What Drives the Fragmentation of the Post-2011 Syrian Opposition?

Of the popular uprisings and subsequent power struggles that overtook the Middle East and North Africa starting in late 2010, Syria’s conflict has been undoubtedly the most destructive, descending into a bloody civil war with numerous opposition factions battling both among themselves and against the government. The popular movement which took to the streets in early 2011 – beginning in marginalized areas like Daraa and the working class suburbs of Homs – was initially unified in its demands for an end to state violence against dissenters and repression of free speech, and eventually the demand for Bashar al-Assad to step down from power. These common demands were articulated in the protest songs which were shared across virtually every city which engaged in anti-government demonstrations, as well as the statements released by the Local Coordination Committees which constituted the organizing base of the civil phase of the uprising that lasted roughly until late 2012.1

However, despite these initial unified – if decentralized – mobilizations, the opposition has been unable to unite in the long-term to present demands and a strategy to install an alternative regime to that of Bashar al-Assad, and instead has only managed to capture territory and power from the regime in a fragmented fashion. The fragmentation of the Syrian opposition exists on several levels – first, that the civil, militarized, and official political wings of the opposition are not well-coordinated in meaningful ways, and furthermore, that within each of these organizational types, there exists numerous schisms – for example, the militarized opposition is divided into hundreds of distinct militia groups which continually coalesce and then

1 While non-militarized protest continues in Syria into the present day, this non-violent political organizing began to be eclipsed by militarized aspects of the conflict starting in the end of 2012.
splinter in different patterns, changing alliances month by month.

The extreme fragmentation of the Syrian opposition therefore, seems to offer a compelling case study for contributing to what we know about which factors explain why opposition movements under authoritarian regimes are able or unable to unite. In this article, I will hold the Syrian case up to the literature on opposition fragmentation to see where it seems to confirm, contradict, or offer an alternative explanation of the mechanisms that drive correlations found in the literature. Furthermore, I hope to offer a better framework for understanding of the origins of the fragmentation of the opposition in Syria.

This subsequent study of opposition dynamics in Syria is divided into three sections. The first section reviews some of the extant theoretical literature on opposition fragmentation under authoritarian regimes, which tends to focus on either regime strategies or ideological, ethnic, and religious divides. Assessing this literature against the Syria case, I argue that ideological, ethnic, and religious divides are not sufficient as explanatory variables – these sorts of divisions may have in some cases become salient in Syria’s war, although this overlooks the equally significant conflicts that have emerged both across and within such divisions. Section two proposes to incorporate and expand another body of research – on resources and civil war outcomes – to provide a framework for helping understand why certain divisions may become important in particular cases and how resources shape opposition groups. In section three, I show that the fierce on-going resource war between the two most prominent Sunni-identified militia groups in Syria largely supports the claims of section three, but may also suggests a more expansive definition for civil war resources and provides alternative mechanisms for explaining why resources affect civil war outcomes.

Reviewing these bodies of research and the facts of the Syrian case, I come to the following conclusion: While many analyses of the Syrian opposition’s fragmentation have focused on ideological or sectarian divisions, equally important was the plethora of resources
available to different opposition groups, due to Syria’s geography coupled with the regional and international context in which it exists.

**Section 1: Existing Literature on Oppositions under Authoritarian Regimes**

**Regime Strategies**

Of the various explanatory factors for opposition fragmentation, regime strategy has received the lion’s share of attention in the literature. Much of the mainstream scholarship on the politics of the Middle East has tended to focus on explaining the resilience of authoritarian regimes, and explaining the ways the opposition can be pacified or even instrumentalized to prop up the regime (Albrecht and Schlumberger n.d.; Albrecht 2005; Lust-Okar 2004; Stacher 2012). A regime has three possible options when faced with opposition: it can co-opt some of its members; it can eliminate the source of its grievances; or it can repress the opposition either through violence, jailing or exile (Zartman 1990).

Cooption of the opposition is by no means easy. Cooption constitutes double-edged sword for regimes, in particular when it creates political openings for already existing “fissures within the ruling block” (Albrecht 2005). In their study of regime strategies facing the threat of rebellion, Gandhi and Przeworski (2006) propose that regimes have two instruments by which to carry out the first two strategies of mobilizing cooperation from some groups and pacifying rebellion from the population: it can grant policy concessions or it can share rents. Their model shows that regimes mix these two instruments depending on how they generate rents and the strength of the opposition.

