



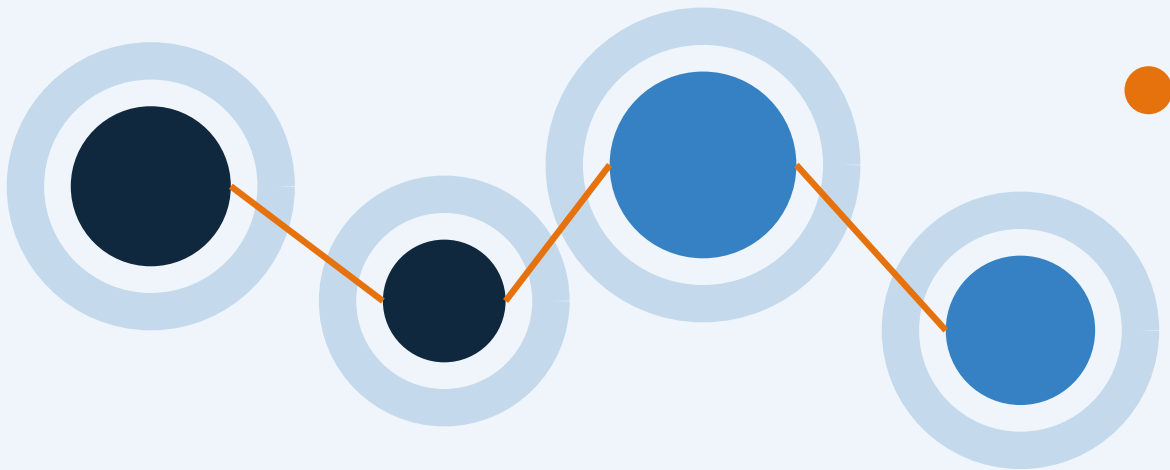
FRAGILITY IN SYRIA

The Roots of Fragility and Prospects for a Solution

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A conceptual illustration of interdependent institutions and conflict dynamics

About this edition

Historical context and editorial transparency

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1. Executive Summary

The roots of perceived sectarian injustice in Syrian society reach back, the paper argues, to the Ottoman Empire, including the millet system and privileges granted to religious communities under arrangements with European powers. State institutions introduced under French influence, and laws enacted from the First Republic onward, had little resonance for many Syrian communities whose relationships, practices and forms of local administration had evolved through centuries of shared history. The encounter between imported institutional forms and established social arrangements weakened the relationship between political authority and society.

Imposed laws and educational systems insufficiently connected to the labor market prevented local communities from making full use of their own resources and eroded the effectiveness of existing social networks. Over time, formal state bodies confronted challenges far beyond their capacities, while alternative livelihoods contracted. Extreme centralization concentrated most resources in the hands of a small circle linked to the ruling system.

The authoritarian order constructed under Hafez al-Assad continued under his son: concentrated political control remained, while economic control became increasingly central to the ruling circle's priorities. Attempts to open the economy to international engagement without relinquishing the regime's command of strategic economic assets or the superiority of its security apparatus were inherently contradictory. The paper argues that this contradiction undermined development initiatives.

Protests that began in Daraa in 2011 included demands for the accountability of security official Atef Najib and opposition to the growing economic power of Rami Makhlouf, a cousin of Bashar al-Assad. In the author's reading, the concentration of economic privileges disturbed existing political and economic balances. Peaceful demonstrations developed into a violent conflict. The resulting deterioration of infrastructure, deaths and injuries among civilians, inadequate health and education facilities, and displacement and demographic disruption were accompanied by less visible losses: weakened institutions, frayed social relationships, trauma and pervasive fear.

Social energies that might have produced wealth and public improvement were increasingly diverted into the continuation of conflict.

The limited provision of light weapons to opposition groups, the paper argues, could not offset the Syrian army's much heavier military capabilities. Government use of heavy weapons, aircraft and other destructive means in residential and industrial areas devastated buildings, water systems, electricity networks, sanitation, roads and production. Industrial and commercial activity collapsed in numerous opposition-held areas. The conflict developed into an arena of intervention by neighboring and international governments, jihadist organizations and sectarian militias.

Decades of repression had also deprived society of political activity and safe spaces in which to debate legitimacy, public authority and collective life. In the author's argument, inherited assumptions persisted without sufficiently adapting to changing conditions. Where institutional capacity and legitimacy are both deficient, citizens seek protection through competing patronage networks. Outside actors, pursuing their own interests, may enable local leaders to play one sponsor against another. Meanwhile, violence damages social cohesion and drives skilled people abroad in search of security and opportunity. These processes reinforce one another in a self-perpetuating cycle.

The paper therefore proposes a connected approach rather than a single remedy: assess the conflict and the dynamics sustaining it; support dialogue and political participation; strengthen justice and the social fabric; agree on a shared national vision; develop accountable political and economic institutions; and give local communities the means to manage their own affairs. Its premise is that rebuilding legitimate relations between state and society is inseparable from breaking the cycle of fragility.

2. The Concept of Fragility and the Deficit of Legitimacy

In 2007 the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) described a fragile state in terms of its lack of political structures and/or capacity to perform essential functions relating to poverty reduction, development, security and human rights. A subsequent formulation emphasized the state's inability to meet citizens' expectations or manage changes in expectations and capacities through political processes [1].

