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Abstract

This thesis undertakes a multidimensional inquiry into the Syrian conflict, addressing the research question: *What are the factors—domestic, regional, and international—that could enable the Syrian de facto Authorities to manage a political transition towards consolidation leading to international recognition and legitimacy, and to what extent are these Authorities in control of such factors?* To explore this, the study integrates historical contextualisation, theoretical approaches to mediation and protracted conflicts, and a comparative framework contrasting Syria's repeated mediation failures with the relative success of the Dayton Peace Accords in Bosnia. It also examines the strategic calculations of major external actors—including the United States, the European Union, Russia, Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt—within an increasingly fragmented multipolar order.

The analysis reveals a persistent gap between normative aspirations and operational realities: while international stakeholders advocate liberal peacebuilding, transitional justice, and inclusivity, these expectations often collide with fragmented authority, asymmetrical coercive power, and fragile local governance. The absence of coherent international coordination, coupled with the erosion of Western leverage and the assertiveness of regional powers, further compounds instability. Yet, the emergence of a Sunni-led transitional leadership, accompanied by initial steps towards constitutional reform, reconciliation, and institutional normalisation, provides cautious grounds for optimism. The study ultimately contends that Syria's prospects will depend on recalibrated international engagement—balancing normative imperatives with pragmatic sequencing—and on the renewal of multilateral mechanisms capable of addressing the complexity of twenty-first century conflicts.

Introduction

This thesis undertakes a comprehensive and multi-layered examination of one of the most complex crises of the twenty-first century: the Syrian conflict. At its core, it seeks to explore the following research question: what are the factors—domestic, regional, and international—that could enable the Syrian de facto Authorities to steer a political transition towards consolidation, ultimately securing international recognition and legitimacy? Furthermore, to what extent do these Authorities exercise effective control over such factors?

Understanding this question requires, first and foremost, a careful assessment of the years leading up to the fall of Bashar al-Assad. These years were marked not only by internal economic, social, and political transformations, but also by evolving regional and international dynamics that decisively shaped Syria's trajectory. The collapse of a regime that had been in power for nearly half a century—rooted in Alawite dominance within a country where approximately 70% of the population is Sunni—represents a watershed moment. It is therefore indispensable to examine both the domestic preconditions and the shifting geopolitical environment that preceded this political turning point.

The thesis is structured into five chapters, each contributing to the progressive deconstruction of the central question. Chapter I provides a historical and geopolitical background to Syria's crisis, situating it within the broader transformations in the Middle East from the early 2011 to the post-Arab Spring period. Chapter II outlines the theoretical framework, drawing from mediation and conflict resolution literature on intractable conflicts. Chapters III and IV compare the repeated failures of

international mediation in Syria—such as the Geneva Process and the missions of UN envoys—with the relative success of the Dayton Peace Process in Bosnia and Herzegovina, extracting key lessons from Richard Holbrooke's strategy. Chapter V examines the positions and strategic calculations of major international and regional actors in post-Assad Syria, focusing on the Western community (United States and European Union), key Arab states (Saudi Arabia and Egypt), and controversial powers such as Russia, Turkey, and Israel.

The Arab Spring, which began in late 2010 in Tunisia, is often portrayed as a wave of democratic awakening. In Tunisia, the uprisings were driven by a genuine democratic impulse: mass protests, though spontaneous, coalesced around the demand for political liberalization and participatory governance. This dynamic soon extended to Egypt, then considered a linchpin of Western influence in the Arab world, where the violent repression of protests by President Hosni Mubarak prompted the United States to abruptly withdraw its political support—damaging decades-long alliances and reshaping Washington's posture toward the broader MENA region.

Libya followed, but with a crucial distinction: unlike Egypt, where the U.S. distanced itself reluctantly, Libya's Muammar Gheddafi was an almost universally disliked figure internationally. The NATO intervention was made possible by the UN Security Council's adoption of Resolution 1973, which established a "no-fly zone." Importantly, this resolution was strategically instrumentalized by France and the United Kingdom—backed discreetly by the United States—to conduct extensive airstrikes that directly facilitated Gheddafi's downfall. This episode proved decisive for Russia's foreign policy: it marked the last time Moscow allowed such a resolution to pass

through its abstention, and it triggered a complete recalibration of its stance toward Western-led interventions, especially in the Arab world.

By the time unrest reached Syria in March 2011, the political and geopolitical landscape had shifted dramatically. Unlike Tunisia—where democracy was the central rallying cry—in Syria, democracy was little more than a rhetorical slogan. The core issue was sectarian: a Sunni majority challenging the entrenched Alawite regime. While urban centers such as Damascus and Aleppo were showing signs of limited socio-economic improvement, decades of accumulated frustration among Sunnis—resonating strongly in Gulf countries—provided the combustible material for a sectarian confrontation. In other words, whereas Tunisia's protests were fundamentally political, Syria's uprising was rooted in identity-based antagonisms, with democratic ideals largely absent from the substantive agenda. This distinction is pivotal for understanding the ensuing dynamics of fragmentation, foreign interference, and prolonged instability.

Such fragmentation, complexity, and volatility have been further accentuated and exacerbated by the mounting instability across the broader Middle East, particularly in the wake of the 7 October 2023 attacks and the subsequent escalation between Israel and Palestinian armed groups. The repercussions have extended well beyond the immediate theater of conflict, deepening regional polarization, straining fragile diplomatic channels, and diverting international attention and resources from other ongoing crises—including Syria's fragile transition. The renewed Israeli–Palestinian confrontation has thus not only destabilized the security architecture of the Levant but also created new obstacles to cooperative multilateral engagement in

the Syrian context, further entrenching the geopolitical rivalries that perpetuate its fragmentation and obstruct prospects for a sustainable peace.

For the first time in nearly five decades, Syria is now governed by Sunni authorities. This demographic shift carries significant implications for legitimacy: it offers the transitional leadership a rare opportunity to appeal directly to the majority identity and to channel long-standing grievances into a unifying political narrative. While such legitimacy is an important asset for reconstruction and reconciliation, it is not immune to erosion —particularly in the face of competing regional agendas, fragmented governance, and inconsistent international engagement.

The thesis adopts a comparative framework to draw out both the structural impediments and the enabling conditions for successful mediation. By contrasting Syria's mediation failures with Bosnia's Dayton settlement, the analysis reveals how differences in institutional capacity, geopolitical alignments, and negotiation strategies determine the viability of peace agreements. This approach also sheds light on the broader limits of liberal peacebuilding when confronted with asymmetrical authority, fragmented legitimacy, and the manipulations of both domestic and foreign spoilers.

The question of what domestic, regional, and international factors could enable Damascus' de facto Authorities to manage a political transition towards consolidation, ultimately achieving international recognition and legitimacy—and to what extent these Authorities are in effective control of such factors is not merely an inquiry into governance capacity. It constitutes, rather, a litmus test for the adaptability and coherence of the international system itself. The findings of this thesis point to a

persistent disjuncture between normative aspirations and operational realities, exacerbated by the erosion of Western hegemonic tools, the absence of coordinated multilateral mechanisms, and the growing assertiveness of regional powers with divergent agendas.

Chapter One.
Understanding the Syrian Crisis.

This initial chapter serves as a foundational introduction to the broader analytical exercise undertaken in this thesis. Its principal objective is to provide the reader with a structured overview of the Syrian conflict, with particular attention to its origins in the Arab Spring of 2011 and its subsequent evolution into one of the most complex and internationally entangled crises of the twenty-first century. By offering a detailed historical and geopolitical contextualization, this chapter aims to equip the reader with the necessary background to critically engage with the more thematically focused chapters that follow. Understanding the roots, trajectories, and multifaceted nature of the Syrian conflict is essential for assessing the various diplomatic, strategic, and humanitarian responses examined throughout this work.

The Syrian crisis, initially sparked by peaceful demonstrations calling for democratic reforms and civil liberties, rapidly escalated into a civil war of unprecedented scale, marked by sectarian fragmentation, authoritarian repression, and widespread displacement. Moreover, it must be understood not merely as a domestic uprising, but as a geopolitical arena in which regional and global actors—both state and non-state—have pursued competing agendas. In this regard, the country has become emblematic of what Beaujouan

(2024) describes as a *"hybrid peace marketplace"*, wherein diplomacy is driven not by universal liberal norms but by pragmatic, interest-based transactions among rival powers.

The fundamental complexity of Syria's social and political structure is the main cause of its protracted instability. The nation's diverse ethnic, sectarian, and ideological groups—including Christians, Kurds, Druze, Alawites, Sunni Arabs, and others—have traditionally been kept together by a flimsy, centralized authoritarian system. A multitude of fault lines were released when this system started to fall apart, leaving a political void and conflicting ideas about the future of the nation. These internal divisions, which overlapped with regional rivalries, great power competition, and transnational currents of jihadism, intensified the bloodshed and made united national governance more and more unattainable. As a result, Syria's internal diversity not only exacerbated the dynamics of the conflict but also made any attempt to achieve inclusive, long-lasting peace extremely difficult (Baczko et al. 2108; Philips, 2016).

Iran and Russia, for example, intervened decisively in support of the Assad regime, viewing the preservation of Syrian statehood under Assad as vital to their strategic influence in the Middle East. Conversely, actors such as Turkey and the United States supported various opposition groups. Turkey, motivated by concerns over Kurdish autonomy along its southern border, aligned itself with select rebel forces, while the United States—although initially cautious—eventually partnered with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) under the banner of counterterrorism and anti-ISIS operations.

In order to accurately reflect the true complexity of this conflict, this chapter also introduces a categorization of the main stakeholders involved. These include not only sovereign states

and international organizations, such as the United Nations and NATO, but also influential non-state actors such as Hezbollah, the Islamic State (ISIS), and the various factions of the Syrian opposition, including the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and more radical groups like Hayʾat Tahrīr al-Shām (HTS). Each of these actors has played a role—whether through direct intervention, support, or obstruction—in shaping the trajectory of the war.

This introductory overview is therefore not a mere historical recounting, but a critical framework designed to allow the reader to navigate the following chapters with a fuller awareness of the political, social, and economic legacies of over a decade of conflict. By situating the reader in both the historical roots and the geopolitical present of the Syrian crisis, this chapter sets the stage for the more targeted analysis of mediation strategies, international responses that will follow in the body of the thesis.

1.1 Historical Overview of the Syrian Conflict (2011-2024).

The Syrian civil war quickly evolved from a local protest movement into one of the most intricate and globally intertwined conflicts of the twenty-first century. It began in March 2011 in response to the wave of pro-democracy upheavals known as the Arab Spring. Syrian society was split along sectarian, ethnic, and ideological lines as a result of the regime's harsh response to the initial, peaceful protests calling for political reforms and civil liberties. Instead of reformist discourse, these early protests were met with violent crackdowns, mass arrests, and a militarization of public areas—a response representative of the larger authoritarian framework that characterized President Bashar al-Assad's rule.

After his father, Hafez al-Assad, passed away in 2000, Assad took power and upheld the long-standing authoritarian systems

of Syria's Ba'athist state. A centralized security infrastructure, widespread surveillance, and the methodical suppression of dissent were hallmarks of his regime. At first, the younger Assad presented himself as a technocrat and made cautious reform suggestions, but these aspirations soon vanished. Any semblance of political transparency had been completely destroyed by 2011. The government's violent response to protests demonstrated how fragile Syria's political agreement was and how much the regime depended on coercion rather than legitimacy to stay in power (Hinnebusch, 2012: pp. 95-113). According to the U.S. Congressional Research Service (CRS, 2023), by 2021, more than 580,000 people had died and over half of the pre-war population had been forcibly displaced, either within or across international borders. The disintegration of state authority and the rise of extremist militias such as Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS further fractured the battlefield, creating a vacuum that precipitated a surge in foreign intervention. With the absence of a dominant national actor, Syria became a playground for external powers pursuing divergent geopolitical agendas—effectively transforming the conflict into a prolonged theatre of proxy warfare.

By 2012–2013, Iran and Russia emerged as primary backers of the Assad regime. Iran’s military involvement was motivated by its desire to preserve its strategic corridor—often referred to as the “Shia Crescent”—across Iraq and Lebanon, thereby maintaining its influence in the Levant. Russia, in a parallel move, intervened militarily in 2015, deploying air strikes and troops to demonstrate its capacity as a global power and to secure its naval facility at Tartus. These actions significantly bolstered Assad’s hold on power.

Simultaneously, a constellation of opposition forces received varying degrees of support from other external actors. Turkey, concerned primarily with Kurdish autonomy along its southern border, extended military and logistical assistance to Syrian rebel groups—particularly in the northern provinces. The United States, while initially hesitant, gradually escalated its presence under the pretext of counterterrorism operations against ISIS. Notably, Washington partnered with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition that became the cornerstone of anti-ISIS operations in northeastern Syria. However, this partnership strained U.S.-Turkey relations, given Ankara's designation of the SDF's core component, the YPG (People's Protection Units), as a terrorist organization linked to the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) (Beaujouan, 2024).

As one the major regional players, we must mention Israel which has also contributed significantly to the Syrian conflict, but in a way that is sometimes overlooked. Since 2013, Israel has carried out hundreds of airstrikes within Syrian territory, mostly to prevent the flow of advanced weapons to Hezbollah and to curtail Iranian entrenchment near its northern frontier. Israel's larger strategic goal of limiting Iranian influence in the Levant and maintaining its deterrent posture is reflected in these activities, even though they are not often officially recognized (Baconi, 2021; International Crisis Group, 2023). Israel's security strategy has grown even more forceful since October 7, 2023, when regional tensions escalated, and it now sees Syria's instability as a component of a larger arc of threat. As a result, Syria has also come to embody Israel's developing preemption and regional deterrence doctrine, so solidifying its position as a key player in the continuing geopolitical struggle over Syria's destiny.

As highlighted by Beaujouan (2024), these multilayered international involvements created what he terms a *"hybrid peace marketplace"*—a mediation environment in which traditional UN-led frameworks (such as the Geneva and Astana processes) were increasingly overshadowed by transactional, interest-based diplomacy. In this evolving landscape, peacemaking became less about fostering democratic transitions or securing universal human rights, and more about managing power distributions among rival states. Beaujouan argues that Syria exemplifies a "post-liberal" model of conflict resolution, where liberal norms are subordinated to realist bargaining and coercive leverage.

Nowhere is this dynamic more visible than in the protracted stalemate that followed the military rollback of ISIS and major rebel factions. By 2021, the Assad regime had consolidated control over approximately two-thirds of Syrian territory, while the remaining zones—particularly in Idlib and parts of the northeast—remained under opposition or Kurdish administration. Despite repeated diplomatic overtures under UN Security Council Resolution 2254, aimed at achieving a negotiated political settlement, these initiatives failed to generate binding agreements (UNSC, 2015). The reasons for this are manifold. First, there was no enforcement mechanism to compel compliance from warring parties. Second, the international actors involved in the conflict had divergent endgames: while Russia and Iran aimed to preserve Assad's sovereignty, Western states remained skeptical of any transition excluding credible opposition actors or human rights guarantees.

This deadlock ultimately ossified into what Beaujouan conceptualizes as *power peace*—a fragile equilibrium where active combat diminishes, but political violence and repression

persist under the shadow of international strategic calculations. Unlike the liberal peacebuilding model promoted in the post-Cold War era—characterized by state-building, democratization, and norm diffusion—the Syrian context reveals a peace sustained not through shared normative frameworks but through mutually tolerated spheres of influence.

1.2 Case Study: The Iranian-Iraqi Air Corridor.

To gain a deeper understanding of the concept of a *hybrid peace framework*, in which international stakeholders operate through strategic bargains rather than normative consensus, this section will proceed to analyze a critical geopolitical episode discussed by both Beaujouan (2024) and Barkawi (2015). Barkawi points to the establishment of an Iranian air corridor through Iraqi airspace, which was used to transfer weapons and matériel to the Assad regime during critical phases of the conflict. The Iraqi government publicly maintained that these flights were humanitarian in nature, occasionally staging inspections—likely in coordination with Tehran. However, these corridors were instrumental in sustaining the Syrian military's capacity and coincided with the influx of Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon. In Barkawi's reading, this episode underscores the blurring of traditional dichotomies between war and diplomacy. The air corridor, while presented as a humanitarian route, in effect functioned as a covert instrument of warfare—thus epitomizing the hybrid character of international engagement in Syria.

The United States, on the other hand, used diplomatic channels in an attempt to disrupt these flows, further highlighting the dual logics at play. For Assad, Iran, and Iraq, diplomacy was a mechanism for war support; for the United

States and its allies, it was a tool for rebellion assistance. As Barkawi notes, one cannot conceptualize these dynamics through the lens of unitary state actors. Rather, one must consider the transnational networks of funding, personnel, and armament that sustained the conflict. The success of the Iranian logistical network—combined with the battlefield gains of Assad's forces in 2013—marked a strategic inflection point, allowing the regime to regain initiative and deter further international calls for regime change.

In this light, the Syrian conflict cannot be understood merely as a domestic civil war or an ideological struggle. It is more accurately described as an arena of multipolar confrontation, wherein competing visions of regional order, security doctrine, and state legitimacy have clashed. The rise of transactional diplomacy, supported by asymmetric coercive power and selective mediation, has entrenched Syria within a new paradigm of conflict governance—one that challenges the normative architecture of international peacebuilding.

The Syrian war exemplifies the decline of liberal internationalism in favor of interest-driven, post-liberal strategies. The failure of UN diplomacy, the prominence of militarized mediation, and the normalization of indirect warfare through proxies all reflect a profound transformation in how civil wars are internationalized, sustained, and eventually managed. The external stakeholders—far from acting as neutral mediators—became primary architects of the conflict's trajectory, transforming Syria into both a battleground and a testing ground for 21st-century geopolitics.

