# Challenges of Peace building:
# Understanding War within War in Syria

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## Peace Building Perspectives

Peace, in common parlance connotes a state of being characterized by absence of physical and or organized violence. However this is not to obliterate the fact that peace is a contested narrative within the academia and policy makers. There are questions of whose peace, at what cost and in what form. One understanding of peace by the parties in conflict who emerge vindicated from the conflict situation may be antithetical to the peace narratives cultivated by the party ending up as looser. It becomes, then, a dichotomous choice between victor's peace and loser's peace (Shurke et al., 2012). Similarly, mere absence of violence may, in many cases, not guarantee the absence of incompatibility and discontent in society. Durable peace warrants an equitable deal seen to be fair and just by the larger community. A pertinent distinction here can be, what Johan Galtung calls, negative peace and positive peace. "Whereas negative peace is the absence of direct violence (e.g., people being killed), positive peace also includes the absence of structural violence (e.g., dying as a result of poverty), and cultural violence (e.g., factors that blind people to injustice or allow them to rationalize it). Thus, while the negative peace of order and the cessation of direct violence may not be compatible with justice, the positive peace of reconciliation and psycho/social healing for the most part presupposes it" (Gawerc, 2006). The present paper presupposes such an understanding of peace and underscores the importance of peace building, unlike peacemaking or peace keeping, as a process to establish lasting peace. Peace building refers to a dynamic and multidimensional process covering a wide range of social, psychological and economic well-being aspects. The intention of peace-building is to create a structure of peace that is based on justice, equity, and cooperation (i.e., positive peace), thereby addressing the underlying causes of violent conflict so that they become less likely in the future. Peace building also recognizes that conflicts are seldom solved and peace building is a continuous and complex process. This leads us to another important concept, namely, conflict transformation instead of conflict resolution. Conflict transformation is a complex set of intervention

that includes (1) context transformation at the international, regional, and/or social level; (2) Structural transformation focused on the root causes; (3) Actor transformation through a change of leaders or the constituency, or by a drastic change in their beliefs and goals; (4) Issue transformation through a change in positions or the salience of issues; and (5) Personal and group transformation which is focused on changing "hearts and minds (Miall et al., 2005). There is no one way to build peace as it involves broadest range of ambitions for justice, equality and participation. Other approaches of peace building include a school of thinkers who converge on conflict and peace as game. Another approach to peace building has been the unmet need school (Coser, Azhar, Gurr, Davies). Unmet need approach emphasize that conflict happen when people are denied the means to meet some or all of their needs for access, opportunity, security, dignity etc. If the patterns of unmet need coincide with ethnic and religious divides, than conflict is likely to be more complex and so is the peace building process. The present paper proposes to use the unmet need framework to explore the possibility of peace and conflict resolution, if not transformation, taking the case of Syrian Civil War.

## Methodology

Conflict studies are complex exercises which has to deal with a combination of factors that go into making and probably unmaking of a particular conflict. The present piece of research work is descriptive in research design relying on data mostly from the secondary sources like books, magazines, unpublished work, personal correspondence, new reports, reports by international aid agencies, Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), Amnesty International etc. The case of Civil War in Syria will be analysed here as a case study. The case study proposes to use Horizontal Inequality (HIs) as a theoretical framework in the analysis of the case and try to map the embedded challenges in this particular conflict for peace building in Syria. The Work particularly pursues following few research questions:
(1) What is the backdrop of Conflict in Syria? (2) Who are fighting with the Regime and amongst themselves in Syria? (3) What is the Political economy of Conflict in Syria? (4) What is the Role of major world powers in Syrian Conflict? (5) What is the structure of social and political inequality in Syria? (6) Can HIs (Horizontal Inequalities) explain conflict in Syria? (7) What challenges for Peace building in Syria can be identified from the work?

