# The Arab Spring in Yemen


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## 1 Yemen and the Arab Spring

Much was written in the world's mass media expressing serious concerns about Yemen's future when the Arab Spring came to this country. Most of those fears were based on the possibility of Yemen falling under the control of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). However, the events of 2011–2012 in Yemen proceeded in a very unusual, even extraordinary and, what is more important, a totally different way in comparison with other states of the Arab World.

Yemen was different from other Arab countries from the very inception of the Arab Spring (see Issaev & Shishkina, 2012b). For instance, in the beginning of 2011 Egypt was on the leading edge of the Middle East "economic miracle," a period of strong economic growth in Libya, Egypt, Syria, Morocco and other countries based on major foreign investments, capital-intensive growth projects, and increases in both exports and local production of formerly imported goods (see Korotayev et al., 2012b; Korotayev & Zinkina, 2011a, 2011b). The situation there could be characterized as "a trap on the very exit of the trap", as Malthusian pressures gave way to concerns about uneven development and over-educated youth. In comparison with Egypt, Yemen was a perfect example of a traditional high-fertility society that

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was still far from such a level of socio-economic development. Judging by its socio-economic and demographic indicators, Yemen has been lagging behind the majority of the Arab countries for several decades (see, e.g., Korotayev et al., 2012a). Thus, it will not be a surprise if some Arab Spring structural preconditions re-appear in this country in the future.

Speaking about Yemen, one should start from its rapid population growth, which was record high for the region during the last several decades (see Issaev & Shishkina, 2012b). Although Yemen's GDP growth was respectable, at just under 4% per year on the eve of the Arab Spring (2006–2010), its record high population growth, at 3% per year, almost thwarted all GDP growth. Thus, while Egypt—which had a population growth rate of under 2% per year and enjoyed GDP growth well over 5% in the decade before the Arab Spring—saw its GDP/capita rise by one-third in the years 2000–2010,[1] in Yemen the total growth in GDP/capita in this decade was only about one-tenth.

As a result, by 2011 the situation in Yemen could be characterized as being in the neo-Malthusian trap, which is typical for the early period of a country's modernization, when rapid population growth and limited economic growth produce only small gains in GDP/capita; and Yemen still remains in this trap.[2] In particular, the average per capita calorie intake is still lower than the 2300–2400 kcal level recommended by WHO (WHO, 2012).

Yemen's economic problems often intersected with "the woman question"—in Yemen the female labor force participation rate in all economic spheres except the agriculture is one of the lowest in the world (see Korotayev et al., 2013, 2015). This acts as a powerful constraint on GDP per capita growth. For some time, the country has needed to develop new industries which could involve the female labor force, as this could lead to much needed investment flows into the country. To encourage this process the government must support further reforms to support women's education after the stabilization of the situation in this country. Such a tendency was already noticeable in Yemen at the eve of the Arab Spring, where the education level of young women was markedly higher than that of the adult female population.

Moreover, Yemen is still in the beginning of the urban transition: the urban share of the population is just thirty percent (see Issaev & Shishkina, 2012b). Together with a rapidly growing population all these problems lead to low labor productivity, especially in agriculture (World Bank, 2020). This low labor productivity then becomes one more factor which hinders the economic development of the country.

Finally, the effects of modernization trap also matter. The rapid development of Yemen's health sector made it possible to achieve a sharp fall of the total death rate, especially infant mortality. It also led to steady increases in life expectancy. These successes were especially pronounced in the second half of 1970s and the first half

[1] See Chapter "Egypt's 2011 Revolution. A Demographic Structural Analysis" (Korotayev & Zinkina, 2022, in this volume).

[2] For more detail on the original Malthusian and neo-Malthusian trap see, e.g., Malthus (1978 [1798]), Artzrouni and Komlos (1985), Steinmann and Komlos (1988), Komlos and Artzrouni (1990), Steinmann et al. (1998), Kögel and Prskawetz (2001), Korotayev et al. (2011), Zinkina and Korotayev (2014a, 2014b), Korotayev et al. (2014), Korotayev and Zinkina (2014, 2015).

of the 1980s, when oil prices were very high. In these years, financial flows from the oil-exporting Arab countries through the official channels of "Arab help," as well as through remittances from Yemeni labor migrants who left to work in oil-rich Arab countries, predominantly Saudi Arabia and other oil monarchies of Arabian Peninsula, raised incomes (see Korotayev et al., 2012a: 51–52).

This provided the government with an opportunity to modernize the health sector and led to the introduction of modern health care, which resulted in a sharp increase in life expectancy and falling death rates. The rapid decline in infant mortality led to the emergence of a "youth bulge" (Moller, 1968; Mesquida & Weiner, 1999; Goldstone, 1991, 2002; Korotayev et al., 2010, 2011, 2012a). In other Arab Spring countries, the lack of white-collar jobs for huge numbers of educated youths who attended vastly expanded colleges and universities turned out to be a major factor of destabilization, as in Egypt (see, for instance: Korotayev et al., 2012b). In Yemen, by contrast, the youth bulge had the effect of increasing the recruits to radical Islamist movements and clan militias. However, the peak of the "youth bulge" will take place in Yemen in the 2020s and 2030s (see Issaev & Shishkina, 2012b). And unlike in Egypt, the process of this youth bulge formation in Yemen is likely to happen even before the country exits from the Malthusian trap. *The consequences of this process are likely to be especially harsh amid the growth of unemployment levels and, consequently, the absence of livelihood sources for the youth,* particularly those who live in urban areas. These problems will almost certainly continue to trigger some radical tendencies in the youth movements and fuel socio-political tensions in the country.

The combination of youth bulge, state corruption, alienation from increasingly authoritarian regimes and other factors,[3] along with the example of Tunisia leading the way with its revolution against its President Ben Ali,[4] led to upheavals in all the Arab countries. But the outcomes were quite different according to the particular circumstances in each country [see Chapter "The Arab Spring: A Quantitative Analysis" (Korotayev et al., 2022, in this volume)]. In Yemen, the Arab Spring protests that began in 2011 led first to a peaceful change of government. However, a few years later this led to a massive civil war with foreign intervention that remained stalemated for over half a decade.

## 2 The Evolution of Conflict in Yemen

The Yemen stalemate can be partially explained by Yemen being a less developed, and a still more tribal/clan society with a weaker central state, than other Arab nations. In these circumstances the opposition could not unify and mobilize the country to overthrow the regime, and the regime could not suppress the opposition

[3] For a rather full description of those factors see Chapter "The Arab Spring: Causes, Conditions, and Driving Forces" (Grinin & Korotayev, 2022, in this volume).

[4] See Chapter "The Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia and the Birth of the Arab Spring Uprisings" (Kuznetsov, 2022, in this book).

(see Issaev & Shishkina, 2012b). Instead of political parties competing to govern, in Yemen personal intrigues and clan divisions dominated.

The revolution in Tunisia played the role of the initial igniter of the Arab Spring in Yemen, as in all other Arab countries. As a result of that revolution, the former Tunisian government and parliament were dissolved, and, what is more important, President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali fled the country [see Chapter "The Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia and the Birth of the Arab Spring Uprisings" (Kuznetsov, 2022, in this book)]. Therefore, one could notice the emergence of an "Arab precedent"—the possibility of overthrowing the dictator who had been in power for several decades by popular uprisings (Issaev & Shishkina, 2012a; Grinin et al., 2016). As a result, antigovernment movements were initiated in the entire Arab world, including Yemen.

Long before the Arab Spring, one could notice the emergence of a common Internet space for all the Arab countries (see Abdulla, 2007). In this space all educated Arabs who knew Standard Arabic could communicate without country barriers. As a result, during the Arab Spring people from those Arab countries where revolutions were taking place could easily communicate with those whose countries were still politically stable. It was also significant that during the last twenty years another silent media revolution happened in the Arab world, with the emergence of super professional TV satellite channels. Two of those became especially popular in the Arab countries – the Qatar information outlet Al Jazeera, and the Saudi Arabian and UAE channel Al Arabiya. These TV channels gained enormous popularity across the entire Arab world (Korotayev et al., 2012a: 55). As a result, the so-called "Al Jazeera effect" (Tausch, 2011) played a special role in the synchronization of the events during the Arab spring: the Egyptian revolution was broadcast for all the Arab world to see, and so colorfully and even "excitingly" that it resembled a thriller movie, which was watched by all the Arabs with inspiration. An apparently "happy end of the Egyptian fairytale" in the initial broadcasts gave a strong impetus for antigovernment uprisings in all the Arab countries, including Yemen. Looking more precisely at the chronology of antigovernment uprisings, one could easily notice how the resignation of Hosni Mubarak on February, 11, 2011 triggered new protest waves in almost all the countries of the Arab world. For Yemenis who watched the coverage of the Egyptian events on Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, the emotional and bright images from Tahrir Square played a crucial role in the emergence of the protest wave in their country.

However, the Yemenis had more than a few reasons for their own discontent over life conditions. For over several decades the country—which in the time of the Prophet had been the most advanced region of Arabia, the proverbially rich land of *Felix* ("lucky, fertile") *Arabia*—blessed by the seasonal monsoons that made its valleys exceptionally fertile—was relegated to the periphery of the Arab world. It was not by accident that the protesters filled the streets of Yemeni cities with socio-economic demands.

Among the most important reasons for that discontent were problems in health and education. Following Nasser's Arab Socialist Revolution in Egypt, most Arab governments accepted the tasks of providing improved health care and education for their people. But Yemen lagged behind. For instance, in Yemen a national medical

insurance system is absent. Moreover, many medical services are not available for the majority of the people because of their high prices, and state hospitals are poorly equipped in terms of both their medical technology and the qualifications of medical staff. These problems intersected with those in the education system, which produced neither sufficient numbers of qualified professionals to provide health and educational services, nor prepared Yemeni youth for better jobs, notwithstanding the considerable expansion of higher education achieved by the Ali Abdullah Saleh administration in the years preceding the Arab Spring (World Bank, 2020).