1.3 The Fall of Assad and the Uncertain Road Ahead.

The strategic narrative outlined above is now entering a decisive new phase. On 8 December 2024, a swift military offensive led by Hayʾat Tahrīr al-Shām (HTS) and supported by the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army brought about the collapse of Assad's regime. Assad fled to Russia, marking the end of his 14-year rule (SpecialEurasia, 2025). In the aftermath, HTS transitioned from insurgency to state-building, establishing a transitional government and rebranding its leader, formerly known as Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, as President Ahmed al-Sharaa, head of the newly formed Syrian Transitional Government (The Guardian*,* 2025*)*. This transformation embodies ideological and strategic recalibration: from militant insurgent to formal political authority. While Syria's emerging post-war order clearly reflects the structural logic of power peace—linking territorial control to regional patronage—the ascent of al-Sharaa also suggests early institutional experimentation. Indeed, the international community's cautious re-engagement, coupled with regional dynamics favoring state-brokered transitions, creates an opening for governance reform.

However, it is impossible to ignore regional actors' influence, such as Israel, on Syria's post-Assad scenario. Israel's persistent military vigilance, especially against Iranian and Hezbollah-aligned infrastructure in southern and central Syria, indicates a strategic desire to shape the terms of any future security arrangement, even though it has not directly participated in state-building operations. In this way, Israel serves as a geopolitical indicator of how the balance of power in the region will change under the transitional government as well as a deterrence. Israeli politicians have shown a cautious interest in the stability of Syria's new leadership as of early 2025, but they

are still adamant about preventing the establishment of hostile enclaves along the Golan Heights. Therefore, Israel's security requirements and regional red lines will probably need to be taken into consideration in any long-term peace architecture (Haaretz, 2025; Middle East Institute, 2025).

Yet, whether Syria's nascent order will mature into a durable and inclusive peace depends critically on follow-up: the implementation of transitional justice, constitutional reform, economic recovery, and civic reconstruction. These aspects—and their reception among Syrians and the broader international community—will be the focus of the final chapter of this thesis. There, we will examine whether the current transitional government can move beyond elite bargaining and proxy equilibrium to pursue reconciliation, institutional consolidation, and long-term stability.

Chapter Two.
Theoretical Tools for the Interpretation of the Syrian Case.

Before delving into the specificities of the Syrian case, it is essential to establish a robust theoretical framework grounded in diplomatic studies and conflict analysis. Such a foundation not only provides the conceptual tools necessary to interpret complex conflict environments but also enables a structured understanding of why and how states, international organizations, and other actors strategically choose to participate in mediation efforts. The objective of this chapter, therefore, is threefold.

First, it offers a comprehensive overview of mediation as a distinct practice within the broader field of conflict resolution.

While the term "mediation" is widely used across diplomatic and academic discourse, its precise nature, modalities, and mechanisms remain subject to varying interpretations. By clarifying the core components of mediation—its voluntary character, the non-coercive role of the third party, and its flexibility in adapting to diverse conflict scenarios—this section delineates the analytical boundaries that distinguish mediation from adjacent practices such as negotiation, arbitration, and peacekeeping. A nuanced typology of mediation forms will be presented to illuminate how third-party involvement can range from passive facilitation to assertive intervention, and how these variations bear on the effectiveness, legitimacy, and sustainability of mediated outcomes.

Second, the chapter contextualizes mediation within the broader field of conflict theory by presenting a selection of conceptual models that are widely employed to interpret conflict dynamics and state behavior. Drawing upon foundational frameworks—such as those developed by Bercovitch, Diehl, Greig, and Zartman—this section provides the necessary analytical vocabulary to decode the strategic logic that underpins mediation efforts. These models not only explain how different forms of mediation operate but also help forecast potential outcomes based on structural variables, such as asymmetry of power, issue salience, or third-party leverage. In particular, the application of Graham Allison's tripartite model of decision-making—comprising the Rational Policy Model, the Organizational Process Model, and the Bureaucratic Politics Model—enriches our understanding of the choices made by governments and institutional actors in conflict settings.

Third, and no less importantly, this chapter surveys the typology of conflicts as elaborated by scholars such as Chester

Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Aall. Understanding the nature and classification of a conflict is not a mere taxonomic exercise; it is a precondition for identifying appropriate mediation strategies and for assessing the level of international attention, resources, and institutional mechanisms that may be mobilized. The ability to categorize the Syrian conflict within an existing typological framework—whether as a "dependent conflict," an "orphan conflict," or a "ward of the system"—offers analytical clarity and supports the selection of appropriate comparative cases. It also enables a more systematic application of mediation models, both retrospectively (in analyzing previous interventions) and prospectively (in forecasting the feasibility of future mediation efforts).

This chapter sets the stage for the analysis that follows by equipping the reader with the conceptual instruments necessary to engage critically with the Syrian case. Through the articulation of key concepts, models, and typologies, it underscores the indispensability of theory in informing both scholarly interpretation and practical engagement with mediation as a tool of international diplomacy. Only through this theoretical groundwork can one meaningfully assess the strategic calculations of mediators, the structural constraints of the conflict, and the potential trajectories of post-conflict stabilization. The subsequent case study on Syria will thus be interpreted not in isolation, but through a layered analytical lens that connects theory to practice in the evolving landscape of global conflict mediation.

2.1 Mediation as a Diplomatic Instrument.

Mediation, though defined in various ways across the literature, is most fundamentally understood as a structured and voluntary

process of conflict management in which disputing parties seek the assistance of a third party to resolve their disagreements (Berridge, 2022). Central to this definition is the concept of *assistance*: unlike negotiation, which entails direct engagement between the parties, mediation introduces an intermediary who facilitates dialogue and helps overcome impasses. This third-party intervention is not merely procedural—it symbolizes both the failure of direct resolution and the potential for constructive transformation through guided communication.

Crucially, mediation is distinct from negotiation in its reliance on an external actor who does not hold decision-making power but enables the disputants to reach mutually agreeable outcomes. Therefore it is essential to distinguish mediation from other conflict resolution tools. While negotiation involves direct party-to-party communication; fact-finding missions collect data without intervening; good offices provide diplomatic support but do not engage substantively; conciliation involves low-level facilitation; arbitration and adjudication are legalistic and binding; peacekeeping stabilizes post-conflict zones; and punitive mechanisms, such as sanctions or interventions, represent coercive diplomacy (Berridge, 2022); mediation occupies a unique position: it is non-binding, yet participatory and flexible, allowing for the surfacing of underlying grievances and creative compromise. As such, it is especially suited for protracted, identity-based, or asymmetric conflicts, where binding decisions may not be acceptable or enforceable. In mediation, the process is controlled by the mediator—they set the agenda, coordinate logistics, and manage communications. However, the outcome remains entirely in the hands of the parties and this contrasts sharply with adjudication or arbitration, where the third party imposes a legally binding solution. Mediation seeks a win–win solution based on mutual consent, and as a result, tends to produce more durable and

stable agreements, particularly in conflicts marked by asymmetric power dynamics. The voluntary nature of the process enhances legitimacy and can lay the groundwork for long-term reconciliation rather than mere cessation of hostilities. This third party may be an individual, a state, an international organization (IO), or a non-governmental organization (NGO). Even when selected by formal institutions, mediators bring their own personal, cultural, and professional backgrounds, which inevitably shape both process and outcome (Bercovitch & Houston, 2000). The mediator's identity and style can be decisive, as illustrated by the assertive, interventionist diplomacy of Richard Holbrooke in the Dayton Accords compared to the facilitative, community-based approach of Sant'Egidio in Mozambique (Hartwell, 2019; Zartman, 2000).

While traditional theory stresses the principle of impartiality, empirical evidence suggests that credibility and perceived fairness are more critical than strict neutrality. As Bercovitch (1997) emphasizes, mediation is often most effective when conducted by actors who, although not neutral, are trusted by all sides and capable of delivering concrete results. For example, the United States' mediation role in the Middle East has long been shaped by strategic interests, yet parties have often accepted its involvement due to its capacity to enforce or incentivize compliance.

Moreover, mediation must be understood as non-coercive and consensual: it cannot be imposed. The authority of the mediator thus derives not from institutional mandate but from personal legitimacy, charisma, or political leverage. Holbrooke's success in the Balkans was due not only to U.S. military backing but also to his ability to manipulate incentives and reshape strategic calculations among warring parties (Zartman, 2000). In contrast, less empowered actors—such as NGOs—may lack the tools to

enforce compliance, despite their normative appeal or proximity to the ground (Diehl & Greig, 2012).

Because no permanent global body is mandated to carry out mediation, each instance is inherently ad hoc, requiring sensitivity to the unique political, cultural, and historical contours of the conflict. If mediators limit themselves to procedural neutrality, they risk entrenching existing asymmetries. Instead, effective mediation requires *substantive engagement*—an effort to identify and transform the root causes of the conflict. In this context, values such as fairness, justice, and accountability often override the mere appearance of neutrality (Bercovitch, 1997).

2.1.1 Track One and Track Two Diplomacy: Levels of Engagement and Institutional Roles.

A crucial distinction in mediation studies is between Track One and Track Two diplomacy.

Track One mediation refers to formal, state-led processes in which official actors—often states or coalitions of states—intervene in conflicts. These processes are often tied to geopolitical interests, including the preservation of regional stability or global order. Far from undermining their credibility, the involvement of superpowers can actually enhance a mediator's leverage. Cases such as Russia's involvement with India and Pakistan, the EU's mediation between Russia and Georgia, and the UK's role in Cyprus illustrate how states often mediate disputes in which they have a strategic interest. While this contradicts the ideal of complete neutrality, such engagement can be instrumental in securing compliance and post-agreement support (Berridge, 2022).

Track Two mediation, by contrast, involves non-state actors —primarily NGOs, civil society groups, and sometimes IOs.

Originally associated with grassroots or "citizen diplomacy," the term "Track Two" was formally coined by Joseph Montville in 1981. Today, some NGOs, especially in Scandinavia, have become professional mediators, with dedicated expertise and long-term engagement in conflict zones. While Track Two actors may lack the coercive leverage of state mediators, they are often better positioned to build trust, open informal channels, and engage actors excluded from official negotiations.

2.1.2 Forms of Mediation.

Mediation can take different forms depending on the role of the third party and the degree of intervention. Grieg and Diehl (2012) identify four principal types of mediation: *conciliation*, *consultation*, *pure mediation*, and *power mediation*. Each form varies in terms of the mediator's involvement, influence, and the tools employed to reach a resolution.

1. Conciliation

   Often referred to as *good offices*, conciliation involves minimal intervention by the third party. The mediator provides a neutral venue and facilitates basic communication, without participating directly in the negotiation process. Some scholars argue that conciliation should not be considered mediation in the strict sense but rather a *pre-mediation* phase (Grieg and Diehl, 2012). An example of this light-touch approach includes the role of the Sant'Egidio community in the Mozambique peace process and its attempted involvement in the Russia-Ukraine conflict—though the latter was ultimately ineffective due to the conflict's escalation.

2. Consultation (Facilitation)

   Consultation involves a more active third party who

facilitates the negotiation process but leaves substantive control to the conflicting parties. The mediator may help set the agenda, encourage a shift from confrontational to problem-solving attitudes, and ensure that parties remain committed to the process. This approach was exemplified by President Carter's role during the Camp David Accords, where he worked to prevent disengagement by either party (Touval, 1982). The aim is to foster an integrative, win-win solution, and to reframe the conflict from positional bargaining to interest-based negotiation. This style of mediation is widely regarded as effective due to its sustainability—since outcomes are fully owned by the parties themselves.

3. Pure Mediation

In this model, the mediator acts as a *solution innovator*, assisting in the development of a substantive formula for agreement. The mediator identifies overlapping interests and may temporarily set aside contentious issues to build diplomatic momentum. Senator George Mitchell's involvement in Northern Ireland is a prominent example. Here, the mediator influences both the procedure and the substance, managing time and introducing deadlines to keep negotiations on track. A central feature of pure mediation is the *one-text procedure*, where all parties work from a single document drafted and refined by the mediator—thus facilitating convergence toward agreement.

4. Power Mediation (Heavy Mediation)

This form represents the most intrusive type of mediation, where the mediator possesses significant leverage and may use coercive tools—such as threats or incentives—to compel parties toward an agreement. Zartman (2000) refers to this as *manipulation*. Richard

> Holbrooke's mediation in Bosnia-Herzegovina is a key example, where the use of threats and promises altered the expectations and positions of the parties. In these cases, the bargaining space is compressed, and the process is no longer entirely voluntary. The mediator clarifies the cost of non-agreement, as demonstrated by Henry Kissinger, who threatened to withhold arms supplies from Israel during the Yom Kippur crisis. NATO's bombing campaign in Serbia also falls within this strategic framework.

Bercovitch (1997) offers a slightly different typology, distinguishing among *good offices* (not considered true mediation), *facilitative*, *formulative*, and *manipulative* mediation. His classification similarly aligns with the levels of involvement and coercive capacity of the mediator.

In terms of effectiveness, consultation (facilitation) is often regarded as the most sustainable form of mediation. Since outcomes arise from the efforts of the conflicting parties, they are more likely to be perceived as legitimate and durable. Understanding mediation requires moving beyond static definitions to recognize the fluidity and diversity of third-party roles within complex conflict environments. Scholars and practitioners have developed typologies to capture these variations—ranging from light-touch conciliation to heavy-handed power mediation—each with distinct implications for the balance between impartiality and effectiveness. These frameworks reflect not only methodological differences but also normative tensions between sovereignty, agency, and structural transformation. In Greg and Diehl and Jacob Bercovitch's models, for instance, mediation styles are organized along a spectrum of increasing third-party involvement: from conciliation, where the mediator merely facilitates dialogue, to

power mediation, where coercive tools and leverage are deployed to alter parties' cost-benefit calculations.

2.1.3 Empirical Cases.

This typological lens becomes particularly illuminating when applied to real-world mediation cases. For instance, the Oslo Accords constitute a pivotal case in the study of informal mediation and the evolution of conflict resolution mechanisms. Initiated through a series of secret backchannel negotiations facilitated by the Norwegian research institute FAFO, the process initially took the form of *conciliation*, with the third party providing a neutral setting and logistical support without intervening in substantive matters. As negotiations progressed, FAFO transitioned into a *consultative* role, helping to sustain dialogue and manage procedural tensions without imposing solutions. At the outset, the Israeli government refused to formally engage with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), instead sending unofficial representatives, while the PLO was represented by Abu Ala (Ahmed Qurei). Only after substantial progress was made did Israel replace its academic emissaries with official negotiators, acknowledging the necessity of formal engagement. The process culminated in the signing of the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements (Oslo I Accord) on 13 September 1993, in which both parties mutually recognized one another and agreed to a framework for future negotiations on final status issues such as borders, security, Jerusalem, refugees, and settlements (Declaration of Principles, 1993). Although many of these issues remained unresolved, the Oslo process marked a historic breakthrough. Crucially, the mediation never reached the stage of *pure mediation* or *power mediation*, as FAFO refrained from proposing a binding formula or applying external pressure. The Oslo case illustrates how low-key, adaptive facilitation—without

coercive leverage—can open channels of communication in highly polarized conflicts and demonstrates the value of hybrid Track I and Track II diplomacy in creating political space for negotiation (Grieg and Diehl, 2012).

More assertive styles—such as power mediation—bring both strategic advantage and normative controversy. Richard Holbrooke's role in brokering the Dayton Accords exemplifies this model. By leveraging the diplomatic and military influence of the United States, Holbrooke effectively narrowed the "reservation area" of the conflicting parties, making continued warfare in Bosnia more costly than compliance. Here, the mediator not only facilitated communication but redefined the structure of the conflict itself, deploying incentives and threats to compel agreement. This form of intervention, while arguably effective, raises concerns about ownership, consent, and the sustainability of externally imposed settlements.

The typological framework also helps distinguish mediation from adjacent conflict resolution mechanisms. Unlike arbitration, where decisions are binding and determined by expert judgment, or good offices, where the third party merely brings disputants together without guiding the process, mediation occupies a hybrid space. It is participatory, non-binding, and highly context-sensitive, with success often hinging on the credibility and adaptability of the mediator. Moreover, mediation allows for a more flexible engagement with underlying grievances and asymmetries, which rigid legalistic mechanisms may overlook. Crucially, the degree of mediator involvement also reflects broader geopolitical interests and positionality. When France, under President Sarkozy, mediated between Russia and Georgia in 2008, the intervention reflected not just procedural engagement but strategic concern for regional stability. Likewise, Qatar's growing role as a mediator in Middle Eastern conflicts suggests a hybrid of power and

credibility: a small but wealthy state leveraging its neutrality and diplomatic ties to influence outcomes while preserving its soft power image. These examples illustrate how typologies of mediation are not only analytic tools but also reflections of international hierarchies and the moral economies of intervention.

Mediation as a practice resists reductive categorization. Instead, typologies should be understood as heuristic devices that illuminate the dynamic interplay between process control, outcome influence, and normative alignment. Whether operating through light-touch facilitation or assertive power mediation, the effectiveness of third-party engagement hinges on timing, trust, and contextual sensitivity—factors that remain as relevant today as they were in Bosnia or Oslo.

2.2 Understanding Strategic Decision-Making.

Understanding how national governments, mediators, and diplomats behave in times of conflict is of pivotal importance. Doing so not only allows us to identify the most effective courses of action by reflecting on historical precedents, but also enables us to critically evaluate present strategic decisions—including why a given state might choose to engage as a mediator in a particular dispute. Analysts frequently approach foreign and military policy through implicit conceptual frameworks. As Graham T. Allison famously argues in his seminal article "Conceptual Models and the Cuban Missile Crisis," published in *The American Political Science Review*, analysts often unconsciously rely on what he terms the Rational Policy Model (Model I) (Allison, 1969). According to this model, explanations aim to reconstruct how a national government, conceived as a unified rational actor, selects a particular course of action in response to a strategic problem.

This model is especially useful because it provides a structured framework for analyzing political behavior and evaluating decisions through a value-maximizing logic. Without such a theoretical structure, it would be nearly impossible to comprehensively assess the variables of a complex conflict or political phenomenon[1].

