeks to answer the question: What is the utility of external intervention in fragmented civil wars?

The majority of military theory and academic literature sees war as a Clausewitzian duel between two unified actors. In contrast, I argue that very few wars are actually duels; the duel is a conceptual model intended to simplify and impose order on a much more complex reality. Clausewitz himself understood this, but as I will illustrate below, many subsequent scholars have lost the nuanced evolution of his thought and take the duel for granted. A duel implies two, comparable, unified actors, which leads to a specific theory of victory: eliminating a singular opponent or breaking his will. However, the empirical record is replete with anomalies that do not fit the duel model. In many wars, a bewildering range of actors employ violence to further their interests. These actors include state-controlled armies, militias, local insurgents, insurgents with global and ideological aspirations, opportunistic criminals, foreign proxies, private military contractors, and more. To complicate this picture, actors are seldom unified; they often fragment, recombine, and defect from one faction to another.

Such fragmentation raises questions about traditional theories of victory. Can victory be achieved by breaking an actor's will, if the will to fight is distributed throughout dozens of armed factions? Who has the authority to offer a surrender, and can it be enforced? Faced with such complexity, modern strategists struggle to conceptualize what victory even means, let alone achieve it. If we are having such a difficult time explaining

war and achieving victory, we have to ask: is the duel model the best way to understand war?

I argue no. Although the duel model has its uses, it excludes potentially vital dynamics. Large numbers of actors, different types of actors, and fragmentation within actors have significant ramifications for warfare and achieving victory. This is especially true in insurgencies and civil wars in which the future of the country is open to violent renegotiation by multiple actors. The duel model is insufficient, and has led to strategic incoherence and serious mistakes among both academics and military practitioners.

The catastrophic US experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrate the inadequacy of the duel model. While the US skillfully employed force to topple two unsavory regimes, it was ill-equipped to manage the violent forces unleashed in the aftermath. For years, US political and military leaders floundered with no clear policy and no theory of victory. The rediscovery of population-centric counterinsurgency theory promised greater conceptual clarity and the possibility of victory, but neither war neatly fit the paradigm of a government dueling with an insurgency for the loyalty of a neutral population. More recently, the civil war in Syria has put the dynamics of fragmentation front and center. One November 2013 report stated Syria may have as many as 1,000 armed groups, which fight in a shifting kaleidoscope of alliances and rivalries.<sup>1</sup> Fragmentation defines modern Syria. US policymakers and military leaders struggle to even articulate what is happening in Syria, let alone enact sensible policy.

The purpose of this thesis is to suggest a model of war that can account for any number of actors, any type of actors, and fragmentation among actors. Such a model can help decision-makers in external states understand the complexity of fragmented war and offer guidance about the possible utility of intervention. The need for such a model will only grow as the international order outgrows the Westphalian state-centric system, and as various types of non-state actors continue to rise in importance.

Creating such a model is an ambitious undertaking, and the model I present here is no doubt incomplete in many respects. It is general by design. Its usefulness does not lie in making specific hypotheses, but in helping scholars and practitioners think through

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<sup>1</sup>“Syria crisis: Guide to armed and political opposition,” BBC, December 13, 2013, <http://bbc.in/1isEREO>.

the dynamics of fragmented wars. Better models can quite likely be conceived. However, I believe my model is a useful way of looking at war and presents a strong point of departure. My hope is that, if nothing else, I expose deficiencies in our existing models of war and illustrate that alternative models might be useful.

I argue that war is best understood as a violent renegotiation among stakeholders within a complex, adaptive social system. Even in peacetime, a broad range of actors are constantly “renegotiating” their place in society, using nonviolent mechanisms ranging from discussion and debate to economic transactions, litigation, and legislation. Sometimes, however, actors find the status quo intolerable and choose violent mechanisms of renegotiation. *War is a violent renegotiation of the status quo on a large scale.* The chaos of war often provokes multiple violent renegotiations simultaneously at multiple levels of analysis.

War continues until a social system reaches a new point of dynamic equilibrium; that is, until enough key stakeholders consent to a new status quo. Victory does not mean overcoming a single adversary, but achieving a new equilibrium that is favorable to one’s interests. This thesis hypothesizes that in fragmented wars, achieving victory requires building a coalition of stakeholders willing to consent to one’s desired equilibrium while simultaneously fragmenting rival coalitions. Because complex systems are always changing and evolving, even the most decisive victory will not be perfect; it will only establish a temporary equilibrium that the march of history will eventually disrupt. In conflicts where the renegotiation is not completed to the satisfaction of key stakeholders, repeated conflict episodes are likely and may be considered part of one larger war.

To return to the underlying research question: what is the utility of external intervention in these fragmented wars? Intervening actors can pursue two types of strategies: *winning* and *non-winning*. The utility of intervention is very different in each case.

Actors who wish to win in a fragmented war face the herculean task of re-stabilizing an entire social system. Because a single actor usually cannot impose an outcome on a fragmented system, this requires a strategy of coalition-building among stakeholders. This is the essential strategic activity of the war. Nation-building is not an optional process of running elections or building schools; it is the political and military process of bringing an array of actors into equilibrium. An external intervener can help this

process along by facilitating or incentivizing cooperation, using force to shape the calculations of key actors, or using force to annihilate irreconcilable actors. However, re-stabilizing a fragmented social system is an extremely long and difficult process, and may ultimately be impossible. The process is nonlinear; outcomes emerge organically from complex interactions among stakeholders. The extreme difficulty of re-stabilizing a social system means that interveners should only rarely try. If they do, they must expect a long, frustrating, and open-ended commitment to a process they are unable to completely control. Exit strategies cannot be articulated ahead of time.

A better alternative for most external stakeholders is a non-winning strategy. Instead of trying vainly to re-stabilize an entire social system, interveners must pursue limited ends that protect or advance their most important interests, with little expectation of a decisive victory. They must navigate the rapids of violence rather than solve it. Within the complex nonlinearity of fragmented war, this calls for strategies that are flexible, adaptive, and open-ended. This way of thinking poses domestic challenges, because neither practitioners nor democratic publics like going to war when decisive victory is not an option. Although the war will continue to rage, external intervention can have utility in protecting or advancing specific, narrowly-defined interests.

This thesis applies this model to two cases that demonstrate fragmentation at its most extreme: Iraq 2003-2014 and Syria 2011-2014. In Iraq, the US invasion toppled the government, fractured Iraq's social system, and prompted a widespread renegotiation of the country's and the region's future. Domestic actors jostled for political power and control of territory, while neighbors and regional powers intervened or supported proxies. Meanwhile, opportunistic non-state actors pursued their own violent agendas in semi-anarchic conditions. The US struggled for more than seven years to win by re-stabilizing Iraq's social system, illustrating the difficulty and the perils of such a strategy.

In Syria the government's monopoly on violence collapsed because of internal uprisings. The country fragmented along multiple fault lines, and like Iraq, became a battleground for regional stakeholders to renegotiate their place in the Middle East. In a country where no single actor is strong enough to re-stabilize the social system, most actors are pursuing non-winning strategies to secure their place within a cycle of violence that has no end in sight. That has not stopped calls from both Syrians and American in-

terventionists for US military intervention, either through airpower or through arming rebel groups. This thesis does not rule out US military intervention, but argues the US is not capable of creating a new equilibrium in Syria. In other words, it cannot achieve victory. The best the US can achieve is the limited protection of its interests through non-winning strategies.

Given the reality of fragmentation in so many modern wars, assuming fragmentation away is dangerous. There is an urgent need for both scholars and military theorists to integrate fragmentation into their theories and models. My hope is that this thesis will contribute to filling this gap.



## Chapter 1

### War is Not a Duel

For most of history, human beings have conceived of war as a duel between two sides. The idea is intuitively appealing, because that is how soldiers actually experience combat at the tactical level. War consists of a series of engagements, and in any given engagement, it is typically two sides who meet in a violent clash of arms. Even at the operational and strategic levels, the notion of a duel often does have some explanatory power. A rough principle of polarity is often superimposed on conflicts that are dizzyingly complex. That is why we collapse the Peloponnesian War into a duel between Athens and Sparta, or the myriad conflicts of World War II into a contest between the Axis and Allies.

However, this view of war is not inviolable. The duel is not an accurate representation of what war actually is; it is a model, a simplification of a complex reality. Building models is all about stripping away nonessential details to highlight essential features. While theories can have great explanatory and predictive power, their very explanatory power comes at the expense of fine details that may, in some contexts, be vitally important. Furthermore, zealous acolytes might push a model much farther than it is capable of going. If they take a model literally—that is, if they accept it as an accurate representation of the real world—it may lead them to predictions and conclusions that are misleading or even dangerously wrong.

This chapter will demonstrate that the duel model is not sufficient for explaining many conflicts. Clausewitz did not intend the duel to be a perfect representation of war, but a “schematized model” that would help his readers make sense of war’s idealized nature. The model rests on three critical assumptions: (1) war consists of two primary actors (2) actors are of comparable types and (3) actors are unified. The duel model is misleading and even dangerous in wars where these assumptions do not hold. Unfortunately, many scholars and practitioners of war have taken the duel model much farther than Clausewitz ever intended it to go. Clausewitz’s description of war as a duel was only the first stage in a complex dialectical argument, culminating in his formulation of war as a paradoxical trinity of enmity, intelligence, and chance. Unfortunately, many students of

war have clung to the duel model while downplaying the complex, nonlinear formulation that follows.

This chapter considers Clausewitz's theoretical formulation of war as a duel, considers anomalies, and examines each of the three assumptions underlying the duel model. It then considers how students of war have employed the duel model in theory or practice. The chapter concludes that, while the duel model is useful within certain limits, it is woefully inadequate for describing fragmented wars and for prescribing strategy in them.

### **The Importance of Models**

Before we delve into the duel model, it is important to consider the role that theories and models play in shaping our understanding of the world.

All of us rely on theories and models to interpret and explain things. This is just as true for the man in the field, staring down the enemy, as it is for an academic studying war in a university library. Theories and models are not mere academic jargon; they are the lenses through which we experience reality. The question is not whether we use theories and models, but whether we explicitly recognize their use.

What exactly is a theory? According to Kenneth Waltz, a theory is an effort to explain some facet of the world. A theory answers questions like, "Why does this occur? How does that thing work? What causes that? How does it all hang together?"<sup>1</sup> A theory is not a collection of facts, but an effort to explain how those facts fit together.

Models are simplified versions of reality, and are often used to represent theories.<sup>2</sup> They do not accurately and faithfully represent every detail of the real world. Rather, they isolate and emphasize certain features in order to explain something. That is why they are so helpful. As George Box and Normal Draper write, "All models are wrong, but some are useful."<sup>3</sup> Attempting to perfectly replicate reality would require accounting for every relevant variable or detail in the world, making for models and theories that are almost infinitely complex—and therefore useless. Simplification makes sense of a world that is

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<sup>1</sup> Waltz, Kenneth N., *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2010), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Waltz, Theory, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Mitchell, *Complexity*, Kindle Locations 3709-3710.

bewildering in its complexity, allowing people to isolate a specific phenomenon, study it, and explain it in intelligible language. Models “lay bare the essential elements in play and indicate the necessary relations of cause and interdependency—or suggest where to look for them.”<sup>4</sup>

Consider a category of models each of uses on a regular basis: maps. A truck driver finds a highway map useful, not because it accurately depicts the world, but because it strips away nonessential clutter and presents only the features that concern him: highways and cities. On the other hand, a demographer studying urban gentrification might pore over maps depicting concentrations of race or income levels. She would find the trucker’s map useless. Maps are useful within specific contexts, but each type of map has limits. The same is true of models in general.

Because theories and models do not perfectly correspond to the real world, there are limits to how and when they should be employed. That is why it is helpful to explicitly acknowledge the theories and models we use to understand the world, anticipate the future, and determine courses of action. If we understand the assumptions and simplifications upon which a theory depends, we will be better equipped to recognize the theory’s limitations. We will understand when and how it can be used appropriately, and will also be sensitized to its potential dangers.

This discussion is important to the matter at hand, because the famous claim that “war is a duel” is not a perfect representation of reality. The duel is a model representing Clausewitz’s theory of absolute war, and it is subject to the limitations discussed here.

### **Clausewitz's Duel**

Although he was not the first person to suggest the idea, it is the nineteenth-century Prussian theorist Carl von Clausewitz who formalized the idea that war is a duel. His masterpiece *On War* remains the starting point for most subsequent discussion of war and strategy. His theory of war is deeply interwoven through both military doctrine and academic scholarship about war.

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<sup>4</sup> Waltz, *Theory*, 10.



Clausewitz defines war as “nothing but a duel [*zweikampf*] on a larger scale . . . War is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.”<sup>5</sup> The German word *zweikampf* literally means “two-fight,” a meaning that is captured well in the English word *duel*, which is derived from both the Latin *duellum* (“war”) and *dualis* (“of two”).<sup>6</sup> Clausewitz tells his readers, “countless duels go to make up war, but a picture of it is a whole can be formed by imagining a pair of wrestlers. Each tries through physical force to compel the other to do his will.”<sup>7</sup> Clausewitz’s definition, and his accompanying metaphor, are striking both for their simplicity and their explanatory power. Both resonate with anyone who has clashed with the enemy on the field of battle.

At the same time, the very simplicity of Clausewitz’s definition obscures the fact that he is not describing what war actually is; he is presenting a theory, which abstracts the essential parts and relationships from a much more complex whole. The image of a wrestling match is not simply a helpful analogy, but a model representing the essential parts and relationships of the theory. Implicit in Clausewitz’s theory and model are certain assumptions.

First, the duel model assumes two actors. It is implicit in Clausewitz’s word choices (“two-fight”) and in the metaphor of a wrestling match. Clausewitz lived, fought, and wrote at a time when numerous states were caught up in the Napoleonic wars and alliances were constantly shifting, but he believed war was reducible to an interaction between two parties. Only two armies typically met in battle at a given time and place. Up until Clausewitz’s day, most writings about “strategy” were really about what we today call “operational art”: the maneuvering of armies to battle, or what Clausewitz described as “the use of engagements for the purpose of war.”<sup>8</sup> Engagements typically were duels.

Second, the model implies actors are unified. An individual human being in a wrestling match cannot be subdivided. He has a unified will; he can keep fighting or yield. He has unified preferences, which dictate how much pain he is willing to accept in

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<sup>5</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 75.

<sup>6</sup> Waldeman, Thomas, *War, Clausewitz and the Trinity* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate), 55; Harper, Douglas. Online Etymology Dictionary, entry for *duel*, <http://bit.ly/1JJJq6>.

<sup>7</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 75.

<sup>8</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 128.

pursuit of his goal. He is a single organism, and may be incapacitated or killed by attacks on vital points of his body. He cannot join forces with another wrestler to overpower his rival, because there are no other wrestlers on the mat. Although Clausewitz later goes on to write about alliances, the introduction of alliances deviates from a pure duel model. Dynamics become possible that the duel model does not anticipate.

Third, although Clausewitz does not explicitly state it, his model implies actors of comparable types. Writing at a time when Europe was beset by conventional wars between professional armies, Clausewitz simply takes it for granted that war is a competition between armies belonging to states. He disregards naval forces, gives guerrilla warfare only brief treatment, and understandably does not foresee the rise of violent non-state actors.

These three assumptions about war have undergirded much strategic thinking ever since. While many practitioners and scholars have questioned them, they continue to reappear in various guises because they are so alluring. They provide conceptual clarity to what is an otherwise chaotic and messy phenomenon.

Latent within the duel model is a theory of victory: a combatant uses physical force to compel the enemy to do his will. This theory of victory stems directly from Clausewitz's starting premises. If it is only my adversary and me on the wrestling mat, I can focus all of my willpower and exertion on physically overpowering him. If my enemy is a unified entity, he has a will that can be broken and a body that can be incapacitated or killed. A compelling theory of victory emerges, which has served as the foundation for much military theory ever since. When the enemy capitulates, war ends.

If the three underlying assumptions are not valid, however, the theory of victory might not be valid either.

### **Anomalies**

If we turn to the historical record, we find numerous anomalies that do not fit within the paradigm of the duel model. Consider the Peloponnesian War, fought between the Athenian Empire and the Peloponnesian League led by Sparta between 431 and 404 BCE. At one level, we do see a basic principle of polarity at work between Athens and

Sparta. Thucydides, the war's famous historian, characterized it this way in the very first sentence of his book: "Thucydides, an Athenian, wrote the history of the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians."<sup>9</sup> The vast majority of commentators in the intervening 2400 years describe the conflict in the same terms. But does this shorthand description capture what actually happened in the war?

The Peloponnesian War was characterized by a large number of influential actors, and these actors were hardly unified. Readers of *The History of the Peloponnesian War* are bewildered by the byzantine politics of shifting alliances among fragmented actors. The two "sides" were coalitions of city-states. Most had treaty obligations, but alliances were constantly shifting, and relations between colonizers and colonized could be problematic. Compounding this complexity was factionalization within city-states, which led to foreign support and proxy warfare. To further complicate matters, the war brought in outside actors like the Persian Empire, which had threatened the entire Greek civilization in two previous wars. Although the Peloponnesian War began with a conventional effort by Sparta to march on Athens, it disintegrated into an array of local conflicts that only loosely tied into the larger contest. In the latter phase of the war, the Spartans supported rebellions throughout the Athenian Empire. Thucydides writes, "Later on, one may say, the whole Hellenic world was convulsed; struggles being everywhere made by the popular leaders to bring in the Athenians, and by the oligarchs to introduce the Spartans."<sup>10</sup> Because of the war, Thucydides says, revolutionary parties solicited foreign help they never would have accepted in peacetime.<sup>11</sup> The breakdown of the Greek world into factionalized and endless warfare led to hopelessness, barbarism, and the death of meaning. Survival became the only prerogative. "To put an end to this, there was neither promise to be depended upon, nor oath that could command respect; but all parties dwelling rather in their calculation upon the hopelessness of a permanent state of things, were more intent upon self-defense than capable of confidence."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides*, ed. Robert Strassler (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 1.1.

<sup>10</sup> Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides*, 3.82.

<sup>11</sup> Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides*, 3.82.

<sup>12</sup> Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides*, 3.83.

The Peloponnesian War was more complex than the duel metaphor suggests, which made victory extraordinarily difficult. Athens and Sparta never lost sight of defeating each other, but this overarching contest became a framework in which dozens of local conflicts played out. A wide range of actors employed violence to refashion the entire Mediterranean world. Victory ultimately required decisive military action, but it also required skillful manipulation of alliances, the building of coalitions, and the tearing apart of rival coalitions. The fragmentation of will made it difficult to impose peace. Following the death of prominent Athenian and Spartan hawks, the two sides managed to sign the Peace of Nicias, but key allies on both sides refused to abide by its terms.<sup>13</sup> The “fifty year” peace treaty quickly broke down, dragging the Hellenic world into another decade of war. In the end Sparta did win a decisive military victory over the Athenian fleet, compelling the Athenians to surrender. Still, it was a messy victory and came only after the ruin of Greek civilization. It was not long before Philip II of Macedon conquered the weakened Greeks, bringing their golden age to an end. As we look back with 2400 years of hindsight, we can see that history never stands still. The story of the Mediterranean world is one of almost continuous violence, punctuated only by brief periods of peace, which raises questions about both the duel model and its vision of decisive victory.

The Peloponnesian War is only one example illustrating anomalies in the duel model, chosen because of its archetypal value. The case studies in Chapters 3 and 4 present two other examples. However, it is not hard to identify anomalies in other prominent wars.

The Thirty Years War (1618-1648 CE) devastated Europe and drew in nearly every country on the continent. It was characterized by constantly shifting alliances, side-switching, and the proliferation of local conflicts within the framework of the broader war. The Lebanese Civil War lasted fifteen years, saw bloody fighting between a proliferation of political and religious actors, and prompted interventions by numerous outside powers. Many of the largest actors switched sides at least once. When Somalia’s government collapsed in 1991, it set off a many-sided war among armed factions that has yet to be resolved. Even World War II, the quintessential duel between industrial nation-

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<sup>13</sup> Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides*, 5.22.

states, was more complex than the duel model suggests. The Axis and Allies represented a diverse group of countries with disparate interests, and World War II encompassed many smaller wars. Even as the Allies fought Germany and Japan, they were concerned with the balance of power that would result between the US and Western Europe and the Soviet Union. Embedded within the Chinese resistance to Japanese occupation was a conflict between Chinese Nationalists and Communists. Even as they fought a duel against clear enemies, policymakers and military leaders had to consider how these various conflicts interacted. This became especially important in the final months of World War II, when the “facts on the ground” helped to establish the balance of power between the superpowers.

These anomalies should lead us to question whether the duel model is the best way to represent and understand war. As Thomas Kuhn observed, the presence of numerous anomalies may suggest the need for new paradigms.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps the wars cited here are not merely outliers, but demonstrate essential features of war that the duel model overlooks. In an extended analysis of the war in Afghanistan, Emile Simpson writes, “The political fragmentation that characterizes the Afghan conflict is likely to point to the future of contemporary conflict rather than prove to be an anomaly.”<sup>15</sup> Dr. Conrad Crane has coined the term *mosaic conflicts* to encapsulate “the idea that . . . war is best represented by the accumulated effects of a multitude of sub-narratives, none of which is decisive in itself.”<sup>16</sup> These are important insights, but as we have seen here, mosaic conflicts are nothing new. Perhaps our analytical problem is not that modern war is transforming, but that the duel model has never been sufficient. The glaring presence of anomalies should lead us to inquire whether better models might be possible.

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<sup>14</sup> Kuhn, Thomas, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Simpson, Emile, *War from the Ground Up: Twenty-First Century Combat as Politics* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press), 75.

<sup>16</sup> Simpson, *War from the Ground Up*, 93.

## Clausewitz, the Duel, and Real War

Do these anomalies mean Clausewitz was wrong in presenting war as a duel? I argue no. To claim that would be to fundamentally misunderstand what Clausewitz was setting out to accomplish. Clausewitz presented the duel model to represent a basic feature of “idealized” war, but he was perfectly aware that the real world was considerably more complex. His presentation of the duel model was only one step in a complex dialectical argument that culminated in a more nuanced model of war. One reason for Clausewitz’s enduring relevance is his refusal to be dogmatic, and in various places Clausewitz looks past the assumptions of the duel model. With that said, Clausewitz does often take the assumptions behind the duel model for granted, and we can only speculate how far he intended the duel model to go.

Clausewitz has confused generations of students and scholars. He spends the first chapters of *On War* developing a Kantian ideal of “absolute war,” which he sees as a clash of cosmic proportions between two wills, utilizing the utmost extremes of violence. War’s essential nature is unlimited violence, and “[t]o introduce the principle of moderation into the theory of war itself would always lead to logical absurdity.”<sup>17</sup> It is in this ideal section of *On War* that Clausewitz defines war as a duel.

But after spending several chapters developing this extreme vision of absolute war, Clausewitz makes a dialectical turn. He explains that “absolute war” can’t actually exist in the real world. In actuality, violence is situated in a messy political reality. This leads Clausewitz to his second definition of war: “war is merely the continuation of policy by other means.”<sup>18</sup> War “converts the overwhelmingly destructive element of war into a mere instrument.”<sup>19</sup> This leads Clausewitz to a less dogmatic theory of victory. He writes, “We can now see that in war many roads lead to success, and that they do not all involve the opponent’s outright defeat.”<sup>20</sup> Clausewitz eventually arrives at a synthesis,

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<sup>17</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 76.

<sup>18</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 87

<sup>19</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 606.

<sup>20</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 94.

defining war as a “paradoxical trinity” of hatred and enmity, reason and chance, and policy.<sup>21</sup>

The earliest generations of Clausewitz’s followers missed the dialectical turn, and embraced Clausewitz’s calls for maximal violence to defeat an enemy—a misinterpretation that led critics like B.H. Liddel-Hart and John Keegan to scorn Clausewitz for facilitating the bloodbath of World War I.<sup>22</sup> Modern scholars and practitioners have a better grasp on Clausewitz. However, while they recognize that Clausewitz’s redefinition of war effectively abrogates his concept of “absolute war,” they largely stand by Clausewitz’s first definition of war as a duel. They do this even though the duel model occurs before the dialectical turn. This raises the question: Did Clausewitz intend his later definitions of war to supersede the logic of a duel, or did he view them as complementary?

The text itself suggests that Clausewitz continued to find the notion of a duel helpful—although he is not dogmatic about it. Most of *On War* implicitly assumes two armies engaged in combat, although their means, ways, and ends can assume many forms. Clausewitz modifies his ideal theory of victory, and acknowledges that in the real world subjugating the enemy’s will through combat is not the only way to achieve a political objective. He specifically mentions political strategies of disrupting enemy alliances or gaining new allies, which goes beyond a pure duel model.<sup>23</sup> However, such dynamics mostly remain in the background, and the three assumptions underlying the duel model continue to drive much of Clausewitz’s discussion in *On War*.

It seems reasonable to conclude that the duel passage should be treated in the same fashion as Clausewitz’s passages on absolute war. Just as absolute war is a Kantian ideal embodying the essential nature of war, a duel is a hypothetical ideal of two wills colliding. But just as the extreme violence of absolute war is refracted through the conditions of the real world, so is the conceptual purity of the duel. One should expect the real world to be messier than the duel model suggests.

Clausewitz’s ambiguity about the nature of war mirrors the ambiguity in modern military doctrine. History is replete with examples where military leaders have tried to

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<sup>21</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 89.

<sup>22</sup> Bassford, Christopher, “John Keegan and the Grand Tradition of Trashing Clausewitz: A Polemic,” *War in History* vol 1 no 3 (November 1994), 319-336, <http://bit.ly/1kIIaKM>.

<sup>23</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 92.

apply the duel model to wars that do not fit. A careless embrace of the duel model can contribute to what Clausewitz identifies as the worst errors in judgment: mistaking a war for, or trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.<sup>24</sup>

### **The Duel in Joint Doctrine**

United States military doctrine reflects the same ambiguity about the duel model that we find in Clausewitz himself. Doctrine is important, because it represents what military institutions collectively believe and teach about war. It represents canonical wisdom gleaned from theory and battlefield experience, and is the basis for training, equipping, and employing forces. Current US doctrine begins with the premise that war is a duel, but the authors wrestle with each of the three underlying assumptions. The authors seem intuitively aware that the three assumptions are not universally valid, but they repeatedly fall back on them and rarely discuss them explicitly. They do not consider the full implications if these assumptions do not hold true.

Joint Publication 1, which is the bedrock doctrinal publication for all of the US Armed Forces, illustrates this ambivalent use of the duel model. If we consider each of the three assumptions underlying the duel model, we see a clear recognition by the authors that the assumptions do not always hold.

First, JP-1 clearly recognizes that actors may not be of comparable types. The United States has enough experience fighting non-state actors to drive a stake through the idea that war only occurs between nation-states. However, US doctrine has struggled to conceptualize asymmetric wars. It generally breaks war down to “conventional war” and “everything else.” Terminology abounds. The “everything else” category has been variously described as small wars, guerrilla wars, low intensity conflict, asymmetric warfare, insurgency, policing, irregular warfare, war amongst the people, 4GW, military operations other than war, stability operations, and many other labels. JP-1 currently draws a distinction between “traditional” and irregular” warfare. It states, “Traditional warfare is

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<sup>24</sup> Clausewitz writes, “The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.” Clausewitz, *On War*, 89.



characterized as a violent struggle for domination between nation-states or coalitions and alliances of nation-states.”<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, “IW is characterized as a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population(s)... In IW, a less powerful adversary seeks to disrupt or negate the military capabilities and advantages of a more powerful military force, which usually serves that nation’s established government.”<sup>26</sup>

Second, JP-1 is open to the possibility that war might consist of more than two actors. Shortly after defining war as “socially sanctioned violence to achieve a political purpose”<sup>27</sup>, it covers Clausewitz’s three definitions of war: a duel, a continuation of politics by other means, and a paradoxical trinity. In its discussion of the duel, JP-1 makes a curious and revealing modification: “Distilled to its essence, war is a violent struggle between two (*or more*) hostile and independent wills, each trying to impose itself on the other” (emphasis added).<sup>28</sup> This heretical modification of Clausewitz suggests a serious effort to come to grips with the potential complexity of war, and has profound implications if true. War is a duel, but apparently it isn’t always a duel. Unfortunately, the authors decline to probe where this logic might lead. In a paragraph elaborating on IW, the manual alternates between the singular “adversary” and the plural “adversaries.”<sup>29</sup> Although the repeated use of singular nouns may simply be a shorthand for multiple enemies, it may also reflect the intense appeal of the duel model to simplify the messy complexity of war. This reductionism comes at a price, however; whether or not a war has more than two actors may have substantial implications for the conduct of the war and the conditions for victory. This section also states actors compete for legitimacy and influence among “population(s),” implying more than one population may have a stake in the conflict. These inconsistencies are never considered as important phenomena in their own right.

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<sup>25</sup> *Joint Publication 1: Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States* (25 March 2013), 1-5, <http://1.usa.gov/1hAFQ4I>.

<sup>26</sup> JP-1, 1-5.

<sup>27</sup> JP-1, 1-3.

<sup>28</sup> JP-1, 1-3.

<sup>29</sup> JP-1, 1-6.

Third, JP-1 largely assumes that actors are unified entities. However, the publication hints that divisions within actors might have strategic significance. For example, JP-1 defines an erosion strategy as using “military force to erode the enemy leadership’s or the enemy society’s political will.”<sup>30</sup> The distinct separation of “enemy leadership” and “society” suggests a possible fault line for fragmentation, but the implications are not discussed. Which will should be targeted? If the goal of erosion is “to convince the enemy that accepting our terms will be less painful than continuing to aggress or resist,” how can we achieve this goal if more than one will is operative?<sup>31</sup> Questions such as these become particularly salient as we move from abstract theory into real-world application.

The duel assumptions are especially evident when JP-1 presents two strategies for attaining victory. The first is annihilation, which entails making “the enemy helpless to resist us, by physically destroying his military capabilities.”<sup>32</sup> The second is erosion, which means “using military force to erode the enemy leadership’s or the enemy society’s political will.”<sup>33</sup> Both strategies assume the war is being waged against a single unified actor. In both strategies, politics appears to stand still when the fighting starts; the military simply enacts these strategies until the enemy acquiesces to a political end state that political leaders have previously established.

This way of thinking about strategy is not particularly helpful if the duel assumptions do not hold. Consider a hypothetical case in which three equally powerful warlords compete for control of an ungoverned space. What happens if one warlord tries a JP-1 strategy of annihilation or erosion against another? He might destroy or coerce one rival, which simplifies the war, but it does not deliver victory; he still has an adversary standing. On the other hand, his attack may drive his two adversaries into an alliance strong enough to defeat him. In such a war, the political dynamics among the three actors are as important to victory as annihilation or erosion—perhaps even more important. Annihilation and erosion will likely be important components of strategy, but if they are not sufficient to deliver victory, can we really call them strategies in and of themselves? The dy-

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<sup>30</sup> JP-1, 1-4.

<sup>31</sup> JP-1, 1-4.

<sup>32</sup> JP-1, 1-4.

<sup>33</sup> JP-1, 1-4.

namics that matter most to victory lie above this level, and JP-1 offers almost no guidance at this level.

The deficiencies become even more apparent if our warlords' armies can fragment. It is difficult to coerce a warlord if his army splits into one faction that submits and one faction that continues fighting. It is entirely possible that one warlord can achieve victory by annihilating or coercing specific actors and sub-actors in a precise time sequence, but such a strategy goes far beyond what JP-1 offers. Victory will be contingent on complex interactions among these multiple actors, but such complexity is not found in military doctrine.

Some might argue that managing such complexity is the responsibility of civilian policy-makers, not military strategists. After all, integrating instruments of national power is a vital responsibility belonging to the highest levels of government, something JP-1 reminds its readers.<sup>34</sup> This is an important point, but as the example above illustrates, politics cannot be separated from military strategy. In a fragmented war, the use of military force is an inherently political process and only has utility in an appropriate political context.

Worse, no single agency in government has responsibility for integrating military and political strategy. As scholars like Colin Gray and Eliot Cohen remind us, a chasm stands between military action and political activity, but some of the most important dynamics in war are found in that murky no-man's-land. Strategy must bridge that gap, which requires a continual dialog between both military and civilian voices. Both communities need a meaningful theory of victory to guide them, because "when liberal powers do not understand a problem on its own terms, applying instead a distorting paradigm of war, proper strategic dialogue is frustrated."<sup>35</sup>

JP-1 provides no such theory of strategic victory for fragmented wars. It kicks the most important dynamics of war "upstairs" to civilian leaders, but these civilian leaders also have no theory of victory to guide them. This is a glaring deficiency. Both civilian leaders and military strategists need a theory of victory for fragmented wars that looks a

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<sup>34</sup> *JP-1*, 1-4.

