A Protracted Civil War in Syria
Defies All Concerted Efforts to End It

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Abstract: The paper critically analyzes the reasons for the protraction and intractability of the Syrian civil war despite several concerted efforts to resolve it. The analysis leads to identifying seven theories that proffer different explanations each of which addresses an aspect of the problem. The explanations are that Syria's civil war is prolonged and intractable due to the institutional weakness of the United Nations and the infighting in the United Nations Security Council; the sectarianization of the civil war by Islamist extremist rebel groups; the Syrian opposition's deployment of violent approach instead of sticking to non-violent approach; the Syrian rebels' abundant profits from Syria's illicit economy; the West's reluctance to use military action against the Syrian government because such action will be unprofitable; internal factors which include the peculiar nature of the dynamics of the civil war and the internal politics and institutional power structure of the major internal players in the war; and external factors like the obstructive behaviour and activities of external players, especially great powers. While these theory-based explanations are important, the paper concludes that the last account is most likely the truest reason why the Syrian civil war continues up to now in its eighth year.

Keywords: Bashar al-Assad; Syria, Syrian civil war; Syrian opposition; Syrian government

1. Introduction

There is no doubt that the Syrian civil war is protracted and intractable: it continues beyond the expectation of the majority of people and has so far defied all diplomatic efforts to end it. This situation has raised the question, "why is the Syrian civil war protracted and intractable despite concerted efforts to end it?" The question has elicited seven different theory-based explanations which, interestingly, provide diverse academic perspectives on one subject-matter.

The first scholarly explanation based on institutionalism argues that the protraction and intractability of the Syrian civil war is caused by the failure of the United Nations (UN) and the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to intervene in Syria. This disappointing fact is the consequence of the inability of the UNSC, especially its five permanent members, to present a united and cohesive approach to resolve the civil war, and the reason for this is because they are engaged in the

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rat race of pursuing conflicting selfish interests instead of helping the Syrian people altruistically. The second explanation anchored on relative deprivation theory states that the sectarianization of the civil war by desperate Islamist extremist rebel groups is responsible for the prolongation and difficulty in resolving the war because these groups of rebels have both entrenched ideology and the resourcefulness for re-emergence and remobilization that make them difficult to defeat.

Another explanation founded on non-violence theory is that the substitution of violent approach for non-violent approach by the Syrian opposition for the belief that violent approach is the proper opposition response to the Syrian government's brutality ended up protracting the civil war and making it intractable. The fourth explanation rooted in economic theory of conflict holds that the Syrian rebels' illicit economy makes them undaunted and resilient and, consequently, prolongs the civil war and makes it difficult to end. The fifth based on classical deterrence theory contends that the Syrian civil war is prolonged and intractable because Russia's strong military presence in Syria, as well as other secondary factors, deters the West from launching a military campaign against the Syrian government to stop the civil war. The sixth explanation built upon structural conflict theory argues that the intricate dynamics of the civil war itself and the internal politics and institutional power structure of both the Syrian government and the Syrian opposition favour the Syrian government while, at the same time, they divide the opposition into pockets of groups, and this makes them unable to defeat the government, on the one hand, and difficult to be defeated completely by the government, on the other hand. Consequently, the civil war is protracted and intractable. The seventh explanation founded on national role theory blames the protraction and intractability of the Syrian civil war on external players who are pursuing conflicting and selfish national interests in Syria and have refused to set aside their differences and interests in order to help the Syrian people unselfishly.

In the final analysis, the paper takes the position that the most compelling theory-based explanation for the protraction and intractability of the Syrian civil war is the last explanation which, based on national role theory, holds strongly that the activities of external players, especially Russia and the United States, in Syria, which they consider as expected national role in the civil war albeit pursuing selfish interests, constitute the greatest reason why the war is prolonged and difficult to stop. This is because the great power external players possess all it takes to create the conditions that will ultimately compel both the Syrian government and the Syrian rebels to stop fighting even if they would have chosen to continue to fight.

2. The United Nations is Hindered from Ending the Syrian Civil War

Institutionalism is a reference point in the attempt to answer the question of why the Syrian civil war is protracted and intractable. The theory argues that the structure of power and the dynamics of an institution impact on how the institution performs its functions as well as on the performance outputs and outcomes of the institution. Here, this theory refers to the discouraging activities and behaviour of the UN and the UNSC towards the Syrian civil war. Institutional perspectives or theories "focus on the [roles,] rules and structures of institutions and show that these established routines or patterns have an impact on outcomes" (Baglione, 2016, p. 64). The UNSC is giving a cosmetic treatment to the Syrian conflict, as seen in the resolution to dismantle Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles which was not effectively and comprehensively implemented, and which was not intended to end the civil war. The Council has failed alongside other actors, such as the United States and Russia, to address the core problems of the civil war, which surround the Bashar al-Assad government (Güney, 2013). Whilst the existence of ISIS constitutes a huge impediment to efforts to resolve the conflict peacefully, the UN has failed to stop the conflict. The behaviour of powerful external players hinders the UN from successfully negotiating a settlement of the conflict. Since the failure of the Geneva III Conference on Syria, held at the behest of the UN, the UN's role in trying to resolve the Syrian civil war has been reduced to merely brokering short-lived truces (Ibrahim, 2017).

The protraction and intractability of the Syrian armed conflict is largely due to the exploitation of veto power by the five permanent members of the UNSC. The UN has the responsibility of promoting world peace and security, but this function is performed through the UNSC. However, due to the conservative and undemocratic pattern of organizing power in the UNSC, which confers veto power on five permanent members of the Council by virtue of Article 27 of Chapter V of the UN Charter, it is difficult for the Council to agree on a resolution to the Syrian conflict because each of the permanent members uses veto power selfishly rather than altruistically for Syrians. The failure of the UNSC to resolve the Syrian conflict or, at least, to sustain negotiated ceasefires underlines the great power politics among its five permanent members— Britain, France and the United States versus China and Russia. These permanent members of the UNSC are frustrating the UN from resolving the armed conflict, by using veto power arbitrarily to seek to push or protect some egoistic interests. Hence, diplomatic initiatives sponsored by the UN to end the civil war, such as the Kofi Annan's, Lakhdar Brahimi's and Staffan de Mistura's peace plans, are abortive because of the reckless use of veto power by the countries that wield it (Önügören & Tankr, 2018).

Similarly, the chances of attaining peaceful resolution of the civil war has been impeded due to the futile efforts of the UN to provide a negotiated peaceful settlement between the Syrian government and the Syrian opposition through its Geneva Peace Talks held under the auspices of UN-Arab League Joint Envoy, Kofi

Annan. The futility of the UN's efforts is the consequence of the adverse competition among various internal and external players to make more territorial gains over the others so as to be in a better position during negotiation, instead of seeking a popular solution to the conflict. This has given rise to numerous rebel groups and an adamant Syrian government. While the UN failed to reach a common agreement on which groups of the Syrian opposition to invite to the Geneva Peace Talks, some opposition groups have been prohibited from participation amidst rift between Syrian rebels fighting at home and the exiled Syrian opposition figures that lack full control over the rebels at home (Collin, 2018). The UN's effort to reconcile the internal parties to the armed conflict and end the war through a negotiated agreement has been futile because members of the international community argue over choices of delegates to attend peace talks (Habets, 2016).

In as much as the West is reluctant to use military action in Syria despite calling for external military intervention against the Syrian government in order to end Syria's civil war, they blame Russia and China as the obstacle to the resolution of the war for vetoing Western diplomatic efforts to get the UNSC to approve external military intervention against the Syrian government, which the West sees as the only way to implement the multilaterally agreed peace plan proposed by the UN-Arab League Joint Envoy to Syria, Kofi Annan. Hence, the anti-Western activities of Russia and China in the UNSC hinder the Council from using the doctrine of "Responsibility to Protect" to sanction external military intervention against the Syrian government in order to end the armed conflict in Syria. Particularly, Russia is the one accused of preventing the UNSC from intervening in Syria militarily to end the country's civil war, because it tenaciously objects to the enforcement of the UN principle of "Responsibility to Protect" in Syria and only gets China to support its position (Zifcak, 2012). While Russia and China also support the peace plan for Syria, they are both opposed to the use of external military force to implement it ("Russia ready to seek consensus", 2012; Lesch, 2012; Nuruzzaman, 2013). Besides the Geneva Peace Talks, the UN-sponsored peace talks held in Vienna failed to yield any significant results. Also, Russia's and China's anti-Western diplomacy and the Syrian government's continued military offensive and rejection of dialogue with the Syrian opposition in certain talks contribute to the incapacity of the UN to help Syria with a solution to its civil war ("The UN in Syria", 2018). Generally, the failure of world powers, not just only the five permanent members of the UNSC, to end the disagreement over which group(s) or party(ies) to hold accountable for the sufferings caused by the Syrian civil war and over how to resolve the war, also contributes to the UNSC's inability to impose sanctions and order external military intervention against the Syrian government (Khan, 2012). In addition to other circumstances, these factors pose a serious challenge to the UN and defy its efforts to help Syria to end its long civil war.

3. Sectarianism Makes the Syrian Civil War Protracted

When the Syrian civil war began on 28 July 2011, it had no sectarian colouration; almost all ordinary Syrians jointly protested against the Syrian government. However, the eventual sectarianization of the civil war can be explained by relative deprivation theory. Relative deprivation theory, a social psychological construct relevant to the study of politically significant conflict, is attributed first to Stouffer, Suchman, DeVinney, Star and Williams (1949) who coined and utilized the relative deprivation concept in surveys of American soldiers during World War II in which he discovered that members of the US Army Air Corps felt relatively deprived due to frustration over problems with promotion in comparison to the US Military Police, even though they enjoyed a faster rate of promotion than the military police. After him, other scholars contributed to the development of the theory: Merton (1957) and Merton and Kitt (1950) applied it to explain reference group theory, while Runciman (1966) expanded it by introducing and distinguishing between individual/egoistic relative deprivation and group/fraternal relative deprivation (Smith & Pettigrew, 2015). Since then, several scholars have used the theory as a broad framework to explain the causes of social conflicts so that the theory connects with frustration-aggression theory, grievance theory, social comparison theory, equity theory, causal attribution theory, etc which also explain different kinds of social conflicts.

The theory, which was introduced into political science by Gurr (1970), emphasizes the role of perception of economic inequality in building the consciousness of relative deprivation within an identity group or a section of people in a larger social setting. Relative deprivation theory, especially the fraternal strand of it, argues that when people or a group of people within a larger group or community experience(s) a gap or disparity between what they think they deserve and what they actually get and are able to connect this fact to a real or perceived deprivation or denial of their right to enjoy values that are essential to society and humanity—such as power, money, employment, freedoms/rights, justice, equality, and other vital socio-economic, civil and political values—especially when such values are largely distributed through the politics of authoritative determination of who gets what, when and how, whereas other people or another group of people within the same community enjoy(s) such values and are, therefore, better-off politically, socially and/or economically, such people or group of people are/is usually given to organizing or joining social movements dedicated to cause the government to provide the values of which they feel or are actually deprived. In extreme cases, relative deprivation has been implicated as a driver of socio-political disorder such as insurrection, militancy and terrorism, as well as outright conflicts such as insurgency or civil war where the relatively deprived group decides to overthrow their government believed to be the source of their deprivation and replace it with another one that will be favourable to them.