## The Context of Syria:

Syria became an independent republic in 1946, from French occupation, although democratic rule was ended by a coup in March 1949, followed by two more coups

that same year (Little, 1990). The political history of Syria has been punctuated by coups and violent contestations, often facilitated by Cold War rivalry, besides new political experiments of briefly joining a United Arab Republic (1958-61). The Ba'ath Syrian Regional Branch government came to power in 1963 again after a successful coup by Army officers. In 1966, another coup overthrew the traditional leaders of the party. In 1970, again, General Hafez al-Assad, the then Minister of Defense, seized power in a "corrective revolution" and remained as President, until his death in 2000. Hafez Al Assad is also symbol of autocracy in Syria as he held on to power through repression (eg. He dropped, 1973, the Constitutional Requirement of President to be a Muslim, he himself belonging to the Shia Alawite minority community which is considered by many as unIslamic). Since then, the secular Syrian Regional Branch has remained the dominant political authority in what is virtually a single-party state in Syria; Syrian citizens may only approve the President by referendum and could not vote in multi-party elections for the legislature. Bashar al-Assad, who succeeded in 2000 after the death of his father as the President of Syria initially, inspired hopes for democratic and state reforms. Bashar al-Assad started with releasing political prisoners and allowed a liberal environment for Muslim brotherhood to engage in political activity and a promise to completely end more than 40 years of emergency. The period was characterized by the emergence of numerous political forums or salons, where groups of like-minded people met in private houses to debate political and social issues. The Damascus Spring largely ended in August 2001 with the arrest and imprisonment of ten leading activists who had called for democratic elections and a campaign of civil disobedience. From 2001 even reformists in Parliament had begun to criticize the legacy of stagnation since the rule of former President Hafez al-Assad; Analysts say, Bashar al-Assad has talked about reform but carried out very little, and he has failed to deliver on promised reforms since 2000.

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**Syrian Economy and Society:**

Syria is a multi-ethno-religious country where the majority (60%) of the population belongs to Arab Sunni sect. Other ethno religious groups living in Syria are the Shia Alawite (12%), Kurd Sunnis (9%), American and Assyrian Christians, Arab Druze etc. There is marked social and economic inequality along ethnic and religious lines. Political inequality between the majority Shia and minority Sunni community is very high. Being part of the Arab family of countries, there is a tendency that majority Shia population aspires for moderate Islamic rule with the heart of Arab Socialism. The Assad family comes from the minority Alawite religious group, an offshoot of Shi'ite Islam. It has maintained tight control on Syria's security services generating resentment among the majority Sunni Muslims. Ethnic minority Syrian Kurds have also protested and complained over ethnic discrimination and denial of their cultural and language rights.

Discontent against the government was strongest in Syria's poorer areas, predominantly among conservative Sunnis. These included cities with high poverty rates, such as Daraa and Homs, rural areas hit hard by a drought in early 2011, and the poorer districts of large cities. Socio-economic inequality increased significantly after free market policies were initiated by Hafez al-Assad in his later years, and accelerated after Bashar al-Assad came to power. With an emphasis on the service sector, these policies benefited a minority of the nation's population, mostly people who had connections with the government, and members of the Sunni merchant class of Damascus and Aleppo. By 2011, Syria was facing deterioration in the national standard of living and steep rises in the prices of commodities. The country also faced particularly high youth unemployment rates. According to a study of Dubai School of Governments Wolfenshon Centre for Youth Development titled Youth Exclusion in Syria: Social, Economic and Institutional Dimensions, 2007 the rate of unemployment among the youth stands at close to 26%. Gender divide in employment is also very large. Young women in Syria are half as likely as young men to participate in the job market.

> Over the past ten months, the international community has gazed awestruck at how Syria's uprisings have swept through a nation once viewed as pacified by a repressive regime. An analysis solely focusing on the brutality of the Assad regimes, however, elides some of the economic roots of popular unrest, particularly those stemming from the rural poor. As a result of four years of severe drought, farmers and herders have seen their livelihoods destroyed and their lifestyles transformed, becoming disillusioned with government promises of plentitude in rural areas. In the disjuncture between paternalistic

promises of resource redistribution favoring Syria's peasantry and corporatist pacts binding regime interests to corrupt private endeavors, one may begin to detect the seeds of Syrian political unrest (*http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/4383/sowing-the-seeds-of-dissent_economic-grievances-an*).