<sup>35</sup> Simpson, *War from the Ground Up*, 92.

level above the “strategies” outlined in JP-1. Such a theory must consider how activities like annihilation and erosion can be made to serve higher strategic goals.

We will consider one such theory in the next chapter, but before we do, let us consider more examples of how the duel has been institutionalized among both warfighters and scholars.

### **The Duel in Strategic Airpower Theory**

Joint doctrine is not the only place where the duel model has been institutionalized. Strategic airpower theory is rooted in the same assumptions, which partially explains the failure of strategic airpower to live up to its promises.

The assumptions of two, comparable, unified actors are readily apparent in the writings of Giulio Douhet, one of the earliest theorists of strategic airpower. He begins his book *The Command of the Air* with a definition of war rooted in Clausewitz’s first definition: “War is a conflict between two wills basically opposed one to the other.”<sup>36</sup> He ignores Clausewitz’s later nuances, and strictly adheres to this definition for the rest of the book.

Douhet assumes a universe consisting entirely of two actors. He always writes of “the enemy” in the singular and takes no account of third parties. Today it is conventional wisdom that excessive use of force might provoke undesirable consequences among third parties, such as the loss of allies or the strengthening of enemy alliances, but such concerns find no place in Douhet’s reductionist universe. Douhet advocates not only bombing raids against the enemy’s population, but “[ravaging] his whole country by chemical and bacteriological warfare.”<sup>37</sup> He has no fear of strategic consequences among other actors.

Douhet also assumes these two actors are comparable nation-states with fixed, targetable population centers. In his universe, aerial warfare is a race to unleash devastation on cities. Whichever side can accomplish this destruction first will win the war.

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<sup>36</sup> Douhet, Giulio, *The Command of the Air*, eds. Joseph Patrick Harahan and Richard H. Kohn, trans. Dino Ferrari (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2009), 8.

<sup>37</sup> Douhet, *The Command of the Air*, 7.

Douhet doesn't consider the possibility of asymmetric warfare against irregular opponents.

Finally, Douhet assumes actors are unified. The entire premise of coercive bombing is that the enemy state—its government, its military forces, and its population—are a coherent whole. For Douhet, inflicting sufficient misery on an enemy population will inevitably lead to that government's surrender.<sup>38</sup> The target in total wars is the enemy's will, a singular force that permeates every aspect of society. "Military activity is never directed against material force alone; it is always aimed simultaneously at the moral forces which give it life, and the two cannot be separated."<sup>39</sup> A singular will can choose to fight or capitulate. What it cannot do is fragment.

If we look past the unified actor assumption, and view the enemy as a coalition of discrete wills, we find a dangerous new range of possibilities. In *The War in the Air*, H.G. Wells depicts New York City in the throes of a German aerial bombardment. When the mayor surrenders—a move that should have ended the battle, if New York was a unified actor—something happens that calls Douhet's entire theory of war into question: New Yorkers refuse to accept the surrender. They rise up in defiance against the German occupation and their traitorous mayor, "humming like a hive of bees—of very angry bees."<sup>40</sup> History has also provided examples of the opposite phenomenon: populations suffering the consequences of strategic bombing, while unconcerned government leaders refuse to submit their will.

Later variants of strategic airpower theory continued to rely on these assumptions in varying degrees. In the 1930s, the US Air Corps Tactical School refined a concept known as industrial web theory, which modeled the state as a machine comprised of nodes and linkages. Destroying the right nodes could create cascading effects that would paralyze or incapacitate a state without the need to fight its armed forces. Airmen searched throughout World War II for the right nodes, but it is questionable whether the

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<sup>38</sup> For example, Douhet writes, "Tragic, too, to think that the decision in this kind of war must depend upon smashing the material and moral resources of a people caught up in a frightful cataclysm which haunts them everywhere without cease until the final collapse of all social organization. Mercifully, the decision will be quick in this kind of war, since the decisive blows will be directed at civilians, that element of the countries at war least able to sustain them," *The Command of the Air*, 61.

<sup>39</sup> Douhet, *The Command of the Air*, 137.

<sup>40</sup> Wells, H.G., *The War in the Air* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2005), 139.

German and Japanese states were ever the singular, unified machines the ACTS theorists envisioned. The theory missed the resilience and adaptability of adversary populations in keeping their war machines running despite Allied bombardment. Industrial web theory was even more problematic in Korea and Vietnam, where targeting the nodes most critical to their adversaries would have triggered adverse political consequences among third-party actors like the Soviet Union and China. In Vietnam strategic airpower proved especially ineffective against a decentralized, irregular enemy.

In the early 1990s, USAF Col. John Warden resurrected industrial web theory by describing the enemy as a biological organism. The enemy's command structure was the brain and therefore the ultimate target of military action, since it "is the only element of the enemy that can make concessions, that can make the very complex decisions that are necessary to keep a country on a particular course, or that can direct a country at war." If the enemy is a unified biological system, striking the brain is a sure way to incapacitate the adversary as a strategic actor. Warden writes, "there can be no substitute for it and without it the body, even though technically alive, is no longer operating at a strategic level."<sup>41</sup> This principle became the basis for Warden's entire theory of airpower. However, if the enemy is not a unified actor, Warden's metaphor might be a poor one. Many organizations survive when their "brain" is attacked; they replace leaders, disperse, fight decentralized, or form new ad hoc networks.

Many airpower theorists today recognize the dangers of relying on a duel model, but they lack alternative models that can guide them through messy, fragmented wars. This strategic confusion manifests itself in a deep institutional reluctance to involve itself in irregular war. Many Airmen have shifted their focus back to conventional wars, where classic strategic airpower theory—and the duel model underlying it—appears to have more relevance.

### **The Duel in Counterinsurgency**

Classic counterinsurgency theory views insurgencies as a battle between a government and an insurgency for the loyal of a neutral population. It shows a more sophisti-

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<sup>41</sup> Warden, John, "The Enemy as a System," *Airpower Journal* (Spring 1995), <http://bit.ly/1qhA5jE>.

cated understanding of fragmented wars than traditional models, but still relies on modified duel assumptions.

First, although COIN theory introduces the neutral population as a significant actor, it still views war as a contest between two sides. The population is not an independent agent, but merely the human terrain in which the duel plays out. Galula writes, “In any circumstances, whatever the cause, the population is split among three groups: (1) an active minority for the cause, (2) a neutral majority, (3) an active minority against the cause.”<sup>42</sup> John Nagl echoes Galula’s definition and describes the civilian population as “the sea in which the insurgent swims.”<sup>43</sup> Trinquier sees insurgencies as monolithic organizations that governments must coerce or destroy using traditional tools of warfare.<sup>44</sup> Working with the population is simply a means of gaining access to and destroying the insurgency. A theory of victory emerges from these COIN theorists, which the US Army and Marines COIN Field Manual 3-24 states explicitly: “Victory is achieved when the populace consents to the government’s legitimacy and stops actively and passively supporting the insurgency.”<sup>45</sup>

COIN theory does not view the duelists as comparable types, but it does view them as fixed types. On the one hand, there is a national government in control of organized, conventional military forces seeking to preserve its hold on power and eliminate the insurgency. On the other hand, there is an elusive insurgency consisting of unconventional fighters who hide among the population. This is an important modification of the duel model, and has helped scholars and practitioners break out of a conventional warfare paradigm that is ill-suited to irregular warfare. However, this modification trades one assumption for another. The nature of the two sides is specified in detail. This risks imposing a one-size-fits-all paradigm on irregular warfare that may, in actuality, assume a variety of forms.

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<sup>42</sup> Galula, David, *Pacification in Algeria, 1956-1958* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2006), 70.

<sup>43</sup> John Nagl, quoted in Galula, David, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006), viii.

<sup>44</sup> Trinquier, Roger, *Modern Warfare: a French View of Counterinsurgency* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006), 46.

<sup>45</sup> *The US Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 1-3.

COIN theorists have given less theoretical attention to the assumption that actors are unified. This is particularly true of the earliest COIN theorists. Galula and Trinquier display rigid doctrinal purity, with their stable and unified governments battling monolithic insurgencies. Trinquier writes, “we are not up against just a few armed bands spread across a given territory, but rather against an armed clandestine organization whose essential role is to impose its will upon the population. Victory will be obtained only through the complete destruction of that organization.”<sup>46</sup> Just as the singular “enemy” fills the pages of Clausewitz, Jomini, Sun Tzu, or modern doctrinal manuals, a singular “insurgency” presents itself in much COIN writing.

With all that said, the counterinsurgency theorists drop hints that the real world is more complex than their pure models might suggest. Mere pages before his depiction of a pure duel, Galula writes, “War is not a chess game but a vast social phenomenon with an infinitely greater and ever-expanding number of variables, some of which elude analysis.”<sup>47</sup> Later he writes that a civil war “suddenly splits a nation into two or more groups which, after a brief period of initial confusion, find themselves in control of part of both the territory and the existing armed forces that they proceed immediately to develop” (emphasis added).<sup>48</sup> In a book about his experiences in Algeria, he notes that government military action can break rebel forces into “small, ineffective bands,” but also notes they are very hard to eradicate. He even discusses fault lines between parties or coalitions of parties and the army.<sup>49</sup> These passages all suggest the assumptions of the duel model might not hold in reality. However, these passages occur in isolation and are not systematically developed as part of COIN theory.

The primary challenge to the duel model has come from on-the-ground experience fighting insurgencies. The United States began its wars in Afghanistan and Iraq expecting to fight duels. Much later the US shifted to a COIN model, but empirical reality did not fit the duel assumptions underlying that model. Instead of focusing on “the Taliban” in Afghanistan, US and NATO forces had to come to grips with a plurality of actors like al-Qaeda, the Quetta Shura, the Haqqani network, the Hizb-i-Islame Group, war-

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<sup>46</sup> Trinquier, *Modern Warfare*, 7.

<sup>47</sup> Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, xi.

<sup>48</sup> Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, 3.

<sup>49</sup> Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, 5.



lords, smugglers, and tribes.<sup>50</sup> It also became apparent that the war operated on many levels; the violent reconstruction of Afghanistan's future paved the way for Iran's rise and complicated Pakistan's strategy of "defense in depth" against India. Insurgent activity also spanned the porous border with Pakistan, which granted insurgents safe havens and led to an insurgency against the Pakistani government. Sound strategy in Afghanistan could not be reduced to a duel between an American-assisted Afghan government and the Taliban; it had to account for all these interconnected conflicts. The complexity of the Iraq war also became apparent with time, as the case study in Chapter 3 will demonstrate. The US initially treated insurgents as criminals, then as monolithic enemies like "enemies of the Iraqi government" and "anti-Iraqi forces"<sup>51</sup> By 2007 the US was speaking of Sunni insurgents, the Sons of Iraq, al-Qaeda in Iraq, the Jaysh al-Mahdi of the Sadrists, and even specific Iraqi tribes.<sup>52</sup>

More recent scholarship on counterinsurgency has tried to account for some of this complexity. Although the FM 3-24 COIN manual has been accused of presenting a cookie-cutter methodology for prosecuting COIN fights, it goes out of its way to point out that every war is different. It states, "counterinsurgent commanders may face a confusing and shifting coalition of many kinds of opponents, some of whom may be at odds with one another."<sup>53</sup> The manual explicitly mentions the likelihood that outside actors will pursue their own agendas in the war, including "transnational organizations motivated by ideologies based on extremist religious or ethnic beliefs."<sup>54</sup> These acknowledgments give considerably more granularity than traditional models of war, but the manual gives little attention to processes by which actors fragment or cohere—or how strategy should account for these processes. Also, although it considers fragmentation among insurgents, it does not do the same for the government, which is typically regarded as a uni-

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<sup>50</sup> A 2011 House of Commons report on Afghanistan states: "In reality, the Afghan insurgency is a mix of Islamist factions, power-hungry warlords, criminals and tribal groupings, all pursuing their own economic, political, criminal and social agendas and interests, from local feuds to establishing a pan-Islamic caliphate." Quoted in Simpson, *War from the Ground Up*, 51-52.

<sup>51</sup> Javers, Eamon, "Spinning Fallujah: Why the Marines say they're fighting 'anti-Iraqi forces,'" Slate, May 5, 2004, <http://slate.me/PPy0hN>.

<sup>52</sup> For example, General David Petraeus' testimony to Congress in 2007 stands in stark contrast to discourse in 2003-2004. See Petraeus, David H. "Report to Congress on the Situation in Iraq" (speech, Washington, DC, 10-11 September 2007), Department of Defense, <http://1.usa.gov/1kpvvR8>.

<sup>53</sup> *COIN Field Manual*, 1-5.

<sup>54</sup> *COIN Field Manual*, 1-2.

fied actor. Finally, much COIN writing glosses over the important difference between a COIN effort by a host government and COIN support by a foreign government.

Soldiers on the ground were the first to notice the disconnect between the classical COIN model and the reality they were facing. Gian Gentile, a critic of COIN theory, writes that classical COIN theory “did not match at all, not in any way, the complexity of the civil war, the insurgency, and the Iraqi population that I confronted in western Baghdad in 2006. There were few fence sitters in this civil war—only fences, and a red line drawn right through the population—Shia versus Sunni.”<sup>55</sup>

If existing models of war are insufficient for the empirical reality on the ground, we must at least ask whether better models are possible.

### **The Duel in Academia**

Many scholars rely on the same models and assumptions that military theorists do. They do this for essentially the same reason: to make complex reality more comprehensible. And just like military practitioners, their reliance on these assumptions sometimes leads them to incomplete or even erroneous conclusions.

For example, one body of literature attempts to explain war as the outcome of bargaining among rival actors. Bargaining theory is promising because it can potentially bridge the chasm between policy and military strategy. In earlier bargaining models, war was seen as a failure of bargaining, which ceased when war erupted.<sup>56</sup> More recent models recognize that bargaining continues even during the war and that violence itself can become a means of negotiation.<sup>57</sup> Pearlman and Cunningham explain that this framework “entails identifying key players—typically just two—and specifying their preferences, the limits of their capabilities and resolve, and the information they have about each other.”<sup>58</sup> This allows analysts to make predictions about their strategic interaction and the potential

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<sup>55</sup> Gentile, Gian, *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2013), xvii.

<sup>56</sup> For example, Fearon, James, “Rationalist explanations for war,” *International Organization* 49 no. 3, Summer 1995, 379-414.

<sup>57</sup> For example, Darren Filson and Suzanne Werner, “A Bargaining Model of War and Peace: Anticipating the Onset, Duration, and Outcome of War,” *American Journal of Political Science* 46 no. 4, October 2002.

<sup>58</sup> Pearlman and Cunningham, “Nonstate Actors, Fragmentation, and Conflict Processes,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56 no. 1, February 2012, 3-15.

for conflict. In insurgency and civil war literature, these approaches typically model “a two-player game between an incumbent state and a rebel insurgency.”<sup>59</sup> Bargaining theory thus relies on the same assumptions that underlie the duel model. It typically limits itself to two major actors<sup>60</sup> or else models complex interactions as a series of dyadic relationships. It assumes actors of fixed types and assumes unified actors with fixed preferences that drive their bargaining behavior.<sup>61</sup>

Even when scholars account for multiple opposition groups, they generally model the government as a unified actor, just as COIN theorists typically do. To account for internal dissent, scholars typically apply various theories of domestic politics, which they regard as qualitatively different than international politics. Significantly, they almost always assume domestic politics is non-violent. Although the government must satisfy various constituencies and may have to pay “audience costs” if they don’t, the government is still a unified decision-maker.<sup>62</sup> Rarely does academic scholarship consider fragmentation within the government itself. The sharp distinction between governments and non-governments may also limit the ability of such theories to explain paradigm-defying types of war.

Bargaining theory makes these assumptions because the field relies on formal modeling techniques, and modeling a two-player game is orders of magnitude easier than modeling interactions among multiple, fragmented players. However, these assumptions mean bargaining theory can overlook complex interactions “that lead to important shifts and realignments within and between identity groups.”<sup>63</sup> Some of the most important conflict dynamics may be assumed away. Kalyvas writes, “Positing coherent, identifiable political groups with clear preferences fails to match the vast complexity, fluidity, and

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<sup>59</sup> Driscoll, Jesse, “Commitment Problems or Bidding Wars? Rebel Fragmentation as Peace Building,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* vol 56 no 1, February 2012, 121.

<sup>60</sup> Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, Kristin M. Bakke, and Lee J.M. Seymour, “Shirts Today, Skins Tomorrow: Dual Contests and the Effects of Fragmentation in Self-Determination Disputes,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56 no. 1, February 2012, 67-93.

<sup>61</sup> Pearlman and Cunningham, “Nonstate Actors,” 3.

<sup>62</sup> For audience costs, see Fearon, James D., “Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes,” *The American Political Science Review* 88 No. 3, September 1994, 577-592.

<sup>63</sup> Cunningham, “Shirts Today.”

ambiguity one encounters on the ground.”<sup>64</sup> Findley writes, “A focus on fragmentation challenges the unitary actor and fixed set of actors assumptions in the current literature. It implies that how actors form, change, and cease to exist may be important for how conflict occurs.”<sup>65</sup>

Another reason scholars use dual assumptions is because of the shift in political science toward quantitative, large-N methodologies, which can only be as good as the available datasets. Few datasets about civil war contain the fine-grained details that would be required to capture the dynamics of fragmentation.<sup>66</sup> The Correlates of War, one of the largest and best-known datasets, models conflict with dyadic relationships. Without adequate datasets, the quantitative methodologies currently in vogue simply don’t have the resolution to look past the assumptions of the duel model.

Qualitative case studies, which are less reliant on formal models and pre-existing datasets, are more attuned to the complexity introduced by multiple actors. Pearlman and Cunningham highlight this discrepancy: “There is hence a gap between neat conceptual frames, in which nonstate groups are treated as unitary entities, and a messy empirical record in which nonstate groups are frequently racked by internal differences and struggles.”<sup>67</sup> Nilsson sees this divide between quantitative and qualitative research as problematic: “the literature on durable peace suffers from an unfortunate disconnect between the qualitative and quantitative research. Many case studies recognize that the rebel side often consists of several actors and propose that various aspects such as spoiler dynamics can have implications for creating a lasting peace (e.g. Hampson, 1996; Stedman, 1997). Whereas case studies within the literature on durable peace emphasize that a refined view

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<sup>64</sup> Kalyvas, Stathis N., *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 10.

<sup>65</sup> Michael G. Findley, Peter J. Rudloff, “The Downstream Effects of Combatant Fragmentation on Civil War Recurrence,” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association Annual Conference “Global Governance: Political Authority in Transition,” Le Centre Sheraton Montreal Hotel, Montreal, Quebec, 2011, 6. <http://bit.ly/1e9hR1y>.

<sup>66</sup> Cunningham, “Shirts Today,” 76. Cunningham points out that the Minorities at Risk (MAR) database, which is used in many large-N studies of ethnic conflict, uses all-encompassing ethno-political groups as the level of analysis. One database that does include finer detail about multiple actors is the Peace Research Institute of Oslo/Uppsala Armed Conflict Database (ACD) which “identifies 288 internal armed conflicts, of which 90 contain more than two combatants at the same time (30%). Some of these conflicts contain more than ten different groups.” (Cunningham, Veto, 2006).

<sup>67</sup> Pearlman and Cunningham, “Nonstate Actors,” 4.

of the rebel side is needed, quantitative studies have, so far, mainly focused on two parties – the government and the opposition.”<sup>68</sup>

In summary, academic literature is often bound by the simplifying assumptions of the duel model. While this model has much explanatory power, as we have seen, it assumes away dynamics that may be essential in some conflicts. Scholars have paid insufficient attention to these processes. In a discussion of this deficiency, Kalyvas goes so far as to write, “the dynamics of civil wars, though generally understood, have seldom been the object of analytical examination by social scientists.”<sup>69</sup> This has led some scholars to call for fresh research. In 2009, the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* devoted an entire issue to fragmentation. In the lead article, Pearlman and Cunningham assess the current state of research and lay out an ambitious research agenda for future scholars. The authors point out that if one allows for the possibility of fragmentation, it leads to very different explanations of conflict processes than traditional bargaining models.”<sup>70</sup> This shifts attention to which actors should be included in peace agreements,<sup>71</sup> the potential role of spoilers,<sup>72</sup> escalatory bidding, and radical-moderate divides.

In summary, departing from the duel model may yield useful insights about the causes, processes, and termination of conflict.

## Conclusion

Looking past the duel model can be disconcerting. In their call for research on fragmentation, Pearlman and Cunningham invite their readers to “rethink what constitutes a ‘side’ in any situation of conflict.”<sup>73</sup> This is conceptually difficult, challenging our intuitive notions about what war is and how it is fought. The notion of a duel is comfort-

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<sup>68</sup> Nilsson, Desiree, “Partial Peace: Rebel Groups Inside and Outside of Civil War Settlements,” *Journal of Peace Research* 45 no. 4, July 2008, 479-495.

<sup>69</sup> Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence*, 11.

<sup>70</sup> Pearlman and Cunningham, “Nonstate Actors,” 5.

<sup>71</sup> Nilsson, for example, asks how inclusive peace agreements should be. Nilsson, “Partial Peace.”

<sup>72</sup> Stedman and Kydd & Walter consider the role of spoilers in peace processes. Stedman, Stephen John, “Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes,” *International Security* 22 no 2, Fall 1997, 5-53. Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F. Walter, “Sabotaging the Peace: The Politics of Extremist Violence,” *International Organization* 56 no. 2, Spring 2002, 263-296. Cunningham, “Veto Players” considers how the number of actors in a peace agreement influence the duration of peace.

<sup>73</sup> Pearlman and Cunningham, “Nonstate Actors,” 12.

ing, promising to simplify confusing, frustrating, and ambiguous wars fought by ever-shifting factions wage complex interactions. Modeling such conflicts is daunting for both academics and for political and military leaders who must formulate strategy. Nonetheless, as Pearlman and Cunningham write, “The stakes are high.” Although fragmentation “unsettles that which we often take for granted to be ‘actors,’” these conflict processes cannot be ignored. “Future research will reveal to what degree this shift likewise unsettles reigning wisdom about the sources, processes, and outcomes of conflict.”<sup>74</sup> Practitioners have even more at stake. As Arthur points out, “an awful lot of policy-making has to do with finding the appropriate metaphor.”<sup>75</sup> If the duel model cannot prescribe winning strategies—or worse, suggests strategies that are dangerously inappropriate—then it is imperative to build new models. The next chapter will introduce one possible model of fragmented conflict.



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<sup>74</sup> Pearlman and Cunningham, “Nonstate Actors,” 12.

<sup>75</sup> Quoted in Waldrop, *Complexity*, 334.

## Chapter 2

### War is a Complex System

In this chapter, I draw on the field of complex adaptive systems (CAS) to argue that a society at war is best understood as a complex system of dynamic, interacting agents. The overall pattern of the system is not ordered from above, but emerges from the interaction of these agents. Moment by moment, agents continually “renegotiate” this system. Agents have many peaceful means of renegotiating their place in the system, but sometimes they turn to violence. As such, war is a violent renegotiation of the status quo on a large scale. War is a highly disruptive activity to the system’s normal functioning. As peaceful mechanisms for interaction break down or are supplanted by violence, all agents with a stake in the system have increased incentives and opportunities for violence. All of these agents find themselves in an intensive bargaining process, using both violent and non-violent means, to help shape the system. Victory means the social system stabilizes at a new equilibrium point conducive to one’s interests. Although employing violence to coerce or annihilate specific agents will likely be necessary to achieve such an outcome, it will rarely be sufficient. The essential strategic activity is not the employment of violence in and of itself, but the renegotiation process the violence supports. Because achieving equilibrium is so difficult and is beyond the capability or will of most actors, many actors choose non-winning strategies to protect or advance their interests among the chaos of war.

This chapter will begin with a brief overview of complexity theory, then explain how society functions as a complex system in peacetime. Next, it will examine how the system changes when war begins and consider the utility of force in terminating and managing conflict.

### **The World as a Complex System**

In the heady days of the enlightenment, scientists came to believe in a clockwork universe that functioned like a cosmic machine. They believed “a whole can be under-

stood completely if you understand its parts, and the nature of their sum.”<sup>1</sup> Science was a matter of breaking the system into simple parts, explaining how they functioned, and then integrating them to understand larger wholes. This mindset permeated military theory as well. Antoine Henri von Jomini reduced war to straightforward maxims about bringing massed force against a decisive point. Mahan applied this approach to seapower, writing, “War has such [enduring] principles; their existence is detected by the study of the past, which reveals them in successes and in failures; the same from age to age.”<sup>2</sup> Douhet reduced his theory of war to formulas and claimed “mathematical certainty” about outcomes.<sup>3</sup> These are all examples of the reductionist scientific worldview that prevailed at the time.

Two discoveries in the early twentieth century upset this reductionist paradigm: relativity and quantum mechanics. Both cast doubt on the idea of a deterministic, clock-work universe. Scientists observed that many complex systems could not be reduced to elementary components; the system somehow added up to more than the sum of its parts. Networked neurons gave rise to human consciousness. Feeble-minded ants mysteriously collaborated to form sophisticated colonies. These discoveries gave rise to a new interdisciplinary field known as the science of complex systems, which is currently being applied to everything from weather to artificial intelligence to human society.

In her book *Complexity: A Guided Tour*, Melanie Mitchell defines a complex system as, “a system in which large networks of components with no central control and simple rules of operation give rise to complex collective behavior, sophisticated information processing, and adaptation via learning or evolution.”<sup>4</sup> This definition seems to describe many elements of human society. Complexity theory suggests that human civilization, with all its complex patterns of social and political interaction, emerges from the dynamic relationships among micro-structures within the system: namely, human beings. Their interactions give rise to increasingly complex structures like tribes and nation-

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Hofstadter, quoted in Mitchell, *Complexity*, Kindle Location 65.

<sup>2</sup> Mahan, A.T., *The Influence of Seapower Upon History 1660-1783* (New York, NY: Dover Publications, 1987), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Douhet, *The Command of the Air*, 26.

<sup>4</sup> Mitchell, *Complexity*, Kindle Locations 317-319.



states, which exhibit behaviors that cannot be purely explained purely in terms of their parts. Complexity theorists call this phenomenon “emergence.” Such a system is said to be “self-organizing” because patterns of order emerge in the absence of an external or internal controller.<sup>5</sup>

Complexity theory offers several useful insights into the study of war. First, complex systems are nonlinear, meaning there is no simple correlation between cause and effect. In the world of mathematics, a linear system can be plotted on a straight line; changing *X* leads to a corresponding change in *Y*. Nonlinear systems defy such simple correlation; slight changes in initial conditions may lead to radically different outcomes. This is a key tenet of chaos theory, represented by the hypothesis that a butterfly flapping its wings might cause a thunderstorm across the world. Because of synergistic relationships among parts, the system’s overall behavior may appear random or erratic.<sup>6</sup> One practical consequence is that chaotic, nonlinear systems can be extremely difficult to model. For this reason, Mitchell writes, “Linearity is a reductionist’s dream, and nonlinearity can sometimes be a reductionist’s nightmare.”<sup>7</sup> The neat world of cause and effect goes up in smoke.

If war occurs within a complex system, the relationship between force and outcomes will be highly unpredictable and long-term prediction will be almost impossible. Clausewitz understood this to be essential to the nature of war. His example of a pendulum suspended between three magnets is a classic example of a chaotic nonlinear system, in which the tiniest change in initial conditions creates radically different outcomes. Clausewitz writes, “the same political object can elicit differing reactions from different peoples, and even from the same people at different times.... Between two peoples and two states there can be such tensions, such a mass of inflammable material, that the slightest quarrel can produce a wholly disproportionate effect—a real explosion.”<sup>8</sup> Clausewitz is right, of course, but note the lapse into the assumptions of a duel model. Multiply Clausewitz’s point by any number of actors—states, armies, leaders, nonstate

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<sup>5</sup> Mitchell, *Complexity*, Kindle Locations 323-325.

<sup>6</sup> Beyerchen, Alan D., “Clausewitz, Nonlinearity and the Unpredictability of War,” *International Security* 17 no. 3, Winter 1992/1993, 59-90, <http://bit.ly/R25IHp>.

<sup>7</sup> Mitchell, *Complexity*, Kindle Locations 472-473.

<sup>8</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 81.

actors—and the difficulties of working within a complex system become apparent. Because the relationship between ends and means cannot be predicted in advance, it is imperative that wartime leaders learn from the system and integrate that feedback into policy and plans. Beyerchen writes, “The constant interplay is an interactive, feedback process that constitutes an intrinsic feature of war. Clausewitz’s conception is that the conduct of any war affects its character, and its altered character feeds back into the political ends that guide its conduct.”<sup>9</sup> Such a notion challenges overly simplistic notions of applying violence until an adversary’s will breaks.

Second, complex systems are dynamic. They never stop changing, but are continuously reconstituted by the independent agents comprising the system. This is just as true for human society in peacetime as in wartime. Thinking about social systems in these terms can be overwhelming, but it can also shed light on puzzles other models do not explain. If the system is always being reconstituted by agents, then it makes sense why a concept like victory can be so elusive. No military victory can permanently reorganize the system in one’s favor; it might be decisive within a specific context, but it is simply one more alteration in a dynamic system that will go on evolving in the war’s aftermath. The very words victory and defeat only really make sense within a specified context and timescale.

Third, complex systems often exhibit a characteristic called self-similarity at different scales. A classic example is a coastline. A tourist looking out his beachfront hotel window would see a jagged pattern of coastline stretching to either horizon. An astronaut looking down from the International Space Station would see a very similar jagged pattern, but on a much different scale. The same pattern recurs at different levels of magnification. If this is true of human society, it might have important ramifications for a “grand unifying theory” of war. It also might offer insights into fragmentation, which splinters a conflict into smaller, possibly self-similar sub-conflicts.

Fourth, observable and repeatable patterns may emerge from complex systems. Thankfully, this means that even in the chaotic nonlinearity of a complex system, it is still possible to learn useful lessons. It is the emergence of such patterns that allows us to

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<sup>9</sup> Beyerchen, “Clausewitz, Nonlinearity.”

create and utilize various models of war and politics. Concepts like structural realism, democratic peace theory, and deterrence are useful because they identify and help explain emergent patterns. This means that complexity theory does not substitute for other models, but complements them. It might help explain anomalies that other theories cannot.

### **Social Systems in Peacetime**

The basic unit of human civilization is, of course, the individual human being. Individuals join together in organizations for purposes such as security, economic benefit, collective action, spiritual fulfillment, or simple enjoyment. We live in a world consisting of families, clans, tribes, governments, militias, armies, states, ethnic groups, religions, political parties, non-governmental organizations, inter-governmental organizations, and many other types of actors. We call these organizations *actors*, meaning they are capable of taking unified action in some meaningful sense.

When actors interact, they form social systems. One dictionary defines a social system as “the patterned series of interrelationships existing between individuals, groups, and institutions and forming a coherent whole.”<sup>10</sup> This definition encompasses three key ideas: (1) actors in a social system are *interdependent*, meaning they affect each other’s decisions (2) that interdependence is expressed in *patterned* or organized relationships and (3) the system forms a *coherent whole* at the given level of analysis. In one sense, the entire human race constitutes a single social system. In another sense, collective actors—like families, unions, states, or faith communities—are also small social systems in their own right. This illustrates the fractal, self-similar character of complex systems discussed above. Where are the limits of a “social system”? Defining that boundary with any precision is difficult; the best we can say is that if an actor can cause effects and feel effects within a system, it is part of the system. This is akin to how we decide whether a celestial body is part of another body’s gravitational system.<sup>11</sup> How we answer that question depends on the nature of the analysis we are conducting.

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<sup>10</sup> Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online, <http://bit.ly/1hVTErV>.

<sup>11</sup> An object’s gravitational pull falls off exponentially with distance. The effects of gravity theoretically extend forever, but for practical purposes, the effect is negligible beyond a certain distance.

Every actor in a social system has interests that it considers important and works to protect. The foundational interest for most actors is survival. Beyond that, interests vary. Economists typically model human beings and companies as profit maximizers. Political scientists generally consider states to be concerned with security and power. Religious organizations may seek to spread their faith to the unconverted, to win divine favor, or even to sacrifice themselves for a cause. Political lobbies seek to change the behavior of their governments. Ethnic groups might come together to remedy racial injustice or seek greater awareness about their heritage.