Relative deprivation theory is viable for explaining identity-based conflicts in which a section of society is marginalized politically and economically because of their identity, whether religious, ethnocultural, ideological or political, by a government dominated by an opposing identity group. In the long run, the likely consequences are frustration, pent-up grievances, demonstrations and possible aggression against the government. This theory helps to account for the reason the Syrian civil war has assumed a sectarian dimension and become protracted and intractable. Syria is an Islamic nation and, like other Islamic countries, has two dominant Islamic denominations: Sunni Islam and Shia Islam each of which has beliefs that differ greatly from those of the other. Sunni Muslims who constitute the majority of Syrians suffer from an entrenched, informal, systematic political marginalization and deprivation perpetuated by the Alawite-Shiite dominated national government that has held power for many decades, where Syrian Shiite Muslims comprise a minority. It is, therefore, logical to see that the Syrian civil war —which developed from a Sunni Muslim dominated nation-wide mass protests against an Alawite-Shiite dominated national government with whom Sunni groups such as the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood had often militantly struggled for power in the past—revived the old Sunni acrimony, frustration and pent-up grievances against the Bashar al-Assad government and, thus, easily took a sectarian dimension in which Syrians identified as Sunnis take the civil war to be the final opportunity to end Shiite strong hold over Syria, while Syrian Shiite Muslims and other non-Muslim minor identity groups that benefit from the Assad government or sympathize with Syrian Shiites that are also a minority see the war as a challenge to defend their privileged position, on the other hand.

Consequently, the sectarian nature of the Syrian civil war has created a conflict situation that has become volatile, convoluted and unpredictable so that concerted efforts to resolve it are futile. In the light of this, it has been observed that the civil war has become rift with several sectarian clashes between Sunni and Shiite, including Alawite, Muslims. The sectarianization of the civil war has resulted in an angry Sunni-Shiite vendetta, which has triggered sectarian identity-based massacres across Syria in the midst of which many Sunni Islamist rebel groups such as ISIS and al-Nusra Front gained ascendency over the Free Syrian Army (FSA) which gradually declined. In this situation, a union of Salafist groups has emerged dominant and strong. ISIS and several other rebel groups have strong control over vast territories where they govern in effect. ISIS's extreme violence heightens the chaos and ferociousness of the civil war and makes the West frantic (Ibrahim, 2017). Another reason the Syrian civil war has turned seriously sectarian is because while the international community failed to pressure Bashar al-Assad into submission, several members of the community have provided immense support to Sunni Syrian rebels based on sectarian consideration. In the sectarian complication of the war, Sunni Muslims still believe that massacring confessional minorities is instrumental in ousting the government and forming a confessional majority government, while the minorities continue to fight against Sunnis, fearing

marginalization and harsher vendetta under a Sunni Syrian government. These negative extremes of contrary convictions defeat the hopes of a peaceful solution to the conflict. Without resolution of these contradictions, the Syrian civil war tends to be a frozen war (Outzen, 2014).

Due to the Sunni-Shia sectarian nature of Syrian society, the old struggle between the two sects and the old grievances of Sunni Muslim majority against the advantaged Shia and Alawite Muslim minorities who dominate the Bashar al-Assad government, the Syrian armed conflict rapidly took the form of a Sunni-Shia sectarian civil war which attracted the direct and indirect interventions of regional State and non-State actors along the same sectarian lines. The sectarian nature of the war has resonated once again the bitter regional rivalry chiefly between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran which are supporting the Syrian opposition and the Syrian government respectively alongside pursuing their conflicting geostrategic interests. Iran has enormous regional, anti-Western and geostrategic interests that it needs to accomplish with the support of the Syrian government. With direct involvement in the Syrian civil war, therefore, Iran has shored up the Syrian government's military strength by providing strong military support and significantly mobilizing Shiite militias from Iraq, Afghanistan and Lebanon through Hezbollah, while Saudi Arabia, alongside other Sunni States, though not directly involved in the war, is supporting rebel groups with weapons and funds. Like Saudi Arabia, the sufferings of Syrian Sunni Muslims from the onslaught of the Shiite-Alawite Syrian government have dragged Turkey—an Islamic State led by a Sunni dominated government—into conflict with the Syrian government (Rabinovich, 2017).

As the demographically dominant Sunni Muslims are in the forefront of the opposition's war against the Syrian government, the sectarianization of the Syrian civil war creates great anxiety among Syrians. A difficult issue in the civil war is that there are too many well-rounded Sunni opposition groups fighting the Syrian government for various selfish reasons many of which are conflicting. Consequently, it is difficult to aggregate the various interests of these groups or to make a good sampling of the opposition's interests and representatives in peace talks. Often times there are conflicting demands and preferences among different Sunni sectarian groups and among members of the same Sunni sectarian group. The hopes of reaching a peaceful settlement of the armed conflict through negotiation are, therefore, slim in that some opposition groups and independent armed groups will certainly be discriminated against through exclusion from negotiation. Such rejected groups are inclined towards sabotaging the peace process and advancing the incentives for a continuous war, seeing that their hopes, expectations, goals and interests are doomed, while the groups whose interests are favoured would consequently incur hate and dissociation of the unfortunate groups (Groarke, 2016). Also, the Geneva II Conference on Syria has failed to formulate frameworks to defeat Jihadist rebel forces and to strengthen the unity of the Syrian

army—whose Alawite officers have the suspicion that their Sunni colleagues are sympathetic to the cause of Sunni Jihadists against whom the Syrian government is fighting—for security responsibilities post-Assad. The failure to tackle these two issues will make the resolution of the Syrian conflict as well as post-Assad political transition impossible (Khatib, 2014).

The civil war is beyond ordinary revolution. Besides the rigid stance of the Syrian government not to stop fighting, the involvement of multiple opposition groups gives the war some ethnoreligious character that continues to drive it. The ruling class, together with the Alawite community, fears socio-political displacement, while several extremist elements of the Sunni-dominated opposition have turned the war into a Jihad and posed an existential threat to non-Sunnis. In defence of their conflicting interests, these groups are seriously engaged in an existential war which may not end even if Bashar al-Assad is overthrown (Sorenson, 2013). Moreover, the multifarious ethno-confessional nature of Syria and the cleavages such identity groups have formed far into the past reflect in the complex dimension the Syrian civil war has taken. The civil war has been a war between the Alawite-led Syrian government supported mainly by other ethno-confessional minorities, on the one hand, and the mostly Sunni-dominated opposition inclusive of Islamic extremists and Jihadists, on the other hand. The minorities loosely align against the Sunni majority and each side is fighting to avoid defeat for fear of untold revenge of the victor against the vanquished. While minorities across all confessions fear ethnic cleansing from the Sunni-led opposition and, therefore, fight desperately to preserve their lives and communities, the Sunni-led opposition considers the war as an opportunity to revenge against the Alawite-led government and depose it, and to form a government that will represent their interests without which a victorious Alawite-led government will persecute them even more and relegate them to perpetual inferiority (Robinson, 2012).

There is a stalemate between the Syrian government and the Syrian rebels in which both sides lack superior resources to defeat the other; while the government lacks adequate personnel and as such could not retake all the territories it lost to the rebels, the rebels lack both adequate personnel and weapons to advance into government-controlled areas, including Damascus, and to overthrow the government. The Syrian government has been confident and forceful in prosecuting the long Sunni-Alawite/Shiite sectarian war. It hopes to drag the Syrian opposition into a war of attrition aimed to annihilate it ultimately (Spyer, 2012). Following the Syrian government's repression of volatile protests—an act which started a military confrontation between it and the opposition's FSA—the Syrian civil war has gradually become uncontrollable as Syria has split into pro-government and anti-government factions, each of which is desirous of fighting to zero-sum military victory. Further on the upward spiral course, the Syrian opposition has divided into several armed groups, including Islamist groups—such as ISIS, al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra, Turkey-backed Jaysh al-Islam and

Saudi-backed Ahrar al-Sham—fighting the Syrian government and one another. Consequently, while the sectarian and ideological dimensions of the civil war lead to Sunni-Shia and moderate-fundamentalist confrontation, Iran's role in the war is perceived to increases Sunni-Shia sectarian tension (Habets, 2016). The sectarian nature of the civil war enhances terrorism, while Jihadists' involvement in the war further complicates the chances of resolving it, as they are rooted in various ways and wont to sabotage peace efforts (Lesch, 2012).

Despite the fact that the United States clamours for the deposition of Bashar al-Assad, it is actually hesitant to oust him. Instead, the United States tacitly supports the al-Assad government's fight against Islamist Jihadist groups because such a fight serves its anti-Jihad interest (Khatib, 2014). The failure of the UN's Geneva Talks to address the civil war in Syria consequently encouraged the emergence of ISIS. Although the United States and Russia entered the civil war to fight ISIS in coordination with Syrian rebels and the Syrian government respectively, the concerted fight against this Islamist terrorist State has reduced the chances of a negotiated resolution because it removed the original cause of the war from the spotlight and turned attention to defeating ISIS (Collin, 2018). Nevertheless, ISIS and other uncompromising Islamist Jihadist groups have become very active and the incomplete annihilation of ISIS further makes resolving the conflict impracticable because the terrorist group will revive, regroup and resume fighting (Dalton, 2017). Similarly, while the introduction of terrorism into the civil war also by some moderate opposition groups' forces prolongs the war and makes political settlement practically impossible ("Russia's intervention", 2015), the threat of a continuous Islamist terrorism created by the unfinished extermination of ISIS is a feature of the armed conflict to bother seriously about (Rabinovich, 2017).

4. By Adopting a Violent Approach, the Syrian Opposition Loses the Hopes of Victory and Prolongs the Civil War

Non-violence theory suffices to explain that the adoption of non-violent approach towards violent repression or clampdown by the State is instrumental in gaining victory for the repressed group. The essential philosophy of this theory is the application of restraint and self-denial in response to conflict and abstaining from the use of physical force to achieve an aim or to resist or respond to the violent aggression of another party against one. Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King are famous for their strong advocacy and practice of non-violent approach to conflict with government. Non-violence "refers to methods of political action that eschew violence" (Howes, 2013, p. 430). "As an ethical philosophy, it upholds the view that moral behaviour excludes the use of violence; as a political philosophy, it maintains that violence is self-perpetuating and can never provide a means to a securely peaceful end" (Peace Pledge Union, n.d.). Referring to the unprofitability of violence as a means to socio-economic change, it is stated that "Many schools of

thought see no other way out of this terrible contrast (that is, the huge economic disparity between the masses and the privileged few) than one of violence. Yet violence itself is making for much misery" (Mathur & Sharma, 1977, p. 2).