2.2.1 The Rational Policy Model (Model I).

Allison introduces two alternative models to complement and enrich the explanatory scope of the Rational Policy Model: the Organizational Process Model (Model II) and the Bureaucratic Politics Model (Model III). Starting with the Rational Policy Model—which Allison characterizes as an "analytic paradigm" in the sense developed by Robert K. Merton—the basic unit of analysis is *policy as national choice* (Allison, 1969; Merton, 1957)[2]. The model is structured around four core components: *the National Actor; the Problem; Static Selection; and Action as Rational Choice.*

First, *the National Actor* is conceived as a unitary, rational decision-maker. Second, *the Problem* is understood as a strategic challenge that demands a deliberate policy response. Third, *Static Selection* implies that governments choose among fixed sets of alternatives. Finally, the concept of action as rational choice is broken down into four interrelated subcomponents: G*oals and Objectives, Options, Consequences, and Choice*. The

[1] Governments choose the course of action that will best achieve their strategic objectives. Explanations include demonstrating the purpose the government had in mind when it carried out the act and why, in light of the country's goals, this was a reasonable decision.

[2] Although paradigms are a significant step away from more loose, implicit conceptual models, they are nevertheless far weaker than a suitable theoretical model. The concepts and the relationships between the variables are not well enough defined to produce deductive propositions. However, "Paradigmatic Analysis" holds great potential for elucidating and standardizing political science analysis approaches.

rational agent assesses strategic options based on expected outcomes, selecting the course of action that maximizes utility according to clearly defined national interests.

2.2.2 The Organizational Process Model (Model II).

Model I provides the foundation, but Allison contends that it alone is insufficient for a thorough explanation or reliable prediction of state behavior. The Organizational Process Model (Model II) offers an alternative view, suggesting that government actions are not the outcome of a single rational actor but rather the product of outputs generated by large organizations operating according to established routines[3]. In this model, the basic unit of analysis becomes *policy as organizational output*. Decisions, therefore, are shaped by pre-existing standard operating procedures (SOPs), which enable organizations to address recurring issues efficiently but often limit flexibility in novel or complex situations (Allison, 1969). Model II emphasizes the routinized and programmed nature of decision-making, where organizational behavior is constrained by internal procedures and interdepartmental coordination. Although this model can provide relatively accurate predictions due to the consistency of organizational behavior, it has been criticized for underestimating the adaptability required in crisis contexts. The strength of this model lies in its ability to identify how bureaucratic inertia and procedural constraints influence national policy[4].

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[3] Remember that established programs are necessary to ensure the reliable performance of actions that rely on the conduct of a hundred people.

[4] The importance of programs, repertoires, and coordination as determinants of organizational behavior increases with the complexity of the action and the number of participants.

2.2.3 The Bureaucratic Politics Model (Model III).

The third model, the Bureaucratic Politics Model (Model III), shifts the focus from organizational structure to political interaction. Here, *policy* is viewed *as a political outcome* arising from bargaining among players located at different levels of a hierarchical government structure. Outcomes are not necessarily solutions to well-defined problems but rather the result of compromise, negotiation, and competition among actors with diverse interests and institutional positions (Allison, 1969)[5].

Unlike the Rational Policy and Organizational Process Models, Model III highlights the inherently political nature of decision-making, where internal power dynamics and the individual preferences of policymakers play a decisive role. Although this model offers valuable insight into the political context of policymaking, Allison notes that it requires an extraordinary level of detail to reconstruct decision-making processes accurately.

2.3 Forgotten Conflicts and Intractability.

In their work *Taming Intractable Conflicts: Mediation in the Hardest Cases* (2004), Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Aall introduce the analytical framework of forgotten conflicts, a category encompassing violent or post-violent crises that persist on the margins of international attention, often with devastating consequences for affected populations. Unlike high-

[5] Bargaining games entail regularized methods of generating action rather than occurring at random. Politics is determined by the mechanics of choice, which are determined by independent judgments regarding significant choices.

profile wars that benefit from sustained diplomatic, military, or humanitarian engagement, forgotten conflicts tend to be protracted, structurally complex, and largely resistant to resolution. Crucially, the authors emphasize that such conflicts are not static in their classification: they can—and often do—move between categories as their dynamics evolve and as the level of external engagement fluctuates (Crocker et al., 2004). Crocker, Hampson, and Aall identify five non-exclusive categories of forgotten conflicts, which help elucidate the range of international responses—or lack thereof—these crises typically receive.

The first category is that of *Neglected Conflicts*, referring to situations that have never commanded significant international attention. These crises are allowed to fester for years, and in doing so, become increasingly impervious to conventional resolution strategies. Rwanda in the early 1990s, the Sri Lankan civil war, and the long-standing insurgency in Myanmar illustrate how inattention can entrench hostilities and render late-stage interventions largely ineffective (Crocker et al., 2004, pp. 16–18).

The second category, *Orphan Conflicts*, includes conflicts that once attracted considerable international involvement but have since been abandoned due to shifts in global priorities, donor fatigue, or strategic disinterest. Countries such as Afghanistan, Somalia, and Cambodia typify this category. As shown by Lund (2009), this category reflects the volatility of political will and the consequences of premature disengagement.

Captive conflicts, the third category, are characterized by the strategic entrapment of peace efforts. These are conflicts in which external powers with vested geopolitical interests deliberately block or manipulate mediation processes. Examples include the Vietnam War, and the Armenian–Nagorno-Karabakh dispute. In these cases, the perceived stakes of strategic

competition outweigh humanitarian or diplomatic concerns, rendering resolution a function of great-power rivalry rather than local dynamics (Crocker et al., 2004).

The fourth type is *Dependent Conflicts*, where local disputes escalate into wider geopolitical confrontations, usually through foreign intervention, regional entanglement, or proxy warfare. These conflicts, although rooted in domestic grievances, become arenas for international confrontation, often prolonging the violence. The Syrian conflict is a quintessential dependent conflict: originally sparked by the Arab Spring protests in 2011, it rapidly evolved into a complex war involving state and non-state actors, regional rivalries, and international powers with divergent interests such as Russia, Iran, Turkey, the United States, and non-state transnational forces (Phillips, 2020).

Finally the fifth category is that of *Wards of the System*—conflicts that have become functionally embedded within the institutional machinery of international organizations, most notably the United Nations. These conflicts are not resolved, but rather administratively managed, often through peacekeeping missions, humanitarian aid, and cyclical negotiation processes. The term reflects the paradox of institutional attention without effective leadership or resolution, where global institutions maintain a presence more out of necessity than efficacy.

2.3.1 Syria as a Dynamic Conflict Typology.

When applied to the case of Syria, this framework offers valuable insights into the conflict's evolution and current status. Since 2011, Syria has traversed multiple categories. Initially a dependent conflict, the Syrian civil war attracted a range of international actors—both states and non-states—transforming it into one of the most internationalized and militarized crises of the 21st century. By 2013, the United Nations had assumed a

central role in mediation efforts, as most other actors prioritized their strategic goals over inclusive peace. In this phase, Syria effectively became a ward of the system, subject to institutionalized but largely ineffective diplomatic efforts.

A turning point occurred on 8 December 2024, when the regime of Bashar al-Assad was finally overthrown following a prolonged military campaign. Victory was claimed by the opposition forces, unified under the leadership of Abu Mohammad al-Jawlani, who has since assumed the presidency of a transitional government under the name of Ahmad al-Sharà. This development marks the formal cessation of active hostilities and the beginning of a post-conflict transitional phase, which, according to Crocker, Hampson, and Aall (2004, pp. 91-93), is often the most fragile and dangerous juncture in the life cycle of a conflict.

In *Taming Intractable Conflicts*, the authors highlight the importance of sustained third-party engagement during the implementation phase of peace processes. While the international community often celebrates a peace accord as a diplomatic endpoint, this stage is merely the beginning of a new —and arguably more difficult—phase of reconstruction and stabilization. It is precisely in this period that spoilers, institutional vacuums, weak governance, and residual violence can easily derail the peace process. Without coherent strategies and reliable external support, the foundations of peace remain fragile and reversible.

Syria today illustrates this precarious condition. Despite the formal end of civil war, the country faces profound internal fragmentation—ethnic, sectarian, political, and ideological cleavages that threaten to reignite instability (International Crisis Group, 2024). The new transitional government is burdened with enormous challenges: a shattered economy, decimated infrastructure, widespread poverty, and above all, a devastated

civil society. Over fourteen years of war have eroded trust, dismantled grassroots institutions, and silenced independent civic actors. The very fabric of Syrian society—its connective tissue—is now dangerously thin.

This reality raises the pressing risk that Syria may soon enter a new category: that of an orphan conflict. With the opposition now in power and the strategic goals of many international actors ostensibly fulfilled, external interest may rapidly wane. Yet this is precisely the moment when international engagement is most urgently needed—not for military intervention, but for capacity-building, reconciliation processes, economic recovery, and civil society empowerment.

Neglecting Syria at this juncture would not only repeat the failures witnessed in Afghanistan or Libya, but would also squander a hard-earned opportunity for inclusive, bottom-up peacebuilding. The long-term sustainability of peace in Syria depends not solely on the absence of warlords or regime change, but on the reconstruction of legitimate institutions, the rehabilitation of civic space, and the reweaving of a national identity capable of accommodating diversity and dissent. As Crocker, Hampson, and Aall (2004) remind us, the true test of peace lies not in signing agreements, but in the difficult, messy, and unglamorous work of implementation—a stage where failure is both common and catastrophic.

Chapter Three.
Mediation in the Syrian Conflict.

The forthcoming two chapters are conceived as complementary components of a broader comparative exercise. The aim is to critically examine the trajectory and outcomes of mediation in two complex civil conflicts: Syria and Bosnia-Herzegovina. We begin by exploring the multiple, and often unsuccessful, mediation initiatives that took place in Syria between 2011 and 2018. This examination will be followed by an in-depth analysis of the Dayton Peace Process, which concluded the Bosnian war in 1995. Through this comparison, the objective is to identify the underlying reasons why the Syrian conflict culminated in a military outcome, whereas the Bosnian crisis resulted in a negotiated political settlement.

Such a juxtaposition allows us to uncover both structural and procedural divergences between the two cases. In particular, it enables us to revisit and critically evaluate the flaws and missed opportunities that characterized the Syrian peace efforts—drawing important lessons from a comparative peacebuilding lens.

The Syrian conflict serves as a paradigmatic example of a "mediation-saturated" crisis, marked by repeated but fragmented attempts at conflict resolution. Notably, the ceasefire agreements of 2012 and 2016 illustrate the application of both regional and international leverage. Yet, as highlighted in Chapter One, Syria's extreme internal fragmentation—along ethnic, sectarian, and ideological fault lines—exacerbated the conflict and hindered unified negotiation channels. According to Lundgren (2016), the fragility of the Syrian peace process reveals a central limitation of top-down mediation strategies, which often

prioritize external leverage over genuine engagement with the fundamental incompatibilities between parties.

The following chapter will thus provide a systematic mapping of the various stakeholders involved in Syrian mediation—ranging from sovereign states to regional powers and international organizations—and the specific strategies adopted by these actors. By contrasting the Syrian case with the Bosnian peace process, the reader will gain a clearer understanding of the differing modalities, sequencing, and political calculations that shaped each conflict's resolution pathway.

Importantly, the Syrian context reveals a diverse array of mediators, both state and non-state, operating with divergent motivations and capacities. As Bercovitch and Gartner (2006, pp. 329–354) argue, international organizations tend to be more effective in resolving high-intensity conflicts and achieving durable settlements, owing to their perceived neutrality and institutional legitimacy. Conversely, states and regional actors often demonstrate higher efficacy in low-intensity disputes, owing to their geographical proximity, shared cultural frameworks, and more flexible diplomatic apparatus. However, Bercovitch and Gartner also caution that when a state acts as mediator, its interventions are often influenced by its foreign policy objectives. In such cases, mediation becomes a tool of strategic statecraft, where achieving geopolitical influence may be prioritized over genuine conflict resolution (2006, p. 345).

This theoretical framework provides a useful reference point for assessing the Syrian case. Interestingly, Syria defies many of these assumptions. It constitutes a complex empirical setting that involves all categories of mediators—states, non-state actors, and international institutions—and often displays mediation

dynamics that diverge from theoretical expectations. For instance, as will be examined later in this chapter, mediation efforts by both Russia and Saudi Arabia took place during periods of high-intensity conflict, challenging Bercovitch and Gartner's distinction between mediator type and conflict intensity (Akpınar, 2016).

By dissecting these anomalies, this chapter seeks not only to overview the mediation attempts in Syria, but also to reflect on the broader limitations of dominant mediation theories when applied to multi-actor, high-stakes conflicts like the Syrian civil war.

3.1 State as Mediators: Turkey.

Turkey was among the earliest actors to propose mediation in the Syrian conflict, initiating its diplomatic efforts in 2011, when the crisis had not yet escalated into a full-scale civil war. This early engagement aligns with the theoretical observations of Bercovitch and Gartner, who argue that states tend to intervene more effectively during low-intensity conflicts (Bercovitch & Gartner, 2006). In the initial stages, Turkey attempted to persuade President Bashar al-Assad to adopt a peaceful and reformist approach to the mounting unrest. Despite several rounds of high-level negotiations and diplomatic outreach, these initiatives yielded no tangible results (Akpınar, 2016).

As the conflict intensified, Turkey’s position evolved from that of a neutral mediator to an overt supporter of the opposition forces. It aligned itself strategically with Qatar, reflecting the broader alliance patterns that emerged during the Arab Spring. The Turkish-Qatari axis, already consolidated through shared regional ambitions, played a crucial role in a notable

humanitarian mediation: the exchange of 2130 Syrian prisoners for 48 Iranian detainees. This operation was facilitated by the Turkish-based humanitarian NGO IHH (The Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief), which acted as an intermediary between otherwise intransigent parties.

This episode represents an early instance of what can be termed hybrid diplomacy, whereby non-state actors—such as humanitarian organizations—collaborate with state entities to achieve conflict mitigation. According to İzzet Şahin, IHH's Board Member and Diplomacy Coordinator, the primary rationale behind such hybrid initiatives was the prevention of regional spillover through non-violent means. Şahin emphasized that civil society actors were able to communicate with groups that official diplomatic channels could not access due to institutional and political constraints. Crucially, IHH's lack of formal affiliation with any government allowed it to maintain a degree of perceived neutrality, which played a pivotal role in encouraging parties to engage in dialogue (Şahin, 16 April 2015).

A second significant Turkish mediation effort occurred in August 2015, when Ankara co-mediated a 48-hour ceasefire with Iran. This temporary truce was negotiated between Syrian rebel groups and Hezbollah fighters, who were engaged in active combat in the towns of Zabadani and Idlib. The mediation was particularly noteworthy because it brought together two regional powers—Turkey and Iran—that were backing opposing sides in the conflict. Turkey was supporting the rebel factions, while Iran remained a staunch ally of the Assad regime.

This moment of cooperation, although limited in scope and duration, demonstrated the potential for pragmatic diplomacy rooted in reciprocal leverage. Both Ankara and Tehran

successfully exerted pressure on their respective proxies, culminating in a short-lived cessation of hostilities. This represents a textbook example of coercive diplomacy—or what scholars often term the "stick" approach to mediation—a concept we will explore in greater detail in the following chapter.

Nonetheless, despite the relative progress marked by this initiative, the ceasefire ultimately failed to pave the way for a sustained political process. Accusations of partiality soon resurfaced: Iran was repeatedly criticized for its unwavering support of the Assad regime, while Turkey faced scrutiny for its open backing of rebel forces. These perceptions of bias severely undermined the credibility of both mediators, illustrating the structural limits of power-based peacemaking when trust and impartiality are absent.

In sum, Turkey's role in the Syrian conflict reflects a dynamic trajectory—from early diplomatic overtures to more complex forms of hybrid mediation. Its experience reveals both the opportunities and the constraints of state mediation in asymmetric civil wars, particularly when national interests and strategic alliances take precedence over neutrality and long-term conflict resolution.

3.1.1. State as Mediators: Saudi Arabia and Russia.

As detailed in Chapter One, the Russian Federation positioned itself early on as a firm supporter of the Assad regime. In line with this posture, on January 30, 2012, Russia proposed to host informal talks in Moscow—a gesture aimed at facilitating dialogue between the Syrian government and the opposition. While the Assad government accepted the invitation, opposition

groups firmly declined to participate. This early diplomatic failure underscores one of the most persistent obstacles that would plague all subsequent mediation attempts: the inability to convene all relevant parties at the negotiation table under acceptable terms for both sides.

Just a month later, Russia's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Vitaly Churkin, unofficially introduced a three-point plan aimed at de-escalating the conflict. The plan included: halting arms supplies to opposition forces; initiating direct negotiations between the Assad government and the opposition; and formulating an "honorable exit" strategy for President Assad. According to former Finnish President and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Martti Ahtisaari, this proposal represented a critical—but ultimately missed—opportunity. Despite being shared with American, British, and French representatives, the initiative was reportedly dismissed due to Western expectations of an imminent collapse of the Assad regime (Borger & Inzaurralde, 2015).

Russia's ambition to mediate crises across the Middle East has long been part of its broader strategic calculus. The Arab Spring, therefore, presented Moscow with an opportunity to both reassert its regional presence and project itself as a diplomatic heavyweight capable of balancing hard power with negotiation. A turning point in Russia's mediation narrative came in the aftermath of the alleged chemical weapons attack on Ghouta in August 2013. Amid mounting international pressure on Assad, Russia brokered a high-stakes agreement with the United States: Assad would dismantle his chemical weapons arsenal under international supervision by mid-2014. This accord not only averted U.S. military intervention but also set the stage for the Geneva II peace talks , which both Moscow and

Washington agreed to be held inNovember 2013 (BBC News, 2014). This moment is illustrative of Russia's pragmatic engagement, where strategic interest and diplomatic visibility converge.