The status quo is a snapshot of the social system at any given moment. It simply means “the existing state of affairs,” and is deliberately not defined with specificity. The status quo has many dimensions, such as material, mental, and moral. It embodies such things as the landscape of actors, their relationships, the allocation of resources, and the distribution of power. The status quo is the state of reality in which actors live and act. At any given moment, the status quo satisfies or does not satisfy the interests of each actor in varying degrees. Actors are typically most concerned with the parts of the social system that impact their interests, which we can loosely model as a “sphere of concern.” Actors are stakeholders within the parts of the social system that lie within their spheres of concern.

The status quo is not static, but is constantly reconstructed or renegotiated by actors seeking to protect or advance their interests. Negotiation here does not refer to traditional diplomacy, but to any activity that actors can use to influence other actors and alter the status quo. Viewed this way, much of human intercourse is about renegotiating the status quo. Human society has many formal and informal mechanisms to facilitate renegotiation, most of which are nonviolent. Means of renegotiation include but are not limited to discussion, debate, legislation, litigation, diplomacy, lobbying, and economic transactions. At the informal end of the spectrum, a husband and wife can renegotiate their conflicting calendars with a quick chat. At the opposite end of the spectrum, arbitration is a highly formalized means of resolving deep conflicts. Economic transactions are formalized means of renegotiating the distribution of wealth and property. It is the availability of such mechanisms that allows human society to function at all.

Absent from this discussion so far is the concept of the “state.” That is by design. Although at present the state remains the most important actor in international relations, the intent of this thesis is to suggest a model of war that transcends specific forms of political or social organization. That is why it uses the language of *social systems* and *stakeholders*, which applies just as well to criminal cartels as it does to states. This generalized framework is a useful complement to definitions of war tied to specific types of actors.

With that said, we can illustrate these concepts using states and the modern international system as examples. The modern democratic state is a quintessential example of continual, nonviolent renegotiation among actors. Constitutions and laws specify powers for different branches of government, and create the legal framework in which citizens can come together to negotiate their interests. Viewed from the outside, states are analytic concepts that can be taken as givens. But viewed from within, states are not static. Individuals and groups continually renegotiate the social contract that binds them. Coalitions form and fragment. Negotiations over controversial legislation like health care reform draw stakeholders ranging from concerned private citizens, insurance companies, health care providers, human rights organizations, religious clergy, corporate lobbies, and lawyers, not to mention politicians who want to satisfy their different constituencies and get reelected. A healthy democracy facilitates its own continual renegotiation, a process that is messy, chaotic, and many-sided.

The international order is also under continual renegotiation, albeit in anarchic conditions with no formal arbiter of disputes. Despite these conditions, states and other international actors still use many nonviolent means to continually renegotiate the international order. States use elaborate conventions like embassies and diplomats to facilitate communication and negotiations. Despite its weaknesses, international law helps establish and preserve international norms of behavior. Organizations like the United Nations and NATO can influence the credibility of states, constrain their actions, and facilitate collective action on global challenges. Non-governmental organizations champion causes, exert pressure on states, and help shape the agendas of those who possess political power. International institutions are examples of the “patterned relationships” mentioned

in the definition of social systems above, which give structure to the system and facilitate nonviolent renegotiation of the status quo.

There are also means of renegotiation somewhere on the spectrum between peace and war, which social scientists refer to as “contentious politics.”<sup>12</sup> These include demonstrations, strikes, riots, civil disobedience, and even terrorism. These means are not necessarily violent, but they are disruptive and occur outside of ordinary institutional channels.<sup>13</sup> Despite their unconventional nature, nonviolent contentious politics usually do not tip a social system into chaos.

When actors turn to violent means of renegotiation, everything can change.

### **The Introduction of Violence**

Violence is an extreme mechanism for renegotiating the status quo. Actors typically employ violence because they find the status quo intolerable to their interests. A jealous husband kills his cheating wife’s lover, putting an end to the affair and satisfying his own need for vengeance. Police use tear gas to disperse protestors conducting an embarrassing public sit-in. A dictatorial government sends militias to ethnically cleanse villages hosting insurgents. In each case, violence is a means for an actor to reorder the status quo in its favor.

Actors may choose violent means for any number of reasons. In some cases, they may lose faith in peaceful means of renegotiating the status quo. If peaceful mechanisms cannot provide the desired outcome, violence may become an attractive option. One reason Hitler went to war was to renegotiate a status quo, codified in the Treaty of Versailles, that the German people found intolerable and were powerless to change. When the African National Congress’ nonviolent campaign failed to overturn apartheid in South Africa, Nelson Mandela broke with the party and created an underground military wing

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<sup>12</sup> For an overview of the field see Tilly, Charles, *Contentious Politics* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: the Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2013), 12.

called Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation).<sup>14</sup> Marxist insurgencies in the latter half of the twentieth century largely took root among the rural poor, who were excluded from power and had little hope of peacefully renegotiating their place in society.

Actors may also view violence as an effective shortcut, bypassing more demanding or time-intensive mechanisms of renegotiation. In the post-World War II era the European powers began disassembling their colonial empires, but many colonies saw violence as a way to expedite the process. Radical Islamists in the vein of Seyyid Qutb believe a violent, pious vanguard can topple apostate regimes and hasten in the rule of God's law on earth.<sup>15</sup>

Actors may also choose violence because of passionate emotions like fear or hatred, which themselves can make the status quo intolerable. Thucydides wrote that in ancient Greece, "the growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta, made war inevitable."<sup>16</sup> In Rwanda, Hutu extremists institutionalized hatred of Tutsis through media campaigns, setting the conditions for an explosion of violence.

When violence reaches a sufficient scale, a condition of war exists. This leads us to the following definition: *War is a violent renegotiation of the status quo on a large scale.* This definition captures four essential dynamics of war: its violence, its interactivity, its political nature, and its scope.

First, war is violent. In an age of cyber threats it is commonplace to raise questions about what constitutes an act of violence or war, but we have to draw the line somewhere, and violence has always been war's most salient feature. The dictionary definition of violence provides a helpful reference point: "behavior involving physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill someone or something."<sup>17</sup> This definition of violence is still flexible to encompass many forms of warfare, but emphasizes its essential nature.

Second, war is interactive. It is a process in which multiple combatants try to impose their will over others. A combatant never fights against a static object, but against a thinking enemy with an independent will. Clausewitz expressed this interactivity in terms

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<sup>14</sup> Dixon, Robyn. "Nelson Mandela's Legacy: As a leader, he was willing to use violence," L.A. Times. December 6, 2013, <http://lat.ms/1n1TUcw>.

<sup>15</sup> See Qutb, Seyyid, *Milestones* (Damascus, Syria: Dar al-Ilm, 1990).

<sup>16</sup> *The Landmark Thucydides*, ed. Robert Strassler (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 1.23.

<sup>17</sup> Google dictionary result, *violence*, April 17, 2014

of a duel with a single adversary. The definition here expresses war's interactivity in terms of a negotiation with any number of players.

Third, war is political. Combatants do not wage war for its own sake, but to forcibly establish a better status quo. That desired status quo is what Clausewitz called the political object: "The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose."<sup>18</sup> It is also what B.H. Liddell-Hart means when he claims the purpose of war is to establish a better peace.<sup>19</sup> The objective in war is not merely to destroy an enemy, but to establish a new status quo that is more conducive to one's interests. Lasswell succinctly defined politics as determining "who gets what, when, and how."<sup>20</sup> That is actors try to determine when they go to war.

Fourth, war is a phenomenon that occurs on a large scale. Just how large is a question upon which no two scholars will likely agree, which is why the definition here is deliberately imprecise. Isolated acts of violence occur on a regular basis and do not constitute war. Most cultures have cultural or legal mechanisms in place to deal such acts. Within modern nation-states, initiating acts of violence is almost never considered a legitimate means of renegotiating the status quo. Even at the international level, a variety of mechanisms exist to prevent isolated acts of violence from escalating into costly and dangerous wars. So long as violence remains within a manageable level, a social system's many nonviolent mechanisms for renegotiation continue to function. However, sometimes violence crosses a threshold, engulfs a large swath of the social system, and leads to the further breakdown of nonviolent mechanisms for renegotiation. When that happens, a condition of war exists.

This model does not rely on any of the duel model's three assumptions. It views war as a violent renegotiation among any number and any type of stakeholders. It can easily accommodate nation-states but is not tied to them. Because any number of actors can participate in the violent negotiation process, and because actors may consist of grouped sub-actors, the model can easily account for fragmentation.

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<sup>18</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 87.

<sup>19</sup> Liddell-Hart, Basil Henry, *Strategy* (New York, NY: Meridian, 1991), 353.

<sup>20</sup> Lasswell, Harold D., *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* (Whitefish, MT: Literary Licensing, 2012).



## Conflict Termination and Victory

If war is a violent renegotiation of the status quo, then a war should theoretically end when the negotiation is complete and violence ceases. This definition is problematic, however, because the status quo never stands still; actors continually renegotiate complex systems. Furthermore, because peaceful and violent means of renegotiation exist on a spectrum, violence may not completely end when the war terminates. These two difficulties help explain why it is so difficult to pinpoint the ending of many wars. To further complicate things, conflict settlements may plant the seeds of future wars. As Clausewitz wrote, “even the ultimate outcome of a war is not always to be regarded as final. The defeated state often considers the outcome merely as a transitory evil, for which a remedy may still be found in political conditions at some later date.”<sup>21</sup> In many social systems, violence perennially erupts because of unresolved political issues. These flare-ups may be legitimately considered part of one overarching war. This has led the custodians of conflict datasets like Uppsala Conflict Termination Dataset to use “conflict episodes” as the basic unit of analysis, instead of wars.<sup>22</sup> In such circumstances, what does victory even mean? How do wars end?

Once again, the science of complex systems can offer some insights. Complex systems never stand still, but they do exist on a spectrum ranging from inert stability to pure chaos. A perfectly stable system is so rigid that it can no longer evolve in response to its environment. Real-world examples that incline in this direction include bureaucracies, monopolies, and dictatorships. On the other hand, a system in chaos ceases to function as a system. At both extremes, the system will eventually wither and die. Complex systems perform best at what Mitchell Waldrop calls “the edge of chaos.” He writes:

The balance point—often called the edge of chaos—is where the components of a system never quite lock into place, and yet never quite dissolve into turbulence either . . . The edge of chaos is where life has enough stability to sustain itself and enough creativity to deserve the name of life. The edge of chaos is where new

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<sup>21</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 80.

<sup>22</sup> See Uppsala University Department of Peace and Conflict Research, <http://bit.ly/1eOkYg5>.

idea and innovative genotypes are forever nibbling away at the edges of the status quo, and where even the most entrenched old guard will eventually be overthrown . . . The edge is the constantly shifting battle zone between stagnation and anarchy, the one place where a complex system can be spontaneous, adaptive, and alive.<sup>23</sup>

Elaborating on this passage, John Cleveland writes systems at the edge of chaos have a “‘hunger’ for novelty and disequilibrium that distinguishes them from rigidly ordered systems. At the same time, however, they also possess a deep underlying coherence that provides structure and continuity, and distinguishes them from chaotic systems.”<sup>24</sup> He cites several real-world examples of systems at this thriving balance point: “A vibrant democracy is an ‘edge of chaos’ form of governance; a healthy market is an ‘edge of chaos’ form of economics; a flexible and adaptive organization is an ‘edge of chaos’ institution; and a mature, well-developed personality is an ‘edge of chaos’ psyche.”<sup>25</sup>

If we apply this idea to questions of peace and war, we see that war inclines towards pure chaos. While war does have some utility in breaking up calcified structures and injecting change, it is devastating to those involved. Social systems at war are not “where a complex system can be spontaneous, adaptive, and alive.” In fact, we now possess such terrible weapons that war is capable of destroying the entire system—a possibility made dramatically clear in the Cuban Missile Crisis. War is a chaotic and destructive force, and policymakers have an imperative to restore warring social systems to health.

We need a word to describe this healthy state of the system, but terminology becomes difficult here. “Equilibrium” is an attractive word, which means, “a state in which opposing forces or influences are balanced.”<sup>26</sup> That definition seems to fit hand in glove with balance of power theory. However, many complexity theorists equate the word

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<sup>23</sup> Waldrop, M. Mitchell, *Complexity: The Emerging Science at the Edge of Order and Chaos* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 12.

<sup>24</sup> Cleveland, John, “Complex Adaptive Systems Theory: An Introduction to Basic Theory and Concepts,” unpublished slide deck, Innovation Network for Communities, 2005, <http://slidesha.re/1qoUkdg>.

<sup>25</sup> Cleveland, “Complex Adaptive Systems Theory.”

<sup>26</sup> Google dictionary search result, *equilibrium*, April 17, 2014.

“equilibrium” with “rigid stability.” According to their definitions, equilibrium is the extreme at which forces are so precisely balanced that dynamic interaction and adaption no longer occurs. That is not what we mean. We want a balance among actors in which their core interests are mostly satisfied and nonviolent mechanisms of renegotiation are functioning properly. We want social systems to be “on the edge of chaos,” in a thriving but balanced system where productive interactions occur.

Science gives us two helpful metaphors to describe such a state. The first comes from evolutionary biology. Charles Darwin and other early evolutionary biologists believed evolution was an “even and slow” process, but in 1972 evolutionary scientists Niles Eldredge and Stephen Jay Gould proposed a new model they called “punctuated equilibrium.”<sup>27</sup> They proposed that species might remain stable for vast periods then time, then suddenly undergo a rapid transformation resulting in a new species. Evolution is always a dynamic process in this model, but certain time periods are uniquely disruptive. The parallels to peace and war are evident. Peacetime is analogous to periods of evolutionary equilibrium.<sup>28</sup>

A second helpful metaphor comes from chemistry. Reversible chemical reactions can reach a state known as *dynamic equilibrium*, in which they obtain a constant ratio of reactants and products. Reactions are continually happening in both directions, but the overall composition of the solution appears constant.

With these examples in mind, we can say that conflict episodes end when the key stakeholders reach a state of dynamic equilibrium. This means they all consent to a new status quo, whether willingly or through coercion, and agree to stop employing lethal force. Violence ceases to be the principal means of renegotiating one’s place in the system. Instead, actors return to nonviolent channels like politics and economics.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Niles Eldredge and Stephen Jay Gould, “Punctuated Equilibria: An Alternative to Phyletic Gradualism,” *Paleobiology* 3, 1977, p115-151, <http://bit.ly/Q2Tt6A>.

<sup>28</sup> Mitchell Waldrop uses the metaphor of punctuated equilibrium for war in *Complexity*, 320.

<sup>29</sup> This concept accords with Tom Doumaux’s definition of peace: “a state of social harmony in the which inherent tensions among nations and/or their component socio-political groups are dealt with effectively enough that the threshold of war is not crossed.” Why not just use the word *peace*, then? The concept of “dynamic equilibrium” is useful because it explains peace in terms of complexity theory, and allows us to keep our emphasis on both peace and war as processes of negotiation among actors. Doumaux quoted in Guilmartin, John, “Conflict Termination: How to End — and Not to End — Insurgencies,” *Origins* vol 1 Issue 3, December 2007, <http://bit.ly/1jMGwoM>.

Of course, policymakers and military leaders are not simply concerned with ending wars. They want to end wars on their terms, with a new status quo that protects or advances their interests.<sup>30</sup> The purpose of going to war is to create a better status quo than would otherwise exist. In Clausewitzian terms, the only victory that ultimately matters is obtaining one's policy objective. The model presented here hopefully provides greater context for that insight. An actor is victorious in war only to the degree that a favorable equilibrium emerges. It is also worth mentioning that many actors pursue limited ends that do not require achieving equilibrium. In some cases, actors may even profit from the war. These will be discussed in the "Non-Winning Strategies" section below.

If this definition of victory sounds precarious, that's because it is. Hostilities end when a constellation of actors reach some kind of balance, but nonviolent conflict will likely continue and war might recur. Consider the Arab-Israeli wars of 1948, 1967, and 1973. Each was an effort among Israel and her neighbors to renegotiate an intolerable status quo in the Middle East. Each was a discrete conflict episode with a demarcated beginning and end, and each ended with a kind of consensual (if coerced) state of dynamic equilibrium. However, none of the underlying issues was resolved, all major actors retained some ability to fight, and the impetus for further conflict remained. Israel's military victory in each of the three wars bought a temporary reprieve from existential threats, which was perhaps the best outcome available at the time, but in the long view the same conflict is still playing out.

Even "decisive" endings to wars can produce precarious states of equilibrium. The Allies decisively defeated Germany in World War II, but the war ended with Western Europe facing down the Soviet Union in Berlin. Western European cooperation with the USSR was necessary to defeat Germany at the time, but it also planted the seeds for a high-stakes cold war that threatened the existence of the human race. No victory is permanent. If we look back at ancient history, we can see the waves of history eroding what at the time seemed like supreme victories.

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<sup>30</sup> This is in line with existing US doctrine. William Flavin writes, "US doctrine holds that the goal of military operations is to set conditions that compel belligerents' decisionmakers to end hostilities on terms favorable to the United States and its allies." Flavin, William, "Planning for Conflict Termination and Post-Conflict Success," *Parameters*, Autumn 2003, 95-112, <http://1.usa.gov/1qP9oGt>.

With that said, some equilibria are more stable than others. The Battle of Waterloo ended a quarter century of continuous warfare and gave rise to almost 50 years of European peace. For all the challenges of the Cold War, the architects of the post-World War II world skillfully constructed an international system that brought unprecedented peace and prosperity to much of the world and rehabilitated Japan and Germany. Even as policymakers acknowledge that no peace is permanent, their goal in war termination should be to create equilibria that both safeguard their interests and can last as long as possible. No actors want victory on unsatisfactory terms, but neither does an actor want a victory that can be reversed tomorrow.

The relationship between war and post-war peace posited here is very different from traditional models. In the classical view, building a post-war settlement is a discrete activity that takes place after the war has terminated. Although Colin Gray emphasizes the importance of fighting war with the post-war peace in mind, he still engages in this bifurcation. He writes, “The statesman needs to turn advantage in warfare into both success in war as a whole and, above all else, into leverage for the kind of peace that is sought.”<sup>31</sup> He repeatedly writes of a “currency conversion” between warfare and post-war peace. He urges strategists to conduct warfare with the desired post-war state in mind, but notes how difficult that can be because of the demands of the fighting itself.<sup>32</sup> For Gray, war and post-war are related but discrete stages.

The picture from complexity theory looks quite different. It is the war itself that builds the post-war order. The violent bargaining process among actors reconfigures the social system, changing the relative power of each actor. In pure duels this is such an obvious phenomenon that we take it for granted; the victor dominates a region in a way that the defeated cannot. However, we cannot take it for granted in complex wars, because managing this violent reconfiguration of the system is the essence of strategy and will shape the emergent political order.

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<sup>31</sup> Gray, Colin, *Fighting Talk: Forty Maxims on War, Peace, and Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac), 2007, Kindle Locations 189-192).

<sup>32</sup> Gray, *Fighting talk*, Kindle Locations 194-196).

## Winning in Fragmented Wars

An actor that wishes to conclude a fragmented war on favorable terms faces a daunting challenge. In a statement that mirrors the distinctions between fragmented wars and duels, Hampson and Hart contrast multilateral negotiations with “bilateral negotiations or negotiations in which hegemons dictate the conditions.”<sup>33</sup> The larger the number of stakeholders, the less any single stakeholder is able to dictate the outcome. Coercive violence has limits in fragmented wars, and a new equilibrium will emerge from collective bargaining in ways that individual actors can hardly foresee. Actors must constantly be reformulating their vision of acceptable outcomes, incorporating feedback, and watching for openings to bind other actors to their desired end state. Attaining a new equilibrium is rarely the result of a single decisive event; rather, it requires a cumulative, iterative strategy of binding stakeholders to one’s desired end state. In other words, it requires building a winning coalition.

Coalition-building is an essential feature of multilateral negotiations.<sup>34</sup> Coalitions form because they give participants greater bargaining power than they would have individually.<sup>35</sup> Coalitions also simplify the complexity of multilateral negotiations and make it possible to engage in collective decision-making. The same dynamics that drive coalition-building in formal negotiations apply to complex wars as well.

Here at last we come to the essence of strategy in fragmented wars. This thesis hypothesizes that achieving victory in fragmented wars—that is, bringing the system to a new dynamic equilibrium that favors one’s interests—usually requires building a winning coalition among diverse actors, while simultaneously working to break up rival coalitions. By a *coalition*, we do not mean the actors must be friends; rather, they must consent to some common, minimum definition of what the emerging status quo should look like. In war, coercion is a perfectly valid way to generate this consent.

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<sup>33</sup> Fen Osler Hampson and Michael Hart, *Multilateral Negotiations: Lessons from Arms Control, Trade and the Environment* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), vii-viii.

<sup>34</sup> Hampson and Hart, *Multilateral Negotiations*, vii-viii.

<sup>35</sup> Stevenson, Pearce and Porter 1985:262 and Touval 1979: 161, cited in Andre Auer and Jerome Racine, “Multilateral Negotiations: From Strategic Considerations to Tactical Recommendations,” unpublished paper, <http://bit.ly/1gMzeEJ>.

This is fundamentally a political process, although force clearly plays a role in both building one's own coalition and fragmenting rival coalitions. If we can borrow and modify the term, "operational art" in this context does not primarily consist of maneuvering military forces around a battlefield; it means structuring the ongoing, violent renegotiating process in such a way to cumulatively build up one's own coalition while breaking down the adversary's. Hampson and Hart believe negotiators can form winning coalitions by "negotiation strategies and tactics that decompose complex issues, sequence the negotiations in such a way as to maximize the realization of joint gains, and encourage parties to eschew comprehensive agreements in favor of more modest or partial settlement packages."<sup>36</sup> These tactics are also important in complex wars, but in war actors have additional means available; they can coerce actors into joining the coalition, punish defectors, annihilate actors that refuse to join, and use violence or subterfuge to break apart rival coalitions. We will consider the utility of force more in the next section.

If we narrow our scope to civil war, we find the concept of coalition-building has direct application to the termination of civil war and the construction of a viable state. One scholar who applies a multilateral bargaining model to civil war is Jesse Driscoll. He models civil war as a violent bargaining process between any number of self-interested warlords, which he defines as "violence entrepreneurs that have organized private armies."<sup>37</sup> In an anarchic environment produced by state failure, warlords compete for wealth. By banding together, they can form a coalition strong enough to impose a figurehead president, rule the country, and increase their payoffs. One of Driscoll's key insights is that the state is not a monolithic entity, but a "semipermeable membrane for violence entrepreneurs, who weigh their life opportunities as social bandits against their life opportunities as agents of an internationally recognized sovereign."<sup>38</sup> Warlords can pass back and forth through the membrane depending on their interests. Warlords never actually disarm, but "Some warlords simply reinvent and redefine themselves as the state."<sup>39</sup> The state itself is essentially one coalition, which rival coalitions or internal extortionists can challenge. To keep the loyalty of his coalition, the figurehead president doles out

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<sup>36</sup> Hampson and Hart, *Multilateral Negotiations*, 5.

<sup>37</sup> Driscoll, "Commitment Problems," 123.

<sup>38</sup> Driscoll, "Commitment Problems," 120.

<sup>39</sup> Driscoll, "Commitment Problems," 122.

wealth in the form of “ministry positions, non-enforcement of tax laws, closed-bid contracts, and rigged privatization schemes.”<sup>40</sup> The coalition of warlords is the president’s real power base and serves as a corrupt “shadow state.” Warlords may try to extort the government coalition for further profit; if that happens, the outcome depends on the president’s ability to punish extortionists. Driscoll’s model can culminate with a collapse back into state failure, a “full incorporation equilibrium” among warlords, or partial equilibriums in which a weak central state continues to engage in low-intensity conflict with insurgent warlords.

Driscoll’s model raises important ideas about the relationship between force and the strategic bargaining process. First, building a functioning government in a failed state is essentially an exercise in coalition-building. Unlike traditional models that pit an established government against an insurgency, this model views a government as a fragile coalition comprised of multiple actors. The population is not a neutral entity; rather, the myriad actors which represent the population are the very building blocks of either the state or rival coalitions.

The second key insight from Driscoll’s model is that both bribery and force may be essential ingredients in building a winning coalition. Classical COIN theory speaks of “winning hearts and minds” through development projects and the provision of services and effective governance. Many observers view government corruption as a cancer that delegitimizes the government in the eyes of the people and possibly fuels insurgencies. In Driscoll’s model, “hearts and minds” is really about the cold realpolitik of sticks and carrots. Even as the population might find corruption distasteful, corruption might be the very glue that holds some actors in the coalition. Likewise, force may be essential in compelling actors to join the coalition. Force can also keep a coalition together, by punishing defectors and extortionists. This is essentially what a healthy state does; it uses its legitimate monopoly on force to hold a diverse array of actors together and to punish those who violate its laws.

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<sup>40</sup> Driscoll, “Commitment Problems,” 124.



## Non-Winning Strategies

Not every actor in a war is trying to win. That is, not every actor expects to complete the violent renegotiation process and achieve equilibrium. Most actors lack sufficient power for such ambitious ends, but they can still benefit from more modest strategies to achieve limited ends. Strategic success for these actors is both easier and harder. It is easier because they do not face the daunting task of bringing a complex, many-sided negotiation to a close. However, strategic success is harder because it is an ongoing, endless process.

Relatively powerless actors may desire nothing more than to survive the war. They ride the churning waves of history, striving for some minimally acceptable outcome, while leaving the task of restoring equilibrium to others. Unfortunately, such actors may ultimately undermine higher-level efforts to restore order. Furthermore, force is not likely to remain purely defensive for long. Because defensive actions cannot guarantee a decision, sooner or later actors usually go on the offensive. As soon as an actor makes that switch, the demands for effective utilization of force dramatically increase.

Other actors may simply work to prevent the emergence of an unacceptable status quo. This was the Communist strategy in Vietnam, and has been the strategy of insurgents in many other places as well. It has also been the strategy of various “spoiler” factions, which actively undermine settlements negotiated by more moderate actors. Such actors can use many violent means to fulfill their strategy of spoiling an emerging status quo: they can violate ceasefires, brazenly attack adversaries to instill fear or doubt, provoke overreactions, or attempt to peel off popular support for moderates by using violence to demonstrate that they are the “true” resistance.

Still other actors may wage micro-conflicts within the framework of the overall war. While they do not have the will or ability to end the war at higher levels, they can renegotiate grievances at the local level. This demonstrates the principle of self-similarity we saw earlier. War affords opportunities to exact vengeance for past injustices, pursue profit, eliminate threats, and perform other acts that rebalance power at local levels. Some of these micro-conflicts will be complex and multi-sided, while others will resemble du-

els. They may be relatively independent of the broader renegotiation underway, or there may be important linkages.

Finally, some parasitic actors feed on the chaos of war itself. David Kilcullen writes of “conflict entrepreneurs” who seek to prolong war or instability to obtain wealth or power. In this category he places “Somali clans, Afghanistan's Haqqani network, and gangs like Kenya's Mungiki or Mexico's Zetas.”<sup>41</sup> He notes that turning such entrepreneurs into “stakeholders in stability” is exceedingly difficult.

### **The Utility of Force**

We have established that victory in fragmented wars requires establishing a new dynamic equilibrium favorable to one's interests. We have also suggested that in fragmented wars, building a winning coalition is usually central to achieving such a victory. Finally, we have acknowledged that many actors undertake non-winning strategies in pursuit of limited aims. Within this strategic framework, we can now ask a central question: what is the utility of force in a fragmented war?

For actors seeking victory, force has utility to the extent that it contributes to the emergence of a favorable equilibrium. Force that does not contribute to such an equilibrium is futile and possibly even counterproductive. In a fragmented war, force can contribute to the emergence of a favorable equilibrium in several ways.

First, force can annihilate an actor that refuses to consent to one's desired equilibrium. In a peacetime negotiation, participants must come to a mutually acceptable outcome. Military force effectively gives actors an additional option: they can shoot a particularly obstinate negotiator. In the words of JP-1, annihilation “requires the enemy's incapacitation as a viable military force.”<sup>42</sup> This activity is the heart and soul of much traditional warfare, and although it must be combined with many other lines of operation, the “discriminate targeting of irreconcilable insurgents” is a key tenet of counterinsur-

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<sup>41</sup> Kilcullen, David, “The Future of War?: Expect to see urban, connected, irregular ‘zombie’ conflicts,” *The Best Defense*, Foreign Policy Blog, February 5 2014, <http://atfp.co/1euFXia>.

<sup>42</sup> *JP-1*, I-4.

gency theory.<sup>43</sup> Some actors will simply refuse to acquiesce to one's desired status quo; they will never join one's coalition of stakeholders. Fanatical religious organizations like al-Qa'eda, for example, generally refuse to accept political outcomes other than the rise of Islamic states subject to shariah law. Annihilating specific actors can simplify the web of multilateral relationships and eliminate obstacles to the emergence of a favorable equilibrium.

Second, force can change a specific actor's calculations about what new status quo it is willing to accept. In other words, one actor can coerce another to consent to outcomes it would otherwise reject. According to JP-1, this approach "is to convince the enemy that accepting our terms will be less painful than continuing to aggress or resist."<sup>44</sup> The phrase "our terms" is problematic in a complex system, however, because it implies a duel. In a complex war, multiple actors are fighting to create a new equilibrium on their terms. Every actor has a range of possible outcomes it is willing to accept. The application of force can alter that actor's acceptable range of outcomes. Performing this function against specific actors, at specific times, may be necessary to "lock them in" to an emerging coalition.

What makes these annihilation and coercion strategies different from their presentation in JP-1? According to the model presented here, they are not strategies in and of themselves. They are merely components of a broader strategy of drawing stakeholders into coalitions that consent to desired outcomes. This fundamental strategic activity of coalition-building is absent from JP-1 and other doctrine, and is usually treated as a post-war responsibility belonging to politicians.

Force can also be used to break apart rival coalitions. Several mechanisms can translate force into enemy fragmentation. First, offensive force may damage or destroy an actor's ability for collective action. Ruthless decapitation efforts have transformed al-Qaeda from a centralized, hierarchical terrorist operation into a decentralized network of semiautonomous actors. Although al-Qaeda is still capable of launching painful blows against its adversaries, there is little chance al-Qaeda or its affiliates will build a strong

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<sup>43</sup> Nagl, John. "The Evolution and Importance of Army/Marine Corps Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*." Foreword to *The US Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 1-3., <http://bit.ly/1mWR5fM>.

<sup>44</sup> JP-1, 1-4.

enough coalition to establish a new status quo on their terms. Second, force may be coupled with diplomatic openings to drive a wedge between hardline extremists and moderates who are willing to negotiate.<sup>45</sup> Sowing fragmentation in rival coalitions is a double-edged sword. It can damage their collective action and ability to influence outcomes, but it also multiplies the number of actors and the potential number of spoilers.

Finally, violence must sometimes be employed within one's own coalition to prevent defection and punish extortionists. This may be essential in the early days of coalition-building, when members of the coalition are fully armed and loyalty to the coalition is low, and common values and institutions have not had time to materialize.

In addition to these functions, force can serve many ancillary purposes. Kalvyas notes that various literatures identify more than twenty uses of violence, including, "intimidation, demoralization, polarization, demonstration, radicalization of the public, publicity, the improvement of group morale, the enforcement or disruption of control, the mobilization of forces and resources, financing, the elimination of opposing forces, the sanction of cooperation with the enemy, and the provocation of countermeasures and repression."<sup>46</sup> Many of these functions are concerned with maintaining or improving an actor's power relative to other actors. These activities increase an actor's bargaining power, effectively increasing its ability to influence the new status quo.

These are the functions that force brings to a renegotiation of the status quo in a complex system. A winning strategy requires linking these functions to the emergence of a dynamic equilibrium, or status quo, favorable to one's interests. If an actor can achieve this linkage, its use of force has utility. In non-winning strategies, force has utility if it protects or advances an actor's interests, regardless of what happens to the social system as a whole.

For actors employing non-winning strategies, force can have a broader range of utility. Force can destroy or suppress specific, problematic actors. It can prevent the emergence of unfavorable equilibria, spoil peace agreements, protect specific communities or areas, punish crime, contain violence within specific areas and prevent spillover,

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<sup>45</sup> Cronin, Audrey Kurth, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 67.