As attention shifted from the state considered in isolation to relations between state and society, discussion increasingly moved from “fragile states” to “situations of fragility.” The latter term brings the character of the state-society relationship to the foreground.

For the purposes of this paper, the defining feature of fragility is an inability of public authority to govern effectively and to establish constructive, reciprocal relations with society. Capacity should not be understood only as organizational, institutional or financial resources. It also depends on rules, norms and regulations recognized as legitimate by both institutions and the people subject to them. Weakness in finance, technology and human resources can make a state fragile; so can a deficit of legitimacy. Either can prevent state institutions from functioning as a credible public authority.

Legitimacy is understood here as the authorization or acceptance of a political or social institution by those over whom it exercises authority. It is therefore an empirical and relational phenomenon, shaped by beliefs, perceptions and expectations. An institution that falls short of a formal benchmark may nevertheless be perceived as legitimate by a community, while a formally established institution may fail to command acceptance.

Analyzing fragility requires attention to relations between the state and society, and to relations of power within society itself. A legitimate political order presupposes that citizens recognize the state as their ultimate public authority. Yet in fragile situations, institutions often fail to organize even basic aspects of everyday life, weakening their claim to that authority. Deficient capacity frequently becomes a source of deficient legitimacy, which then further undermines capacity.

State formation normally grows out of relationships among communities, elites and centers of power. The modern practice of statebuilding with significant external assistance developed through colonialism and the League of Nations' mandate system and has reappeared in countries emerging from international or internal war. Such states face two kinds of demand for legitimacy: internal demands to reflect citizens' priorities and external demands from other states, international organizations and donors. These demands may not coincide. Local factions may respond by cultivating outside sponsorship rather than earning the confidence of the populations they claim to represent.

Conversely, what donors consider the most efficient route to state legitimacy may not be viewed as legitimate by local actors [2].

External assistance can damage legitimacy when national policy becomes subordinate to outside preferences and citizens have little influence over decisions affecting their lives. Elites already distant from their populations may become further accountable to external patrons instead. Uniform statebuilding templates are particularly problematic when they neglect local historical, social and institutional conditions. The paper's conclusion is that there can be no universal recipe for rebuilding the state, and no single institutional model that produces the same outcome everywhere [3].

Fragility and weak legitimacy aggravate a series of interlinked challenges: violent conflict and violations of human rights; the emigration of skilled people; refugee crises; displacement and demographic imbalance; widespread fear; extreme poverty; and the erosion of social cohesion. They are not merely separate symptoms. They affect the ability of public institutions and communities to recover from one another's losses.

3. The Roots of Fragility in Syria

3.1. The Sense of Sectarian Injustice

The paper traces the sense of religious and sectarian inequality in Syria to practices of the Ottoman Empire. Legal distinctions between communities, together with arrangements negotiated between European powers and Ottoman authorities from the seventeenth century onward, enabled European governments to claim protective roles toward particular Christian communities and other minorities. The author notes that France and Austria were associated with Catholic communities, Russia with Orthodox Christians and Britain with smaller Protestant groups. Privileges could include travel rights, access to special tribunals, education, particular tax exemptions and appointments in consular services [4].

The nineteenth-century Tanzimat reforms, although designed to modernize the empire and develop a common framework of citizenship, did not fully displace the older millet-based distinctions. The violence of 1860 in Lebanon, and Sultan Abdulhamid II's subsequent emphasis on Islamic political identity after 1876, are presented as developments that deepened anxieties among Christian communities and reinforced perceptions of unequal citizenship [5].

The commercial consequences were equally significant. Certain religious-community elites were able to use positions within local administration and ties with European markets to accumulate wealth and influence. Drawing on the work of historian Philip Khoury, the author discusses how merchant, lending and banking networks connected the economy of Ottoman Damascus ever more closely with European commerce [6]. French educational and institutional activity in the Levant also expanded, partly in competition with British influence.

The paper notes links between Saint Joseph University and French higher education, including a Beirut law faculty and professional training oriented to industries and investments of interest to France.

When Arab rule under Faisal emerged in 1918 after the collapse of Ottoman authority, the effort to abolish the existing system of privileges met resistance from some of those who had benefited from it. The new authorities had yet to establish a credible alternative to the Ottoman order, notwithstanding that order's many defects. The result, in the author's reading, was a transition in which competing claims to equality, protection and political belonging were not reconciled within a shared concept of citizenship.

3.2. The Burden of Colonialism and Imported State Structures

State structures and laws introduced during the French Mandate and the First Republic were often disconnected from the systems through which Syrian communities had historically managed their affairs. Colonial boundaries separated communities from parts of their social and economic environments. Republican institutions modeled on the French experience encountered locally rooted practices of exercising authority, negotiating relationships and organizing collective affairs. The success of a model in one country, the paper argues, did not mean that it would succeed in a society that had not experienced the historical transformations that produced it.

The author draws here on the argument, associated with Seth Kaplan, that colonial legacies and poorly rooted institutions can separate governments from societies and elites from citizens [7].

Western-style parliaments, ministries and administrative structures were introduced without a corresponding process through which communities could understand, shape and take ownership of them. Until the late Ottoman period, expectations of state-provided services remained limited in many localities. People did not commonly expect the central state to establish schools, irrigation systems or modern networks of water, electricity and roads. Heavy taxation was experienced without commensurate services [8]. The years 1915–1918 brought drought, locusts and severe food shortages, as well as political upheaval.