In parallel, Saudi Arabia sought to advance its own mediation initiative by addressing the persistent fragmentation of the Syrian opposition. On December 10, 2015, Riyadh hosted a landmark conference that brought together a diverse array of opposition factions. The aim was to forge a unified negotiating body capable of representing the Syrian people at the upcoming Geneva III negotiations. The outcome was the creation of the High Negotiations Committee (HNC), an umbrella platform comprising 34 opposition groups. While hailed as a diplomatic breakthrough, the Riyadh meeting was marred by significant exclusions: Kurdish political groups, as well as extremist factions such as the Islamic State (ISIS) and Jabhat al-Nusra, were deliberately left out on the grounds that they were classified as terrorist entities (AlJazeera, 2015).

This selective inclusivity, while politically understandable, had long-term implications for the prospects of a comprehensive peace. As will be explored in greater detail throughout this chapter and the next, the exclusion of powerful but controversial actors from formal negotiation frameworks severely undermined the legitimacy and efficacy of the mediation process. Without the participation of all influential stakeholders—regardless of their ideological positioning—any attempt at inclusive dialogue was structurally compromised. This dynamic, coupled with the polarizing role of external sponsors, constituted one of the central barriers to sustainable conflict resolution in Syria.

Both the Russian and Saudi mediation efforts thus reveal the challenges of balancing strategic interests with genuine

peacemaking. While Russia sought to shield its geopolitical ally and elevate its international status, Saudi Arabia aimed to reshape the political architecture of post-Assad Syria in line with its own regional vision. Despite moments of apparent progress, both initiatives ultimately fell short in producing an inclusive or enduring settlement—a failure that highlights the deep structural and political asymmetries at the heart of the Syrian crisis.

3.2 Regional Initiative: The Arab League.

During the initial phases of the Syrian crisis, the League of Arab States (commonly referred to as the Arab League), much like Turkey, emerged as one of the earliest actors to engage in conflict management. Upholding its traditionally non-interventionist doctrine, the League opted for a conciliatory approach in response to the growing violence in Syria. This diplomatic initiative partly arose as a countermeasure to the deadlock at the United Nations Security Council, where repeated attempts to adopt resolutions condemning the Assad regime were thwarted by vetoes from China and Russia (Al Jazeera, 2001; Akpınar, 2016; Lundgren, 2016).

In a departure from its usual caution, however, the League adopted a more assertive stance by dispatching its then Secretary General, Nabil El-Araby, on a mediation mission that extended from the autumn of 2011 through the early months of 2012. The basis of this diplomatic engagement was the Arab Action Plan, a regionally framed blueprint aimed at de-escalating the conflict. It called for the immediate cessation of violence, the withdrawal of military assets from civilian areas, and the launch of an inclusive “national dialogue.”

Although the Syrian government formally endorsed the plan on 30 October 2011, it remained deeply suspicious of the League's intentions. Damascus perceived El-Araby's involvement as a veiled intervention orchestrated by Qatar and Saudi Arabia—two states it believed were actively pursuing regime change. This skepticism severely impaired the League's credibility in the eyes of the Syrian leadership, rendering the mediation process ineffective from the outset. As in many other attempts at peace in Syria, trust deficits not only between the warring parties but also between mediators and stakeholders played a central role in obstructing diplomatic progress.

It became increasingly evident that the Assad regime was intent on suppressing the uprising militarily and rendering international mediation efforts irrelevant. Months of negotiations, coupled with mounting regional pressure—including economic sanctions and the suspension of Syria's membership in the Arab League[6]—were ultimately required to secure the regime's nominal compliance. Yet resistance persisted on both sides. The Syrian National Council (SNC), the leading opposition umbrella group at the time, also rejected the Arab Action Plan. It denounced the regime's apparent willingness to engage in political dialogue as disingenuous, viewing it as a tactic to buy time and regain control.

In an effort to overcome this impasse, the League established an observer mission tasked with verifying the Syrian government's adherence to the ceasefire. The mission deployed personnel throughout the country to conduct rudimentary monitoring operations. However, it quickly became apparent that the mission was under-resourced, lacked professional training, and suffered from a lack of political cohesion among

[6] Syria's membership in the Arab League was placed on indefinite suspension on November 16, 2011.

member states. As noted in Chapter One—and as will be further demonstrated throughout this chapter—internal divisions within the international and regional community severely hindered effective mediation. The Arab League, far from being a unified actor, was deeply fragmented in both mandate and vision (Lundgren, 2016, pp. 275–276).

This fragmentation culminated in the suspension of the observer mission on 28 January 2012, a mere eight days after the withdrawal of Qatar and Saudi Arabia from the initiative. Their exit was strategically timed to pressure the League into adopting a more robust, interventionist stance—specifically, one that would explicitly call for Assad's resignation and the establishment of a transitional unity government. The withdrawal also responded to criticisms that the League was being disproportionately influenced by its Gulf members, especially Saudi Arabia and Qatar, both of which had a vested interest in seeing Assad removed from power (Akpınar, 2016).

Yet beyond geopolitical maneuvering, a deeper structural factor contributed to the Arab League's limited efficacy: the Arab Spring itself. The wave of revolutionary upheavals intensified existing rivalries among Arab states, exposing and exacerbating sectarian cleavages and heightening competition over regional leadership. These dynamics made consensus-building within the League increasingly elusive. As Hampson (2015) cogently observes, regional mediation efforts tend to succeed only when they are underpinned by broad-based international support, as in the case of Libya[7]. In Syria, however, such consensus never materialized—leaving regional efforts isolated, fragmented, and ultimately insufficient to bring about a meaningful resolution (Hampson, 2015, pp. 439–463).

[7] By establishing a consensus to enforce a no-fly zone, the league helped manage the Libyan crisis and gave the NATO operation legitimacy.

3.3 International Initiatives: UN - Kofi Annan.

In the initial stages of the Syrian conflict, the United Nations' efforts were concentrated within the Security Council, where the United States, the United Kingdom, and France advocated for the endorsement of a plan aligned with the Arab League's proposal, which explicitly called for political transition. This initiative was, however, met with firm resistance from Russia and China, both of which vetoed any resolutions perceived as legitimizing regime change or external interference in Syria's domestic affairs (Lundgren, 2016).

In light of the worsening humanitarian and security situation, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon appointed his predecessor, Kofi Annan, as Joint Special Envoy of the United Nations and the League of Arab States for Syria in February 2012. Annan undertook an extensive diplomatic mission, engaging a broad spectrum of stakeholders including representatives at the UN headquarters in New York, political leaders in the Middle East—most notably in Egypt, Qatar, and Turkey—and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus. He also met with figures from the fragmented opposition. Unlike prior mediators, Annan succeeded in reaching out to a wide array of both state and non-state actors, demonstrating a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to conflict mediation.

Central to his initiative was a six-point peace plan, which proposed a UN-supervised ceasefire, unfettered humanitarian access, the release of arbitrarily detained persons, freedom of movement for journalists, and a Syrian-led political transition process. The ceasefire, which formally took effect on 12 April

2012, was initially monitored by a UN Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS), composed of approximately 300 personnel. For a brief window of six to eight weeks, levels of violence reportedly decreased, giving the international community cautious hope (UNSMIS, 2012).

However, this fragile de-escalation quickly unraveled. By early June, several opposition factions resumed military activities, and the deteriorating security environment forced UN observers to suspend operations. In response to the breakdown of the ceasefire and mounting international frustration, Annan convened the Action Group for Syria in Geneva on 30 June 2012. The meeting brought together representatives from the five permanent members of the Security Council, the Arab League, the European Union, and key regional actors including Turkey and Iraq. The result of this gathering was the Geneva Communiqué, a diplomatic framework that outlined principles for a Syrian-led political transition, including the creation of a transitional governing body with full executive powers, formed by mutual consent (Action Group for Syria, 2012).

Despite its procedural significance, the Geneva Communiqué was marred by one critical ambiguity: it did not address the political fate of President Assad. The U.S. and its allies interpreted the document as a mandate for Assad's removal, whereas Russia insisted that the language allowed for his continued participation in any transitional arrangement. This fundamental divergence led to conflicting interpretations and rendered the Communiqué ineffective as a roadmap for peace. Furthermore, the exclusion from the talks of essential actors—namely the Syrian government, the opposition, Iran, and Saudi Arabia—significantly undermined the legitimacy and

enforceability of the agreement (Akpinar, 2016; Borger & Inzaurralde, 2015).

Following the inconclusive Geneva meeting, Annan attempted throughout the summer of 2012 to reconcile international differences and persuade Russia to soften its backing of Assad. However, his efforts failed to yield tangible results. On 2 August 2012, Annan announced his resignation as Special Envoy, publicly attributing the failure of his mediation to the intensifying militarization of the conflict and the entrenched divisions within the UN Security Council. He lamented the lack of a unified international front and the insufficient leverage provided by global and regional powers to enforce his plan (Annan, 2012).

Annan's resignation marked a pivotal moment in the diplomatic trajectory of the Syrian crisis, illustrating the limits of high-level mediation in the absence of cohesive international support and inclusive participation. His experience underscores a recurrent pattern in the Syrian peace process: initiatives that are robust in design often falter due to geopolitical rivalries, the exclusion of key stakeholders, and a lack of enforceable commitment mechanisms—an issue we shall explore more fully in the following chapter.

3.3.1 International Initiatives: UN - Lakhdar Brahimi.

Following the resignation of Kofi Annan, the role of Joint Special Representative for Syria was assumed by Lakhdar Brahimi, a seasoned Algerian diplomat with substantial experience in complex conflict contexts, notably Lebanon and Afghanistan. Brahimi adopted a more measured and consensus-driven approach, seeking to underscore the devastating human

toll of the conflict and to persuade the parties of the futility of continued violence. Although his tenure did not yield the transformative breakthroughs that were hoped for, his mediation efforts remained anchored in the foundational principles of the Geneva Communiqué. He also retained several key elements of Annan's framework, including the pursuit of a general ceasefire supervised by an international mechanism (Lundgren, 2016; Akpinar, 2016).

However, Brahimi's efforts unfolded in a dramatically deteriorating context. The conflict escalated rapidly, transitioning from a relatively localized low-intensity dispute to a full-scale war of high intensity. The territorial scope expanded across national borders, particularly into Iraq, while the introduction of chemical weapons and the growing prominence of additional actors—such as the Islamic State (ISIS), Hezbollah, and Kurdish militias—compounded the complexity of the situation. As noted by Crocker et al. (2014), the mediation of intractable conflicts becomes exceedingly difficult when the dispute becomes overly fragmented and militarized, leaving little strategic space for effective third-party intervention.

In response to this worsening scenario, Brahimi attempted to scale up the mediation to the international level, leveraging the influence of both regional stakeholders and global powers. Despite these efforts, his call for a ceasefire achieved only a symbolic success in the form of a temporary truce during the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha in October 2012. Brahimi's insistence on remaining independent—eschewing alignment with either party—ultimately weakened his standing with key actors on both sides. The Assad regime grew increasingly distrustful due to his continued references to the Geneva Communiqué, which they interpreted as signaling support for a

political transition. Meanwhile, several Arab states turned against him after he emphasized the necessity of involving Iran, a principal ally of the Syrian government, in the consultation process—a move viewed as controversial in the region (Hilal, 2014; Akpinar, 2016).

After a protracted diplomatic deadlock, negotiations were reconvened under the banner of the Geneva II Conference, which took place between January and February 2014. The conference, mediated once again by Brahimi, sought to bring the Syrian government and the opposition to the table to discuss a pathway for implementing the Geneva Communiqué. The roadmap envisioned a nationwide ceasefire and the formation of a transitional governing body with full executive powers. While Geneva II achieved certain procedural milestones—most notably, the first direct, face-to-face engagement between the two warring parties and a renewed display of coordination between the United States and Russia within the UN framework—it ultimately fell short of delivering substantive outcomes.

Negotiations stalled due to mutual intransigence: both the Assad regime and the opposition believed that the strategic balance was in their favor and thus saw little incentive to compromise. Additionally, the process suffered from a lack of inclusivity. Iran was initially invited to participate, but its invitation was subsequently withdrawn following pressure from the United States, undermining the legitimacy and representativeness of the process. The participation of the Syrian National Coalition in Geneva II also led to internal fragmentation, prompting the Syrian National Council to withdraw in protest (Hilal, 2014).

In May 2014, Brahimi resigned from his position, having failed to secure a durable resolution. Nonetheless, his efforts

marked a critical milestone in the Syrian peace process, as Geneva II constituted the first direct negotiations between the belligerent parties since the outbreak of hostilities in 2011. His tenure, while ultimately unsuccessful in halting the conflict, laid the groundwork for subsequent initiatives and revealed, once again, the structural impediments to mediation in a conflict characterized by geopolitical rivalry, proxy dynamics, and deep-seated mistrust among stakeholders.

3.3.2 International Initiatives: UN - Staffan de Mistura.

Following Lakhdar Brahimi's resignation in May 2014, the United Nations appointed the seasoned diplomat Staffan de Mistura as the new Special Envoy for Syria. Unlike his predecessors, de Mistura pursued a pragmatic, bottom-up approach that sought to circumvent the entrenched political deadlock by focusing on localized ceasefires. Rather than aiming for an immediate comprehensive political agreement, his initial strategy was to implement tactical truces in key conflict zones, which could later build *momentum* for broader negotiations (Akpınar, 2016).

In April 2015, de Mistura extended invitations to a range of stakeholders, yet his initiative quickly encountered political turbulence. He was accused by certain opposition figures of exhibiting bias towards the Assad regime, particularly due to his deliberate ambiguity concerning Assad's role in a potential transitional process. For instance, Subhi al-Refai, Executive Head of the Revolutionary Command Council, accused the envoy of fostering division within the opposition and of lacking a credible framework anchored in international guarantees (Lund, 2015). Despite this, the ability of de Mistura's letter to

momentarily unify 37 opposition factions represented a rare instance of cohesion—though it ultimately lacked the strategic direction necessary to supplant the widespread rejectionist stance towards the political process.

A case emblematic of de Mistura's methodology was his proposal for a temporary truce in Aleppo, Syria's largest city, which had long been fragmented among regime forces, opposition groups, and Kurdish militias. The envoy characterized the "Aleppo freeze" as a confidence-building measure, stressing that it was merely "a test" that could pave the way for a broader de-escalation of hostilities (de Mistura, 2015). Though this initiative failed to materialize, it reinvigorated international discussions and set the stage for renewed diplomatic engagement.

This new *momentum* coincided with shifting geopolitical dynamics. Between 2014 and 2015, the emergence and consolidation of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) fundamentally altered international priorities. The growing threat posed by ISIS compelled Western powers and regional actors to recalibrate their strategic objectives, placing counter-terrorism above regime change (Lundgren, 2016). Consequently, a convergence of interest emerged among previously divided actors, creating an opening for renewed multilateral dialogue.

On 30 October 2015, this diplomatic thaw culminated in the Vienna talks, where 20 countries—including all permanent members of the UN Security Council—convened under the auspices of the newly established International Syria Support Group (ISSG). The meeting reaffirmed the principles outlined in the Geneva Communiqué of 2012, a foundational text calling for a transitional governing body formed on the basis of mutual consent among parties (UN, 2012; Lundgren, 2016). This

framework was formalized in Security Council Resolution 2254, unanimously adopted on 18 December 2015, which mandated the UN to facilitate a Syrian-led political process encompassing a nationwide ceasefire, humanitarian access, and elections supervised by the UN within 18 months (UNSCR 2254, 2015).

As stipulated in the resolution, formal peace negotiations were to begin in early 2016. The Geneva III talks, inaugurated on 1 February 2016, saw the participation of both the High Negotiations Committee (HNC)—representing the bulk of the Syrian opposition—and elements affiliated with the Russia-backed opposition. Despite this broad representation, substantive dialogue quickly collapsed. Talks were suspended on 3 February due to intensified regime offensives in Aleppo, prompting the opposition to withdraw. As de Mistura (2016) lamented, parties remained "locked in fixed positions and a zero-sum game."

Multiple factors contributed to the talks' demise. The inclusion of pro-Russian opposition elements outside the HNC was perceived as undermining the legitimacy of the process. Simultaneously, key actors such as ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and Kurdish groups remained excluded—replicating the flaws of earlier negotiation rounds. Western powers, moreover, were criticized for pressuring for a deal at any cost, disregarding grassroots needs and perceptions (Akpınar, 2016).

This period marked a shift in Western diplomacy. Increasingly, European and U.S. officials appeared more willing to accommodate the geopolitical preferences of Russia and Iran, motivated in part by a confluence of crises: the unprecedented influx of Syrian refugees into Europe, the proliferation of jihadist attacks in Western cities, U.S. reluctance to escalate military engagement in the Middle East, and the fragile détente

resulting from the Iranian nuclear agreement (The World Post, 2016).

A glimmer of hope reemerged in February 2016 during the Munich Security Conference, when the ISSG announced a nationwide “cessation of hostilities.” This initiative, articulated in a joint U.S.-Russia declaration on 22 February and codified in UNSCR 2268, used the terminology “cessation” rather than “ceasefire” to maintain ambiguity regarding Assad’s fate and ensure broader opposition buy-in (UNSCR 2268, 2016; Lund, 2015). Over 40 rebel groups and the Syrian government agreed to halt military operations, facilitate humanitarian aid, and refrain from territorial expansion against other signatories (The Guardian, 2016).

To monitor compliance, the U.S. and Russia established a joint operational hotline and coordination centers, including one at Russia’s Hmeimim airbase. While hailed by some as a step forward, the mechanism was criticized for aligning too closely with Russian interests, potentially serving more as a platform for reconciling anti-ISIS operations than as a truly neutral peacekeeping instrument (Russia Beyond the Headlines, 2016).