<sup>46</sup> Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence*, 23.

and fulfill many other purposes. In non-winning strategies, the standard for demonstrating utility is much lower than winning strategies. An actor does not need to re-stabilize the social system, merely achieve a limited policy goal. However, although such acts of force may have utility, they will likely not be *conclusive*.

### **External Intervention**

We come at last to the question that motivated this thesis: what is the utility of external intervention in fragmented civil wars? Everything until now has laid the foundation for exploring that question.

The word “external” implies that the intervening actor is not part of the geographical area in which a war is predominantly playing out. To enter the war, an intervening actor must project influence across geographical space into the conflict system. The type and degree of this intervention can vary tremendously. Although the word “intervention” typically has military connotations, external intervention does not necessarily require force. Actors can employ everything from strategic messaging to financial aid to cyber attacks to massive deployments of ground troops. Each of these topics deserves volumes of research, here we will merely suggest some broad ideas about what role external intervention might play in fragmented wars.

External actors intervene in conflicts because they are stakeholders in the conflict system, regardless of geographical distance. The importance of the stakes can vary. When Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990, he threatened the global oil supply, putting a vital American interest at risk. A few years later, the United States intervened in Somalia almost entirely out of humanitarian interest. Today, advocates of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) believe the United States should employ force to prevent mass atrocity. Non-state actors also can intervene in conflict systems in which they are stakeholders. Takfiri jihadists have also converged on Syria because they see an opportunity to carve an Islamic state out of the chaos. Private military contractors and multinational corporations enter conflict systems to reap profits, and humanitarian NGOs enter conflict zones to provide humanitarian services.

External actors who wish to win can augment the power of internal actors by providing additional sticks or carrots. This additional power can be used for all the purposes explored in the previous section, such as strengthening coalitions or fragmenting rival coalitions. The combat power of the United States dwarfs that of any state or non-state actor in the world. When the US throws that firepower behind a favored actor or actors—as it did in Libya in 2011—it dramatically increases the ability of those actors to shape outcomes. Splintered fighting groups may join forces with that actor because of its sheer firepower, prospects for winning, and payoffs. The intervener can impose some degree of unity, because other actors want the payoffs associated with cooperation. Then again, other fighting groups might unite against this powerful new threat. A forceful intervention can drive a conflict system towards greater polarity, with all the good and the bad this entails.

External intervention can also tear apart rival coalitions. Although the United States has not achieved stability in Afghanistan, it has done an effective job of decapitating al-Qa’eda and splintering the group into smaller, less centralized factions. These factions are still dangerous, but they lack the capability to impose their own favored equilibria on Afghanistan or other countries. Likewise, the US-supported Ethiopian invasion of Somalia tore apart an emerging Islamic state, returning Somalia to anarchy. While the wisdom of this strategy was questionable, it demonstrated the utility of external force in preventing the emergence of undesirable outcomes.

External intervention can also increase the capability of coalitions to punish defection and extortion. Because each “side” in a fragmented war consists of armed, self-interested actors, there is always a danger that actors will blackmail the coalition for their own benefit. The fundamental challenge of state-building is for the ruling coalition to develop a legitimate monopoly on force, which typically does not exist in embryonic governments. External force can help fill this shortfall, deter actors from extortion, and punish them if they try.

Despite these potential advantages, winning strategies by external actors carry grave dangers. First, we have seen how difficult it is to win in fragmented wars. Victory requires returning a warring social system to non-violent equilibrium, but in a fragmented war, no single actor can dictate such an outcome. Equilibrium emerges from an iterative,

unpredictable process of violent bargaining among actors. Victory demands what war-weary Westerners disparagingly call nation-building, an enterprise that is almost guaranteed to be long, bloody, and expensive. Any lesser effort on the part of an intervening power will not lead to victory, because it will stop short of equilibrium. This does not rule out more limited forms of intervention for specific ends, but such limited interventions will be deeply frustrating for both combat forces and the governments and publics standing behind them. For example, peacekeepers could intervene to stop a particular massacre or soldiers could intervene to evacuate foreign citizens, but when they withdraw the war will continue. No soldier likes withdrawing from a combat zone with his enemy still standing, still terrorizing, and still killing.

Second, intervention weaves the external actor into the fabric of the social system. It distorts the calculus of every other actor, creates dependencies, and raises a new problem: how to get out again. If the conflict system does achieve equilibrium, the intervener is now part of the equilibrium. The very act of withdrawal fundamentally alters the system, forcing all stakeholders to recalculate their positions and decisions. If the system is fragile and depends on the intervener to keep order, there is a risk the system will tilt back into violence. On the other hand, if the intervener withdraws before the system has returned to equilibrium, the disruptive shock will create cascading effects throughout the social stem and may result in more violence.

Of course, this insight is nothing new. Interveners have long been wary of creating dependency. From Vietnam to Iraq, interveners have sought ways to wean conflict systems off external support and transfer security responsibilities to local actors. Fear of dependency fuels the belief, codified in the Weinberger-Powell doctrines, that countries should not intervene militarily without a clear exit strategy already in place. While this sentiment is understandable, it runs up against the logic of war in complex systems. Because fragmented wars are nonlinear and order emerges from complex interactions among multiple actors, it can be difficult or impossible to predict their course. In a fragmented war, the very idea of an exit strategy is often incompatible with the pursuit of victory. Policymakers only have a reasonable chance of establishing up-front exit strategies if their aims are extremely limited. The Iraq War of 1991 is rightfully hailed for adhering to the Weinberger-Powell doctrine, but its exit strategy entailed leaving Saddam Hussein

in place. While the immediate conflict episode ended with Saddam's withdrawal from Kuwait, low-intensity conflict continued for more than a decade, culminating in a new war in 2003.

Third, fragmented wars become dramatically more complex when more than one external actor intervenes. The influx of force then works at cross-purposes, intensifying the conflict and increasing the cost in both blood and treasure. When more than one actor intervenes in a conflict, this also creates conditions for a new violent bargaining process at a higher level of analysis. While local actors war for a limited geographical area, the external powers war for higher stakes across a broader region. Returning the system to equilibrium now requires the resolution of both bargaining processes, which may have different ranges of acceptable outcomes. This dynamic is evident in Syria today, the subject of Chapter 4.

External intervention in fragmented civil wars can have utility, but it is also exceedingly dangerous. Actors contemplating intervention must be under no illusions about the difficulties they will face. Unless they wish to spend years or decades re-stabilizing fractured social systems, they must pursue limited strategies for limited ends. In most cases, they must accustom themselves to the idea of managing violent conflict rather than solving it.

### **Conclusion**

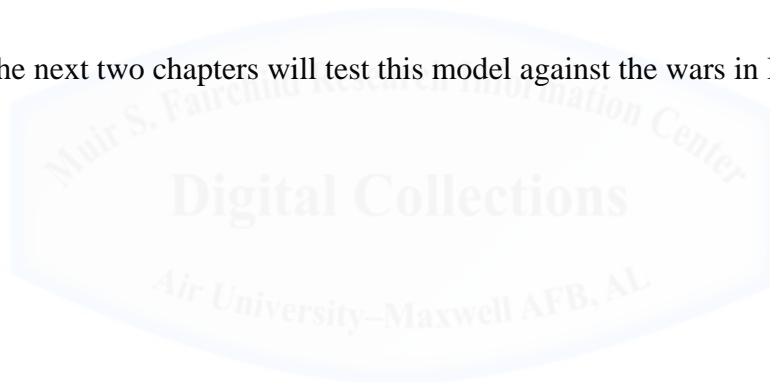
This chapter has presented a new model for conceiving war as a violent renegotiation among members of a complex social system. This model has several advantages over the traditional duel. First, the model is flexible enough to encompass both pure duels and wars that fall outside the duel model. It accommodates any number of actors and any types of actors, and recognizes processes like fragmentation, consolidation, and defection as essential to the conflict and its outcome. It is equally capable of explaining World War II, al Qaeda's global insurgency, criminal insurgency in Mexico, and complex warfare between tribes and warlords in a failed state like Somalia. Second, the model explains the puzzles of why military force is often not decisive, and why victory is so difficult to define and achieve in many wars. Third, the model explicitly links military action to politi-



cal strategy and emphasizes that the essential strategic activity in war is at the level where they meet.

In this model, force plays important roles in both shaping the long-term outcome of fragmented wars and pursuing limited ends within those wars. Properly sequenced violence against specific actors at specific times can nurture the growth of a winning coalition, fragment rival coalitions, and enforce discipline within one's own coalition. External intervention can augment these processes. However, the extraordinary difficulty of stabilizing fragmented wars, and the risks of dependency and proxy warfare, makes intervention a costly and dangerous endeavor. Unless they are willing to invest in the costly and difficult work of returning a conflict system to equilibrium, would-be interveners should consider more limited strategies in pursuit of limited ends. Such strategies will not be satisfying to either soldiers or democratic publics, but they have the virtue of being realistic.

The next two chapters will test this model against the wars in Iraq and Syria.



## Chapter 3

### Fragmented War in Iraq

This case study examines the history of Iraq from 2003-2014 using the framework established in the previous chapter. It explores a number of questions: What made Iraq's status quo intolerable, and how did its social system collapse? Who were the key stakeholders at each stage of the war, and how did they respond to events? What was the utility of violence at each stage? How did coalitions change over the course of the war? How did the rise and breakup of coalitions influence the prospects for stabilizing the system?

The United States went to war with Iraq in 2003 expecting to fight a duel. Conventional wisdom says that the US military won this duel with remarkable skill and speed, destroying the Iraqi government and utterly defeating its armed forces, but failed to win the subsequent peace because of incompetent planning. The linchpin of this interpretation is the sharp delineation between "war" and "post-war" activities.

The model presented in Chapter 2 casts the Iraq War in a different light. The invasion of Iraq shattered the uneasy equilibrium that had prevailed in the Middle East since the 1991 Gulf War, setting off a scramble to renegotiate the futures of both Iraq and the region. Destroying Saddam Hussein's regime was only the first act in this many-sided renegotiation. With Saddam's monopoly on violence gone, entrepreneurial actors sought to establish their place in the emerging order. The Iraq War was never about the US facing off against a single insurgency, but about the renegotiation of the entire Middle East using both violent and nonviolent means. This was likely to happen no matter how much planning the United States did.

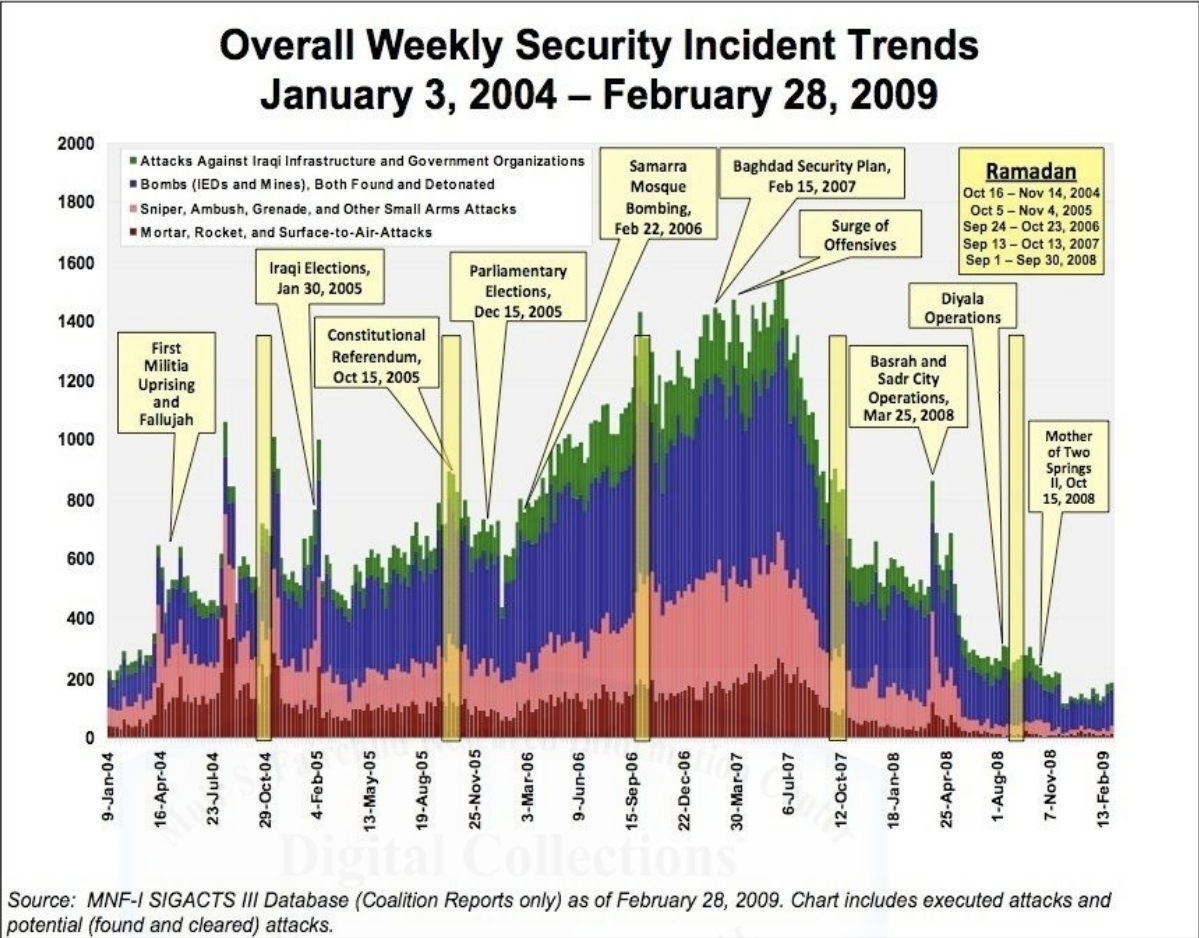


Figure 1: Iraq Security Incident Trends

Source: Anthony Cordesman, "Recent Trends in the Iraq War: Maps and Graphs"

To win in Iraq, the United States needed to bring the conflict system to a new state of dynamic equilibrium that met a minimum standard of US interests. This meant building a coalition of actors willing to accept a framework in which they could carry out their political contests using nonviolent instead of violent means. More specifically, the US needed to build a viable Iraqi government that could exercise a monopoly on force throughout the country, satisfy a Shi'ite majority, protect and represent Sunnis, and grant Kurds limited autonomy. Along the way, the United States needed to re-establish a tolerable balance of power with Iran and annihilate irreconcilable actors like al-Qa'eda in Iraq. All this had to take place in an environment in which violence was rampant and trust was low.

Early US and Iraqi efforts failed to achieve such an equilibrium. In fact, both authorities actively shunned key actors, who then turned to violence. Over time, the US-led coalition integrated key stakeholders, particularly through the Anbar Awakening and Muqtada al-Sadr's declaration of a ceasefire in 2007. Even then, key actors refused to disarm and retained their ability to extort the new government, until the US assisted Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in a risky effort to punish Sadr for extortion in 2008. These developments helped Iraq reach a point of dynamic equilibrium. Contentious political issues remained unresolved and limited violence continued, but most acts of renegotiation were once again occurring through nonviolent channels.

However, in a complex system, no equilibrium lasts forever. Prime Minister al-Maliki failed to build trust with Sunnis who, at the time of this writing, have been threatening to extort the government and withdraw from the coalition. The standoff between Sunni militants in Anbar province and the Government of Iraq could potentially drag the country into a new conflict episode.

### **An Intolerable Status Quo**

The George W. Bush administration invaded Iraq because it found the status quo in the Middle East intolerable on several levels. A long-standing policy of containing Iraq

was breaking down, Saddam Hussein appeared to be hungry for weapons of mass destruction, and in the wake of September 11th terrorism posed a dire new threat to the United States. Many saw the Middle East—illiberal, underdeveloped, hostage to dictators—as a stagnant swamp that gave rise to religious extremism and anti-Americanism. Neoconservative ideologues in the administration believed the exercise of American power could fundamentally transform the region for the better, ridding the world of a hated dictator, refashioning Iraq as a flourishing democracy, and promoting liberal-democratic ideals in a region that desperately needed them. The United States initiated a war of choice, to renegotiate an intolerable status quo and build an entirely new future for Iraq and the region.

It is worth considering how this intolerable state of affairs came into being. Prior to 1979 the United States primarily viewed the Middle East through the lens of the Cold War, but the 1979 Iranian Revolution changed US perceptions forever.<sup>1</sup> Cold War politics receded before the threat of revolutionary Islam, and when the Iran-Iraq war began in 1980, the US supported Saddam Hussein as a bulwark against revolutionary Iranian expansionism. US attention drifted after the war ended in 1988, but Saddam—indebted, embittered, and commanding a heavily militarized country—soon recaptured the world’s attention by invading Kuwait and threatening neighboring Saudi Arabia. A US-led coalition forced Hussein to withdraw after a 40-day air campaign and a 4-day ground campaign, but US policymakers committed to a clear exit strategy did not pursue regime change. The logic was impeccable, but this policy choice came at a cost: a dangerous, humiliated, and heavily armed Saddam was still in power and still had the ability to threaten Western interests.

Throughout the 1990s the US maintained a policy of “containment” using no-fly zones and a harsh sanctions regime, but by the end of the decade many policymakers believed the containment strategy was breaking down. Saddam was cheating, the containment effort was expensive, Americans were dying, and the US presence in the region

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<sup>1</sup> Allawi, Ali A., *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 3.

fueled terrorism.<sup>2</sup> Saddam had spent the decade torturing and brutalizing his own people and had even employed chemical weapons against them. He appeared to be dead-set on obtaining a nuclear weapon and had flaunted the UN and international weapons inspectors. Many believed terrorist organizations like al-Qa'eda benefited from his sponsorship, and his appalling authoritarian governance fueled their cause.

This was the status quo the US found intolerable and set out to change. A war in Iraq, its advocates believed, would renegotiate this status quo in the United States' favor. It would lead to a better government within Iraq, would transform the relationship between Washington and Baghdad, and would transform Washington's relationship with other hostile or terrorist-sponsoring states. In 1998 a group of scholars from the neoconservative Project for the New American Century sent an open letter to President Clinton making the case for war with Iraq.<sup>3</sup> The September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 attacks showed how high the stakes might be, and gave neoconservatives like Paul Wolfowitz an opportunity to renew their call for war. Kenneth Pollack laid out the case for war in a 2002 book titled *The Threatening Storm*. With sanctions failing and a popular uprising no longer likely, the "least bad" option to disarm Saddam might be a US-led invasion aimed at regime change.

If we view this backstory through the model in Chapter 2, we can already gain some useful insights. Analysts struggle to answer whether the period from 1990-2011 witnessed two separate Iraq wars or one protracted one. Although Iraq withdrew from Kuwait in 1991 after a crushing military defeat, the political outcome was ambiguous. Violence never completely ended; the US maintained two no-fly zones over Iraq, which saw a high but underreported amount of kinetic activity.

The theory presented in Chapter 2 sees a world that never stands still. Agents continually renegotiate their place in the system. Peace is never permanent, but is only a time of dynamic equilibrium in which disruptive violence is minimal. This framework helps us make sense of Iraq's history in the 1990s and early 2000s. The two gulf wars were con-

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<sup>2</sup> Wolfowitz cited a cost of \$30 billion, and noted that a 1996 bombing in Saudi Arabia had killed 19 Americans and wounded 372 others. Ricks, Thomas E., *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2003 to 2005* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2006), 18.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to President Clinton, published on the website of the Project for the New American Century, retrieved from zFacts, <http://bit.ly/1nsLpHY>.

flict episodes within a broader pattern of hostility. In 1991 Saddam audaciously renegotiated his territorial and economic holdings, but a US-led coalition checked his ambitions, Saddam conceded, and the region settled back into an uneasy equilibrium. Tensions remained high with Saddam and low-level violent conflict continued in the form of Northern and Southern Watch, but regional powers managed disputes with nonviolent tools like diplomacy, UN resolutions, and weapons inspections.

By 2003, however, many American policymakers believed these nonviolent means of renegotiation had ceased to function. This drove a deliberate turn towards violence.

### **Iraq as a Complex System**

A helpful way to approach fragmented war is to identify the stakeholders within the social system and their interests. Developing this sort of taxonomy is an imprecise exercise, as much art as science, but this section will cover some key actors and their interests in Iraq. They are organized by level of analysis, which illustrates that the violent negotiation over Iraq's future occurred at multiple levels simultaneously.

At the global level, President George W. Bush chose to invade Iraq as part of a global war on terror. Bush said states "are either with us or against us," and warned state sponsors of terrorism would face repercussions.<sup>4</sup> The US invaded Afghanistan on these grounds, and President Bush's 2002 "Axis of Evil" speech identified three other terrorist-sponsoring countries by name: Iraq, Iran, and North Korea.<sup>5</sup> Although the US gave contradictory explanations for invading Iraq, crippling terrorist networks was at least one of those reasons.

For its part, al-Qa'eda hoped to damage the United States and expel it from Arab lands. Although it is not certain bin Laden consciously embarked upon such a strategy, he later realized that terrorist attacks could provoke the US into costly overreactions that

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<sup>4</sup> "'You are either with us or against us', CNN, November 6, 2001, <http://cnn.it/QdD7s8>.

<sup>5</sup> "Bush State of the Union address," CNN, January 29, 2002, <http://cnn.it/1gimyog>.

would bleed it “to the point of bankruptcy.”<sup>6</sup> Al-Qa’eda also hoped to eliminate US client governments in the Middle East and replace them with faithful Islamic ones. The turmoil in Iraq gave al-Qa’eda an opportunity to build a fledgling Islamic state and directly fight American forces.

The Iraq war can also be understood as a referendum on the United States’ place in the world. Since the collapse of the USSR the United States had become an unchallenged “hyperpower.”<sup>7</sup> Some believed the US should exercise benevolent hegemony during this “unipolar moment” to fashion a more liberal-democratic world. Others saw the United States as a dire threat that needed to be contained. The invasion of Iraq was one of the most aggressive expressions of power in American history, and even states with no intrinsic interest in Iraq found themselves forced to decide how to respond. The Bush Administration’s failure to win the support of “Old Europe” illustrated this dynamic. If winning in fragmented wars requires building a coalition of stakeholders, the global pushback against US policy in Iraq was a dangerous sign.

Scoping down to the Middle East, we find a regional competition between Sunnis and Shias, sects tracing back to a succession debate in the early caliphate. Sunnis constitute approximately 90% of the Muslim world<sup>8</sup> and have traditionally had political dominance, while Shia have largely embraced their role as a persecuted minority seeking messianic justice. Only in Iran did Shiism thrive, and the 1979 Iranian Revolution set the stage for a zealous campaign of Shia expansion. Sunnis fear Shiite activism, and an American overthrow of Iraq’s Sunni regime was sure to embolden Iraqi Shia and exacerbate religious tensions across the region.

Another critical bloc was the Kurds, a minority spread across Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. The Kurds sought an independent state, and had waged a protracted insurgency in Turkey in the 1990s. The Kurdish issue also made Turkey was a clear stakeholder in the Iraq war. Turkey feared Kurdish activism and was especially concerned that Iraqi Kurds

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<sup>6</sup> “Transcript: Translation of Bin Laden’s Videotaped Message,” CNN, November 1, 2004, <http://wapo.st/1qHdUBN>.

<sup>7</sup> French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine coined the term in a 1999 speech. See “To Paris, US Looks Like a ‘Hyperpower,’” The New York Times, February 5, 1999, <http://nyti.ms/OPOuFv>.

<sup>8</sup> “Mapping the Global Muslim Population,” Pew Research, <http://bit.ly/1ncNckh>.



might provide sanctuaries for Turkish Kurds, which they could then use to launch cross-border attacks.

The regime in Iran believed that US foreign policy in the region was an existential threat. The United States had eliminated the government of Afghanistan and was about to do the same in Iraq, and President Bush had included Iran in his 2002 “axis of evil” speech.<sup>9</sup> If the US succeeded in Iraq, Iran might be next. On the other hand, this perilous moment also offered Iran tremendous opportunity, because Afghanistan and Iraq were among Iran’s arch enemies. By destroying their governments, the US was paving the way for Iranian expansion. If Iran could slow down the American project in Iraq, it might have time to develop a nuclear weapon, which would be the ultimate deterrent against regime change.

Like Iran, Syria feared it might be on the United States’ target list. Although President Bush did not include Syria in his 2002 “axis of evil” speech, US Under Secretary of State John Bolton added Syria to the list in a speech titled “Beyond the Axis of Evil.”<sup>10</sup> Syria was an ally of Iran’s, considered Iraq an adversary, and had long engaged in activist foreign policy to project power across the region.

Scoping down further, we come to those actors inside the territory of Iraq itself. When the war began, Saddam Hussein presided over a fractious, battered country: devastated by two wars, heavily indebted, weakened by a decade of sanctions, humiliated on the international stage, and thoroughly isolated. Ethnic, religious, and political rifts ran through the population. Only brute force and an array of oppressive internal security services held these latent tensions in check.

The most important fact about pre-war Iraq is that the minority Sunni Arabs dominated an ethnically and religiously heterogeneous country. Iraq’s Sunni Arabs represented only 18.5% of Iraq’s population<sup>11</sup> and were concentrated in an oil-poor region of Western Iraq, but maintained power through repression, going so far as to use chemical weapons

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<sup>9</sup> “Bush State of the Union Address,” CNN, Jan 29, 2002, <http://cnn.it/1gimyoG>.

<sup>10</sup> “US expands ‘axis of evil,’” BBC News, 6 May 2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/1971852.stm>.

<sup>11</sup> Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, 19.

against Shiite and Kurdish insurrections following the 1991 Gulf War.<sup>12</sup> The Sunnis had high stakes in the future of Iraq: they wanted to retain their hold on both political power and oil wealth, wanted to prevent the emergence of a Shi'a-dominated government, and wanted to ensure they did not fall victim to sectarian violence. The Sunnis exercised their power through Saddam's government, the ruling Ba'ath party, and tribal alliances.

The Shi'a had been suffering in opposition for years, but although they lacked political power, they had a formalized and highly regarded institution providing spiritual leadership.<sup>13</sup> Shi'a also formed the country's first Islamic political party, Da'awa, which later spawned a constellation of other Islamist parties.<sup>14</sup> This religious and political activism created a number of respected Shi'a leaders, including Grand Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei and Grand Ayatollah Muhammed Muhammed Sadiq al-Sadr. The former was a quietest who believed spiritual leaders should shy away politics; the latter was a vigorous activist who believed in mobilizing the Shia politically.<sup>15</sup> Their the two visions for Shi'ite mobilization would come to fruition during the Iraq war through their successors: Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani and Sadiq al-Sadr's son, Muqtada al-Sadr.

A final set of actors "internal" to Iraq were its exiled opposition forces, who had been gathering in world capitols after waves of Ba'athist repression and war. The best organized of these groups was the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), which was founded in Iran in 1982 by exiles who wanted to see an Islamic state in Iraq.<sup>16</sup> At the time Iran had the upper hand in the war against Iraq, and these exiles hoped the Iraqi regime might actually fall. SCIRI's reputation was complicated by its close ties to Iran. Its military force, the Badr Corps, was initially led by Iranian Revolutionary Guard officers, although it passed in time into the hands of Iraqi officers.<sup>17</sup> SCIRI supported the liberation of Kuwait in 1991 and a year later called for unifying opposition groups to overthrow Saddam's regime. This forced SCIRI to take a pragmatic stance on

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<sup>12</sup> Beehner, Lionel and Greg Bruno "Why Iraqis Cannot Agree on an Oil Law," Council on Foreign Relations, 22 Feb 2008, retrieved 28 Feb 2014 from <http://on.cfr.org/1j8sa2e>.

<sup>13</sup> Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, 25.

<sup>14</sup> Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, 27.

<sup>15</sup> Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, 30, 55.

<sup>16</sup> Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, 43-44.

<sup>17</sup> Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, 44.

many issues, such as considering the Kurdish demand for a federal Iraq and accepting that the US might need to play a role in regime change.<sup>18</sup>

Two other opposition movements had ties to the West. Ahmed Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress (INC) received US funding and lobbied globally for regime change in Iraq. The INC created an opposition leadership structure and laid out a roadmap for a future Iraq, but the group was plagued by infighting among members<sup>19</sup> and even by violence at its headquarters in the Kurdish region of Iraq.<sup>20</sup> The other group was Ayad Allawi's Iraqi National Accord (INA), which advocated a clandestine process of co-opting elements of the military, security services, and other pillars of Saddam's support.<sup>21</sup> Chalabi and Allawi despised each other, and their organizations sniped at each other all the way up through the invasion of Iraq.

Taken together, these constitute some of the major stakeholders in the future of Iraq. Others existed, of course, but this list includes the most powerful actors who had a critical stake in the American-led war in 2003 and had a figurative vote in how events unfolded. The Iraq war is largely a story of these actors negotiating, through both nonviolent and violent means, to create a stable social contract that secured each of their interests.

### **Planning for War**

The catastrophic planning for the Iraq War has been well-documented elsewhere and will not be repeated in detail here.<sup>22</sup> However, it is important to consider how the pervasive duel model influenced planning. On 8 December 2001, immediately after Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld tasked him with planning for war with Iraq, US Central Command Commander General Tommy Franks sketched a diagram he proudly called a

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<sup>18</sup> Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, 45.

<sup>19</sup> "Iraq's Constitutional Challenge," International Crisis Group, 2003, 3, <http://bit.ly/1r30iAV>.

<sup>20</sup> Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, 53.

<sup>21</sup> "Iraq's Constitutional Challenge," ICG, 3.

<sup>22</sup> See Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco*, and Woodward, Bob, *Plan of Attack: The Definitive Account of the Decision to Invade Iraq* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2004).

“basic grand strategy” matching US capabilities against slices of the Iraqi state.<sup>23</sup> Franks was apparently thinking about just one thing: how to take down Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. He was preparing to fight a duel.

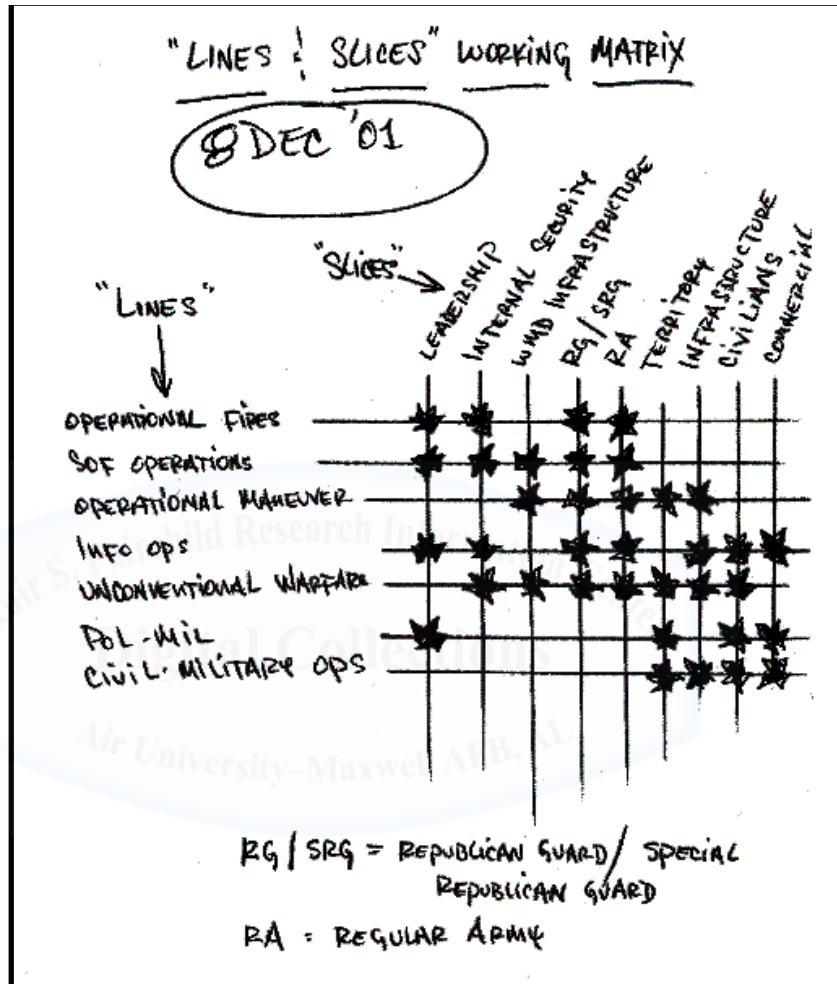


Figure 2: General Tommy Franks’ “Lines & Slices” Working Matrix

Source: Andrew Bacevich, *The Limits of Power*

In a critique of Franks’ leadership, Andrew Bacevich explains what his “grand strategy” was missing: “...even a casual examination of Franks’s matrix shows that it did not remotely approximate a strategy. For starters, it was devoid of political context. Nar-

<sup>23</sup> Bacevich, Andrew, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York, NY: Metropolitan Books, 2009), 166.

rowly focused on the upcoming fight, it paid no attention to the aftermath. Defining the problems of Iraq alone, it ignored other regional power relationships and made no provision for how war might alter those relationships, whether for good or for ill. It was completely ahistorical and made no reference to culture, religion, or ethnic identity. It had no moral dimension. It failed even to include a statement of purpose.”<sup>24</sup>

Bacevich’s critique strikes to the heart of the duel model. The war was inseparable from its regional and internal political context. No plan for victory could possibly be complete without accounting for multiple stakeholders, but Franks’ first instinct was to exclude them entirely. He ignored the possibility of internal fragmentation among religious and ethnic groups. Even worse, Franks appears to not have considered these factors to be within his purview as a military leader. His gross misuse of the phrase “grand strategy” suggests deep confusion about who ultimately has responsibility for these crucial political factors. Bacevich believes officers like Franks “studiously disregard either political purpose or potential political complications” so they can “preclude any interference from insufferable civilians . . . and to reconstitute war as the exclusive province of military professionals.”<sup>25</sup>

If one is tempted to suggest that Bacevich is reading too much into a single diagram, the war plans developed over the subsequent year and a half do not fare much better. In his autobiography Franks wrote that while his CENTCOM staff planned for the war, his message to Washington was essentially, “You pay attention to the day after, and I’ll pay attention to the day of.”<sup>26</sup> As we have seen, this sharp delineation between war and post-war is a conceptual error in fragmented wars, because the fighting itself helps create the resulting political order. By excluding post-war considerations, Franks abdicated responsibility for the level of strategy that was most important. CENTCOM saw “major combat as an end in itself rather than as a component part of a broader effort to create a stable, reasonably democratic Iraq.”<sup>27</sup> The mediocre post-war planning products which

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<sup>24</sup> Bacevich, *The Limits of Power*, 166-167.