The number of pupils in Yemeni school classes could be as high as 120, but only twenty percent of those pupils have an opportunity to get a higher education because of the educational payment rules, which demanded a full, one-time payment fee. For the majority of Yemenis coming up with this sum of money is unbearable. Moreover, most universities lack Master's degree programs, to say nothing of opportunities to get a Ph.D. degree in the country (Issaev & Shishkina, 2012b). The physical infrastructure of Yemeni schools and universities also remained rather underdeveloped (notwithstanding substantial improvements of the 2000s).

However, the core socio-political problem remains the archaic tribal way of life,[5] which still penetrates all spheres of Yemeni society in the North; whereas in the South, which had gone through a wide socio-political modernization before the unification, such a way of life became for its citizens a kind of "historic anachronism".

The Yemeni education and health sectors display some of the clearest instances of the distortions that arise as consequences of the tribal factor. For instance, in small cities and towns the sons and relatives of tribal *shaykhs* can become school directors, doctors and teachers, although they do not have the appropriate qualifications. Only 40 percent of Yemeni teachers have acquired university degrees, to say nothing about the high levels of clientelism, bribery and corruption that characterize all government sectors (UNESCO, 2020).

Nonetheless, the Yemeni government made enough progress in some areas to raise expectations. As has been mentioned above, the medical services in Yemen went through a serious transformation, and due to the introduction of modern drugs and sanitation, during the last decades of the 20th century life expectancy grew substantially and the mortality rate dropped, especially the infant mortality rate. The construction of hospitals and the spread of pharmacies accelerated. In the 2000s, the education sector got the largest part of the national budget. Moreover, more women started to get access to higher education.

As a result, popular discontent over the Yemeni education sector can be explained by the "demonstration effect": after returning back from universities abroad the young Yemenis found a rather underdeveloped education system at home, and the most natural way to explain it was to invoke the corruption factor. This "demonstration effect", however, had not only an external, but also an internal side: the healthcare system and educational system in the South of Yemen (which had been remodeled

[5] On the other hand, it appears necessary to stress that Yemeni tribes are in no way "primitive" sociopolitical structures. In fact, they only emerged in the early Islamic period replacing more ancient South Arabian chiefdoms (Korotayev, 1996, 2000, 2003, 2020).

during the decades in which South Yemen was identified as a socialist country and received aid from the USSR, Cuba and other Communist countries) were much more modern than those which still exist in the Yemeni North (see, for instance, Issaev, 2012; Issaev & Shishkina, 2012b).

During the whole first month of antigovernment protests in Yemen, the growth of protest was slow; the extent of Yemeni protestors' activities was more dependent on the events that happened in Tunisia and Egypt rather than in Yemen itself. The Yemeni opposition's attention was focused more on what was happening to Ben Ali and Mubarak, rather than on Yemen's President Ali Abdullah Saleh.[6]

Yemen's first demonstration took place on January 15, 2011—the day after President Ben Ali of Tunisia fled the country and took refuge in Saudi Arabia. During that demonstration its participants demanded socio-economic reforms—reformation of the healthcare system and educational system, increase of salary rates, etc. The first demonstration lacked the students' participation—one could notice only 40–100 of them, as most preferred to stay at home because of fear of government punishment (Issaev & Shishkina, 2012b). The protests restarted on the 18th of January. On the 27th of January, Yemen's capital Sanaa witnessed protests demanding the resignation of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had ruled the country during the previous 33 years.

On February 2, 2011, right after Hosni Mubarak addressed the Egyptian nation with a promise not to participate in the forthcoming elections and not to transfer power to his son, under the pressure of mass protests throughout the country (see Issaev & Shishkina, 2012a for detail), a new demonstration began in the Tahrir Square of Sanaa as well as near the Tunisian and Egyptian embassies in Yemen. President Saleh responded with a speech in Yemen's Parliament that was analogous to the one given by President Mubarak—that he was not going to run for re-election in the new presidential elections or transmit power to his son Ahmad, who was the Commander in Chief of the Republican Guard.

On February 2, 2011, massive demonstrations were held in several Yemeni cities. That day was called "The Day of Rage" (*Yawm al-Ghaḍab*—similar to mass protest days in Tunisia, Egypt and Bahrain). During those demonstrations, protesters put forward their demands, which included the eradication of corruption and the resignation of President Saleh. More than twenty thousand people took part in those protests (Agence France-Presse, 2011). In the southern city of Aden the national security forces used live ammunition and tear gas to suppress the uprisings. Thousands took to the streets in the capital, Sanaa—both regime supporters and antigovernment protestors. After the "Day of Rage" classes in the capital's university were terminated practically until the next year.

The next wave of the Yemeni opposition protests occurred on February 12, 2011, just the next day after the speech of Egypt's Vice President Omar Suleiman, in which

[6] For the preparation of this chapter we have relied on the following main sources: Day (2012), Issaev (2012), Issaev and Shishkina (2012a, 2012b), Bonnefoy (2014), Brehony (2015), Issaev and Korotayev (2015), Fraihat (2016), Juneau (2016), Brandt (2017), Hill (2017), Ragab (2017), Sharp (2017), Blumi (2018), Palik (2018).

he announced the resignation of Hosni Mubarak. Starting from this date, the rhetoric of the majority of the protesters became more political (see Issaev & Shishkina, 2012b for detail).

Ali Abdallah Saleh had stayed in power for 33 years, starting from June 17, 1978. His reign started with the position of President of the Yemen Arab Republic (from 1978 to 1990, Yemen was split into the pro-Western Yemen Arab Republic in the north and the socialist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in the south, with its capital at Aden). After that he became the Chairman of the Yemeni Presidential Council and, finally, after reunification he became the President of the Republic of Yemen. He was the first president of the united country.

After the unification of Northern and Southern Yemen in 1990, Saleh came forward with several constitutional amendments (which were put to the referendum on February 24, 2001) to expand and entrench his power as President. Those amendments expanded the presidential term from five to seven years. They also gave the Yemeni president an opportunity to convene new elections after Parliament's dissolution and removed the President's jurisdiction limits, which restricted him from issuing decrees that have the force of law when the Parliament does not sit or is dissolved (Sapronova, 2003). During the 1999 and 2006 elections Saleh was reelected for seven-year terms. Moreover, on the eve of the 2011 events Saleh produced another amendment initiative—to cancel presidential term limits altogether, which was not put on referendum because of the Arab Spring (Issaev & Shishkina, 2012b).

On February 8, 2011, two mass actions took place in the southwestern city of Taiz. The first was close to Hurriyyah Square, where the president's opponents held "Friday of the Beginning" prayers (*Jum'at al-Bidaya*). During the praying an unknown person threw a grenade into the crowd, as a result of which one protestor was killed and 87 were injured.

At the same time, Saleh's supporters held "Friday of Peace" (*Jum'at al-Salam*) prayers in Taiz, calling for a peaceful dialogue and political reforms initiated by Saleh. Among the slogans one could hear calls like "Yes to security" (*Na'am li-l-aman*) or "Yes to development and no to chaos" (*Na'm li-l-tanmiyah wa-la li-l-fawda*). After three days President Saleh announced during his speech that he was not going to resign and was ready to leave his seat only after the next elections were held.

However, by that time an old conflict between two factions of the Yemeni elite—the Saleh clan and al-Ahmar clan—had already manifested itself. The Ahmars controlled many important, highly-capable formations of the Yemeni armed forces. Just as the Egyptian military elite had used the Arab Spring protests to settle accounts with its main enemy, the circle of internationally-connected business elites led by Gamal Mubarak,[7] the Ahmar clan decided to use the popular protests in Yemen to defeat its main enemy, the Saleh clan. To this end, with applause from the gullible international community, the al-Ahmar clan positioned itself as the defender of the "people's fight for democracy," against the repression of the "despotic dictatorship" of Ali Abdullah Saleh. On February 26, 2011, several leaders of Yemen's two largest

[7] See Chapter "Egypt's 2011 Revolution. A Demographic Structural Analysis" (Korotayev & Zinkina, 2022, in this volume).

tribes, Hashid and Bakil, led by the Ahmars, announced their defection to the side of the opposition.

In March 2011 Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, the Commander of the northern military district and the first armored division (one of the most efficient in the country) announced his withdrawal from President Saleh's ruling party, the General People's Congress (Issaev & Shishkina, 2012b). Following General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar's defection three other generals and dozens of officers announced that they did not obey the president. In Sanaa, troops of rebel generals were sent by the Ahmars "to protect the demonstrators"; these troops took positions in the central square of the city as well as close to the buildings of the Central Bank, the Ministry of Defense and the Presidential Palace.

Several representatives of the General People's Congress of Yemen, including ministers, withdrew from the party. The defections included minister of tourism Nabil Hassan al-Fakih, who was the head of the Foreign Policy Committee of the House of Representatives and adviser to the Prime Minister Mohammed al-Kubati. He was joined by the head of the state news agency Nasr Taha Mustafa, the permanent representative of Yemen in the League of Arab States (LAS) Abd al-Malik Mansour, and many others.

However, President Saleh was not left without any support. On March 21, 2011, he proclaimed the necessity of using the army for the stabilization of the situation in the country (Issaev & Shishkina, 2012b), and immediately after that Yemeni Defense Minister major general Muhammad Naser Ahmed Ali addressed the Yemeni people on Al Jazeera TV to say that President Saleh had the backing of the armed forces. The head of the Defense Department promised to give the president protection from any antidemocratic coup attempt, adding that "the armed forces will remain loyal to the oath given to God, the people and the political leadership of President Ali Abdullah Saleh" (Novyje Izvestiya, 2011). However, it should be noted that the Yemen Minister of Defense is in fact a nominal figure who predominantly deals with economic issues. The real control over the army was concentrated in the hands of the Military District Commanders, primarily the Commanders of the North and West Military Districts, and that the Commander of the North District was no one else but the main enemy of Ali Abdullah Saleh—Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar.

On the other hand, the son of the president, Ahmad Saleh, headed the Republican Guard. In addition, President Saleh's step-brother was appointed as the Air Force Commander, and his other brothers also occupied leading posts in the army and special services. The President's nephew, Tarek Muhammad Saleh, was the head of the elite Presidential Guard. Another nephew, Yahya Muhammad Saleh, headed the Central Security Forces and Counter-Terrorism Unit. Still another nephew, Amar Muhammad Saleh, served as National Security Agency Deputy Commander.