Nevertheless, the cessation agreement held for several weeks, and on 27 February, guns fell silent across substantial portions of the country. This unexpected breakthrough revived international optimism, leading to proximity talks in Geneva on 9 March 2016. De Mistura described this period as the most sustained and widespread reduction in hostilities since the conflict's onset in 2011 (de Mistura, 2016). The Geneva March talks produced a document entitled “Points of Communality,” which reaffirmed the principles of political transition embedded in the Geneva Communiqué and UNSCR 2254 (UN, 2012; UNSCR 2254, 2015; Lundgren, 2016).

Yet beneath this surface calm, critical fissures persisted. The ceasefire did not extend to Salafi-jihadist groups like ISIS and al-Nusra, nor to many Kurdish factions. Moreover, the regime capitalized on the lull to launch a symbolic military campaign, reclaiming the ancient city of Palmyra with Russian air support. In areas like Aleppo, hostilities soon resumed, exacerbated by the intermingling of excluded and included groups within the ceasefire parameters. In May 2016, the ISSG reconvened to bolster the fragile truce and reinvigorate diplomatic momentum. However, once again, negotiations stumbled over the unresolved issue of Assad's future—a recurring obstacle that continued to undermine efforts for a sustainable transition.

In sum, while de Mistura failed to achieve a conclusive resolution, his tenure marked a critical juncture in the Syrian peace process. He capitalized on a fleeting moment of strategic convergence, facilitated significant reductions in violence, and introduced innovative approaches such as localized freezes and proximity talks. Above all, his efforts highlighted the necessity of addressing both geopolitical constraints and grassroots legitimacy in any durable peace framework.

3.3.3 International Initiatives: UN - Geir O. Pedersen.

In 2018, following years of stalled negotiations and eroding confidence in the peace process, the Norwegian diplomat Geir O. Pedersen was appointed as the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria. Building on the fragmented legacy of his predecessors, By focusing on the long-delayed Constitutional Committee's revitalization—first suggested during the 2018 Sochi Congress under Russian auspices—Pedersen aimed to rebalance the negotiation architecture. In line with the Geneva

Communiqué and UNSCR 2254, this proposal sought to bring together representatives from the Syrian government, opposition, and civil society in a tripartite structure to develop a new constitution that would act as the cornerstone of a larger political settlement (United Nations, 2015; UN, 2012). Pedersen's diplomatic approach was twofold: first, he advocated for an inclusive, Syrian-led, and Syrian-owned process that paid close attention to procedural balance and representation; second, he proposed the idea of a "humanitarian plus" framework, a proposal for early recovery efforts that would encourage cooperation among adversarial actors and bridge the humanitarian-development nexus (Pedersen, 2019).

But even though this reframed aim was appealing rhetorically, it was very challenging to achieve. Strategic ambivalence and skepticism were the responses of key parties. Supported by Russia and Iran, the Assad government viewed the constitutional reform initiative as a diplomatic distraction that could be used to buy time and justify military victories rather than actually shift the political tide. Because of the regime's reluctance to accept meaningful power-sharing agreements or make concrete concessions, the opposition, which had been weakened and dispersed by years of territorial losses and outside interference, viewed the process with distrust (Hinnebusch & Imady, 2019). The "third list" of participants was symbolic rather than transformative since civil society actors, many of whom were required to work under tremendous pressure or exile, found it difficult to meaningfully influence proceedings (ICG, 2020).

Furthermore, international actors with divergent geopolitical agendas—namely Russia, the United States, Turkey, and the European Union—remained divided over the sequencing of

political transition, the scope of reconstruction, and the future role of Assad. Pedersen's attempts to create a cohesive mediation platform were thwarted by these asymmetries. Western donors resisted his call for an early recovery, despite the fact that humanitarian organizations applauded it. They were concerned that, in the absence of significant reform, reconstruction funding may strengthen the regime's war economy and solidify authoritarian rule (Lund, 2021).

In the end, the constitutional committee, which was formally established in Geneva in October 2019, made very little headway. Despite several sessions, no consensus was reached on substantive constitutional provisions, let alone basic procedural procedures. Pedersen's attempts to refocus the conversation around "step-for-step" confidence-building measures failed to overcome the underlying political lethargy, while the government delegation's purposeful stalling tactics and procedural intransigence slowed discussions (Pedersen, 2021). As a result, the procedure came to represent a larger problem in international diplomacy regarding Syria: although institutional mechanisms were preserved in their structure, their purpose was undermined by the lack of political will, unequal power dynamics, and the regime's belief that military superiority eliminated the need for compromise.

3.3.4 Comparing the Mediation Efforts.

Over nearly a decade of diplomatic attempts, the mediators tasked with resolving the Syrian conflict deployed markedly different strategies, yet faced recurring structural impediments that undermined their efforts. From Annan’s initial framework built around the Geneva Communiqué—an ambiguous but still

foundational blueprint that reflected a fragile convergence of great power preferences—to Brahimi's cautious recalibration, to de Mistura's incremental "freeze" initiatives and finally Pedersen's attempt to revitalize constitutional dialogue, each envoy navigated a treacherous political landscape marked by volatility, fragmentation, and mistrust. What emerges from this comparative lens is not merely a catalogue of mediation failures, but a pattern: a collective preference across mediators for conflict mitigation rather than conflict resolution. Ceasefires, in this sense, became instruments of tactical de-escalation rather than springboards for structural reconciliation.

A key variable that consistently eroded the credibility and efficacy of these initiatives was the persistent international disunity over Syria policy. Without a unified diplomatic backbone, mediation remained suspended in a geopolitical vacuum, with no coherent enforcement mechanism or agreed trajectory for political transition. As will become even clearer in the next chapter's comparative analysis, this systemic discord among external actors—particularly within the UN Security Council—functioned as both a constraint on mediator leverage and a signal to the conflict parties that zero-sum logic could still prevail.

Compounding this paralysis were entrenched perceptions of mediator bias, which plagued each envoy in turn. Whether it was Annan's reluctance to clarify Assad's future, de Mistura's openness to partial deals, or Pedersen's call for "humanitarian plus" as an early form of reconstruction, both the regime and the opposition questioned the neutrality of the process, often viewing the mediators as conduits for foreign interests rather than honest brokers. Furthermore, limitations in inclusivity—exemplified by the exclusion or marginalization of actors such

as Iran, Kurdish representatives, and civil society—undermined the representativeness and perceived legitimacy of every major negotiating platform.

Nonetheless, it would be mistaken to read this history as one solely of futility. These efforts, though imperfect and often fruitless in immediate outcomes, succeeded in generating a diplomatic infrastructure, articulating minimum consensus points (such as the Geneva Communiqué and UNSCR 2254), and maintaining a fragile thread of engagement through moments of extreme violence. Above all, they provided a recurring mechanism through which mediation could return and attempt to reconstitute dialogue—a cyclical but necessary endeavor in the face of one of the most complex civil wars of our time.

Chapter Four.
Mediation in Deeply Divided Societies.

This fourth chapter continues and complements the comparative exercise initiated in the previous section, with the aim of deepening the analytical framework for understanding the dynamics of international mediation in protracted civil conflicts. Together, the two chapters are conceived as interdependent components of a broader comparative inquiry, offering parallel lenses through which to assess the strategic approaches, challenges, and outcomes of mediation efforts in contexts marked by entrenched violence and diplomatic fragmentation. In particular, this chapter will offer an in-depth analysis of the Dayton Peace Process, drawing extensively on Leon Hartwell's work *Conflict Resolution: Lessons From the Dayton Peace*

Process (2019, pp. 443–469). This case study is of fundamental importance for the purposes of this thesis, as it enables a structured comparison between two different outcomes in contemporary civil wars: a conflict brought to an end through internationally mediated negotiation (Bosnia and Herzegovina), and a conflict settled through military means without a conclusive mediation agreement (Syria).

The selection of the Dayton Peace Process as a case study is not incidental. The Bosnian War, like the Syrian Civil War, was rooted in profound internal divisions within a formally unified state marked by significant ethnic, religious, and political pluralism. In both cases, these internal divisions were exacerbated by external interventions, resulting in multi-layered conflicts with complex regional and international dimensions. By focusing on Dayton, we could witness a rare case of effective third-party mediation that, following years of unresolvable bloodshed, resulted in a formal peace deal, albeit one that was faulty and sometimes disputed. This enables us to objectively consider the difficulties of post-conflict governance in sharply divided countries and assess the circumstances in which mediation can be successful.

The comparative relevance of the Dayton process becomes even more evident when considered alongside the Syrian case. While the Syrian conflict did not culminate in a negotiated peace, it was nevertheless the subject of multiple international mediation efforts, particularly since 2012. These attempts, explored in detail in the previous chapter, included initiatives led by the United Nations, regional powers, and non-state actors. Analyzing the failure of these efforts in contrast to the relative success of the Dayton Accords offers valuable insights into the

structural, procedural, and geopolitical variables that influence the outcome of mediation processes.

This comparison also provides a critical opportunity to examine why the mediation led by Richard Holbrooke in Bosnia is widely regarded as a successful—albeit highly *manipulative*—example of conflict resolution. It will allow us to assess what specific conditions enabled the parties to reach an agreement in Dayton, and to what extent these conditions were absent or mishandled in the Syrian context. Moreover, this analytical comparison will help us identify the key mistakes, limitations, and missed opportunities that undermined the various Syrian mediation initiatives.

In conclusion, the comparative analysis developed across Chapters Three and Four serves a dual purpose: first, to evaluate the efficacy of international mediation by contrasting a paradigmatic case of negotiated settlement with one of protracted failure; and second, to deepen our understanding of how the nature of internal fragmentation—particularly in multiethnic and multiconfessional societies—shapes both the trajectory of civil wars and the strategies needed for their resolution. The Dayton Peace Process thus stands as a vital point of reference not only for its historical significance but also for its enduring relevance in contemporary debates on conflict resolution and international diplomacy.

4.1 Historical Context: From the Breakup of Yugoslavia to the Bosnian War.

Early in the 1990s, Yugoslavia fell apart, sparking a string of bloody wars around the area. The main cause, according to Warren Zimmermann, the US ambassador to Yugoslavia at the time, was Slobodan Milošević, the president of Serbia at the

time, whose advocacy of an exclusive brand of Serbian nationalism starting in 1987 made it nearly impossible for non-Serbs to continue living together in Yugoslavia. The nation has been a multicultural and multiethnic federation up to that point (Zimmermann, 1999, p. 245).

Between 1991 and 1992, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia—which was made up of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia—broke up, giving rise to a number of new independent republics. Almost each one of them suffered from severe violence, with the notable exception of Macedonia, which was able to maintain relative peace. While Croatia fought a brutal war of independence (1991–1995), Slovenia survived the short-lived Ten-Day War (1991). But the most terrible and intricate conflict, the Bosnian War (1992–1995), took place in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

As Hartwell observes, the so-called "Bosnian War" was far from a conventional civil war. From the outset, external actors—namely rump Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) and Croatia—were deeply involved:

> On March 25, 1991, Slobodan Milošević and Croatian President Franjo Tuđman reportedly met in Karađorđevo, where they allegedly agreed to partition Bosnia and Herzegovina along ethnic lines. Each sought to create a greater ethnically homogeneous state: Milošević envisioned a greater Serbia, and Tuđman, a greater Croatia (Hartwell, 2019: pp. 445-446).

Although ethnic identity in the Balkans was often fluid and socially constructed, it became a central fault line and a key instrument of division and mobilization throughout the Yugoslav conflicts.

Over one-fifth of the people living in Yugoslavia at the time of its breakup had parents from diverse ethnic origins. In this regard, in addition to wreaking havoc on the area, the Bosnian War successfully reshaped Bosnia and Herzegovina's collective identity along strict ethno-national lines. Three main groups emerged during the conflict: the Bosnian Croats, who were supported by the Croatian Republic of Herzeg-Bosnia and wanted to unite with Croatia; the Bosnian Serbs, who were primarily supported by rump Yugoslavia and supported the self-proclaimed Republika Srpska; and the Bosniaks, who were led by President Alija Izetbegović and who favored a sovereign, democratic, and multicultural Bosnia and Herzegovina.

When the United States mediated the Washington Agreement between the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Herzeg-Bosnia on March 18, 1994, it marked a watershed. The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina was created by this agreement with the intention of putting an end to the conflict between Bosniaks and Croats so that they may focus on their shared enemy, the Bosnian Serbs.

Nonetheless, the international response was marred by indecision and division. The United Nations Security Council was split on how to address the crisis and failed to authorize a transformation of the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) from a peacekeeping to a peace enforcement mission, undermining its capacity to prevent atrocities.

The most harrowing moment came on July 6, 1995, when Bosnian Serb forces entered the United Nations-designated “Safe Area” of Srebrenica. The international community had been warned of the likely consequences, and yet the massacre that followed—over 8,000 Bosniak men and boys were

systematically executed—was not prevented (Silber & Little, 1996). It marked a defining moment of shame for international diplomacy. Following Srebrenica, it became indisputably clear that the United Nations was incapable of halting the conflict. Moreover, the United States and the broader Western alliance faced growing criticism for their failure to act decisively. As Richard Holbrooke later remarked, the conduct of the international community represented "the greatest collective security failure of the West since the 1930s" (Holbrooke, 1995a, p. 40).

The case of Bosnia shares several parallels with the Syrian civil war that erupted in 2011. In both contexts, deeply entrenched ethno-religious divisions within a formally unified state were exploited and exacerbated by internal actors and external powers alike. Syria's fragmentation along sectarian lines—primarily between Sunni Arabs, Alawites, Kurds, and other minority groups—mirrors the ethnic segmentation that plagued post-Yugoslav Bosnia. In both cases, the legacy of multiethnicity and the absence of a cohesive national identity created fertile ground for violent conflict when political crises emerged. As in Bosnia, the civil war in Syria evolved into a complex regional and international proxy war, with overlapping domestic and foreign agendas fueling prolonged violence and humanitarian catastrophe.

4.2 What the Dayton Peace Process Reveals About Effective Mediation.

Building on the Dayton Peace Process, Leon Hartwell identifies "thirteen valuable conflict resolution lessons for third-party intervention" (2019, p. 449). In this chapter, we will examine a selection of those lessons—specifically those that are most

relevant for a comparative analysis with the Syrian conflict. The aim is not to provide an exhaustive review of all thirteen, but rather to highlight those principles that exemplify best practices in mediation and that, if applied, might have improved the effectiveness of international efforts in Syria.

These selected lessons serve as instructive examples of what has worked in a complex, multi-ethnic civil war context. They offer not only practical guidance, but also analytical tools that allow us to better understand the structural and procedural foundations of successful mediation. As such, they provide a valuable lens through which to assess the shortcomings of the Syrian peace initiatives and the potential missed opportunities for third-party actors involved in that process.

It is important, however, to emphasize a key caveat articulated by Hartwell himself: while these lessons can offer significant guidance across various mediation contexts, one must always bear in mind that each mediation process is inherently unique. As previously discussed in Chapter Two, mediation is, by its very nature, an *ad hoc* and context-specific endeavor. Success in one scenario does not guarantee replicability in another. Therefore, while the Dayton experience can offer useful insights, it should not be treated as a one-size-fits-all model. Rather, it should be seen as a framework from which adaptable, context-sensitive strategies can be drawn.

4.2.1 Lesson 1 – Seize the Moment: How Timing Transformed Crisis into Diplomatic Opportunity.

As discussed above, the Srebrenica massacre made it undeniably clear that the Bosnian conflict had reached a critical turning point and that the international community was increasingly incapable of containing its escalation. On July 20, 1995—just

two weeks after the fall of Srebrenica—the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Russia reached a consensus on the urgent need for a more interventionist strategy, acknowledging the United Nations' failure to maintain peace and enforce its own mandates[8].

A particularly decisive moment came with the second Markale marketplace massacre in Sarajevo, which, alongside the worsening humanitarian catastrophe, became a major catalyst for international military intervention. As noted by Muhamed Šaćirbegović (Sacirbey, 1995), Bosnia's Foreign Minister at the time, the attack prompted Bosnia to threaten withdrawal from the ongoing peace process, accusing the international community of negligence and moral failure. According to Sacirbey (1995), this crisis was precisely the kind of moment that U.S. diplomat Richard Holbrooke had anticipated and intended to leverage against Pentagon reluctance in order to push for decisive military action.

Indeed, on the day of the second Markale massacre, the United Nations—under intense diplomatic pressure from the United States—authorized NATO to conduct airstrikes as a clear message to the Bosnian Serb leadership that continued atrocities would no longer go unanswered. As recorded by Annan and Mousavizadeh (2013, p. 72), over the following eleven days, NATO warplanes carried out more than 3,500 sorties, targeting nearly 400 positions held by Bosnian Serb forces.
This moment marked a fundamental shift in the strategic landscape. Prior to NATO's intervention, the balance of power on the ground had heavily favored the Bosnian Serbs, rendering any peace negotiation virtually undesirable from their perspective. The use of military force, strongly encouraged by

[8] UNPROFOR's role was to keep the peace, not to enforce it, yet the Srebrenica massacre, followed by the Markale massacre, demonstrated that intervention was needed.

Holbrooke, altered this asymmetry. It compelled the Bosnian Serbs to reconsider their position and created the necessary conditions for a more balanced and credible negotiation framework. This development exemplifies *Lesson 1* from Hartwell's conflict resolution framework: *"Seize the Moment"*. The international community, by acting swiftly in response to an atrocity that shocked global public opinion, was able to convert a humanitarian disaster into an opportunity for diplomacy—ultimately paving the way for the Dayton Peace Accords.

The international response to the Syrian civil war illustrates the failure to seize similar critical moments. Between 2011 and 2023, the Syrian conflict witnessed at least five major mediation efforts, all of which fell short of achieving a sustainable resolution. Each mediator pursued a dual-track approach, combining domestic engagement with international diplomacy. Yet, none managed to capitalize on key turning points in the conflict that might have opened windows for decisive mediation.

