EXAMINING THE CENTRALITY OF STATE LEGITIMACY AND CAPACITY TO STABLE GOVERNANCE IN THE SYRIAN CONFLICT: THE DETRIMENTAL EFFECTS OF INTERNATIONAL GEOPOLITICAL INFLUENCES ON LONG-TERM STATE STABILITY

By

Lavan Kandiah

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ABSTRACT

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Lavan Kandiah   Advisor: Helen Hambly Odame
University of Guelph, 2018

The paper examines the relationship between state legitimacy and capacity in attaining stable governance in Syria, and the effect that external geopolitical influences have in influencing the stability of governance. Domestic state legitimacy is the cornerstone of stable governance in Syria; however, the presence of external mediators and stakeholders in the conflict, mainly the United States and Russia, has made the legitimacy of local actors subject to the geopolitical interests of these two states. Russo-American attempts to steer the conflict in accordance to their interests, and their support for rival factions has made domestic legitimacy and capacity conditional, unpredictable and volatile, contributing to state fragility and instability. Given the unlikelihood that Syria will cease to be an arena of international competition, attaining stable governance in Syria will be a long-term and arduously complex task.

Introduction

Substantial work has been done to examine the most crucial capacities required for stable governance in states affected by conflict. In contrast to non-conflict states, countries in the midst of civil unrest and violence often lack the capacity to provide basic economic and security services

to their citizens (Brinkerhoff, 2010), and are prone to sudden fluctuations and shifting political allegiances. The Syrian civil war is a primary example of this unstable dynamic; the country is in the midst of a long-running, contested and multi-sided conflict that has severely eroded the capacity of both state and non-state actors, and has involved numerous regional and international players who have influenced these capacities (RAND Corporation, 2013). These international players have had a defining role in shaping the country's future.

This paper seeks to examine the relationship between the ability of Syria to come out of conflict in order to regain stable governance, and the international actors that are increasingly dictating the conflict's course. It asks the following questions: what state capacities are needed to bring about peace and stability in Syria? How do external geopolitical factors and actors influence the governance capacity of Syrian state and non-state actors? What impact do these factors have on the future political stability of the country?

The paper takes the position that *domestic legitimacy* is the most crucial component of developing state capacity and long-term state stability; the future of Syria as a capable and stable governing state ultimately depends on the capacity of the country's leadership to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens. However, as this legitimacy is dependent upon and influenced by external powers, developing stable governance is immensely difficult to accomplish. According to the recent literature, as long as external states maintain geopolitical interests in Syria, developing state legitimacy, capacity, and stability will be an arduous and prolonged task (RAND Corporation, 2013; RAND Corporation, 2017b).

In its analysis, the paper will first define and discuss the three main themes examined: state stability, state capacity, and legitimacy. Following this, relevant literature that discusses the interdependence of these three themes will be discussed. The literature points to the central

importance of how state legitimacy determines capacity and stability. Subsequently, the paper will examine the relationship between external actors and domestic legitimacy, using a number of cases to demonstrate the influence that great power rivalries and geopolitical interests have had on civil conflicts over the last three decades. Finally, these same concepts will be discussed in relation to the Syrian war, to highlight the role that international geopolitical interests have played in influencing domestic stability, capacity, legitimacy, and conflict resolution. It must be stressed that this paper does not seek to present a framework for conflict resolution; it merely seeks to demonstrate that conflict resolution has minimal chances of success as long as external geopolitical forces continue dictating the legitimacy and capacity of the Syrian conflict's domestic actors.

Methodology

This paper relies on secondary sources, with no primary data collection. It draws its sources primarily from peer-reviewed journal articles and academic books. Sources were identified through a systematic search of online databases including EBSCOhost and JSTOR. Due to the Syrian conflict being currently ongoing, a substantial number of sources are also drawn from international media organisations, in order to gather perspectives on ongoing changes to the conflict's progression and dimensions. Project reports and policy briefings published by global think-tank organisations are also used extensively, as these reports provide insight into the conflict's international geopolitical dimensions. Only English-language sources were examined.

Interdependence of State Stability and Capacity

In assessing the relationship of state stability, capacity, and legitimacy to external geopolitical influences, it is important to define what these various terms signify, and why they

were selected as a focus. The World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators Project identifies "Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism" as one of six dimensions of governance, the other five being "Voice and Accountability, Government Effectiveness, Regulatory Quality, Rule of Law," and "Control of Corruption" (Kaufman, Kraay & Mastruzzi, 2010, pg. 3). It is acknowledged that effective governance is affected by a variety of factors, as these indicators demonstrate; however, for the purposes of this paper, I focus on the political stability dimension as an important indicator of effective governance.

A politically "stable state" is defined by Derouen and Goldfinch (2012) as one that possesses "government capacity, legitimacy, a legal/rational state, democracy and human rights, and development and economic integration" (pg. 501). If we accept this definition of a stable state, we accept that state stability and government capacity are strongly correlated (*legitimacy* will be examined separately below). The centrality of government capacity to state stability is stressed by Brinkerhoff (2010), who argues that state fragility and instability are "directly related to capacity deficits" (pg. 66). Brinkerhoff states that in order for a fragile or conflict-affected state to develop long-term stability, institutions of governance need to develop their own governance capacity. Without this capacity, political stability cannot be maintained.

With regard to "capacity," this paper borrows the definition offered by Brinkerhoff (2010, pg. 66): "Capacity deals with the aptitudes, resources, relationships and facilitating conditions necessary to act effectively to achieve some intended purpose." For the purposes of this paper, the "intended purpose" of capacity refers to the capacity of a state to govern its citizens and meet the various needs of these citizens. If a state possesses the capacity to ensure the security of its citizens, effectively deliver "basic public goods and services," and manage "political participation and accountability," it will achieve a strong degree of political stability, which in turn will contribute

to effective governance (Brinkerhoff, Wetterberg, & Dunn, 2012, pg. 274). Derouen and Goldfinch (2012) support this notion, arguing that for low-income and fragile states, strong public administration and governance is especially important for ensuring stability, even if a fully democratic state is lacking.

Defining State Legitimacy – The Importance of Perception

In the brief examination above, I have highlighted the role that state stability plays in underpinning strong governance, and how state stability is in turn underpinned by strong state capacity. But what underpins state capacity? This brings attention to the central theme of this paper, which is legitimacy.

Various definitions of state legitimacy have been offered by scholars, demonstrating that it is a highly debated term. Gilley (2009) states that Max Weber was among the early scholars to offer a definition of legitimacy: the "willingness to comply with a system of rule, out of not selfishness, expedience, or habit, but rather a considered belief in the moral validity of that rule" (pg. 3). Gilley expands on this definition, saying that "a state is legitimate if it rightfully holds and exercises political power" (pg. 3). He contends, however, that the "moral validity" and rightfulness mentioned in these definitions require clarification in order to understand what legitimacy is. I will come back to this point below.

Brinkerhoff, Wetterberg, and Dunn (2012) explain state legitimacy in the form of two dimensions, a cognitive and a behavioural: the former as when an "obligation or willingness to obey authority" is created, while the latter is concerned with "attitudes, perceptions, and expectations of state" (pg. 275). The merging of these two dimensions forms the authors' following definition of legitimacy, cited from Johnson et. al. (2006, pg. 55).

social reality in which the elements of a social order are seen as consonant with norms, values, and beliefs that individuals presume are widely shared, whether or not they personally share them ... [L]egitimacy is indicated by actors' compliance with a social order as either (a) a set of social obligations, or as (b) a desirable model of action.

Risse and Stollenwerk (2018) differentiate between empirical, normative and legal legitimacy. The empirical perspective lines up closely with Brinkerhoff's cognitive definition, while the authors describe the normative perspective as an actor or institution's "right to govern according to various normative principles" (pg. 404). The legal perspective, however, considers only an actor's right to govern according to domestic or international laws.

Barakat and Zyck (2012) define legitimacy as "the complex moral right [a state] possesses to be the exclusive imposer of binding duties on its subjects, to have its subjects comply with these duties, and to use coercion to enforce the duties" (pg. 443). McLoughlin (2015), meanwhile, explains legitimacy as process in which the state earns the loyalty of its citizens.

What these various definitions highlight is that state legitimacy is most fundamentally about perception (Barakat & Zyck, 2012; McLoughlin, 2015). The "moral validity" and "rightfulness" that Gilley (2009) refers to support this view, as rightfulness and moral belief are contingent upon individuals' perspectives of the state. For instance, in conflict-affected regions where state control is low or nonexistent, citizens have very low expectations of service delivery by the state, leading to low state legitimacy (Brinkerhoff, Wetterberg, & Dunn, 2012). Similarly, in cases where the state's service delivery is unevenly distributed, does not return to "pre-conflict levels," or is

displaced by non-state actors, perceptions of state legitimacy decline (Brinkerhoff, Wetterberg, & Dunn, 2012, pg. 278; McLoughlin, 2015).

State legitimacy cannot be maintained unless it is accepted by the governed population. The "complex moral right" that Barakat and Zyck (2012) refer to, and the notion of loyalty mentioned by McLoughlin also highlight legitimacy's subjectivity. The authors' reference to the use of coercion is crucial as well, as a state's use of force on its population can be a pivotal indicator of citizens' acceptance of state authority (Brinkerhoff, Wetterberg, & Dunn, 2012). Risse and Stollenwerk's (2018) reference to legal legitimacy, however, must not be overlooked: while legitimacy is first and foremost about perception, the legal recognition of a state as legitimate provides additional weight to its claim of rightful rule (Nadarajah & Sriskandarajah, 2005). Given the fundamental role that perception, legality and the use of force play in state legitimacy, this paper combines the definitions of Gilley and Barakat and Zyck. I adopt the following definition for state legitimacy throughout this paper: "a state is legitimate if it holds and exercises political" and coercive power "with legality, justification, and consent" (Gilley, 2009, pg. 8; Barakat & Zyck, 2012).