Syria has undergone through sever political repression for more than 50 years. The country was under emergency rule from 1963 until 2011, banning public gatherings of more than five people, and effectively granting security forces sweeping powers of arrest and detention. World Human Rights Report 2005, 2007, 2010 has documented the dismal record of Assad Regime, stating that he had failed to substantially improve the state of human rights since taking power, although some minor aspects had seen improvement (Human Rights Watch Report, 2010). Rights of free expression, association and assembly were strictly controlled in Syria even before the uprising. The social, cultural, political and economic rights of Stateless Kurds have been brutally suppressed by the ruling regime in Syria. The authorities harass and imprison human rights activists and other critics of the government, who are often indefinitely detained and tortured in poor prison conditions. Women and ethnic minorities have faced discrimination in the public sector. Thousands of Syrian Kurds were denied citizenship in 1962 and their descendants continued to be labeled as "foreigners". The successive governments of Hafez and Bashar al-Assad have been closely associated with the country's minority Alawite religious group, an offshoot of Shia, whereas the majority of the population, and most of the opposition, is Sunni.

The Syrian Civil War, declared such by the UN in 2012, is an ongoing armed conflict taking place in Syria. Pro-democracy protests erupted in March 2011 in the southern city of Deraa after the arrest and torture of some teenagers who painted revolutionary slogans on a school wall. After security forces opened fire on demonstrators, killing several, more took to the streets. The unrest triggered nationwide protests demanding President Assad's resignation. The government's use of force to crush the dissent merely hardened the protesters' resolve. By July 2011, hundreds of thousands were taking to the streets across the country. Opposition supporters eventually began to take up arms, first to defend themselves and later to expel security forces from their local areas.

**Major armed opposition groups:**

The Syrian crisis is a typical case of rebellion by armed groups fighting against the ruling regime who are united by the purpose and opposed to each other by agenda.

Consequently it has snow balled into a sectarian situation where it is a free for all to kill each other in the fight against the State. The groups are divided amongst themselves on the basis of objectives, targets, ethnicity, and international support base or economic interest base that each enjoys. The conflict is now more than just a battle between those for or against President Assad. It has acquired sectarian overtones, pitching the country's Sunni majority against the president's Shia Alawite sect, and drawn in neighbouring countries and world powers. The rise of the jihadist groups, including Islamic State, has added a further dimension.

The armed opposition consists of various groups that were formed during the course of the conflict, primarily the Free Syrian Army, which was the first to take up arms in 2011, and the Islamic Front formed in 2013. In 2013, Hezbollah entered the war in support of the Syrian army. In the east, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), a jihadist militant group originating from Iraq, made rapid military gains in both Syria and Iraq, eventually conflicting with the other rebels. The Syrian National Defense Force was formed out of pro-government militias. The force acts in an infantry role, directly fighting against rebels on the ground and running counter-insurgency operations in coordination with the army, which provides them logistical and artillery support. The force has a 500-strong women's wing called "Lionesses of National Defense" which operates checkpoints. NDF soldiers are allowed to take loot from battlefields, which can then be sold for extra money in locations dubbed the "Sunni market. The Shabiha, named a terrorist organisation by the US in 2012, are unofficial pro-government militias drawn largely from Assad's Alawite minority group. Since the uprising, the Syrian government has frequently used shabiha to break up protests and enforce laws in restive neighborhoods. As the protests escalated into an armed conflict, the opposition started using the term shabiha to describe any civilian Assad supporter taking part in the government's crackdown on the uprising. The formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was announced on 29 July 2011 by a group of defecting Syrian Army officers. The purpose of the Free Syrian Army was to defend civilian protesters from violence by the state, and to bring the Syrian regime down. Many Syrian soldiers subsequently deserted to join the FSA. The FSA functions more as an umbrella organization than a traditional military chain of command, and was first headquartered in Turkey, but moved its command headquarters to northern Syria in September 2012. The Islamic Front is a merger of seven rebel groups involved in the Syrian civil war that was announced on 22 November 2013. The group maintains a distance from FSA and Syrian National Council, the political front of FSA. The group is widely seen as backed and armed by Saudi Arabia. The al-Nusra Front, being the biggest jihadist group in Syria, is often considered to be the most aggressive and violent part of the opposition. It is