The conflict between the two most influential clans of Yemen—the Ahmars and the Salehs—without doubt turned out to be a crucial factor of the 2011 political destabilization. Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar hoped that he would take the place of President Saleh after his departure from his post, but the president himself was seeking an opportunity to transfer power to his eldest son Ahmad, who would have turned 40

years old by 2013, which would have given him rights to claim the highest public office (Ryabov, 2011).

Besides political interests, one could notice practical economic reasons behind the inter-clan conflict. After the death of the Shaykh Abdullah al-Ahmar the financial interests of Ali Abdullah Saleh and the al-Ahmar clan (first of all, Hamid al-Ahmar's financial interests) became more and more irreconcilable. For instance, the two largest mobile operators in the country MTN and Sabafon belonged to Saleh and al-Ahmar respectively (Issaev & Shishkina, 2012b) and each sought a monopoly at the expense of the other.

To reinforce his position, after 2001 President Saleh sought an external ally. To gain support from the United States, he offered President George W. Bush Yemen's help in the War on Terror, and began persecuting conservative and anti-Western Islamists. This caused the Al-Ahmar clan to suffer even more serious losses. Yemen gradually took up a position as an important ally of the U.S. in Middle East politics. As Russian orientalist Sergey Serebrov noted, this pressed Washington "to look for additional resources to strengthen Saleh's regime in Yemen by transitioning financial flows into the Saleh regime which previously used to come to Yemen from Saudi Arabia by multiple channels, bypassing the President. The new arrangements deprived the Ahmars (and their political base—the moderately Islamist Islah party) of their usual income flows from Saudi Arabia, which threatened them with further political costs" (Serebrov, 2015: 301).

The situation became even worse after Shaykh Abdullah al-Ahmar's death in 2007. President Saleh did not feel obliged to the Shaykh's sons, and made it clear that he did not intend to adhere to a generous policy towards al-Ahmar clan, which was highly privileged during the lifetime of Abdullah al-Ahmar. The conflict reached its peak in 2009, when Shaykh Hamid al-Ahmar, as the opposition leader, demanded an urgent National Dialogue session in Yemen in order to remove Saleh from power. However, at that time the president managed to resist.

Nevertheless, in 2011 the heightened inter-clan conflict in the wake of the popular protests led to the defection of many tribes of the North to the opposition. This was the result of the tough position of the Hashid tribal confederation leader, Sadiq bin Abdullah bin Hussein bin Nasser al-Ahmar, towards President Saleh. The attempted assassination of Sadiq al-Ahmar on May 2011 can be considered as one of culminating points in the struggle between President Saleh and the head of the tribal confederation (Ryabov, 2011).

Two months later, the northern tribes' representatives announced the creation of the Alliance of Yemeni tribes led by Shaykh Sadiq al-Ahmar. The Alliance was joined by deserters from the regular Yemeni army; they entered the first armored division of General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar who hastened to declare his "solidarity with the protesters," warning that any attack on the opposition by the government would be regarded as an armed intervention in the tribal unions structure (Ahramonline, 2011).

However, it was not only the pro-Ahmar tribes who composed the opposition to President Saleh. The Yemeni opposition, like the oppositions in all the other Arab countries, can be characterized as highly heterogeneous, moved by different causes and pursuing different goals (Issaev, 2012; Korotayev et al., 2016). One of

the structural components of the opposition forces was the Yemeni Socialist Party, which remained from the pre-unification socialist regime in South Yemen. The YSP was initially a pro-Soviet party based on a Scientific Socialist/Communist political platform (Vorobyev, 1978), but it turned to the Social Democratic doctrine in the late 1980s against the background of the crisis in the USSR.

The demands of the southerners were largely based on dissatisfaction with the fact that after the country's unification in 1990 and the 1994 civil war, the more economically and socio-politically developed South was essentially turned into a financial and economic appendage of the North. Since 2010, in the southern regions one could notice an escalation of conflicts with the incumbent regime. That escalation was visible in the increased activities of the opposition-minded elite in the major cities of the South, as well as among the traditional supporters of the YSP. The situation became even more complicated because of the development of the armed separatist movement al-Hirak, which originally pursued mainly the private interests of the leaders of some of the more remote southern provinces (Bahran, 2010).

## 3 From Protests to Revolution and Civil War

The complicated configuration of Yemeni society predetermined the long and internally contradictory course of Yemen's conflict until it came to armed clashes between opponents and supporters of the President Ali Abdullah Saleh. The Yemeni crisis reached its acute phase in April 2011, after several months of swelling protests and defections. Under pressure from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), President Saleh had agreed to step down. However, on April 30th President Saleh followed his practically established tradition of changing his own decisions, and refused to sign the agreement to resign his presidential powers in exchange for immunity from criminal prosecution. On that day, the Secretary General of the GCC, Abd al-Latif al-Ziyani, arrived in Sanaa and failed to convince the President to accept the settlement plan proposed by the Council (Issaev & Shishkina, 2012b).

A month later, on May 31, 2011, the first major clashes between government forces and armed detachments of the Hashid tribal confederation took place. The cause for unleashing an armed confrontation in the elite quarter of Sanaa—al-Khasab—was the complaint of a director of a school where pupils were taking their exams. Armed guards of the al-Ahmar family were stationed nearby the school, which aroused the concern of the school administration and they alerted security services. The clashes began when the army units entered the part of the city where the school was located. The situation became much more complicated after the attempt of the police special forces to seize the house of Shaykh al-Ahmar, the leader of the Hashid tribe, whose guards were able to repel the attack and launched a counter-offensive. During the clashes, 38 people were killed, 24 of whom were representatives of the Hashid tribe (Issaev & Shishkina, 2012b).

After a fierce five-day confrontation, the Yemeni capital Sanaa was actually divided into several parts: the city's southern part was controlled by government

troops and the security forces of President Saleh, while General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar detachments were stationed in the North. West Sanaa was occupied by Hashid tribal detachments, while "peaceful protests" continued in the East. Al-Zubayri Street became a kind of watershed between the western and eastern parts of the city, and one of the largest streets, 60th Street, which was also important because of its strategic location (as it leads to Sanaa airport), was also occupied by demonstrators. The streets that divided the areas were occupied by various factions, the fortifications were reinforced and checkpoints with armed fighters were deployed.

The main fighting between the Hashid tribal detachments and government forces that erupted in the area of al-Khasab in North Sanaa was located between the house of the Hashid tribal union leader Shaykh Sadiq al-Ahmar and the Ministry of the Interior building.

Moreover, military actions also took place in other cities of the country. In particular, in Taiz, the demonstrators were fired at by the police. Those police actions led to the elimination of a protesters' camp and the deaths of more than 50 people.

In the Yemeni South things grew far more serious. The coast city of Zinjibar was seized by a group of militants who were initially thought to be associated with al-Qaeda, but later it turned out that they belonged to the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army grouping. This paramilitary religious and political organization included militants who during the 1994 civil war had fought for President Saleh against the socialists in the south. In gratitude for that help, members of the group received several leading positions, but this was not enough for them, and that was now long ago. Thus, in May 2011 they decided to take advantage of the opportunity provided by the popular riots which were spreading throughout the country (Lenta, 2011), and they attacked the small military garrison and captured the city. Outraged by this turnabout by a group once loyal to him, President Saleh sent his air force and artillery to strike the rebel's positions. However, the fighting swelled to include armed tribespeople and went on for months before the rebels were dislodged.

On Friday June 3, 2011, an assassination attempt on President Saleh took place during prayers in the Presidential Mosque. The explosion left Saleh with extensive wounds and burns. The President accused the United States of attempting to kill him in order to stage a coup in Yemen (al-Bayan, 2011).

The day after the assassination, Saleh left Yemen for Saudi Arabia for medical treatment, landing at a military base in Riyadh; after that he was taken to a military hospital. During his absence of more than three months, Vice President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi had to take the duties of the head of the state as well as the supreme commander of the armed forces (in accordance with Article 116 of the Yemeni Constitution). Previously Vice President Hadi had been proposed and nominated by the GCC to become the interim President of Yemen after the resignation of the President Saleh. Immediately after the departure of the injured president to Saudi Arabia, the oppositionists declared their determination to prevent President Saleh's return.

During the absence of President Saleh from the country, Acting President Hadi began to pursue his own policy aimed at establishing a dialogue with the protesters, starting negotiations with the groups still occupying major streets, conducting

marches and demonstrations. In addition, he managed to suppress quickly and relatively bloodlessly the military operations; however, they broke out in Yemen again in September 2011. These emerged between various factions dispersed throughout the capital city after the declaration of the forthcoming return of President Saleh and they lasted for three days.

On September 18, 2011, armed groups loyal to President Saleh opened fire at pro-Ahmar demonstrators in Sanaa, killing at least 26 people and injuring several hundred (Al Jazeera, 2011). Eyewitnesses reported that the security forces opened fire at the pro-Ahmar activists who were leaving their camps located on Sanaa Change Square near the university and heading to the city center. Before that, the government units fought with the pro-Ahmar forces in the al-Khasab area, where one could find the residence of the Hashid tribe leader Shaykh Sadiq al-Ahmar, who claimed that he gave his men the order not to attack with reciprocal fire (Al Jazeera, 2011). The next day, demonstrators were again subjected to snipers' fire in the capital as well as in Taiz. The end of the acute phase of confrontation between government forces and oppositionists was largely facilitated by the order of Prime Minister Hadi to stop army units' attacks. The acute civil unrest in those days could be described by the following data: on the first day of fighting 23 people were killed, on the second 83 were, and the third day witnessed the clashes with the army units—which, however, helped to stop the confrontations.

On September 23, 2011, President Ali Abdullah Saleh returned to Yemen after more than three months of treatment in Saudi Arabia. That evening, Yemeni TV began broadcasting President Saleh's decision to sign a package of documents concerning the transfer of power to the interim government.

The signing of the GCC Plan took place on November 23, 2011, in Riyadh with the participation of the Saudi King and representatives of the Yemeni opposition (Rashad, 2011).