Their model seems to explain relatively well the regime’s initial response to protests in Syria. Syria has some petroleum resources in the northeast, but in general requires a relatively higher level of cooperation in order to generate rents. The regime did not respond to the protests
by simply distributing large amounts of rents, although it did grant some raises to government employees (Wind 2014). Because this model sees rents and policy concessions as substitutes and also acknowledges institutions such as parliaments as a form of policy concessions under authoritarian regimes, this model also helps us understand the less-discussed attempts at cooption carried out by the regime in 2011. The Assad regime’s cooption of some leftist opposition groups and figures fits with Gandhi and Przeworski’s model in which the dictator selects certain groups to be granted access to the legislature and allows them to reveal their demands while still remaining tightly controlled by the dictatorship in the form of ‘fronts.’

Conrad (2011) argues that, even if we assume the regime is able to coopt some members of the opposition into the legislature, Gandhi and Przeworski’s model still does not help us understand how regimes respond to domestic opposition groups outside of the legislature. He contends that this type of cooption should be understood differently from true rights concessions, which risk providing the opposition with further opportunities to mobilize, but agrees with Gandhi and Przeworski that legislatures under dictatorships are more than “window-dressing” and the institutional presence of opposition in the legislature impacts dictators’ concessions of rights. He finds that, in the absence of financial constraints, authoritarian regimes respond to oppositions in parties and legislatures with a significantly higher provision of non-material rights.

This explanation corresponds with the behavior of the regime in response to the initial wave of protests. The opposition that constituted the base of the 2011 uprising in Syria emerged suddenly, partly in response to the optimism of the other Arab uprisings. Due to a long history of jailing dissidents and an almost total government control of the media, at the beginning of the uprising in 2011, Syrian had barely any independent organizations in the country to speak of. Established opposition organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood or communist groups had

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2 Most notably, the establishment of the Popular Front for Change and Liberation, which brought together Qadri Jamil’s People’s Will Party and Ali Haidar’s Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party, and which participated in the 2012 parliamentary elections as a regime-sanctioned opposition front.
become either totally removed from any significant political base or had been in exile for decades (Najm 2011). The first political organizing that sprung up in the wake of the uprising came in the form of the decentralized and ad-hoc “Local Coordination Committees.” These emerged from neighborhood gatherings in locations across the country where representatives of active anti-regime groups met to get to know each other better and build trust, were inspired in part by similar networks in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere in the Arab world (Lund 2012).

This new and unfamiliar opposition was therefore largely untouched by regime attempts at cooptation. Conrad proposes that non-institutionalized opposition groups introduce uncertainty about how demands are to be received, and this discourages regimes from conceding rights to the opposition. This explanation could help explain why the regime was so intransigent about granting any of the demands of protesters, even the very moderate ones being called for in the first months, when Syrian demonstrators chose to modify the slogan of the Egyptian uprising from “the people want the downfall of the regime” to the gentler “the people want the reform of the regime.”

While the literature may help us better understand the Assad regime’s response to the opposition, it still does not seem to aide much in understanding opposition dynamics in the wake of the uprising. The regime strategies of cooptation, granting policy concessions and distributing rents can be considered largely unsuccessful and few would claim that these constituted important factors accounting for the failures of the oppositions to unite. In fact, just a few small opposition groups – not central to the uprising in the first place – were willing to be coopted into participating in elections, and opposition only grew fiercer in response to these regime attempts at pacifying the uprising. Furthermore, the question of participating in parliamentary elections did not constitute a point of schism between any of the important segments of the opposition.

A much more important tactic pursued by the Syrian regime in the face of protests was the third tactic: repression. A distinguishing element of the Syrian crisis in contrast to the other Arab uprisings has been the extreme levels of violence and repression carried out against
protestors – in the form of arrests and extreme forms of torture, intimidation (house visits by intelligence services or snipers placed in visible public places), firing live bullets at demonstrators, and eventually bombing and starving out neighborhoods which were known opposition strongholds.