Centrality of State Legitimacy to Capacity and Stability

As mentioned above, the capacity of a state or non-state actor to govern is related closely to their legitimacy in the eyes of the population under their tutelage. As Brinkerhoff, Wetterberg, and Dunn (2012) highlight, a state that has legitimacy can count on its citizens to accept and follow the laws and regulations set out by that state, because the state is seen as representative of the population's interests. This perspective is supported by Risse and Stollenwerk (2018), who assert that legitimacy increases a state's ability to "enforce decisions and ensure compliance," and that

"more legitimacy of a governance actor or institution leads to more effective governance, and more effective governance leads to more legitimacy" (pg. 412-413). McLoughlin (2015) expands on this correlation to state that legitimacy and capacity are mutually enhancing and form a "symbiotic relationship," as legitimacy "makes citizens more likely to defer to decisions" of the state out of a belief in its rightful authority, "rather than through the threat (or exercise) of punishment or reward" (pg. 344). Lake and Farris (2014) further argue that in conflict-affected states, the ability of the state to legitimately use force against citizens is crucial for building state capacity. Legitimate states possess what the authors refer to as "a monopoly of violence;" however, this monopoly can only be maintained if it is seen as acceptable (pg. 572). Legitimacy of state builds trust in state institutions, allowing the state to carry out its governance functions. This in turn creates greater capacity as the state need not divert time and resources to repress or confront revolt, unrest, or discontent, which furthers legitimacy.

In analysing these various dimensions of legitimacy and capacity, it is clear that they are intricately connected. We can conclude that state stability, capacity and legitimacy are critical cornerstones of effective governance in conflict-affected states. This is corroborated by Robert Zoellick, the president of the World Bank, who called legitimacy the "strategic centre of gravity" for "good and effective governance" (Zoellick, 2008, pg. 77). It is recognised that legitimacy and state capacity are only two of the multiple, interrelated and complex components that underpin state stability (Derouen & Goldfinch, 2012); however, given the centrality of legitimacy and capacity demonstrated by the above analysis, these concepts form the basis of this paper.

Sources of State Legitimacy

Given that state legitimacy is founded on citizens' perception and acceptance of the state's authority, understanding the various forms and sources of these perceptions is crucial, as the state's ability to align to them determines its legitimacy. Gilley (2009) highlights five categories of sources of legitimacy: the particularistic view sees sources of legitimacy as variable across "time and space," which cannot be generalized or categorised (pg. 32); the sociological view on legitimacy states that legitimacy is gained through specific sociocultural nuances, including ethnic, religious, and gender dimensions; the developmental perspective sees legitimacy as tied to the capacity of the state to effectively deliver goods and services to the population, and economic performance; democratic legitimacy is centered on democratic governance and human rights; and bureaucratic legitimacy focuses on the "strength and effectiveness of state institutions" to attain legitimacy (pg. 37).

Sabrow (2017) discusses similar sources of legitimacy with regard to international intervention in conflict-affected states, instead describing them in terms of pragmatic and ideological legitimacy. Ideological legitimacy is described as an entity's ability to relate its motivations for intervention to citizens. Sabrow describes pragmatic legitimacy as that arising from the population's perception of the entity's actions.

Barakat, Evans and Zyck (2012), meanwhile, state that legitimacy can also arise from charismatic leadership and international standing.

This brief analysis demonstrates that legitimacy can be gained through various complex sources, and can be lost through the same channels. The sources of legitimacy described become important in later examination of the Syrian conflict.

Relevant Case Studies of the Implications of State Legitimacy on Governance

The above analysis provides an overview of the role that legitimacy, capacity and stability play in effective governance. To understand the practical implications of these concepts, it is necessary to examine contested contemporary environments where these implications have been observed. The cases below were selected to demonstrate that legitimacy has been acknowledged as being intricately tied to capacity and stability in numerous conflict-affected and fragile states around the world. They are intended to demonstrate the diverse methods in which legitimacy is sourced and lost in contested environments by both state and non-state actors, and will draw parallels to the later analysis of the Syrian conflict. The four cases below will be very brief overviews, as the Syrian conflict will form the crux of the paper's subsequent analysis.

First, I will briefly highlight what happens when a governing authority fails to gain legitimacy and capacity. Brinkerhoff, Wetterberg, and Dunn (2012) state that a low-legitimacy state ultimately lacks acceptance in the eyes of its citizens, forcing it to rely increasingly on coercion to suppress discontent and unrest. The authors state that this creates a deteriorating cycle of instability, as "weak legitimacy leads to decreased acceptance and the emergence of opposition; repression and the use of force increase to assert control; [and] service delivery capacity declines," which in turn leads to increasing instability, conflict and further deterioration of state legitimacy (pg. 275). The authors further contend that illegitimate governments will often face competition from or be displaced by non-state actors as the "highest authority," as citizens look to alternative governing bodies to lead, such as rebel groups and religious leaders (pg. 277). Risse and Stollenwerk (2018) further argue that illegitimate leadership is unsustainable for long-term governance, as there will inevitably be an overreliance on coercion and enforcement, which contribute to instability and opposition.

The reign of Indonesian president Muhammad Suharto provides an interesting example of lost legitimacy, as it was, despite being authoritarian, very stable for most of its existence between 1967 and 1998 (Mietzner, 2018). According to Mietzner (2018), Suharto depended heavily on a strong coercive element through the first decade of his rule, and throughout the 1980s consolidated his rule by distributing resources to the country's most powerful political and societal elites. As his rule continued, the state's coercive practices diminished as Suharto's wide-ranging social welfare policies kept citizens dependent on state services and increased his legitimacy, fuelled by the country's growing economic prosperity. However, Mietzner states that the 1997 Asian financial crisis led to a sudden drop in Suharto's ability to continue providing these services, leading to growing discontent and his resignation later that same year.

Suharto's rise and fall indicate several parallels to legitimacy and capacity scholarship; as Mietzner points out, Suharto took power at a time of severe economic turmoil in Indonesia, which meant that even modest reforms led to dramatic economic and social improvements, and gave Suharto strong legitimacy from the very start of his tenure. Secondly, his fall is demonstrative of his regime's dependence on developmental and bureaucratic legitimacy, and the effects of its loss; as his regime provided welfare to citizens, Suharto's legitimacy improved and citizens accepted him and his authority, allowing him to improve state capacity and thereby strengthen his government's stability. But as his capacity to deliver services diminished, his legitimacy also weakened and led to the emergence of opposition. Suharto's fall is a clear example of McLoughlin's (2015) assertion about perception in state legitimacy: while service delivery may improve above historic levels, growing expectations of state services may lead to the perception

that the state is failing, leading to discontent; ultimately, Suharto failed to meet the needs of the Indonesian population, leading to the breakdown of the symbiotic relationship between his capacity to deliver services and his legitimacy.

Moro Islamic Liberation Front – Philippines

In her examination of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front's (MILF) legitimacy in the Philippines' Mindanao region, Podder (2012) provides an example of what Brinkerhoff, Wetterberg and Dunn (2012) highlight as a common consequence of state illegitimacy: the rise of non-state actors that challenge state authority. Podder argues that the MILF enjoyed support in areas under its influence partly because the Philippine army had long been seen as a repressive force. This, coupled with poverty, isolation, and a common religious identity around Islam gave the MILF consent and a justification to exist. However, Podder's study demonstrates that the legitimacy of the MILF was ultimately dependent on its ability to meet the needs of the citizens under its control. She states that "for a sustained and positive relationship of mutual dependence and support, rebel groups need to transcend from being roving bandits to stationary providers of social services, most importantly governance, justice, law enforcement and security" (pg. 510). The MILF, according to Podder, lost much of their capacity to govern over time, and were plagued by infighting and clashes that lead to population displacement. This led to growing discontent towards the group, leading to deteriorating legitimacy and governance capacity. She further states that the growing presence of army "civil defense militias" called Citizen Armed Force Geographical Units, which provided better pay than the MILF, led to citizen disillusion and provided a viable alternative to the opportunities offered by the MILF (pg. 504).

Podder's study demonstrates that the MILF's ideological and sociological legitimacy could only be maintained as long as they succeeded in meeting community needs. The MILF succeeded in appealing to their Islamic roots and offered opportunities for local residents to identify with their political objectives. But as soon as the capacity gap between the MILF and the state narrowed, and the state was able to appeal to citizen desires, the legitimacy of the MILF diminished. As this legitimacy diminished, so did its capacity to govern.

Sudan People's Liberation Army – South Sudan

The Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) of South Sudan is a fascinating case of non-state legitimacy, as this former rebel group became South Sudan's state military force upon the country's independence in 2011. Podder (2014) states that the SPLA grew out of the limited representation of southerners in Sudan's government and community life. The SPLA's early efforts were initially met with suspicion among southerners, due to the group's unclear message and goals, its violent coercive methods, and its fragmented command structure. However, over time the group altered its governance approach to include greater citizen participation, and brought traditional chiefs into its military leadership, creating a "civilian administration under rebel control" that was charged with day-to-day governance functions (Podder, 2014, pg. 226). The SPLA's partnership with tribal chiefs brought it sociological and ideological legitimacy as it appealed to historic traditions and customs that citizens could identify with.

Podder states that the SPLA worked with international NGOs to control and distribute aid to civilians under its control, which added to its legitimacy and gave the impression that it had at least some capacity to govern as a state. Ultimately, Podder states that the SPLA's governance structures were deeply flawed and that the group did not possess the capacity to govern effectively and

democratically. Podder's case nevertheless demonstrates that legitimacy is gained through perspective, and as McLoughlin (2015) states, can be engineered; the SPLA was able to appeal to traditional forms of governance that gave it legitimacy and acceptance from citizens, despite the fact that its governance approach was highly centralised and undemocratic (Podder, 2014). It can be safely assumed that the perception of legitimacy that the SPLA enjoyed did influence its eventual acceptance and establishment as South Sudan's state military force.

Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam – Sri Lanka

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's (LTTE) rise and popularity during Sri Lanka's civil war as a non-state authority was due to its ability to appeal to shared ideological and traditional values among the country's Tamil minority (Terpestra & Frerks, 2017). Terpestra and Frerks argue that appealing to these shared values, claiming to represent Tamils' "sociocultural and political aspirations," portraying the Sri Lankan state as violent and oppressive, their willingness to sacrifice themselves for their cause, and their charismatic leadership gave the LTTE broad legitimacy in Sri Lanka's north during the war (pg. 285). Despite coercive tactics, the authors state that citizens supported the rebel group as they were viewed as fighting for the Tamil people. Citizens also "felt better represented under LTTE rule," were able to take part in commemoration and remembrance ceremonies, and had family and ethnic ties to LTTE cadres (pg. 291). This legitimacy was further fuelled by the LTTE's strict code of conduct for members and its strong governance capacity: over the 25-year course of the civil war, the rebel group established banks, schools, radio and television programs, a strong and uncorrupt police force, an extensive global fundraising platform, a large civil service and taxation system, as well as a capable and organised army, navy and air force that saw substantial success against the Sri Lankan military (Nadarajah & Sriskandarajah, 2005). The

LTTE's leader also had a strong cult of personality around him, contributing to the group's popularity. Furthermore, the LTTE controlled large parts of northern Sri Lanka, providing the group with a population to which it could demonstrate its capacity to govern.

Terpestra and Frerks state that the LTTE did encounter resistance; clashes with smaller Tamil rebel groups for dominance led to the loss of its legitimacy among some segments of the population. The LTTE's sociopolitical reforms often conflicted with established values, such as its rejection of the caste system and recruitment of women into combat. Nevertheless, despite being defeated and disbanded in 2009, the group still enjoys broad support among Tamils worldwide (Terpestra & Frerks, 2017).

The LTTE's enduring legitimacy is indicative of its ability to gain the consent of citizens in its sphere of influence, and justify its existence despite being a non-state actor. The rebel group carefully appealed to tradition, culture, and sacrifice to claim representation of Tamil interests. Coupled with its battlefield successes, the group was able to establish its legitimacy and monopoly of force, reinforcing their governance capacity and stability as a political entity. This case, as well as the cases examined above, indicate the multiple ways in which legitimacy and capacity underpin stable governance, and the ability of non-state actors to challenge the state when the latter fails to identify with citizens or fulfill their needs. Secondly, these cases demonstrate that stable governance is most crucially contingent on *domestic* legitimacy. This concept brings attention to the difference between domestic and international legitimacy, and the influence that international powers can have on domestic legitimacy. The theme of external influence will be briefly analysed in the context of several contemporary conflicts next, before I transition to examining the Syrian conflict as the main case study.

The Influence of International Geopolitical Forces on Domestic State Legitimacy

In the case of the LTTE examined above, their broad legitimacy among Sri Lanka's Tamil population is not mirrored at the international level. The LTTE was classified as a terrorist organisation by several western countries between the late 1990s and early 2000s, and fundraising on its behalf was outlawed in Australia and Canada in 2002 (Nadarajah & Sriskandarajah, 2005). Nadarajah and Sriskandarajah assert that while this loss of resources did not cripple the rebel group, its designation as a terrorist organisation hurt its legitimacy in the eyes of foreign powers, undermined its goal of self-determination, and weakened its position as the representative of Tamil interests in Sri Lanka. The authors state that the decision of the United States to proscribe the LTTE as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation (FTO) was not due to any threat the group posed to American interests, but rather fears that not doing so would give legitimacy to non-state actors seeking to redraw state borders through force. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, it is reasonable to assume that failure to enforce this position would have undermined American military campaigns in the Middle East.

The authors contend that the labelling of the LTTE as an FTO had several implications on the course of the conflict: on the one hand, it made international negotiations difficult, as states were often unwilling to host talks with a proscribed terrorist organisation on their own soil. Most importantly, however, it gave legitimacy to the Sri Lankan state's aggressive and hawkish approach to confronting the LTTE, and made any government attempts at negotiation difficult to justify. Nadarajah and Sriskandarajah argue that this in turn led to the LTTE taking a similar approach to negotiations with the Sri Lankan state, in order to maintain its own legitimacy among Tamils.

Nadarajah and Sriskandarajah's study demonstrates that regional or civil conflicts, despite being geographically confined, are often influenced by the strategic interests of the world's dominant powers. The geopolitical priorities of western governments in the midst of the "war on terror" guided their position against the LTTE, which empowered the Sri Lankan state's hardline position. In cases of direct and indirect foreign military intervention, this influence stretches much farther (Sabrow, 2017; Barakat, Evans & Zyck, 2012; Roy, 2004). The role that world powers have in influencing the domestic legitimacy and capacity of state and non-state actors in civil conflicts has received limited attention from scholars. Literature examining the relationship between legitimacy and governance has predominantly addressed the service delivery model of legitimacy, and legitimacy as measured against international laws and standards (Sabrow, 2017). However, legitimacy plays a pivotal role in the success or failure of state interventions, and must be examined.

Lake and Farris (2014) argue that state-building interventions in civil wars by foreign "trustee" powers will often fail to improve state capacity, due to the fact that all actors will inevitably act in their own interest. Although the trustee is theoretically intended to act as an impartial facilitator for the development of governance capacity, intervening trustees will seek to hand authority from supposedly illegitimate regimes to an individual who falls in line with their geopolitical and strategic interests. Furthermore, in conflict-affected states where authority is contested, whether or not a regime is considered legitimate is often decided by the trustee rather than the population. Aside from the legitimacy of fragile regimes, the legitimacy of the trustee also impacts the success of state-building interventions. This legitimacy, according to the authors, is more often than not gained from the international community or institutions such as the United Nations (UN), with limited consideration towards whether trustees will be accepted among locals.

Lake and Farris identify two conditions that must exist in order for "trusteeships" to be successful: the first being when "the trustee has few, if any, interests beyond stability in the failed state, or secondly, when the interests of the trustee and the average citizen naturally overlap" (pg. 579). Understandably, however, only states with strong local or regional interests are willing to commit adequate resources and time to enhance state legitimacy and capacity, which ensures that their own interests will be prioritised over local needs. The authors go on to state that trusteeships are inherently impractical due to the fact that trustees will always desire regimes that are loyal to them, while at the same time preferring they be viewed as legitimate by citizens, which is difficult to accomplish. Secondly, illegitimate state authorities, especially those brought into power by a foreign trustee or "patron power" as Ibonye (2018) describes them, are often more concerned with consolidating their power and survival than developing state capacity and legitimacy, which leads to elite capture. The result of these complex and differing interests are corrupt, illegitimate, and unaccountable regimes that lack the capacity to govern (Lake & Farris, 2014). Lake and Farris conclude that there is "little or no relationship between trusteeship and state capacity" (pg. 582).

Barakat, Evans, and Zyck (2012) mirror many of these points, arguing that in post-conflict states, the failure of state-building interventions is often due to the use of unsuitable governance frameworks that "undermine both the capacity and the legitimacy" of the state and local actors (pg. 440). The authors state that "governance is inherently and unavoidably contested" in post-conflict environments, partly due to what the authors term a "dual legitimacy trap" (pg. 446). They define this as "the need for governments in developing countries, particularly post-conflict countries, to be viewed as legitimate both by their own citizens as well as by the international community which supports and protects them" (pg. 446). The "trap" emerges as the wishes of the international community often do not fall in line with the wishes of the population, as mirrored by

Lake and Farris' (2014) second condition for effective trusteeship. Illegitimate regimes are consequently caught between remaining loyal to their backers and maintaining their hold on power. In order to avoid such polarisation, Barakat, Evans, and Zyck (2012) conclude that local institutions should be given the lead on foreign state-building interventions, even if that capacity has not yet been achieved to its fullest. They also conclude that:

> the legitimacy of fragile post-conflict states is more important than effectiveness, accountability, transparency, equity or any other concern aside from stability. International or local governmental actors should not pursue administrative performance to the detriment of political legitimacy, even if doing so is perceived to have negative implications for development in the short-term (pg. 451).

The Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (2009) similarly contends that the failure of state-building initiatives by foreign powers is due to two inaccurate assumptions: "the first assumption concerns the privileging of universal over local knowledge. The second assumption concerns the privileging of international over domestic sources of legitimacy" (pg. 4). The authors assert that state-building interventions tend to view local knowledge as valuable only in terms of how compatible it is with established frameworks, and that "the principle of ownership is not foundational but is (merely) a measure to increase effectiveness" (pg. 17). International standards of what constitutes legitimacy and "correct" knowledge take precedence over domestic expectations, failing to acknowledge local capacities, perceptions, needs and socio-political relations. The authors assert that "only when external actors allow for liberal principles to emerge from and through domestic debate and contestation – rather than being already defined by external

actors – will peacebuilding efforts be sustainable and "owned" by the population in question" (pg. 21).

The intersection of competing geopolitical interests and legitimacy has been seen in previous state-building interventions. For example, Sabrow (2017) asserts that the UN's 2013 peacekeeping intervention in the Malian conflict, known as MINUSMA, has low legitimacy in the eyes of Malians. Sabrow attributes this to the limited African representation within the UN Security Council, and the fact that the UN's most powerful members are predominantly former colonial powers. This created suspicion and mistrust of the UN intervention, giving the UN low ideological legitimacy and hindering its ability to identify with Malians.

The separate French military intervention in the conflict, according to Sabrow, had strong pragmatic and developmental legitimacy due to the French military's strong capabilities. However, the French intervention suffered similarly low ideological legitimacy due to its status as Mali's former coloniser. Consequently, French forces were often accused of neocolonial pursuits such as "pursuing strategic interests" and "attempting to capture the state" (pg. 172).

In contrast to the UN and French interventions, Sabrow (2017) states that the Economic Community of West African States' peacekeeping intervention in Mali (AFISMA) had substantially more legitimacy among locals, despite poor performance. Many of the neighbouring countries that make up the AFISMA force have similar cultures and colonial histories as Mali, providing a shared identity that Malians could connect with. AFISMA was also seen by locals as being more representative of Malian and African interests, and was not viewed with suspicion of plundering resources or "pursuing self-interests" (pg. 174).