In accordance with the GCC Plan, the Yemen crisis resolution was to be implemented in two stages: in a "first transition period," President Saleh would transfer his powers to Vice-President Hadi, and promise to resign following early presidential elections to be held on February 21, 2012. Then would follow a "second transition period" of two years, after which Yemen would hold a new presidential election (UN Peacemaker, 2011).

During the first transition period, it was planned to create a Government of National Unity, which was supposed to consist of 50 percent of the representatives of the pro-Saleh National Council and another 50 percent of the anti-Saleh (and mostly pro-Ahmar) National Coalition. Moreover, in accordance with Article 8 of the Plan, legislative decisions in the House of Representatives were to be made only on a consensus basis, otherwise the prerogative of passing a controversial bill was passed on to the Vice President, and, if necessary, to the President himself (UN Peacemaker, 2011).

Article 14 of the GCC Plan gave Vice President Hadi the following jurisdictions in the first transition period from November 26, 2011 to February 21, 2012:

1. to hold early presidential elections;
2. to perform presidential functions in relation to Parliament;
3. to announce the formation of the national unity government and to administer the oath of office to its members;
4. to interact with the Committee on military affairs in order to achieve security and stability in the country;
5. to conduct foreign affairs within the framework necessary for the Plan implementation;
6. to issue the decrees necessary for the Plan implementation (UN Peacemaker, 2011).

It was also assumed that Hadi would become a consensus candidate for the presidency in the February 2012 election. To secure this, Article 18 prohibited both opposing sides to nominate other candidates for this post. This explains the election results: more than 99% of the votes were given to Hadi in the early presidential elections on February 21, 2012.

During the second transition period, Article 19 of the GCC Plan entrusted the elected president and the Government of National Unity with the task of convening a conference to achieve a national dialogue and draft a new constitution. Article 20, which regulated the composition of the Conference, emphasized the need for representation of women in all participating groups. These are the issues put on the Conference agenda:

1. to prepare the Constitution draft, including the convocation of the Constitutional Commission;
2. to develop a system for reform of the new Constitution, including the possibility of submitting constitutional amendments to the Yemeni people through a referendum;
3. to establish a dialogue with the South in order to facilitate the adoption of fair decisions which would guarantee the country's unity;
4. to review the national issues including prior armed conflicts and seek their resolution;
5. to implement comprehensive reforms aimed at establishing a democratic system, including reforming the state service, judiciary and local government systems;
6. to take measures aimed to achieve national reconciliation and the implementation of justice, as well as measures aimed to prevent violations of human rights and humanitarian law in the future;
7. to take legal and other measures to ensure better protection of vulnerable groups, including children and women;
8. to promote the determination of the priority areas for reconstruction and sustainable development in order to create employment opportunities and improve economic, social and cultural development in Yemen (UN Peacemaker, 2011).

Former President Saleh, however, was not prepared to go quietly. Vice President Hadi was not a member of Hashid or any other major tribe; Saleh therefore thought Hadi would be a weak ruler whom he could influence. However, since early 2012,

power in Yemen was gradually passing into the hands of al-Ahmar family, represented by the sons of the leader of the Hashid tribal confederation Shaykh Abdullah al-Ahmar, who had died in 2007. The al-Ahmar family acted in an unofficial coalition with President Hadi, who increasingly emerged from the control of Saleh and strove to become the real leader of the country. They had major allies in the Islamist party Al-Islah and the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood, which rose due to the wave of success of their ideological inspirers in Egypt (Bonnefoy, 2014). But success accompanied this new coalition only as long as the Muslim Brotherhood was in power in Egypt; the overthrow of Mohamed Morsi (and the subsequent inter-Arab isolation of the association and its foreign cells) sharply undermined the positions of the new Yemeni leadership. Meanwhile, former President Saleh continued to work with his allies to undermine the transitional government.

After the failure of the National Dialogue Conference in early 2014, the main political forces in Yemen focused on two opposing camps—the General People's Congress, led by former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, and the al-Ahmars' camp, already led by Sadiq al-Ahmar. Already in 2011, the two forces had found themselves at opposite political poles, beginning to seek allies among the other political actors in Yemen: Al-Islah and the Muslim Brotherhood rallied around al-Ahmar, while the General People's Congress joined an alliance with the secular Baath Party (Bonnefoy, 2014) and the "Union of Popular Forces", and also began to pursue a policy of unofficial rapprochement with the Ansar Allah movement.

Of particular interest was the secret alliance of Saleh's General People's Congress with the Houthi Islamists (Ansar Allah), which a few years before had seemed unthinkable. During the reign of President Saleh, the extreme north of Yemen was considered the most insecure region in the country. The feud between the former regime and the Houthis had deep roots, and President Saleh himself fought against Ansar Allah six times during his reign. However, in early 2014, these two political forces were on the same side of the barricades, acting as a serious counterbalance to the current government in the person of President Hadi and the al-Ahmars. Thus, the struggle was not between secular and Islamist forces, but between different groups of secular forces supported on both sides by various Islamist forces.

It was not a coincidence that the al-Ahmars and al-Islah failed to develop good relations with the Houthis. The fact is that with the active assistance of al-Islah in Yemen, the Salafi grouping al-Nusra was created, which was to enter into a confrontation with Ansar Allah. In this case, such a tactic had already occurred in the past, when in the second half of the 2000s the regime used Salafi radicals in the interests of its own domestic policy. This was due primarily to General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, who directly led six military operations against the Houthis in the Saada province from 2004 to 2010, and repeatedly resorted to the services of the Salafis in the battles.

The al-Ahmars, along with the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood, managed to quarrel with all the leading political forces in the country. The problems of the South of the country (where speeches demanding the re-establishment of an independent state within the boundaries of the former PDRY were ceaseless) were not solved. Moreover, the growing power of the Islamists in Sanaa did not suit the southerners who well remembered 1994 when the North pursued a hegemonic policy toward the

South based on the ideas of the spiritual leaders of al-Islah (first of all, al-Zindani and al-Daylani) who declared jihad against the "atheists" of the South.[8]

Therefore, the situation in which power in Yemen gradually began to be monopolized in the hands of the coalition of President Hadi, the al-Ahmars, al-Islah and their allies represented by the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis, put their opponents on the defensive, and forced them to go to extreme measures. The counter-coalition of former President Saleh, his allies in the General People's Congress, the Houthis, and the southerners therefore launched the "Revolution of 21 September" in 2014. Sweeping down from the north in a surprise attack, Houthi forces captured Sanaa, after which the al-Ahmars were forced to leave the country, while the Houthis' "Ansar Allah", pursuing their policy of concluding alliances with the Yemeni tribes, as well as members of the General People's Congress, in fact, established control over Northern Yemen.

The next aggravation of this situation occurred on January 17, 2015, when the Houthis arrested the head of the presidential administration, Ahmed bin Mubarak on suspicion of an attempt to falsify the draft constitution of the country. On January 18, after unsuccessful attempts to agree on the release of bin Mubarak, President Hadi convened an emergency meeting of the Yemen Security Council, in which all the law enforcement agencies were instructed to bring troops to the streets of Sanaa on January 19 at 5:00 am Yemeni time. However, "Ansar Allah" learned about the plans of the president the evening before, and appealed to their supporters in the army and security services not to obey Hadi's orders. The Houthis acted in advance, and in the morning of January 19 surrounded the presidential palace in Sanaa as well as the National Security Bureau. Throughout the day, fighting continued, which then ended in the evening when "Ansar Allah" managed to take control of the territory of the presidential palace and the building of the Bureau of National Security.

On January 22, 2015, President Hadi filed a resignation petition and found himself under actual house arrest. Members of the government of Yemen also sent a petition to the President giving their resignation, and on February 6, the Houthi Revolutionary Committee was established as an interim authority in the country. By mid-February, the coalition of Houthis and forces faithful to former President Saleh had established control over virtually all of Northern Yemen and also a part of South Yemen. On February 15, 2015, the Houthis began their assault on the remaining southern stronghold, the city of Aden.

On February 21, 2015, Hadi managed to escape from Sanaa to Aden, after being under house arrest for a month. There, he managed to meet with the governors of the southern provinces and make a statement on the withdrawal of his resignation.

The revolutionary events of September 21, 2014 to February 6, 2015 brought considerable alarm to the Sunni leaders of Saudi Arabia, other Gulf states, and a

[8] In 1994, an armed conflict took place between the Yemeni government in Sanaa and the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) in Aden headed by Ali Salem al-Bid, which ended with the defeat of the Southerners. During the Civil War, the religious leaders of al-Islah Shaykhs al-Zindani and al-Daylani issued fatwas against the residents of the South that justified massive violations of political and economic rights on the part of the northerners as well as the removal of the YSP from government (see, e.g., Day, 2012).

number of Arab countries, for whom Shi'a control of Yemen was anathema. The Houthis' victory thus turned the intra-Yemeni conflict into a regional problem. The situation was further aggravated by the fact that various radical Islamist groups were already operating in Yemen, which alarmed the international community and the Gulf states.

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) arose in 2009, but in the early years of the organization's activities, it was not considered a primary threat to the security of Yemen. However, after the resignation of President Saleh, AQAP harshly intensified its activities, in particular in the oil province of Marib, which in turn was due to both external and internal circumstances. The emergence of the "Islamic State" (ISIS/Daesh) in Syria and Iraq was one major external influence. Various radical Islamist groups saw in Daesh a real power to follow. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which swore allegiance to the Daesh leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in February 2015, was no exception. AQAP was also roused to action by the expansion of Houthi control, as the Shià Houthi are considered heretics by AQAP, who see them as incompatible with Al-Qaeda at an existential level.

The pressure of the Saudis to strike back and retake control forced President Hadi to abandon his abdication that he signed in January 2015, to transfer de facto his capital to Aden, and to create a new government to fight against Ansar Allah.

Saudi Arabia also tried to consolidate the international community in exerting pressure on the Houthis. In particular, Riyadh demanded that its Arab neighbors should support the claims to authority of President Hadi.