Here I use Tilly’s (1978, 100) definition of repression as “any action by another group which raises the contenders cost of social movements,” a definition which allows us to separate the use of force from cooption and other regime alternatives for dealing with the opposition.

There exist two somewhat opposing schools of thought dominate research on repression. A number of scholars argue for a “threat” model of repression in which the larger the threat to political elites, the greater the amount of repression. In particular, many have argued that groups pursuing revolutionary goals will be more repressed than less radical groups (McAdam 1982; Bromley and Shupe 1983). There have been a number of studies showing support for the ‘threat’ model (for examples see Porta 1995, 1996; Fillieule and Jobard 1998; Gartner and Regan 1996).

In a review of 101 studies on the relationship between repression and dissent, it was found that most studies proved a positive relationship of dissent on repression and vice versa. However, in the same review when selecting studies that use time-series design and other dynamic models, all show an effect of dissent on repression, but only 17% demonstrate that repression fosters dissent (Hoover and Kowalewski 1992).

Another school of thought, led by Gamson (1975) suggests that weakness begets repression. Gamson argues that repression is dangerous for power holders because elites risk ridicule if they fail in their repressive activities. Therefore, elites should only repress movements that are likely to collapse under such pressure. Earl (2003) notes that there is still little empirical support for such a claim, but examples include Wisler and Guigni’s (1999) study of Swiss protest which showed that protests following lower amounts of protest coverage by media outlets had higher likelihoods of police intervention and use of rubber bullets. Compared to the other Arab countries that experienced protests in 2010 and 2011, Syria had among the weakest presence of
any form of foreign or independent domestic press. Many of the initial reports on events in Syria relied exclusively on civilian documentation on registered on mobile phones and uploaded to the Internet. While the Internet allowed for a more open arena of contestation in one sense, it also facilitated the production of media with dubious sources and unverifiable claims on both sides of the conflict. Therefore, there remained in many ways a blackout on the media within Syria, but with a propaganda war of doctored and real images, video footage, and statements from both regime supporters and the opposition that served to bring about even more confusion. This lack of reliable media coverage likely contributed to the extreme levels of violence carried out against protesters compared to countries that had extensive established press institutions such as Egypt and Tunisia.

Ethnic, Religious, and Ideological Divides

Of the work that focuses on the strategies of oppositions rather than regimes, some of the literature posits that opposition failures stem from ethnic, religious, and ideological antagonisms within the opposition (Haugbolle and Cavatorta 2011, Cavorta 2009). Syrian society is one of the most religiously diverse of all the countries in the Arab world. Only about 70 per cent of the country is Sunni Muslim, with large minorities of Alawites and various Christian denominations, as well as a small percentage of Shi’a and other Muslim denominations. Syria is also ethnically and linguistically diverse, with a significant Kurdish population in the Northeast, a small but economically and culturally influential Armenian community, and a variety of other small ethnic groups concentrated in specific regions around the country. Syria also has a myriad of tribes, especially in the South. The uprising notably began in the city of Deraa’ in the Houran plains, after the regime arrested, tortured and killed children from the some of the city’s prominent and influential tribes (Dukhan 2012).

At the outbreak of the uprising, Assad was quick to raise the specter of sectarianism and warned against the destruction of Syria’s diverse society should more people support the uprisings. In particular, he underlined the threat the uprising could pose to the Alawite and Christian minorities, and frequently framed it as an Islamic war on the secular Ba’athist government. In the international media, the Syrian conflict is often framed as primarily originating out of ethnic (between Kurds and Arabs) and sectarian (between Sunni, Alawite, and secular) divides, and the fragmentation of the opposition is frequently attributed to the inability to overcome these sorts of ‘primordial’ differences.

It is true that in some cases, the ongoing civil war has reinforced intra-community solidarities and hostilities and fear of other ethnic and sectarian groups. The Alawite community faces heightened sectarian anxieties over the last five years because of their minority status and their ties to the Assad regime. Fear for survival has led to an increased self-identification as part of an “Alawite community,” whereas previously, regional and class affiliations tended to have more salience, creating divisions among Alawites.