What unites these failed attempts is the international community's chronic inability—or unwillingness—to seize the moment when the conflict had reached decisive junctures. Despite numerous atrocities comparable in scale and horror to Srebrenica—such as the chemical attacks in Ghouta (2013), the siege of Aleppo (2016), or the humanitarian crisis in Idlib—none of these events translated into a unified, forceful diplomatic or military initiative that could have shifted the power balance or pressured the parties into serious negotiations.

In Syria, instead of using atrocity-driven momentum to catalyze peace, mediators often found themselves constrained by geopolitical rivalries, vetoes in the UN Security Council, and the fragmentation of the Syrian opposition. As a result, rather than pursuing conflict resolution, most efforts defaulted to conflict

mitigation—seeking temporary truces or humanitarian corridors without addressing the root causes or power asymmetries of the war.

Therefore, Syria exemplifies a missed opportunity to apply *Lesson 1: "Seize the Moment."* The failure to act decisively during key episodes of escalation, coupled with a lack of coordinated international resolve, rendered mediation efforts ineffective and ultimately prolonged the conflict. In contrast to the Dayton model, where the diplomatic window was recognized and forcefully leveraged, the Syrian case illustrates how inaction at critical moments can entrench violence and foreclose the possibility of negotiated peace.

4.2.2. Lesson 3 – Incentives, Pressure, and the Use of Diplomatic Leverage.

The NATO airstrikes ultimately achieved their intended effect: only a few days after the bombing campaign, Slobodan Milošević announced that the Bosnian Serbs were prepared to enter negotiations with Radovan Karadžić, then President of Republika Srpska, and General Ratko Mladić. Of particular analytical interest is Richard Holbrooke's interpretation of this development. He firmly maintained that the NATO intervention was the decisive factor that compelled the Bosnian Serbs to come to the negotiating table. This interpretation, however, was not universally accepted. Carl Bildt (2015), who served as one of the co-chairs of the Dayton peace talks, offered a more nuanced view. While he acknowledged that the NATO airstrikes had indeed contributed to the shift in posture among the Bosnian delegation, he argued that their willingness to negotiate was not primarily driven by fear. Rather, he contended that the Serbs,

confident in their military ascendancy in the country, were motivated by a desire to consolidate their gains diplomatically. This divergence in interpretation between Holbrooke and Bildt illustrates the complexity behind *Lesson 3* of Leon Hartwell's conflict resolution framework: *"Balance Carrots and Sticks"* (Hartwell, 2019, p. 451). As Hartwell argues, successful mediation often requires the simultaneous use of coercive pressure ("sticks") and positive incentives ("carrots") to make the conflict ripe for resolution. In the case of Bosnia, it is evident that the United States effectively employed both strategies to shift the calculations of the warring parties.

One of the clearest examples of a "stick" was the direct and credible threat from the United States that failure to engage in good-faith negotiations would result in further military action and a rebalancing of power on the battlefield. For the Bosnian Serbs—who at that point held a considerable military advantage—such a prospect was undesirable, as it risked undermining their territorial gains and strategic leverage.

At the same time, Holbrooke made effective use of "carrots" to encourage participation in the peace process. A particularly significant incentive was the promise to lift economic sanctions against rump Yugoslavia if the Serbian leadership cooperated. This was a crucial bargaining chip, as the sanctions were severely weakening the domestic legitimacy of Milošević and threatening the stability of his regime. By simultaneously exerting pressure and offering meaningful concessions, Holbrooke was able to create a framework in which each party had both something to fear and something to gain.

This dual approach enabled Holbrooke to bring all sides to the negotiating table without resorting to coercive imposition of an agreement—thus avoiding the pitfalls of "captive mediation."

Scholars have often cited Holbrooke as a paradigmatic example of power mediation, in which the mediator does not pretend to be neutral but instead uses strategic leverage to shape the process. Nevertheless, Holbrooke did not impose a settlement unilaterally; instead, he adopted an interest-based approach, akin to that used by George Mitchell in the Northern Ireland peace process. At Dayton, Holbrooke carefully calibrated his strategy around the core demands and concerns of the parties involved (Hartwell, 2019).

This did not occurred during the Syrian peace process, where *Lesson 3—"Balancing Carrots and Sticks"*—was largely absent or ineffectively applied. Despite a decade of mediation efforts—ranging from Kofi Annan's Six-Point Plan (2012) and Lakhdar Brahimi's Geneva II talks (2014), to Staffan de Mistura's "freeze" proposal for Aleppo (2015) and Pedersen's constitutional committee revival (2018)—no actor succeeded in employing a truly assertive and strategic mediation model capable of altering the cost–benefit calculations of the belligerents.

In none of the major mediation attempts was there a credible mechanism to impose meaningful costs for non-compliance (e.g., coordinated international sanctions with enforcement, or credible threats of military consequences), nor were sufficiently attractive incentives placed on the table to entice regime or opposition factions toward compromise. For example, while de Mistura's plan to freeze hostilities in Aleppo showed tactical pragmatism, it lacked the strategic vision and leverage necessary to compel Assad's regime to make substantive concessions. Similarly, Annan's Geneva Communiqué, although endorsed by major powers, failed to translate into binding commitments, precisely because no actor enforced the political "sticks" that

might have pressured the regime to comply, nor were clear "carrots" tied to negotiated outcomes.

The Syrian case therefore reveals the perils of an imbalanced approach to mediation—one that relies predominantly on soft appeals to dialogue without offering either compelling incentives or credible consequences. In contrast to the assertive diplomacy employed by Holbrooke in Bosnia, Syrian mediation efforts lacked a power-based strategy capable of reshaping the preferences of the disputants. This ultimately contributed to the failure of the international community to transform the Syrian conflict from a protracted war into a negotiated peace.

4.2.3 Lesson 8 – Engaging Controversial Actors.

Continuing with our analysis of Hartwell's conflict resolution framework, we now turn to *Lesson 8: "Include Devils If You Must, Exclude Them If You Can"* (Hartwell, 2019, p. 459). This lesson speaks directly to one of the most ethically charged and politically complex aspects of mediation: the necessity of involving actors who are deeply implicated in the violence, yet who hold significant leverage over the conflict's trajectory.

In the case of Bosnia, Richard Holbrooke was acutely aware of the inherent tension between peace and justice—a dilemma famously highlighted by Sriram and Pillay (2009). As a mediator, Holbrooke understood that any viable peace process would require direct engagement with individuals such as Slobodan Milošević and Franjo Tuđman. Despite their involvement in serious human rights violations and ethnonationalist agendas, they remained indispensable to the negotiation process. Their capacity to exert control over their respective constituencies meant that excluding them would not

only have weakened the talks, but could have rendered them entirely futile. In diplomacy—as in architecture—one cannot build a lasting structure without anchoring it to the foundational elements, however compromised those elements may be.

This harsh reality is echoed by Tarak Barkawi (2015), who reminds us that diplomacy is not merely about moral clarity or procedural fairness. Rather, it is often the management and coordination of coercive power in the service of reordering political life. Peace negotiations, therefore, inevitably involve interlocutors with "blood on their hands." However objectionable such actors may be, their inclusion is frequently necessary if the objective is to end large-scale violence. In Bosnia, the participation of key nationalist leaders—however controversial—brought with it the promise of implementation and enforcement, precisely because they held sway over the fighters on the ground.

Nevertheless, the inclusion of such actors is not without significant ethical and strategic costs. As Sacirbey (2016b) warns, incorporating extremists and warlords into post-conflict governance structures may ultimately entrench the very ideologies that fuelled the conflict in the first place. In the Bosnian case, he argued that the decision to engage radicals "effectively cut off the future of an alternative narrative based upon a multiethnic society." In other words, short-term stability came at the expense of long-term pluralism. This is the double-edged sword of realpolitik diplomacy: it secures the peace, but may sacrifice the very values the peace is meant to preserve.

This lesson—and its moral ambivalence—is especially relevant when considering the repeated failure of mediation efforts in Syria, where *Lesson 8* was never meaningfully applied. Over the course of more than a decade, as already

mentioned, numerous international envoys attempted to negotiate a settlement. Yet none of these initiatives succeeded in bringing all relevant actors to the table, particularly those perceived as too radical, too violent, or too ideologically extreme to be legitimate participants. Groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra, Kurdish groups, and later Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, were either deliberately excluded by international actors or refused participation themselves, perceiving the peace talks as illegitimate or manipulated.

This exclusion was not entirely unwarranted: the risks of legitimizing groups accused of war crimes or linked to terrorism are especially acute in the Syrian context, where the conflict is shaped by deep ethno-sectarian cleavages and a highly fragmented political landscape. However, the decision to exclude those with military and political leverage ultimately undermined the credibility and effectiveness of the peace processes. Without the participation of those capable of enforcing a ceasefire on the ground, the talks remained largely performative, divorced from the realities of power and violence in Syria's provinces.

Moreover, Syria's multiconfessional and multiethnic fabric made the construction of a sustainable and inclusive peace even more dependent on a broad societal consensus. The absence of key actors from the negotiating table not only hindered the prospects for short-term de-escalation, but also foreclosed the possibility of reconstructing a shared national vision rooted in pluralism. In contrast to Bosnia—where the idea of multiethnic coexistence was weakened but not entirely extinguished—Syria risks the complete erosion of a common civic identity.

In conclusion, *Lesson 8* teaches us that excluding those with real influence on the battlefield in favor of more "acceptable"

but weaker actors may appease international norms, yet doom peace efforts to irrelevance. The Syrian case is a cautionary tale of what happens when diplomacy fails to reflect the true distribution of power. While the inclusion of radicals brings undeniable risks—particularly in a deeply divided and ethnically diverse society—it may nonetheless be the necessary price of peace, and the starting point for a more inclusive political future.

4.2.4 Mediation Is Only the Beginning.

What ought to capture our attention when reflecting on the good practices drawn from the Dayton peace process is the fact that it was not an isolated or symbolic diplomatic exercise. Mediation was undoubtedly essential to halting the Bosnian war, but, crucially, mediation alone was not sufficient to secure long-term peace. Lasting peace, as the case of Bosnia demonstrates, requires sustained international commitment, robust post-agreement mechanisms, and a clear vision for post-conflict reconstruction.

Before delving into this final consideration, it is important to recall that the peace achieved at Dayton was far from ideal. As Alija Izetbegović poignantly stated: *"It is not a just peace, […], but my people need peace"* (Holbrooke, 1999, p. 309). The American negotiators acknowledged that the final agreement was imperfect—perhaps even unjust in parts—but also recognized that the alternative, continued war, was a far greater peril. This pragmatic approach reflects a broader truth in international diplomacy: the perfect must not become the enemy of the possible.

To fully grasp what is meant by the assertion that "mediation is not enough," one must consider Carl Bildt's observation that

the objective of the Dayton process was not merely to end the war, but to *"set up a functioning Bosnian state"* (Bildt, 2015). This long-term ambition could only be realized through a sustained international presence. Following the signing of the accords, NATO and the European Union took on lead roles in maintaining peace and fostering reconstruction. NATO deployed the Implementation Force (IFOR), and later the Stabilization Force (SFOR), while the EU provided political direction, legal frameworks, and financial assistance. A key strategic incentive was the prospect of EU integration, which acted as a long-term stabilizing force for both Bosnia and Serbia. As Petritsch (2006) observed, Bosnia underwent a major transition in 2001, moving from the so-called "post-Dayton era" into a "European phase" of its development. The Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA), signed between the EU and Bosnia in 2015, formalized this path toward integration. The agreement marked a turning point in the country's transition, offering tangible rewards for political and institutional reform, while anchoring Bosnia within a larger European vision.

The fundamental lesson here—what we may justifiably term a *fourteenth lesson*—is that without a comprehensive and sustained follow-up in the implementation phase of a peace process, the chances of long-term stability are significantly diminished. Peace agreements are not self-sustaining; they require political will, economic support, security guarantees, and mechanisms of transitional justice to prevent relapse into violence.

This insight is particularly relevant in the context of Syria, where the international community currently finds itself at a critical crossroads. While formal hostilities have subsided in several regions, the risk of renewed conflict remains alarmingly

high, especially in the absence of a coordinated peacebuilding strategy. According to the 2024 *Global Peace Index*, the world is currently experiencing the highest number of violent conflicts since the end of World War II. Syria remains a volatile epicenter of this global instability (GPI, 2024).

Most importantly, the Syrian case shows that a major weakness in earlier mediation efforts was the exclusion of all pertinent parties from peace talks, particularly those with actual military or political clout. As was previously said, a number of radical groups were purposefully left out of the negotiation process because of their extreme beliefs, their refusal to accept international standards, or the unwillingness of outside forces to give them legitimacy. Yet, any deal struck lacked credibility in the eyes of important constituencies and failed to secure enforceability on the ground because such actors, who controlled a sizable territory and people, were excluded. That said, the risks of including radical actors are arguably even greater in Syria than they were in Bosnia. Given Syria's intricate ethnic and sectarian fragmentation, a sustainable peace requires the reconstruction of a shared national identity rooted in a multiconfessional and multiethnic vision. Including extremist elements in political dialogue may threaten this fragile foundation. However, excluding them entirely may render peace efforts ineffective. The challenge, therefore, is not whether to engage such actors, but how to do so in a way that neither rewards violence nor undermines pluralism.

4.3 Concluding Remarks: Lessons from Dayton, Warning for Syria.

This chapter has offered a structured comparative reflection on the conditions under which international mediation can succeed

—or fail—in bringing protracted civil wars to a negotiated end. Through a focused reading of the Dayton Peace Process and selected lessons from Leon Hartwell's analytical framework, several key insights have emerged. First, the success of mediation in Bosnia was not merely the product of diplomatic skill, but of timely intervention (*Lesson 1: Seize the Moment*) when the conflict had reached a tipping point. Second, Holbrooke's use of a calibrated strategy of incentives and threats (*Lesson 3: Balance Carrots and Sticks*) reshaped the cost–benefit calculus of the warring parties and made negotiation a viable alternative to continued war. Third, the deliberate inclusion of actors with real leverage—however morally compromised (*Lesson 8: Include Devils If You Must*)—was essential to reach an enforceable agreement. Finally, and perhaps most critically, the sustainability of peace in Bosnia was made possible not by mediation alone, but by a long-term international commitment to post-conflict state-building and integration.

In this light, the comparative analysis of Bosnia and Syria becomes more than a retrospective academic exercise. It becomes a diagnostic lens, a way to reinterpret past failures in Syria and identify the strategic and normative blind spots that have undermined international efforts. While the Bosnian case shows that peace can be brokered even in deeply fractured societies, it also makes clear that success depends on recognizing windows of opportunity, involving actors with real power, and committing to peace beyond the signing of agreements.

In the case of Syria, many of these lessons remain unheeded. Despite more than a decade of mediation attempts, the conflict has persisted, mutated, and calcified into a long-term crisis of governance, identity, and sovereignty. The exclusion of key

armed groups from peace negotiations—whether due to their radical ideologies, international pressure, or self-exclusion—has repeatedly weakened the credibility and implementation capacity of proposed settlements. Yet including such actors also poses undeniable risks in a country as ethnically and confessionally fragmented as Syria. Unlike Bosnia, where multiethnic coexistence was weakened but maintained as a normative horizon, Syria risks the total erosion of a shared civic identity unless reconciliation is built upon inclusiveness.

Importantly, the failure to seize critical junctures—such as the Ghouta chemical attacks or the fall of Aleppo—as moments for assertive diplomacy has limited the leverage of mediators. Unlike Holbrooke's forceful but strategic use of pressure, Syria's mediators were often constrained by veto politics in the UN Security Council and the competing interests of regional powers. The absence of a coherent and assertive international strategy, capable of balancing coercive sticks with diplomatic carrots, has left Syria in a state of frozen conflict rather than post-conflict recovery.

Yet, even now, the situation remains fluid. The international community has taken tentative steps toward re-engagement. Sanctions have been eased for humanitarian reasons in select areas, and diplomatic contact with Syria's transitional government has resumed. Moreover, there are nascent discussions—supported by the UN and regional actors—regarding the establishment of a transitional justice mechanism, possibly through a hybrid tribunal or special court. These developments, while fragile and politically contested, reflect an emerging recognition that Syria cannot be indefinitely abandoned to the status quo.

Nonetheless, the Bosnian experience warns us that without a structured and sustained follow-up—including economic investment, institutional reform, and justice for victims—these steps may be insufficient. Peace must be constructed, not merely declared. And it must rest upon a foundation broad enough to include diverse identities, credible enough to deter spoilers, and legitimate enough to endure over time.

In sum, the comparative reflection developed throughout this chapter serves not only to illuminate the factors that enabled peace in Bosnia, but also to issue a cautionary reminder to international actors today: without a credible follow-up strategy, inclusive engagement, and a long-term vision, the chances for sustainable peace in Syria remain dangerously slim.. In such a fragile international context, Syria must not become another missed opportunity—but a chance to apply, with urgency and precision, the lessons hard-won in Bosnia.

Chapter Five.
Regional and Global Powers in Syria's Transition.

The fall of the Assad regime and the rise of transitional authorities have marked the start of a new phase in the Syrian crisis, making it necessary to systematically analyze the changing positions of relevant external actors that continue to influence the course of the nation's governance and recovery. With varying geopolitical goals, normative commitments, and security imperatives, this chapter examines the strategic orientations of both Western and regional nations. We start by examining the measures taken by the US and the EU, whose coordinated support for the interim government under President

Ahmed al-Sharaa rests upon a conditional framework grounded in democratic benchmarks, human rights accountability, and national sovereignty (European Council, 2025; White House, 2025).

Next, we evaluate the divergent strategies of revisionist nations like Russia, which seek to maintain its strategic depth through institutional impediments and military entrenchment, and Turkey, whose securitized vision is primarily influenced by the Kurdish question and its regional rivalry with Iran (al-Ahmed, 2025; Güneylioğlu, 2025).