<sup>25</sup> Bacevich, *The Limits of Power*, 167.

<sup>26</sup> Nora Bensahel, Olga Oliker, Keith Crane, and Richard R. Brennan, *After Saddam: Prewar Planning and the Occupation of Iraq* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Arroyo Center, 2008), xviii.

<sup>27</sup> Bensahel, *After Saddam*, xix.

emerged from CENTCOM's Joint Task Force IV were disparaged by colleagues.<sup>28</sup> One such slide, shown below, reflects little grasp of strategy or the challenges the US would face following the invasion. Post-war plans were eventually developed, but “they were always a low priority at CENTCOM, which focused the vast bulk of its time, attention, and resources on major combat operations.”<sup>29</sup> The civilian side of the US government did not fare much better. Many agencies studied post-war scenarios, but the government lacked an interagency process capable of coordinating and directing their efforts.<sup>30</sup> A 2005 RAND report concluded, “Post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction were addressed only very generally, largely because of the prevailing view that the task would not be difficult.”<sup>31</sup>



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<sup>28</sup> One officer described the group as “fifty-five yahoos with shareware who were clueless,” while another said bluntly, “they didn’t produce a plan.” Another colleague described their work as “a very pedestrian product... it looked like a war college exercise.” Ricks, *Fiasco*, 79-80.

<sup>29</sup> Bensahel, *After Saddam*, xviii.

<sup>30</sup> The Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), the State Department, the US Agency for International Development (USAID), and the National Security Council each studied postwar scenarios. Bensahel, xix.

<sup>31</sup> Ricks, *Fiasco*, 111.

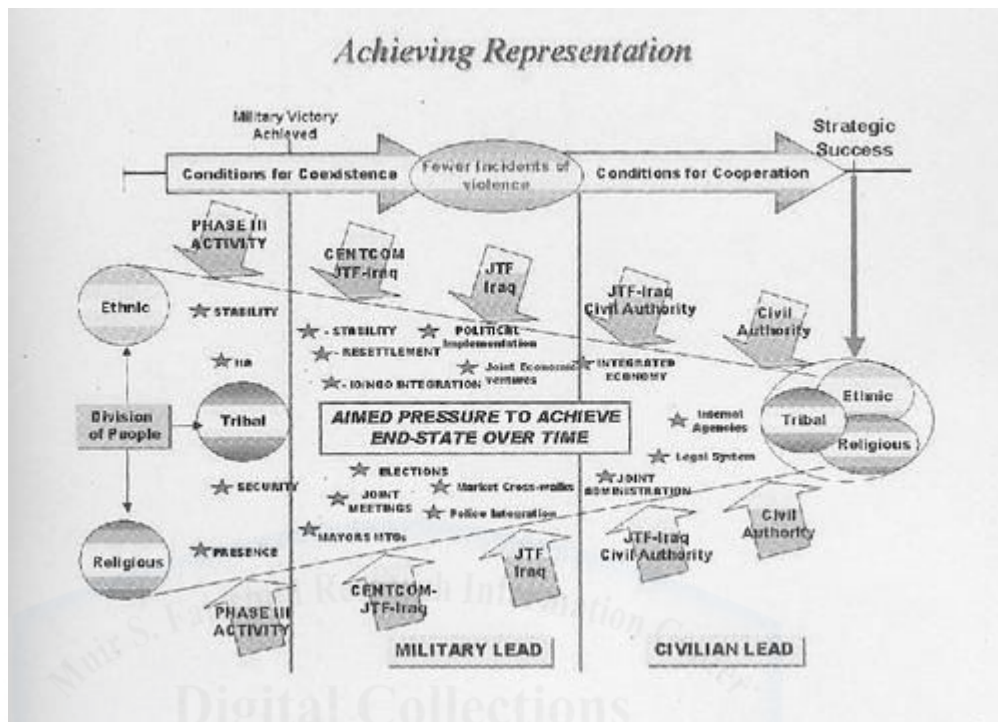


Figure 3: Iraq Phase IV Planning Slide

Source: Tom Ricks, *Fiasco*

Franks' delineation ran through the entire US national security apparatus: there was war, and there was post-war. The former entailed removing Saddam Hussein from power. The second entailed providing stability, services, and transitioning to the rule of a new Iraqi government. The assumption seemed to be that if the US could just provide enough security and transition assistance, that latter process would take care of itself. Few seemed to recognize that the war would dramatically alter the balance of power within Iraq and across the region. Few anticipated that the war would create new winners and losers, some of whom would have both the ability and will to utilize violence to manipulate the outcome.

To deliver peace in 2003, the US would have needed to steer domestic and regional upheaval caused by the war entirely into nonviolent political channels. It would have needed to birth an Iraqi government that adequately represented each of the coun-

try's major ethnic groups, and that had sufficient strength and legitimacy to prevent dissatisfied actors from using violence to contest unpopular decisions. Such a government would have had to facilitate a rise of Shi'ite power and a decline of Sunni power within Iraq, and negotiated deals over sovereignty and oil revenues between pro-independence Kurds and the Arabs who opposed them. The United States and the Iraqi government would also have needed to prevent violent meddling by a newly empowered Iran that feared an American invasion and wished to keep the US bogged down in Iraq, and would have needed to prevent outbreaks of fighting between ambitious Kurds and their wary Turkish neighbors. The US and the Iraqi government would also have needed sufficient force and intelligence to prevent the rise of insurgents, terrorists, and other spoilers who opposed the new Iraqi order or the US presence. Could the US have achieved all this with better post-war planning?

Several factors suggest this would have been unlikely. First, the US had many opportunities to resolve conflicts through nonviolent political channels, and these efforts often failed. Even with de-Ba'athification and the disbanding of the Iraqi army, many Iraqis were willing to give politics a chance. It is difficult to remember now, but violence in the months following the invasion was limited to looting and crime. Despite this window of opportunity, Iraqis could not overcome their serious differences. Even now, after more than a decade of conflict, core issues like Sunni political representation and oil revenues have not been entirely resolved. Second, Iraqis had used violence before to renegotiate the political order. Shia and Kurds had risen up against Saddam's regime in 1991, and the Iraqi army had retaliated with extreme brutality. Iraq was a country acquainted with violent politics, so the resort to force would have been on the table even under the best of conditions. Third, many actors had a vested interest in the Iraqi experiment failing. Fourth, no matter how careful or well-prepared the United States was, disorder was sure to attend such a shocking and violent transformation.

Iraq was never going to be a mere duel; it was destined to be a complex transformation of the entire Middle East.



## Invasion and aftermath

On April 9, 2003, Iraqis danced and cheered when US Marines tore down a statue of Saddam Hussein in central Baghdad's Firdos Square. Iraqi defenses had melted away, the expected battle for Baghdad had failed to materialize, and US soldiers and Marines found themselves owning the country's capitol just three weeks after Operation Iraqi Freedom began. The US had won its duel with Saddam Hussein, and the transition to a post-war order had begun.

Planning for post-war Iraq depended on many unwarranted assumptions, which historians and analysts have thoroughly dissected.<sup>32</sup> However, one assumption was so fundamental that it has rarely even been acknowledged: the assumption that Iraq still had a government. The notional concept of a "government" is so inviolable that it scarcely seems possible to imagine a geographically bounded state without one. Because the concept of government is seamless, American planners assumed a physical actor representing that concept would continue to exist in Iraq, even if it would undergo a dramatic transformation.

The model presented in this thesis takes a different view. Government is not a fixed entity but a "semi-permeable membrane" through which violence entrepreneurs can pass. It is a coalition held together by a monopoly on force—in Saddam Hussein's case, a robust internal security apparatus. When the US Armed Forces rolled into Baghdad, they shattered that monopoly on force and atomized the elements constituting Saddam's government. Although a notional government still existed, the practical reality resembled something more like Jesse Driscoll's starting point—an anarchic, ungoverned space in which violence entrepreneurs bargain for power.

The absence of a real government was apparent within weeks of Saddam's downfall. Jay Garner and the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA) made a "well intentioned but dysfunctional" effort to stabilize Iraq, hampered by "inadequate communications, poor coordination, and personal rivalries."<sup>33</sup> On May 11<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ricks, *Fiasco*, 110.

<sup>33</sup> Mansoor, Peter R., *Surge: My Journey with General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 7.

Secretary Rumsfeld established the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) to govern Iraq, led by Ambassador L. Paul Bremer II. The CPA, driven by neoconservative ideology and staffed by inexperienced Republican party loyalists,<sup>34</sup> was not the result of a political process among Iraqis and was only a government in theory; in reality, it was one actor among many in the complex political landscape of Iraq.

The CPA squandered what little power it did have. Chapters 2 hypothesized that winning in a fragmented war requires assembling a coalition of stakeholders willing to consent to one's range of acceptable outcomes. With his first two orders, Bremer did exactly the opposite; he tore apart the coalition he already had. With CPA Order Number 1 (May 16, 2003) Bremer instituted de-Ba'athification, stripping the government of tens of thousands of ordinary Iraqis who served as "professionals, doctors, engineers, university professors, and civil servants—many of them the same people that US war plans had assumed would remain in their positions to enable Iraq to function after regime change had occurred."<sup>35</sup> De-Ba'athification effectively excluded put these stakeholders "out of work, denied them their livelihood and pensions, and removed any chance of a political future."<sup>36</sup> This was an intolerable fate that drove many former Ba'athists into rival, violent coalitions like the nascent insurgency.

De-Ba'athification also illustrated how war creates conditions for a renegotiation of power. One of the foremost advocates of de-Ba'athification was Ahmed Chalabi, the charismatic Iraqi exile who had championed the invasion. A Shia, Chalabi used the post-invasion period and capitalized on American ignorance to advance Shiite interests at the expense of Sunnis. Bremer even put Chalabi in charge of a de-Ba'athification appeals commission, which one CPA official described as, "putting the fox in charge of the henhouse."<sup>37</sup> Men like Chalabi were not interested in building a stable coalition of actors; they were playing a zero-sum game to maximize their power.

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<sup>34</sup> Ricks, *Fiasco*, 203.

<sup>35</sup> Mansoor, *Surge*, 7.

<sup>36</sup> Mansoor, *Surge*, 7.

<sup>37</sup> Chandrasekaran, Rajiv, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Iraq's Green Zone* (New York, NY: Vintage Books), 2006, 83.

Bremer's second formal order as CPA Administrator disbanded the Iraqi Army and "all Iraqi government departments that had a role in security or intelligence."<sup>38</sup> Iraq's Army was one of the most professional and respected institutions within the country and a major provider of jobs. This decision further contracted the possible coalition of actors willing to support the American project for Iraq. It also dismantled a capability critical to re-stabilizing a social system: punishing extortionists and defectors. With the intelligence and security services gone, the CPA and its Iraqi partners had no way to prevent other actors from withdrawing from the government or illegally manipulating it to their advantage.

Chapter 2 hypothesized that the violent fracturing of a social system creates opportunities and incentives for stakeholders to violently renegotiate their own place within that system. That was certainly true in post-invasion Iraq. The first problem to confront occupation forces was looting, a criminal and sometimes violent rebalancing of wealth. Professional thieves plundered the National Museum of Iraq and the Iraq National Library, before burning the latter to the ground.<sup>39</sup> Others targeted state property, especially opulent villas, expensive vehicles, and arms caches belonging to the regime's inner circle.<sup>40</sup> While such criminal activity does not rise to the level of war, it does illustrate that social systems are under continual renegotiation using both violent and nonviolent means, and that the chaos of war makes this process especially volatile. The invasion of Iraq facilitated criminal and sometimes violent wealth transfers that would have been inconceivable in peacetime.

Under these conditions, the CPA was notoriously ineffective at performing the basic functions of government. It failed to contain violence, which had a cascading effect on Iraq's governance, economic performance, and reconstruction. Kidnappings, assassinations, and travel restrictions sent insurance premiums and unemployment skyrocketing.<sup>41</sup> Commercial activity became "the preserve of the privileged few who had access to

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<sup>38</sup> Mansoor, *Surge*, 8.

<sup>39</sup> Burkeman, Oliver, "Ancient archive lost in Baghdad library blaze.", *The Guardian*. April 15 2003, <http://bit.ly/1lcFJ3i>.

<sup>40</sup> "Reconstructing Iraq," International Crisis Group, September 2, 2004, 20.

<sup>41</sup> By August 2004, insurance premiums ran as high as 30% of some companies' payrolls, and unemployment was estimated to run 25-50%. ICG, *Reconstructing Iraq*, 3,16.

those in power and to lucrative state procurement contracts.”<sup>42</sup> The vast infusion of reconstruction money, which overwhelmed dysfunctional Iraqi institutions, fueled corruption.<sup>43</sup> A September 2004 report concluded, “Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) performance fell far short of expectations and needs and offers a fragile, dysfunctional legacy on which to build.”<sup>44</sup> Although the CPA had a theoretical claim to be Iraq’s government, it did not fulfill this role in practice. It was only one actor among many in a dynamic political ecosystem.

### **A new beginning**

On July 13, 2003, in an effort to establish a more legitimate governing structure, the CPA stood up an Interim Governing Council (IGC) comprised of 25 Iraqi representatives.<sup>45</sup> The CPA and IGC were theoretically to share power until elections could pave the way for a more representative government, but in reality the US had ultimate authority. The IGC failed to satisfy many key actors; the CPA determined its final composition, it lacked legitimacy, and it excluded key actors. Even actors who remained within the governing coalition were losing faith in the way Americans were shaping their country. At a time when the Americans should have been expanding and strengthening the governing coalition, they were barely holding it together.

The IGC was depressingly ineffective. Its members were selected not on technocratic ability or even ideology, but on sectarian identity.<sup>46</sup> They used their limited authority to dole out jobs and other favors to their sectarian groups, contributing to ever-louder Iraqi complaints of government corruption<sup>47</sup> and leading the International Crisis Group to warn Iraq was “on the road to Lebanonisation.”<sup>48</sup> Iraq had not traditionally “defined itself in terms of religious or ethnic affiliation,” but now the CPA was “turning

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<sup>42</sup> “Reconstructing Iraq,” International Crisis Group, 6.

<sup>43</sup> “Reconstructing Iraq,” International Crisis Group, 21.

<sup>44</sup> “Reconstructing Iraq,” International Crisis Group, i.

<sup>45</sup> “Governing Iraq,” International Crisis Group, August 25, 2003, ii.

<sup>46</sup> “Governing Iraq,” International Crisis Group, 12.

<sup>47</sup> Mansoor, *Surge*, 9.

<sup>48</sup> “Governing Iraq,” International Crisis Group, 16.

them into organizing principles of government and, in the process, taking the risk of solidifying and exacerbating them.”<sup>49</sup>

Actors who felt excluded from the ICG were especially dissatisfied, eroding their already limited trust in the US-led political process. Foremost among the critics was Muqtada al-Sadr, whose participation had reportedly been vetoed by other Shi'a groups, including the SCIRI. Al-Sadr “denounced the Interim Governing Council as an illegitimate, foreign-imposed body,” announced the formation of an “alternative Governing Council,” and called for the establishment of a militia.<sup>50</sup> His Mahdi Army went on to become one of the most violent actors in Iraq.

A second group that felt excluded from power was Iraq’s Sunni population. Although Sunnis received 40% of the seats in the ICG, reflecting their percentage of Iraq’s population, this was the first time in memory that they had been given minority status in the Iraqi government. Given the sectarian nature of the ICG, this was “a free fall into the abyss for a group that once possessed all the keys of power.”<sup>51</sup> This formulation reinforced the perception that the US was equating Sunnis with Ba’athists and Saddamists, and that the war and post-war projects were “sectarian in character and purpose, designed to help Shiites and Kurds at their expense.”<sup>52</sup> By this time, the US was also angering Sunnis with a heavy-handed and sometimes indiscriminate military approach in the Sunni triangle.

The CPA also neglected to work with one of Iraq’s oldest and most established institutions, its tribal network. It sought to circumvent an institution it found anachronistic, and did not convene a tribal gathering until May 2004.<sup>53</sup> The US rebuffed tribes who fought only to avenge lost sons and who might have been pacified with bloody money.<sup>54</sup> At the local level, occupation forces seldom vested Iraqis with real authority. They neglected local power structures and largely attempted to govern directly.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> “Governing Iraq,” International Crisis Group, 16.

<sup>50</sup> “Governing Iraq,” International Crisis Group, 15.

<sup>51</sup> “Governing Iraq,” International Crisis Group, 16.

<sup>52</sup> “Governing Iraq,” International Crisis Group, 16.

<sup>53</sup> Mansoor, *Surge*, 11 & “Governing Iraq,” International Crisis Group, 14.

<sup>54</sup> “Governing Iraq,” International Crisis Group, 7.

<sup>55</sup> “Governing Iraq,” International Crisis Group, 16.

Despite these frustrations, organized violence against the occupation was slow to develop in the early months. In August 2003 the International Crisis Group could still write, “Armed resistance against the occupation is very much a minority affair, and one viewed predominantly negatively by the Iraqi population.”<sup>56</sup> It was localized and fragmented among a smattering of diverse, uncoordinated groups.<sup>57</sup> Because resistance forces were so fragmented, they could not form coalitions broad enough to meaningfully challenge US authority.

It helped that one of the most important blocs within Iraq was still willing to participate in the political process: mainstream Shiites, represented by Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani and Shia political parties like the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraqi (SCIRI). Sistani, the highest-ranking Shia cleric in Iraq, was critical of the CPA and the ICG,<sup>58</sup> but played a nonviolent, moderating role. Formerly exiled Shia political parties also joined the US-led political process. The most important of these was SCIRI, under the leadership of Ayatollah Muhammad Bakr al-Hakim, who publicly opposed the occupation but accepted a role in the ICG and supported a democratic political transition.<sup>59</sup> However, partnership with the US occupation was never easy for these groups. The formerly exiled opposition groups “felt betrayed by the US administration,” and al-Hakim complained that the Americans were preventing the emergence of a national Iraqi government.<sup>60</sup>

In these first months after the invasion, the US built only a shaky political foundation for the new Iraq. By the end of 2003 Iraq still did not have a proper government, merely a patchwork of organizations like the CPA, the US military, and the ICG. Iraq had not yet found its equilibrium.

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<sup>56</sup> “Governing Iraq,” International Crisis Group, 6.

<sup>57</sup> “Governing Iraq,” International Crisis Group, 6.

<sup>58</sup> “Governing Iraq,” International Crisis Group, 11.

<sup>59</sup> “Governing Iraq,” International Crisis Group, 8.

<sup>60</sup> “Governing Iraq,” International Crisis Group, 11.

## Dysfunctional politics

Between late 2003 and early 2006, the US tried to birth an Iraqi government that would allow Iraqis to resolve the serious political differences within their country. In a time of great uncertainty, and against a backdrop of poor security and inadequate public services, actors figuratively and literally fought for their place in the new order. Unfortunately, emerging Iraqi institutions were not up to this challenge. As key stakeholders lost faith that the political process could satisfy their interests, many of them turned to violence.

During these years, US military forces tried to stamp out a growing insurgency and hand off security responsibility to Iraqi forces. Military strategy was clumsy and slow to emerge, at least partly because of confused policy. As late as November 2003, when US troops were busy fighting insurgents in Baghdad, President Bush told his National Security Council, "I don't want anyone in the cabinet to say it is an insurgency. I don't think we are there yet."<sup>61</sup> Units trained for conventional war could not distinguish friend from foe, and used kill-or-capture tactics against broad swaths of the population, which inflamed the population.<sup>62</sup> Tactical victories, like the capture of Saddam in December 2003 and the killing of his two sadistic sons, did little to transform the political landscape. By spring 2004 US commanders determined their forces were serving as a contagion for the spread of violence, so they withdrew troops to large, hardened forward operating bases (FOBs) and shifted to a strategy of standing up Iraqi security forces. Without US forces providing order in the streets, violence grew even worse.<sup>63</sup>

Several political milestones occurred during this timeframe, and can be viewed as new rounds of the negotiation over Iraq's future. The first was the passing of the March 2004 Transitional Administrative Law (TAL), a temporary constitution that laid out a timetable for elections and the drafting of a permanent constitution.<sup>64</sup> Among the TAL's most important contributions were establishing a semi-autonomous Kurdish region and

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<sup>61</sup> Mansoor, *Surge*, 12.

<sup>62</sup> Mansoor, *Surge*, 13.

<sup>63</sup> Mansoor, *Surge*, 14.

<sup>64</sup> Governing Accounting Office, Iraq's Transition Law, May 25, 2004, retrieved 5 Mar 2014 from <http://www.gao.gov/assets/100/92638.pdf>.

requiring a census in Kirkuk before deterring its final status.<sup>65</sup> These concessions satisfied many Kurdish interests at the time, effectively locking the Kurds into the governing coalition, but they infuriated Arabs, aggravated the Sunni insurgency, and heightened tensions with Turkey.<sup>66</sup> Emboldened by their autonomy from Baghdad and by their American support, Kurds set about de-Arabizing Kirkuk.<sup>67</sup> Kurdish factions also resumed violence against Turkey, which culminated in a Turkish incursion into Iraq in November 2007.<sup>68</sup>

On June 28, 2004 the US formally transferred sovereignty to an Iraqi government led by Ayad Allawi. While this was an impressive step, it lacked legitimacy. There had not yet been an election, and the new government became another means of pushing sectarian agendas, especially when the US granted Iraqis authority to recruit “to recruit, promote and dismiss military personnel.”<sup>69</sup>

While the US continued trying to build a democratic government, the two biggest losers from the invasion and its aftermath—Muqtada al-Sadr’s downtrodden Shia and the Sunnis—continued to negotiate their place using violence. In October 2003 Sadr formed a shadow government, a deliberate and obvious provocation to the CPA’s authority, but the CPA did little in response.<sup>70</sup> That spring and summer Sadr’s Jaysh al-Mahdi launched two separate uprisings. US troops put down both uprisings, but Shia members of the ICG threatened to resign if Bremer arrested Sadr. Bremer backed off, giving the Jaysh al-Mahdi time to rearm and reorganize. After the second uprising, Al-Sistani brokered a ceasefire that left Sadr’s organization intact.<sup>71</sup> In the language of Chapter 2, Sadr was extorting the governing coalition, and the coalition was too weak to punish him. The Shia on the ICG effectively hamstrung Bremer, and while the US suppressed Sadr’s revolts,

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<sup>65</sup> “Iraq’s Kurds: Toward an Historic Compromise?,” International Crisis Group, i.

<sup>66</sup> ICG, Don’t Rush, 1; Mansoor, 14

<sup>67</sup> “Iraq’s Kurds,” International Crisis Group, i.

<sup>68</sup> Savran, Sungur, “Turkish incursion into Northern Iraq: Military Fiasco, Political Debacle.” Global Research Center for Research on Globalization, May 14, 2008, <http://bit.ly/RsTAdc>.

<sup>69</sup> Mansoor, *Surge*, 17.

<sup>70</sup> Mansoor, *Surge*, 15.

<sup>71</sup> Mansoor, *Surge*, 15-16.



the police and the newly formed Iraqi Civil Defense Corps largely stood on the sidelines.<sup>72</sup>

During this same time, the Sunni insurgency was also growing. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda in 2004 and set up shop in the Sunni stronghold of Fallujah, where he imposed shariah law and recruited imams and tribal sheikhs who were angered by US behavior.<sup>73</sup> His group launched attacks against both US and Iraqi targets and openly called for “sectarian war” in Iraq.<sup>74</sup> Al-Qaeda in Iraq’s message was that Sunnis needed to join forces to fight Americans and “Persians”—referring to Iraq’s Shia, who Sunnis saw as in league with Iran.<sup>75</sup> Foreign Sunni fighters flooded into the city, taking over entire neighborhoods.<sup>76</sup> Al-Zarqawi was hard at work building his own coalition to challenge the one governing from Baghdad.

The US fought two bloody and ultimately unsuccessful battles to regain control of Fallujah, in April and November/December of 2004. The latter, the bloodiest battle of the Iraq war, was the apex of a conventional war strategy in Iraq. The US succeeded in neither annihilating nor coercing Iraq’s Sunnis. Annihilation of an entire ethnic group simply wasn’t an option, given their sheer numbers, moral concerns, and the dramatic potential for backlash. Coercion wasn’t likely to work either; the ruling coalition was still dominated by Shia who had little interest in sharing power, and Sunnis found their proposed equilibrium abhorrent. In the absence of new political openings, submission would mean a fate as a persecuted and powerless minority within the new Iraq. Nonetheless, the United States was adamant about retaking Fallujah. It was a symbol of defiance against the US, and the US wanted to create security on the eve of January 2005 elections.<sup>77</sup> US strategists, subscribing to the duel model of counterinsurgency, also saw the population of Fallujah as neutral territory rather than a significant power bloc in its own right.

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<sup>72</sup> Mansoor, *Surge*, 15.

<sup>73</sup> Mansoor, *Surge*, 20.

<sup>74</sup> “Iraq: 2004 Overview.” MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base, <http://bit.ly/1gEk4xG>.

<sup>75</sup> Mansoor, *Surge*, 20-21.

<sup>76</sup> Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, 338.

<sup>77</sup> One US strategist said, “This is being done for not only its effect on Fallujah, but for its demonstration effects... on other places resembling Fallujah.” Cited in Grier, Peter, “After the Fallujah fight, then what?” *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 10, 2004, <http://bit.ly/1gMKFvS>.

Unfortunately, the Fallujah assault backfired spectacularly. The ancillary benefits of the attack could not overcome the foundational struggle between Iraq's stakeholders. Although US Marines successfully cleared the city, the heavy-handed violence infuriated Iraq's Sunnis and emboldened the insurgency. Worst of all, Sunnis largely boycotted the January elections, and insurgents intimidated those who did participate.<sup>78</sup> This resulted in Shia and Kurds gaining overwhelming control of the parliament, with Sunnis winning only 17 of 275 seats<sup>79</sup>. One consequence is that Sunnis had only 2 of 55 seats in the council drafting a national constitution.<sup>80</sup> The Sunnis were shut out of power.

Almost everyone recognized the danger and urged Sunni inclusion, even Shi'a leader Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani. Unfortunately, no adequate mechanism existed to bring credible Sunni leaders into the process. The response was predictable; lacking access to nonviolent mechanisms for continuing to negotiate their place in Iraqi society, Sunnis increasingly turned to violence, with April and May of 2005 hitting a new peak for car bombings.<sup>81</sup> For their part, Shia doubled down on their sectarian agenda, using Shia dominated police forces to retaliate against Sunnis.<sup>82</sup> Violence was spiraling out of control.

### **Descent into civil war**

Two trends shaped the remainder of 2005. The first was a continuing politically process, which included the ratification of a constitution in October and parliamentary elections in December. These were impressive achievements on the surface, but they did little to advance political reconciliation. Many observers felt that the constitutional drafting process was rushed, resulting in a document that did not satisfy Sunni interests and had been passed over their fierce objections. The International Crisis Group warned, "Instead of healing the growing divisions between Iraq's three principal communities -- Shiites, Kurds and Sunni Arabs -- a rushed constitutional process has deepened rifts and

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<sup>78</sup> Mansoor, *Surge*, 25-26.

<sup>79</sup> "Iraq: Don't Rush the Constitution," International Crisis Group, June 8, 2005, 2, <http://bit.ly/1nsPig3>.

<sup>80</sup> "Don't Rush," International Crisis Group, 2.

<sup>81</sup> "Don't Rush," International Crisis Group, 3.

<sup>82</sup> Mansoor, *Surge*, 27.

hardened feelings.”<sup>83</sup> December parliamentary elections resulted in another sweeping victory by Shia. The new Prime Minister was Nouri al-Maliki, “a diehard opponent of the Ba’ath party” who had been the deputy of the de-Ba’athification committee.<sup>84</sup>

The second trend during 2005 was a dramatic rise in sectarian violence. While the Sunni insurgency raged, the Iraqi government used its army and police to “suppress the Sunnis and ensure that power and resources flowed to certain groups.” Escalating violence tipped into full-blown civil war on February 22, 2006, when Sunni extremists blew up the Al-Askari Mosque in Samara, the burial place of the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Shi’ite imams and one of the most sacred Shi’ite mosques. Sectarian violence exploded. Even Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who had eschewed violence and done so much to urge political participation, signaled he was willing to resort to arms to protect the Shi’a population from Sunni terrorists.<sup>85</sup> The Shia rose up en masse, forming sectarian militias that waged war against Sunnis. Muqtada al-Sadr’s Jaysh al-Mahdi militias, some of which were backed by Iran, joined the violence.<sup>86</sup>

Throughout 2006 the bloodletting worsened, and the Iraqi government was in the thick of it. Although Maliki gave private assurances to the US, his government continued practicing a sectarian agenda, favoring Shiites over Sunnis and preventing law enforcement against Shi’a hardliners. It didn’t help that Maliki relied on political support from Shia hardliners like Sadr. US policy makers questioned “whether Maliki was just too weak to prevent such actions, or whether he was a willing participant.”<sup>87</sup> If the former, then warlords like Sadr were extorting him. If the latter, there was little hope for Iraq’s return to nonviolent political means of reconciling differences.

When the United States Congress commissioned the Iraq Study Group (ISG) to assess the war, the results were grim. “The situation in Iraq is grave and deteriorating,” the December 2006 report began. It described Iraq as an ecosystem of violent actors, who

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<sup>83</sup> “Unmasking Iraq: A Constitutional Process Gone Awry,” International Crisis Group, September 26, 2005, 1.

<sup>84</sup> Mansoor, *Surge*, 29.

<sup>85</sup> Mansoor, *Surge*, 28.

<sup>86</sup> Mansoor, *Surge*, 28.

<sup>87</sup> Mansoor, *Surge*, 48.

had “very little will to lay down arms.”<sup>88</sup> The country suffered from “a Sunni Arab insurgency, Shi'a militias and death squads, al Qaeda, and widespread criminality.” The report noted that while Iraq had a democratically elected government, “it is not adequately advancing national reconciliation, providing basic security, or delivering essential services.”<sup>89</sup> Sectarianism was rampant, including within the government itself. “The composition of the Iraqi government is basically sectarian, and key players within the government too often act in their sectarian interest. Iraq’s Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish leaders frequently fail to demonstrate the political will to act in Iraq’s national interest, and too many Iraqi ministries lack the capacity to govern effectively.”<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, it said neighboring countries “are not playing a constructive role in support of Iraq, and some are undercutting stability.”<sup>91</sup>

Iraq was in chaos. The situation on the ground did not resemble a duel between two unified actors. Instead, a constantly shifting mosaic of actors engaged in armed politics. Despite intensive US and Iraqi efforts to build a legitimate new government, they could not form a coalition of stakeholders strong enough to impose a new equilibrium. On the contrary, one actor after another abandoned the peaceful political process in favor of violence. Outside actors like Iran played an increasingly belligerent role, arming and training Shi'a militias in their fights against the Iraqi government and US military forces.