However, Fearon and Laitin (2003) find that more ethnically or religiously diverse countries have been no more likely to experience significant civil violence in the post-Cold War period, but rather countries at risk for civil war are those with “conditions that favor insurgency,” such as poverty and rough terrains. In a study on barriers to inter-opposition coordination in Kyrgyzstan, Huskey and Iskakova (2010) find that opposition members felt that religion, ethnicity, language, region, or clan were among the least important factors accounting for why the opposition was unable to act in a unified fashion. Ghandi and Przeworski (2006) also find that religious fractionalization has no significant effect on regimes’ response to oppositions.

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4 Many reports on the Alawite community during the civil war have emphasized that Alawite identification with the regime is “not simply a matter of endorsement, but has evolved into a basic fear for the lives of family members or neighbours” (Nakkash 2013). Nakkash (2013), Hersh (2013), and Omran (2014) are some examples.
Furthermore, much more of the scholarship on opposition coordination and collaboration in the Middle East has drawn attention to patterns of cross-ideological cooperation. Schwedler (2004) and Browers (2009) on Yemen, Clark (2006) on Jordan and Abdelrahman (2015) on Egypt all emphasize the relevance of cross-ideological cooperation, with Browers arguing that there are even ‘antecedents of contemporary cross-ideological coordination among various oppositional elements that have traditionally opposed each other’. In a study discussing the creation of opposition coalitions, Van de Walle (2006) suggests that when oppositions are faced with the prospect of an electoral victory, former ethnic or ideological rivals usually find it more attractive to create such an alternative by forming a coalitional alliance. Similarly, Arriola (2013) finds that when an opposition has improved access to political contributions from the domestic private sector, it is more likely to coalesce across ethnic cleavages to build coalitions that can challenge the incumbent power.

Certainly, these types of cross-identitarian coalitions in Syria have gone somewhat ignored. The early institutions of the opposition – military, civil, and political – included significant representation of virtually every sect and ethnic identification.

It is also unclear why only certain types of previously-important divisions now have little bearing on the conflict. Christian-Muslim tensions, which fueled the past civil war in neighboring and culturally-similar Lebanon, have had much less relevance in the Syrian case. The Christian community, while trending overall towards support for the regime, or at least suspicion of the opposition, nonetheless has had significant elements which have stood in support of the Majority-Sunni opposition, including the formation of Christian-identified opposition militia brigades (Atassi 2012) and the activism of many prominent community members such as Marxist thinker Salameh Kaileh, filmmaker Bassel Shahade and Catholic priest Paolo Dall’Oglio.

Furthermore, some of the most important rivalries within the opposition do not fall along sectarian or ethnic lines, but rather within them. Kurdish political groups in the early years of the conflict were fragmented along the two main opposition groups in Syria, the SNC and the NBC,
while they also experienced contradictory pulls between the influences of Iraqi Kurdish leader Barzani and Turkish Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan (Azizi 2013). Sunni Arabs, far from operating as a unified mass, have fractured into dozens of militia groups and political organizations, with a broad range of alliances. In section three, I will examine more closely the conflict between two of the most prominent hardline Sunni sectarian groups, Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State. To an initial observer, their ideological orientations are nearly indistinguishable, and yet their fighting has become one of the most important conflicts within the Syrian civil war.

Section 2: Tactical Differences and Diversity of Resources

Van de Walle’s contention that opposition groups are likely able to overcome cross-ideological differences when they feel there is a real chance to overcome the regime may have been proposed in the context of electoral authoritarian regimes, but it seems to apply well to the militarized context of Syria as well: overall, when the opposition appears to be on the verge of obtaining substantial external aid or intervention through a representative political institution such as the NC, it has been able to coalesce across ideological lines. When these hopes are frustrated, these institutions are unable to hold together.

Therefore, it seems the failure of the opposition to unite is in many ways caused by its failure to obtain resources or substantial foreign backing through a unified source or institution. Yet, I want to extend this insight by suggesting that thinking creatively about how resources affect the outcomes of civil wars may help explain the Syrian case. The fragmentation of the opposition seems to be best explained by the variety of resources available to Syrian rebels which created rivalries even between groups which share highly similar views.