Accordingly, emphasis is placed on the importance of non-violent approach to conflict in terms of the Syrian civil war. Had the Syrian opposition embraced non-violent approach towards the Syrian government's violent crackdown, they would have won so great international sympathy and support and would have, consequently, defeated the government without violent efforts. However, this was not the case. A major reason why the Syrian conflict has grown protracted and intractable is because the Syrian opposition abandoned non-violent approach and adopted a violent one in responding to the Syrian government's aggression. At the beginning of the conflict, the situation was non-violent anti-government mass demonstrations across Syria, and this created international approval and recognition of the Syrian opposition and condemnation of the Syrian government which faced a legitimacy crisis over the use of violence against peaceful demonstrators. However, when the opposition lost faith in non-violent approach, they turned to violent approach which further militarized the armed conflict, tainted their legitimacy, diminished their international appeal and gave the Syrian government a cogent reason to unleash its military power on the opposition mercilessly. Eventually, the Syrian opposition was harmed and could not withstand the Syrian government which has a greater capacity for military violence. One reason for the despair of the Syrian opposition is that it is seriously undermined by its own internal problems such as disunity and by lack of meaningful support from external patrons who themselves are seeking to achieve selfish goals from the conflict amidst distrust and cautiousness in dealing with the opposition which has displayed disturbing militancy. The adoption of violent approach against the Syrian government gave the civil war a sectarian, religious, ethnocentric and other identity-related character. Violent approach and the consequent identity colouration of the armed conflict attracted local extremist Islamist groups like Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhet al-Nusra whose activities further blacklist the general Syrian opposition and contribute in making the conflict intractable and protracted (Tokmajyan, 2015).

Foreign Islamic fundamentalist groups such as "Muslim Sunnite extremists (Salafis) [who] joined the rebels in Syria [and] Shiite militias from Iraq and troops from Hezbollah [who] joined the governmental forces" (Tokmajyan, 2015, p. 107) contributed to the adoption of violent approach, which has turned the conflict into a quagmire. Having turned violent, the Syrian opposition is unable to realise the very goal of the uprising, which is to depose the Syrian government, but has only broken into multiple fragments and blurred the initial distinction between it and the Syrian government in terms of the use of military violence. Also, the rebels' use of violence against government soldiers, rather than demonstrate only peacefully, has discouraged military defection to the Syrian opposition as several soldiers feel more safe with the government than with the violent opposition; thus, the

opposition did not receive many experienced soldiers whose wealth of experience would have been significantly helpful against the Syrian government. The counter-productiveness of violent approach the opposition adopted has unexpectedly turned to the government's favour. This shift from non-violent approach to violent approach has not only created multiplicity of rebel groups, it has also worsened the violence of the war in such a complex way that continues to hinder peace but sustains terrorism and strife even if the Syrian government and the legitimate opposition may eventually resolve the conflict. The adoption of violent approach is the Syrian opposition's wrong choice that militarized and complicated the conflict, making it prolong and intractable (Tokmajyan, 2015).

Eventually, Syria has become a hub of Middle East conflict where a civil war coloured by sectarianism has caused colossal human losses, economic woe and humanitarian crisis amid firm Russian, Iranian and some non-State players' support for the Syrian government, and Western and GCC countries' support for the Syrian opposition (Dalton, 2017).

5. The Syrian Rebels' Illicit Economy Makes Them Undaunted and Prolongs the Civil War

This argument can be explained within the framework of the economic theory of conflict. Generally, through the scholarly explication demonstrated in the classical work that became known as Marxism, Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) were credited as the fathers of social conflict theory—a broad dimension from which all social science theories of conflict derive. But for the economic theory of conflict, although Reno (1993) applied the ideas and logic of the economic theory of conflict, and Berdal and Malone (2000) explored the greed and grievance theories of conflict (both of which have economic implications), credit is, however, given to Paul Collier (a former American World Bank economist) and Anke Hoeffler for their works: Collier and Hoeffler (1998), (2002a), (2002b), (2004); Collier, Hoeffler and Rohner (2006); and Collier (2000) in which they played particularly significant roles in developing the theory. Subsequent important works in furtherance of the development and application of the theory in explaining the causes of armed conflicts and the incentives for protracted armed conflicts have followed after theirs, such as Ross (2004), Collier and Sambanis (2005), Murshed and Tadjoeddin (2007), Mitra and Ray (2014) and Osah, Ogundiwin, and Eti (2017).

Economic theory of conflict argues that while strong expectation of economic gains is the cause of a civil war or constitutes the incentives for rebel leaders to start a civil war, actual financial profits derived from the continuous illicit exploitation of economic resources—such as natural resources, civilian population, loot, foreign aids, forced taxations of any sorts, smuggling of invaluable materials like artefacts—constitute the incentive for the protraction of a civil war because

such usually huge economic benefits encourage rebel groups and war entrepreneurs not to give up fighting. Whatever the cause of a rebellion in a country, the sustainability of a protracted and intractable civil war is only possible if the rebellious group can sufficiently expropriate and exploit the country's economic resources. In other words, if a civil war is not financially viable or the warring parties, especially the rebels, are not financially equipped to sustain their war enterprise, such a civil war will not last for a long time. On the contrary, for a civil war to prolong, the rebel forces fighting the government must be rich.

Therefore, the economic theory of conflict perceives rebellion as the ultimate demonstration and greatest evidence of organized crime in which rebels pillage and exploit productive economic resources to enrich themselves and to sustain the financing of their war effort. The core of the argument of the economic theory of conflict is the economic determinism of the life of a war; that is, a war prolongs if the warring parties are able to sustain a sufficient economic means of prosecuting it. In terms of a civil war, greater concern shifts to the rebel forces fighting their government—not necessarily the government, for it is usually rich, more creditworthy and more equipped with the means of getting steady and significant foreign aids from State and non-State allies. A civil war prolongs not only because rebel forces are supported by continuous supply of revenues from illicit export of or taxes on natural resources, smuggling of economic valuables and "sympathy package" from foreign sympathizers and/or supporters, but also because war entrepreneurs making huge income from the conflict situation will likely sabotage peace initiative and process for ending the war (Naidoo, 2000; Collier, 2000; Collier, 2004; Charles & Osah, 2018). Hence, the contention of the economic theory of conflict that economic factors constitute the major cause of success or failure of armed groups in or from accomplishing goals, such as political and/or military goals, is helpful in understanding the argument of Herbert (2014) as to the cause of the protraction and intractability of the Syrian civil war.

Accordingly, given the substructure power of the economy over the superstructure of society and ambitions, it can be expected that economically powerful rebel forces are confident and undaunted in a conflict with government forces. As observed, Syria has smuggling activities which date back to the country's political history since British and French rule. The activities have created deeply entrenched smuggling networks and resultant illicit economy in Syria. The civil war in Syria has helped smugglers, fixers and illicit war entrepreneurs to establish complex illegal institutions that will remain for so long. As the Syrian government lost control of its borders and border communities to rebels in the course of the civil war, the latter as well as local tribes that inhabit the border communities, who are already used to smuggling via Syria's porous borders, have gained unchallenged control over the borders. Thus, they engage in and/or control smuggling activities across Syria's borders and reap huge profits from such activities. Consequently, Syrian rebels are able to make a significant amount of profits from illicit trade on

smuggled commodities such as oil, drugs and stolen artefacts, and use the profits to finance their revolutionary cause against the Syrian government. The rebels are resourceful in using the borders to sustain their lucrative smuggling business. The huge fortunes they make from the illicit trade via porous borders make them relatively economically self-reliant. Such level of financial self-reliance, coupled with the financial support they receive from external patrons, offers the rebels some confidence and rigidity, thus making them difficult to cajole into peace talks in terms other than their preference (Herbert, 2014).

Rebel leaders and external players that make huge profits from smuggling activities of Syria's illicit economy constitute themselves as saboteurs to peace process initiated to end the civil war. The illicit exploitation of Syria's war economy by the Syrian rebel groups has been instrumental in shaping the protraction of Syria's civil war. The absence of governmental control in all aspects of Syria that are firmly under the control of various Syrian rebel groups enable them to generate the required revenues to sustain the conflict by increasingly depending on all forms of external support and by sustaining illicit transnational economic connections and trade networks for smuggling natural resources and other stolen valuables out of Syria for sale in exchange for the material wherewithal like military hardware and logistics needed to sustain the war. Until the Syrian government is able to re-establish effective control over Syria's borders once again or until external patrons of the rebels discourage the smuggling activities and links, which is less likely, the rebels will continue to control a significant illicit source of income to fund procurement of arms, payment of smuggling outfits that deliver the arms to them, payment of their fighters, and procurement of all other materials necessary to prosecute the war against the Syrian government. This is a critical juncture in the civil war in that while the Syrian government suffers from indebtedness and financial setbacks due to huge loses of significant sectors of the economy to rebels and to the destruction of war, the rebels, who control many of the economic assets abandoned by the government and who also receive huge financial support from foreign sources, are becoming wealthy enough to keep on fighting against a government that is struggling financially. Consequently, it will be difficult for foreign patrons of inveigle or sway the rebels to accept diplomatic initiatives designed to end the war if such initiates are less favourable to them (Herbert, 2014). The Syrian civil war is, therefore, protracted because the huge revenues rebels are able to generate from smuggling and from Syria's general illicit economy make them buoyant and ready to sustain their combat capability.

6. The West Sees Military Action against Bashar al-Assad as Unprofitable

Classical deterrence theory is crucial in explaining this assertion. The theory originated with Bernard Brodie (1959) in his work entitled "The Anatomy of Deterrence" and was developed through the 1950s and early 1960s by strategic thinkers such as Herman Kahn, Thomas Schelling, Oskar Morgenstern, William Kaufmann and Glenn Snyder. Rooted in the Realist intellectual tradition and balance of power politics, classical deterrence theory argues that peace is likely to exist if power is apportioned equally among major actors or groups of actors in the international system so that no one actor or group of actors will have the motivation or capability to change the status quo and challenge other actors or groups of actors. While structural deterrence theory—a strand of classical deterrence theory—argues that international stability can be guaranteed if nuclear power is distributed in the international system, particularly among great powers, in such a way that ensures balance of nuclear power and parity of relationship so that it is absurd for one side to start a war, decision-theoretic deterrence theory— the second strand cum decision-making aspect of classical deterrence theory— argues that the consequences of a nuclear war is too costly, enormous and dire so that no rational leader would want to start a nuclear war as a means of resolving a conflict. Essentially, decision-theoretic deterrence theory holds that States that are engaged in a conflict, directly or indirectly, may strategize to defeat each other, but all of them have a common interest in circumventing or avoiding war (Zagare, 1996). Although the two strands of the classical deterrence theory enrich the argument of the theory, the second strand—decision-theoretic deterrence theory— provides a more appropriate framework for explicating the assertion that the West sees military action against Bashar al-Assad as unprofitable.