group which is competing against Islamic State and maintains allegiance to al-Qaeda in Iraq. Al-Nusra Front is also opposed to indigenous Syrian opposition (FSA) even though al-Nusra Front has fought alongside the FSA in several battles and some FSA fighters defected to the al-Nusra Front. The Mujahideen's strict religious views and willingness to impose sharia law disturbed many Syrians. Needless to mention that though Al-Nusra Front and IS both have had their roots in Al Qaeda, Al-Nusra Front unlike the IS, is more gradualist in methods of enforcing sharia law. The Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), first entered this Syrian Civil War as belligerent in July 2012, by capturing a town, Kobane, that until then was under control of the Syrian Assad-government. Kurds consist of mostly Sunni Muslims, with a small minority of Yezidis. They had suffered from decades of discrimination and neglect, being deprived of basic civil, cultural, economic, and social rights having no State of their own. YPG is participating in the civil war in smaller numbers than their Syrian Arab Sunni counterparts. Consequently, violence and state repression in Kurdish areas has been less severe. In terms of a post-Assad Syria, Kurds reportedly desire a degree of autonomy within a decentralized state. (From Wikipedia and reports of leading News Agencies like BBC, Reuters, The Guardian, France Presse, Amnesty Internationals, Human Rights Watch Group, Al Jazzera, Al Akhbar, Al Monitor etc.). From among all the players, Islamic State happens to me most prominent and deadly. It is known for its brand of ultra-radicalism and believes in terrorizing the non-Arab and non-sunni people into submission by selective display of violence against humanity. Earlier it was Jamaat al-Tahwidwa-i-Jihadfounded in 1999 and had a prominent role in fighting American occupation forces in Iraq along with Al Qaeda. In 2006 it became Al Qaeda Iraq and Islamic State Iraq in 2010. Abu Baqr Al Baghdadi took over the leadership and it got itself involved in the Syrian Civil War. Throughout late 2013 and early 2014, ISIS built its power base in Syria, establishing its stronghold in Raqqa, where it was able to seize total control after ousting all other rebel groups. Despite a counterattack by other factions sparked by its brutal tactics, ISIS was able to hold its positions and consolidate its power base. They effectively imposed control over areas by empowering their allies and crushing their enemies. Policies of divide and rule in fractious tribal areas helped them to sustain their hold on territory. On June 29, 2014, the first day of Ramadan, ISIS declared itself a caliphate and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as Caliph Ibrahim, calling for the immediate loyalty of all Muslims throughout the world (Special report: Islamic State, Clarion Project: 2015). By July 2014, ISIL controlled a third of Syria's territory and most of its oil and gas production, thus establishing itself as the major opposition force. By July 2013, the Syrian government was in control of approximately 30-40% of the country's territory and 60% of the Syrian population. The ideology of the Islamic State is that of Salafist-

jihadism (A group of ultra-conservative Sunnis with a reference to the earliest Islamic pious forefathers- Al Salaf or earliest followers of Prophet Mohammed). The Islamic State is not only a terrorist group. It is a political and military organization that holds a radical interpretation of Islam as a political philosophy and seeks to impose that worldview by force on Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Politically it has been learnt that they are building and consolidating State Institutions. They devote considerable attention to delivery of education, security and health services. Militarily they have captured a large part of Syria, though mostly desert and thinly populated but most importantly resource rich regions, in a short span of time. Tactically they use wholesale killing, intimidation, torture, rape, beheading, crucification to enforce sharia law & order. The ghastly beheading of American Journalist James Foley, Stephen Sotloff and British aid worker David Haines is still vivid in the mind of international community. Amnesty International in a report recounts the rape and sexual slavery of Yezidi Women in Sinjar Region, North western part of Syria in the following words:

> In August 2014, IS fighters abducted hundreds, possibly thousands, of Yezidi men, women and children who were fleeing the IS takeover from the Sinjar region, in the north-west of the country. Hundreds of the men were killed and others were forced to convert to Islam under threat of death.5 Younger women and girls, some as young as 12, were separated from their parents and older relatives and sold, given as gifts or forced to marry IS fighters and supporters. Many have been subjected to torture and ill-treatment, including rape and other forms of sexual violence, and have likewise been pressured into converting to Islam (Escape from the Hell, Amnesty International, December, 2014)