Special focus is placed on Israel's complicated stance, which has actually pursued a policy of strategic fragmentation despite its rhetorical agreement with Western stabilizing objectives. Israel has attempted to establish long-term buffer zones through direct military interventions and targeted assistance to minority groups, undermining Syria's territorial consolidation and causing Arab states to question its actual strategic thinking (Oron, 2025; Freilich, 2025). Arab nations like Saudi Arabia and Egypt, on the other hand, have united around a common goal: encouraging a peaceful, Arab-led reintegration of Syria into the regional order, despite having different ideological stances toward the new administration in Damascus. This tendency reflects a larger imperative: containing non-Arab influence and promoting regional stability through practical diplomacy (Ardemagni, 2025; INSS, 2025).

Throughout the chapter, each actor’s narrative and operational strategy will be addressed in dedicated sections, with specific emphasis on how their engagement has impacted Syria’s path toward unity or disintegration. The analysis draws on a wide array of updated sources, including institutional

reports, policy papers, and expert commentary, which will be cited and revisited in subsequent sub-sections.

5.1 Western Community: USA & The EU.

The Western community has coalesced around a common strategic and normative objective: supporting the emergence of a sovereign, democratic, and unified Syria, free from the authoritarian legacy of the Assad regime. Both the European Union and the United States have framed the fall of Bashar al-Assad not merely as a moral necessity, but as a geopolitical prerequisite for regional stabilization, conflict de-escalation, and counterterrorism. Since early 2025, the transatlantic consensus has shifted from passive containment to active support for Syria's transitional government led by President Ahmed al-Sharaa, perceived as the legitimate channel for democratic reform and national reconciliation.

This alignment was crystallized in the European Council Conclusions on Syria of 23 June 2025, where the EU welcomed key milestones achieved by the transitional authorities—namely, the holding of the first *National Dialogue Conference*, the adoption of a *Constitutional Declaration*, and the formation of an interim government. The EU urged the full and timely implementation of these steps, especially the creation of a permanent constitution and the organization of credible elections within a five-year horizon, while calling for women's full and meaningful participation in political life and the strengthening of judicial institutions (European Council, 2025). In parallel, the EU reaffirmed its support for transitional justice, praising the establishment of the *National Authority for Transitional Justice* and the *National Authority for Missing Persons* as necessary

instruments to address grave human rights violations and the fate of over 150,000 disappeared persons.

The United States, under the second Trump administration, has adopted a conditional engagement strategy that complements EU efforts. In June 2025, President Trump issued an *Executive Order* formally lifting broad economic sanctions on Syria—with the exception of targeted measures against individuals affiliated with the Assad regime or designated terrorist groups—in recognition of the transitional government's efforts to restore rule of law and political inclusivity (White House, 2025). Secretary of State Marco Rubio emphasized U.S. endorsement of the *March 2025 power-sharing agreement* between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the interim government, describing it as a "historic achievement" that lays the groundwork for federal decentralization and long-term stability (Rubio, 2025; Reuters, 12 March 2025).

Moreover, the United States has explicitly linked its continued diplomatic normalization to the performance of the transitional authorities on key benchmarks: disarmament of non-state militias, minority protection, and accountability for past atrocities. U.S. Special Envoy Thomas Barrack, in a speech delivered in Amman in July 2025, warned that Western support would remain contingent upon "visible progress in de-sectarianising the state, curbing external interference, and ensuring justice for all communities" (Reuters, 22 July 2025). While American forces began a partial withdrawal from northeastern Syria in April 2025, Pentagon officials clarified that residual troops would remain deployed to secure anti-terror operations and prevent the resurgence of Daesh (Washington Post, 17 April 2025).

Simultaneously, both Brussels and Washington remain alert to the actions of destabilizing external actors. The EU explicitly condemned Russia and Iran as complicit in the Assad regime's repression, while voicing concern over Israeli military strikes in southern Syria, calling for strict adherence to the 1974 Disengagement Agreement and the demilitarized buffer zone. With respect to Turkey, both powers acknowledge Ankara's legitimate security interests, yet urge restraint and insist that Kurdish communities and other minorities be guaranteed security and political rights (European Council, 2025; U.S. Department of State, 2025). Finally, on refugee return, the EU and the U.S. share the position articulated by UNHCR, which continues to deem large-scale repatriations premature due to unresolved humanitarian, legal, and security concerns. Instead, both actors have committed to supporting the creation of conditions for safe, voluntary, and dignified returns, in line with the principle of non-refoulement (UNHCR, 2025).

In sum, the Western community's posture toward Syria is defined by a dual-track approach: sustained diplomatic recognition and material support for the transitional authorities —conditional upon democratic reform, accountability, and inclusion—coupled with strategic containment of foreign interference and terrorist threats. As articulated in the European Council Conclusions (2025) and the U.S. Executive Framework of June 2025, the shared transatlantic objective remains clear: building a free, inclusive, and accountable Syrian state.

5.1.1 Turkey.

As we continue our analysis, Turkey emerges as a key strategic player in the Syrian conflict, whose closeness, military might,

and regional aspirations make its actions crucial in deciding whether Syria will undergo a peaceful transition to a civil, democratic state. The overthrow of the Assad government and the containment of Kurdish autonomous formations close to its southern border have been the two main goals of Ankara's strategy toward Syria. As such, its role is characterized by a deeply entrenched security ideology with regard to Kurdish actors, in addition to its influence over rebel groups and post-conflict negotiations.

As outlined in Murat Güneylioğlu's commentary (*Reconsidering Turkey's Influence on the Syrian Conflict*, 31 January 2025), Turkey has historically been among the most proactive external actors in Syria, especially through its early support for the Syrian opposition and its extensive leverage over proxies such as the Syrian National Army (SNA). However, this influence is now increasingly contested by the ascendant leadership of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), whose autonomy and pragmatism have complicated Ankara's influence over the political transition. Güneylioğlu notes that although Turkey provided the primary international access point for HTS's prior administration in Idlib, the group's leadership—particularly after the fall of Damascus and the formation of the interim government—has pursued a more diversified foreign policy, engaging also with regional powers and even softening its rhetoric toward actors like Russia (Güneylioğlu, RUSI, 2025) (rusi.org).

At the heart of Turkey's security calculus lies its ongoing confrontation with Kurdish forces. Since the mid-2010s, Ankara has viewed the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and in particular its leading component, the People's Protection Units

(YPG), as an existential threat linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) insurgency inside Turkey. The 2024–2025 Turkish military operations in northeastern Syria—ostensibly aimed at preventing a Kurdish corridor along the Turkish border—were accompanied by sustained airstrikes and ground incursions targeting SDF-controlled territory, particularly in the Hassakah and Qamishli regions. These actions drew international concern, as they displaced civilians and risked renewed confrontation with U.S.-backed Kurdish forces (Washington Post, April 2025; UN Human Rights Council, June 2025).

Despite Ankara's hostility toward the YPG, it has maintained complex relations with HTS, whose governance model in Idlib evolved largely outside Turkish control. As Güneylioğlu emphasizes, Ankara has attempted to weaken HTS's dominance by dividing more radical elements from pragmatic factions. Nevertheless, by 2022, HTS had consolidated territorial and political hegemony in Idlib and beyond, eventually assuming full authority in the Damascus-based interim government formed after Assad's fall. This development diminished the political relevance of Turkey's primary proxy—the SNA—which shifted its focus eastward to compete with the SDF rather than join the HTS-led political transition (Güneylioğlu, RUSI, 2025).

Simultaneously, the economic legacy of the Assad regime remains a formidable obstacle to democratic reconstruction. Omran's policy study (*Assad's Officers' Companies: Disclosure, Accountability and Reallocation*, June 2025) lays out a structured framework to dismantle the illicit networks of regime-affiliated military officers. The proposal includes identifying front companies used for sanctions evasion, money laundering, and procurement fraud—including those contracted

by UN agencies—and advocates for freezing assets, prosecuting perpetrators, and reallocating resources toward social development (Almustafa, Omran, 2025).

However, it is still unclear how Turkey fits within this economic justice agenda. International oversight has been made more difficult by Ankara's previous tolerance of financial conduits running from opposition-controlled zones, which occasionally facilitate smuggling and informal trade, despite the fact that Turkish officials openly support the stabilization and reconstruction of Syria. Furthermore, in the regions it controls, Turkey's emphasis on security sector control has frequently trumped inclusive governance or economic accountability.

More recently, Western actors have attempted to leverage Ankara’s contact networks to moderate HTS’s stance and ensure that Syria’s new leadership does not relapse into sectarian authoritarianism. However, as HTS’s political arm, led by Prime Minister Mohammed al-Bashir, consolidates its grip on the interim government, many key ministries remain under the de facto control of individuals linked to HTS’s Idlib administration, with little inclusion of other opposition currents. In this environment, Turkey’s capacity to shape political outcomes is more limited than often presumed—confined largely to border diplomacy, proxy management, and selective military deterrence.

In conclusion, Turkey’s role in Syria straddles the line between indispensable power and constrained stakeholder. It remains crucial in shaping regional alignments, and influencing HTS via longstanding channels. Yet, the complexity of intra-opposition dynamics, the rising assertiveness of HTS, and unresolved economic legacies limit Ankara’s ability to steer the transitional process unilaterally. A democratic and stable Syria

cannot emerge without Turkish engagement—but neither can it rely solely on Ankara's strategic calculus.

5.1.2 Russia.

Russia is shown to be structurally hostile to the ongoing democratic change that the Syrian transitional government and its Western allies foresee as we continue our investigation of foreign actors in Syria. Although the US and the EU have turned their attention to the creation of a sovereign, unified, and demilitarized post-Assad state, Moscow has continuously blocked this path, choosing instead to maintain and take advantage of internal division for its own strategic ends. Russia has established a network of remote military outposts, particularly at Hmeimim, Tartous, and Qamishli, that function outside the jurisdiction of the transitional authorities, thereby undermining attempts to consolidate control over security institutions and territorial sovereignty, rather than aiding stabilization (al-Ahmed, 2025).These "security islands" serve not only as military strongholds but also as leverage points from which Russia can exert pressure on local actors, particularly in regions vulnerable to sectarianism and political volatility.

In the Kurdish-controlled northeast, Russia's presence in Qamishli has become increasingly assertive since the March 2025 agreement between President Ahmed al-Sharaa and General Mazloum Abdi of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Following the deal, Moscow transitioned from an intermediary to a spoiler, engaging with factions opposed to rapprochement with Damascus and bolstering its garrison with advanced air-defense systems and electronic warfare units in late 2024 (al-Ahmed, 2025). This strategic escalation reflects not a

commitment to security cooperation but rather a calculated attempt to complicate American withdrawal and dilute SDF authority, while retaining long-term coercive capacity in the region.

On the western coast, similar dynamics unfold. Russia is credibly accused of facilitating arms transfers to remnants of the Assad regime prior to the March 2025 clashes between loyalist militias and transitional forces, resulting in mass civilian casualties. Moreover, reports suggest that defected officers were sheltered at the Russian base in Hmeimim, which acted as a sanctuary for regime-linked fugitives and served as a logistical hub for destabilization efforts orchestrated in part by figures like Mohammed Jaber, now living in exile in Russia (al-Ahmed, 2025). By instrumentalizing sectarian identities—especially among Alawite communities—Moscow has continued to sow internal division, thereby complicating national reconciliation and reinforcing centrifugal forces that obstruct the formation of a cohesive civil state.

In tandem with its military posture, Russia pursues influence through less overt but equally corrosive channels. It remains a provider of Syria's printed currency, fosters economic dependencies through shadow companies, and cultivates personal patronage networks within the political and security apparatus. These instruments of soft power, while less visible than armored vehicles or airstrikes, serve the same strategic aim: to entrench Russia's presence and retain indirect control over post-Assad Syria (European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2025). Such influence is further sustained by Russia's symbolic hosting of exiled regime figures, including former president Bashar al-Assad himself, who remains a political card in Moscow's regional calculations.

Despite the collapse of its long-time ally in Damascus, Russia's regional goals has not shifted toward supporting national reconstruction or institutional resilience. Rather, Moscow appears invested in maintaining a weakened Syrian state, fractured along ethnic, sectarian, and administrative lines. This state of controlled instability maximizes Russian leverage, enabling it to pose as an indispensable actor in any diplomatic negotiation while deterring alternative centers of power from consolidating authority. As such, Russia's continued presence is viewed by most Western analysts as the single most significant impediment to a viable transition. Indeed, as noted by several European policymakers and reflected in the EU's June 2025 deliberations, Moscow's dual strategy—publicly affirming Syrian sovereignty while subverting it through military and economic means—is no longer tenable (European Council, 2025).

Internationally, this posture places Russia at odds with a growing consensus around the necessity of foreign troop withdrawal. The European Union and the United Kingdom, particularly in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine and the broader erosion of trust in Russian diplomatic overtures, have explicitly tied reconstruction support to the reduction of Russian and Iranian influence in Syria (European Council, 2025; INSS, 2025). While the United States has been more ambiguous, partly due to Israeli lobbying favoring a residual Russian presence as a counterbalance to both Iran and Turkey, even Washington has linked sanctions relief and diplomatic normalization to a clear rollback of foreign interference in Damascus' sovereign affairs (Washington Post, April 2025; MEI, 2025).

The Russian Federation is ultimately playing the part of a revisionist actor in Syria, attempting to prolong the unrest in

order to preserve its strategic depth in the Levant. Russia is purposefully undermining the foundations of peace and reconstruction by preventing the establishment of a single, civilian-led state. A larger geopolitical logic—that a crippled Syria is more useful to Moscow than a sovereign one—is reflected in its military entrenchment, support for regime holdovers, and manipulation of local dynamics. Russian meddling is likely to continue to exist as a structural obstacle to Syria's complete democratic recovery unless it is successfully contained by concerted diplomatic pressure and internal Syrian resiliency.

5.1.3 Israel.

In the current geopolitical configuration of post-Assad Syria, Israel occupies a uniquely complex and delicate position, marked by a conspicuous tension between its declarative diplomacy and its operational strategies. Although traditionally aligned with Washington’s regional objectives, Israel’s approach toward Syria in 2025 diverges significantly from the U.S. vision of a unified, sovereign, and demilitarized state. While the Israeli Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) has recently advanced a multilateral stabilization proposal under U.S. leadership, emphasizing regional coordination and Syrian sovereignty (Freilich, 2025), this initiative stands in stark contrast to the Netanyahu government's sustained policy of targeted airstrikes, covert support to local militias, and selective backing of minority factions, most notably the Druze in the South and elements of the YPG in the northeast. These interventions, justified as defensive necessities, in effect consolidate ethno-sectarian enclaves and reinforce a pattern of

fragmentation that mirrors, albeit less overtly, Russia's destabilizing tactics elsewhere in Syria (al-Ahmed, 2025).

Following the Assad regime's collapse in December 2024, Israeli forces occupied substantial contiguous zones—extending up to 460 km² into southern Syria including the Mount Hermon region and parts of Quneitra, Daraa, and Suwayda—effectively transforming United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) buffer areas into permanent Israeli-held security enclaves, under a doctrine justifying indefinite military presence "to protect our communities and thwart any threat". Israel's defense minister reaffirmed that these zones will remain under Israeli control indefinitely, thereby precluding Syrian sovereign reoccupation (Reuters, February 2025).

The INSS policy paper's vision of Syria as a moderate, rights-respecting, and independent Islamic state, stabilized through a U.S.-brokered international mechanism involving Turkey, the Gulf states, and key European powers, also betrays a critical paradox: while purporting to uphold Syria's territorial integrity, the initiative prescribes Israeli non-participation to preserve its credibility, even as it aims to entrench Israeli security imperatives indirectly via American diplomacy (Freilich, 2025). This calibrated distance permits Israel to shape the regional framework without overtly appearing to intervene—thus maintaining a posture of strategic deniability while securing buffer zones against Iran and counterbalancing Turkish ground influence, which Israel views as both inevitable and potentially destabilizing.

Recent commentary from INSS further highlights the discrepancy between Israel's overt support for stability and its covert entrenchment in Syria's internal dynamics. Amira Oron (2025) notes that Egypt's pragmatic engagement with the new

Syrian regime under President Ahmed al-Sharaa—despite ideological divergences—centers on preserving national unity and resisting centrifugal tendencies, whereas Israel's so-called "minority diplomacy," publicly framed as protection for vulnerable communities, effectively amplifies internal divisions. By legitimizing local militia leaderships and intervening militarily under the guise of minority protection, Israel inadvertently fosters the very instability it professes to counter. This strategy has led Arab states, including Egypt, to question whether Israel's security interests are being pursued at the expense of Syria's cohesion, thereby challenging the narrative of a neutral humanitarian concern (Oron, 2025).

Furthermore, this divergence from the American line is now more pronounced than ever. As the United States and European Union extend diplomatic and material support to Damascus conditioned upon national reconstruction and institutional consolidation (European Council, 2025), Israel's actions increasingly appear uncoordinated, or even counterproductive, to those efforts. While Western actors advocate for the reintegration of Syria into the Arab system, Israel's targeted interventions risk reinforcing its isolation, not only from its neighbors but also from its long-standing strategic partner in Washington. Analysts at the European Union Institute for Security Studies have noted this trend, emphasizing that Israel, like Russia, benefits—albeit indirectly—from a weakened central authority in Damascus, which grants both actors increased maneuverability within Syria's fragmented terrain (EUISS, 2025).

Moreover, the intensification of the Israel–Palestine conflict —particularly the Gaza crisis and renewed hostilities in Lebanon—amplifies Jerusalem's incentive to maintain Syrian

disorder as a containment strategy. The same paradigm driving its operations in Gaza and southern Lebanon extends across its Syrian border: occupation layers, selective interventions, and the perpetuation of fragmented minority enclaves constitute a transregional doctrine of preemptive instability (FT analysis of Israeli buffer expansion, FT 2025; MEI, 2025).