Almost all of Syria’s cities lie along its borders, with a huge swath of mostly depopulated desert in the middle. These cities often have historical, social and commercial ties with
hinterlands across national borders: Homs and Northern Lebanon, Aleppo and the south Turkish countryside, Deraa and the Houran farming plateau which extends into northwest Jordan, and Deir Ezzor with western Iraq. Syria also enjoys a unique strategic importance at a regional level. For decades, Syria has held an important regional role in a number of broader political struggles, including the Arab-Israeli conflict, United States and Russian imperialism in the region, and the rivalry between Iran and the Gulf countries. These countries’ interests in the outcome ensured that the situation in Syria quickly escalated beyond a national uprising. Syria’s oil fields and antiquities markets also brought in millions of dollars to various groups, adding fuel to the proverbial fire. The relatively porous borders on each side of Syria -- with the exception of the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights -- along with its internal natural and cultural resources (oil and antiquities), and conflicting international interests over the outcome in Syria, have allowed various opposition groups in different cities to obtain supplies, weapons, and logistical support independently of one another. Although national coordination is a pressing ideological and political need, such groups thus have little incentive to unify for economic or logistical regions.

Much of the civil war literature posits civil wars as binary conflicts between two actors, the government and the rebels. However, I find that using the insights about how the presence of resources prevents agreement between these binary actors, can help explain the inability of the various opposition factions within Syria to settle on a permanent agreement, even when they share similar goals, identities, and ideologies. Using this insight in the case of Syria requires not only understanding conflict as possibly taking place among opposition actors as suggested by Cunningham (Cunningham 2013), and not just between the opposition and the regime; but also understanding resources not only in terms of “a commodity…that can be easily extracted or cultivated” (Ross 2004a), but also as the provision of financial and military aid by foreign powers.

It has been shown that resource wealth tends to lengthen the duration of conflicts (Doyle and Sambanis 2000; Fearon and Laitin 2003; Ross 2004b), by giving combatants reason to fear
that settlement would result in losing resources that they had access to because of the conflict. Furthermore, it has been suggested that resource endowments result in a different composition of rebel groups, in which economic endowments create incentives for opportunistic fighters to join who have few long-term commitments to the organization (Weinstein 2005). It has been a common observation by journalists working in Syria that many of the rebel fighters tend to jump rapidly from one group to another, displaying very low levels of allegiance to any particular group as long as they are committed to overthrowing the Assad regime (Abdul Ahad 2013; Safadi 2015).

Moving to the literature on foreign intervention in conflicts, Sawyer et al (2015) find that different types of external support to the opposition influence their fighting capacity differently. Specifically, provision of financial support and weaponry to the opposition, rather than direct intervention against the regime, tends to inhibit a bargained settlement and prolongs the length of conflicts. While Sawyer et al. posit that this is because more fungible sources of support -- such as direct financial support or weaponry -- generate the most uncertainty for regimes as they attempt to estimate the effect of external support to rebels on the conflict, it could be argued that this type of intervention creates more economic incentive for the rebels to identify closely with the interests of the provider of these financial or military resources, in order to ensure their continued access to them over time. These foreign backers may have less incentive for a settlement than domestic supporters, who face the immediate negative consequences of conflict. In Syria, the multitude of fungible aid being provided secretly and openly by a variety of international powers with different interests served to pull the strategic orientation of the opposition in a variety of different directions, as well as shift alliances and positions constantly as groups scramble to adjust their strategies and images to obtain different sources of funding.

Section 3: The Intra-Sunni War
The Sunni-identified rebel groups of Syria’s war are not one united front, but myriad groups which are engaged in fierce battles not only against the government, secular opposition groups or Kurdish groups, but also intensely against the plethora of other Sunni-identified rebel groups in the Syrian civil war. This runs counter to the intuition of Syria being primarily a war that falls along sectarian lines. A study of fragmentation among one sectarian affiliation may help clarify the factors and mechanisms that drive opposition fragmentation outside of identitarian divisions.

Perhaps the most important, and certainly the bloodiest of the intra-Sunni conflicts has been the protracted war between two of the most hardline groups – Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) and the Islamic State (IS). While IS’ brutal methods and sleek, internationally-oriented propaganda won them news headlines from their earliest days, the focus on IS has led to an under-emphasis on the important gains made by JN, and by extension, the fierce war between the two groups.