The document presents these events as sources of displacement and migration among people possessing skills and education [9].

Under French administration, the state expanded its functions and its encounters with local society. Its ambition was to create a legal and administrative order in which citizens would receive services and be equal before the law. The new conception of the state was radically different from the institution that many Syrians had known. Yet new legislation was often neither widely discussed nor understood.

The building of governmental bodies was not matched by equivalent changes in economic, political, social and cultural institutions or by a sustained effort to develop the skills needed to make the system operate. A professional public service and a sense of common ownership of the state were never adequately established. The author argues that a national identity capable of grounding a new political relationship could not simply be legislated into existence [10].

After independence. Political life following independence from France was marked by repeated military interventions and competition between civilian and military authority. Between 1949 and 1954 Syria experienced a series of coups: Husni al-Za'im took power in March 1949; two further coups followed in August and December of that year; Adib al-Shishakli consolidated his position through another coup in November 1951; and his rule ended in February 1954. The paper treats this sequence as evidence of a republican institution unable to stabilize its own political rules.

Twentieth-century efforts at political change—including coups, revolutions, party projects and attempts to unite republics—fell short of their declared promise. Rivalries between Aleppo and Damascus, and later sectarian alignments, exclusionary competition and struggles over privileges, weakened confidence in political leadership. The dominance of Sunni landowning elites in parts of political life began to erode in the 1950s. The Baath Party's military seizure of power in 1963 enabled historically marginalized economic groups and members of minority communities to gain a greater role in the political arena, without resolving the problem of building legitimate, broadly shared institutions.

3.3. Laws Imposed from Above

Between the Ottoman withdrawal in October 1918 and the time of writing, Syria adopted a succession of constitutions under changing political circumstances and military coups. A more durable constitutional framework was imposed in 1973, when Hafez al-Assad appointed a committee chaired by Muhammad al-Fadil to prepare what was described as the country's permanent constitution. Approved through a referendum in March of that year, the document established the Baath Party's worldview at the center of the state.

It defined the aims of Syrian society through the language of “unity, freedom and socialism,” connected Syria to the Federation of Arab Republics, and described its people as part of the Arab nation. The requirement that the president be a Syrian Arab, in the author's assessment, excluded other components of society from the highest office.

Article 8 designated the Baath Party as the leader of state and society. The president was nominated by the party's regional leadership, through the People's Assembly, for a referendum without an alternative candidate. The constitution envisaged a socialist economy built primarily around the public sector. Yet the author argues that its declarations concerning public freedoms were largely unrealized. Constitutional prohibitions of torture and other abuses coexisted with arbitrary arrest, exile and surveillance. From 1973 until the lifting of emergency measures in April 2011, the constitution operated alongside the state of emergency declared in 1963.

Citing a study of the Syrian constitution, the paper identifies five legal instruments used to restrict freedoms that the constitution ostensibly protected [11]:

- The 1963 Emergency Law, which restricted demonstrations and facilitated arbitrary detention and surveillance.
- Legislative Decree No. 6 of 1965, commonly described as the Law for the Protection of the Revolution.
- Military Trials Law No. 109 of 1968, which enabled civilians to be tried before military courts.
- Legislative Decree No. 47 of 1968, establishing State Security Courts.
- Law No. 49 of 1980, imposing the death penalty for membership in the Muslim Brotherhood, in the context of the confrontations of that period.

Presidential authority was exceptionally broad. The president headed the executive, could issue legislation, exercised extensive influence over the judiciary, appointed the Supreme Constitutional Court, commanded the armed forces, nominated civilian and military officials and could submit major questions to referendums. Seven-year presidential terms could be renewed. In the author's view, this concentration of power made formal constitutional protections inadequate as restraints on executive and security authority.

The authoritarian system built by Hafez al-Assad was preserved under Bashar al-Assad, but the economic component became increasingly prominent. The regime sought external economic openness

while retaining control over major facilities and the superiority of the intelligence and security apparatus. It could not accommodate Western-style liberalism, the paper argues, because a genuinely liberal order would give individuals and civil society independent economic, intellectual and ultimately political agency. It would make the state an enabler rather than the manager of social initiative.

The language of the “social market economy,” borrowed from Germany's post-war experience, offered a way to speak of liberalization while retaining discretionary control over investment. The paper argues that this adaptation enabled politically connected actors to deploy wealth accumulated through access to state assets and privileges. Its stated developmental aims could not be achieved through weak regional planning, a central monopoly over investment decisions, unequal budget allocations among governorates, the exclusion of local communities from their own development choices and persistent delays in urban and town planning.

The problem was therefore not simply an inadequate law or an isolated policy: it was a pattern in which legal institutions and administrative decisions were detached from public accountability.

3.4. Education Systems

Syrian law guaranteed a right to education and made basic schooling compulsory and free. Yet the author identifies a widening mismatch between education and the labor market. General secondary schools, vocational and technical institutions, and universities did not consistently develop the skills required by productive employment. Growing numbers of educated young people consequently sought state jobs, while the public sector's capacity to absorb new entrants was diminishing [12].