The Iraq Study Group believed no purely internal solution could stabilize Iraq, so long as outside countries continued to meddle. They recommended a major diplomatic effort including “every country that has an interest in avoiding a chaotic Iraq, including all of Iraq’s neighbors.”<sup>92</sup> The ISG recognized it is not possible to restore equilibrium to a social system without the consent of that system’s most influential stakeholders. However, the ISG’s proposed strategy was predicated on willful consent to a new future, something that is not likely when clashing interests are at stake. Whereas the ISG urged a US withdrawal and a negotiated political reconciliation, Iraq soon stumbled into an alterna-

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<sup>88</sup> James A. Baker III and Lee H. Hamilton, “The Iraq Study Group Report,” United States Institute of Peace, December 6, 2006, <http://bit.ly/1mhUSBK>.

<sup>89</sup> Baker and Hamilton, “The Iraq Study Group Report,” 6.

<sup>90</sup> Baker and Hamilton, “The Iraq Study Group Report,” 15.

<sup>91</sup> Baker and Hamilton, “The Iraq Study Group Report,” 9.

<sup>92</sup> Baker and Hamilton, “The Iraq Study Group Report,” 6.

tive form of reconciliation: a new political compact shaped by changing power relations on the ground, written in Iraqi blood.

### **The surge years**

The events of 2007 in Iraq are exceptional in American military history. In December 2006 Iraq was at its most violent and appeared to be beyond hope. Over the next nine months, Iraq experienced a complete turnaround. By the time MNF-I Commander General Petraeus and US Ambassador Ryan Crocker briefed Congress in September 2007, they could present clear evidence that Iraq's plunge into the abyss was reversing itself. At the Iraqis' request, American forces withdrew from Iraqi cities in June 2009 and from the remainder of the country in December 2011.<sup>93</sup> Although the reasons for this turnaround remain a subject of heated debate, these remarkable events hold the key to formulating a theory of victory in complex wars.

President Bush's announcement of the surge in January 2007 was a bold act of defiance against the prevailing view that the war was lost. Instead of withdrawing troops like the ISG recommended, Bush surged an additional 30,000 troops to join the 130,000 already in Iraq. The surge was accompanied by the appointment of General David Petraeus as MNF-I Commander and a shift to a population-centric counterinsurgency, which emphasized living among and protecting the civilian population of Iraq rather than merely killing or capturing adversaries. The surge was predicated on the idea that providing security and halting violence could create breathing space for political reconciliation among Iraqi leaders. Events on the ground seemed to vindicate this approach, and popular media coverage and early histories embraced the narrative that the surge strategy was responsible for winning the war.<sup>94</sup> However, this narrative, which Douglas Ollivant calls "The New Orthodoxy," had its skeptics.<sup>95</sup> Foremost among them was Army Colonel Gian

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<sup>93</sup> "Unofficial Translation of US-Iraq Troop Agreement from the Arabic Text," McClatchy Newspapers, November 18, 2008, <http://bit.ly/1hQDQeB>.

<sup>94</sup> For example, Ricks, *Fiasco*; Kaplan, Fred M., *The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2013); Broadwell, Paula, *All In: The Education of General David Petraeus* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2012).

<sup>95</sup> Ollivant, Douglas, "Countering the New Orthodoxy," New America Foundation, June 28, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1jOkXHM>.

Gentile, who argues violence was already beginning to decline before the surge troops arrived, suggesting neither the surge nor General Petraeus' leadership were responsible for the country's stabilization.

More recent scholarship recognizes the turnaround in Iraq had multiple causes. While any authors acknowledge the importance of the surge and the institutionalization of COIN theory, they also point to the importance of indigenous factors. These include the Anbar Awakening in 2006-2007 and a Shia ceasefire signed by Muqtada al-Sadr in August 2007.<sup>96</sup> These events are of special interest to this case study, because they both contributed to a major expansion of a winning coalition in Iraq. Each development considerably expanded the set of stakeholders willing to consent to the equilibrium favored by both the US and the Iraqi government. This coalition-building process, which required significant US pressure and assistance, was a marked reversal from earlier trends.

Both of these phenomena are worth exploring in detail. The Anbar Awakening was a Sunni uprising against al-Qa'eda in Iraq, which resulted in the incorporation of 30,000 Sunni fighters into a government-sponsored program called the Sons of Iraq.<sup>97</sup> The development of this remarkable program required recalculations by both Sunnis and by the Iraqi government.

Sunni perspectives had evolved since the war began, and by 2006 the Sunnis were contemplating political outcomes that would have been imaginable three years earlier. They had refused to peacefully give up power after the US invasion, and for years fought for ends largely incompatible with those sought by the US and the Shi'a majority Iraqi government. By late 2006 their calculations had changed, and they sought accommodation. Scholars offer two main hypotheses for this recalculation: (1) Sunni tribes were fed up with the brutality, cultural offensiveness, and economic interference of al-Qa'eda in Iraq and (2) Sunnis realized they had effectively lost the civil war. Shi'a were cleansing

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<sup>96</sup> Ollivant makes one such argument in "Countering the New Orthodoxy." Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey A. Friedman and Jacob N. Shapiro make a similar argument in a 2012 article that uses empirical evidence to test various hypotheses about Iraq's declining violence; their evidence suggests "a synergistic interaction" between the surge and indigenous Iraqi events. Colonel Peter Mansour, General Petraeus' executive officer during the surge, makes a similar argument in his book *Surge*.

<sup>97</sup> Kalyvas, Stathis, "Ethnic Defection in Civil War," *Comparative Political Studies* 41 no. 8, August 2008, 1043-1068, 1055.

Sunnis from one sector of Baghdad after another<sup>98</sup>, US forces had shown their willingness to fight at Fallujah, and the US had become exceptionally skilled at identifying, hunting, and killing irreconcilable insurgents.<sup>99</sup>

Whichever of these two explanations is most accurate, the United States played a critical role in Sunni calculations. Had the US withdrawn from Iraq like the ISG recommended, Sunnis would have had better odds in a prolonged insurgency, and an uprising against al-Qa'eda would have been difficult or impossible without American assistance. For these reasons, the single greatest contribution of the surge might have been the "political signal sent by President Bush that the United States was decisively committed to Iraq for the duration of his tenure in office."<sup>100</sup> Colonel Sean MacFarland, one of the US commanders who enabled the Anbar Awakening, writes, "Instead of telling [the tribal leaders] that we would leave soon and they must assume responsibility for their own security, we told them that we would stay as long as necessary to defeat the terrorists. That was the message they had been waiting to hear."<sup>101</sup>

The desire of Sunnis to "defect" was only half the equation for the Anbar Awakening; the other half was a willingness by the US and by the Shia-majority Iraqi government to accept them. After years of obstructing Sunni side-switching, these actors finally created mechanisms to make this defection possible.<sup>102</sup> This was not an inevitable outcome; there had been overtures from some Sunni tribes as early as 2004, but although some American commanders tried to capitalize on these opportunities, they were never institutionalized. This changed in 2006, when Ramadi Sheikh Abd as-Sattar Abu Risha began cooperating with the Americans against al-Qa'eda. US commanders provided arms and training and paid salaries out of their own funds until they could institutionalize support from the Iraqi government.<sup>103</sup> Prime Minister Maliki and his government were not especially happy with the arrangement, fearing a Sunni conspiracy to infiltrate the gov-

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<sup>98</sup> Ollivant, "Countering," 4.

<sup>99</sup> Gentile, *Wrong Turn*, 101.

<sup>100</sup> Ollivant, "Countering," 6.

<sup>101</sup> Quoted in Mansoor, *Surge*, 131.

<sup>102</sup> For more on the facilitation of defection, see Kalyvas, "Ethnic Defection in Civil War."

<sup>103</sup> Mansoor, *Surge*, 141.

ernment.<sup>104</sup> Maliki continued his sectarian agenda, using the newly created Office of the Commander-in Chief (OCINC) to directly influence appointments and promotions and to target enemies.<sup>105</sup> Even as the US was attempting to grow a coalition of stakeholders in the new Iraq, many feared Maliki might be working to dismantle it. Shi'a were skeptical and fearful of the Sons of Iraq program, sensing a Sunni conspiracy to infiltrate Baghdad and the government. Only American pressure kept the program functioning, but many Shia were eager to dismantle it as soon as possible.

Nonetheless, the program did function and brought a dramatic reduction in violence. With the Sunnis under government control and violence declining, Maliki could turn his attention to another bloc that stood outside his coalition: the Jaysh al-Mahdi belonging to Muqtada al-Sadr.

### **Punishing Sadr**

Until early 2008, Prime Minister Maliki dared not move against Shi'a actors in the country. He was focused on a Sunni-led insurgency, and both Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi and the SCIRI Badr Brigades were critical support blocs.<sup>106</sup> With the Anbar Awakening and the rapid decline of sectarian violence, Maliki's calculations began to change. Ollivant writes, "... At some point in late 2007 to early 2008, it appears that Maliki realized that Shi'a control of Iraq was no longer in any serious contention. If this is an accurate characterization, he then stopped being as concerned about operations against the Sunni and instead began thinking of his personal political future and the shape of post-war Iraq."<sup>107</sup> That meant taking on rivals closer to home.

Sadr seemed to be losing control over his highly fragmented army, some units of which were sponsored by Iran. An outbreak of intra-Shi'a violence in August 2007, which resulted in 50 dead and drew alarmingly near to two Shi'a holy shrines, led Sadr to

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<sup>104</sup> Wilbanks, Mark and Efraim Karsh. "How the 'Sons of Iraq' Stabilized Iraq," *The Middle East Quarterly*, Fall 2010, pp.57-70, retrieved Mar 25, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1nenb6T>.

<sup>105</sup> Mansoor, *Surge*, 77.

<sup>106</sup> Mansoor, *Surge*, 31.

<sup>107</sup> Ollivant, "Countering," 5.



announce a six-month ceasefire.<sup>108</sup> In February 2008 Sadr renewed the ceasefire for another six months. While the move helped check sectarian violence at a time when the US and Iraqi government were consolidating their gains, the move also bolstered Sadr's standing as a key political player in Iraq. By keeping his army in reserve, Sadr made himself an indispensable actor in Iraqi politics. At any moment, he could extort the Iraqi government by ending the ceasefire again and unleashing his army.

Maliki needed to put Sadr in his place. By January some Iraqi officials were complaining of "entrenched militias and criminal organizations, Iranian penetration of southern Iraq, and insufficient and outgunned Iraqi security forces to counter these threats."<sup>109</sup> Some sought a surge in Basra, a Shi'a majority city in southern Iraq and a stronghold of Sadr's power. Preparations began for a lengthy military operation, but on March 21, 2008 Maliki stunned his American partners by rushing the time table and ordering Iraqi military units into Basra. Operation Charge of the Knights was a daring move, but one Iraqi military forces were not prepared for. They quickly came under heavy fire, and Maliki—who had personally gone to Basra to supervise the operation—found himself trapped in a palace in Basra. Recognizing the significance of this battle, General Petraeus brought the resources of Multinational Force-Iraq to bear. US Special Forces and airborne infantry rushed to Basra, while US fighters, AC-130 gunships, Apache helicopters, and Predator drones provided air support. The result was a smashing military and political victory for Maliki.

With US help, Maliki's government had finally shown itself strong enough to punish extortion. The government gained precious legitimacy. While Sadr's forces continued to fight and negotiate for their very survival, Maliki showed shrewdness and cunning in pursuing his adversary to the finish. Sadr never again seriously challenged Maliki's rule. The battle also forced Iran to decide between ongoing support for the Jaysh al-Mahdi or working with the Iraqi government. It opted for the latter, bringing one more critical actor into the coalition.

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<sup>108</sup> MacAskill, Ewen, "Mahdi army calls six-month truce after fighting leaves 50 dead," *The Guardian*, August 29, 2007, <http://bit.ly/1gEnjFv>.

<sup>109</sup> Mansoor, *Surge*, 239.

## Withdrawal

By mid-2008, Iraq's social system was finally returning to equilibrium. A broad coalition of stakeholders found the new status quo mostly tolerable. Shi'as dominated the new state and no longer had to worry about Sunni insurgency or a collapse of their government. Sunnis had reached a precarious accommodation with the government, they no longer had to fear Shi'a death squads, and many former insurgents were now employed and paid to be part of Iraq's security forces. Kurds had a thriving semi-autonomous region, which neighboring Turkey was willing to live with since cross-border violence had tapered off. By contributing to an exhausting stalemate in Iraq, the Iranians had helped ensure the US would not pursue regime change in their own country. Although they no longer directly sponsored Sadr's militias, they could live with Maliki's Shi'a-majority government. Al-Qa'eda in Iraq had been fragmented and scattered and no longer posed a threat for the time being. And the US had finally brought a sufficient level of stability to Iraq that it could contemplate a withdrawal.

Iraq's problems were by no means over. Vicious disagreements remained, of course—most of Iraq's most important political disagreements still had yet to be worked out—but negotiation over these differences had been steered back into political channels instead of violence. The political battles were ferocious. A close-run parliamentary election in 2010 resulted in months-long political deadlock over who would be the new Prime Minister. This drama ended with the Supreme Court favoring Maliki over his rival Iyad Allawi in violation of the Iraqi constitution.<sup>110</sup> Today Iraq's political environment is as contentious as ever, but for all its problems, it has remained largely non-violent. Although the Iraqi government continued to face sporadic challenges from militias, it could treat these as law enforcement problems instead of acts of war. By 2011, Iraqis felt confident enough in their security that they could effectively expel the Americans from their country.

Unfortunately, no complex system remains in equilibrium forever, and some Iraqis seem eager to throw away their hard-won gains. With US forces gone, Maliki immediately began dismantling the coalition the US had helped him build. Less than 24 hours

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<sup>110</sup> Yaphe, Judith, "Maliki's Last Stand?," *The Majalla*, February 26, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1nens9P>.

after the last American troops withdrew from Iraq, Maliki's government issued an arrest warrant for Tareq al-Hashimi, the Sunni Vice President of Iraq, accusing him of orchestrating bombing attacks.<sup>111</sup> In various in absentia trials, Iraqi courts have sentenced al-Hashimi to death no less than five times.<sup>112</sup> Maliki's most significant move was refusing to honor the integration of Sons of Iraq Sunnis into Iraq's security forces. He largely ignored them, and some were killed or forced to leave the country. Maliki views these actions as necessary moves to consolidate the rule of law by a centralized government, but many others see another Saddam Hussein in the making.

Discontent among Sunnis, exacerbated by weak Iraqi institutions and the war in neighboring Syria, have fueled a return to violence. Al-Qa'eda in Iraq has been reborn as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In January 2014 the organization occupied Fallujah and Ramadi, provoking Iraqi military action and the greatest levels of violence in Iraq since 2008. Commentators are repeatedly warning that Iraq could tip back into open war. The next round of violent negotiations over Iraq's future may be set to begin.

## Conclusions

The Iraq war illustrates many of the characteristics of fragmented wars described in Chapter 2. It was a multi-sided war, waged at multiple levels of analysis by stakeholders to renegotiate the future of both Iraq and the region. Simplistic, duel-based theories of victory—such as annihilating a singular enemy or coercing him to accept one's terms—were neither relevant nor helpful in making sense of the war. Instead, military force served specific and important roles within a broader framework of an evolving political settlement. Listed below are some of the key lessons about fragmented war that can be gleaned from the American experience in Iraq.

*Destabilizing a social system is exceedingly dangerous.* Iraq was hardly a friendly country prior to the US invasion, but it was a functioning social system. The balance of

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<sup>111</sup> Karadsheh, Jomana, "Arrest warrant issued for Iraqi vice president," CNN, December 19, 2011, <http://cnn.it/1h7N0gM>.

<sup>112</sup> Whittle, Thomas, "Iraqi court issues 5th death verdict against fugitive VP Hashimi," NZWeek, December, 14, 2012, <http://bit.ly/RsYwyA>.

power among actors was stable both within the country and in the surrounding region. Shattering Iraq's government destabilized these precarious balances, forcing a violent and prolonged reconstruction of social and political order. The experience in Iraq should cause policymakers to carefully weigh the decision to shatter other social systems in the future.

*Military and political outcomes are intertwined and cumulative.* In a fragmented war there is no linear route to victory. Because the military defeat of a single actor will likely not be sufficient to restore stability to the system, military engagements and political outcomes must be threaded together in a cumulative and highly interactive process that aims at a loosely defined and flexible end state. Harmonizing military and non-military instruments of power, and properly sequencing interactions, are of paramount importance. After initially making a series of counterproductive military and political moves, the US—and to a lesser degree Iraqis—learned to capitalize and thread together small victories, especially during the Anbar Awakening and with the decision to punish Muqtada al-Sadr.

*Local factors are critical.* Most theories approach war deductively, from the top down. Although such theories are important, they must be complemented with bottom-up understanding of local dynamics. It was sensitivity to local dynamics that first allowed US commanders like Colonel Sean MacFarland to recognize and build upon Sunni disaffection with al-Qa'eda. Unfortunately, developing this fidelity of insight is difficult; the US only achieved it after years in country with more than a hundred thousand soldiers on the ground.

*Achieving victory—stabilizing a social system on favorable terms—requires coalition-building.* In a fragmented war with many stakeholders, actors must build coalitions who share at least some range of acceptable outcomes. Unfortunately, the US and its Iraqi partners dismantled their coalition of potential stakeholders early in the war through mistakes like de-Ba'athification and disbanding the Iraqi army. It took until 2007 to expand the coalition by integrating Sunnis and coercing Muqtada al-Sadr into quietism. Developing effective mechanisms for defection is a critical component of this strategy, as illustrated by the Sons of Iraq program.

*Violence is critical for both influencing actors and destroying irreconcilables.* In wartime, violence and the threat of violence play essential roles in shaping the calculations of specific actors at specific times. US and Iraqi military victories against Sunni insurgents, coupled with their ongoing war against al-Qa'eda, contributed to the Anbar Awakening. Operation Charge of the Knights coerced Muqtada al-Sadr into accommodation with the government. Violence was also essential in destroying irreconcilable actors like al-Qa'eda in Iraq.

*External intervention has utility in augmenting the coalition-building process.* External power can employ violence against the proper actors, at proper times, to expand a favored coalition, fragment rival coalitions, or destroy irreconcilables. This outside intervention might be necessary when the favored coalition is too weak to accomplish these goals using its own resources. US support was essential in fighting the Sunni insurgency and helping Maliki confront Muqtada al-Sadr in 2008. External powers can also use non-violent means to support coalition-building, such as exerting political pressure. War tears apart social systems, inflames passions, and creates conditions of terrible fear and uncertainty. Under such conditions, stakeholders may not be able to overcome their differences to come together in coalitions. Outside pressure can help break such deadlock. The US repeatedly played this role in Iraq, pressuring the Iraqi government to avoid sectarian agendas that would antagonize important stakeholders. Intense US pressure was required to convince Maliki's government to accept the Sons of Iraq. Finally, external powers can dangle carrots to buy stakeholders off. The US paid salaries to Sons of Iraq fighters before the program could be institutionalized in the Iraqi government.

This case study has drawn on the American experience in Iraq to illustrate how fragmentation changes the dynamics of war in ways the duel model cannot explain. It has argued that Iraqis and Americans were only able to achieve victory in Iraq through a cumulative, interactive effort to grow a coalition of stakeholders. The next chapter will apply this new way of thinking to one of the most complex and devastating wars on the planet: the civil war in Syria.

## Chapter 4

### Fragmented War in Syria

Over the past three years, the Syrian civil war has become one of the most devastating conflicts on the planet. Nine million of Syria's 22 million residents have been displaced. An estimated 130,000 are dead and 180,000 are detained in prison.<sup>1</sup> Refugee crises are overwhelming neighboring countries, and violence is spilling across the borders into both Lebanon and Iraq. Syria has become a semi-anarchic wasteland, in which regime forces and predatory pro-regime militias fight many-sided battles with a fractured opposition comprised of hundreds of fighting groups. New alliances rise and fall faster than observers can memorize their tangled acronyms. Numerous stakeholders have vital interests in Syria, which has always been the beating heart of the Middle East. The violent negotiation for Syria's future is being waged by these stakeholders at multiple levels simultaneously. Syria is simultaneously a political insurgency, a Sunni-Shi'ite religious war, a war of extremists against mainstream Islam, a proxy war between Iran and Gulf countries, a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Qatar for Sunni leadership, a war for Hizballah to continue its very existence, and a vehicle for Western powers and countries like Russia and China to assert their views on the international order.<sup>2</sup> If there was ever a conflict that defines fragmented war, it is the war in Syria.

Syria starkly illustrates the limitations of the duel model discussed in Chapter 1. There are more than two actors, and actors are constantly combining and fragmenting and shifting their loyalty. Because the will and capability to fight are distributed among innumerable armed actors, there is no single adversary whose defeat will ensure victory. There is no clear delineation between "war" and "post-war," only a violent political process that is unlikely to end any time soon. Strategies like annihilation and coercion only become intermediate steps in a long, cumulative process of building one coalition's strength at the expense of another.

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<sup>1</sup> Miliband, David. "Syria's Latest Victim: International Law," TIME, Mar 26, 2014, <http://ti.me/1mP1hWq>.

<sup>2</sup> See Cordesman, Syria, "The Search for the Least Bad Option," Apr 3, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1jmQxgy>.

Syria also illustrates the usefulness of the alternative model presented in Chapter 2. When Syrian citizens lost faith that a deeply flawed political system could provide them with dignity and justice, they turned to contentious politics. The introduction of violence—first by the regime, then by the opposition—caused a progressive breakdown of political and social structure, and by mid-2012 violence became the primary means for actors to negotiate their place in the churning chaos. As a social system, Syria is now in severe equilibrium, with none of its internal or external actors certain of what the future holds for them or their interests. The war in Syria will continue for years, probably through many stages, until the social system until key actors consent to a new equilibrium that facilitates a return to ordinary politics.

The only two actors in Syria committed to such a victory are the Syrian regime and the amorphous set of groups committed to the regime's overthrow. This thesis suggests that restoring equilibrium in a fractured war requires growing a coalition of stakeholders who consent to the new equilibrium while fragmenting rival coalitions. At present, the Syrian regime is winning precisely because it follows this formula. Although the regime is likely not strong enough to restore the entire territory of Syria to equilibrium, it has a much stronger coalition than the badly fragmented opposition.

Syria also illustrates the importance of what I called “non-winning strategies” in Chapter 2. Nearly all outside actors are pursuing such strategies in Syria.

For American policymakers, Syria presents a very different strategic problem than Iraq. Following the invasion of Iraq, the US was effectively trapped in the social system and could not exit until Iraq was returned to equilibrium. Exiting during violent disequilibrium would have carried tremendous domestic political costs and damaged US prestige. What was frequently and erroneously disparaged as nation-building was really an effort to impose equilibrium on a fractious group of warring actors. As defined in this thesis, victory in fragmented wars always requires such a nation-building project.

In Syria, neither the US nor any other outside actor is bound by similar constraints. Outside actors can mostly satisfy their interests by skillful maneuvering within the disequilibrium of war. This approach to strategy acknowledges the unpredictability and nonlinearity of war amongst multiple agents. It is flexible and adaptive. It is less concerned with the broader “ends” of the war itself, which cannot be known in advance and

can only be partially influenced, than with the limited “ends” associated with protecting one’s interests. This more modest view of strategy might not be satisfactory to the American “can do” spirit and can do little to alleviate the tragedy facing the Syrian people, but it is realistic about the complexity of fragmented war and the limits of strategy in such an environment.

This chapter will briefly survey the key stakeholders in Syria and provide an overview of the conflict until now. Then it will examine the efforts of the Syrian regime and various opposition groups to achieve victory. Finally, it will examine the strategies of external actors.

### **Syria as a Complex System**

Mapping the social system of Syria is particularly challenging because the war interacts with so many other regional conflicts, but this section highlights some of the main stakeholders and their interests.

At the global level, the United States has three major interests in Syria: “limiting regional instability, containing Iran, and safeguarding chemical and biological weapons.”<sup>3</sup> Instability in the Middle East is bad for the world, because of both the contagion effect of violence and the risks to the global oil supply. The United States has long cozied up to dictators to ensure stability, especially given the political and military threats posed by Sunni Islamist groups. In Syria, that interests clashes with the need to contain Iran, a Shi’ite power and close ally of the Assad regime. Toppling Assad could deal a severe blow to Iran, but would risk creating a militant Sunni theocracy in Syria. Even as it deals with this sectarian power contest, the US seeks to prevent the use and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Some in the US also feel their country has a moral responsibility to alleviate the humanitarian tragedy unfolding in Syria, a position reflected in the

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<sup>3</sup> Iyengar, Radha, “The Conflict in Syria: An Assessment of US Strategic Interests,” The New America Foundation, March 2013, <http://bit.ly/1fyqQdG>.



Responsibility to Protect (R2P). To some degree, other Western countries share these interests.<sup>4</sup>

Russia and China seek to check Western power, and oppose violating any nation's sovereignty. They oppose nonconsensual humanitarian interventions, fearing such precedent could eventually be used against them. Russia also has interests in Syria such as protecting its naval station at Tartus and its investment in oil and natural gas.<sup>5</sup>

Although it is fragmented, al-Qa'eda remains a global actor with international ambitions. After its defeats in Afghanistan and Iraq and its decline of support among ordinary Muslims, al-Qa'eda sees Syria as a "key way to make inroads into the Arab Spring movement writ large and to attract a new generation of recruits."<sup>6</sup> Al-Qa'eda's emir Ayman Zawahari called upon "every Muslim and every free person in Turkey, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon to go aid his brothers in Syria."<sup>7</sup> Although specific affiliates with local aims like Jebhat an-Nusra and ISIS will be discussed below, as a global organization, al-Qa'eda desires an end state in which apostate regimes are weakened and the seeds of an Islamic state can be planted.

Iran has both global and regional interests. At the global level, Iran is engaged in a competition with the United States, Israel, and other Western countries over its nuclear program and views Syria is a bulwark against these countries.<sup>8</sup> At a regional level, Iran supports Shi'a Muslims in their struggle against Sunnis and their Gulf backers. Assad's Alawite government, presiding as it does over a Sunni majority, contributes to Shi'ite strength. "Losing" Syria would be costly for Iranian interests.

Gulf states like Saudi Arabia and Qatar have interests nearly inverse to Iran's; they wish to ensure Sunni domination of the Middle East and limit Iranian, Shi'ite adventurism.<sup>9</sup> They are deeply concerned by the possibility of an Iranian nuclear weapon. The

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<sup>4</sup> For an extended treatment of US interests in Syria and how different end states might affect them, see Iyengar, "The Conflict in Syria."

<sup>5</sup> Iyengar, "The Conflict in Syria," 7.

<sup>6</sup> Iyengar, "The Conflict in Syria," 8.

<sup>7</sup> O'Bagy, Elizabeth, "Jihad in Syria," Institute for the Study of War, September, 2012, <http://bit.ly/11BRi2s>, 26.

<sup>8</sup> Iyengar, "The Conflict in Syria," 7.

<sup>9</sup> Iyengar, "The Conflict in Syria," 8.

Gulf states would stand to benefit if Assad's regime fell and both Iran and Hizballah were weakened, but at the same time, these states fear Sunni militant extremism. The Gulf states are not united, but are in competition for de facto leadership of the Sunni Arab world.

Over the past decade Turkey has also tried to assume a mantle of leadership in the Islamic world. For years Ankara saw Syria as "a key element in Turkish engagement and influence in the Middle East," but relations soured after the Syrian regime embraced violence.<sup>10</sup> Turkey has national interests in preventing Syrian Kurds from reigniting Kurdish insurgency in Turkey and in preventing violent spillovers from the Syrian war. However, there is also a prominent strain of domestic politics in Turkey's Syria policy. An increasingly authoritarian Erdogan is constantly searching for ways to use the Syrian war to bolster his party's legitimacy and popularity.

Lebanon is so complex that it can hardly be viewed as a unitary actor. The country endured a bloody 15-year civil war, which culminated in a "complex equilibrium—between Riyadh and Damascus; between Israel and the Arab world; between Syria's stabilising and disruptive role; between Christians and Muslims; and between Sunnis and Shiites."<sup>11</sup> Its sectarian complexity rivals Syria's, and its various sectarian groups have never reconciled their differences, so the fear of renewed conflict is omnipresent. Two major political coalitions dominate Lebanese politics today. The March 8<sup>th</sup> Coalition, dominated by Hizballah and its allies, views the Syrian war as a "potentially apocalyptic nightmare" because of its dependency on the Syrian regime and on Iran.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, the Sunni-dominated March 14<sup>th</sup> Coalition originally saw the Syrian war as "a golden opportunity to seek revenge against an antagonistic regime as well as a chance to challenge Hizballah's domestic hegemony."<sup>13</sup>

Jordan and Israel have fewer direct interests in Syria, and are primarily concerned with internal stability and border security. Jordan is a small and poor country with a fragile social contract and a latent Salafi-Jihadi threat, so mitigating the threat of violent

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<sup>10</sup> Iyengar, "The Conflict in Syria," 8.

<sup>11</sup> "A Precarious Balancing Act: Lebanon and the Syrian Conflict," The International Crisis Group, Nov 22, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1pUuL8Z>.

<sup>12</sup> "A Precarious Balancing Act," ICG, 1.

<sup>13</sup> "A Precarious Balancing Act," ICG, 1.

spillover is of paramount importance. Spillover is also a concern for Israel, a country that is much stronger but that is surrounded by enemies. Israel is less concerned with Syria itself than with actors like Hizballah, which benefit from the Syrian war and pose a direct threat to Israel.

Shi'ite-led Iraq reluctantly supports Assad, because a Sunni rebel victory would escalate the threat from Sunni Gulf powers as well as from al-Qa'eda.<sup>14</sup> Iraq is embroiled in a conflict with the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS), which fights in both Syria and Iraq and has entrenched itself in the Iraqi Sunni stronghold of Fallujah.<sup>15</sup>

Mapping the landscape of domestic actors in Syria is a challenge. In addition to the sheer number of actors and their constantly changing alliances, it is difficult to identify clear fault lines between rival groups. Syrian opposition members deny that this is a sectarian war. Although there are definite patterns and sectarian identities have hardened since the war began,<sup>16</sup> subgroups of Alawites, Sunnis, and Christians work for and against the government. Independent variables influencing this loyalty likely include not just sectarian identity but economic class, geography, ideology, and personal experience and relationships as well. One American aid coordinator emphasized that every town and every province in Syria is essentially fighting its own war.<sup>17</sup> A thorough taxonomy of actors must capture these local dynamics, but given the space limitations here, this section will consider a few overall trends.

The most readily identifiable actor within Syria is the Assad regime itself, which is simply trying to survive—even it means burning down the rest of the country. Despite the scale of the uprising, the Syrian government still includes a wide range of actors within its coalition. Alawites form its support base, and many have chosen to maintain their

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<sup>14</sup> "Syria: the view from Iraq," European Council on Foreign Relations, 14 Jun 13, <http://bit.ly/1n8K9Km>.

<sup>15</sup> Sly, Liz. "Al-Qaeda-linked force captures Fallujah amid rise in violence in Iraq," The Washington Post, Jan 3, 2014, <http://wapo.st/PVt7Dl>.

<sup>16</sup> Al Jazeera Staff, "Q&A: Nir Rosen on daily life in Syria," [aljazeera.com](http://aje.me/1kuijFP), Feb 20, 2012, <http://aje.me/1kuijFP>.