The theory, which explains the operation and constitutive parts of the international system, further argues that a State or group of States can be prevented from executing the threat to use military action against another State or group of States if it is aware that that other State or group of States has an assured military capability to retaliate with such a military response that will be so great as to make the aggressor's action unprofitable, make the cost of such aggressive action greater than the expected benefits, or that can further provoke a greater conflict resulting in mutually assured destruction. With this awareness, the potential aggressor is threatened indirectly and will be compelled on its own not to take the intended military action. Deterrence warns and convinces a potential aggressor that the use of military action against another State would attract a kind of response that will inflict unimaginable damage that will outweigh any possible benefits it seeks to achieve with taking military action. This assertion leads to the definition of deterrence as the use of threats by one party to convince another party to refrain from initiating some course of (military) action. Deterrence policy can be made to prevent an armed attack against a State's own territory (direct deterrence) and/or

prevent an armed attack against another State (indirect or extended deterrence). The latter happens when a great power becomes involved in a conflict or dispute between at least two countries in which a more powerful one is threatening a military action against the other, the weaker one (Huth, 1999).

Deterrence became very important after the Second World War and during the Cold War marked by the nuclear arms race between the USA and the former USSR. Two important factors for a successful deterrence policy include, firstly, the strategy of a defending State to balance the probable coercion and adroit diplomacy of the State threatening military attack, by demonstrating proportionality, reciprocity and coercive credibility, and, secondly, the degree of vulnerability or indefensibility of the threatening State rooted in its political and economic conditions (Jentleson & Whytock, 2005). Deterrence emphasizes the importance of threat of military retaliation from a threatened State against another State threatening it, in order to prevent the threatening State from executing its threat to use military force against it, the threatened State, or against any other State while pursuing its (the threatening State's) foreign policy goals. Threat can deter a potential aggressor from executing an intended or threatened military action against another State because of the huge cost and losses it would incur if it goes ahead to execute the intended or threatened military action. Thus, the threat of a possible nuclear conflict between the West and Russia, of Russia's assured retaliatory capability and of mutually assured destruction (MAD) deters the West from attacking the Syrian government directly and significantly or gravely because such an attack is most likely to kill Russian soldiers and destroy their weapons in Syria and, then, drag Russia into a West-Syria war, which will possibly escalate into a global nuclear war the West does not want. Russia's military involvement in Syria, therefore, is a strategy to prevent military conflict between Syria and the West. That is, to deter the West from attacking the Syrian government militarily. The West is also reluctant to use military action against the Syrian government given secondary forms of deterrence such as the natural geographical barriers in Syria, the complicated nature of the Syrian civil war, the anticipated humanitarian crisis of enormous degree, and the domestic anti-war atmosphere among Western populations.

Accordingly, although military planners in the West had prepared a robust strategy for a possible external military intervention in Syria against the Bashar al-Assad government, the strategy has remained at best a white elephant as the West and its Arab allies are not ready to implement it because the United States is unwilling to lead such military campaign. Pro-intervention voices rely on the West's military achievement against Gaddafi's government in Libya and are motivated to repeat the same in Syria. However, this is an illusory hope because Syria is considerably different from Libya in terms of the nature and circumstances of the civil war, loci of intense battles, character and organization of the opposition, the opposition's military gains and international relevance, and military might and prowess of the

government, among others. The vicissitudes of the war is more favourable to the Syrian government. Hence, contrary to Western pro-interventionists' pressure, the Obama administration, which was expected to lead an external military intervention in Syria against the Bashar al-Assad government, considered that such military intervention would be a huge blunder that will embroil the United States in another Middle East war. This is because the West's military intervention against the Syrian government is thought to produce unimaginable catastrophic consequences. The Syrian government, if it had to confront a huge enemy army of the West headed to destroy it, could, in its final existential defence, become drunk in desperation and, thus, display wantonness of behaviour such as to unleash the whole array of its conventional, chemical and biological weapons against the enemy army, unfriendly neighbours such as Israel, and its own citizens, thus leading to untold casualties, regional ramifications, and humanitarian and environmental disasters (Lesch, 2012).

Naturally, Syria has difficult topography characterised by numerous mountains, hills, valleys and rivers that will impede the movement, swiftness and mobilization of intervening army's human and material resources. With safe haven likely to be provided by ally neighbours—Iraq and Lebanon—, external military intervention would achieve an insignificant destruction of Syria's government armaments, while serious humanitarian and domestic political conflicts can ensue in Turkey and Jordan if these nations with anti-Assad leaders are required, without assurance of victory, to send troops to Syria alongside Western intervening forces against the Syrian government. While the West has not taken any decisive step against the Syrian government, it appears to be expecting the government to win the war in a less brutal way so that it would not have any reason to yield to the temptation of international outrage urging it to intervene. More so, the West is still vacillating due to the feeling that Western military intervention against the Syrian government would have huge domestic and sectarian aftermath. This irresolute attitude is strengthened by the unresolved ideational conflicts as to how to prevent such anticipated aftermath, especially where the West is not ready to commit its resources in reconstructing Syria after the war and where it distrusts the Islamist-dominated Syrian opposition supported mainly by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and doubts the kind of government the opposition will provide for Syria post-Assad (Lesch, 2012).

The Syrian conflict is, thus, very perplexing. It defies implementation of a wide range of possible US policy options intended to resolve it because all such policy options will have to face or trigger specific circumstances that will thwart them. For example, a possible US decision to allow the Syrian government to sustain control over western Syria while itself ceases to support the Syrian opposition, as an approach to end the conflict, will be frustrated as Syrian Sunni Muslims would not cease to fight the government and as regional foes of the government would continue to support the rebels against it and against Iranian leverage in Syria. On

the other hand, a US Syrian policy that limits the United States' operations in Syria to fighting terrorism with certain co-operation with Russia does not address the big issues that created terrorism in Syria, and will not be able to annihilate ISIS because the group is an integral part of the general Sunni rebellion against the Syrian government. Even a US Syrian policy aimed at co-operating with Russia in operations to combat terrorism will ultimately justify the Syrian government's claim that it is combating terrorists and, thus, encourage it to intensify military operations which will eventually worsen Syria's already dismal humanitarian conditions (Dalton, 2017).

Also, the United States may have calculated that its idea of military action of whatever nature and magnitude against the Syrian government will not be serious because of Russia's military presence in Syria and because such military action will eventually favour the Syrian government, thereby making it an insignificant deterrence or a counter-productive effort entirely. Thus, the Syrian opposition is hopelessly stranded in the conflict: the West does not want to get militarily involved in Syria in its favour since Russia's military presence in the country is so strong, and they do not want to have a direct conflict with Russia because it will be too costly for them (Abboud, 2015). The thinking is that a serious Western military attack on the Syria government will amount to aggression against Russia if it results in Russian soldiers' casualties and material losses. The logical consequence will be a serious retaliation from Russia which will culminate in a direct war between it and the United States. Such military conflict between the two great powers can spiral into a full-blown Third World War which the United States is not willing to start or fight. On the other hand, a small, limited military attack on the Syrian government, for the avoidance of trouble with Russia, will be ineffective and incapable of defeating the government. Hence, the United States is indecisive to go to war in Syria, and cautious not to enmesh itself in another Middle East quagmire. The United States will best be able to contain the civil war within Syria so as to prevent a regional escalation which can make the war too problematic. However, this measure alone is incapable of resolving the civil war (Sorenson, 2013).

7. Complicated War in Syria: The Syrian Regime Gains from the Opposition's Misfortune

Structural conflict theory provides the basis for explaining the protraction and intractability of the Syrian civil war from this dimension. Conflict theory itself explains the contradictions in society between the State and other political actors as well as the roles and consequences of such contradictions on the society and politics (Igwe, 2007). From this theoretical standpoint, the structural conflict theory sees conflict "as a product of the tension that arises when groups compete for scarce resources" and argues that "conflict is built into the particular ways societies

are structured or organized. It describes the condition[s] of the society and how such condition[s] or environment can create conflict. Conflict occurs in society due to the exploitative and unjust nature of human societies or because of domination of one class by another" (Folarin, 2014, p. 18). Such conditions include "social exclusion, deprivation, class inequalities, injustice, political marginalization, gender imbalances, racial segregation, economic exploitation and the likes" (Oakland as cited in Folarin, 2014, p. 18). Moreover, the theory believes that structural conflicts are caused by the incompatible interests of groups competing for scarce resources. In relation to Syria, the dynamics of the Syrian civil war, and the internal politics and institutional power structures of the major internal players in the civil war—the Syrian government and the Syrian opposition—not only account for the reason the civil war has remained protracted and intractable, but also reflect incompatible interests represented by the Syrian government, on the one hand, and by the Syrian opposition, on the other hand, where the former strives to retain the scarce resource—power—, while the latter fights to acquire same scarce resource through a violent revolution.

In consonance with this theory, the dynamics of the Syrian civil war is shaped by the age-old structural injustice, marginalization and system corruption created by the minority Alawite-Shiite Syrians and their loyalists inclusive of non-Alawite Shiites against the majority Sunni Syrians who are structurally disadvantaged. The internal politics and institutional power structures of the two major internal parties to the civil war reflect a significant difference. For the Syrian government, internal politics is characterized by centralism, and institutional power structure reflects a monocephalous arrangement. For the Syrian opposition, internal politics reflects decentralism, and institutional power structure reveals an acephalous order. Against this backdrop, it has been argued that while the Syrian civil war portrays a structural problem deep in the fabric of Syrian society, the centralization of power on a single body, the Syrian government, personified by a monocephalous figure, President Bashar al-Assad, on the one hand, and the decentralized system of power and the acephalous nature of leadership of the Syrian opposition, on the other hand, place the Syrian government in a better position against the opposition who themselves are handicapped by lack of unity, cohesion, singleness of purpose and united forces. Given this asymmetric situation, the Syrian rebel groups lack the capacity to overthrow the Syrian government, while the latter cannot easily defeat the former because they are fairly strong and resilient to keep the war on-going. This condition makes the civil war look like an entanglement in which all parties have the capacity to fight and make some gains, but, at the same time, none has the capability to win the war totally and determinedly. This problem, thus, makes the civil war protracted and intractable.

The Geneva II Conference on Syria held early in 2014 failed to achieve its goal of forming a transitional government in Syria because, despite Russia's support for a political solution to the Syrian armed conflict, the representatives of the Syrian

government and of the Syrian opposition at the conference failed to reach a negotiated mutually agreed resolution on transitional government. This is because government representatives rejected the Syrian opposition's proposal of resignation of Bashar al-Assad before starting the Syrian political transition process, while the groups that constitute the Syrian opposition, on the other hand, are discordant and divisive, with the opposition negotiating body—the Syrian National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces—lacking full representation, integration, inclusion and sufficient relations with all rebel groups, including the FSA. Similarly, while some Syrian opposition groups refused to dialogue with one another, the accredited Syrian opposition groups gave prerequisites for negotiation and rejected talks with the government's delegates (Habets, 2016).