Education and vocational training should have evolved with changing markets and local economies, enabling young people to move into more productive and sustainable work. Instead, regulations and economic policies made it difficult to establish businesses capable of employing new workers in the formal economy. Informal employment expanded. The paper calls for simpler business-registration procedures, tax reform, incentives for productive private investment and support for the creation of legitimate enterprises.

Traditional and informal apprenticeships, meanwhile, often remained confined to established crafts. Without opportunities for skills upgrading, Syrian artisans struggled to raise productivity, adopt new practices or innovate. Thus education, regulation and labor-market structures combined to restrict economic mobility and weaken the ability of local communities to make use of their resources.

3.5. Patronage in Syrian Politics

When Hafez al-Assad displaced the Baath Party's leftist leadership in 1970, he expanded party membership and sought to transform its claim to revolutionary redemption into a mass political source of legitimacy. The party's original image of rescuing the Arab nation from colonial domination was recast, in the author's account, as the defense and elevation of marginalized social groups, including religious minorities. The ruling system presented Hafez al-Assad as a protector against the supposed domination of an urban Sunni majority.

This was an unofficial political narrative rather than the Baath Party's formal pan-Arab doctrine. Within it, Alawite communities in particular could be represented as an isolated and historically oppressed population rescued through access to state employment, the military and intelligence bodies. The author takes care to distinguish the privileged stratum that grew within security and governmental institutions from the Alawite community as a whole. It was a political and socioeconomic network that claimed to represent a wider communal identity, not an entire sect acting with a single interest.

The confrontation with the Muslim Brotherhood's Fighting Vanguard in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and its campaign of assassinations, reinforced mutually hostile and exclusionary narratives. The Vanguard's understanding of state ownership in religious terms helped reproduce the official claim that Alawites as a community were being threatened by urban Sunni society. Such narratives obscured the much more complicated reality that many Sunni rural communities had also participated in and supported the Baath's social coalition.

Hafez al-Assad was adept at building alliances across social groups, above all with previously marginalized rural constituencies. The paper identifies three pillars of this coalition. First, land-reform policies begun during the 1958–1961 union with Egypt and continued under Baath rule were maintained. Second, the public sector expanded to absorb people with insufficient capital or experience for independent business. Third, the army, intelligence services and the party apparatus grew, tying livelihoods and careers to the survival of the ruling system.

Salaries, free schooling, food and fuel subsidies, housing loans, cooperatives and access to agricultural plots provided material security for beneficiaries and their families.

These arrangements were forms of patronage, but they also constituted an intricate system of social provision. The younger ruling generation under Bashar al-Assad increasingly regarded those inherited obligations as burdens. The author argues that the social networks supporting the earlier state became among the first casualties of a monopolistic and selective economic liberalization, although many households continued to depend on the income and services those networks supplied.

Drawing on the interpretation attributed to Muhammad Jamal Barout, the paper describes a contest during Bashar al-Assad's early years between the older generation of officials and a younger circle seeking greater political and economic power. Despite reliance on Syrian advisers with Western education and professional experience, the emerging pattern resembled elite capture visible elsewhere in the region: economic privileges concentrated among the ruler's family, relatives, trusted associates and major companies attached to them. Public assets were neglected or dismantled; commercial, tourism and other rapidly profitable investments were favored over broad-based production.

The author compares this pattern with crony networks around ruling families in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia during the period preceding the Arab uprisings.

In Syria, economic “liberalization” became associated with Bashar al-Assad, Rami Makhlouf and a narrow circle of connected business figures. The paper reports a popular play on the Arabic word for privatization that conveyed the idea of turning the national economy into the private estate of a ruling

family. This was not the diffusion of market opportunity; it was a redistribution of public privileges to individuals able to obtain protection and preferential treatment.

The author describes this form of “monopolistic liberalism” as an extractive capitalism based on quick returns rather than free and fair competition. Tourism, telecommunications, real-estate speculation, large commercial complexes, limited processing industries and consumer lending did not create enough productive employment or a sufficiently broad economic base. Skilled service professionals could benefit while large numbers of workers remained outside the gains. Nor did wealth reliably spread from privileged firms through the wider economy.

The security apparatus was integral to the resulting political economy. Connected firms could rely on agencies that operated above ordinary law, bypassing bureaucracy and excluding competitors. Repression thereby entered economic life: an actor whose interests conflicted with the dominant business circle could face the kind of arbitrary pressure previously associated with political opposition. Impunity for security chiefs, combined with selective enforcement of the law, weakened any public belief that the state acted impartially.

The Daraa protests of 2011, which included demands for accountability for Atef Najib and criticism of Rami Makhlouf's economic influence, expanded into calls to end dynastic and security rule, remove the president and reconstruct institutions including the armed forces. The government, the paper contends, did not respond to meaningful reform demands. The slogan “The people want the fall of the regime,” popularized in Tunisia and Egypt, came to define a broad revolutionary aim.

The author also questions the assumption, held by some protesters and political leaders, that the rapid departure of a ruler would automatically produce a free and functional new order.

The example of Egypt encouraged the belief that mass mobilization in a central square could achieve regime change at relatively low cost. The slogan was transported to Syria without sufficient analysis of the country's distinctive institutional structure or the practical steps needed after a transition. Enthusiasm and hope after years of political closure encouraged maximal demands, while neither communities nor elites possessed a shared plan to translate the abstract goal into an operative political system.