On March 26, 2015, Saudi air strikes marked the start of the invasion of Yemen by the coalition forces of the Sunni Arab states led by Saudi Arabia within the framework of Operation Decisive Storm. The battle for Aden began between the Houthis, who had just seized the city, and the Saudi coalition. In July 2015, the Houthis were knocked out of the city. By August the Saudi coalition (in which an important military role was played by the UAE from the very beginning) concentrated a powerful mechanized force in the southern Yemeni provinces and, allied with the Yemeni detachments supporting President Hadi, started advancing northward. However, the bloc of Houthis and forces supporting Ali Abdullah Saleh managed to organize a fairly effective rebuff of the Saudi coalition, and the civil war in Yemen took on a protracted character. In general, the "front line" between the two coalitions has remained quite close to the old state border between the Yemen Arab Republic and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. Note that the Islamists—albeit of different groups—are active participants in both coalitions. The Zaidi Islamists led the Houthis and the northern coalition, while Islamists from the Islah party joined the southern coalition. At the same time, the radical Islamists of al-Qaeda and Daesh proved to be at war with the forces of both coalitions.

As the civil war dragged on, antagonisms began to develop within both coalitions. Former President Saleh had expected the Houthis to restore him to the Presidency and then return to their northern homelands. When it became clear that they had no intention of doing so, and instead were planning to remain in Sanaa and rule as much of Yemen as they could hold, Saleh changed course again. In December 2017, he broke with the northern alliance and declared his intention to rejoin with

President Hadi. This led the Houthis to label Saleh a traitor, and he was killed by a Houthi sniper on December 4, 2017. However (to the surprise of many observers) the Northern Coalition was able to survive even this shock.

The antagonisms in the Southern Coalition have worsened to an even greater degree, despite the military assistance that they received from Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The Yemeni portion of the southern coalition was initially quite heterogeneous. On the one hand, the moderately Islamist and politically conservative al-Ahmars and their al-Islah allies came to this coalition mainly to overthrow the Houthi-GPC regime in Sanaa. On the other hand, the rather secularist Southern Movement (*al-Ḥirāk al-Janūbiyy*) was more interested in achieving the independence of South Yemen under a modernizing secular/socialist regime. The interests of these two groups in just about everything, except for driving the Houthis out of Sanaa, were thus almost completely incompatible. At the same time, the antagonisms worsened even among the external participants of the anti-Houthi coalition. In the summer of 2017, as a result of a sharp deterioration of relations between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Qatar withdrew from the coalition. On the other hand, relations between Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Yemen are extremely complicated, due to the Emirates pursuing their own policy in Yemen that differs very significantly from that of the Saudis. The most important point is that the Emirates support the Southern Movement, whereas the Saudis rely on the al-Ahmars/al-Islah block. Meanwhile, on the 4th of April 2017 the Southern Movement formed the Southern Transitional Council and started taking practical steps in order to form an independent state in the South, and in late January 2018 Aden saw open fighting between the forces of the al-Ahmars (that are formally loyal to the President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi) and the forces of the Southern Transitional Council.

## 4 Endgame?

Thus, the situation in Yemen became more and more complicated. Under U.S. President Trump, the United States—which has long held Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to be important allies—gave Saudi Arabia a green light to pursue its war aims in Yemen. Indeed, Trump promised to sell the Saudis advanced weapons for the war, and generally seemed to look favorably on Saudi Arabia's efforts to project strength and gain influence in the region. This was despite the conflicts that arose between the Saudis and Qatar, where the U.S. has important military facilities.

However, now that Trump has been succeeded by President Biden, who seems far more concerned about the humanitarian crisis being created by the Yemen war, it is unclear if unbridled U.S. support for the Southern Coalition will continue. Having just suffered a massive refugee problem from the Syrian civil war, Western nations do not want to see yet another huge flow of war refugees from an even larger country (Syria in 2010 had 21.4 million inhabitants, Yemen had an estimated 28 million in 2018). Western nations are therefore interested in seeking a negotiated settlement as soon as possible, even if that means leaving the Houthis in control of the northern portion of the country. If the United States joins the effort to create a settlement,

perhaps even putting pressure on Saudi Arabia to stop using US weapons in the war, it may be that a settlement will come sooner. However, it is not always clear who to negotiate with, or to what end, especially as AQAP remains a problem that is not controlled by either side.

The Arab Spring protests not only unseated President Saleh; they unleashed and exacerbated all the regional, religious, and clan conflicts that have bedeviled Yemen for the last forty years. It will not be easy to bridge those conflicts and create a stable peace.

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# The Syrian Revolution


**Vladimir M. Akhmedov**

The Syrian revolution, which began in March 2011, degenerated into a bloody civil war that pushed the country into both a secessionist upheaval and the breakdown of the population's national identity. Both the duration of the crisis and the complexity of reconciling the various actors in the Syrian conflict stem from a sequence of fundamental factors, which this chapter will analyze (see also Akhmedov, 2019a, 2019b).

This chapter stresses that the distinctive feature of the political model in Syria prior to the revolution was its traditional authoritarianism combined with a military committed to maintaining a stable security environment (see George, 2003; Seale, 1988: 420–440). Indeed, civilian-military relations in the Syrian Arab Republic during the last 40 years were mainly dictated by the military's priorities in the framework of the country's critical internal and foreign policies (Hinnebusch, 1993; Zisser, 2001: 5–8).[1] Control during the current crisis has been largely transferred into the hands of the armed forces, which in effect means the intelligence services (Quilliam, 1999: 27–60). In fact, the intelligence services have determined and continue to shape the future of the regime as well as Syria as a whole (Ziadeh, 2013: 143–170). Regardless, this regime has sustained itself despite the radicalization of Syria's conflict and its mutation into an inter-religious struggle.

[1]For more detail about the role of the military in politics see Rubin and Keaney (2002).

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## 1 The Background and Causes of the Syrian Revolution

There were various causes for the emergence of the crisis in Syrian society in 2011: the Assads' staying in power for too long (taking into account the transfer of power from father to son from his father), corruption, injustice, an increase in the number of educated youth, deterioration of the socio-economic provisions and much more (see, e.g., Grinin et al., 2016).[2]

But a number of important reasons lay in the very demographic structure of the population of Syria and the existing system of distribution of resources and benefits. The total population of Syria in 2011 was approximately 22 million (Akhmedov, 2010: 152). Among ethnic groups, Arabs accounted for about 85%, Kurds were about 10%, the rest were accounted for by Turkomans, Armenians, people from the North Caucasus ("Circassians"), Syriacs, etc. Among confessional groups, Muslims make up 87%, of which the overwhelming number are Sunnis (more than 70%), whereas other Muslim and para-Muslim confessions are about 14–15%, among which Alawites predominate. Christian confessions. among which Orthodox and Jacobites predominate, make up about 10%, there are also Druze—about 3%.

Taking a look at these statistics, there is no doubt that the dominant position of the Sunni Arabs in the ethno-confessional picture of the country is clear, but at the same time the dominant position in politics, the economy and the military structure is occupied by a small group of Alawite Arabs. This suggests a quite logical conclusion that the protest movement must inevitably be led by the Sunni Arabs as representatives of the ethno-confessional majority, which, in fact, happened already at the first stages of the development of the political crisis in 2011. But then the situation was influenced by other factors, including the Kurdish one (see, e.g., Grinin et al., 2016).

In addition, by the beginning of the twenty-first century in this country, new profound factors had also manifested themselves, which were also pushing the Syrian society towards cardinal changes.

While remaining an ally of the Soviet Union for decades, Syria was a socialist oriented state that adopted the Soviet model of economic planning. The accumulation of financial resources was mainly due to external factors: economic and military support from the USSR, and financial support from the Arab oil exporting countries in the framework of the so-called "Arab solidarity" (which in just five years from 1975 to 1980 provided the country with an inflow of $ 4 billion) secured normal economic growth.

In those years, the Syrians developed a strong dependence on foreign capital, due to which, after the fall in oil prices (which led to a reduction in financial assistance within the framework of the "Arab solidarity") and the collapse of the USSR, the country was unprepared for independent restructuring of its economic model. Former Syrian President Hafez al-Assad was constantly looking for new external resources

[2] About the general causes of Arab Spring' revolutions see Chapter "The Arab Spring: Causes, Conditions, and Driving Forces" (Grinin & Korotayev, 2022) and Chapter "Introduction. Changing yet Persistent: Revolutions and Revolutionary Events" (Goldstone et al., 2022 in this book).

capable of ensuring economic growth, but his efforts did not bring tangible results. With the coming to power in 2000 of the young President Bashar al-Assad, the search for a new strategy intensified. The new economic policy envisaged, in particular, a decrease in the state's role in the regulation of the economy, the introduction of market principles, the rejection of many of the state's social obligations. As part of this course, government subsidies for bread, rice, corn and other food products were gradually canceled. The social situation deteriorated especially sharply after the cancellation in the early 2000s of fuel subsidies: the sharp rise in fuel prices led to a 4% drop in industrial production and a tangible decline in the standard of living of most Syrians, especially aggravated by the catastrophic drought.

The fact that in Syria (unlike other countries of the Arab Spring) before the onset of unrest a real decline in the standard of living of significant segments of the population could be observed, is evidenced by the following point: despite the rapid GDP growth rates observed in the country (as well as in all other Arab states) in the 2000s, Syria was the only country of the Arab Spring where, on the eve of its outbreak, there was a decrease in the average life expectancy of the population (in all the other Arab Spring countries, its steady growth was recorded in the same years) (see, e.g., Grinin et al., 2016).

The fact that the old political system did not correspond to the new economic realities became more and more obvious.

## 2 The Opposition

Those who took to the streets of Syria's cities in March 2011 demanding reforms and liberties were met with surprisingly severe repression, and so came to face the harsh dilemma of whether to halt their peaceful protests or to take up arms. The growing coercion and brutality of the government against the peaceful civilian population compelled many, especially the young, to enlist in the armed struggle (Lesch, 2013: 55–87). Once the Syrian uprising at the end of 2011 began to transform into an armed struggle, the position of the armed opposition, including Islamic militants, began solidifying.

At the same time those who took up arms soon enough became dependent on those who could actually supply the arms. Such assistance was made available at the cost of pledging loyalty to the Islamist resistance, manifested by the name of the squadron, and by special behavioural patterns (for instance, following Sharia) in the liberated territories (Akhmedov, 2018b: 49–62).