**International involvement and Magnitude of the Humanitarian Crisis:**

What began as another Arab Spring uprising against an autocratic ruler has mushroomed into a brutal proxy war that has drawn in regional and world powers. Iran and Russia have propped up the Alawite-led government of President Assad and gradually increased their support, providing it with an edge that has helped it make significant gains against the rebels. The major parties supporting the Syrian Government are Iran and Hezbollah. Both of these are involved in the war politically and logistically by providing military equipment, training and battle troops. The Syrian government has also received arms from Russia and support directly from GRU, Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation. The government has also enjoyed the support of Lebanon's Shia Islamist Hezbollah movement, whose fighters have provided important battlefield support

since 2013. The Sunni-dominated opposition has, meanwhile, attracted varying degrees of support from its main backers - Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other Arab states along with the US, UK and France. Syrian rebels have received training from CIA at their bases in Quatar, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia happens to be one who mainly finances and arms the rebel group. However, the rise of hardline Islamist rebels and the arrival of jihadists from across the world has led to a marked cooling of international and regional backing. The US is now arming a 5,000-strong force of "moderate" rebels to take the fight to IS on the ground in Syria, and its aircraft provide significant support to Kurdish militia seeking to defend three autonomous enclaves in the country's north (www.bbc.com). Thus we can see that different international actors in the Syrian conflict have played carrot and stick strategy in keeping with their geo-political interest instead of showing any genuine interest in lasting peace in the strife torn nation. The armed opposition group itself is a divided house consisting different religio-ethnic groups who are competing with each other for political dominance. The United States of America itself was initially reluctant to support the rebel groups fearing indirect support to ex members of Al Qaeda who have eventually joined the coalition of armed forces to fight the Assad regime. US Policy so far have been overtly IS focused instead of working towards peace in this theatre of war within war in Syria.

International lack of interest or taking more partisan interest has led to one of the deadliest war in Syria in recent times. According to Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) estimate (Up to June, 2015), more than 2,30,620 - 3,20,620 deaths has taken place in the more than four year old civil war in Syria. The estimates by UN for death stands at 2,20,000 (January 2015). International organizations have accused the Syrian government, ISIL and other opposition forces of severe human rights violations, with many massacres occurring. Based on news reports, activist accounts and Report of UN Enquiry Commissions, it has been found that Chemical weapons have been used many times during the conflict as well. The Syrian government is reportedly responsible for the majority of civilian casualties and war crimes, often through bombings. In addition, tens of thousands of protesters and activists have been imprisoned and there are reports of torture in state prisons. The severity of the humanitarian disaster in Syria has been outlined by the UN and many international aid organizations. More than 12 million Syrians have been displaced, almost 4 million Syrians have fled the country to countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt and become refugees, and millions more have been left in poor living conditions with shortages of food and drinking water. A report published by the UN in March 2015 estimated the total economic loss since the start of the conflict was $202 billion and that four in every five Syrians were now living in poverty-30% of them in abject poverty. Syria's education, health and social welfare systems are also in a state of collapse.

**External Conflict resolution Initiatives:**

With neither side able to inflict a decisive defeat on the other, the international community long ago concluded that only a political solution could end to the conflict in Syria. However, a number of attempts by the Arab League and the UN to broker ceasefires and start dialogue have failed. In January 2014, the US, Russia and UN convened a conference in Switzerland to implement the 2012 Geneva Communique, an internationally-backed agreement that called for the establishment of a transitional governing body in Syria formed on the basis of mutual consent. The talks, which became known as Geneva II, broke down in February after only two rounds. The then UN special envoy Lakhdar Brahimi blamed the Syrian government's refusal to discuss opposition demands and its insistence on a focus on fighting "terrorists" - a term Damascus uses to describe rebel groups. UN Secretary General Ban-Ki-Moon says the organisation's long-term strategic objective remains a political solution based on the Geneva Communique. The UN special envoy Staffan de Mistura has also proposed establishing a series of "freeze zones", where local ceasefires would be negotiated to allow aid deliveries in besieged areas. But his attempt to broker a truce in Aleppo has been rejected by rebels in the city, who fear the government will use it to redeploy its forces elsewhere and that IS militants will simply ignore it. The blood shedding refuses to stop. An externally aided loose coalition of armed opposition keeps fighting the unyielding, nonetheless, isolated, ruling regime with no chance of either party achieving decisive victory. The opposition group also fights on two other fronts; its own internal factions and to a less extent the fundamentalist forces called Islamic State. Islamic State sees a window of opportunity in this pandemonium of cross-cutting conflict to establish a pan Arabic Islamic Caliphate.

