

# A CAUTION AGAINST FRAMING SYRIA AS AN ASSAD-OPPOSITION DICHOTOMY

*The Western media, think tanks, and policy community routinely portray the Syrian conflict as a dichotomy of the Assad regime and the opposition. Yet, this has never been the case on the ground. The conflict has been –and still is, primarily – a popular movement of Syrians from all walks of life and backgrounds for better governance, freedom of expression, and other liberties. By reducing the Syrian conflict to an “Assad-opposition” duality, we effectively marginalize the population’s peaceful majority, empower two violent extremist actors, and ignore Syria’s complexity and its overarching civic identity. However, these latter societal characteristics are precisely the pillars we need to cherish if we are to prevent a further slide toward a protracted conflict eventually resulting in either a dictatorship or a fundamentalist state.*

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**T**he Western media routinely portrays the Syrian conflict as a clash between the Bashar al-Assad's regime and the "opposition". While some commentators acknowledge that the opposition is fragmented, the conflict is still framed in a very dichotomous way in which one side is the regime and the other is made up of various opposition groups with competing agendas for the Syrian future. Analyses by international think tanks are certainly more nuanced and acknowledge the presence of multiple ethnic identity groups in Syria, such as Alawites, Sunnis, various Christian groups, and Kurds, as well as non-ethnic identities such as the Syrian Army, the Free Syrian Army, and various non-armed opposition groups. Still, even these reports frame the conflict as a struggle between the regime and the opposition, and try to fit the multitude of identities that constitute today's Syria into one or the other of these "sides." The reports on Syria produced by the International Crisis Group (ICG) consistently refer to "the regime" and "the opposition" as units of analysis. They describe Alawites as supporters of the regime, Sunnis as supporters of the opposition and use phrases such as "opposition should," in order to demonstrate to ICG that there is an identifiable party to the present conflict called "opposition" that is the binary opposite of the regime.<sup>1</sup>

The traditional conflict resolution approaches, such as negotiations, are similarly based on a taken-for-granted assumption that conflicts exist between or amongst a specific number of identifiable parties. Such framing then dictates approaches with respective interventions and conflict resolution efforts. As the Syrian conflict is routinely framed to be between a dictatorial regime and a fragmented opposition, Western intervention efforts are, not surprisingly, directed at supporting and consolidating the opposition.

Further, as the opposition's fragmentation is often framed as consisting of one wing leaning toward Islamic fundamentalism and another leaning toward democratic reform, the West's efforts are more specifically directed at strengthening of the democratic "wing" of the opposition. Other interventions, such as former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's effort, attempt to find a mediated solution between the "two sides".<sup>2</sup> Most critically, the terms used to frame the non-unified nature of the opposition almost universally have a negative connotation and include: "fragmented", "divided", "weak", and similar. But is that diversity really something negative? I insist that if embraced rather than rejected that very complexity is the solution to the current conflict.

1 "Syria's Mutating Conflict," *International Crisis Group*." 1 August 2012, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/egypt-syria-lebanon/syria/128-syrias-mutating-conflict.aspx>

2 Kofi Annan, "Security Council 6736th Meeting," *United Nations*, <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2012/sc10583.doc.htm>

In this paper, I do not aim to question the merits of approaches that frame the conflict in binary us versus them terms in general. In some cases, where the conflict parties are clearly identifiable, trying to mediate a solution between the sides might be appropriate. What I see as problematic, however, is that we seem to use that framing by default. More disturbingly, we rarely question the influence that our framing and subsequent interventions could have on the conflict. Crucially, however, framings matter.

In the Syrian case, if we frame the context as two-sided regime versus opposition binary, mediation or other interventions that bring the two sides together or aim to replace one side by the other would seem appropriate. In contrast, if we see the Syrian context as a fluid and chaotic struggle of numerous agendas and cross-cutting identities still united under the umbrella of an overarching Syrian identity, then boiling it all down to an oversimplified notion of a regime versus opposition conflict does little to help the situation. Such approach arbitrarily assigns individuals and identity groups to one side or the other, exacerbates a dichotomy that might not be otherwise clearly pronounced, and then in a manifestation of a self-fulfilling prophecy tries to reconcile the “sides” that the approach itself just created.

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This is not to say, of course, that the Western media, think tanks, or the conflict’s mediators created the current crisis in Syria. However, I insist that we should be open to the possibility that our framing and intervention do further damage, as assuming binary opposition every time when we see a conflict paves a way for creating one.

