

# Transnational mobilisation and escalating conflict in Syria

## An anatomy of Syria's exiled political opposition

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## Abstract

The master frame of the “Syrian Civil War” has dominated the public discourse, implying that it is essentially domestic in nature and bound by the territory of the Syrian state. This state-centric view has underscored most research on civil war. However, domestic-level analyses provide insufficient explanations. The escalation of the Syrian conflict displays a substantially more complicated picture characterised by ambiguous dynamics, myriad identities, and diverse private and collective interests and behaviours that transcend the modern Syrian state. This study responds to an identified weakness in the research on diaspora mobilisation and engagement in civil conflicts. It is built upon two questions. Firstly, how does conflict escalation mobilise Syria’s exiled political opposition? Secondly, how does transnational mobilisation of the exiled political opposition play a causal role in conflict escalation? Set within a theoretical analysis of diaspora and transnational mobilisation in politics and conflict, a single case study of the principal political opposition, the *National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces*, is conducted. The process-tracing method is applied to examine hypothesised mechanisms of transnational mobilisation and their relationship to conflict escalation. The mechanisms of transitional brokerage, strategic framing and outbidding deployed by the exiled political opposition are shown to be consequences of conflict escalation. The exiled political opposition’s approach to resource mobilisation, and lobbying and persuasion are shown to advocate and exacerbate conflict. Overall the study makes a contribution towards understanding the transnational dynamics of contentious politics and conflict escalation in Syria.

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## i Introduction

*We are accused of terrorism  
If we dare to write about the remains of a homeland  
That is scattered in pieces and in decay  
In decadence and disarray  
About a homeland that is searching for a place  
And about a nation that no longer has a face  
About a homeland that has nothing left of its great ancient verse  
But that of wailing and eulogy  
About a homeland that has nothing in its horizons  
Of freedoms of different types and ideology  
About a homeland that resembles poetry in our country  
Improvised, imported, loose and of no boundaries  
Of foreign tongue and soul  
Detached from Man and Land, ignoring their plight as a whole.*

Nizar Qabbani, "We are accused of terrorism", London, 15 April 1997

Written one year before his death, the opening stanzas of Nizar Qabbani's poem transcend some 17 years to provide an accurate description of the Syrian Arab Republic (Syria) today – fraught with disunity and plagued by foreign influence. Qabbani laments the great Syrian homeland or historical *Bilad al-Sham* that, since being restructured by foreign powers in the wake of World War I, has left the modern state struggling to carve out a unifying and durable national identity whilst the void is filled with widespread societal malaise and competing ideologies.<sup>1</sup> Consistent with Qabbani's refrain, those who in the present day write about or challenge the Syrian government's designs on state ideology, national identity and, therefore, solidarity are accused of collaboration with the hostile

<sup>1</sup> Bilad al-Sham (The Syrian Lands or The Levant) describes the territory organised in the wake of the Arab conquests of the 630s and governed under the Rashidun, Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates and later divided and administered as sub-provinces by the Ottomans. It extends eastward from the Mediterranean to the Euphrates and is bound by the Arabian Desert in the south and the Taurus Mountains in the north. It spans present-day Lebanon, Israel, Palestinian territories, Jordan, Syria, eastern Iraq and south-east Turkey.

West, sedition and terrorism.<sup>2</sup> This has remained the narrative of the Syrian government during the onset and course of the current conflict. Dissent and resistance, whether cast through words or the taking up of arms, are framed as being existential threats to the unity and security of the Syrian state and society. Those threats are said to be fomented by hostile foreign actors. Dissenting Syrian citizens who participate in resistance activities are branded as being rogue, misguided and coopted by conspiring foreign interests and the practitioners of extreme interpretations of the Sunnah.<sup>3</sup>

If the Syrian government's narrative is to be believed, then one would conclude that the conflict is almost entirely foreign in origin and design. That it has been stoked by the United States and its allies in Europe and the Gulf, as well as foreign-bred Salafi zealots and al-Qa'eda types, that have long sought to destabilise Syria in order to serve their ideological and geopolitical interests. The conflict's critical flashpoint – the 15<sup>th</sup> March 2011 uprising in Dar'a – was followed by locally-led acts

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<sup>2</sup> Lesch, David W. *Syria: The fall of the house of Assad*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2013, pp.88, 227. Lesch explains that the al-Assad regime believes that the perpetrators of instability are armed gangs and terrorists acting on behalf of Syria's external enemies. Shaaban, Bouthaina. 2011. 'News, which news?!' *Syria Forward Magazine*, [90], April 2011, p.56. Shaaban is Bashar al-Assad's political and media advisor. She conveys the view that an interfering hostile West is at work in the present conflict. She writes that this is a continuum of the Wests' division and domination of the Arab region since the Balfour Declaration and Sykes-Picot agreement. Less than two months into the conflict, she warns that foreign interests threaten to hijack popular calls for political reform.

<sup>3</sup> Lesch, 2013, pp.24, 106-7. Bashar al-Assad's 2007 speech was directed at a Saudi Arabian audience in which he declared that "*the biggest threat in the region now is the sectarian one*". At the time he was referring to the divisive impact of the sectarian dispute in Iraq on the integrity of its Arab identity and the likely repercussions for Syria, Saudi Arabia and other Arab states. The framing of opposition groups as Sunni-Salafist extremists that threaten the unity and security of Syria's secular society has been a long-standing strategy of the Syrian regime under both Bashar al-Assad and his father before him.