**Making Sense of the Syrian Civil War- Horizontal Inequality Thesis:**

Given the complex nature of Syrian crisis there is a need for systematic explanation of the conflict in Syria. A cultivated distance by the international community, Poverty of information from the ground zero, multiple narratives of war propaganda, the urgency of humanitarian response help to obscure our understanding of what is happening in Syria. The present paper seeks to systematically analyse the conflict using a Horizontal Inequality (HIs) framework given by Frances Stewart (2008) and will examine challenges of Peace Building in Syria.

In the post-cold war era, conflicts all over the world are increasingly over identity rather than ideology. Horizontal Inequality framework explains such religious and

ethnic conflict in multicultural societies. Stewart, much like the Functions of Conflict by Lewis A Coser, says that mere religious and ethnic differences do not lead to conflict unless there are also major economic and/or political causes. Conflicts along ethnic and religious lines necessarily have horizontal inequality (HIs). Horizontal inequality refers to economic, political, social and cultural inequality between culturally defined groups. There are causal connections between different His, i.e., one HI can lead to other forms of horizontal inequality. HIs as drivers of conflict do not operate independent of the context. Any particular HIs may give rise to conflict depending on a. political conditions b. cultural demographic conditions c. economic conditions of a particular context. Political inequality in a democratic State may not provoke violent conflict. Similarly low growth economies with Economic HIs are prone violent conflict than high growth economies with economic HIs. Some of the assumptions here are, first, the group boundaries are clear and continuous over time. Secondly, the group boundaries are fixed with limited opportunity to switch group affiliation. The theory takes into account four broad categories of inequality and develops four hypothesis of violent conflict:

Hypothesis I: Conflict is more likely where there are significant political or economic HIs or both.

Hypothesis II: Political mobilisation is especially likely where there are consistent HIs, i.e., both political and economic His run in the same direction.

Hypothesis III: Lack of cultural recognition will be provocative while cultural inclusion will be ameliorative for Peace.

Hypothesis IV: Political mobilisation and possibly conflict will become more likely where HIs are widening.

Horizontal Inequality framework for conflict analysis has certain advantages over other theories. Firstly it applies to particularly multicultural societies like Syria. Secondly, instead of being overly deterministic, it says that whether HIs will provoke conflict is dependent on a number contextual factors and conflict can be caused by other factors where HIs are very limited. Lastly, Horizontal Inequality is an open-ended theory in the sense that HI is an, and not the, important source of violent conflict.

The curious case of Syria: Is the conflict in Syria a religious or ethnic one? A clean answer to the question will either be misrepresentation of facts or may be a wild

approximation. One of the bloodiest since WW II, or at least the largest in the middle east in terms of death and devastation and continuing since more than four and half years, the conflict has grown so complex, evolving, with each passing day, it is but natural that there is no straight answer to the question. There are, though, many theories around. One such convenient theory is that Syrian civil war is between the Shias and Sunnis. Another set of propositions talk of an anti-regime struggle inspired by pro-democracy Arab spring protest in the neighbourhood. Yet another theory makes a case of an international proxy war. None of the theories can be contradicted for paucity of evidence to the contrary. The Conflict started with a call for reformation/ resignation of President Bashar Al Assad and it grew garish towards democracy ultimately culminating in a violent conflict to remove the regime. Conflict in Syria is also approximately along the Shia-Sunni divide. It started with "All Syrians are one" and went through "Sunni blood is one" to "We did not hate the Alawis, Now we do" (Phillips, 2015 ). End of dictatorship by a string of democratic protest under the rubric of Arab Spring in Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt provides the immediate backdrop to Syrian Civil War. Different countries, based on their competing geo-political interest in the region, have supported or opposed the Assad regime or the Syrian National Coalition. International support has also gone well beyond political support to include training, financing, Arms and intelligence. Still these are not convincing. How can Syrians who believed the Assad regime to be a guarantee of stability in the face of seamless chaos in neighbours like Lebanon and Iraq, turn inimical to the same regime? The roots of conflict in Syria lie somewhere else. All the hypotheses above point only the sufficient conditions of conflict and not the necessary one. The real drivers of conflict in Syria are rooted in the accumulated political economic asymmetries of decades as a result of regime machinations to maintain its monopoly of power. The unrest is result of a combination of socio-economic and political problems that had been building for years and that affect especially Syria's large rural population. The drought of 2007-2010, high unemployment rates, inflation, income inequality, declining oil resources and pauperization of the peasantry all contributed to profound discontent on the part of the opposition movement. The accumulated discontent now finds a channel to come out as a violent conflict against the Authoritarian regime of Bashar Al Assad. However this is not to obliterate the ethno-religious edges of the conflict. It is the regime who itself, has over the years, maintained a discriminatory distinction between different ethno-religious formations, sometimes even a class of people across ethnoreligious groups, by selectively privileging few and excluding others. Therefore, Political, economic and socio-cultural inequality in Syria does have an ethno religious pattern. The Conflict in Syria is a case of ethicised political conflict aimed at change of Assad regime. The conflict might have had a united beginning. With the passage of time the ethno-religious