In essence, Israel's position toward Syria in 2025 is defined by a strategic ambivalence: rhetorically committed to regional stability and cautious cooperation, yet operationally invested in preserving fragmentation and cultivating parallel channels of influence. This duality reveals a critical fault line in the post-Assad regional architecture, wherein Israeli national security doctrines conflict with broader international aspirations for a unified and functional Syrian state. If not recalibrated through genuine diplomatic coordination, Israel's actions may serve to entrench the very volatility it seeks to contain—while undermining the collective efforts of regional and global actors striving for a peaceful and inclusive Syrian transition.

5.2 Arab-State Actors: Saudi Arabia.

Of considerable relevance to our broader analysis is the evolving narrative and strategic posture of Arab states toward Syria, which consistently reflects a pronounced pattern: a collective desire for regional stability anchored in Arab leadership. Ardemagni's June 2025 Aspenia analysis demonstrates that Saudi Arabia and the broader Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have aligned with the United States on Syria—regarding the transitional government under Ahmed al-Sharaa as central to containing Iranian influence and reconstructing a moderate state (Ardemagni, 2025). Building upon this foundation, Riyadh has

transitioned from diplomatic gestures to tangible economic commitments: in April 2025 it arranged repayment of Syria's US $15 million World Bank arrears, unlocking future reconstruction aid (Reuters, May 2025), and in July signed nearly 44 investment deals valued at approximately US $6 billion, spanning infrastructure, real estate, energy, and telecommunications, with projected job creation of up to 200,000 positions (Reuters, July 2025; Financial Times, July 2025).

By situating Syria's reintegration firmly within the Arab fold, Saudi Arabia seeks not only to offset Iranian and Turkish influence but also to foster a stable buffer zone on its borders. The convening of the Riyadh Meetings on Syria in January 2025 —attended by GCC states, Western powers, the UN, and Turkey —reflected Riyadh's ambition to lead a diplomatic mechanism excluding Tehran and Moscow while addressing reconstruction, refugee return, and counterterrorism. Furthermore, the establishment of a Saudi-Syrian Business Council, the launch of a $100-million mixed-use tower in Damascus, and GCC-backed healing of Syria's sovereign debt signal a deliberate strategy of economic stabilization aimed at binding the new government to Gulf-led frameworks (Arab News, July 2025; Reuters, July 2025).

Crucially, this Saudi posture diverges from Turkey's securitized influence and Iran's ideological alliances. Riyadh positions Syria as part of a moderate Arab axis led by Egypt and Jordan, rejecting sectarian fragmentation and privileging Sunni consensus over enclave-based power balancing. As Syria's southern province of Sweida descended into deadly Druze–Bedouin clashes in July 2025, Egyptian and other Arab ministers issued a unified condemnation of Israeli interference,

reinforcing Saudi Arabia's narrative of Syria's sovereignty, unity, and civilian rule (Al Mayadeen, July 2025) . This contrasts sharply with Israel's minority-driven fragmentation tactics.

Saudi Arabia's orientation toward Syria reflects a dual logic: stabilization through diplomacy and economic hedging, underpinned by Arab regional leadership. The kingdom leverages diplomatic connectivity, financial assistance, and infrastructural ties to anchor Syrian transition within an Arab-led paradigm—one that emphasizes state unity, minority protection, and resilience against external coercion. This posture amplifies Ardemagni's thesis and demonstrates that Saudi strategy is not only reactive to regional upheaval, particularly in Gaza and Iran —but proactive in shaping a post-Assad Syria anchored in regional stability and Arab agency.

5.2.1 Arab-State Actors: Egypt.

Among the evolving regional dynamics surrounding Syria's reintegration, the stance adopted by Egypt merits close attention, as it reflects, as mentioned above, a broader strategic trend: the pursuit of regional stability as a political imperative overriding ideological divergences. Egypt's relationship with Syria under the transitional leadership of Ahmed al-Sharaa is characterized by measured pragmatism. Despite Cairo's fundamental distrust of al-Sharaa's Salafist credentials and prior affiliations with jihadist networks, the Egyptian government has neither obstructed Syria's re-entry into the Arab system nor openly legitimized its new regime (Oron, 2025). Instead, Egypt has renewed diplomatic ties, maintained its embassy in Damascus, and continued consular services, while framing its engagement

around the preservation of Syria's territorial integrity, state sovereignty, and the promotion of a political process toward national unification. This calibrated position—backed by President el-Sisi's consistent support for the central role of Arab national armies—mirrors the strategic calculations of Saudi Arabia, which also places regional order above political alignment (INSS, 2025).

At the same time, Cairo's media and political establishment have voiced strong reservations about the ideological nature of the Syrian transitional government, with prominent commentators labeling al-Sharaa and his entourage as representatives of a radical evolution of the Muslim Brotherhood (Oron, 2025). Nonetheless, this ideological unease has not translated into political resistance: Egypt not only approved Syria's return to the Arab League in 2023, but also hosted al-Sharaa at the March 2025 emergency summit on Palestine, signaling a deliberate diplomatic tolerance designed to keep Syria within the Arab sphere and reduce the influence of non-Arab actors (Reuters, 2025a; Reuters, 2025b). This approach differs substantially from Israel's conduct.

Indeed, Israel's posture stands in contrast, as its policies since the collapse of the Assad regime appear aimed at reinforcing Syria's internal fragmentation rather than fostering stability. Tel Aviv has actively supported ethnic and sectarian enclaves—including factions within the Druze and Kurdish YPG groups—not only as a buffer against hostile forces but also as part of a broader "minority diplomacy" strategy that contradicts Arab calls for a cohesive Syrian state (Freilich, 2025; Oron, 2025). Israel's military interventions—including recurrent airstrikes and its de facto control over portions of southern Syrian territory—have been condemned by Egypt as violations of the 1974

Disengagement Agreement and Syria's sovereignty, and are perceived by Arab states as exacerbating the country's political disintegration (Arab League Statement, 2025).

What emerges, therefore, is a fundamental strategic divergence: while Egypt, despite deep-seated ideological misgivings, is facilitating a path toward Syria's institutional reintegration and peaceful unification, Israel is engaging in selective destabilization, which, under the guise of self-defense, ultimately consolidates a fractured and controllable neighbor. This Israeli approach aligns with efforts to limit Turkish and Iranian influence, but also reveals a tacit policy of obstructing centralized authority in Syria (INSS, 2025; Freilich, 2025). Cairo's position, on the other hand, resonates with the goals of Saudi diplomacy, which has backed initiatives to normalize relations with Syria under the condition of restoring governance and internal cohesion—even brokering Sharaa's meetings with U.S. President Trump and regional leaders (Washington Post, 2025).

In sum, while Israel adopts a tactical security logic rooted in fragmentation, Egypt champions a vision of geopolitical consolidation, seeing in a unified Syria not a threat, but a necessary pillar of Arab regional architecture. This contrast reveals deep fractures in regional strategic thinking on Syria's future and underscores the complexity of forging a shared peace agenda in the Levant.

5.3 External Actors' Strategic Divergence and Convergence.

As we draw this chapter to a close, it is instructive to ask: what distinguishes the ambitions of Western powers from those of Arab states, and where do their expectations converge? Our

comparative analysis has revealed diametrically opposed paradigms among key actors. The Western community—particularly the United States and the European Union—has articulated a normative-strategic framework grounded in democratic expectations, institutional reconstruction, transitional justice, and containment of foreign interference (European Council, 2025; White House, 2025). This dual-track posture not only conditions diplomatic and financial support on tangible political reforms, but also aims to fortify Syria as a stable and sovereign actor.

In stark contrast, Russia, Turkey, and Israel exhibit convergent tendencies toward exploiting fragmentation as a means to secure influence. Russia maintains enclave-based military presences in Hmeimim, Tartous, and Qamishli—so-called "security islands"—that subvert Damascus's authority and preserve Moscow's leverage in negotiations (al-Ahmed, 2025; EUISS, 2025). Turkey likewise anchors its policy on border security and Kurdish containment, supporting proxy forces while limiting Turkey's role in economic justice efforts (Güneylioğlu, 2025; Omran Studies, 2025). Israel, though rhetorically echoing Western goals of stability, operationalizes a form of "minority diplomacy." By supporting Druze and Kurdish enclaves and conducting enclave-based military operations, Israel perpetuates Syrian fragmentation to safeguard its strategic depth (Freilich, 2025; Oron, 2025). Thus, while Western rhetoric and Israeli official statements may appear aligned, Israeli actions pragmatically reinforce the very instability the West seeks to overcome.

By contrast, Arab states such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt have charted a different course—one marked by cautious pragmatism and a shared vision of Arab-led reconciliation. Though Saudi Arabia and Egypt maintain reservations about the ideological

orientation of Syria's new leadership, they nonetheless support its reintegration into the Arab League, facilitate diplomatic engagement, and back the principles of unity and sovereignty (Ardemagni, 2025; Oron, 2025; INSS, 2025). Their posture underscores a convergence with Western objectives—not through ideological uniformity, but via a mutual strategic interest in regional stabilization and minimizing non-Arab influence.

Ultimately, the salient divide lies in whether external actors reinforce Syrian disunity to secure short-term influence or bolster national cohesion in pursuit of long-term peace. The Western and Arab coalition sees unity as the pathway to sustainable transition, while revisionist powers and Israel pursue a paradigm of controlled fragmentation to preserve leverage. Without a shared commitment to sovereignty and institutional restoration, Syria risks descending once more into chaos. Thus, as we have cautioned throughout this work, the imperative for the international community to remain vigilant and coordinated is not abstract but urgent—especially amid intensifying competition among third-party stakeholders whose strategic interests in Syria continue to deepen.

Conclusions

This study has aimed to explore one of the most intricate and multi-layered crises of the twenty-first century, interrogating which domestic, regional, and international dynamics may empower the Syrian de facto Authorities, in the wake of the Assad regime's downfall, to steer a political transition towards consolidation capable of yielding international recognition and

legitimacy, and to what extent such dynamics remain within their effective grasp. To address this inquiry, a multidimensional analytical framework was adopted, tracing the evolution of Syria's internal fragmentation, the role of mediation and international initiatives, and the strategic calculations of external stakeholders.

The conclusions presented here are the outcome of a methodologically layered process developed throughout the thesis, which has integrated historical contextualization, conceptual depth, and comparative insight into a coherent analytical trajectory. The thesis began with a comprehensive historical overview of the Syrian conflict, detailing its eruption during the Arab Spring of 2011 and its subsequent transformation into one of the most geopolitically complex and internationally entangled crises of our time. This foundational chapter was crucial for understanding the country's social fragmentation and the enduring influence of regional and global interventions that continue to shape its trajectory.

Building on this historical grounding, the second chapter introduced a dedicated theoretical framework designed to provide the conceptual tools necessary for a critical understanding of the Syrian conflict's evolution. By exploring typologies of mediation, the characteristics of protracted civil wars, and decision-making dynamics among both domestic and international actors, the chapter established the analytical lens through which the Syrian case would be interpreted in the remainder of the thesis.

The subsequent comparative chapters deepened the inquiry through an examination of past and present mediation efforts. The third chapter assessed the repeated failures of international

mediation in Syria since 2011—most notably the Geneva Process and the efforts of UN envoys such as Kofi Annan and Staffan de Mistura—while the fourth chapter turned to the successful case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with particular focus on the Dayton Peace Accords and the strategic role played by Richard Holbrooke. This juxtaposition enabled a critical reflection on best practices and structural shortcomings, revealing how different institutional, geopolitical, and contextual factors shaped the outcomes of each peace process. The comparative exercise thus served as a valuable lens to assess both the potential and the limitations of international mediation in contexts marked by fragmentation, asymmetry, and competing interests.

The last chapter then provided a systematic review of the evolving positions of major international actors as of 2025. The United States and the European Union have adopted a strategy of conditional engagement, linking recognition and cooperation to demonstrable progress in democratic transition and transitional justice. Meanwhile, key Arab states—particularly Saudi Arabia and Egypt—have shown a more pragmatic posture, emphasizing Syria's reintegration into the Arab regional order as a stabilizing priority, even in the absence of full political convergence with the new leadership. In contrast, actors such as Russia, Turkey, and Israel have pursued strategic agendas that often run counter to Syria's unification. While Russia maintains its patronage of loyalist enclaves, Turkey continues to exert influence in northern Syria to contain Kurdish aspirations, and Israel, although officially neutral, has consistently acted to perpetuate internal fragmentation by targeting Iranian-linked infrastructure, reflecting its broader deterrence strategy in the Levant.

It becomes evident that the Syrian crisis is not solely the product of internal fractures, but also the outcome of conflicting, and at times irreconcilable, expectations articulated by the international community. To assess whether the transitional authorities in Damascus genuinely exercise control over the factors necessary to steer a political transition capable of securing international recognition and legitimacy, two preliminary questions must be posed. Is the international community truly facilitating this transition through coherent and realistic demands, or is it instead constraining it by advancing conditions misaligned with the country's fragile capacities? And do the expectations placed upon Damascus reflect feasible pathways to consolidation, or are they shaped by strategic incoherence and normative excess that risk undermining the very legitimacy they seek to promote?

The analysis suggests that a significant disjuncture persists between normative aspirations and operational realities. Western actors, while publicly endorsing democratic reform, have frequently subordinated their support to geopolitical calculus—illustrated by the ambiguous stance of the United States regarding Israeli and Turkish military activities in Syria. On the other hand, Arab states, despite their collective advocacy for Syria's reintegration, remain internally divided on the legitimacy and ideological orientation of the transitional leadership.

Throughout the thesis, this tension has been shown to underpin a recurring dilemma: international expectations—rooted in commitments to liberal peacebuilding, inclusivity, and accountability—often fail to reflect the fragmented nature of Syrian political authority, the asymmetrical distribution of coercive power, and the hybrid structures of local governance. While not intrinsically unjustified, such expectations risk

becoming performative when applied without sufficient attention to on-the-ground feasibility. In particular, pressure to implement constitutional reforms, organize elections, and ensure minority inclusion can inadvertently weaken transitional legitimacy if imposed through rigid conditionality or manipulated by domestic and foreign spoilers.

The absence of coherent international coordination further compounds this misalignment. While Western actors advocate for reintegration and stabilization, other regional powers—Russia, Turkey, and Israel among them—actively promote strategies that preserve fragmentation and obstruct sovereign consolidation. This divergence between rhetorical endorsement of peace and the strategic behavior of key stakeholders creates a volatile and contradictory environment, in which the very notion of national unification is regularly undermined by geopolitical maneuvering.

Additionally, the transitional government's lack of control over certain territories—whether governed by HTS, Kurdish-led SDF factions, or occupied by foreign military forces—makes the full and immediate implementation of internationally mandated reforms exceedingly difficult. Normative calls for disarmament, transitional justice, and central governance risk overlooking the complex terrain of asymmetric authority, contested legitimacy, and political fatigue. Reform sequencing and local ownership become indispensable components of any viable pathway forward.

Nevertheless, this incongruity does not invalidate international demands. Rather, it calls for a recalibration of engagement—one that balances normative imperatives with pragmatic sequencing, fosters inclusive dialogue among internal stakeholders, and adopts a more context-sensitive understanding

of Syria's transitional moment. Without such adaptation, international intervention risks replicating past cycles of disillusionment and undermining the fragile progress already underway.

Within this context of contradictions and constraints, a cautiously optimistic trajectory begins to emerge. Despite the persistence of fragmentation, economic deterioration, and external interference, the Syrian transitional government has demonstrated a level of institutional commitment that merits recognition. The adoption of a Constitutional Declaration, the establishment of transitional justice mechanisms, and the successful convening of a National Dialogue Conference all signal meaningful efforts to construct a new political order, however precarious. Part of this optimism derives from a profound demographic and historical shift: for the first time in nearly half a century, Syria is led by a Sunni administration in a country where approximately 70% of the population is Sunni, following decades of rule under the Alawite Assad family. This religious and political change carries significant implications for legitimacy. It enables the transitional leadership to appeal to the identity and frustrations of a majority long excluded from political dominance, offering a unifying narrative that could serve as a cornerstone for national reconstruction and reconciliation. This represents a potentially powerful asset in rebuilding the state, one that could foster renewed trust and social cohesion.

Yet, while this legitimacy factor remains a real advantage, it faces formidable challenges. Many stem from the international sphere, where responses to the Syrian transition have increasingly shifted toward unilateral, state-specific actions devoid of coherent multilateral coordination. Traditional United

Nations mechanisms—once regarded as the gold standard for conflict resolution—now appear ill-suited to the complexities of the current international order. These tools are outdated both in their analytical frameworks and in their capacity for timely and context-sensitive intervention, unable to keep pace with rapidly changing geopolitical dynamics. The erosion of Western powers' hegemonic influence, coupled with the European Union's lack of flexible and effective instruments to address crises of such magnitude, further exacerbates this gap.

While it is undoubtedly premature to declare success, the political trajectory under President Ahmed al-Sharaa offers a glimpse of what could become a more stable and inclusive governance model. His administration's overtures toward national reconciliation, institutional normalization, and legal reform—however limited in their implementation—signal a clear departure from the autocratic logics of the past. This evolution is all the more significant when viewed against the backdrop of international interference, which has often acted as a barrier rather than a bridge to democratic consolidation.

Ultimately, this thesis does not presume to offer a definitive verdict on Syria's future. What it does offer, however, is a critical reflection on the structural contradictions that define post-conflict governance in contemporary international relations. It highlights the need for alignment between external aspirations and internal constraints, between normative rhetoric and geopolitical practice. The fate of Syria's transition will depend as much on the will and capacity of its domestic actors as on the international community's ability to reconcile its strategic behavior with its declared principles.

If there is to be any realistic prospect of lasting peace, the international system must confront an uncomfortable truth: the

tools it has long relied upon are no longer adequate for the conflicts of the twenty-first century. The United Nations, in particular, must undergo a profound renewal of its operational instruments, developing agile, context-aware mechanisms capable of responding to fragmented governance, hybrid warfare, and multipolar rivalries. This is not merely an institutional adjustment—it is a fundamental transformation. And it stands as one of the greatest challenges, and opportunities, for the future of global peace and security.

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