Generally, the Syrian peace process is rift with complex diplomatic impediments and beset by little commitment from the Syrian government and the Syrian opposition. This makes mediation by great power patrons of both parties to the conflict a difficult endeavour marked so far by insignificant success. The Syrian government has also blamed the sluggishness of the peace talks on the legitimacy problem and incomprehensive representativeness of the Syrian opposition as well as on the tendency of the UN and interest-seeking external players to dictate the terms of political transition, which ought to be entirely Syrian originated (Hodge & Malas, 2016). Opposed to the demands of the Syrian opposition, Bashar al-Assad remains intransigent to persuasion and pressure to step down and end the civil war. Instead, under the guise of fighting terrorism, he continues to fight the Syrian opposition whose legitimacy has been undermined by its own characteristic problems—such as group proliferation; intra-group squabbles, schism and outright disintegration; inter-group rivalry; deep suspicion; poor organization; divisiveness; and inconsistency—that existed since the civil war started and made them unable to articulate a comprehensive and agreeable political or military plan to counter the Syrian government forces and end the war. The Syrian opposition is beset by its own adverse internal politics. This handicap would make it incapable of forming a workable transition government if Bashar al-Assad is deposed. Thus, while the Syrian conflict continues, the political transition process has been stalled for fear that deposing Bashar al-Assad from power without a ready competent opposition to replace him will create a power vacuum which portends a greater danger than having Bashar al-Assad in power (Khatib, 2014).

Some of the rebel groups in the Syrian opposition parade themselves as the only representatives of the entire Syrian opposition, even though the complex nature of the Syrian conflict discourages the formation of a lasting merger of Syrian opposition groups. This behaviour fuels dissension and rancour among the Syrian opposition groups and contributes to undermine their legitimacy and to prolong the civil war. Besides, media misinformation and false reportage perpetuated by big media houses complicate the civil war as they create difficulty in understanding the real situation and true story of the war, which is relevant to any sound resolution to

be negotiated ("Russian paper studies reasons", 2012). As the civil war degenerates into a very miserable and catastrophic condition, the Syrian government is emboldened to fight on because of its military superiority, strong foreign support, stable domestic elite support base, and due to the vindictive appetite to avenge the killing of some very senior and key Syrian military officers such as the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Syrian Armed Forces—Assef Shawkat—who was Bashar al-Assad's brother-in-law and second-in-command in Syria. With advantages over the FSA, the Syrian government is committed to outright annihilation of all rebel fighters, expectant of total victory and, thus, unwilling to negotiate or compromise (Khan, 2012).

The FSA needs adequate human and material resources to be able to effectively confront the half a million large, strong and powerful Syrian Arab Army firmly loyal to President Bashar al-Assad, but the lack of the wherewithal to handle this task is the rebels' undoing (Khan, 2012). The Syrian opposition groups are also undermined by personal conflicts and selfish political ambitions among their leaders who are already struggling for a place in an anticipated opposition-led government post-Assad. Thus, they fail to coalesce into a single force against the Syrian government and to commit to a common approach towards resolving their country's civil war (Lesch, 2012). The war in Syria is now a complex quagmire that has wrecked unimaginable destructions across the country and unsettled governments in the region and in Europe where it has had serious negative effects. It remains explosive and unpredictable. The situation prompts Western governments' thought of military intervention against the Syrian government, but this thought has been discouraged by considerable public opposition given the problems caused by Western military intervention in Iraq (Habets, 2016).

The benevolence Bashar al-Assad demonstrated at the beginning of the Syrian conflict, even though it was born out of local and international pressure, failed, unfortunately, to prevent the conflict from degenerating into a civil war. The Syrian government made more concessions to the Syrian Kurds, made minor but vital constitutional changes and released fundamentalist political prisoners in the hope that the Syrian people would be appeased, amenable and compliant so as to avert a civil war. However, these concessions ended up creating the conditions which made the armed conflict protracted and intractable. For example, when the Syrian government lost control over several regions of Syria, the same freed political prisoners who now constitute the vanguard of strong rebel forces/groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra, ISIS and the YPG took control of those regions, filled the power vacuum created there, and became bent on ousting the government. The negligence created by the international community following its failure to act timely in Syria due mainly to strife and dissension among key regional and extra-regional players in the Syrian conflict contributed in helping these groups to become very strong and to create their respective defacto States which threaten regional security and make the civil war more chaotic (Kahf, 2016).

The dynamics of the Syrian civil war is such that neither the Syrian opposition nor the Syrian government can win the war. It is very difficult to find an agreeable resolution to the conflict due to its highly convoluted nature and associated web of internal and external problems. The Syrian opposition groups—comprising numerous rebel groups within and outside Syria such as the Local Co-ordination Committees (LCCs), the Syrian National Council (SNC) and the FSA—are unable to coalesce into a strong, united, well-organized formidable fighting force against the Syrian government because they lack independent civil unions, broad resources, general unity and solid organizational structure. These handicaps make them vulnerable to the scramble and competition of regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar who seek to establish leverage over the Syrian opposition. Also, the Syrian opposition's military wing, the FSA, lacks the coherence, unity, loyalty, centralized and consolidated command structure as well as adequate resources needed to confront the Syrian government forces effectively. By seeking governmental change in Syria and by supporting the Syrian opposition to achieve this goal, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar and some other regional States have bolstered the morale of the Syrian opposition groups, improved their economic strength and further militarized the civil war, on the one hand, and have intensified internal strife, discord, suspicion and de-synchronization of their efforts, on the other hand.

There is disaffection between the SNC and the ordinary Syrian protesters seeking to reform Syria democratically. The latter challenges the authority of the SNC for being foreign-based and lacking real understanding of Syria's local realities, and for sidelining ordinary Syrian activists that are not ideologically inspired. The local and exiled self-interested Syrian activists who high-jacked Syria's popular anti-Assad demonstrations and formed the Syrian opposition and its military wing are unable to oust the Syrian government because they are disunited and fractious, and this handicap enables the government to continue to prosecute the war against them. Both the home-based and foreign-based Syrian opposition groups lack adequate support from their Western sponsors. Their efforts to make the countries that want governmental change in Syria to provide material support for that cause are futile as the countries failed to match their desire with action. Hence, insufficient resources, especially finance and weapons, compel the Syrian opposition to accept truces as they could not sustain the momentum of their victories, the management of territorial gains and the marshalling and deployment of their forces against strong government counter-offence and against emergent Islamist terrorist forces that are aggressive towards ordinary Syrian opposition groups (Abboud, 2015).

Hence, while the Syrian government fails to exercise full control across Syria, the FSA suffers territorial losses as it is unable to sustain control, on behalf of the general Syrian opposition, over territories abandoned by government forces. The opposition's material lack and inability to coalesce their political and military

wings into an indivisible centrally administered entity led to the emergence of several rebel groups, including Islamist groups, many of which took up arms to defend their immediate communities against government forces and hostile rebel groups, and all of which strove against one another over control of abandoned territories. This situation increased the number of fighters, heightened the violence, further militarized the conflict and fragmented Syria into numerous pockets of territories held defacto and weakly controlled by discordant rival rebel groups' authorities. This situation encourages dissension, selfishness, weak and short-lived co-operation, and fragile communications among the Syrian opposition (Abboud, 2015). With disunity and internal strife, the Syrian rebels are seriously undermined: they struggle to possess and control ISIS's and government forces' territorial losses. Their inability to form a united coherent front also draws from their Western and Arab patrons' discrimination and refusal to co-operate with many Salafist rebel groups such as al-Nusra Front declared a terrorist group. There is an interest-based division among these patrons over which rebel groups to support and not to support, and this has contributed in setting the opposition back (Ibrahim, 2017).

On the other hand, having incurred huge military and territorial losses, and facing the likelihood of defeat, the Syrian government also established ancillary combat forces comprising local militias mainly of Alawite origin and regional militias from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq whose efforts, coupled with the considerable military support of Lebanese Hezbollah militia, Iran and Russia, have substantially given the Syrian government some leverage over the opposition. The involvement of these actors also further militarizes the conflict and intensifies its violence. The military and territorial losses of the Syrian government did not result in the emergence of a dominant rebel group. Instead, three dominant opposition bodies have emerged and are competing strongly with the Syrian government. Syria is, consequently, split into the following four administrative fragments with administrative authorities opposed to each other, namely "Damascus and north through Homs and to the coast; Kurdish areas organized under an autonomous administration in three cantons in the north and northeast, known as Rojava; areas held by Islamic State (ISIS) in the eastern parts of the country; and areas under the control of the FSA and Islamist-dominated military fronts, such as Jaish al-Fateh (Army of Conquest), in the northwestern and southern parts of the country" (Abboud, 2015, p. 341).

As the powerful rebel groups that control these parts of Syria abandoned by the Syrian government are unwilling to surrender these territorial gains, Syria apparently faces disintegration into three States—a Sunni State, an Alawite State and a Kurdish State—based on strongholds held by the Sunni Islamist rebels, Alawite-led Syrian government, and Kurdish rebels. ISIS effect on the Syrian armed conflict portends continuous crisis in Syria post-Assad. This fear inspires the thinking in several circles in the West that Bashar al-Assad should retain power in

order to oversee the transition of power to the opposition in a way that guarantees stability. This contemplation by the West and their attendant reluctance to be actively involved in the civil war also help to prolong the war (Monshipouri & Wieger, 2014). The forceful fragmentation of Syria into many territories illegally governed by many competing rebel forces, the failure of world leaders to provide and adopt an agreeable political resolution that can end the armed conflict, as well as the humanitarian and refugee catastrophe to which too many Syrians have been too long exposed, contribute significantly to the protraction of the Syrian armed conflict and leave Syrians only with serious economic suffering, violence and humanitarian crisis. Given the high level of militarization and deterioration of the conflict, formulating a panacea to correct the horrific situation in Syria and to cause a successful political transition is practically impossible, especially as Russia and Iran are strongly bolstering the Syrian government against its domestic and foreign adversaries that are also opposed to Russia and Iran (Abboud, 2015). Consequently, the protracted Syrian civil war has finally assumed a kind of violence that no party, whether internal or external, is able to manage effectively. It has now become a compounded and disastrous war of attrition with diminished hopes of resolution, and slim chances of victory for either the government or the rebel group forces. With many government sieges, the war has reached a stalemate.