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under currents of the conflict have clearly surfaced turning it more sectarian. Unequal ethno-religious identity groups are now adding more energy to the already violent war against the regime seen as monopoly of the other ethno-religious group.

Sectarian animosity, if not sectarianism is a historical product in Syria. Under the French Mandate (1902-1946), The French sought to appropriate the cultural identity differences to foster sectarian, class and communal separatism widening the gap between majority Sunnis and various minorities. Up to 1958 Syrian politics was about polarization, coup, and domination of the landed gentry. It is the temporary union with Egypt (1958-1963) that showed some beginning of consolidation of a socialist State through introduction of comprehensive agrarian reform law and nationalisation of economic sector. It also meant the end of political space for opposition and the foundation of one-party rule. The Arab Baath Socialist Party, also known as Baath regime (1063-70) that followed reversed the trend urban bourgeoisie politics in favour of rural and peasants. A Socialist transformation through promise of egalitarianism, modern agrarian revolution, and redistributive land reforms are some of the cementing sentiments that tied the alienated workers, peasants and farmers to the Baath regime. This also explains a privileged relationship that Syria came to share with the communist bloc. However the defeat in the Arab-Israel war (1967) fueled wrangling and polarisation within the Baath party and consequently paved the way for Hafez to seize power through a corrective movement (1970). From here starts the story of Authoritarian regime consolidation, appropriation of party machine to crush opposition, political privileging and alienation of the majoritarian Sunnis. Politically he filled the top party and State positions with his own loyalists and Alawi Officers and at the bottom sought to mobilise cross-sectarian and rural-urban constituencies through inclusive policies. Economically he introduced limited economic liberalization and changed the agrarian reform law to get back the support of rich business families and merchant class. Political opposition was ruled out by the 1973 Constitution which guarantees sole authority to Baath Party to represent State and Society. Control of the State was also ensured through expansion of bureaucracy and military intelligence services. However the drying up oil revenue, international aid from the Arab gulf and communist countries in 80s led further curtailing of populist national projects and warranted more privatization. Increasingly the business community and religious organisations made inroads into to party and State through selective co-option. This also shrank the regimes mass social base and broad based coalition that it put in place initially. Baath Party increasingly moved away from mass mobilization and relied more on its patronage by the business elites and the new bourgeoisie. Important economic sectors came to be dominated by family members of the President and bureaucracy including intelligence services