Another example, is the 2001 American invasion of Afghanistan is a second example of the clash between geopolitical interests and domestic legitimacy. Roy (2004) argues that the U.S.

failed to gain legitimacy both in Afghanistan and Iraq due to its image as an "occupying army," its failure to understand the important role that religious and familial ties play in the allegiances of Afghans and Iraqis, and its failure to recognise the strength of Afghan and Iraqi nationalism in the face of invasion (pg. 171). Roy states that the American administration often reinforced existing societal divisions by supporting militias and tribal leaders who were willing to support their goals against jihadist groups, to the detriment of long-term political stability. Risse and Stollenwerk (2018) further assert that American state-building efforts in Afghanistan threatened to upend the political dominance of ethnic Pashtuns in the country, which resulted in the growth of opposition. Most importantly, the illegitimacy of the American occupation meant that any government set up by them would also be seen as illegitimate. As a result, Roy (2004) argues that "no transitional authorities appointed by a foreign country could acquire sufficient legitimacy to be followed" (pg. 171). As the United States had its own democratisation and security objectives in Afghanistan and needed a pro-American government in place, they failed to be receptive to these factors and could not satisfy citizens' desires. The post-invasion government of Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan is a clear example of the dual legitimacy trap and the effects of illegitimate, patron-appointed governments. Karzai's government suffered from severe and well-known corruption and elite capture, and was unsustainably dependent on foreign aid throughout its existence (Lake & Farris, 2014).

The Mali and Afghanistan cases demonstrate several factors inherent in legitimacy's domestic and international dimensions, and its relationship to capacity and stable governance. The French and UN interventions failed to gain legitimacy among Malians, due to the perception that they were both pursuing their own geopolitical agendas. This undermined their state-building efforts and contributed to continuing political instability and low governance capacity in the

country. The AFISMA intervention, on the other hand, gained the acceptance of the Malian population through a shared identity and history, despite the fact that its performance was inadequate. The American administration in Afghanistan, due to its greater geopolitical objectives, failed to consider local knowledge and perceptions of legitimacy, and were unable to justify their existence to Afghanistan's population. As resources were increasingly diverted for military operations and insurgency repression rather than governance development, governance capacity and political stability deteriorated, leading to the growth of discontent, suspicion, and opposition.

These cases reinforce the centrality of perception in attaining legitimacy: whether or not an external intervention is commenced in pursuit of self-interest is irrelevant; as long as citizens believe it is, legitimacy will not be attained. Lake and Farris' (2014) two conditions for successful state-building interventions reinforce that successful external state-building is immensely difficult to accomplish, as the respective American and French interventions were unable to meet either.

The review finds that domestic legitimacy is the foremost indicator of governance capacity and political stability in fragile states. In conflict-affected and post-conflict states, governing authorities cannot hope to rule unopposed unless they are able to attain this legitimacy. In contexts where external patron powers have geopolitical interests in the outcome of a conflict, and are directly engaged in engineering its outcome, this interference can substantially hinder long-term state stability, as domestic leaders are caught between meeting the demands of both citizens and their foreign backers, while the backers pursue their own objectives. This complex balancing act inevitably means that the development of governance capacity and state stability will take a backseat. As international patron powers continue to have a stake in civil conflicts and support rival factions, the ability of domestic actors to attain and retain governance capacity is limited.

Having briefly examined the implications of these concepts in several contemporary conflict zones, I transition next to the Syrian conflict as my central focus.

Approaching the Syrian Conflict: Legitimacy and Geopolitics in a Contested Environment

The Syrian civil war shares many of the geopolitical dimensions examined above. The war has multiple actors linked through interwoven and convoluted alliances vying for legitimacy, and has been subjected to renewed external geopolitical pressures since the commencement of open hostilities in 2011. The Fund for Peace Fragile States Index (FSI) ranks Syria as the fourth most fragile state among 178 countries as of 2018, with a total measure of 111.4 out of 120 (Fund for Peace, 2018). Four FSI indicators particularly highlight the state of the Syrian government's governance capacity, legitimacy, and the scale of foreign influence: the *State Legitimacy* indicator, measuring "the representativeness and openness of government and its relationship with its citizenry" and the "level of confidence in state institutions and processes;" the *Factionalized Elites* indicator, which "considers the fragmentation of state institutions along ethnic, class, clan, racial or religious lines;" the *Public Services* indicator, described as a state's capacity to provide basic services and security evenly across its citizenry; and the *External Intervention* indicator, measuring "the influence and impact of external actors in the functioning […] of a state" (Fund for Peace, 2018). Measured on a severity scale of 10, Syria's measure for each indicator stands at 9.9, 9.9, 9.3, and 10.0 respectively, indicating that governance capacity and state legitimacy has severely deteriorated, while the state's functions are very heavily dictated by external actors.

Quoting Bercovitch, Akpinar (2016) argues that "internationalized ethnic conflicts" like that in Syria "are generally acknowledged as the most difficult and complex conflicts to manage" (pg.

2289). Given the Syrian war's substantial sectarian divisions, external influences and the fragile state of its governance functions, the conflict offers a valuable contemporary case study of the challenges that arise when external geopolitical priorities mix with the conflicting interests of local populations in areas of contested legitimacy. In order to understand how the Syrian conflict came to be defined by these dimensions, its sociopolitical context must first be examined in detail.

Understanding the Roots of Assad's Claim to Legitimate Governance

Syrian president Bashar al-Assad took power in July of 2000, groomed as a successor by his father Hafez, who ruled from 1971 to 2000. Bashar's subsequent success and legitimacy is tied intricately to his father's legacy, warranting a closer look.

Hafez al-Assad's rule was notable in that it brought stability to the country for the first time since independence, which had seen 18 changes in government between 1946 and 1969 (Masud, 2018). Hafez' subsequent three-decade rule can be seen as an indicator of the legitimacy historically attached to the "Assad" name. Leverett (2005) identifies three crucial actions taken by Hafez to consolidate his rule in the 1970s. First, "key levers of power," including the civil service and military, were brought under the direct control of his Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party (pg. 24). Alawites, an ethnic minority of which Hafez was a member, were brought into key positions of power, ensuring that Alawites maintained effective control over state and military institutions despite making up only 12 percent of the national population in 2018 (Minority Rights Group International, 2018). Secondly, Leverett states that Hafez, like Indonesia's Suharto, consolidated his support among societal elites through wealth redistribution. A key element of this action was to appeal to Sunni elites who, as Syria's largest ethnic group, would determine the survival of Hafez' presidency. He also appealed to minority Christians and Druze, ensuring that his "social

base" was diverse and wound across ethnic lines (pg. 25). Thirdly, Hafez established a cult of personality around himself, ensuring that state affairs were centered on him and his personality rather than a nameless and faceless "government." This entailed creating a close "inner circle" of family members, diplomats and officials that were trusted and personally loyal to him (pg. 26). Alongside these measures, Hafez created a "highly developed and coercive police state apparatus" (Leverett, 2005, pg. 24). Despite Hafez' authoritarian rule and repression of rights, he did not blindly employ coercive tactics, using them in response to perceived threats and ensuring that the coercive element of his rule became less central to his governance over time. This approach added another layer to his perceived legitimacy.

Hafez' methods of consolidating state control brought everyday citizens into political participation, and though they had no real influence, gave the impression of participative rule that Syrians were previously unfamiliar with (Sottimano, 2016). He required public participation in political organisations, which made it "possible for the Ba'ath to impose itself heavily on Syrian society, even among those who regarded it with cynicism" (Sottimano, 2016, pg. 453).

Hafez' foreign policy also served to increase his legitimacy among citizens. Coming to power at a time of severe tensions between Israel and several Arab states, Hafez portrayed himself as a protector and resister against Israeli and American colonialism and aggression (Leverett, 2005). Hafez used the perception of external danger to justify his tight control over all levers of power, and putting citizens' needs second to the protection of Syria's sovereignty. As Sottimano (2016, pg. 453) explains, the effect this had was that it "legitimised the militarisation of everyday life, exceptionalism in law and order, and strict obedience to a supreme authority in the name of a superior national interest."

As Bashar came to power (referred to as Assad hereafter), he inherited much of the sociological and traditional legitimacy established by Hafez. In the months before taking office, Assad was put on a nationwide charm offensive, building his legitimacy among the military, political elites and the public. He was presented as a modernist open to political debate, democratisation and accountability in order to spread his appeal (Perra, 2016). Leverett (2005) states that upon taking office, Assad created his own inner circle of close confidantes and family members, as well as a group of advisors referred to as the Group of 18, many of whom had western educations in business and economics. He increased salaries for public sector employees, introduced limited privatisation, released several hundred political prisoners, closed the notorious Mezzeh political prison, and allowed political parties to open offices and publish newspapers (Leverett, 2005; Carnegie Middle East Centre, 2012). Given that Assad's older brother was initially meant to take power before his unexpected death, Assad was presented as having been unwantedly thrust into a spotlight he did not desire nor aspire to (Al-Jazeera, 2016). He could also claim to be democratically elected, officially winning 97.3 percent of votes in the 2000 presidential election, though no other political parties were allowed to run (Masud, 2018).