In a context of asymmetric warfare where the regime was using air strikes and artillery to bombard rebel neighbourhoods, and where the resistance was badly in need of additional arms and ammunition, suicide bombers became the only viable means of offsetting the government's far superior forces on the battlefield. Relying on this type of attack intensified the deployment of Jihadi brigades among the armed resistance, and led to their initial popularity in the liberated neighbourhoods (for more detail about Syrian armed opposition see Akhmedov, 2015: 52–57). Bashar Assad's

enlistment of Lebanese, Iraqi, and Iranian mercenaries, which was prompted by the high level of losses among the national military, as well as the lack of combat experience among many of his newly-recruited soldiers, legitimized the involvement of jihadists from other Arab countries in the eyes of some (Lister & Nelson, 2017).

An official report issued by the Free Syrian Army in January 2014 indicated that the losses suffered by government forces during the conflict amounted to some 65,000 soldiers (Akhmedov, 2014). It is necessary to note that overall, some 100,000 soldiers and officers had deserted as of February 2013. According to various appraisals, without the assistance of its allies, the regime would have suffered an overwhelming defeat by 2014. In order to remedy the situation, in 2013 the regime began training new armed troops based on militia formations (Bou Nassif, 2015), recruiting foreign mercenaries, and seeking active foreign support.[3]

Consequently, the National Democratic Forces (NDF), the Quwwat al-Nimr, and the Suqour al-Sham Brigade were formed during that period. Typically, the initiative behind the creation of the mentioned divisions belonged essentially to important Alawite businessmen and retired Syrian intelligence officers close to the regime. At the outset, these regiments were similar to private armies (though they were based on religious or ethnic principles) but reported to the central command. These factors lessened the efficiency of their military operations and their level of trust and support from the population. Nevertheless, these regiments carried out some successful operations against the armed opposition in various regions of the country. Towards the end of 2015, such formations comprised, according to various estimates, some 35,000–40,000 soldiers (Al-Masri, 2017). Still, it was only after the appearance of Russia's air force (RAF) that the situation began improving. In 2015, under the leadership of Russian and Iranian consultants, the regime began to create its fourth and fifth army corps, which integrated the above-mentioned units and coordinated their activity with air and artillery operations.

Notwithstanding those measures, by the fall of 2015 the number of Syrian government soldiers totaled no more than 100,000, while at the beginning of the conflict this figure was closer to 300,000. Most of these losses were not casualties, but rather soldiers who preferred to flee rather than fight to defend the Assad regime. It is not surprising that by October 2015, the Syrian regime controlled no more than 20% of the country's territory and could not endure without support from abroad.

Under such circumstances, Assad had to request assistance from foreign countries. As Assad's Alawite governing faction identified itself as a Shiite regime, they initially sought support from other Shiite militias. This assistance was essentially made up of Lebanese Hezbollah combat units, who contributed [according to various assessments (e.g., Pollak & Ghaddar, 2016)] some 10,000–14,000 soldiers, as well as Iraqi Shiite al-Abbas militarized brigades (several thousand soldiers) commanded by the elite Iranian Republican Guard Al-Quds, which was under the command of General

[3] After the July 2012 bombing (that killed four top security officials in Damascus) and the subsequent assault on Damascus, the regime started to slide. There was a true danger it might lose the capital, which would have amounted to its collapse (extracts from author's private talks by phone with unofficial Hezbollah representatives. Moscow-Lebanon, July, 2012).

Qasem Suleimani[4] (Akhmedov, 2014). According to sources from the Syrian armed opposition, the general was actually responsible for the defense of Damascus and its outskirts.[5] Data regarding the number of Iranian military counsellors and specialists fighting for Assad is rather contradictory and inaccurate. However, many experts consider that their overall number is no greater than 15,000 (Iran Focus, 2017).

In recent years, Iran created its own Syrian army, Jeysh Tahrir al-Sham, which numbered up to 5000 soldiers and essentially consisted of Shiite mercenaries from Iran and Afghanistan, some Arab countries, and a small number of Syrians. According to data from the Syrian opposition, there were some 60–62 Shiite militia combat formations operating in the country (Al-Nahhas, 2019; Iran Focus, 2017).

Typically, those opposing the regime in the Free Syrian Army (FSA) consisted of deserted soldiers and officers, militia detachments, and numbered no more than 30,000–35,000 soldiers. Yet they often lacked provision of arms and ammunition from their western allies (principally the United States, Great Britain, and France). This made it extremely difficult to confront even the regime's substantially weakened army, not to mention the Lebanese, Iranian, Iraqi and Afghan Shiite armed units. Indeed, the FSA would have had great difficulty withstanding Syrian government forces without the support of the so-called Islamist armed opposition,[6] which in 2013–2015 fluctuated between 70,000 and 80,000 fighters.[7]

Unlike the FSA and its civil nationalist nature, the Islamists did not require any additional support in funding or arms, both of which were supplied by Arab Gulf monarchies, primarily by Saudi Arabia. The lack of reaction by the international community was notable; it was powerless to counteract the harsh measures adopted by the Syrian regime. Limiting its provision of funds and weapons for fear they would fall into the hands of extreme Islamists, Western aid was both insufficient to combat Syrian government forces, and fractured the political opposition, as contention between the Islamist and nationalist opposition groups made them unable to rally the forces of armed resistance based on a common patriotic stance and political program.

Two particularities that rendered the Syrian conflict difficult to resolve were its internationalization and unprecedented duration. But even the internal conflict developed from a string of internal deep-seated processes that covertly matured over several years, and surfaced at a crucial point for the country and its citizens.

One crucial element in the makeup of the Syrian uprising was the traditional distinction between the country's urban and rural environments,[8] as well as the role of the uprising in the outlying regions (at least during its early stages). It is well-known that the provincial centers were the breeding grounds of the revolution. This can be

[4] Qasem Suleimani was killed during US airstrike in Baghdad in January 2020.

[5] Unpublished correspondence.

[6] For more about the special role of the *Salafiyyun* in the Syrian Uprising see Al-Hajj (2013).

[7] Unpublished correspondence.

[8] For more detail about this issue see Van Dusen (1972).

explained by the fact that the army and the security forces originally lost their influence among the population exactly in those centers. Also important was the sudden socio-economic deterioration among the population in the periphery due to several years of dry spells, as well as the crippling drought of 2010. Consequently, some 1 million bankrupted farmers and unemployed villagers began moving to Syria's major population centres right before the uprising.[9] In addition, the privatization policies adopted by the government in the mid-2000s to replace the welfare policies of "Arab socialism" engendered a sharp polarization among the population, and led to the impoverishment and marginalization of the masses in rural areas.

The regime's policies supporting the Islamic resistance in Palestine and Lebanon invigorated the religiously conservative atmosphere in these depressed rural areas. As a result, the population in these areas was the most receptive to radical initiatives. The role of moderate Islam began to fade, and the population began to perceive the government's secular policies and ideology in a negative light. This situation proved most fertile for the outbreak of Islamism, and the measures that were adopted by the government in response to the uprising only strengthened its appeal. Such an environment among the population served as the perfect matrix for the proliferation of jihadist ideas, whether they were bred locally or imported from abroad [see also Chapter "Two instances of Islamic 'revival': the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and the formation of the 'Islamic State' in Syria and Iraq in the 2010s" (Filin et al., 2021, in this volume)].

Representatives from this group of the population settled in the outskirts of Syria's major cities over several years and served as a catalyst for the Syrian uprising. The most radical representatives of this new urban periphery established their own *modus vivendi* and demanded the overthrow of the regime. The Syrian crisis brought some new social forces to the political stage and exposed an array of serious social contradictions, as well as clannishness and religious and ethnic conflicts that had been concealed and muted by the regime. The Syrian community began fragmenting in light of the escalation of the crisis, and in the process the overall pro-Islamic disposition in the country increased (see, Van Dam, 1981: 169; Wedeen, 2015: 272).

As a result, the Syrian nationalist movement, though inspired by the Arab Spring,[10] took on some radical religious traits, and its secular composition practically vanished. Many social groups at the forefront of the armed struggle began perceiving the governing regime as collaborating with Iran, Israel, and other influential neighboring powers, with the goal of subjecting and subordinating Syria to foreign dominance. This position became the motivation behind the struggle to overthrow the Assad regime.

[9] The data was received by the author during personal discussions with various representatives from the Syrian opposition from 2011 to 2017.

[10] See Chapter "The Arab Spring: Causes, Conditions, and Driving Forces" (Grinin & Korotayev, 2022), Chapter "The Arab Spring. A Quantitative Analysis" (Korotayev et al., 2022), and Chapter "Introduction. Changing yet Persistent: Revolutions and Revolutionary Events" (Goldstone et al., 2022) in the present monograph for the discussion of general preconditions, factors, and driving forces of this major revolutionary wave of the twenty-first century.

In 2012, according to various assessments, there were some 1200 armed Islamist units in Syria, most with a few dozen to a few hundred fighters—some moderate, others radical (Lund, 2013: 152; Raialyoum, 2016). By the end of 2016, the number of units had shrunk substantially. Some were totally annihilated in combat, while others dissolved on their own and ceased to exist as independent combat units. Others were assimilated by greater forces such as the Islamic State, Jaysh al-Islam, Jaysh Fatḥ al-Sham, Ahrar al-Sham, Suqur al-Sham, Feilaq al-Sham, the FSA, and others. New regiments surfaced in early 2015–2016, which essentially comprised former joint military headquarters and units, including Jaysh al-Nasr (a division of the Free Syrian Army), which consists of al-Jabhah al-Shamiyyah, Jaysh al-Izza, the Falcons of al-Ghab, and 13 more units, as well as the New Syrian Army (essentially based on Kurdish resistance units), and others.

Due to the brittle situation on the Syrian front and the fast-changing political discourse regarding the country, it was rather difficult to determine the exact number of armed units representing the Syrian opposition. However, most experts believed that there were some 100–120 active armed opposition units in Syria (including ISIS and al-Nusra) that comprised no less than 70,000 professional and heavily armed soldiers (Itani, 2014: 3–5; Raialyoum, 2016). Notwithstanding the opposition's transformation of its social matrix, ideological concept, political orientation, and major goals and challenges, it must be noted that it has practically remained unaffected with regard to its key parameters from the time of its formation in the first half of 2012; that is, it has remained largely Sunni, strongly Islamist, and united mainly in its insistence on removing Assad from power (Al-Masri, 2017).