The early language of the uprising was also the language of “freedom and dignity.” For people living under pervasive coercion, freedom meant escape from fear and from the near-total control exercised by the authorities over daily life. A protester's insistence, “I am not an animal; I am a human being,” summarized the demand for dignity. Regime ideology, by contrast, had long equated “freedom” primarily with national liberation from colonialism and “dignity” with the state's posture toward Israel and Syria's external adversaries.

These contrasting meanings deepened the inability of the two sides to recognize each other's political language. The goal of a democratic civilian state was articulated most explicitly by opposition intellectuals as the institutional expression of freedom and dignity.

The government answered demands and demonstrations with extreme violence. The paper recounts the history of prosecutions for charges such as “weakening national sentiment,” “undermining the prestige of the state” and belonging to an unauthorized organization. Special courts, prolonged detention, prison systems and intelligence agencies placed sharp limits on political organization and expression. The collective memory of earlier violence, including the Hama massacre and atrocities associated with Syrian involvement in Lebanon, had already eroded public trust in the state. The repression of the 2011 uprising further damaged that relationship.

As the uprising became militarized, new local leaders emerged. Some withdrew from direct activity or left Syria, partly because fieldwork had become dangerous or impossible, and partly to seek the funding and political support on which emerging organizations increasingly depended. Their links with opposition networks formed in exile gave rise to several institutional forms that the paper analyzes critically.

The political façade: the Syrian National Council. Early opposition elites presented themselves as the political voice of an uprising they believed needed representation. Public declarations and signs proclaiming that “the Syrian National Council represents me” constituted a thin and unstable form of authorization. Support could quickly turn to withdrawal of confidence. The Council's premise, in the author's analysis, was that representation would lead to an international intervention on the model seen in Libya. But the international willingness to undertake such an intervention in Syria did not materialize.

Top-down governing structures: the Coalition. Once direct outside military intervention appeared unlikely, external calls encouraged the formation of institutions to provide essential services where the Syrian state had withdrawn. The author criticizes the way opposition bodies attempted to organize local administration from above. Structures that were beginning to emerge as specialized local service groups were displaced or distorted by an assumption that money sent through higher bodies would eventually produce functioning government. Resources were channeled through incomplete governorate-level and other structures rather than strengthened communities.

The paper regards this as a reproduction of centralizing and patronage practices, not a genuine movement toward accountable decentralization.

Emerging patronage and dependency networks. As conflict ruined livelihoods and political institutions failed to consolidate, networks linked to opposition bodies, armed groups and local intermediaries competed for externally supplied resources. Their members could exchange political claims, service delivery and loyalty for funding. The basic relationship was hierarchical: powerful patrons provided resources to local clients in return for support. Such networks had little need for transparent rules or a coherent institutional structure; their purpose was to allocate favors and maintain influence. Competition between several major patrons made them prone to fragmentation and internal conflict.

The inability to build functioning institutions in exile or in insecure areas helps explain the growth of these exchanges, but it does not justify the absence of a credible political strategy. Some opposition leaders came to believe that an extensive network of patronage could operate as a political system.

Yet whereas the Assad regime organized its hierarchy around one dominant patron, opposition networks depended on numerous external sponsors with divergent objectives. The more these sponsors multiplied, the more conflicting loyalties made effective coordination and institutionalization difficult.

The conclusion of this section is especially important. In the author's view, an older network distributing wealth and power in the Baathist state had broken apart and reconstituted itself as competing patronage networks. They contested resources and authority through an increasingly violent zero-sum struggle, in the absence of common rules. A political culture of victory or defeat prevailed over a shared framework for negotiation.

3.6. Mentalities and Misleading Assumptions

Decades of restricted freedoms, repression and the absence of safe public spaces for political engagement prevented inherited assumptions from being questioned and revised. Established habits of interpreting authority and group relations survived despite profound changes in the country. Some actors continued to defend relationships founded on inequality and coercion even after those arrangements had lost legitimacy and become difficult to sustain.

Many local communities had benefited little from the distribution of national wealth. Distance from central decision-making and weak opportunities for meaningful participation reinforced a fatalistic view of politics. Power was understood in terms of domination: either one prevailed over an opponent or submitted to the victor. The paper links this conception to older traditions of political thought on the ruler who exercises authority through military strength, referring to al-Mawardi and Ibn Khaldun.

It argues that the idea of **ghalaba**, or the rule of the victor, influenced groups engaged in Syria's conflict and narrowed the range of political compromises they could imagine.

3.7. Violent Conflict and Its Effects: Destruction and the Erosion of Cohesion

The protests that began in 2011, demanding accountability for Atef Najib and challenging the economic privileges of figures such as Rami Makhlouf, developed into a conflict that profoundly disrupted established political and economic relations. Civilian deaths and injuries, damage to homes and infrastructure, inadequate medical and educational services, mass displacement and population movements were accompanied by the collapse or erosion of institutional functions and ordinary social ties. Fear and psychological trauma became pervasive. Under such circumstances, communities increasingly organized their resources and attention around survival and conflict rather than production and development.

The paper argues that limited light weapons supplied to opposition groups provoked responses from a regular military equipped with heavy weapons, aircraft and destructive capabilities. Bombardments of residential and industrial areas damaged roads, water and power networks, sanitation and buildings. Productive and commercial activity was disrupted across large areas. These attacks were irregular in

time, affected populated communities and threatened the country's long-term economic and social capacity.