Indeed Syria has some defined conflict parties, such as Assad’s regime and specific armed groups opposing the regime. But my work with Syrians, as well as interviews with activists or other practitioners working there indicate that large parts of the population do not identify with either of these two binary opposites. Many Alawites and Christians, routinely considered as pro-regime, are actually opposed to Assad, while also fearing the armed opposition. Further, many of those

opposing the regime include groups such as various non-violent movements, some ethnic minorities, communists, non-aligned youth groups, and intellectuals –to name just a few– who are opposing the armed rebels as much as they are opposing the regime. Perhaps most importantly, a great many people still identify themselves as Syrians, a shared identity, and strongly resist any attempt to classify them as pro-regime, anti-regime, Alawite, Sunni, Kurdish or anything else that can suggest a division. Yet these voices are rarely heard. Since they are not “the regime” and not “the opposition,” they are marginalized.

### ***The Inadequacy of Mainstream Theories of International Relations for Resolving the Syrian Conflict***

In the international relations field the two main schools are arguably realism and liberalism. The former typically portrays conflict as either a natural form of human behavior or necessary condition of state behavior, with the latter accepting the theoretical possibility of sustainable peace.

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Realism has long been the most influential school in international relations. There are, of course, some variations among the different schools of realism. Classical or Human Nature Realism represented primarily by Hans Morgenthau advanced a Hobbesian argument that human nature is inherently competitive.<sup>3</sup> The Defensive Realism, or structural realism, represented by Kenneth Waltz maintains that states aim to survive by maintaining the

balance of power and warns against acquiring too much power arguing that it is counterproductive and can backfire.<sup>4</sup> The offensive realism, and its main representative Mearsheimer has similarities with both, but also major differences. Offensive realism and defensive realism agree that the cause of state competition is the anarchic *structure of international system*.<sup>5</sup> Great powers are forced to compete to maximize their relative power because that is the optimal way to maximize their security. This is also the key disagreement of offensive realism with human

3 Hans Joachim Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1978).

4 Kenneth N Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove, Ill.: Waveland Press, 2010).

5 John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003).

nature realism that argues that it is the *lust for power* inherent in the states (or their leaders) that causes the states to compete.

What unites many different schools of thought under the umbrella of realism is their focus on the international system and their disregard for the internal political structures of the states.<sup>6</sup> States are portrayed as rational, unitary actors, and are the sole focus of analysis in realist theory. As the prevalent school of international relations, realism clearly sheds light on the behavior of various international actors in regard to Syria and can help explain certain geopolitical dynamics.

At the same time, this approach has close to nothing to say about the evolving and complex intrastate conditions in Syria and therefore is not adequate for explaining this conflict.

Within the international relations field, the base assumptions of realism are criticized by various liberal schools. Unlike realism, liberalism is very much concerned with the internal characteristics of states. Some key assumptions of liberalism are that the internal characteristics of states vary considerably and these differences have profound effects on state behavior.<sup>7</sup> Liberals argue, for instance, that internal political forms such as democracy are inherently preferable to others, such as authoritarianism, as they are believed to lead to peaceful international relations among states sharing democratic norms and institutions. As liberalism accepts the possibility of absolute rather than relative gains, positive-sum conflict resolution models and sustainable peace are seen as attainable. Bargaining models, negotiation between state actors, and to a lesser degree mediation, are some of the main intervention practices associated with liberalist theories.

Similar to realist theories, however, states are still seen as the main units of the analysis here and, as a result, the focus is primarily on identifying or creating conditions under which states are ready to agree to a negotiated solution. In situations

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6 Mearsheimer (2003), p. 17.

7 Mearsheimer (2003), p. 15.

of internal conflict or when the conflict involves non-state actors, liberals usually advocate for a negotiated settlement that requires identification of sufficiently consolidated groups within the state who could sit across the table from the state actor. The boxing of Syria into a two-party frame when applying a liberal perspective, therefore, is not surprising. Negotiations are the main conflict resolution mechanism of that school, and to have negotiations one needs to find recognizable “parties”. To quote Maslow, if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.

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Syria, then, must be a negotiator’s nightmare. One actor, Assad’s regime, is clear and visible. But there is no counterpart. Syria, one would think, could give a good reason to question the duality of conflicts, a reason to contemplate interventions other than the ones that assume a state versus state or a government versus opposition dichotomy. But such questioning, if it even happens, remains outside of mainstream media and policy circles.