The backbone of many of the Islamic armed opposition units consists of Salafis, and a good part of them remain faithful (to varying degrees) to the jihadist ideology. The most evident jihadist group is Jabhat al-Nusra. Most of these formations supported the creation of an Islamic State based on Sharia law in Syria.

Such an approach complicated the position that these movements and units adopted in their relationship with the foreign Syrian opposition. Most of these factions, including those that cooperated with the FSA, experienced a certain lack of confidence with regard to the Syrian opposition that was actually operating abroad, most of which were more secular nationalist in their outlook. Indeed, any attempt by the opposition from abroad to impose its influence was greeted with suspicion. This circumstance complicated the opposition's mutual relationships with the FSA and the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. Efforts by Western powers to assemble and unify leaders of the external and internal opposition to Assad invariably ended in discord and failure.

The Islamist component of the Syrian uprising has undergone a major transformation in recent years, especially with regard to the unique makeup of the Syrian revolution. The near complete territorial defeat of ISIS, and the disrepute its tactics produced, provided the possibility that support for the Islamist groups and their agenda might fade away with the cessation of hostilities and the country's return to peace; this cannot be excluded since much of the motivation for supporting Jihadists

is the civil war.[11] Even though at present moderate Islam in Syria has almost disappeared, we should not exclude that in the event of a peace settlement, and the implementation of certain specific political prerequisites, moderate Islam may actually have a positive impact on the Syrian community and supplement the creation of a new social ideology.

## 3 Foreign Intervention

Following the failure of the Geneva I Conference on Syria (June 2012), as well as Geneva II (January 2014), and Geneva III (February–March 2016), an interesting trend appeared among the Syrian conflict's major foreign armed players. This trend was expressed by a shift in priorities regarding relations with Assad and the armed Islamist opposition in the context of mutual efforts towards the inception of a road map for Syrian reconciliation. This primarily regards the pivotal shift by the US and several of its major allies in Western Europe, and the Middle East. Inspired by the military achievements and the growing political influence of the armed Islamists in Syria, the West and certain allies leaned towards prioritizing the liquidation of Syria's militant Islamists, followed by Assad's overthrow.

At the same time, other nations stepped up their support for the regime. A salient example is Iran, which played a major role in preserving the current Syrian regime. In January 2012, the Central Bank of the Islamic Republic Iran provided Syria with a multi-billion-dollar credit line, which allowed it to pay the salaries of its soldiers. Iran also provided Syria with several thousand soldiers from the Lebanese Hezbollah, as well as counsellors and specialists from the elite al-Quds brigades, and Shiite militias from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Iran's interest in Syria has a long history. Iran always considered Damascus to be a vital component in the Tehran-Baghdad-Damascus-Beirut-Gaza axis of resistance aiming to restrain Israel's influence and spread its own authority in the region by supporting Shiite communities in a number of Arab countries in the region.

Iran's authority in Syria increased substantially when Bashar al-Assad assumed Syria's presidency in June 2000, as well as during his subsequent major reforms to Syria's military structures from 2004–2005. The pinnacle of Iran's infiltration in Syria was reached in 2007–2009. It was exactly during this period that Iran signed a series of profitable financial contracts with the new Syrian administration, as well as an agreement on military cooperation. This allowed Iran to infiltrate practically all of Syria's economic and state institutions and to influence the disposition and views of the Syrian ruling elite.

[11] On ISIS see Chapter "Two instances of Islamic "revival": the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and the formation of the 'Islamic State' in Syria and Iraq in the 2010s" (Filin et al., 2021, in this volume).

With the expansion of Syria's armed resistance, its subsequent descent into civil war, and the internationalization of its armed conflict, Iran perceived a threat to its own interests and intensified its military presence by recruiting al-Quds, the Shiite militia, and most of all, the Lebanese Hezbollah. Tehran also had plans to send to Syria some 100,000 soldiers from the Basij brigades and regular military units from the Iranian armed forces. This leads us to believe that Iran could perceive Syria as a trump card in a wider geopolitical game. At the same time, however, we should not overlook Iran's interests in Syria, which Tehran has considered a major foothold for the expansion of its authority in the region.[12]

The conflict in Syria and its surroundings changed radically with the involvement of Russia's Aerospace Forces (RAF). In less than a year, the territory under Assad's control grew to 35–40% of the country's territory.[13] Moscow became a key partner in the Syrian conflict, a situation that the US, Europe, Turkey, Israel and neighbouring countries have been forced to acknowledge.

Notwithstanding the traditionally friendly relations between Moscow and Tehran, the involvement of Russia's military forces in Syria and Moscow's growing authority in the development of a new international relations framework has been justifiably perceived with some apprehension by Iran and Turkey.

Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia believe that their interests in both Syria and the Middle East in general are threatened by Moscow's course of action when it comes to preserving Syria's territorial sovereignty, key Syrian state institutions, and its ceasefire. This also applies to Russia's insistence on the gradual withdrawal of all foreign armed troops from Syria in order to provide the Syrian population with the possibility to fashion their own future in a peaceful environment under a new transitional government.

The "liberation" of Aleppo—the stronghold of Syria's armed opposition—was the result of Russia's armed involvement in the Syrian conflict from the fall of 2015. This was essential for a December 2016 draft agreement between Russia, Turkey, and a substantial part of the detachments that comprise Syria's opposition (some 60,000 armed soldiers). The essence of these agreements consisted of designing a plan to reach a peaceful Syrian solution. Subsequent meetings in Astana in 2017 included the governments of Syria and Iran (Issaev et al., 2018).

However, the primary contribution for the design of a number of mechanisms guaranteeing the ceasefire and a peaceful resolution was made through the contact of Russia's military officers with the Syrian armed opposition. This resulted in the signature of critical agreements establishing the willingness of certain troops (between 50,000 and 60,000 soldiers) to support the Russia-Turkey agreement conditional on some specific terms regarding a ceasefire in Syria and the implementation of a political settlement through the creation of a transitional government that would

[12] For more detail about the role of Iran see Clawson (2018).

[13] The mentioned data was substantiated during the author's personal discussions with various representatives of the Syrian opposition in February–March 2017.

include the participation of the political opposition. Representatives of nine units of the armed opposition joined the meeting in Astana, while some four additional units assumed a wait-and-see attitude and sent their observers to the conference. The delegation from the Islamic armed opposition was headed by one of its leaders (Jaysh al-Islam, Ahrar al-Sham), Mohammed Alloush. However, the draft documents from the meeting were certainly far from ideal. Notably, the ceasefire zone did not cover the entirety of Syria's districts. Further, the agreement did not include the major militant squadrons prohibited in Russia (Islamic State and al-Nusra). Additionally, the parties must still identify who will verify the ceasefire and by which methods, as well as determine which areas fall under whose responsibility in the said process, their respective authorities and roles, and so on. The recognized skepticism that prevails among the armed opposition with regard to the intentions of the ruling regime and Iran must also be surmounted.

Notwithstanding the above, the consistent efforts of Moscow, Ankara, and Tehran, as well as the succession of conferences organized in Astana—Nur-Sultan, have all fostered a positive basis for pursuing dialogue that may lead to a Syrian reconciliation within a larger international format.

From the end of 2017 to the beginning of 2019, the situation in the armed confrontations in Syria and the areas around it has changed dramatically. The ongoing hostilities were notable for the unpredictability of the finale and could have pushed a new process in the development of the Syrian crisis.

The complexity of the situation was determined, in our opinion, by a number of important and multi-level circumstances.

First, the Syrian conflict has been developing since 2017 according to a different paradigm. Conventionally, it can be designated as the "post-terrorist" stage in the Syrian uprising. After the decisive victory over terrorism in the face of ISIS, a new situation began to emerge in the country. It definitely influenced the mindset of the main participants in the conflict and determined their behavioral stereotype.

It is noteworthy that the victory over ISIS enhanced the merit of the Russian military, which was able to resolve this issue. However, there are still the "notorious" al-Nusra and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. At the same time, in a number of key areas of the country—the suburbs of Idlib and Aleppo—this terrorist structure was gradually losing its former leading position and social base of support. The Turkish military could finally decide its fate, which, in pursuance of the Astana agreements, should put a final end to these terrorist structures.

Another question was how soon this could happen? Since, according to some sources, after a series of defeats, the Tahrir al-Sham detachments had to find refuge in northern Syria in the Syrian-Turkish border areas. It cannot be excluded that they could still be used by Turkey, the United States and other external actors in a major political game on the Syrian conflict field.

But in general, the "post-terrorist" stage of the Syrian uprising has already been fixed. This circumstance forced both local and a number of regional parties to the conflict to take a new approach to the Syrian crisis and to consider the additional parameters of its political settlement (Akhmedov, 2019c).

For a part of the Syrian opposition, the new stage marked a return to the original goals of the Syrian uprising. This is a struggle with the unrighteous (from their point of view) regime. In addition, the Syrian authorities themselves gave them many different reasons for accusations of excessive violence.

On the other hand, after the victory over ISIS, Russia and the United States have become not so much allies in the fight against terrorism as rivals in the struggle for Syria.

The US strategy on Syria has changed, and the appetites of the American administration have increased. The essence of the new US strategy is focused on limiting the extent of Moscow's influence in Syria and not allowing it to take control of new strategically important areas of the country, diminishing Russia's role as an impartial arbiter in Geneva and thus depriving it of the ability to influence the key political decisions on Syria. Practical confirmations of the new US strategy on Syria were the actions of the American military in Syria since the beginning of 2018 in relation to the FSA and the Russian military. At the same time, Moscow was subjected to unprecedented criticism and pressure from US allies in the EU and NATO.

Despite the fact that Ankara was trying to carefully carry out the duties assigned to it, it often has had to maneuver between the United States, Russia and Iran in order to comply with the agreements reached earlier with these countries (Akhmedov, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). The fact that the guarantors of the "tripartite security agreement" ("de-escalation zones") ultimately failed to take advantage of the chance presented to them on legal grounds to wholly eliminate the Syrian opposition should not be ignored.