From an ideological perspective, their differences may not seem significant. Both groups’ ideologies are deeply imbued with the Bin Laden-influenced strain of Islamism which was articulated and reinforced through the growth of the jihadist movement in Afghanistan and Pakistan. They both draw heavily on the influential jihadist tome The Management of Savagery, authored by a Salafist scholar under the nom de guerre Abu Bakr al-Naji (W. F. McCants 2015, 82). The Management of Savagery calls for the undertaking of ‘vexation operations’ against economically and politically sensitive targets such as oil pipelines or tourist sites, in order to open up government security vacuums in more marginal areas due to the reallocation of security resources. These security-weak “regions of savagery” could then be taken over by jihadists, who would maintain control through military prowess and through winning over the support of locals by the implementation of a just, Islamic governance system (W. F. McCants 2015, 83). To this end, both groups have sought to take advantage of the chaotic situation in Syria, fighting to overthrow the Assad regime, with the stated goal of establishing an Islamic government to
Reports on the JN-IS war have often tended to explain their mutual opposition in terms of levels of brutal violence, with many making the astonished claim that IS was “too extreme for even Al-Qaeda” (Calamur 2014; Tran 2014). While over simplified, the characterization is not wholly inaccurate: It would be wrong to whitewash the enormous violence and brutal control tactics of JN in various regions around Syria, but the group is much less prone to celebrate and publicize these acts, while in contrast, IS often uses beheadings and mass shootings as central elements of their propaganda. JN’s relative diplomacy has earned them popularity with the local Syrian population, whereas IS is seen as more of an outsider group (Safadi 2015). The U.S.’ designation of al-Nusra as a terrorist organization in 2012 led to protests across Syria organized by 29 opposition groups, both militias and civilian organizations, under the slogan “No to American intervention, for we are all Jabhat al-Nusra” (Al-Jazeera 2012; Sherlock 2012). In ISIS: A History, Fawaz Gerges, a scholar of political Islamism writes, “The extent to which al-Nusra was able to co-opt local communities in Syria is astounding…. Syrians tell me that al-Nusra will ultimately shed its jihadist skin and become Syrianized, reflecting a blind faith in [JN leader]

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5 In fact, the two groups’ were originally both branches of Al-Qaeda, with the Islamic State’s first prominent iteration, Al-Qaeda in Iraq, serving as some of the primary investors and supporters of the establishment and expansion of JN as AQ’s attempt to take advantage of the chaos and violence enveloping Syria. Relations between AQI and Al-Qaeda Central were nevertheless constantly under strain, as their political alliance was often more of a marriage of convenience rather than perfect strategic cohesion. Despite AQI founder Zarqawi’s pledge of allegiance (baiya) to Osama Bin Laden, his strategic choices in Iraq engendered considerable worries on the part of Al-Qaeda central, and Zarqawi was forced to legitimize his choices to violently target the local Iraqi Shia community and Kurd rather than devoting their attentions and resources to the forces of the American occupation, as Al-Qaeda central preferred. Despite numerous ideological differences, Bin Laden and Zarqawi found benefits to their alliance (Gerges 2016, 75).

In 2013, tensions developed between al-Nusra and its parent organization AQI when Baghdadi unilaterally proclaimed that the two organizations had merged to create the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Julani agreed that AQI had aided al-Nusra from the beginning, but rejected the merger and renewed his pledge of allegiance to Al Qaeda commander Ayman al-Zawahiri. Despite Zawahiri’s public denial of the merger, a number of al-Nusra fighters defected to ISIS, furthering tension between the groups. By March 2014, over 3,000 fighters had been killed in battles between ISIS and al-Nusra (Gerges).
While both groups rely on international jihadi fighters in their ranks, JN reportedly has a majority of Syrian fighters. According to a June 2015 claim by Julani, the fighting force of JN is was about 70% Syrian (Masi 2015). In areas they take over, both groups establish Shariah courts, but JN does not typically carry out executions as IS frequently does.