These numerous gestures and the sudden tolerance for open political debate gave citizens the impression that genuine reforms were on the horizon. The period covering Assad's ascent and this liberalisation is popularly known as the Damascus Spring (Cohen, 2016). As part of this wave of reform, in September of 2000 a group of 99 political advocates and intellectuals released a document called the Statement of 99, which called for an end to the state of emergency that had been in effect since 1963, "an amnesty for all political prisoners," "freedom of assembly, the press and of expression," and an end to "restrictive" laws and censorship (George, 2003, pg. 173). While this call for reform did cause some concern among regime officials, the subsequent Statement of

1000, released six months after Assad took office, proved to be the end of Assad's tolerance for political debate. The statement, along with reinforcing the ideals of the Statement of 99, called for democratic elections, establishment of political parties, and questioned the right of the Ba'ath Party to dominate Syrian political life at the expense of participatory reform (George, 2003). Subsequent to its release, political advocates and intellectuals were arrested, and political newspapers and communication platforms were shuttered in what has been called the Damascus Winter. Despite the fact that Assad was responsible for this crackdown on freedoms, Leverett (2005) states that it was at least partially motivated by the necessity of appeasing the regime's holdovers from Hafez' rule, at a time when Assad's legitimacy was still not well established and numerous family members were competing for power. Consequently, whether accurate or not, Assad could claim that he was in fact a modernist who had been unwillingly forced to halt genuine attempts at political reform (Al-Jazeera, 2016).

The "protector" role established by Hafez was also adopted by Assad. From the earliest days of his presidency, Assad was concerned about the possibility of neighbouring countries falling under American political influence, and adopting pro-western and pro-Israeli policies that challenged his interests (Leverett, 2005). Central to countering these concerns were populist rhetoric and Arab nationalism, the idea of a collective Arab citizens' struggle (Sottimano, 2016). Since taking office, Assad continued his father's suppression of individual freedoms, but justified these measures as the citizen's sacrifice for the nation's sovereignty. Several intellectuals arrested after the Damascus Spring were labelled as Israeli agents, while the movement itself was presented as an external conspiracy against the state (George, 2003). The continuation of the state of emergency was subsequently justified by arguing that Syria was in a state of war, which necessitated adherence to central authority for the sake of citizens' welfare and security (George,

2003). Assad's support for Hezbollah during the 2000 Lebanon conflict, which was widely seen as a Hezbollah victory, fed his protector image, his domestic legitimacy, and the impression that the Israeli threat to Syria was real (Sottimano, 2016). Sociological legitimacy based on collective pan-Arab struggle became a key legitimisation strategy for Assad in his early rule (Masud, 2018).

Assad's calculated legitimisation strategies did have some success. The limited introduction of private ownership and political parties, though under the regime's watchful eye, were an improvement over the economic reforms of Hafez, who's actions predominantly maintained the status quo (Leverett, 2005). Syria's economic growth between 2005 and 2009, though not at its full potential, was "comparable with regional standards" (RAND Corporation, 2017b, pg. 9; Leverett, 2005). However, the most substantial effects of Assad's economic policies were only felt by the privileged elites whose loyalty he had always depended on (Cohen, 2016). The country's major "telecommunications, energy, and construction" sectors were estimated to be owned by just 200 people in 2011, while 60 percent of the national economy was estimated to be owned by just one of Assad's cousins (Al-Jazeera, 2016). The government's unwillingness to address such debilitating corruption, alongside the repression of basic freedoms, growing income inequality, high food prices, a housing crisis, and severe drought all contributed to the growth of opposition (RAND Corporation, 2017b; Cohen, 2016; Sottimano, 2016). Assad's heavy-handed response to early protests contributed to further discontent, especially among the country's youth, culminating in open revolt and armed rebellion by mid-2011 (Cohen, 2016).

The Conflict's Actors

The two initial warring sides to emerge out of the 2011 uprising are the armed forces of the Syrian state, headed by Assad, and multiple loosely coordinated and independent armed groups

collectively referred to as "the Opposition." The Syrian National Coalition (SNC) is the most recent of several attempts to bring these various organisations, which Zuhur (2015) estimates at over a thousand separate armed groups, under a central political authority. Alongside the SNC, the Syrian National Army (SNA) is the most recent collective armed Opposition entity, formed by Turkey in late 2017 (Al-Jazeera, 2017a; TRT World, 2018). A third faction emerged in 2015 in the form of the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a collective of Kurdish militia groups. Although the SDF and its main armed wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG) also oppose the Assad regime, their political objectives differ substantially from the Opposition; while most Opposition forces primarily seek to remove Assad from power, the SDF comes from the autonomous Kurdish region in northern Syria known as the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, and has long advocated for greater Kurdish autonomy (Ulutas, 2011). The conflict's fourth faction is the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and affiliated jihadist groups, which emerged as a powerful organisation in mid-2014, taking control of large parts of Syria and Iraq and prompting international military intervention.

The presence of four opposing sides and their diverse objectives has created an exceptionally complex environment on the ground, which has been further complicated by the presence of international actors. The Syrian government has received substantial resources and diplomatic support from the Russian and Iranian governments, as well as the Iranian-backed Hezbollah (RAND Corporation, 2013). The Opposition forces have received political and military aid from the United States, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and various NATO and European Union countries. The same holds true for the SDF and other Kurdish rebel groups, with the exception of Turkey, which is firmly positioned against the Kurds. Israel has positioned itself in the middle, taking neither an

openly hostile or friendly approach to either the Syrian government or the various anti-Assad forces (RAND Corporation, 2013).

International Geopolitical Interests in Syria

The motivations of foreign actors in the conflict are as complex as the motivations of the domestic actors they support. The Iranian and Saudi Arabian governments' respective alliances with the regime and Opposition reflect their longstanding mutual hostility as the Middle East's dominant Shia and Sunni powers, respectively. Aside from being a traditional Assad ally, Iran's ability to project its regional influence depends on a pro-Iranian government remaining in place in Syria (Ibonye, 2018). Iran also depend on Syria as a supply route to Hezbollah in Lebanon, which acts as Iran's proxy force for resisting feared Israeli expansion.

Saudi Arabia sees benefits in a Sunni regime taking power in Syria, to counter Iranian aspirations and project its own regional interests (Perra, 2016). Saudi Arabia, along with Qatar and Jordan, have provided substantial funding and military aid for the Free Syrian Army (the SNA's predecessor) and other Opposition groups (Zuhur, 2015).

Given Iranian influence, Israel's position has been to keep the war firmly away from Israeli-controlled territory in the Golan Heights and stopping Iranian weapons shipments to Hezbollah. While removing Assad and stopping the arms flow entirely is in Israel's interests, an Assad successor potentially even more hostile to Israel motivates a more hands-off approach to the conflict (RAND Corporation, 2013).

Turkey's position in the conflict is complex: on one hand, as a NATO member it has supported American and NATO airstrikes against ISIS targets, and has given considerable material and diplomatic support to various Opposition groups; however, unlike its western allies, it does

not support the SDF and other Kurdish forces. This is due to the fact that the Kurdish independence movement encapsulates not just Kurdish-majority regions in Syria, but also Kurdish areas in Iraq and Turkey itself. Kurdish independence advocates have long sought to unify the majority-Kurdish regions straddling these three countries, attracting Turkish opposition (Atlantic, 2016). The Turkish government is primarily concerned with suppressing SDF operations above other considerations, reflected by Turkey's creation of the SNA, its frequent military clashes with Kurdish rebel groups, and its deteriorating relations with the United States (RAND Corporation, 2013; RAND Corporation, 2017b; Al-Jazeera, 2017a).

However, the foci of this paper are the two external actors whose presence has arguably proved most consequential, the United States and Russia. Renewed tensions between these great powers in the 2010s has been referred to as a new Cold War, or the New Great Game, of which Syria has become a proxy conflict (Ibonye, 2018). Ibonye (2018) argues that the Syrian war's international dimensions are a reflection of US-Russian competition for influence over international affairs, resources and energy markets. Though it is not within the scope of this paper to delve into the accuracy of a second Cold War label, it is undeniable that American support for Opposition and Kurdish rebel groups, and Russian support for the Assad regime have shaped the conflict's progression, as will be seen next.

American Interests and Actions in Syria

The United States' current position against the Assad regime can be seen as a continuation of historical tensions between the two states, and American views of Syria as a state sponsor of terrorism (Perra, 2016). After the September 11 attacks, Assad sought to improve relations with the U.S., partly due to fears that his lax attitude towards Hezbollah and other militant groups would

prompt an invasion, and to broaden his international legitimacy. However, Assad's position never changed firmly enough to end American sanctions against the regime. His alignment with Iran, anti-Israeli stance and continued support for jihadist groups clashed with American interests in the region, foreshadowing U.S. support for Opposition and Kurdish rebel groups upon the conflict's outbreak (Perra, 2016). The current U.S. position against Assad in Syria is driven by concerns over Israel's security, Iranian influence, energy routes, and the presence of numerous jihadist groups within Syria's borders (Perra, 2016).

As a traditional Israeli ally, successive American administrations have long been concerned with Assad's vocal anti-Israeli policies and his backing of Hezbollah and Hamas (Perra, 2016). The threat to Israel's security is tied to the second objective of constraining the threat posed by Iran, which alongside Syria is a historic rival to Israel and has sought to undermine Israeli interests through Hezbollah, and American geopolitical interests in the Middle East. Installing a pro-American regime in Syria would eliminate a crucial Iranian ally, and severely hamper Iranian regional power and its supply lines to Hezbollah (RAND Corporation, 2013).

The American position against Assad is further tied to the conflict's wider implications on the international oil trade. Ibonye (2018) asserts that the U.S. has substantial interests in curtailing any economic threats to western Europe and the global oil supply. The U.S. and its European allies have long been concerned with European dependence on Russia as an oil and gas supplier, due to the political and economic leverage this gives Russia over European states. In addressing this issue, the U.S. and various European states have sought to build what is known as the Qatar-Turkey Pipeline, which would route oil from Qatar through Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Syria into Turkey. With the exception of Syria, these states have historically been American allies and their cooperation in the pipeline venture would decrease Russia's ability to control energy supplies into

Europe (Ibonye, 2018). Assad, however, has rejected the possibility of a pipeline going through Syrian territory, providing an incentive to install a pro-American regime in the country.

The leading cause for American involvement in Syria is the threat posed by ISIS and other jihadist groups (RAND Corporation, 2017b). The emergence of these organisations in Syria catalyzed American military intervention, as incidents of terrorism linked to the group pose a direct threat to American domestic security (Perra, 2016). American policy makers recognise that allowing a power vacuum to form in Syria will contribute to intense sectarian division and "endemic terrorism," and therefore have a vested interest in maintaining Syria's internal stability (RAND Corporation, 2017b, pg. 1; Perra, 2016).