8. Blame the Protraction of the Syrian Civil War on External Players

The behaviour of external players in the Syrian civil war can be explained by the national role theory. National role theory is a conceptual framework of analysis in international politics and foreign policy studies, inspired by role theory in sociology and social psychology, which characterize the role of individuals in the society. The theory inquires into the question of "how do policymakers view the roles their nations should play in international affairs" (Holsti, 1970, p. 235)? Although the theory has been systematically applied to the study of political phenomena by a few scholars such as John C. Wahlke, Heinz Eulau, William Buchanan and Leroy C. Ferguson in their 1962 publication entitled "The Legislative System: Explorations in Legislative Behavior", it was popularized by Kalevi Holsti in his 1970 work entitled "National Role Conception in the Study of Foreign Policy". Holsti leans on John Dewey's and George Herbert Mead's works in sociology and social psychology in developing national role theory for foreign policy analysis. In conceptualizing national role, Holsti (1970, p. 245) defines national role performance "as the general foreign policy behavior of government … include[ing] patterns of attitudes, decisions, responses, functions and commitments towards other states." The theory argues that sovereign States "maintain general orientations towards the external environment and fulfil certain functions within the international system…" (Holsti, 1970, p. 247). He further explains national role as:

"the policymakers' own definitions of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules and actions suitable to their states, and of the functions, if any, their states should perform on a continuing basis in the international system or in subordinate regional systems. It is their "image" of the appropriate orientations or functions of their state towards, or in, the external environment. Typical national role conceptions would be *regional defender,* with the function of protecting other states in a defined area, or *mediator,* with the continuing function of assisting in international conflict resolution" (Holsti, 1970, pp. 245-246).

In the process of determining the foreign policy goals and objectives of their nations, policymakers, through both institutional and external role prescriptions as well as self-conceptions of role, define the roles of their nations in the international system which will be pursued in line with some set foreign policy goals and objectives. The theory pays attention to understanding the thinking of leaders of States, their understanding of the international system and of the roles of their States in the system. It relates to the roles nations assume upon themselves as well as those trust upon them by other nations given their international status, to perform on behalf of other nations. It also considers role prescriptions from the external environment as an integral part of the national role of a State. This theoretical framework helps explain that the dynamics of external environment, rather than internal conditions in Syria, and the self-seeking behaviour of external players are responsible for the protraction and intractability of the Syrian civil war. External environment represents external players such as the European Union, European countries acting individually, Russia and the United States and countries of the Middle East such as Saudi Arabia and Iran whose behaviour has also contributed significantly to prolonging and compounding the Syrian armed conflict. The roles these nations are playing in the Syrian civil war represent their political elites' conceived national roles their countries should be playing in that armed conflict and, by extension, the role expectation other nations in the international system "thrust" upon them.

The armed conflict in Syria has grown intricate and international, with powerful external State actors providing military support to the Syrian government and the Syrian rebel forces alike, according to where their interests lie (Dalton, 2017). The involvement of several international players, some on the camp of the Syrian government and some others on the camp of the Syrian opposition, serve to compound the Syrian civil war. Russia, China (to a small extent), Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah and Yemeni Houthis are supporting the Syrian government for their own anti-Western and anti-Saudi interests. While Russia provides the greatest diplomatic and military cover that has kept the government afloat, with China playing a minimal role, Iran and the others have military personnel on ground and light arms to support the government. On the other hand, the EU, Western powers of the United States, Britain and France, and Arab powers of Saudi Arabia and Turkey and other Gulf States are backing various Syrian opposition groups, with

comparatively uncommon goals, to oust the Syrian government so that they can control Syria's government to be formed by the opposition in order to achieve their fairly common Middle East strategic goals. These international players on the side of the Syrian opposition have historical hostility and ambivalence against the Ba'athist Party and the al-Assad government since the party came to power in the 1970s. The selfish and conflictual involvement of external players in the Syrian conflict only intends to maximize their own selfish national interests that can be realized only through the success of the internal parties they support. These players are less likely interested in resolving the Syrian civil war altruistically for Syria's own sake. Without caution, they are more likely to have a direct conflict as they help to prolong the war (Ibrahim, 2017).

In the light of this, the continuous selfish scramble for supremacy and greater leverage in Syria between pro-Assad Iran alongside its regional allies, on the one hand, and anti-Assad Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, contributes to the protraction and difficulty in resolving the Syrian civil war. Iran supports the Syrian government because it does not want to lose its strategic leverage and control over Syria which is vitally important to the maintenance of military, political and economic influence as well as communications with Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine. Conversely, Saudi Arabia and Qatar—the most vocal advocates of governmental change in Syria—are engaged in activities capable of splitting Syria into small pieces and threatening pro-Assad parts of the cleavages. While Iran and Hezbollah consider the Syrian civil war as a life threat to them and therefore see continued pro-Assad military activities as imperative, Saudi Arabia and Qatar do not prioritize democratization of Syria; their foremost goal is to destroy whatever leverage Iran has in Syria. Without addressing the differing interests of these pro-Assad and anti-Assad regional actors and without resolving their confrontational stands against each other, the Syrian armed conflict tends to remain in its protracted and intractable situation (Mohns & Bank, 2012).

Saudi Arabia recognizes the Syrian conflict as an integral part of its regional strife and competition with Iran. Accordingly, Saudi priorities in the civil war are to incapacitate Iran and sabotage its military endeavour in Syria and to oust the Syrian government; not the immediate defeat of Islamist terrorism. To achieve this goal, the kingdom strongly supports blacklisted extremist rebel groups. While Saudi Arabia is most unlike to achieve these anti-Iran and anti-Assad ambitions, increased Saudi support for Islamist extremist rebel groups fortuitously count in ISIS's favour. As the Syrian armed conflict assumes regional importance, countries in the Middle East are adjusting their alliances around the framework of Sunni–Shia sectarian divide led by Saudi Arabia and Iran respectively. Political leaders are using this divide to exploit the emotions of the very religious Arab population to worsen the violence of the war. The use of Syria's civil war to intensify the old rat race between Iran and Saudi Arabia over regional supremacy, where both countries are less committed to a political solution to the war, can only widen the

sectarian divide and make a negotiated political settlement to be beyond the reach of diplomacy.

The contradictory geostrategic interests and the consequent hostile regional competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia are predicated on sharply differing Islamic sectarian articles of faith, with origin in several decades of rivalry. These unhealthy competition and conflicting interests have once again found expression in the Syrian civil war in which Shi'ite Iran, on the one hand, provides significant military, technical, political and financial support to the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad—an old and reliable Shi'ite Muslim ally of Alawite extraction—to defeat a serious threat of overthrow posed by the mainly Sunni Syrian opposition, and Sunni Saudi Arabia (alongside Sunni Qatar and the UAE), on the other hand, provides similar support to mainly Sunni Islamist rebels such as the FSA and the Islamic Front to overthrow the Syrian government. The adversarial involvement of Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Syrian civil war highlights a serious proxy war between the two countries which attracts considerable attention as the prolonged civil war itself. Iran is seeking to pervade Shi'ite Islam across the Middle East, first by securing leverage along the Levant crescent (from Iran down to Lebanon adjoining the Mediterranean Sea), and then to diminish the potency of Sunni Islam personified by Saudi Arabia, whereas Saudi Arabia, together with less powerful Gulf countries, is bent on containing Iran and undermining regional spread of Shi'ite Islam. Syria, a multi-confessional society with Sunni majority population without power and Shi'ite minority population with centralized power for several decades, bears all the trappings of Sunni-Shi'ite Islamic sectarian conflict for decades. The civil war happening there has become the greatest incident of Sunni-Shi'ite Islamic sectarian showdown of which Iran and Saudi Arabia are logically enmeshed, with each country trying to emasculate the other's influence and impose its own values or strengthen them. The irreconcilable selfish goals of Iran and Saudi Arabia, therefore, make the Syrian civil war protracted and intractable. To this, any resolution that discountenances the interests of Iran and Saudi Arabia will be futile naturally (Monshipouri & Wieger, 2014).

The West is not ready to be actively involved in the Syrian civil war; instead, it limits its role to providing military equipment and training, while it expects the Syrian locals to fight the civil war themselves. Among the local Syrians left to fight for themselves, Syrian Kurds have been able to gain strong control over Kurdish region in northern Syria and are reluctant to be involved in the broader war against the Syrian government, which would have increased the chances of the rebels defeating the government (Mitton, 2016). While the success on the part of the Syrian Kurds has created a fresh conflict between them and Turkey, the conflict, unfortunately, has been heightened by their ambition of statehood in northern Syria where they have effective control. Consequently, Turkey, which will never allow an independent Kurdish State out of Syria for the fear that such development would encourage Turkish Kurds to take a cue, is embroiled in a conflict with the United

States and Russia who both accidentally support the Syrian Kurds against ISIS. Turkey believes that the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), which is involved in conflict with Syrian Arabs over land encroachment, has direct links with Turkish Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) which it perceives as a terrorist organization contrary to US judgment and that, for this reason, the YPG should be subverted and denied autonomy. For this reason, also, Turkey indirectly supports ISIS to degrade the Kurds in northern Syria while the United States and Russia support and co-ordinate with the Kurds in fighting ISIS. Western approach towards the Syrian conflict aggravates the violence and provokes pro-government and anti-government external interventions. By encouraging Saudi Arabia and its regional allies to be much more involved in the conflict and by increasing training for Kurdish forces, the United States and Canada respectively prolong the conflict, promote a complicated war and make settlement difficult (Mitton, 2016; Dalton, 2017; Rabinovich, 2017). While the United States is divided over how to engage in the armed conflict, the EU is opposed to military intervention. Turkey is in conflict with the Syrian Kurdish armed front (the YPG) and strongly opposes the involvement of the Kurdish political front, the Democratic Union Party, in Syria's peace process. Hence, it has refused to co-operate fully with the United States and Russia in resolving the Syrian civil war because they support the Syrian Kurdish armed group whose cause opposes Turkey's interest (Habets, 2016).

The decision of the West to be passive over the Syrian civil war and not to intervene directly but to leave it to Syrians themselves has created dissension among the Syrian opposition and splintered Syria along Sunni-Shia sectarian divides. This condition has given rise to the regional sectarian dimension of the conflict, which has attracted and engaged Iran and Saudi Arabia, respectively leading Shia and Sunni interests, in a proxy war with no genuine concern for the ordinary Syrian people. The Syrian conflict has transcended the threshold of reversibility because the West failed to intervene decisively when the conflict was new and manageable, as such action would have obviated the current disastrous condition of the conflict. Despite this understanding, the West is not still ready to send ground forces to Syria and be fully involved in the war, even though it is interested in it, because of the lingering apprehension and painful lessons the United States and its NATO allies have learnt from deep and full engagement in the Afghan and Iraqi wars that have defied resolution and discontinuity. Instead, while choosing to play a limited role, the West, in a collective decision, has pushed the greatest responsibility of dealing with the Syrian conflict to regional countries and Syrian locals, urging them to be actively involved in the conflict militarily as a united front, and arguing that it is their war since they have the greatest interests at stake. The West's decision to allow the Middle East conflict to take a natural course and not to join the war in Syria is based on the belief that the temptation to intervene in the Syrian civil war will enmesh it in yet another labyrinth of quandary in a volatile Middle East. This non-interventionist position of the West has caused untold humanitarian and refugee crisis and friction among world powers with

vested interests, consequently heightening the escalation, protraction and intractability of the conflict (Mitton, 2016).