<sup>17</sup> Sasha Ghosh-Siminoff, President of People Demand Change, LLP, interviewed by author in Gaziantep, Turkey, April 12, 2014

loyalty because they have no other benefactor.<sup>18</sup> They remember their persecution and poverty under Sunni leadership,<sup>19</sup> and wealthy Alawites benefit from their connections to the Assads. That does not mean Alawites are happy with the regime; many poor Alawites have been overlooked by regime elites, and poor Alawites fight in the bloody front lines of Assad's army.<sup>20</sup> Despite these frustrations, Alawites largely see the regime as better than the alternatives, and the Syrian Army has become what Syria expert Joshua Landis describes as "an Alawite militia."<sup>21</sup> There have been almost no senior Alawite defections, and fear of retribution by rebels now binds most Alawites to the regime.<sup>22</sup> In addition to Alawites, Christians have largely stood with the regime as the lesser evil. They have seen what happened to their fellow Christians in Egypt and Iraq at the hands of Sunni extremists, and fear a similar fate if the rebels win.<sup>23</sup>

Although the rebellion is largely a Sunni affair, some Sunnis have stood with the regime. Syria has a wealthy Sunni business class, and many Sunnis benefit from state or military employment or Ba'ath party membership. Some moderate Sunnis also fear the extremism among many opposition groups.<sup>24</sup> Some public Sunni religious figures have stood with the regime, such as Mufti Ahmad Hassoun and Sheikh Said Ramadan al-Butti.<sup>25</sup>

The Syrian regime and its allies manifest their power in the form of the army and security services. They have also created an array of supporting actors such as the "shabiha" militias and the National Defense Force (NDF) paramilitary group. The shabiha are gangs of pro-regime thugs, largely recruited from criminals, which the regime allegedly created in 2011 to do its dirty work of terrorizing protestors while giving it plausible de-

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<sup>18</sup> Hashem, Akil, "Former Syrian General Akil hashes on the Uprising in Syria," *Foreign Affairs*, Apr 16, 2012, <http://fam.ag/PVtiyy>.

<sup>19</sup> "A Precarious Balancing Act," ICG, 9.

<sup>20</sup> "Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VII): The Syrian Regime's Slow-motion Suicide," *The International Crisis Group*, Jul 13, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1iEVH8G>, 1.

<sup>21</sup> Lund, Aron, "Syria's Salafi Insurgents: The Rise of the Syrian Islamic Front," *The Swedish Institute of International Affairs*, March, 2013, 9.

<sup>22</sup> Hokayem, Emile, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant* (Abingdon, VA: Routledge, 2013), 48.

<sup>23</sup> Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising*, 48.

<sup>24</sup> Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising*, 50.

<sup>25</sup> Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising*, 51-52.

niability.<sup>26</sup> The NDF is a formal auxiliary force paid and commanded directly by the regime.<sup>27</sup> The regime has deliberately decentralized its fighting power into a loose network of armed groups, which has been helpful in the short term but might cause difficulties later.

Unlike the Syrian regime, the opposition was never represented by a unified actor. It formed spontaneously at the grassroots, in towns and villages across Syria. The opposition is largely comprised of Sunnis,<sup>28</sup> although its sectarian identity is not absolute, and it includes some Alawites, Christians, and other minorities. In the earliest days of the uprising, protestors gathered in the streets and square of Syria without any formal organization. Since then, they have made numerous efforts to create unified, legitimate, representative organizations. These efforts have largely failed. Today the opposition remains highly fragmented.

The most ambitious effort to create a unified fighting force was the formation of the Free Syrian Army in 2011, but this entity no longer exists. The term “Free Syrian Army” is now used as a generic label for the constellation of armed groups seeking the overthrow of the regime. Most FSA groups are independent, although they come together in complex and constantly-shifting alliances to fight the regime. Although most of these units fight for the regime’s downfall rather than ideology, they often form tactical alliances with Islamist groups like Jebhat an-Nusra.<sup>29</sup> The US has supported the establishment of a Supreme Military Command Council (SMC) as an umbrella organization for FSA groups, but the group is dysfunctional and plagued by infighting.<sup>30</sup>

Although many Islamist groups exist in the opposition, Jebhat an-Nusra is noteworthy both for its fighting prowess and for being the official representative of al-Qa’eda in the country. JN prefers to work independently of FSA units that do not fight for Islam-

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<sup>26</sup> Amor, Salwa, “How Bashar al-Assad created the feared shabiha militia: an insider speaks,” The Telegraph, March 23, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1eHblPS>.

<sup>27</sup> Dagher, Sam, “Syria’s Alawite Force Turned Tide for Assad,” The Wall Street Journal, August 26, 2013, <http://on.wsj.com/1i1liBp>.

<sup>28</sup> Lund, “Syria’s Salafi Insurgents,” 9 and Rosen, Nir, “Syria The revolution will be weaponised,” aljazeera.com, Sep 23, 2011, <http://aje.me/1mj4kUL>.

<sup>29</sup> Roggio, Bill, “Al Nusrah Front, Free Syrian Army launch joint operation,” The Long War Journal, Mar 14, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1kzdqgp>.

<sup>30</sup> Ben Hubbard and Karam Shoumali, “Top Military Body Against Syria’s Assad Is in Chaos, Undermining Fight,” New York Times, Feb 23, 2014, <http://nyti.ms/1gPyK0y>.

ic ideology, but many other rebel groups claim affiliation with JN because of its combat capability.<sup>31</sup> Although JN seeks to establish an Islamic state in Syria, it is downplaying these ambitions for now, preferring to focus for the time being on the common goal of toppling Assad.

A relatively new umbrella group in Syria is the Islamic Front, a coalition of Islamist militias not belonging to JN, some of which previously participated in the SMC. The Front is one of the strongest actors in Syria, although it has been mired in fighting with ISIS and has internal rivalries of its own.<sup>32</sup>

The Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS, also known as ISIL) operates in both Syria and Iraq. Its eventual ambition is create one global Islamic state, and the wars in these two countries “have given it an opportunity to attempt to build a proto-state in the adjacent Sunni-majority areas.”<sup>33</sup> ISIS does not need to control all of Syria or Iraq to achieve this ambition. It currently controls parts of eastern Syria and Fallujah in Iraq, and recent reports suggest it is expanding towards Baghdad.<sup>34</sup> With its split from Jebhat an-Nusra, ISIS is also in competition with JN and other organizations for leadership among jihadists. ISIS has been one of the most problematic actors in Syria, both because of its violent extremism and its open warfare with other rebel groups.

Other ethnic and religious minorities have tried to avoid taking sides. The small and vulnerable Druze community has been fence-sitting, relying on negotiated agreements with both the regime and the opposition for protection.<sup>35</sup> The Kurds, too, have tried to avoid picking sides. Unlike in Iraq, they are not concentrated in a geographically bounded territory, but are interspersed with Sunni and various minority communities.<sup>36</sup> While they would like to see the regime collapse,<sup>37</sup> they do not trust the Sunni-led oppo-

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<sup>31</sup> O’Bagy, “Jihad in Syria,” 36.

<sup>32</sup> Christopher M. Blanchard, Carla E. Humud, Mary Beth D. Nikitin, “Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and US Response,” Congressional Research Service, April 9, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1r4A9BB>.

<sup>33</sup> “What ISIS, an al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, really wants,” *The Economist*, Jan 20, 2014, <http://econ.st/1jmTD43>.

<sup>34</sup> Karim, Ammar, “ISIL jihadists open new front in Baghdad push,” *Yahoo News*, Apr 6, 2014, <http://yhoo.it/1pUxoYi>.

<sup>35</sup> Hokayem, *Syria’s Uprising*, 47.

<sup>36</sup> “Syria’s Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle,” *The International Crisis Group*, Jan 22, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1hiQqyl>, i.

<sup>37</sup> Rosen, “The revolution will be weaponized.”

sition. Ultimately, the Kurds look to their own interests while the war rages around them.<sup>38</sup>

### **History of the Conflict**

The Syrian uprising began in March 2011 in the unlikely city of Deraa just miles from the Jordanian border, when a group of schoolchildren—no doubt inspired by the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt—scrawled, “The people want the fall of the regime” on a wall. The regime arrested, beat, and tortured the children, and local authorities insulted and humiliated their family members when they sought their release. The children belonged to a cross-section of Deraa’s most important families, and over the ensuing weeks demonstrations erupted in more and more places. Syrian authorities cracked down with increasingly fierce violence, killing civilians during dispersal efforts and reportedly preventing ambulances from retrieving the injured.<sup>39</sup> While protestors had initially only wanted an “honorable solution and accountability,” the regime’s brutality led protestors to shift their goals to regime change.<sup>40</sup>

The regime cracked down even harder as protests spread throughout the country. On April 26, infantry, tanks, and snipers opened fire on civilians in Daraa and two other locations. The biggest atrocity of the uprising thus far came on August 5<sup>th</sup>, when Syrian security forces killed hundreds in an assault on Hama.<sup>41</sup> During this time period the Syrian regime made modest concessions, but they came too slowly to assuage the rising anger. Bashar al-Assad’s speeches were far from conciliatory; instead of seriously engaging with his opponents, he railed against a foreign conspiracy to destroy the country.

The early months of the uprising showed a remarkably disciplined adherence to nonviolence. Activists emphasized “the three no’s”: no to violence, sectarianism, and external intervention.<sup>42</sup> However, by summer the nonviolent discipline was beginning to

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<sup>38</sup> Hokayem, *Syria’s Uprising*, 47.

<sup>39</sup> MacLeod, Hugh, “Inside Deraa,” Al Jazeera English, Apr 10, 2011, <http://aje.me/1fn2j5o>.

<sup>40</sup> Hokayem, *Syria’s Uprising*, 42.

<sup>41</sup> Associated Press, “Syrian uprising timeline of key events,” Politico, Sep 4, 2013, <http://politi.co/1g3DQ4p>.

<sup>42</sup> Manna, Haytham, “Syria’s opposition has been led astray by violence,” The Guardian, Jun 22, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1j8LkZe>.

crack. The regime was simply too brutal and Syrian demonstrators felt an urgent need to defend themselves. In December 2011, defected Syrian officers and other opposition members began forming armed rebel factions under the umbrella of the Free Syrian Army.<sup>43</sup> These factions were badly splintered, but made repeated efforts to coordinate operations as the war drug on. In summer 2012 they began trying to coordinate efforts, and in December 2012 they formed a 30-member command structure called the Supreme Military Command (SMC).<sup>44</sup> The story of the Syrian opposition is one of disparate political and military groups struggling to achieve unity of effort against a militarily superior adversary. Although many protestors continued to emphasize demonstrations and nonviolent civic resistance, “by early 2012, the armed struggle became a defining, dominant and irreversible feature of the Syrian uprising.”<sup>45</sup>

The moment opposition groups chose violence, they were fighting symmetrically and were at a strategic disadvantage. This gave the regime an excuse to exercise even more violence, which in the fall of 2011 had not reached anywhere near its limits. In February 2012, on the eve of a crucial UN Security Council vote on a resolution calling for Assad to be removed, the regime launched a brutal campaign to retake opposition-held area in Homs. Hundreds were killed. Much to the beleaguered opposition’s dismay, Russia and China blocked the UN resolution. The bloody campaign in Homs “became a template for the military solution. From strict counter-insurgency it morphed into collective punishment and verged on a wholesale scorched earth policy.”<sup>46</sup> By April 2012, “Syrians from all walks of life [appeared] dumbfounded by the horrific levels of violence and hatred generated by the crisis.”<sup>47</sup>

The opposition was ill-equipped to engage in such total warfare. Defectors from the Syrian army were comparatively professional and well-trained,<sup>48</sup> but many other fighters belonged to simple village militias that had emerged out of the need for self-defense. The opposition had an urgent need for heavy weapons capable of challenging the

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<sup>43</sup> O’Bagy, Elizabeth, “The Free Syrian Army,” Institute for the Study of War, March, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1kukskM>.

<sup>44</sup> O’Bagy, “The Free Syrian Army.”

<sup>45</sup> Hokayem, *Syria’s Uprising*, 81.

<sup>46</sup> “Syria’s Mutating Conflict,” The International Crisis Group, Aug 1, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1rKG1QP>, 7.

<sup>47</sup> “Syria’s Phase of Radicalisation,” The International Crisis Group, Apr 10, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1kukHMO>.

<sup>48</sup> Rosen, “The revolution will be weaponised.”



regime's air force and armor, which led them to seek benefactors abroad. For some, the choice to militarize the opposition was a natural response to Libya, where the US and NATO were providing substantial airpower to Libyan rebels in their fight against dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi.<sup>49</sup> Many Syrians hopefully looked West, but Americans and Europeans recognized Syria presented a very different challenge than Libya. Syria's population was far larger than Libya's and had multiple sectarian groups, which did not bode well given the experiences of neighboring Lebanon and Iraq. Unlike Libya, opposition forces held no strategic territory and lacked substantial resources. The Syrian opposition was also badly divided, "with little unity or agreement on the use of violence as a means to an end, and discord about the potential role of foreign intervention."<sup>50</sup>

As disparate fighting groups sought funding and weapons from elsewhere, the opposition underwent a rapid process of apparent Islamization. Although most self-defense fighters were "socially and religiously conservative, they [did] not appear to consider themselves mujahedin or otherwise fit the stereotype of Islamic extremists."<sup>51</sup> However, as the country descended in a violent downward spiral in the first half of 2012, fundamentalist and extremist discourse became more common.<sup>52</sup> Gulf Arab states like Saudi Arabia and Qatar and private Gulf donors were the most forthcoming with military assistance, but this aid frequently came with strings attached. Syrian activists I spoke with told stories of Gulf donors requiring recipient groups to cover their women at demonstrations, adopt Islamist dress and discourse, and even wave the black-and-white flag adopted by extremist groups like al-Qa'eda.<sup>53</sup> The perils of war also stirred a very real sense of religiosity among some fighters, just as it does among Western soldiers. There are, as the saying goes, no atheists in foxholes.

Amidst these more moderate manifestations of Islamic identity, radical Islamist groups also took root in Syria. Foremost among these was Jebhat an-Nusra (JN; "the Vic-

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<sup>49</sup> Abu Omar, a senior coordinator of opposition activities told journalist Nir Rosen, "After Libya, many people said it was a mistake to have a peaceful revolution and if they had done it like the Libyans they would be free by now." Quoted in Rosen, "The revolution will be weaponised."

<sup>50</sup> Nerguizian, Aram, "Instability in Syria: Assessing the Risks of Military Intervention," Center for Strategic & International Studies, <http://bit.ly/1kukNEd>, 16.

<sup>51</sup> Rosen, "The revolution will be weaponised," Sep 23, 2011.

<sup>52</sup> ICG, "Syria's Mutating" Conflict, ii.

<sup>53</sup> Hind Kabawat, interview with author, April 9, 2014.

tory Front”), which was largely comprised of fighters from al-Qa’eda in Iraq (AQI). Syria had originally been a main channel of funding and support in its formative years, so it was not particularly difficult for AQI members to cross the border in Syria and undertake jihad.<sup>54</sup> Unlike the many other groups who fought the regime on a political basis and without ideological motivation, JN sought to create an Islamic state in liberated Syria.<sup>55</sup> The organization released its first video in January 2012, committing itself to “bringing the law of Allah back to His land.”<sup>56</sup> Despite its overt ideology, JN had learned in Iraq not to overreach; it toned down sectarianism and takfir (declaring other Muslims to be apostates) and sought a gradual implementation of shariah. This caution, coupled with JN’s rapid emergence as the opposition’s strongest fighting force, won the movement increasing support and loyalty from the Syrian opposition—especially since the desperately hoped-for Western intervention had failed to materialize. JN’s fighting prowess also contributed to other groups adopting Islamic dress and symbols who entered into alliances with the movement. All of these developments fed into Assad’s original narrative that he was fighting a foreign-sponsored, Islamist conspiracy.<sup>57</sup> They also eliminated any chance that Western governments would arm the opposition. In December 2012 the US Treasury Department officially designated JN an affiliate of al-Qaeda in Iraq.<sup>58</sup>

Despite the lack of foreign intervention, by late 2012 it appeared that Bashar al-Assad’s fall was simply a matter of time. The opposition was making steady gains across the country. Two developments reversed that trend. First, the Lebanese Shi’ite resistance group Hizballah openly entered the war on the side of Assad. These highly trained soldiers, who had a long history of backing by Iran, helped the regime recapture Qusayr, a critical town that set on the Lebanese-Syrian border and connected Damascus to the Ala-

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<sup>54</sup> Noman Benotman and Roisin Blake, “Jabhat al-Nusra: A Strategic Briefing,” The Quilliam Foundation, <http://bit.ly/1nOfYKW>, 2.

<sup>55</sup> Benotman and Blake, “Jebhat al-Nusra,” 1.

<sup>56</sup> Benotman and Blake, “Jebhat al-Nusra,” 3.

<sup>57</sup> “Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VII): The Syrian Regime’s Slow-Motion Suicide,” The International Crisis Group, Jul 13, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1pUyB22>, ii.

<sup>58</sup> Iyengar, “The Conflict in Syria,” 8.

wite-controlled coast.<sup>59</sup> By June 2013, the regime had become increasingly confident in its new gains.<sup>60</sup>

The other major development was the rise of a jihadist organization even more fearsome than Jebhat an-Nusra: the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS). JN's rapid gains in Syria gave AQI's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi enough confidence to announce that the two groups "were one and the same." AQI had already rebranded itself as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), but now amended that to the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS). This set off a confusing power struggle with JN's leadership, and in the confusion, many JN fighters joined ISIS.<sup>61</sup> As ISIS rapidly gained ascendancy in Syria, the political battle with JN became violent. Al-Qa'eda formally renounced ties with ISIS in February 2014, leaving JN as the sole representative of al-Qa'eda in Syria. ISIS's violent excesses and harsh imposition of shariah law alienated Syrians throughout the country, provoking a backlash not unlike that in Iraq against AQI.<sup>62</sup> More moderate opposition groups are now fighting alongside JN against ISIS. However, this development has forced the weak and fragmented Syrian opposition to fight a two-front war against both the regime and ISIS.

Many Syrian opposition leaders believe the regime is actively colluding with ISIS to dissuade Western intervention, keep the opposition fragmented, and cement support for Assad. Opposition activists claim the regime released jihadis from its prisons to radicalize the opposition, and that the regime leaves ISIS targets untouched so ISIS can prosecute its war against other rebels. Syrian activists told me of several occasions in which Syrian air force aircraft have launched numerous air strikes against rebel targets while leaving nearby ISIS targets untouched.<sup>63</sup> Some analysts are skeptical of this narrative, claiming there is no "smoking gun" and that reports of collusion are "thus far empirically

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<sup>59</sup> "It displayed more sophisticated military tactics and incorporated Hezbollah fighters in its recent campaign to reclaim the strategically important town of Qusayr (alt.sp. Qusair) located six miles from the Lebanese-Syrian border. Qusayr is at a crossroads linking Damascus to the Alawite-controlled Mediterranean coast." Blanchard, Humud and Nikitin, "Armed Conflict in Syria," 3.

<sup>60</sup> Blanchard, Humud and Nikitin, "Armed Conflict in Syria," 2.

<sup>61</sup> Zelin, Aaron Y., "Al-Qa'eda in Syria: A Closer Look at ISIS (Part I)," Sep 10, 2013, The Washington Institute, <http://bit.ly/1fyw9d2>.

<sup>62</sup> Sly, Liz, "Al-Qaeda disavows any ties with radical Islamist ISIS group in Syria, Iraq," The Washington Post, Feb 3, 2014, <http://wapo.st/1i3NPYA>.

<sup>63</sup> Hind Kabawat, interview with author, 13 April, 2014.

unsubstantiated.”<sup>64</sup> However, even if there is not active collaboration, these analysts acknowledge the regime is largely benefiting from ISIS’s presence.

At the time of this writing in April 2014, the regime is steadily regaining its hold on the major cities of Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo. It has retaken the most important Lebanese border towns and is consolidating its control over the predominantly Alawite coastal region. The opposition remains badly fragmented and dispirited. Journalist Nir Rosen writes of being “stunned by their lack of motivation and the malaise that had set in, with most armed men not fighting, but staying in their villages, or engaging in predatory activity.”<sup>65</sup> The war is geographically fragmented, with each province and town essentially fighting its own war.<sup>66</sup> The regime has been capitalizing on this, brokering local ceasefires with weary opposition groups.

Bashar al-Assad is as belligerent and confident as ever. During the Geneva II peace talks in February 2014, the regime brazenly began a barrel bombing campaign in Aleppo, designated opposition delegates as terrorists, seized their assets, and arrested some of their family members.<sup>67</sup> Assad is no longer strong enough to regain control of his entire country; the political and geographic entity once called Syria now exists in name only. However, as Emile Hokayem wrote in February 2013, Assad can “afford to be the country’s strongest warlord as long as he benefits from foreign assistance, faces a divided opposition, and can blackmail his foreign foes into inaction.”<sup>68</sup> A year later, that still holds true. Former US Ambassador and envoy for Syria Robert Ford now believes Assad will stay in power through the “medium” term, although he will control no more than about a fourth of the country. The remainder “will be under the control of different armed elements or contested among different armed elements.”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Fishman, Brian, “With friends like these: Al Qaeda and the Assad Regime,” War on the Rocks, Jan 27, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1hYp80E>.

<sup>65</sup> Nir Rosen, private email to author, Mar 30, 2014.

<sup>66</sup> Sasha Ghosh-Siminoff, interviewed by author, Apr 14, 2014.

<sup>67</sup> Psaki, Jen, “Regime Actions Against Delegates to the Geneva Talks,” US State Department, Feb 26, 2014, <http://1.usa.gov/1hYF06L>.

<sup>68</sup> Hokayem, Emile. “No Surrender,” Foreign Policy, Jan 7 2013, <http://atfp.co/1kU2H3x>.

<sup>69</sup> Gordon, Michael R., “Ex-Envoy Sees Assad as Staying in Power,” The New York Times, Mar 20, 2014, <http://nyti.ms/1hiRMZV>.

Within these vague predictions, the violent renegotiation over Syria's future is still underway. With no end in sight, the conflict is likely to rage for years, further devastating both Syria and the region.

### **Regime strategy**

The Syrian regime's reaction to the initial uprisings was clumsy at best. Protestors in Deraa likely could have been pacified with an apology and minor concessions, but instead the regime insulted and humiliated them. From that point on, the regime was always one step behind. It refused to offer meaningful political concessions until protestors had escalated their demands and it became too late.<sup>70</sup> The regime arrogantly felt it could hold its ruling coalition together through fear and brutality, and rebuffed those who urged a more conciliatory approach.<sup>71</sup> Ironically, its sole means of dealing with instability—its security services—inflamed the opposition and drove it from peaceful protests to open warfare.<sup>72</sup>

Despite the regime's arrogance, incompetence, and appalling brutality, it has recently shown a shrewd sense of strategy. The regime is determined to win, which means retaining a minimally viable state in Alawite-majority areas near the Mediterranean coast. To achieve this end, the regime has been pursuing a strategy in line with that presented in Chapter 2: maintaining and growing a coalition of stakeholders willing to accept its terms, while sowing fragmentation among the opposition.

From the beginning of the conflict, the regime masterfully employed fear as an instrument to hold its existing coalition together. It has consistently voiced a narrative that it is at war with foreign-backed "terrorists"<sup>73</sup>, which was a falsehood in the beginning but in many ways has become a self-fulfilling prophecy. In a region where sectarian violence has caused so much bloodshed, the regime presented a dire choice between "preservation of Assad's rule or collective destruction" and "[frightened] Syrians into accepting its rule

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<sup>70</sup> "Syria's Mutating Conflict," ICG, i.

<sup>71</sup> Hind Kabawat, Syrian activist, interviewed by author in Istanbul, Turkey, April 9, 2014.

<sup>72</sup> "Syria's Mutating Conflict," ICG, 4.

<sup>73</sup> White, Jeffrey, "The Syrian Regime's Military Solution to the War," The Washington Institute, Dec 18, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1n3JyMA>.

as a lesser evil.”<sup>74</sup> It sold itself as the defender of the state and the only force that stood between minorities and a gruesome end at the hands of Sunni Muslim terrorists. The regime went to remarkable lengths to institutionalize this narrative. It even distributed materials for building defensive fortifications in Alawite areas, well before there was any sectarian threat, to stoke fear. State media spread “exaggerated and sometimes wholly imaginary stories of the protestors’ alleged sectarian barbarism.”<sup>75</sup> When opposition violence did begin to take on sectarian and religious dimensions, the regime capitalized on these events to reinforce its narrative. These tactics apparently worked, because Alawites, Christians, and other minorities have largely stood with the regime rather than face an uncertain future with Sunni Muslims in power.

The regime has also tacitly endorsed the criminalization of its own forces, which perhaps is calculated to buy short-term support.<sup>76</sup> Although this erosion of law and order will carry long term costs, it is in keeping with the regime’s strategy of sowing any amount of destruction to stay in power. High-level corruption ensures loyalty among the regime’s inner circle.<sup>77</sup>

The regime shows an impressive grasp of local dynamics, and has found creative ways to bind actors to its coalition while allowing them to pursue their local interests. It has given “local self-defense groups, recruited mostly from minorities . . . greater resources and responsibilities to police their areas.”<sup>78</sup> Armed Christians patrol their own neighborhoods in major cities like Aleppo, Damascus, Maaloula, and Homs. As for Shi-  
as, the regime has given them responsibilities around the Shia holy site of Sayyida Ze-  
inab.<sup>79</sup> Fighters from Hizballah have been fighting along their own Lebanese border, part-  
ly motivated by Sunni attacks into Lebanon. In 2013, the regime reversed long-standing  
policy by allowing residents of Aleppo to “serve their mandatory military service inside

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<sup>74</sup> “Uncharted Waters: Thinking Through Syria’s Dynamics,” The International Crisis Group, Nov 24, 2011, <http://bit.ly/R963Sq>, 6-7.

<sup>75</sup> “Uncharted Waters,” ICG, 2.

<sup>76</sup> “Syria’s Mutating Conflict,” ICG, 3.

<sup>77</sup> “Uncharted Waters,” ICG, 6.

<sup>78</sup> Hokayem, *Syria’s Uprising*, 52.

<sup>79</sup> Hokayem, *Syria’s Uprising*, 52.

the city itself, and optionally with a loyalist militia of their choice.”<sup>80</sup> The regime has also brought smugglers, racketeers, and other criminals into its coalition by condoning the rise of the fearsome shabiha gangs,<sup>81</sup> which find profit and social advancement in violence on the regime’s behalf.<sup>82</sup> This is coalition-building at its most nihilistic; Assad is doing whatever it takes to draw people to his side, but such destructive tactics will leave the regime “utterly bereft of the means to re-engage and normalise relations with entire swathes of society.”<sup>83</sup>

At the same time, the regime has used every tool at its disposal to fragment and destroy the opposition. Assad was never strong enough to defeat the opposition entirely, but he seemed to calculate that a holding action might buy enough time for the fragmented opposition to collapse.<sup>84</sup> One tool to accelerate that collapse is extreme brutality, employed against entire communities. The regime has relentlessly shelled residential areas with artillery and airstrikes and besieged entire urban districts where opposition forces are located. Such brutality has eroded the will of opposition fighters and exhausted many of their supporters. The regime has also sought to prevent any external support for opposition groups. Its narrative about opposition “terrorists” is partly intended for foreign audiences, and the regime may have even facilitated the radicalization of the opposition. A favorite talking point of opposition activists is that the regime released hundreds of jihadist fighters from its prisons to radicalize the opposition. More recently, Western intelligence agencies have stated that the Syrian regime is purchasing oil from ISIS and Jebhat an-Nusra, partly to strengthen jihadist ranks and convince Western powers that the opposition could not be trusted.<sup>85</sup> Some opposition activists also allege that the regime has been attacking moderate opposition targets, while leaving nearby jihadist targets unscathed.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Dark, Edward (pseudonym), “Pro-regime Sunni fighters in Aleppo defy sectarian narrative,” Al-Monitor, March 2014, <http://bit.ly/1dxwNGT>.

<sup>81</sup> Harriet Alexander and Ruth Sherlock, “The Shabiha: Inside Assad’s death squads,” The Telegraph, Jun 2, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1eGIPZB>.

<sup>82</sup> “Syria’s Mutating Conflict,” ICG, 6.

<sup>83</sup> “Syria’s Mutating Conflict,” ICG, 4.

<sup>84</sup> Hokayem, “No Surrender.”

<sup>85</sup> Sherlock, Ruth, “Syria’s Assad accused of boosting al-Qaeda with secret oil deals,” The Telegraph, Jan 20, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1gX4Rac>.

<sup>86</sup> Hind Kabawat, interview by author, April 9, 2014.

The regime has also created effective mechanisms for defection. While rebels have no love for Assad, many are exhausted by the violence and dissatisfied with extremism among opposition groups, and are now willing to accede to outcomes in which the regime survives. Since late 2013 the regime has capitalized on these trends by pairing brutal, coercive violence with the opportunity for local ceasefires and amnesties. The first came in Moadamiya, a Damascus suburb the regime had targeted with both chemical weapons attacks and starvation tactics. The regime has signed similar ceasefires in the suburbs of Barzeh, Yarmouk, Beit Sahm and Yalda, with discussions ongoing in other areas. Tellingly, a regime infamous for detaining, torturing, or executing opposition activists has now been letting them go if they “sign declarations admitting wrongdoing and pledging allegiance to the state.”<sup>87</sup>

The combination of coercive violence with an outstretched hand has been effective in peeling groups away from the rebellion, cumulatively shrinking their coalition and growing Assad’s. The regime has played up promises of “national reconciliation” and even appointed a Minister of Reconciliation to manage amnesties and defections.<sup>88</sup> Its narrative is that Syrian insurgents not serious political adversaries, but “simple, illiterate people who will be welcomed back like wayward children.”<sup>89</sup> The regime has also landed on a cynical but effective means of literally growing its coalition and shrinking the opposition’s: starving out opposition-controlled areas. Huge numbers of internally displaced persons are flowing into regime-controlled areas because “the dictator is the only reliable source of life-sustaining food.”<sup>90</sup>

These are risky tactics that could lead to a resurgence of violence in the future, but for now they have been successful. Since the dawn of the uprising, the defining feature of the opposition has been its fragmentation. The regime’s combination of violence and amnesties has contributed to this fragmentation, widening divides between those who wish

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<sup>87</sup> Morris, Loveday, “Syria brokering local cease-fires as US-backed talks falter,” The Washington Post, Feb 20, 2014, <http://wapo.st/Qndkh3>.

<sup>88</sup> Sherlock, Ruth, “Syria: disillusioned rebels drift back to take Assad amnesty,” The Telegraph, July 23, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1gZlz93>.

<sup>89</sup> Barnard, Anne, “Long a Survivor in Syria, a Dutch Priest is Slain,” The New York Times, Apr 7, 2014, <http://nyti.ms/1n8JH0Q>.

<sup>90</sup> Hudson, John, “Exclusive: U.N. Docs Expose Assad’s Starvation Campaign in Syria,” Foreign Policy, Apr 17, 2014, <http://atfp.co/1ix6Y9z>



to accept amnesty and those who wish to keep fighting.<sup>91</sup> One recent survey suggest that the Syrian population in opposition-held areas is far less committed to fighting than armed rebel groups.<sup>92</sup> In some cases, populations are weary and angry when rebel groups take control of their towns and villages because they know regime counterattacks will be unforgiving. By keeping the opposition so divided, the regime is adhering to its strategy of holding the line until the opposition collapses.

Although the regime appears to be far stronger than the opposition, it is not strong enough to return the country to equilibrium and is not foolish enough to try. Assad is now pursuing limited aims within the conflict system; he has focused on critical areas where his support base is the strongest, such as Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, and the highways and infrastructure supporting them.<sup>93</sup> If he can achieve a stable statelet there, he will probably be content to leave outlying areas to the forces of anarchy. This strategy seems to be succeeding. In April 2014 Hassan Nasrallah of Hizballah said, “the phase of bringing down the regime or bringing down the state is over.”<sup>94</sup>

### Opposition strategy

If the regime’s strategic challenge was holding together a coalition of stakeholders, the opposition’s challenge was building one from scratch. Its efforts to do so have been disastrous. The defining feature of the opposition is its fragmentation, which has hindered the capability for collective action, scared away potential external supporters, and led to strategic incoherence. As it stands now, the opposition has no chance of winning—that is, creating a new equilibrium in Syria favorable to its interests. The best it can achieve are limited ends, such as preventing an outright regime victory or holding limited amounts of territory, but even these ends will be difficult to achieve if the opposition cannot overcome its fragmentation problem.

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<sup>91</sup> Barnard, Anne, “Long a Survivor in Syria, a Dutch Priest is Slain,” *The New York Times*, Apr 7, 2014, <http://nyti.ms/1n8JH0Q>

<sup>92</sup> McMichael, James, “Do Syrians Want to Fight Until Victory or Do They Want a Ceasefire?,” *Syria Comment*, March 26, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1qYfZt2>. Note that the survey is non-scientific and only includes 150 people, but more reliable polling is difficult in Syria at present.

<sup>93</sup> Hokayem, *Syria’s Uprising*, 59.