As a result of these various geopolitical considerations, the U.S. government has provided Opposition groups with considerable material support. On December 11, 2012, the U.S. government officially recognised the SNC as the legitimate representative "of the Syrian people in opposition to the Assad regime" (Talmon, 2013, pg. 223). In 2013, the U.S. set aside 250 million dollars to support the Opposition, and was providing vetted groups within the Free Syrian Army (mainly the Supreme Military Council) with food rations, light weapons, "vehicles, sophisticated communications equipment and advanced combat medical kits" until 2017, under a covert program called Timber Sycamore (Washington Post, 2013; New York Times, 2017). Airstrikes also commenced in June of 2014 against ISIS targets and in support of Opposition groups fighting them, which has remained the American priority (Perra, 2016). However, as Opposition groups began losing ground to the Syrian government, and with reports of weapons falling into the hands of jihadist groups, Timber Sycamore was quickly cancelled. Kurdish rebel groups have also received substantial U.S. material aid, as the YPG have proven to be among the most effective rebel groups fighting ISIS in Syria (RAND Corporation, 2017b). However, the future of this

support has also been brought into question under the Trump administration, which has recently expressed its intentions to withdraw American forces from Syria in the near future (Atlantic, 2018; Al-Jazeera, 2018a).

Aside from the reported withdrawal of material support, the U.S. government has also waivered in its political position against Assad. While the Obama administration notably stated in 2015 that Assad had lost the legitimacy to rule and had to step down, in 2017 the Trump administration reversed this condition, stating that "getting Assad out" was no longer a priority (Reuters, 2017b). After the military threat posed by ISIS has been eradicated, it is unclear what the U.S. policy towards Syria will be.

Russian Interests and Actions in Syria

In contrast to American support for Kurdish and Opposition forces, Russia's material and diplomatic support for the Assad regime has been substantially greater and more consequential (Perra, 2016). Aside from the air support brought by the Russian military intervention in 2015, material provided to Assad include cash transfers, "new vehicles, armored vehicles, surveillance systems, radars and electronic warfare systems, as well as spare parts for helicopters, bombs and rockets," totalling billions of dollars (Al-Rawashdeh, 2018, pg. 57). Coming at a time when the Syrian military was losing ground to Opposition forces, Russia's intervention halted Assad's losses and transformed the war in his favour (Perra, 2016; Geranmayeh, 2016). Though the Russian government justified its intervention as an anti-terror operation, airstrikes routinely targeted various US-backed Opposition groups as well as ISIS, clearly indicating Russian wishes for Assad to remain in power and weakening the U.S. position (Al-Rawashdeh, 2018). Russian actions in Syria reflect the fact that its government arguably has considerably more at stake in the conflict

than its American counterpart. According to the RAND Corporation (2013), Syria is the last remnant of Russian power in the Middle East. Accordingly, its involvement in the Syrian conflict is motivated by several factors related to its regional geopolitical interests, influence, and Russian domestic security.

Russia's military and diplomatic alliance with the Syrian government can be traced to the Cold War, when the Soviet Union held considerable sway over the region. A remnant of this historic relationship is a Russian naval base in the Syrian city of Tartus, an important symbol of this influence (RAND Corporation, 2013). Allison (2013, pg. 807) states that this base is of little "practical value" to the Russian navy, but is a tangible symbol of the former Soviet Union's sway in the Middle East that the Russian state desires to maintain. The predominant driver of Russia's Syria policy relates to its regional geopolitical rivalry with the United States. As part of renewed tensions between the two world powers, Ibonye (2018) states that Russia is attempting to reassert the regional economic, military and political power that it lost at the end of the Cold War. As one of the conflict's main belligerents, Russia's position as Assad's main backer and patron gives it substantial leverage and bargaining power in any mediation attempt which, given Assad's vocal anti-Israeli foreign policy, extends to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as well (Akpinar, 2016; RAND Corporation, 2013). Russia's forceful intervention is further explained by the perception that it failed to secure a stake in the Libyan conflict in 2011. Unable to prevent the NATO military intervention that toppled Libya's Ghaddafi, Russian policy makers are determined to have a leading voice in Syria's future, and keep the country firmly within Russia's sphere of influence (Allison, 2013; Akpinar, 2016).

As part of efforts to increase its power and contain American power, Russia has sought to take advantage of tensions between the U.S. and Turkey resulting from the former's support for

the YPG, building closer ties with both Turkey and Israel (Ibonye, 2018). Russia is also cooperating closely with Iran, another key regional ally and proxy, to keep Assad in power and undermine American support for the Opposition (Geranmayeh, 2016).

Assad's removal would also have domestic implications for the Russian government. Like their American counterparts, Russian officials recognise that Assad's removal may create a power vacuum and further sectarian division (Allison, 2013). Due to the various insurgencies in Russia's North Caucasus region, the Russian government is wary of the effect that unchecked Islamist militancy in Syria will have in fuelling militants within Russia's borders (Allison, 2013). Perhaps more critically, questions of Assad's legitimacy to rule may spur similar debates about the legitimacy of Russian president Vladimir Putin. Allison (2013) points out that both Putin and Assad's respective presidencies are highly centralised and personalised, while the RAND Corporation (2013, pg. 2) describes Russia as "backsliding into authoritarianism." If Assad's overthrow is justified on the basis of illegitimacy, Putin may find himself under similar fire, a scenario the Russian government wishes to avoid at all costs. Accomplishing any of these goals and preventing worst-case scenarios requires Assad to remain as Syria's president.

Interference of Geopolitical Considerations in Mediation Attempts

As noted by Perra (2016), neither the Russian nor American governments are willing to completely abandon their stakes in Syria. A consequence of this reality has been the interference of the Russo-American rivalry into several mediation attempts, as both powers want to ensure their interests are protected at all costs. Although there have been several mediation attempts by a host of regional actors, I focus here on Russian and UN-led efforts.

The first Russian offer to mediate between Assad and the SNC came in January of 2012, followed a month later by a peace offer that would have seen Assad step down in favour of his vice-president, Farouq al-Sharaa (Akpinar, 2016; Atlantic, 2012). Widely seen as a lost opportunity for western powers, British, French and American negotiators rejected the offer due to the belief that Assad's regime was close to collapse anyway (Akpinar, 2016). Following these early efforts, in mid-2012 the UN became involved in the mediation process, in the form of the Geneva peace process. The Geneva sessions, of which there have been eight since 2012, demonstrate the prioritisation of geopolitical considerations over bringing the conflict to a quick end, as several crucial actors were excluded or chose not to attend talks. The first Geneva talks (Geneva I) in June of 2012 resulted in the signing of the Geneva Communiqué by the UN Security Council, Turkey, Kuwait, Qatar, Iraq, and the European Union which, according to the RAND Corporation (2017b, pg. 6), "remains the diplomatic foundation for a political transition in Syria." While the communiqué called for humanitarian access and an end to fighting, it did not clarify whether Assad would be part of a possible transitional government, due to American and Russian inability to agree on his future (Akpinar, 2016; United Nations, 2012). The Syrian government and Opposition forces did not attend, and the Iranian government was excluded from the talks due to American resistance (Akpinar, 2016).

The Geneva II talks, held in January of 2014, fared similarly. The Free Syrian Army, as well as a third of the SNC's membership boycotted the talks due to Assad's refusal to step down; the SNC threatened to boycott as well if Iran attended, leading to the latter's exclusion; and there was no representation of the Kurdish militias (Akpinar, 2016; BBC, 2014). Akpinar (2016) attributes these confrontations to both the Syrian government and Opposition's mutual belief in the other's inevitable collapse, which led to an "unwillingness to compromise" during the talks (pg. 2295).

Geneva III, held in February of 2016, coming several months after the Russian military intervention, was criticised for the presence of several Russian-backed rebel groups, the exclusion of Kurdish groups, and continuing Russian-backed Syrian government offensives during the talks, leading Opposition representatives to walk out (Akpinar, 2016). Furthermore, the U.S. and other western powers were becoming increasingly desperate to end the conflict due to growing refugee movements, ISIS-inspired attacks at home, and fear of being drawn into another Middle East war. This, according to Akpinar (2016, pg. 2296) led many western powers to "lean towards the Syrian–Russian line in order to end the conflict," much to the ire of Opposition groups.

The Russo-American rivalry manifested most notably in January 2017 with the creation of a separate mediation process by Russia, Turkey and Iran, known as the Astana process. The creation of the Astana talks has been labelled as an attempt by Russia to bring the Syrian peace process under Russian direction and away from western influence (Al-Jazeera, 2017c). The Astana talks, of which there have been ten at the time of writing, have predominantly reflected Russia's priority of securing Syria's sovereignty against any western attempt to remove Assad. The first joint statement to come out of the talks reflect this, as Russia, Iran and Turkey voiced their "commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic" (Al-Jazeera, 2017e). While the U.S. sent delegations to the first eight Astana talks, it declined to participate in the ninth round in May of 2018 due to the Trump administration's policy shift (Jordan Times, 2018). Kurdish groups have also been excluded from the Astana process, ostensibly due to Turkish pressure. In order to bridge the communications void between the U.S. and Russia, the UN Special Envoy on the Syrian conflict, Staffan de Mistura, has attended both the Geneva and Astana processes as an intermediary. At a September 2018 meeting in Geneva discussing a new Syrian constitution, though both U.S. and Russian-led delegations were present,

they reportedly did not meet at any point, instead leaving Mistura to meet with each side separately (Xinhua, 2018). For these complex reasons, talks have failed to produce anything of substance.