The West is hypocritical about resolving the Syrian civil war. On the one hand, it encourages intra-Syrian negotiations between the Syrian government and the Syrian opposition as a way to resolve the conflict, but, on the other hand, it artfully drives the negotiations into a stalemate which sustains violence and fighting, by persuading some opposition groups not to participate in the negotiations as a way of protest, among others. The West encourages and benefits from the stalemated dialogues that have made the conflict insoluble up to now because, having no genuine interest in institutionalizing democracy in the Middle East such a lingering conflict situation helps to ensure continuous Western domination of the region with little or no risk ("Russian paper studies", 2012). However, even if the West decides to intervene in Syria, a US-led intervention will be catastrophic. More so, it is difficult for the West to find a responsible and reliable group to represent the Syrian opposition and help it to craft a comprehensive plan for the future (Lesch, 2012).

Furthermore, the campaign of other external powers such as Turkey and the United States to undermine and exclude Iran from multilateral peace process concerning the Syrian armed conflict does not help in resolving the conflict. Although Turkey has improved diplomatic relations with Iran and gradually appreciates and supports Iran's involvement in Syria's peace process, the United States is unbending in its stand against Iran. Opposed to Iran's role in the Middle East, the United States is using its leverage to exclude Iran from participating in Syria's peace process, and has succeeded in pressuring the UN to withdraw Iran's participation in the Geneva II Peace Talk, which ended in failure nevertheless. The United States holds fast to its anti-Iran orientation, ignoring pressure and persuasion to support Iran's participation in resolving Syria's armed conflict. Iran is believed to have the greatest influence over Bashar al-Assad and thus is in a special position to sway him into embracing political transition and ending the civil war. The continuous US opposition to Iran's involvement in the settlement of Syria's civil war is detrimental to any prospect of reaching an agreeable resolution of the conflict, and by the same token makes the conflict protracted and intractable (Monshipouri & Wieger, 2014). This point is highlighted by the statements, "The US policy of isolating Iran helps further prolong Syria's agony and feeds instability in the Middle East" (Monshipouri & Wieger, 2014, p. 160) and "the US knows very well that if ever the day comes that Bashar al-Assad needs to go quietly, Iran is the only country capable of achieving that" (Monshipouri & Wieger, 2014, p. 161).

As the United States remains increasingly opposed to Iran, the option of a negotiated political settlement on US terms, without Iran's participation, will be futile as Russia does not have a magic wand to inveigle Iran and as Iran would reject any resolution that is designed to oust the Syrian government. The peace process will be made more intricate because if Iran decides to seek a friendly and

malleable substitute for Bashar al-Assad in order to protect its interest in the Levant, the United States would reject the idea as it would not serve US interests in Syria. Also, Russia is not likely to accept a negotiated political settlement on US terms as the Russian and Syrian governments have the greater leverage to influence any proposed political settlement, having made the biggest military and political gains out of the conflict. Attempt to compel Russia into submission to US whims and caprices over Syria could be counter-productive as Russia could resort to demonstration of military might. These irreconcilable interests of external actors encourage the protraction and intractability of the Syrian civil war (Dalton, 2017). These problems have diminished the prospect of any diplomatically negotiated political solution to the Syrian civil war. Moreover, the little hopes left for a diplomatic settlement are sadly dashed, on the one hand, by the aggressive behaviour the United States, under President Trump administration, has started displaying towards the Syrian government and, on the other hand, by the current estranged relations between the United States and Russia, even with Donald Trump as US President; this is in stark contrast to the expectation of improved Russo-American relations under Trump's administration (Rabinovich, 2017).

Russia's and China's opposition to any external military intervention in Syria developed against the backdrop of NATO's abuse of UNSC resolution 1973 in Libya when it, instead of implementing a no-fly-zone in Libya, deliberately aided the Libyan opposition forces with airpower that contributed significantly to the death of Libyan leader, Muammar Gaddafi. While the emergence of Islamist militia groups in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen after the revolutions that happened in those countries further discouraged anti-Western voices, mainly Russia and China, from supporting a similar intervention in Syria for fear of reproducing in Syria the quagmire in Libya, the catastrophic and disheartening socio-political crisis in Libya post-Gaddafi qualifies as a sound reason why the West must not contemplate intervening in Syria militarily. For many countries, Western military intervention in Libya has now become a reference point as to why external intervention in Syria has to be rejected. Eventually, world leaders are unable to support the Syrian opposition directly due to diplomatic hurdles created by Russia and China in punishing the West for their reckless and imprudent behaviour in Libya (Lesch, 2012; Nuruzzaman, 2013). In the absence of any major or formidable external military threat, the Syrian government continues undauntedly with its war against the opposition (Nuruzzaman, 2013). While powerful countries are exploiting already shattered Syria to compete for diplomatic and military victory against the other, the international community itself has dallied in vain without being able to resolve the civil war. World powers' quest to maximize their national interests in Syria's civil war, coupled with the impotence of the international community in the face of the apparently insoluble civil war, actually adds to the protraction and intractability of conflict. The height of this unproductive behaviour is a stalemate and loss for all parties ("Syria's Insoluble Puzzle", 2016).

The United States' insistence on the resignation or ouster of Syria's President, Bashar al-Assad, weakened the international community's confidence in the peace process and gave the Syrian government a reason to fight desperately for its survival and to despise any negotiation that will not involve it. Even though it is quite profitable, by remaining in Syria indefinitely even after ISIS had been physically defeated, the United States and Russia have established their military presence in the country, thus raising the chances of confrontation between them as well as intensifying the tempo of the war by increasing support to the opposing legitimate parties to the conflict (Collin, 2018). This development is a reflection of the stand-off between the West and Russia over the Syrian civil war. Russia and the West hold conflicting positions as to how to resolve the civil war. While Russia opposes external military intervention in Syria by making reference to the disastrous aftermath of the West's military intervention in Iraq and Libya, and therefore wants to protect the Bashar al-Assad government and allow Syrians to decide the future of their country, the West, on the other hand, desires the resignation of Bashar al-Assad or his forceful overthrow through external military intervention before the determination of the future of Syria can happen. As the opposing views of Russia and the West become more serious, the latter brands the former a hindrance to diplomatic progress to halt the Syrian civil war, while Russia insists it is only playing the role of an unbiased actor and condemns the West as pretentiously seeking to use humanitarian cover to depose Bashar al-Assad for being against the West (Brown, 2014). Notwithstanding the conflict of ideas between the West and Russia as to how to manage the Syrian civil war and combat Islamist terrorism, certain co-operation between Russia and the United States is needed in achieving their mutual interests in the fight against Islamist terrorism and in the stability of the Middle East. The further involvement of more external actors, the pursuit of more irreconcilable goals and the provision of more military backing for different groups by different big powers can ruin the success already achieved, intensify the civil war and drag in many newer actors (Valenta & Valenta, 2016).

The prolongation of the civil war seems to imply that international actors do not want the Syrian government to collapse as its existence is necessary for the maintenance of a global balance of power in the Middle East. They cannot afford the danger that a shift of power in Syria to a dangerous Islamic group would cause the world. However, Russia and the United States are promoting conflicting goals and are using the Syrian armed conflict to play a game of chess involving alignment and realignment vis-à-vis the dynamics of the conflict, in order to ensure that their national interests are defended and sustained notwithstanding the sufferings of Syrians. The international community is implicated for the protraction and intractability of the civil war in Syria by increasingly failing to treat the primary causes of the armed conflict. Foreign governments which support the Syrian opposition, including the United States, are not willing to help the rebels to win the war. Instead, they supply the rebels with minimal non-lethal military materials only necessary for self-defence and maintenance of internal balance of

power against the Syrian government, but not for effective territorial expansion or overthrow of the government. Several of the foreign patrons are reluctant to provide substantial military aids to the rebels because they fear that such support can be used against them by terrorist groups among the rebels. The international diplomacy that ensured such minimal military supply to the Syrian opposition underlines the international tendency to maintain a global balance of power by not deposing the Syrian government. Accordingly, resolutions such as UNSC Resolutions 2042 and 2043 and the Geneva Communiqué of June 2012 were not intended to end the war, but to limit it within Syria and prevent a military victory for both the Syrian government and the opposition. Consequently, international diplomacy for Syria has been decried by some regional and international patrons of the Syrian opposition (Kahf, 2016).

By late 2012 and early 2013, the Syrian opposition had expected a quick victory that would have ended the conflict after its forces, advantaged by increased external military and political support, overwhelmed the Syrian government forces and took at least 60 per cent of Syrian territory from the government. But weak international support eroded their early expectation of victory and eventually undermined their war enthusiasm and hopes. Conversely, the considerable political, diplomatic and military support from Russia and Iran strengthened the Syrian government's position against the rebels whose morale to mount a stiff resistance against the government has dropped due to diminished Western support. Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries that also provided support to the Syrian opposition to overthrow the Syrian government are also failing in their strategy because of Russia's active involvement in the armed conflict and lack of major support from the United States (Kahf, 2016). Despite the demonstrated strength and ardour and the huge commitment of the FSA led by several defectors from the Syrian Arab Army, diminished external military support from its foreign patrons has been a major reason the rebel military body is practically unable to overthrow the Syrian government (Khan, 2012).

Various international coalitions fighting terrorism in Syria, such as the US-led, Russia-led and Saudi-led international coalitions, assign too much emphasis on the fight against terrorism, making it look like the war is all about fighting terrorism. For instance, the United States' action in Syria is self-contradictory and does not take the broader security challenges of the whole region into consideration in that while it is aimed at fighting ISIS, on the one hand, it supports other known-but-less-dangerous terrorism-inclined rebel groups against the Syrian government. The methods adopted by different external powers to resolve the conflict are futile and only serve to help "the marginalized powers in creating a perpetual conflict zone for years to come" because the methods are contradictory and opposed to any concerted efforts to end the war (Kahf, 2016, p. 26). This, unfortunately, has triggered too many socio-political tussles which further deteriorate the gloomy conflict situation. Regrettably, the very problem and major causes of the armed

conflict are taken out of spotlight, set aside and unaddressed, making the Syrian government's narrative that the war is all about fighting terrorism, even more true (Kahf, 2016).

Several multilateral diplomatic efforts intended to end the civil war, such as the Geneva Peace Talks, Moscow Peace Talks and the Vienna Peace Talks, have failed to yield a solution to end the war because the countries involved in the peace processes have largely contradictory regional interests and are seeking to protect their selfish interests against the collective multilateral interest of all. Powerful regional States have differing opinions as to how to end the civil war: all of them lack any practical political strategy to resolve it. Thus, the conflict continues without a political or military solution to it (Abboud, 2015). Whilst the United States displays aggressive behaviour towards the Syrian government and believes that military means is necessary to overthrow it, the behaviour and belief have not resulted in a military intervention against the government. However, this behaviour only constitutes an impediment to a peaceful resolution of the civil war. Moreover, while Bashar al-Assad is under pressure from several international actors to resign, the Syrian opposition itself lacks the capability and competence to govern Syria post-Assad. Despite the fact that the involvement of foreign countries in the armed conflict is helpful in pushing for an end to it, it has also pushed the war far from settlement in the near future because the countries are selfishly involved; they pursue national interests, identify with friendly parties, and are opposed to unfriendly parties. But the Syrian government looks more confidently to victory and has developed reluctance to negotiate with the opposition because it receives steady and significant support from Russia and Iran. This guarantees the government's continued existence. Hence, the West and the Gulf States are incapable of deposing Bashar al-Assad because even though they do not want him to remain in power, they have no direct military engagement in Syria against the government to make this possible (Groarke, 2016).