To take the Maslow analogy a step further: while the tool is still that hammer, but there is no nail, today’s international relations strategy toward Syria seems to be to forge a nail. From the early days of the Syrian conflict, media and think tanks have been busy searching for a worthy counterpart to the Assad regime: could it be the Free Syrian Army? Could it be a coalition of armed groups? Could it be some secular or liberal group? If there isn’t anyone already, how could the opposition be consolidated to create such a group? In other words, the main question does not seem to be how to make sense of Syria. It is, instead, how to influence the situation in a way that an identifiable second party can emerge, so that Syria can start looking more like a two-sided conflict we know.

International relations approaches to Syria generally follow either the liberal school or the realist one. In the first case, the proponents aim to forge an opposition to the Assad regime to proceed with negotiations. When it comes to realists, they are concerned only with external politics and geopolitical implications of the Syrian conflict. Therefore, those who see Assad as an ally, in their own geopolitical game, support the regime; those who see him as an adversary, support an overthrow and

establishment of a government to their liking. With all their differences, then, liberal and realist approaches have one thing in common: the government and a possible consolidated opposition to the government are their only units of analysis.

But is Syria really a conflict of a particular opposition group with the government? I argue that it is not. It has been and still is a popular movement of Syrians from all walks of life and backgrounds demanding better governance, freedom of expression, and other liberties. No group that has a claim to be the alternative to the regime, including the Free Syrian Army, speaks for a sufficiently broad coalition. And if Syria is a movement and not a two-party conflict, then why do we spend all our efforts on reducing that complexity into one identifiable armed group? Is our attachment to seeing every conflict as a dichotomy all that important?

### *Embracing Diversity*

Reducing the Syrian conflict to a duality of “the Assad regime” versus “a particular opposition group” marginalizes the clear majority of Syrians who are neither of these two. Worst of all, by framing Syria as an Assad-opposition binary we are effectively empowering the two violent extremes at the expense of everyone else; we are forcing the majority to either take a side with one of the militant extremes or be silenced. In other words, through our framing we are marginalizing the majority that calls themselves Syrians and are the true peace constituency; and we are legitimizing and sustaining a clear binary division that does not organically exist.

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What’s most paradoxical is that the West continues imposing this framing when even from the realist perspective it should be seen as problematic. The two sides this discourse empowers are precisely the sides the West should not want to see empowered: one is the murderous Assad regime and the other is the fundamentalist opposition, hardly allies of the West.

By espousing this simplistic binary frame we deprive Syria of its two pillars: its complexity and the coherence of its overarching civic Syrian identity. Yet these are

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precisely the two pillars that we need to cherish if we want to prevent Syria from sliding toward a protracted conflict eventually resulting in either a dictatorship or a fundamentalist state.

Our attachment to two-sided framings prevents us from looking beyond outdated international relations approaches into the emerging fields of conflict resolution and transformation that could offer up-to-date solutions to contemporary conflicts. To be fair, when it comes to practice, these fields are by and large replicating the same dichotomous framings borrowed from the international relations field. Analytically, however, these emerging disciplines are heavily

influenced by the discursive turn and the examination of the interrelationships between language (including framing), power (including power of nomination), institutionalization of discourse (including a binary view of conflict), and action (including conflict resolution). Discursive approaches, in turn, are oriented toward overcoming simplistic dichotomies. To paraphrase Jabri, language and discourse do not simply reflect or describe reality; instead they actively construct a version of those things.<sup>8</sup> So while the currently dominant discourse of international relations constructs a dichotomy perpetuating the conflict, a more inclusive discourse of transformation of actors and inter and intrasocietal relations could help us construct a more complex picture of Syria – one in which the choice is not limited to either Assad or the Islamists. This new approach is necessary as it embraces complexity, and opens up a possibility of building a multidimensional, inclusive and civic vision for Syria.

The Syrian conflict is not yet intractable. We need to stop fueling it. Journalists, analysts, and academics in the West are not passive observers and reporters. We hold the power of nomination and are among those defining the narrative of the Syrian conflict. As of today, we are responsible for the marginalization of Syria’s peaceful majority and for the creation of a two-headed monster.

<sup>8</sup> Vivienne Jabri, *Discourses on Violence: Conflict Analysis Reconsidered* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 94-95.

It is time to recognize our power, but also our responsibility, as it is in our own interest. It is time to start noticing and supporting Syria's constituencies that are ready for peace. But in order to do that, we need to give up our oversimplified black and white framings, as convenient as they may seem, and espouse complexity.