Paradoxically, in fact, some detachments of the armed opposition managed to consolidate their positions in a number of Syrian regions, especially those who were in the area of Turkish responsibility. It is known that Ankara actively recruited the FSA detachments in its Operation Euphrates Shield, and while threatening to disrupt the agreements, Turkey sought to expand its zone of influence further into northern Syria, occupying strategically important areas like Afrin, in the provinces of Idlib where the detachments of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and Tahrir Suriya were based.[14]

In this regard, it was impossible to clearly dismiss the likelihood of a large-scale conflict that might start in the Daraa region during the struggle for southern Syria, and cover other areas of the country and neighbouring states.

Thus, according to some sources, since the beginning of the Syrian uprising, Israel has inflicted over 80 air and land strikes on Syrian territory.[15] Operation "Sky Wars" in February 2018, in which the Air Force of Israel attacked Iranian drone bases in Syria and the air defense forces of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA), only confirmed all the danger and unpredictability of the situation.

The successes of the SAA in Eastern Ghouta and the plans for the advancement of government troops to the south did not leave the opposition the choice to strike first,

[14] For more detail on the Islamist military opposition in Syria see Akhmedov (2019a).

[15] For more detail about Syrian-Israeli military balance see Cordesman (2000).

in order to try to preserve the balance of forces (Akhmedov, 2018c; Lund, 2016). In this case, US interests could be affected at their base at al-Tanf. In the spring of 2018, the Pentagon dispatched an additional 200 combat personnel to the area. The United States under President Trump actually increased its military presence in Syria. The US military, one way or another, controlled 10 regions of Syria, and was deployed at 2 Air Force bases and 8 strongholds, which were formally under the control of order protection units and were well represented in areas east and northeast of the Euphrates. At the same time, the United States controlled up to 80% of Syrian oil (Akhmedov, 2018b: 148).

If Moscow succeeded in establishing control over the Syrian military, the Russian Federation would in fact have carried out a transitional period, which remained only to be formalized by political agreements at the international level. Since, regardless of who will rule Syria tomorrow, the real mechanism of power will remain in the hands of the Syrian army and special services, with strong positions there Moscow would be able to influence the adoption of any political decision important to it at any level of the Syrian power pyramid. Therefore, developing new security parameters within which Moscow could legally establish its primacy in Syria is currently Russia's chief focus (for more about allegedly Russia-initiated massive reshuffles in the Syrian secret services and army see Al-Nahhas, 2019).

Indeed, today much depends on how Russia, Turkey, Iran, the United States and Israel will develop agreements on the security system in Syria. As is known, this is happening against the background of the aggravation of the situation in the country, which further complicates the task.

After the announcement by US President Trump, on December 19, 2018, of his intention to withdraw American troops from Syria, the situation in the country changed. A so-called "power vacuum" was being created, which could be filled with various kinds of jihadist, extremist and takfirist organizations. This circumstance, of course, cannot suit the United States and its coalition allies. Today, the US military is trying, under the pretext of fighting Islamist terrorism, to force its allies to play a more active role as part of the military presence in the Middle East. They see this plan as a kind of compromise between America's desire to withdraw troops from as many local conflict zones as possible, and America's aspirations to maintain stability with only a minimal presence there. While the US is trying to carry out this maneuver, the situation in Syria itself remains difficult and the prospect of resolving the crisis is very vague.

## 4 The Syrian Challenge: Instability Without End?

The weakness of the Assad regime, the many divisions among the opposition, and the multi-sided foreign interventions noted above further complicate the situation in the country, and postpone the implementation of the agreements reached earlier in Astana and Sochi on a peaceful transition in Syria.

The acute issues of organizing the transition period and the formation of state institutions with new content should of course be decided by the Syrians themselves through a wide-ranging social contract, under which the parties would be able to make very serious compromises and take on serious warranty obligations. A possible outcome of this transition would be the adoption of a new constitution and the creation of a constituent assembly that will elect representatives to the transitional authorities.

However, it should be borne in mind that the 10-year-old Syrian crisis seriously deformed the Syrian society, including changing the confessional balance in Syria's population, which undoubtedly will affect the course of future political processes in the country.

The peculiarity of the Syrian conflict and the complexity of its resolution is rooted not only in its unprecedented duration compared with the uprisings in other Arab countries, but in the deep and varied divisions that have arisen in Syrian society. Moreover, the geostrategic position of Syria, which forms a crucial wedge in the Eastern Mediterranean, bordering Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Israel and housing Russia's only Mediterranean naval base, invites foreign meddling.

The Syrian crisis brought new social forces to the political foreground, exposing the entire spectrum of acute social contradictions and clan, confessional, ethnic conflicts that had been cleverly disguised and muffled by the regime of Hafez al-Assad. A previously outwardly unified Syrian society began to rapidly fracture in the conditions of aggravating crisis, creating openings for seriously radicalizing Islamist sentiments in the country and the Middle East region as a whole.

On the eve of the revolution, Syrian society was already divided along confessional and ethnic lines. It consisted of four major religious and ethnic groups—Sunni Arabs, Alawites,[16] Kurds, and Christians. The confessional and ethnic composition was as follows: 65% were Sunni Arabs; 15% were Kurds (mostly Sunni); 10% were Alawites, 5% were Christians, 3% were Druze and other local religions, 1% were Ismaili Shiites, and just under 1% were Twelver Shiites. From this point of view, Syria was not very different from neighboring Lebanon, where the principle of "political confessionalism" was at the heart of the country's governance (for more about the evolution of the confessional map of Syria see Akhmedov, 2018a).

The regime's underestimation of the true confessional and ethnic situation in the country, an error also repeated by foreign players, against the background of a worsening economic situation, played a fatal role in the Syrian events and their transformation into a deeply divisive religious and ethnic armed conflict.

The conflict also reshaped Syria's demography. By the spring of 2017, from 7 to 9 million people had moved outside the country. About 6 million people were in a state of constant internal migration. The total population of Syria has decreased to 16 million people. The above data only reflect the general trend and require more precise verification. At this time, the Syrian authorities have ceased to publish detailed statistical data on the composition and number of its population (Balanche, 2014: 29; Phillips, 2015: 57).

[16] For more about the role of Alawites in Syria see Faksh (1984).

At the same time, the Syrian authorities transferred part of the statistical materials to the UN information structure (the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs). In turn, the Syrian opposition created a special body in Turkey—the Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU)—where it sent its data on the state of the local population and refugees. There were also organizations such as Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, and other human rights groups, which kept the opposition's statistics and used their sources. This situation made it difficult to obtain more or less objective data on the real situation of the local population and its indicators.

One thing that is undoubtedly clear is that the war that has been going on for nine years has already led to serious changes in the confessional map of Syria. The transformation of the religious and ethnic composition of Syria was driven by high mortality, both among the military and civil population, large-scale emigration, and the internal displacement of the population. As the Sunni Arab population was most impacted by emigration, a number of minorities were able to increase their population share in both absolute and relative terms.

Of the total number of Syrian emigrants by 2017, 80% (about 5.5 million people) were Sunni Arabs. In addition, the most intense fighting was conducted in the territory where Sunni Arabs traditionally lived, along the heavily populated spine of the country from Damascus to Aleppo. The civil war also had a very negative impact on the Syrian Christians, possibly because, unlike the Alawites and the Druze, they did not have their own territorial enclave separate from most of the fighting.

By the end of 2017, the total share of Christians who had left the country was about 10%. Roughly the same fraction of the Kurdish population also left Syria in 2015. They mostly found refuge in Iraqi Kurdistan. Alawites,[17] Druze, Ismailis and Shi'a left the country least of all.

At the end of 2017, 80% of the territory was under the control of Assad's government. About 75% of the total population of Syria lived there. The territories occupied by the armed forces of the Syrian resistance (the north-west of the country, the southern regions, etc.) were not attractive and did not serve to draw the population, who could not feel safe there due to the constantly ongoing hostilities.

It is curious that in the zones of control of the Syrian authorities, only 42% of the population were Sunni Arab. This was because the Alawite and Druz regions largely retained their populations, and Kurds seeking to flee ISIS entered the areas of government control. At the same time, in the areas occupied by the armed opposition, Sunni-Arabs constituted 87% of the population.

In this regard, when formulating the principles of a Syrian settlement, it is desirable to take into account the nature of the transformation of the confessional and ethnic map of Syria. Before the revolution, President Assad's Alawite minority group held a dominant position, despite being only 10% of the population, while 80% of the population was Sunni (Arabs and Kurds). The civil war, however, has intensified Sunni extremism and Kurdish nationalism. This makes any government settlement difficult

[17] See Footnote 16.

that does not change the balance of power among Syria's ethnic and confessional groups.

In addition, any power in Syria during the transitional period and in the near future will inevitably be faced with the question of restoring the country's economy, which has been virtually destroyed as a result of civil war and foreign intervention in the Syrian conflict.

By 2017, a single economy had ceased to exist in Syria. As a result of the ongoing fighting, more than 6 million Syrians in economically active age groups had emigrated from the country and left the production cycle of the Syrian economy. Oil production almost stopped, gas production decreased, thousands of factories were destroyed, agriculture and the transport system were severely damaged, tourism stopped completely, exports stopped, imports decreased, and GDP fell to less than a quarter of 2010 GDP.

As a result, the restoration of the Syrian economy, relying on its own resources, may turn out to be a practically insoluble task, which for many years will leave Syria at risk of becoming a failed state with a constantly growing external debt.

The main condition for the successful start of the recovery process is of course the cessation of hostilities and the achievement of a stable and lasting peace in the country. This will not only require the assent of all the various Syrian opposition forces, but also for all the foreign armed forces in the country to depart or agree to peace terms.

Still, it cannot be ruled out that even if peace is established, a more inclusive regime is formed, and economic recovery begins, Syria will see in the future a series of military coups and revolutions, as there is nothing worse than unsolved problems aggravated by the years of war and the bitterness of the losses that affected every Syrian family. The Syrians themselves will have to heal these wounds, even as they rebuild their country.

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