Alongside these mediation frameworks, attempts by the UN Security Council (UNSC) to bring the conflict to an end have also met geopolitical hurdles. UNSC Resolution 2254, signed in December 2015, reinforced UNSC support for the Geneva Communiqué, eventual elections and a new constitution, but efforts to condemn Assad directly have been vetoed by Russia (United Nations, 2015). Russia, often alongside China, has vetoed thirteen UNSC resolutions on the Syrian conflict to date, related to investigating, condemning, sanctioning or intervening against the Assad regime for chemical weapons use and early regime violence against protestors (UNSC, 2018a; UNSC, 2018b; UNSC, 2018c; UNSC, 2018d; UNSC, 2018e; UNSC, 2018f; UNSC, 2018g; UNSC, 2018h; UNSC, 2018i; UNSC, 2018j; UNSC, 2018k; UNSC, 2018l; UNSC, 2018m; RTE News, 2018). Several of these vetoed draft resolutions were met with Russian or joint Russo-Chinese counterproposals, which were in turn voted down by the U.S. and other western powers. These actions are a direct consequence of Russo-American attempts to steer the course of the conflict in line with their geopolitical objectives, to the detriment of developing local capacity and legitimising their actions to Syrian citizens affected by their decisions. At the time of writing, de-escalation zones have been created by Turkey and Russia in the last Opposition-held province of Idlib, and a precarious agreement to withdraw rebel weaponry from the province has been reached to prevent a full-scale attack (Al-Jazeera, 2018c). An upcoming meeting between French, Russian, German and Turkish officials in September of 2018 is hoped to establish a permanent ceasefire in the near future as Assad's forces retake remaining Opposition-held territory.

Impact of External Actors on Domestic Actors' Capacity and Claim to Legitimate Governance

As noted in the literature overview, domestic legitimacy is tied directly to governance capacity and the ability of an actor to fulfill the expectations of citizens. Where this capacity is dependent on external patron powers, capacity becomes precarious and volatile, affecting post-conflict stability. The effect that shifting Russo-American priorities have had on their respective domestic proxies has been evident in the actions of both the Assad regime and Opposition groups over the course of the conflict.

Effects of Russian Involvement on Assad's Regime

While several of the Syrian conflict's stakeholders may claim that Assad has lost all legitimacy, numerous authors have pointed out that Assad's successes demonstrate he may in fact be the most capable of the various domestic actors vying for legitimacy, as a direct result of Russian political and military action. As mentioned above, Russia's military intervention in support of Assad came at a time when his regime was losing ground to rebel forces. The turnaround that the Russian intervention brought gave Assad's regime continuity, military victories, and allowed the regime to function despite the overwhelming strain brought on by the war (Masud, 2018). As Masud (2018) states, the impression that the Syrian state continues to function, whether real or perceived, legitimises Assad's regime because it "appears to maintain order and discipline in the country" (pg. 87).

Russia's intervention was also crucial in solidifying the Syrian army's loyalty to Assad. Saturating the military's high command and Republican Guard, as well as major military units stationed within Damascus with Alawite members has been directly responsible for ensuring the

army's loyalty (Landis, 2013; National Interest, 2016; Cohen, 2016). The Carnegie Middle East Centre (2015) adds that "army officers have access to a benefits system that links nearly every aspect of their professional and personal lives to the regime," which ties their future livelihoods and families directly to Assad's protection. However, as Perra (2016) states, this loyalty was not guaranteed, as a military intervention of similar scale by the U.S. in support of the Opposition could have harmed the Syrian military's abilities enough to motivate its members to defect. Russian support generated the Syrian military's victories, thereby ensuring its continued loyalty and legitimising Assad's governance capacity further.

Assad's victories fuel his legitimacy as a protector of minorities and of Syrian sovereignty. As Assad is a minority ruler himself, the country's minority Christian and Druze populations, as well as Alawites, see him as a protector against inevitable majority-Sunni backlash should he fall (Al-Jazeera, 2016; RAND Corporation, 2013). His ability to appeal to Syrians' need for security is well summed up by Sottimano (2016, pg. 458): "domestic legitimacy has boiled down to a threat: the status quo or the promise of chaos."

Western backpedalling on Assad's legitimacy is another notable factor. Despite early U.S. and western expressions that Assad had lost legitimacy to rule, the U.S. changed course in early-2017, followed a few months later by French President Emanuel Macron's assertion that "he saw no legitimate successor to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad" (Reuters, 2017a; Reuters, 2017b). This reversal, the fact that western countries continued negotiations with Assad despite his supposed illegitimacy, and the west's indirect partnership with Assad against ISIS and jihadist forces, only added to Assad's legitimacy (Sottimano, 2016). Decisive Russian backing aided the deterioration of ISIS as an effective fighting force, the Syrian army's successes, the enduring divisions within the Opposition and Kurdish "terrorist groups" and U.S. support for these

"terrorists," which allowed Assad to "present himself as the only political actor in Syria able to restore order in the country" and protect Syria against U.S. aggression and domestic terrorism (Perra 2016, pg. 372; Akpinar 2016; Cohen, 2016; National Interest, 2016; Ulutas, 2011). At the time of writing, Assad's forces have retaken the majority of Opposition and ISIS-held territory, while Kurdish groups continue to control a substantial territory in the north (Appendix A). However, Assad's capacity to govern, his legitimacy, and indeed his future survival, depend on continued Russian military and diplomatic support, which can by no means be guaranteed in the long run.

Effects of American Involvement on Opposition and Kurdish Forces

To the same extent that Russian support empowered Assad to continue fighting, American support for his opponents accomplished the same. Talmon (2013) states that the political recognition of the Opposition as a legitimate representative of the Syrian population empowered them to continue their armed insurrection against Assad, as it signalled that Assad was no longer a legitimate head of state and that his fall was therefore inevitable. Talmon (2013, pg. 251) summarises the effect that this had on armed Opposition groups like the SNC:

there is little incentive for an opposition group widely recognized as the sole representative of the people and a "future provisional government of a democratic Syria" to enter into negotiations with the incumbent government or talk to States not recognizing it.

U.S. and western recognition made the SNC and other Opposition groups more rigid in their approach to negotiations as they believed they had the western world on their side, and as

mentioned by Akpinar (2016) and Talmon (2013), made them unwilling to discuss peace offers by any actors who did not recognise their authority. However, though Opposition and especially Kurdish forces owe much of their early territorial wins to U.S. support, their capacity to govern (like Assad's) depends on their external patron. The autonomous Democratic Federation of Northern Syria and its various armed militias "depend heavily on sustained American military and economic support" in order to control and maintain the considerable amount of territory they have gained over the course of the conflict (Al Jazeera, 2018a). American backing and military presence is also seen as a deterrent against longstanding Turkish determination to crush the Kurdish independence movement's threat to Turkish national unity (Al-Jazeera, 2018a; RAND Corporation, 2017a). The Kurdish autonomous region and its governing Democratic Union Party's (PYD) future stability depend on a long-term American military presence. However, while U.S. officials have so far been able to justify their alliance with the Kurds due to the latter's success against ISIS, any continued American presence after ISIS' demise is unlikely and difficult to rationalise (RAND Corporation, 2017a).

The sudden U.S. policy reversal on Assad's future, coupled with the dwindling of political support for a continued American presence in Syria has indicated to Opposition and Kurdish forces that American support is contingent upon them falling in line with U.S. policy objectives. As their external backer steps away, Kurdish groups have found themselves forced into negotiations with Assad to determine their future; however, with his steadfast Russian support, Assad has shown no willingness to allow the Kurds to hold on to their substantial territory in northern Syria (Atlantic, 2018). US-Russian understanding that Assad will remain in power means that Opposition forces, on the verge of defeat against Assad's army, are similarly unlikely to receive renewed American support.

The Challenges of External Mediation in Syria

The practicality of Russian and American efforts to create a long-term, enduring peace in Syria is constrained by their geopolitical interests and their illegitimacy within Syria's borders. Although it is in both countries' interests that the conflict end, their competing interests make this goal difficult to accomplish.

Firstly, American political support for the Kurds was always destined to end, as U.S. policy makers recognise that allowing Syria to splinter and break apart would turn the country into a security liability (RAND Corporation, 2017b). Though Kurdish forces were built up as a force against ISIS, the U.S. will never support Kurdish separatism due to this concern, as well as its substantially more crucial alliance with Turkey. Despite the Kurds' hopes for American support in pursuing Kurdish interests, this support was contingent upon Assad's fall, which is becoming increasingly unlikely. As Assad takes control of the last Opposition strongholds in the country, he will inevitably turn his attention to the Kurds; given the necessity of keeping Syria united, the U.S. will likely stand aside when this happens (Atlantic, 2018). Russia's military intervention is another factor hastening the Kurds' demise. As is the norm in great power proxy conflicts, the U.S. will not risk a direct confrontation with Russia in Syria (Al-Rawashdeh, 2018). The full-scale Russian intervention on Assad's side in 2015 sealed the fate of Assad's opponents, as the chances of an equally substantial U.S. intervention was immediately nullified. However, U.S. and western support for the Kurds have contributed to the creation of a splintered but capable Kurdish militia and a sizeable portion of Syria's landmass remaining under Kurdish control (Appendix A). Though U.S. policy makers may now see few alternatives to Assad's continued presidency, it is highly unlikely that Kurdish groups, with their localised monopoly of force, will willingly surrender their

territory or recognise Assad's legitimacy as a postwar head of state (Foreign Policy, 2017). While Opposition groups have lost the majority of their territory, their opposition to a postwar government headed by Assad is equally irrefutable.