The conflict also acquired an overtly religious and sectarian language. The author nevertheless argues that sectarian identity was not the original or sole driver of the struggle. Religious frames became particularly effective instruments of mobilization for armed leaders and extremist movements seeking to justify exclusion and recruit support. The representation of the conflict as a Sunni-Shiite confrontation, he contends, obscured its more specific political and socioeconomic origins and supplied competing sides with narratives able to reproduce the confrontation over time.

The original grievance concerned the concentration of state and economic power around a narrow ruling elite and its alliances, not the collective responsibility of an entire religious community.

Conflict divided families and neighbors, disrupted markets and eroded the social fabric. Restoring trust and cooperation could take far longer than rebuilding physical infrastructure. The war also created an opening for neighboring states and great powers to pursue security interests inside Syria. Each side's gain or loss could affect external perceptions of regional balance, making a settlement increasingly dependent on international understandings. Violence therefore weakened sovereignty and internal cohesion precisely when their restoration became most necessary.

4. Why Fragility Becomes a Trap

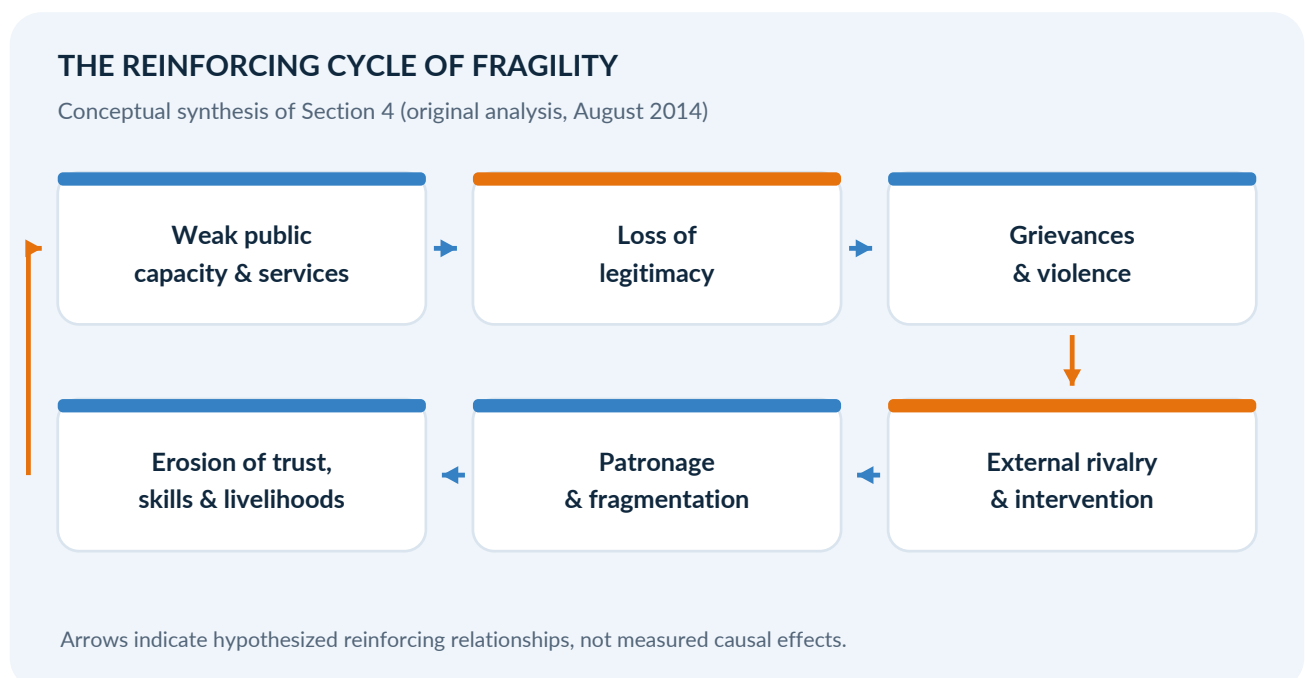


Figure 1. The feedback loop described in the 2014 source, rendered here as a new conceptual diagram. It is illustrative, not a measurement or a current conflict map.

Fragility is not simply a collection of weaknesses. It is a **feedback loop**: causes produce effects that, in turn, intensify the original causes. A vicious cycle occurs when each consequence makes the overall situation more difficult. Conversely, a virtuous cycle arises when successive improvements support further improvements. The paper distinguishes processes in which a cause progressively deepens a condition from situations where the cause and its effects depend directly on each other.

A simple illustration of the latter is the graduate who needs experience to obtain employment but cannot acquire experience without first being hired.

In a fragile political system, weak institutions fail to meet public expectations or deliver basic services. Their inability to perform reduces legitimacy. Where credible arrangements for resolving disputes are absent, grievances can develop into violence. A large conflict invites intervention by external powers whose competing interests complicate political solutions. Simultaneously, deficient capacity and legitimacy push people toward patronage networks that promise protection. Outside support gives local leaders opportunities to exploit rivalry between sponsors. Social trust deteriorates, skilled people migrate, and economic opportunities disappear.

The resulting loss of capacity makes institutions even less able to govern, completing the cycle.