JN frequently collaborates with groups that fall under the umbrella group of the Syrian-identified and secularist Free Syrian Army to fight both the Assad regime and IS (Sherlock 2012). For example, in late 2013, an FSA/JN offensive captured a number of border towns, and in 2014 and 2015 some FSA groups were involved in the rebel collaboration led by JN against the Syrian army in Idlib (Roggio 2014). Furthermore, after an initial summer 2014 speech goading on the future establishment of a JN-run Islamic emirate in Syria, Julani retreated in his rhetoric, claiming that he would not establish a new religious state without support from other Islamist groups, waiting for consensus from “the sincere mujahedeen and the pious scholars” (Joscelyn 2014). A year later, JN’s rhetoric softened even further, with Julani claiming that if the regime were to fall, all factions (presumably including the secular factions of the FSA) would be involved in deciding whether or not to make Syria into an Islamic state. In a further moderation of their previous rhetoric, they promised in May 2015 to have no agenda to target the West, in a move rumored to seek further funds from Gulf donors (Gerges 2016, 183–184; Nusra leader: Our mission is to defeat Syrian regime 2015). Overall, JN has positioned itself to Syrians and international Salafist donors as the local, ‘moderate’ Islamic antithesis to IS’ transnational jihadist movement.

In contrast, the Islamic State employs a majority of foreign fighters (Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq 2015) and seems less concerned about any specific connection to the local Syrian population as such. This is well-

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6 In other cases, al-Nusra and the moderate rebels have clashed on the battlefield. Conflicts between the groups have ranged from defections, with a number of FSA men deserting for the better-armed and more influential al-Nusra in 2013, to inter-group kidnappings and battles.
illustrated in IS’ leader Baghdadi’s July 2014 statement “Rush O Muslims to your state. Yes, it is your state. Rush, because Syria is not for the Syrians, and Iraq is not for the Iraqis” (Al-Baghdadi 2014). With few exceptions, IS refuses all cooperation with any other rebel groups in Syria. William McCants, a researcher on jihadist groups, has estimated that from August to December 2013, reports of abuse from IS towards other rebel groups in Syria outnumbered those of JN ten-to-one (W. McCants 2015, 89).

While it is tempting to point to differing ideological bases to explain the two groups’ differing behavior, the evidence seems to point otherwise. In large part, their sources of scholarly judgement and even Islamic training are nearly-identical. A more compelling factor explaining the diverging strategic orientations of IS and JN are their differing sources of material resources, which compel certain behaviors and strategies from the two groups.

While IS has long focused on financial self-sufficiency and independence, Al-Qaeda, of which JN is an affiliate, is founded on a different model, whereby regional branches of the organization are bound through the group’s financial networks of donors from around the world. JN’s principal source of income derives from these external donors, while ransoms, weapons sales, a minimal internal taxation system, and activity in local black markets also contribute (Lister 2014).

While its intrinsically secretive nature has rendered the identification of JN’s financial backers more difficult, most reports point to the bulk of funding coming from wealthy individuals in the Gulf states (and with suggestions that this may be known to some of the governments involved) and more marginally other countries in the Middle East. (Lister 2014). Qatar in particular has often served as a negotiator in hostage situations between JN and other countries, and U.S. Treasury reports have even identified a private Qatari citizen involved in such negotiations as a major source of JN funding (Dickinson 2014). JN has come to be more reliant on foreign backing as previous streams of oil revenues have dried up due to IS oil field takeovers.
JN’s growing foreign dependence came on the back of IS’ push for self-reliance. In 2013, IS drove JN and a number of its allies from out of one of its key strongholds in Deir Ezzor, which included the oil fields which had come to constitute one of JN’s main sources of income (Solomon, Robin, and Bernard 2016) (ISIL says it faces war with Nusra in Syria 2014). Just the Deir Ezzor oil field alone, one of many in North-East Syria, produces 34,000-40,000 barrels a day. IS quickly expanded its territorial reach across more of Syria’s oil fields, and oil extraction came to constitute the group’s largest source of income. This means, that in contrast to JN, external donations are marginal to IS’ budget (Lister 2014).

Depending on the quality of the petroleum, which varies by oil field, the price of crude oil in IS-held territory ranges from 25 to 45 dollars a barrel, often exceeding international prices because of Syria’s captive local market (Karen; Leigh and Syria Deeply 2014; Solomon, Robin, and Bernard 2016). In 2014, the group was reported to produce forty-four thousand barrels a day from Syrian wells and four thousand barrels a day from Iraqi ones, netting an estimated $1 million to $3 million a day through sales to truckers and middlemen. By selling oil well below market price, traders are incentivized to take on the risk of such black-market deals. Through these middlemen, the oil finds its way back to the group’s supposed enemies, such as the Syrian government and the Iraqi Kurds. The Assad regime’s dependence on IS’ oil has even led to tacit agreements on the part of local state officials to ensure the continuation of basic government services to IS-held areas so as not to put production in peril (Al-Khalidi 2014).