(eg., Rami Makhlouf, President maternal cousin has monopoly of Mobile Phone Services, Private English language schools etc, others include son of Bahjat Sulaiman who was head of internal security). Political surveillance of the opposition and civil societies replaced mass contact. When Bashar inherited power on his father's death in 2000, he inherited a system that was stable but had fostered divisions. Although he enjoyed personal popularity, his reforms exacerbated and increased resentment towards the regime as a whole. Economic reforms alienated the Sunni Arab workers and peasantry, as Bashar moved to open up the economy more rapidly. Syria's GDP grew, but subsidies to Syria's poorest were cut and public sector employment decreased. Rather than genuine liberalisation, those close to power amassed huge fortunes through government contracts and monopolies. These new generations of crony capitalists were visibly excessive, and a disproportionately high number of this elite were Alawis, with Bashar making far less effort than Hafez had to balance the sect's privileged position by promoting prominent Sunni Arab families, fueling resentment among the formerly supportive Sunni Arab poor. The inner ruling circle was packed with loyal people from Assad clan. Important military and security services like Republican Guard and the fourth Armored Division are commanded by officers who belong to the President´s own family and clan such as the Makhloufs and Shaleeshs (eg. President brother Maher commands Republican Guard and Fourth Armed Division, Brother-in-Law Asef Shawkat commanded Intelligence Agency). This kind of nexus between pro-regime capitalists and bureaucrats fostered an environment of alienation in Syria. Four levels of State bourgeoisie came to dominate the economy and network patronage: (a) Ruling family and their relations; (b) Officers of Army and notorious security services; (c) People from administration and bureaucracy; (d) Top level public sector officials (Haddad, 2012). With the shrinking of public sector the jobs for youth was drying up. Then one of the worst droughts (2006-10) crippled the countryside to no end. Drought itself is seen as a consequence of mismanagement of water resources and corruption manifest in Regimes push for strategic crops like wheat and cotton. Failure of the regime to handle water related issue pushed the peasantry into acute poverty. This started a huge wave of rural to urban migration to cities. All the cities are choked with environmental refugees with no basic amenities of health, drinking water, housing and food. There were already signs of rising rural poverty in Syria (Arab Development Challenges Report, UNDP, 2011). Drought hastened the process. This is testified by the fact the most persistent sources of opposition activity since 2011 have been in poorer religious Sunni Arab areas such as Deraa, Jisr al-Shughour, Homs, Idleb, Douma and Hama, and frustrated youth have taken the lead. Since the 80s the population pressure in Syria is increasing. Syria has one of the highest birth rates in the world. Consequently the pressure is transferred to shrinking job market producing

a staggering 26% unemployment rate. So a critical mass unemployed youth is readily available to carry forward the civil war.

**Discussion:**

The above discussion shows that there is an unholy alliance between the ethnicity, business and the regime. This creates exclusion among the Non-Shia population. Freedom of Speech, expression and political association is severely restricted in Syria. This creates political alienation among the Arab Sunni masses. Poor Sunni peasants are distressed from loss of livelihood, job and social protection which is seen as direct consequence of economic policy followed by the regime. The Regime itself is seen to be, and is, the monopoly of minority Alawites and selectively co-opted Sunni upper rich families having connections in the Governments and the Party. Large sections of the population who share a similar religious identity are left out of positions of power. However a minority from the same cultural group are benefactors from the regime. And these rich business interests though were slow to join the civil war, have also joined lately sensing the reprisals in case the regime collapse. So we can say that there definitely exists political inequality between two clearly distinct cultural groups. However, horizontality of this inequality is limited by instances of cross overs. The inequality may look like between the rich and the poor but it also fit into a pattern of minority Shia vs. majority Sunni. We also find the existence of many intermediate cultural groups (eg., Kurdish People's Protection Units, Islamic Front, factions within the coalition of Armed opposition etc. who are opposed to the regime as well as anti-regime groups) who are either poised to join the anti-regime coalition as polarisation picks up or continue to prolong the conflict as spoilers. People who suffer political inequality are also at the receiving end of a crumbling Syrian economy. So here political and economic inequalities are co-terminus and are often reinforcing each other. Though the face value of Syrian conflict is centered on a protest against collapse of the socialist economy, religious fault lines supply energy and propel the civil war. Cultural expressions are also constrained by denial of economic and political power. Cultural inequality, however less pronounced in the case of Syria it might be, is manifest in perception of Bashar regime as anti-Muslim and pro-American (in case of Joining UN mandated war in Kuwait, betraying the Palestinian cause etc.). The sense of cultural inequality is also getting heightened by the entry of radical groups like Islamic State into the conflict. The acceptance, may be powerless, of Islamic State by people in their search for greener pastures testifies to that. Obviously, the gap between the groups has worsened over the years and hope of any reversal looks distant, if not non-existent. We also see that some other contextual factors like pro-democracy protest wave

across the middle-east, Loosening, limited it might be, of the repressive State, Provocative handling of the conflict by the regime, geo-political importance of Syria as a key to many middle east conflict, by virtue of which international support in favour or against the civil war is readily available and the building up of a critical mass of youth as a victim group are also relevant in understanding the war within war in Syria. Horizontal inequality (HIs), however, remains at the heart of Syrian Civil War around which the conflict organises itself. Therefore any peace building initiative has to address the core issues of horizontal inequality first in order to make any head way.

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