While the international community has been actively involved in finding a solution to the Syrian conflict, the behaviour of world powers towards the conflict only increases its transnational humanitarian crisis and makes it difficult to resolve (Habets, 2016). The concerted efforts of the international community to settle the Syrian civil war amidst fighting ISIS had led to the Vienna Peace Talk and the endorsement of UNSC Resolution 2254, among others. The international community's effort to restart peace talks following progress made against ISIS in 2017 led to the UN-led Geneva IV Peace Talk (involving the Syrian government and the High Negotiations Committee), the Astana Peace Talk, and the Sochi Peace Talk—the latter being an indirect negotiation between the Syrian government and the opposition, supervised by Russia, Turkey and Iran. However, the failure of the international community to compel the Syrian government to reframe from violence caused the latter, which was encouraged by its military gains, to resume hostilities with hope of a military victory. This shortcoming has halted these peace

processes and caused the failure of the four de-escalation zones including parts of Idlib, Latakia, and Aleppo provinces; an enclave in northern Homs province; eastern Gouta near Damascus; and areas of the Derra and Quneitra provinces (Collin, 2018).

Again, the trilateral efforts of Russia, Iran and Turkey towards determining how to execute the ceasefire agreement of the Astana Peace Talk have been stalled because Iran and Russia are divided over United States' future participation in the Astana Peace Talk as Iran objects to Russia's position that the United States should be involved in the Peace Talk in the future. Similarly, the Syrian opposition, on their part, rejects Iran's participation in the Astana Talks (Dalton, 2017). This situation makes the hopes of a peaceful resolution of the Syrian conflict to be slim. Like the negotiated agreement between the United States and Russia lacks the framework to provide a permanent solution to the civil war, other peace processes initiated by the Arab League; United Nations and Arab League Joint Envoys to Syria (including Kofi Annan, Lakhdar Brahimi, and Staffan de Mistura); and by Geneva I, Geneva II and Geneva III Peace Talks have unfortunately yielded little or no success due to protraction and politicization of the war, unfavourable external involvement, and poor representation of Syrian people in all the peace conferences (Albasoos, 2017).

Rival regional and extra-regional actors whose selfish pursuit of national strategic interests in Syria hinders the resolution of the Syrian civil war want to be sure that such interests are maintained in the country and in the region whatever the outcome of the civil war. With this in mind and given the emergence of new influences and security threat as well as the fluid and volatile nature of the civil war, there have been issue-based and interest-driven alliances and re-alliances among regional and international rival actors who are responding to the new realities and seeking to wield influence on the course and outcome of the civil war (Güney, 2013). Russia's direct military intervention and the West's indirect technical role in Syria alongside their Arab allies encourage the shifts in alliances among Syrian opposition groups some of which are vacillating between radical and moderate ideologies. While these shifts were also encouraged by Western diplomatic activities, they depended on the calculations and basic values of the Syrian opposition groups involved. The shifts have prevented the chances of identifying competent groups or individuals in the Syrian opposition who can represent the entire rebel groups and be engaged in the peace process to resolve the conflict ("Russia's role and talk", 2016). Discriminatory preferences and support for different Syrian rebel groups by different international actors such as the United States, the EU, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, on the one hand, and alliance and counter-alliance of rebel groups, on the other hand, also contribute to undermine the strength of the opposition and impinge on their capability to create strong balance of power and deterrence against government forces. The discriminatory behaviour of these external players further fractured the Syrian opposition. Yet, the opposition is unwilling to

surrender to the Syrian government. While Russia and Iran provide complementary support to the Syrian government in protection of their own national interests, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, however, proffer conflicting support to different groups of the opposition: this reflects their antagonism and also weakens the opposition. All of these events have undermined the Syrian opposition before the Syrian government forces which profit from the situation (Khatib, 2014; Habets, 2016).

The anti-war current of America's scholarly circle, a section of the political class, and general public restrains the US government from acting against the Syrian government militarily in order to end the long war, and this consequently dispirits its Western and Middle Eastern allies who are fully prepared militarily against the Syrian government but only waiting for US leadership. The US government is, therefore, compelled to abandon the thought of military intervention in Syria to end the country's civil war (Outzen, 2014). Huge cost of executing military intervention against the Basher al-Assad government and reminiscence of the horror of the US intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq post-9/11 constitute the grounds for the lack of popular domestic support for a US military intervention in Syria (Dalton, 2017). However, the option of US military intervention in Syria, which could either overthrow the Syrian government or change the balance of power in favour of the opposition, is not attractive because the success of the option will largely depend on the involvement of a huge US land troops which the US government is not willing to provide. Also, the option is less likely to be adopted because implementing it raises a high risk of US direct military confrontation with Russia and Iran, and collision with Turkey which strongly denounces the Kurdish YPG which the United States will unavoidably co-opt into this cause. It also risks fostering the resurgence of Islamist terrorism (Dalton, 2017). US military intervention in Syria is much less likely because the passive and diplomatic attitudes of the Obama administration towards the Syrian civil war has encouraged massive military involvement of Russia in favour of the Syrian government and furtherance of its superpower global posture, by extension; this situation turned the tide of the war and placed the Syrian government in a great position against the opposition, with a prolonged and intractable civil war, which has defied several diplomatic efforts to resolve it, as a consequence (Rabinovich, 2017).

9. Summary and Conclusion

The paper contains seven theory-based accounts as to the reason why the Syrian civil war is protracted and intractable. The first account blames the UN and UNSC for this problem. It argues that the war is prolonged and difficult to end because of the institutional weakness of the UN and the acrimonious politics in the UNSC between permanent Western members of the United States, the United Kingdom and France, on the one hand, and Russia and China, on the other hand. The clash of interests between the two opposing sides, where the unity and agreement of both

sides must exist before any collective and legitimate UN action can be taken in Syria, is what frustrates all efforts to end the civil war. Another account believes that the sectarianization of the civil war gives it a religious definition and has attracted terrorist and Jihadist activities. This has opened up old grievances and intensified inter-sectarian struggle, thus making the civil war protracted. Moreover, the adoption of the violent approach by the Syrian opposition as a resistant and offensive measure against the Syrian government's brutality, rather than the non-violent approach, has also been blamed for the cause of the prolonged war. The argument is that had the opposition maintained their initial non-violent approach against the brutality of the Syrian government, they would have worn global sympathy which would have caused a sustained global condemnation of the Bashar al-Assad government, discouraged the government's allies and eventually occasion international intervention on their side with little efforts and objections.

The crucial roles of foreign financial and material aids as well as Syria's illicit economy in helping various Syrian opposition forces to keep fighting audaciously against the Syrian government is also thought to be responsible for prolonging the civil war. If the material and financial power of the Syrian opposition, in general, were weak, they would have been naturally forced to stop fighting and leave the Syrian government with no enemy to fight anymore. This would have ended the war.

The reluctance and refusal of the West to use military action to oust the Syrian government is also thought to have prolonged the Syrian civil war and made it difficult to resolve now. The West's refusal to use military action against the Syrian government in order to end the civil war is because Russia's strong military presence in Syria in favour of the Syrian government poses a primary deterrence to it, while the difficult natural geographical barriers in Syria, the complicated nature of the civil war, anticipated humanitarian crisis of great amount, and domestic anti-war atmosphere in the West also constitute a secondary deterrence to the block. It is also contended that the reason the civil war is protracted and difficult to end is because of internal factors such as the complex dynamics of the civil war itself, the awkward internal politics and the comparatively lopsided institutional power arrangement of the Syrian government and the Syrian opposition which create a situation in which the Syrian government appears to be winning the war but the opposition remains resilient, resourceful and difficult to defeat completely. The paper also argues that external factors are responsible for the protraction and intractability of the civil war. Consequently, the war continues beyond expectation and neither the Syrian government nor the Syrian opposition can easily claim a decisive and lasting military victory because external players, most especially the great powers of Russia and the United States, support opposing forces and have conflicting interests in the war for which they are unable to find a compromise. Until they reach a compromise, which is most unlikely, the civil war is certain to continue.

It is distilled from the theory-based arguments that Bashar al-Assad still remains in power in Syria despite strong local and international denunciation of him and all organised efforts to oust him, because of a wide range of factors including the following:

(1) disorganized Syrian opposition, (2) wide Russian and Iranian pro-Syrian government activities, (3) Syrian government's strong internal support base, (4) existence of some delegitimized and incompetent opposition groups, (5) ominous regional impact of Syria's disintegration, (6) threat of Islamist terrorism, (7) failed international attempts at governmental change, (8) gloomy aftermath of NATO's intervention in Libya and failure of democratic institutionalization post-Gaddafi, (9) UNSC's discordant views of the Arab Spring, (10) lack of serious post-intervention development plan for Syria, (11) suspicion of the expansion of Western imperialism via Responsibility to Protect, (12) external non-intervention sentiment in the US public, (13) Obama's policy of narrowing US external military activities, (14) hopeless faith in the possibility of a UNSC-sanctioned intervention in Syria, (15) troubling realities in Syria and the Middle East, and (16) doubts of the genuineness of Russo-American partnership in resolving the Syrian conflict. These factors have the dual effects of making Bashar al-Assad to perpetuate himself in power and making the Syrian civil war to remain protracted and intractable.

Although the theory-based arguments presented above are strong and revealing, the paper accepts the explanation based on the national role theory as the most compelling because it is the roles of external players, sometimes constructive and some other times destructive, in supporting various internal parties to the Syrian civil war as well as their pursuit of conflicting selfish interests, that have kept the war on-going. The obstructive activities of external players also cover the disharmonious activities of the five permanent members of the UNSC which have crippled the Council and the UN, in general, from acting to end the civil war in Syria. Had the UNSC acted neutrally and altruistically in Syria, the Syrian government and the Syrian opposition would have been forced to stop fighting a war that would have been short, ending in favour of either side. Reconciliation, rehabilitation and reconstruction would have started a long time ago. However, this is not the case. The civil war continues up to now not because the Syrian government and the Syrian rebel forces are masters of the art of war or because they have inexhaustible resources to prosecute the war for too long, but because external players seeking to exploit the war selfishly are fanning the embers of the war so that the war has become a tiring and lingering one. The Syrian government and the Syrian opposition keep fighting because they are being consistently propped up by their external backers who seem to be fighting the war by proxy and are unwilling to compel both sides to end the war, even when they can because they profit enormously from it.

10. Acknowledgments

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