The revenue from oil extraction meant that in 2014, IS was able to pay its fighters estimated monthly wages of around $400, more than rival rebel groups or the Syrian government, and as much as five times what ordinary Syrians earn in territory controlled by IS. These high

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7 As it began operating in Syria, IS relied heavily on monetary support from donors in Syria, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Jordan. From 2013-2014, it was estimated that IS received $40 million from these donors. This meant that initially, both groups were being funded in largely similar ways, with the bulk of money coming initially came from foreign donors (Karen Leigh 2013; Mapping Militant Organizations 2016).
salaries explain in part how the group has managed to attract fighters from around the world to immigrate to IS territory, despite great risks (Al-Khalidi 2014; How ISIS Works 2014). Moreover, IS’ monopoly over this precious resource has ensured that other armed groups must concede to IS demands, such as allowing IS fighters the use of strategic crossings or facilities. Whereas JN relies on the mutual favors for cooperation and influence, IS needs no more than the threat of cutting off the oil faucet (Gerges 2016, 193).

A further source of IS funding are the heavy taxes imposed on the 8-10 million people living under its control as of 2014, with the burden placed especially on non-Muslim minorities under the guise of Islamic jaziye. According to Reuters, IS extortion and taxes generate as much as $360 million per year (Al-Khalidi 2014). Trafficking in antiquities and ransom payments also provided IS upwards of $20 million in 2014, including large sums for kidnapped European journalists and other captives.

JN’ and IS’ sources of funding show a great deal more divergence than their sources their sectarian affiliation. Many reports (Lister 2014; Weiss and Hassan n.d.) have drawn connections between the constant shifting sources of finance and ever changing ideological projections. As Fawaz Gerges points out in his book on ISIS, the history of the group “clearly shows that as political actors, jihadists are driven by interests rather than by pure ideology” (2016, 77).

For the moment, IS has undeniably gained the upper hand in the intra-Sunni struggle for dominance. The conquering of the Deir Ezzor oil fields was the turning point in their oil- and territory-driven strategy which has brought them to dominance (Gerges 2016, 191). Even the advent of Coalition military strikes against them, the group has demonstrated impressive resilience, adhering to their slogan “remaining and expanding.” The group’s diversified and self-

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8 However, this revenue has been in decline over time. IS oil production has fallen since its 2014 peak due to Russian and coalition airstrikes targeting oil facilities. Nevertheless, oil production remains a major source of revenue for the group (Solomon, Robin, and Bernard 2016).
reliant economic base make shutting it down remarkably difficult, and ensures that IS remains accountable to no one but its own ambitions for power.

**Conclusion**

In this essay, I propose that reading the case of post-2011 Syria against the literature on opposition fragmentation and the effects of resources on civil wars helps both in generating a clearer framework for understanding the extreme fragmentation of the Syrian opposition as well as suggesting future avenues for research on the fragmentation of oppositions more broadly. I suggest that while the literature on regime strategies and ideological or identitarian splits help explain some aspects of the events in Syria over the past four years, they are not sufficient. Rather, it seems that Syria points to the idea that the concept of resources could be more broadly expanded to incorporate certain types of foreign funding, which have played an important role in shaping the dynamics of the opposition.

Ethnic, religious and ideological divisions clearly play an important role in the fragmentation of the Syrian opposition, but still cannot explain many of the alliances and conflicts within the war, such as the broad cross-sectarian alliances formed in the first years of the uprising, or the intra-sectarian conflicts within various communitarian groups. Using research on resources and civil outcomes, as well as a case study of the intra-Sunni war between Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State, I propose that resources in civil wars should be understood not only in terms of natural resources, but foreign sources of funding and arms, and furthermore that dynamics seen between rebels and governments in civil wars could also occur between opposition groups, helping explain the dynamics of opposition fragmentation. This leads to the observation that Syria’s geography, international importance, and domestic resources helps explain the extreme difficulties at unifying the opposition to Assad.
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