The paper's central proposition is that neither technical assistance alone nor a political bargain detached from society can break this cycle. Any credible response has to alter several of its connected mechanisms: public authority and legitimacy, conflict incentives, patronage structures, social trust, productive capacity and the terms of external engagement.

Conceptual figure: The accompanying diagram is a new visualization of the reinforcing cycle described in this 2014 text, not an empirical map or a claim that the same pattern applies unchanged today.

5. How Can Fragility Be Overcome?

There is no magical formula for escaping fragility. Because the problem reproduces itself through connected causes and effects, measures should seek not merely to alleviate isolated symptoms but to turn a vicious cycle into a virtuous one. The author outlines twelve mutually reinforcing lines of action that, in the conditions of 2014, he believed could help establish a more cohesive state capable of responding to its communities' aspirations.

5.1. Assess the Conflict and/or the Situation of Fragility

A clear assessment of the forces that produced the Syrian crisis, and the incentives that enabled it to persist, is an urgent human need. Syrian and international organizations had already examined particular dimensions of the conflict, but the paper argues that these efforts did not yet amount to a shared, sufficiently comprehensive understanding on which an inclusive political project could be built. Many of the essential stakeholders, especially military actors, were inadequately mapped, while their objectives and relationships remained opaque.

The first task is to identify these actors and enable them to articulate their interests and expectations. An assessment should examine how the crisis arose, how it is sustained, who participates in it, what instruments participants possess and what they seek. Subsequent stages, grounded in this understanding, would generate recommendations for contact and negotiation and begin to develop arrangements capable of ending violence, returning people to their homes and reopening economic activity.

Fragility should be monitored over time rather than measured once. Regular assessments can identify new weaknesses, persistent sources of risk and changes in the factors that drive insecurity. National stakeholders and relevant non-state actors should participate in identifying obstacles to peacebuilding and institutional recovery.

5.2. Support Political Dialogue and Develop Leadership

Political dialogue and leadership development can contribute to peace and statebuilding. Programs should include young people and women's participation and provide opportunities for national, regional and international cooperation in strengthening the skills of political leaders, public institutions and civil society. Leadership development must also challenge the mentality of domination. Emerging leaders need to be able to test their assumptions, evaluate evidence and reorganize relationships within an inclusive framework. Knowledge, dialogue and practical capacities can help move the country from insecurity and confrontation toward cohesion and reconstruction.

5.3. Revive a Legitimate Political Process and Empower Local Communities

A political process capable of building stability requires serious dialogue at all levels and procedures that society regards as acceptable. It also requires inclusive citizenship, mechanisms for handling disagreements and a commitment to ending violence rather than simply redistributing the power to use it. Residents should be involved in designing the arrangements that affect their lives, with legitimate organizational channels through which they can express their different needs, interests and local priorities.

Such participation can reduce distrust and failures of representation. Creating conditions for accepted local-government structures is therefore an urgent part of the response. Local arrangements should enable communities to shape peacebuilding, public service delivery and institutional reconstruction,

while providing precedents for the nonviolent management of local disputes. Political initiatives should reduce patronage and organize rights through law and equality.

The aim, in the author's formulation, is to replace inherited religious and ethnic distinctions as the basis of political competition with a system in which majorities and minorities are political rather than permanently communal: government and opposition would compete within shared rules and cooperate in maintaining the public order. No narrow group should monopolize authority and wealth. A flexible, participatory political framework is necessary to respond to the internal and external changes confronting the country.

5.4. Justice

Peace cannot be sustained without addressing grievances produced by injustice. Accessible and credible justice institutions are essential for reconciliation and stability. The paper recommends considering truth and reconciliation processes that acknowledge suffering, facilitate accountability and help communities confront violent histories without reproducing them.

Remembering victims and recognizing harms is an ethical responsibility. Forgetting atrocities can renew humiliation and exclusion, while memories left unaddressed may return as recurrent political crises. Documenting crimes and recording injuries and losses are therefore integral to transitional justice, not an optional exercise after a political settlement. The author refers to the moral and philosophical search for truth as well as to practical guidance on legal documentation [13,14].

5.5. Rebuild Trust and Social Cohesion

War weakens social bonds and undermines confidence in political leaders. Rebuilding trust requires credible national oversight and accountability, stronger local service institutions, more effective public revenues and an increasing capacity to finance services through transparent domestic mechanisms. Assistance delivered through accountable local and national institutions can help restore visible relationships between taxation, public responsibility and public benefit.

The paper also discusses the possible constructive role of shared religious values and institutions. Religious identity can deepen divisions when mobilized for exclusionary purposes, but faith-based networks may also support reconciliation, service delivery and the renewal of social obligations, particularly where they refrain from seeking partisan dominance. A blanket dismissal of religion as a source of conflict can overlook opportunities for cooperation.

Local leaders, relief and development organizations, youth and women should be treated as partners in restoring the social fabric. The roles of religious figures and community notables differ from those of technical agencies or political bodies; effective cooperation requires recognizing those differences. Religion may contribute less directly to certain economic, refugee or institutional questions, but can have an important role in addressing local discrimination, intergroup grievances and community-level disputes.