Secondly, American military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq have made U.S. officials unwilling to commit to yet another Middle East war, and have also harmed American legitimacy (National Interest, 2017; Perra, 2016; Landis, 2013). As highlighted by the Brookings Institution (2018), creating a rebel military force that can reasonably replace Assad's governance capacity and legitimacy "requires the United States to become deeply involved in their sensitive military affairs, weighing in on broader questions of mission, organizational structure, and personnel." Given the Iraq and Afghanistan experiences, such a commitment is unlikely and undesirable for U.S. policy makers, indicating that a full-scale American commitment to the Opposition and Kurds was never a consideration. The legacy of American military operations in the Middle East has also hurt America's legitimacy in the region in a number of ways. First of all, highlighting failed U.S. nation building and continued violence in Iraq was an important tool for Assad in presenting a Syrian political transition as undesirable to Syrians (Ulutas, 2011). Secondly, American encouragement, and subsequent abandonment of rebelling Iraqis during the 1991 Gulf War in favour of keeping Saddam Hussein in power led to feelings of injustice and betrayal (Wall Street Journal, 2003; New York Times, 2011). Having allowed Hussein to suppress this uprising played a part in the hostile reception that U.S. forces faced upon their return in 2003; considering this outcome, it is likely that the U.S. policy reversal on Syria's Kurdish and Opposition forces will harm local American legitimacy further, and hinder any U.S. efforts to mediate the conflict or have a stake in Syria's postwar governance.

Russia's mediation attempts in support of Assad is equally unlikely to create a stable and legitimate postwar state. Assad is widely seen as illegitimate among Opposition and Kurdish groups, and most have rejected his role in any future governing capacity. As Al-Rawashdeh (2018, pg. 56) states, the conflict has escalated to a point where "it is not possible to return to the pre-revolutionary era." While Russia may continue to prop up his regime, his illegitimacy means that opposition and discontent will continue, contributing to long-term state fragility. Russia's backing of Assad, and its military actions in Syria also hurt Russia's domestic legitimacy and the legitimacy of any Russian-led mediation attempt.

Alongside these challenges, Russo-American competition, the establishment of two competing mediation frameworks in the form of the Geneva and Astana talks, and the exclusion of key actors from these frameworks make it unlikely that a mutually agreeable settlement can be reached through American or Russian action.

Final Discussion

The breakdown of order in Syria and the rise of non-state actors that challenge state authority is a reflection of Assad's loss of legitimacy and governance capacity. Opposition and Kurdish forces do not recognise Assad as a legitimate ruler of Syria. While he has proven himself to be a more capable authority than any other domestic actor in the conflict, Assad's early use of coercion against protestors legitimised armed revolt, and allowed rebel groups to justify their existence to the Syrian population. Assad may successfully retake control of Syrian territory from Opposition, Kurdish and jihadist elements, but perceptions of his legitimacy as a head of state are unlikely to change, and his rule will continue to face opposition and instability.

Russian and American involvement and support for various entities has complicated this situation in a number of ways, described by Sottimano (2016, pg. 459):

Each of these entities asserts a legitimate right to rule over areas under its (precarious) control and to continue to fight enemies who, they proclaim, lack political legitimacy since they are either a criminal regime, a horde of terrorists, or a mass of infidels. Each parties brandish the de-legitimation of the enemy as an imperative for its annihilation in a zero-sum game.

Material and diplomatic support for opposing domestic factions has empowered both sides to continue fighting and resist mediation attempts, which has contributed to the war's prolongation and heavy death toll.

Russian and American unwillingness to abandon their stakes in Syria, and their prioritisation of greater geopolitical objectives highlights the issue inherent in externally-mediated resolution attempts: only countries with substantial interests in a civil conflict will be willing to dedicate resources to intervening in such an endeavour. This contrasts with the first of Lake and Farris' (2014, pg. 579) two conditions for successful trusteeships: "the trustee has few, if any, interests beyond stability in the failed state." In Syria, this is clearly not the case, as both Russia and the U.S. have political, economic and security stakes in the conflict. This ensures that capacity and legitimacy development will take a backseat to ensuring their interests are protected. Russian policy makers see Assad's continued rule as crucial to protect Russian interests, while American policy makers see him as the most viable option in light of limited alternatives. In examining Lake and Farris' (2014, pg. 579) second condition for successful trusteeship, the disparity between the Russo-American position and those of domestic actors is clear: "the interests of the trustee and the

average citizen naturally overlap." Any Russian or American attempt to replace Assad with a favourable alternative will also face hurdles, as Russo-American illegitimacy in Syria will automatically delegitimise any externally-appointed successor to Assad.

As an illegitimate leader dependent on Russia for backing and protection, Assad faces a dual legitimacy trap: given the disparity between the wishes of both the U.S. and Russian governments and Syrian citizens, he will not be able to appeal to both successfully, which will undermine the stability of his rule. As Opposition and Kurdish forces learned from their dependence on a long-term American commitment to their cause, the Russian protection that keeps Assad in power is in no way guaranteed to last, as Russian geopolitical, economic and security concerns may similarly shift. This uncertainty will reinforce the dual legitimacy trap. As opposition and defiance to his rule continue, Assad will be increasingly forced to focus state resources on coercion and the suppression of these activities, rather than develop the state's capacity to deliver services to citizens and build his legitimacy. Although full-scale fighting may end, Syria is very far from attaining stable and durable governance over the long term.

Conclusion

The paper sought to examine the role that the foreign policy objectives of external actors play in influencing the trajectory of the Syrian crisis, by focusing on their influence on state legitimacy and capacity. As demonstrated in the above analysis, this influence has undeniably hindered attempts at conflict resolution. U.S. and Russian policy makers, in their role as patrons, will continue prioritising their regional objectives ahead of domestic legitimacy and capacity concerns. This means keeping Assad in power, putting their objectives at odds with the interests of the conflict's domestic actors who want Assad removed. The presence of external stakeholders

will substantially hinder the ease with which a mediation framework can be successfully implemented.

The cases outlined indicate that an illegitimate ruler cannot hope to rule sustainably without the growth or continuation of opposition. Assad's continued rule, regardless of his military victories and consolidation of control over Syria's territory, will remain illegitimate among Syria's citizens and rely on external protection and resources. The uncertainty of whether Assad will be able to balance the needs of citizens, maintain a semblance of order, and remain in Russia's favour will contribute to continued state fragility and opposition, and low governance capacity for the foreseeable future.

As alluded to in the literature overview by Derouen and Goldfinch (2012), it is recognised that governance capacity and legitimacy are only two of the various indicators that sustain the long-term political stability of a sovereign state. In the context of the Syrian crisis, future research must examine these indicators and their relationship to state stability and fragility if a successful framework for conflict resolution is to be attained.

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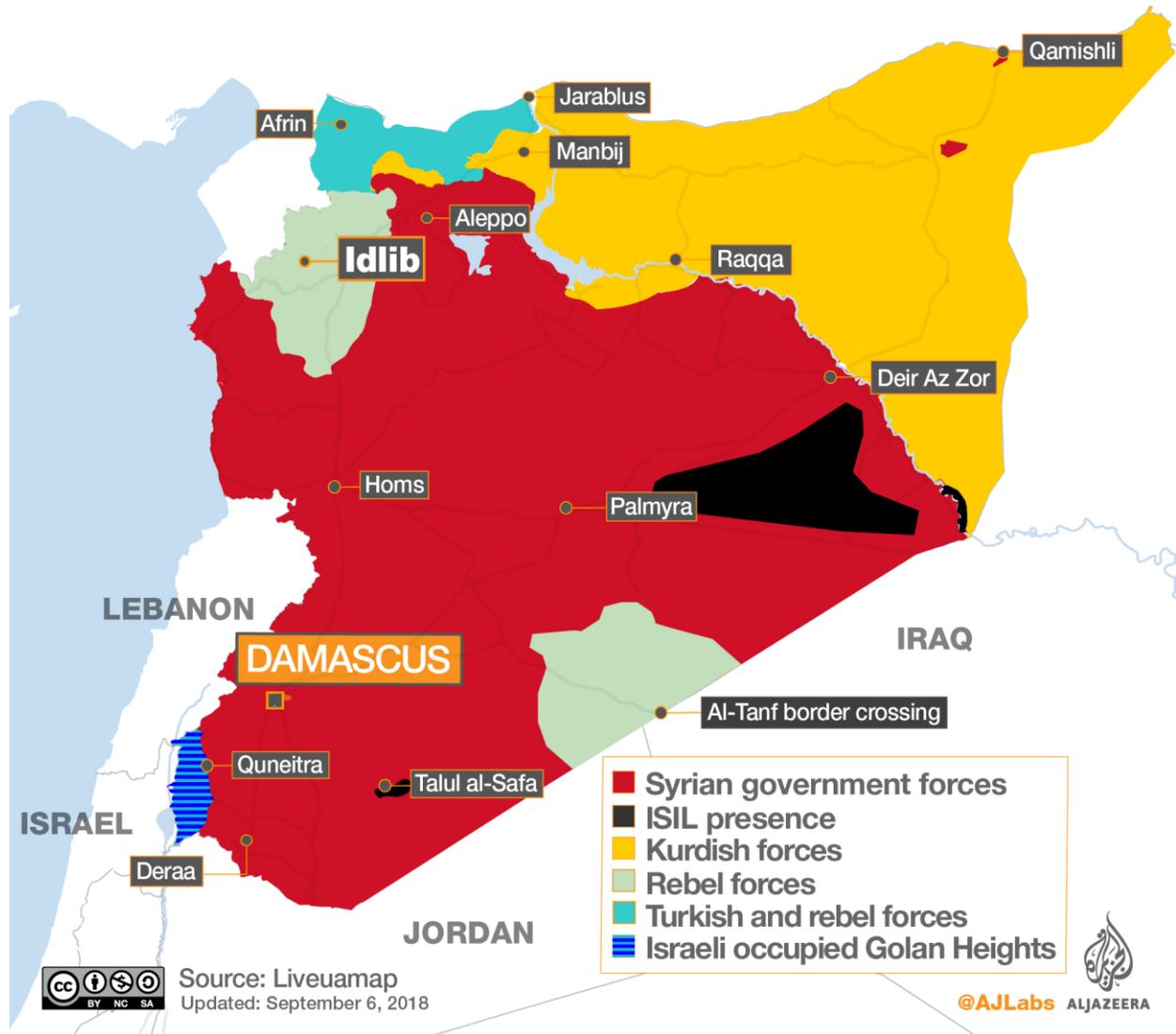7e6dde8f889d_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.993c07c4981a

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