<sup>94</sup> AFP. “Hezbollah chief says danger to Syria regime over,” *Yahoo! News*, Apr 7, 2014, <http://yhoo.it/1kttUqP>.

This failure is not for lack of effort. From the very beginning, opposition activists recognized the need for greater cooperation. In April 2011 they created Local Coordination Committees to coordinate protests and “[ensure] that slogans were consistent and forward-looking.”<sup>95</sup> With time, other coordinating groups like the Syrian Revolution General Commission and Higher Council of the Syrian Revolution emerged.<sup>96</sup> The militarization of the conflict marginalized these groups in favor of better-resourced military organizations like the Free Syrian Army, but the chaotic environment gave birth to multiple organizations with different foreign backers.<sup>97</sup> In summer of 2011 the Syrian National Council (SNC) was born, with Turkish and Qatari support, but the strong presence of Muslim Brotherhood leaders and lack of Kurdish, Alawite, Druze, and Christian representation alienated many people. In October 2012 the United States announced “the SNC can no longer be viewed as the visible leader of the opposition” and shifted support to a new National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, or the National Coalition (NC).<sup>98</sup> The competition for political representation mirrored a similar competition underway among fighting groups. From early 2012 Qatar, the US and other external powers supported regional military councils,<sup>99</sup> which later joined together under the umbrella of the Supreme Joint Military Command Council, or Supreme Military Command (SMC).<sup>100</sup> Meanwhile, Islamist groups have united beneath umbrellas like the Syria Liberation Front.<sup>101</sup> Despite all this activity, no group has managed to exercise leadership over the opposition. Coalitions collapse as fast as they are born.

Several problems have plagued the opposition. First, they lack a unified vision of the future. All that unites the opposition is a hatred of the Assad regime,<sup>102</sup> and according to one poll, more rebels are fighting for vengeance against Assad than for their groups’

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<sup>95</sup> Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising*, 69.

<sup>96</sup> Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising*, 69-7.

<sup>97</sup> Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising*, 70-71.

<sup>98</sup> Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising*, 75-76.

<sup>99</sup> Upaper, Syria's Salafi, 12.

<sup>100</sup> O'Bagy, Elizabeth, “The Free Syrian Army,” The Institute for the Study of War, March 2013, <http://bit.ly/1gyttHb>.

<sup>101</sup> Lund, “Syria's Salafi Insurgents,” 11.

<sup>102</sup> Cordesman, Antony, “Syria: Search for the Least Bad Option,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, Apr 3, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1jmQxgy>.

goals.<sup>103</sup> Some groups fight for a secular democratic state, others fight to create an Islamic state within Syria, and still others hope to use Syria as a base to establish a global caliphate. Second, most groups are severely under-resourced and lack both the sticks and the carrots to draw other actors into broader coalitions. Opposition groups face a chicken-and-egg problem; foreign donors hold off granting groups like the SNC and NC resources and full recognition until they “[demonstrate] credibility and competence,” but groups cannot do so without resources.<sup>104</sup> The challenge is especially acute because Syrians are emerging from an undemocratic, corrupt society with weak institutions.<sup>105</sup> Third, actors are geographically dispersed within both Syria and neighboring countries and face severe coordination problems. Foreign countries have primarily worked with opposition groups based in Istanbul, but opposition fighters on the ground or border areas have little use for what they see as detached, wealthy exiles living in opulent hotels.<sup>106</sup> These elites, on the other hand, have made little effort to reach out to opposition groups within Syria.<sup>107</sup> Fourth, external donors are not coordinated and have been working at cross-purposes. During interviews, numerous Syrian activists criticized the bitter rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, who have been funding rival opposition groups and even rival candidates within opposition groups like the NC.<sup>108</sup> To further complicate the picture, many fighting groups receive arms and support from wealthy private donors in the Gulf.

Few opposition leaders have shown much grasp of political strategy. Despite their fragmentation, they are waging a duel against Assad, with little thought for what comes after his defeat. In interviews, Syrian activists repeatedly told me that if they could just topple the regime, the future of Syria would take care of itself. “We are not Iraq,” was a constant refrain. Their focus was overwhelmingly on arms. They asked for “surgical” airstrikes, no-fly zones, heavy weapons, and other military instruments to help them win the

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<sup>103</sup> McMichael, James, “Do Syrians Want to Fight Until Victory or Do They Want a Ceasefire?,” Syria Comment, Mar 26, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1qYfZt2>.

<sup>104</sup> Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising*, 72-73, 77.

<sup>105</sup> Cordesman, “Search for the Least Bad Option.”

<sup>106</sup> In Arabic, the words for “hotels” and “trenches” rhyme (kha-NA-diq and fa-NA-diq). This has led to numerous chants and commentaries about the divide between exiled and internal opposition groups, i.e. “We need revolution in the trenches, not the hotels.”

<sup>107</sup> Sayigh, Yezid, “The Syrian Opposition’s Leadership Problem,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Apr 3, 2013, 4.

<sup>108</sup> Oweis, Khaled Yacoub, “Qatar-backed bloc says to rejoin Syrian opposition coalition,” Reuters, Mar 9, 2014, <http://reut.rs/1gZzY56>.

duel. In the absence of strategy, many opposition groups are focused on tactical victories and local political successes. One militia commander from Manbij boasted of his success providing security, local governance, and a sustainable economy in the town, a success which drew international press.<sup>109</sup> He expressed outrage that the West did not capitalize on his experiment, and felt personally betrayed when ISIS captured Manbij and killed most of his fighters in 2013.<sup>110</sup> What makes Syria so alarming is that dozens if not hundreds of similar commanders are simultaneously engaged in these small, localized experiments, with little consideration for aggregating them into a larger strategic whole. Rebel groups have sometimes shown an impressive ability to coordinate, but only at the tactical and operational levels.<sup>111</sup>

If the opposition has struggled to hold its coalition together, it has been even less successful in fragmenting the regime's coalition. Defection is almost impossible, because the regime's supporters are so frightened of their fate should the rebels win. According to former US Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford, one of the chief shortcomings of the opposition has been its failure to reassure minorities. He said the opposition "has been very unsuccessful at explaining an agenda that would not threaten the communities that are the pillars of support for the regime, first and foremost the Alawite community."<sup>112</sup> Some opposition activists, such as Sheikh Adnan al Arur, have called for the punishment of active regime supporters in the future.<sup>113</sup>

While the regime is enticing opposition fighters with offers of amnesty, many opposition leaders speak of justice and even retribution. In a panel discussion I attended, someone asked former National Coalition Prime Minister Ghassan Hitto about transitional justice and the tension between justice and peace. He said Syria needs transitional justice, but "all criminals should be held accountable for their crimes... from Assad on

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<sup>109</sup> "Manbij, A Success Story in the Liberated Areas," The Syrian Observer, Jan 22, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1kXoDdP>.

<sup>110</sup> Abu Ma'an (pseudonym), lecture to George Mason University student research group (including author) in Istanbul, Turkey, April 10, 2014.

<sup>111</sup> Nassief, Isabel, "The Campaign for Homs and Aleppo," Institute for the Study of War, January 2014, <http://bit.ly/1mj7fN5>, 10.

<sup>112</sup> Gordon, Michael R., "Ex-Envoy Sees Assad as Staying in Power," New York Times, Mar 20, 2014, <http://nyti.ms/1t1YBHz>.

<sup>113</sup> Rosen, Nir, "Assad's Alawites: The guardians of the throne," Al Jazeera English, Oct 10, 2011, <http://aje.me/1kumO3f>, 1.

down.”<sup>114</sup> His absolutism stands in stark contrast transitional justice programs in countries like South Africa, and has echoes of de-Ba’athification. Hitto became visibly upset when asked about reassurances for ethnic and religious minorities who stood with the regime. There was too much emphasis on minorities, he said. “That’s the wrong question... the question is, who is going to protect the majority from the Allawi minority that has been oppressing this majority for the last fifty years?”<sup>115</sup> While many Syrian activists discussed transitional justice in interviews, they felt it was too soon to flesh out such programs; crimes were still being committed, and they needed to defeat the regime before they could speak of transitional justice and reconciliation. While their raw emotions are understandable, their position makes defection unattractive and possibly even impossible for regime supporters. To date, nearly all defections to the opposition have come from Sunnis, and many of these were “retired or marginal players.”<sup>116</sup> They have also come from the ethnically mixed army and not from the Alawite-majority security services.<sup>117</sup>

In the absence of a coherent strategy, the Syrian opposition has become despondent. According to one reporter within Syria, many opposition groups have largely stopped fighting offensive battles and some have even turned to crime or other predatory behavior.<sup>118</sup> Islamist groups are now doing most of the fighting, although much of their hostility is directed towards one another. Meanwhile, Syrian activists look West for a *deus ex machina* that can save them. Nearly every interview among Syrian activists in Turkey included pleas for the West to “do something,” although nobody could articulate precisely what that “something” should be.

### **External strategy**

External actors are playing a variety of roles within Syria. Although many of these actors have definite preferences for how the conflict ends, most actors recognize

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<sup>114</sup> Ghassan Hitto, former Prime Minister of the Syrian National Coalition, panel discussion in Istanbul, Turkey, April 9, 2014.

<sup>115</sup> Ghassan Hitto, panel discussion.

<sup>116</sup> Hokayem, *Syria’s Uprising*, 60.

<sup>117</sup> Rosen, “The revolution will be weaponised.”

<sup>118</sup> Nir Rosen, email to author,, April 8, 2014.

they will have only limited influence over its outcome. That has led most actors to seek limited ends or hedge on multiple possible futures.

No outside actor has more at stake in Syria than Iran, which has few regional allies and depends on the Assad regime to project power into the Levant. Iran would like the Assad regime to win the conflict, but is realistic about the unpredictability of the future. Its policy has been to hedge; it is using various instruments of power to support Assad against rebel forces, while cultivating relationships with non-state actors to preserve freedom of maneuver in Syria if Assad should fall.<sup>119</sup> Iran has deployed members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Quds Force to train, equip, and fight alongside regime forces, and to support pro-regime militias.<sup>120</sup> Along with Iraq, Iran has also pledged billions of dollars to Syria and exempted Syrian goods from steep import duties.<sup>121</sup> Iranian support has been crucial to the regime, and at present it appears the regime will remaining power. However, the Iranians have been cautious not to overreach by trying to impose an end state over the entirety of the country. While they continue to support the regime's campaign to recapture Syria, they seem comfortable working within a contested environment so long as their vital interests are preserved.

Hizballah also has vital interests at stake in Syria, and has shown more commitment than any other outside actor. Although Hizballah is both smaller and less powerful than Iran, it has gambled its entire future on the intervention. Hizballah has entered the war on the regime's side, training fighters in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley<sup>122</sup> and helping the regime secure crucial victories over opposition strongholds.<sup>123</sup> It is now in an open-ended commitment that will last as long as Syria is at war, but Hizballah considers the commitment worthwhile because of the existential stakes. Hizballah's leader Hassan Nasral-

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<sup>119</sup> Wil Fulton, Joseph Holiday, and Sam Wyer, "Iranian Strategy in Syria," American Enterprise Institute and Institute for the Study of War, May 2013, <http://bit.ly/11FdGM0>, 6.

<sup>120</sup> Fulton, Holliday and Wyer, "Iranian Strategy in Syria," 9.

<sup>121</sup> "Nir Rosen on daily life in Syria," Al Jazeera English.

<sup>122</sup> O'Bagy, "Jihad in Syria," 20.

<sup>123</sup> Chulov, Martin, "Syrian town of Qusair falls to Hezbollah in breakthrough for Assad," The Guardian, Jun 5, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1fyCEw>.

lah seems smug about his involvement so far, saying Hizballah's only mistake was being "late to enter Syria."<sup>124</sup>

Neighboring states, on the other hand, are managing the impact of the war rather than trying to end it. Lebanon and Jordan have absorbed huge refugee flows, straining their economies and fueling social tensions. Even as Hizballah runs rampant in Syria, the Lebanese government has remained focused inward on sectarian tensions and fighting near the border. Jordan has fortified its own border and, in partnership with the US and other countries, provided training and limited assistance to rebels. Like the United States, Jordan wants the Assad regime gone but fears a victory by Islamist rebels. It has played a quiet, cautious role, responding to events rather than attempting to dictate them.<sup>125</sup> With US assistance, Jordan provides training to some Free Syrian Army members, and some allege that Jordan serves as a conduit for the flow of weapons into Syria, but Jordan denies these claims.<sup>126</sup> Israel has also kept quiet, intervening only on limited occasions to retaliate for direct attacks<sup>127</sup> or to destroy alleged arms convoys that might pose a military threat.<sup>128</sup> Iraq has pursued a two-track policy of calling for a negotiated settlement in Syria, while tacitly supporting a flow of Shia fighters into the country.<sup>129</sup>

Turkey's strategy has changed over time. The outbreak of the Syrian uprising put an end to its failing "zero problems" policy, leading it to seek regime change in Syria and the installation of a Muslim Brotherhood-dominated government. Turkey learned the hard way that it had limited ability to influence the final outcome in Syria, especially when the United States refused calls for military intervention. Turkey can do little now except respond to events and manage the humanitarian fallout, and Prime Minister

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<sup>124</sup> Rizk, Ali, "Measuring the Success of Hezbollah's strategy in Syria," The Arab Daily News, Apr 12, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1gBT2KI>.

<sup>125</sup> Mahmoud, Khaled Waleed, "Where does Jordan stand on the Syrian Crisis?," Middle East Monitor, Sep 16, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1eNVUWB>.

<sup>126</sup> Blanchard, Humud, and Nikitin, "Armed Conflict in Syria," 6.

<sup>127</sup> "Israel bombs Syria's Golan after blast," Al Jazeera, Mar 19, 2014, <http://aje.me/RuFU1e>.

<sup>128</sup> Ronen, Gil, "Report: Israel Bombs Another Syrian Weapons Convoy," Arutz Shiva Israel National News, Jul 28, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1h9wxsw>.

<sup>129</sup> "Syria: the view from Iraq," European Council on Foreign Relations, 14 Jun 13, <http://bit.ly/1n8K9Km>.

Erdoğan seems more concerned about using the war for domestic political benefit than for ending it.<sup>130</sup>

For the Gulf states, the war is less about Syria than about their contest with an ascendant Iran. The Gulf states are frightened by destabilizing Shiite activism, Iranian meddling across the region, and the prospect of an Iranian nuclear weapon. Both Qatar and Saudi Arabia both want regime change and have led the way in giving military support to rebels, but they support different strategies and different groups, which has contributed to fragmentation and prevented the emergence of a unified rebel movement. The Saudis are wary of many Islamist groups,<sup>131</sup> while the Qataris are actively supporting them.<sup>132</sup> Gulf countries are committed to toppling the Assad regime and have pressured the United States to intervene, but Obama's refusal to do so has thrown this strategy into question. US diplomatic engagement has further undermined the Gulf strategy. Saudi Arabia's strategy in particular is breaking down, as the kingdom searches for acceptable proxies in an increasingly radicalized and fragmented Syrian landscape.<sup>133</sup> The Saudis are learning the hard way how difficult it is to determine the outcome of a fragmented war.

Russia has provided limited assistance to the Assad regime<sup>134</sup> and advocates a negotiated settlement, putting the onus on opposition members "to lay down their arms and join an ill-defined 'dialogue.'"<sup>135</sup> Russia and China apparently can live with the Syrian disequilibrium; their greatest concern appears to be preventing a forceful Western effort to violate Syria's sovereignty, impose a solution, and set a precedent that might threaten their own sovereignty in the future.

Chastened by its experiences trying to dictate outcomes in Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States has refrained from military intervention in Syria. Although it initially

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<sup>130</sup> In March 2014, unverified recordings surfaced of Erdoğan and cabinet members discussing how they could stage an attack in Syria to provoke military intervention. That same month, Turkey also shot down a Syrian fighter aircraft on the eve of local elections.

<sup>131</sup> Weinberg, David Andrew, "Saudi Strategy in Syria," Foundation for Defense of Democracies, Sep 19, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1eXkNJY>.

<sup>132</sup> Weinberg, "Qatar's Strategy in Syria."

<sup>133</sup> Stratfor, "Saudi Arabia Overhauls Its Strategy for Syria," Irga.com: Indian Review of Global Affairs, Feb 28, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1j7C3gE>.

<sup>134</sup> Although Russia is often perceived as a close ally of Assad, it has been distancing itself from the regime since 2012. Katz, Mark N., "Russia and the Conflict in Syria: Four Myths," Middle East Policy Council, Summer 2013, <http://bit.ly/11FdZX8>.

<sup>135</sup> "Syria's Phase of Radicalisation," ICG, 1.



hoped for a moderate rebel victory over Assad, time has shown this hope to be in vain. Many US policymakers believe the US does not have vital interests at stake in Syria, and favor a policy of managing US interests across the region rather than trying to shape the course of the war. Unfortunately, the US has conflicting interests in both Syria and the region, forcing decision-makers to make difficult tradeoffs.<sup>136</sup> The US would like to weaken Iran and its allies by toppling the Assad regime, but fears the consequences of a Sunni Islamist victory. It would also like to rid Syria of chemical weapons, and has been trying to do so in the wake of a Russian-brokered deal in August 2013, but its ability to punish noncompliance is limited. Meanwhile, the US has tried to support neighboring countries like Jordan and prevent the conflict from spreading. The US also recognizes the moral and practical concerns of the humanitarian catastrophe, and has been a generous provider of aid.<sup>137</sup> However, all of this falls well short of the muscular, activist foreign policy practiced by the US in previous conflicts. The relative inaction has been a bitter pill for many to swallow; many see “moral depravity” in the US policy towards Syria and believe the United States has a moral responsibility to solve the crisis.<sup>138</sup>

### **Recommendations**

Given the competing agendas and the inability of any actor to dictate an outcome, equilibrium is nowhere in sight. What should US policymakers do as they look to the future?

First, the US must be absolutely clear about the costs of full-scale intervention, especially given domestic political pressure for Washington to “do something.” The decisive use of American force could certainly remove the Assad regime from power, but this would not resolve the violent bargaining process underway; it would only advance it to the next stage. A mosaic of armed actors would continue to pursue their agendas through violence, and external powers would almost surely work against whatever outcome the US tried to establish.

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<sup>136</sup> Iyengar, “The Conflict in Syria,” 3.

<sup>137</sup> Blanchard, Humud, and Nikitin, “Armed Conflict in Syria.”

<sup>138</sup> For example see Rubin, Jennifer, “The moral depravity of our Syria policy,” The Washington Post, Apr 14, 2014, <http://wapo.st/1gMcUuM>.

Given the impossibility of shaping the Syrian outcome, the US will be better served by non-winning strategies in pursuit of limited ends. This does not mean doing nothing, which carries tremendous costs of its own; as things stand, the humanitarian crisis and the rise of extremist groups like JN and ISIS both pose threats to US interests in the region. The US cannot ignore these issues. Fortunately, the US can undertake many activities to protect its interests and lay the foundation for an eventual peace. These include mitigating instability by providing humanitarian aid, and containing the conflict by supporting neighboring countries like Jordan and Turkey, activities the US is already engaged in.

More critically, external powers have a role in helping along the coalition-building process. This is admittedly a difficult project, and the US has not had much success so far. However, the work is too critical to abandon. Many analysts now believe the Syrian conflict will only end with a negotiated settlement, but such an outcome will require the formation of a credible opposition coalition that can negotiate on behalf of the rebels. So long as the opposition remains fragmented, there will be no one to negotiate with the regime and no one will be able to enforce the terms of a settlement. The strengthening of an opposition coalition can also strengthen the bargaining position of rebels in negotiations. Coalition-building does not merely require working with rebel groups; it also requires working with other outside stakeholders who are working at cross-purposes. Healing the rift between Qatar and Saudi Arabia is especially crucial. Although ongoing negotiations between the US and Iran are precarious, progress on this front could also open the way for cooperation in Syria.

Even if the conflict seems intractable now, policymakers must not lose sight of the fact that time and exhaustion can change stakeholders' calculations about the range of outcomes they are willing to accept. Fatigue and changing facts on the ground can create new opportunities to build coalitions of stakeholders around possible equilibria, as demonstrated during the surge years in Iraq. Policymakers must be alert to similar opportunities in the chaos of Syria.

## Conclusions

The civil war in Syria shows fragmented conflict at its worst. This is an open-ended civil war with multiple renegotiations underway among numerous actors at multiple levels of analysis. Although there is a rough principle of polarity superimposed over all this violence, it is refracted through the local dynamics of fragmented warfare. The model presented in Chapter 2 offers one way of trying to make sense of what is happening in Syria. According to that model, violence will continue in Syria until key stakeholders consent to a new equilibrium.

Although the war in Syria is still underway, it has much to teach observers about fragmented war.

*Small acts of violence can tip a social system into war.* When the first protestors took the streets in Deraa in 2011, Syrians could not imagine—and certainly did not want—a bloody civil war that would devastate their country. Many Syrians had lost faith in ordinary politics as a mechanism for renegotiating their place in Syrian society, but they turned to nonviolent contentious politics as an alternative. The regime responded with brutality. Under such conditions maintaining nonviolent discipline was difficult, and by summer violence was begetting violence. As rebels took up arms to defend themselves and then fight the regime, the entire social system came apart. Many Syrians were reluctant fighters, but once the violent renegotiation of Syria's future was underway, they saw no choice except to take up arms. This is a cautionary tale about the fragility of social systems. While governments have an obligation to suppress insurgency and rebellion, they also have a responsibility to ensure their institutions are working and giving citizens channels to engage in peaceful politics. When a social system makes the transition to contentious politics, danger is especially high. Even small acts of violence can “cross the rubicon,” so to speak, setting off a violent escalation.

*It is impossible to win without a coalition.* Many Syrian rebels are convinced they are losing because the international community will not give them arms. That is only partly true. The rebels are losing because their “side” is so hopelessly fragmented that the international community sees no viable partner. To be fair, this is not purely the rebels’

fault. They began from nothing, and had to organize in a crucible of extreme violence, in a war-torn environment where cooperation and even communication are difficult. The international community is also badly divided. Conflicting agendas among outside sponsors like Qatar and Saudi Arabia, and the fragmentation of their foreign assistance, have actively contributed to the fragmentation of the opposition. If faced with a crisis like Syria in the future, outside actors must coordinate and cooperate from the outset to achieve unity of effort.

*Violence is a powerful tool for coalition-building.* Coalition-building is not always an activity for the doves. Bashar al-Assad's government exhibits coalition-building at its most cynical. Indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas, starvation campaigns, and collective punishment have led to local victories and ceasefires and the slow expansion of the government coalition. Even on the opposition side, fighting prowess appears to be a crucial variable in drawing support from other actors. For Jebhat an-Nusra, success begot success; smaller fighting groups flocked to join a movement that proved it could fight.

*Sticking with non-winning strategies is painful and difficult.* After the painful lessons of Afghanistan and Iraq, President Obama chose not to invest in a winning strategy in Syria. He and his supporters saw no vital American interests. They also believed the United States could not control the outcome in Syria, a belief this thesis strongly endorses. Instead of trying to re-stabilize the Syrian social system, the US embraced a non-winning strategy. It bolstered neighboring allies like Jordan and Turkey, became Syria's leading provider of humanitarian aid, trained and equipped select rebel groups, and tried to help strengthen and unify the Syrian opposition. Despite these activities, many Americans view President Obama's Syria policy as an unmitigated failure. President Obama's greatest success might be avoiding a new entanglement like Iraq, but that wins him few points when his critics can point to a humanitarian catastrophe, an ailing opposition, the rise of al-Qa'eda-affiliated movements in Syria, and the harsh criticism of allies. Obama's Syria policy illustrates the pain and difficulty of non-winning strategies. They might be the most strategically sound course of action in fragmented wars, but they satisfy almost nobody.

In recent weeks, evidence is mounting that the United States is shifting its policy on Syria. It has begun providing American anti-tank rockets to vetted Syrian groups, and the administration is discussing the possibility of even more military aid. At the time of this writing, it is unclear whether the Obama administration will stick to its non-winning Syria policy or will escalate in an attempt to control the outcome.



## Conclusion

The first chapter of this thesis argued that war is not a duel. The duel is a model designed to simplify and explain a more complex reality, but it relies on three assumptions: there are only two actors, they are unified, and they are of comparable types. The farther a war strays from these three assumptions, the less helpful the duel model. In some cases, adherence to the duel model can be dangerous and lead to misguided policy or strategy. The widespread presence of anomalies suggests a need to look past the assumptions of the duel model and consider alternative models of war.

Chapter 2 presented a model of war as a violent renegotiation among stakeholders in a complex social system. Actors continually renegotiate their place in the system using both nonviolent and violent means, but when violence engulfs a large part of a social system, a state of war exists. Wars only end when the system reaches a new state of dynamic equilibrium among actors, and a specific actor only wins if the new equilibrium is acceptable to its interests. This thesis hypothesized that attaining equilibrium requires building a coalition of stakeholders who consent to a new equilibrium, while working to dismantle rival coalitions. Force has utility if it contributes to this process, and external force can augment internal actors to accelerate the coalition-building process. The extraordinary difficulty of bringing complex social systems back into equilibrium means many actors do not try to win; instead, they pursue non-winning strategies for limited ends within the unfolding drama of war. In these cases, force has utility to the degree that it serves these limited policy aims.

Chapter 3 tested this model against the Iraq war from 2003 to the present. The United States willfully destabilized Iraq's social system, setting off a violent renegotiation over the future of both Iraq and the broader Middle East. The dichotomy between "war" and "post-war" was false; a violent bargaining process likely would have occurred, no matter how well the US had prepared or how many troops it had sent. As it was, the US and the fledgling Iraqi government spent years antagonizing potential stakeholders and allowing a rejectionist coalition to grow. This process finally began to reverse when

the government of Iraq integrated the Sons of Iraq, annihilated rejectionist actors like al-Qa'eda in Iraq, and compelled Muqtada al-Sadr to announce a unilateral ceasefire. By 2008 the government was strong enough to punish Muqtada al-Sadr's extortion and consolidate a monopoly on force. However, although the immediate conflict episode ended, tense bargaining continues even today and Iraq risks a lapse back into war.

Chapter 4 explored the conflict in Syria, where a fragile social compact unraveled from within. It is a highly fragmented war, with hundreds of armed groups acting more or less independently, and with intervention by numerous regional and global actors. Syria's strategic importance means this war is important not just for the country but for the entire Middle East, and it is already showing consequential linkages to both Iraq and Lebanon. While the opposition remains deeply fragmented, the regime has been slowly expanding its coalition through military victories, local ceasefires, and foreign support. However, it is not strong enough to regain control of the entire country, and the violent renegotiation over Syria is likely to continue for years.

Fragmented wars are hard. There is a reason so many US military officers are eager to put Afghanistan and Iraq behind them and to wash their hands of counterinsurgency. There is a reason they look back with nostalgia on the "good old days" of high-tech conventional war between industrial nation-states. The First Gulf War, for example, was a strategist's dream. It was as close to the duel model as a war could ever be: two unified, hierarchically organized adversaries facing each other down across open desert. The formula for victory was right out of the textbook: compel the adversary to do our will. The JP-1 strategies of annihilation and erosion were perfectly suited to the task. American policymakers were able to articulate a desired end state, unleash the US Armed Forces, and sit back and watch. At the war's end, the US was positioned to dictate terms at the end of hostilities. Although execution of the war was extraordinarily complex, the basic strategy was simple and elegant.

Fragmented war, on the other hand, is a strategist's nightmare. Amidst a constellation of armed actors, it is difficult to even name the enemy. Force does not contribute directly to victory, but can ricochet through the conflict system with unpredictable effects. Policymakers and military leaders struggle to define victory, let alone achieve it.

Planned end states go up in smoke, as the war assumes a logic of its own that is beyond anyone's ability to control. Every course of action carries tremendous costs. Despite these challenges, strategists are expected to find the best course of action—or the least bad—in fragmented wars. That is a thankless task, but it is one strategists cannot ignore.

To do strategy, policymakers and military leaders need analytical tools for making sense of fragmented wars. In this thesis, I have presented one such tool: a model that explains the nature of fragmented war and suggests a theory of victory. The good news is that fragmented wars are not beyond comprehension. They obey consistent logic, and they can and do end. Strategy is still possible. The bad news is that strategy in fragmented wars is exceedingly difficult.

This thesis argued that external powers considering intervention in fragmented civil wars have two basic choices: winning strategies intended to end the war, and non-winning strategies to protect limited interests and manage violence rather than solving it. Both strategies present formidable problems. Decisive victory in fragmented civil wars is costly, exceptionally difficult, and maybe even impossible. Limited, non-winning strategies make better strategic sense in many cases and are frequently the better alternative, but they leave serious problems in place and carry high domestic costs.

External intervention can have utility in winning strategies. In our focus on the difficulties of waging fragmented war, we must not lose sight of that. Combat effectiveness is one of the best ways to grow one's coalition and damage rival coalitions. External force can contribute to that combat effectiveness, especially in fragmented wars where rival actors find themselves stalemated. US firepower was essential in helping the Iraqi government grow strong enough and confident enough to incorporate Sunni fighters, kill rejectionists, and fight problematic Shiite militias. In Syria, intervention by Hizballah and Iran were essential to strengthening the Assad regime against its adversaries. Intervention can also take non-military forms, especially given the highly political nature of fragmented wars. If external actors do intervene in fragmented civil wars, they can be of great service. However, to have utility, interveners cannot rely on blind force; they must discriminately apply violence against specific actors, in specific sequences, to serve the overall strategy.



With that said, pursuing victory in a highly fragmented war is one of the most difficult tasks policymakers can ask their militaries to perform. In many cases, restoring equilibrium to a warring social system is simply impossible. If an actor has no leverage over critical stakeholders—consider the US relationship to China in the Korean War, the Soviet Union in the Vietnam War, or Pakistan in the Afghanistan War—then no amount of military activity will deliver victory. Even when victory is possible, it will likely require untold amounts of blood, treasure, and time. Democracies are rarely willing to pay such costs. This is the fundamental critique leveled against counterinsurgency theory. Even if it works (and many critics believe it doesn't), are the costs ever worth it? COIN is essentially a winning strategy, designed to restore equilibrium to a warring social system. That is why it is so audacious. COIN is inseparable from nation-building, because only the emergence of political equilibrium among key stakeholders can end the fighting.

The extreme difficulty of restoring a fragmented social system to equilibrium means that actors are often better served by limited, non-winning strategies. While these strategies may not be satisfying to either leaders or their publics, they are at least a realistic matching of ends, ways, and means. Actors can take an honest inventory of their interests, then act within the conflict system to protect or advance those interests while resisting the temptation to overreach. In these cases, external intervention has utility to the degree it advances the policy goal. This is highly context-dependent, but be easier to assess than in a strategy intended to win.

Unfortunately, sticking to such strategies can be challenging, especially for actors like the United States that do not like settling for anything less than decisive victory. Because limited interventions cannot fully resolve complex problems, there will always be a gravitational pull towards deeper involvement in pursuit of victory. The continuation of violence, the ongoing loss of life, and the lack of decision damage presidential credibility and give ammunition to political rivals. For soldiers in the field, non-winning strategy is a demoralizing prospect. Soldiers want to win, not dwell in a murky, violent, and inconclusive limbo. Syria will be a test of the United States' discipline in adhering to a non-winning strategy. American interests in Syria have not changed, but the Obama admin-

istration faces tremendous pressure to escalate. This is a war the United States cannot in any meaningful sense win, but that might not stop the country from trying.

Some degree of fragmentation has always characterized war, but the democratization of violence today means modern wars will be more fragmented than ever. Syria portends an ominous new reality: a type of war where every village can generate its own formidable militia, and where no single actor is strong enough to impose discipline and order. Traditional strategic theory has little to say about such wars, and in many cases it can be counterproductive. Actors prepared to wage duels will quickly find themselves mired in chaos, exercising force with little apparent utility. We are in need of fresh models that can look past the duel and suggest new, more helpful perspectives for thinking about war.

This thesis has presented one such model for understanding fragmented war. While it is no doubt imperfect, I hope it will at least spark a long-overdue debate about the duel model and about possible alternatives. Other models may exist, and I hope other scholars will take up the challenge of developing them. I also hope scholars will refine and test the model presented here. This thesis was largely theoretical in nature, focused on a broad reconceptualization of war. Future research should subject the various elements of this model to rigorous empirical tests. Such a research agenda would help both practitioners and scholars understand the complexities of fragmented war. It would help them discharge what Clausewitz saw as the most sacred of responsibilities in wartime: “to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.”<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 89.

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