Societies with stronger social cohesion are generally better positioned to cope with crises. Where public institutions fail to provide fairly distributed services or enforce the law equally, distrust and division intensify. Conversely, innovative arrangements that coordinate contributions by various actors and strengthen community checks and balances can rebuild cooperation. The author sees such processes as a bridge from the reproduction of conflict to the renewal of economic and social development.

5.6. Agree on One National Vision and a Shared Plan

A shared national vision is central to a credible transition. It should be agreed among political leaders, developed through consultation with communities and informed by assessments of institutional and social fragility. Planning must be flexible enough to address short-, medium- and long-term priorities rather than assume that every problem can be solved in a single phase.

Competing and sometimes contradictory demands concerning the form of the state, its institutions and its relationship to citizens made an externally designed transition especially risky. The author argues that Syrians need ownership of their own political future. National actors should therefore develop realistic and carefully examined strategies that reflect their actual circumstances rather than simply adopt familiar foreign or historical templates.

5.7. Establish an Economic Foundation for Development

Employment, livelihoods and participation in productive activity can strengthen people's sense of belonging and rebuild practical connections between society and the state. A fragile state burdened by prolonged conflict cannot meet developmental needs if it remains the direct supervisor of every economic and social process. Its role must shift toward enabling enterprise, investment and the improvement of services.

The paper proposes using contracts and, where appropriate, the capacities of non-state organizations and businesses to restore infrastructure and deliver civil services. These arrangements would have to be managed for public benefit and accountability, rather than become another route to exclusive privileges. Their purpose is to create a basis for employment, reconstruction and longer-term economic resilience.

5.8. Transparency and Monitoring of Implementation

Corruption can perpetuate conflict by undermining public institutions and deepening popular resentment. Anti-corruption measures require identifying conflicts of interest, exposing private incentives that distort public decisions and reducing patronage within administration. Public reporting, planning and local oversight should be strengthened. The paper also recommends a logical-framework approach to establish objectives, indicators and mechanisms for monitoring progress at the national level.

5.9. Human Security Before National Security

The security of people is indispensable to peace. Insecurity reproduces violence and prevents unresolved political and social problems from being addressed. Human security offers a corrective to approaches that treat the state rather than the individual as the primary object of protection. The paper criticizes the use of resistance rhetoric, foreign enemies and military mobilization to justify excessive burdens on citizens and to evade responsibility for neglected public development.

National security becomes hollow when it is not underpinned by the security of individuals and communities. Human security means freedom from fear and freedom from want. Its dimensions include economic, food, health, environmental and political security. People must be able to see that these needs come first and that public authorities are assessed against their ability to meet them. A state unable to ensure the basic dignity and security of its population will struggle to defend itself against destabilizing external pressures.

5.10. Improve Revenues and Convert Them into Services

A functioning state needs the capacity to collect public revenue and manage it fairly for collective purposes. This requires transparent tax administration, stronger public services, and accountable management of grants and contributions from Syrians abroad. Rebuilding the connection between public revenues and visible services can support both economic recovery and the restoration of confidence in government.

5.11. Align Commitments and Coordinate Donors

Agreements among national stakeholders should be clear and grounded in an inclusive national vision and plan. The activities of different actors need to complement rather than undermine one another. Negotiations and arrangements should draw on a broad range of stakeholders and public perspectives and be subject to review involving more than one constituency. Donors, despite their different interests and priorities, should align assistance with agreed national needs and support inclusive participation rather than fragment it.

5.12. Build Capabilities

If local service groups are to assume responsibility for aspects of local administration, they must first have the capacities needed to perform those tasks. Capacity-building is not a one-time training exercise and cannot be detached from a national understanding of which functions should be exercised locally and how different levels of government should cooperate. Reorganizing public authority, redistributing economic resources and redefining responsibility for civil services all require long-term investments in professional, organizational and technical capabilities.

The paper ends with the premise that institutional recovery must be pursued as a coherent transformation of relationships, not merely as the restoration of administrative forms.

Notes and References from the 2014 Source

The following references reproduce or translate the citations listed in the original document.

Bibliographic details have not been independently checked or updated.

1. Norad Report 20/2009, *Discussion*, p. 8.
2. Norad Report 20/2009, *Discussion*, p. 9.
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6. Philip Khoury, paper presented to the Second International Conference on Bilad al-Sham, Damascus University (1987), on the nature and distribution of political authority in Damascus, 1860–1908.
7. Seth Kaplan, “The Roots of Fragility” / “A Framework for Fixing Fragile States: Leveraging Social Cohesion and Local Institutions,” Global Economic Symposium (link recorded in the source: <http://www.global-economic-symposium.org/knowledgebase/the-global-polity/repairing-failed-states/proposals/a-framework-for-fixing-fragile-states-leveraging-social-cohesion-and-local-institutions>).
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9. Abdul Qadir Ayyash, *Civilization of the Euphrates Valley: The Syrian Section*, Dar al-Ahali, Damascus (1996), p. 321.
10. Volker Boege, Anne Brown, Kevin Clements and Anna Nolan, forthcoming in *Berghof Handbook Dialogue*, No. 8, p. 6 (as cited in the source).
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Translation note. This is a substantive English editorial translation retaining the source's argument, structure and substantive examples, with paragraph restructuring and prose modernization for readability. The interpretive claims remain those of the 2014 original. It is not a refreshed context assessment, a revalidated citation edition or a statement of KMT Centre's present policy position.