Bashar al-Assad's speech at the People's Assembly, 30 March 2011. Sourced on 4th May 2014 from:

[http://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=305:president-bashar-al-assad-s-a-speech-at-the-people-s-assembly-march-30-2011&catid=117&Itemid=496](http://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=305:president-bashar-al-assad-s-a-speech-at-the-people-s-assembly-march-30-2011&catid=117&Itemid=496)

of confrontation across several Syrian cities and the outer suburbs of Damascus.<sup>4</sup> However, numerous voices and pockets of collective action from outside Syria have curiously come to fit neatly into the Syrian government's narrative. For instance, foreign-based revolutionary campaigns had already materialised and proliferated through social media in the wake of Hosni Mubarak's demise in Egypt. Protests were coordinated by externally-driven and miscible social media entrepreneurs intensifying calls for civil liberties and political reform as the unrest took hold in the Hawran.<sup>5</sup> Grand Mufti Hassoun declared that the *fitna* (dischord) was inspired by seditious media networks funded by hostile Gulf-states intent on breaking Syrian national unity.<sup>6</sup> Western leaders coalesced in their condemnation of Bashar al-Assad, and this soon compelled Great Britain to lead the exodus of foreign diplomatic missions from Syria in efforts to isolate and pressure the regime.<sup>7</sup> Exiled Salafi clerics like Saudi-based Adnan al-'Ar'ur were joined by al-Qa'eda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in calling on *al-ummat al-Islamiyya* to rise up and revolt.<sup>8</sup> With the support of Turkey and Qatar, key figures and supporters of the exiled *Syrian*

<sup>4</sup> The Syrian uprising developed without defined ideology, leadership, or dominant political opposition groups. Once peaceful dissenting voices emanating from the street turned to spirited but disjointed calls for an armed uprising as violent confrontations occurred between citizens and regime forces.

<sup>5</sup> Political Memory. 2014. 'A meeting with Michel Kilo', *Al-Arabiya English*, 9<sup>th</sup> May. Sourced on 13<sup>th</sup> August 2014 from: <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/webtv/programs/political-memory/2014/05/08/A-meeting-with-Syria-s-Michel-Kilo.html>

Leenders, Reinoud. 2012. 'Collective action and mobilization in Dar'a: An anatomy of the onset of Syria's popular uprising', *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, 17:4, pp.419-434.

Leenders, Reinoud. 2013. 'Social movement theory and the onset of the popular uprising in Syria', *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 35:3, pp.273-289. Social media campaigns calling for a popular uprising and revolution in Syria had materialised by January 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Pierret, Thomas. 2013. *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution*, Cambridge University Press, New York, pp.224-226.

<sup>7</sup> Lesch, 2013, pp.91-99.

Author's observation during a visit to Damascus in April-May 2011: The British government began to withdraw its diplomatic presence, triggering a sequence of withdrawals of foreign embassies in collective condemnation of the Syrian government's violent response to the protests.

<sup>8</sup> Pierret, 2013, pp.234-238. *Al-ummat al-Islamiyya*: Arabic for the Muslim nation.

*Ikhwan* congregated to form an external political opposition for which widespread international support grew.<sup>9</sup>

The conflict indeed has regional and international dimensions, which are described in forensic detail by the International Crisis Group in a number of field reports published in 2012-2014.<sup>10</sup> The author of those reports among other scholars observes that the strategies and tactics deployed by external opposition groups are shaped not only by the political and security context of the Syrian state but also other states within and beyond the region.<sup>11</sup> It is important to point out that, contrary to the government's foreign-conspiracy narrative, the external opposition groups are comprised of Syrian citizens who are engaging in unprecedented levels of political activism.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the conflict cannot be quarantined and studied solely within the domestic boundaries of the modern Syrian state.

### **i.i Civil or transnational war?**

The discourse of the Syrian civil war has come to dominate reporting, implying that it is essentially domestic in nature and bound by the territory of the Syrian state.<sup>13</sup> According to political scientist Idean Salehyan, this state-centric view of civil war, as evident in the use of labels such as "domestic", "internal" or

<sup>9</sup> Lesch, 2013, p.167.

Pierret, 2013, pp.216-18, 224-226. *Syrian Ikhwan* is the collective term for the various factions that make up the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.

<sup>10</sup> International Crisis Group. 2012(a). 'Syria's mutating conflict', *Middle East Report No. 128*, Damascus/Brussels, 1<sup>st</sup> August.

International Crisis Group. 2013. 'Anything but politics: The state of Syria's political opposition', *Middle East Report No. 146*, Beirut/Brussels/Damascus, 17<sup>th</sup> October.

International Crisis Group. 2014. 'Lebanon's Hizbollah turns eastward to Syria', *Middle East Report No. 153*, Beirut/Brussels, 27<sup>th</sup> May.

<sup>11</sup> Adamson, Fiona B. 2005. 'Globalisation, transnational political mobilisation, and networks of violence', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 18:1, pp.42-45.

<sup>12</sup> Lesch 2013, p.113.

<sup>13</sup> The conflict in Syria is widely described as a civil war: that is a war between opposing citizens of the same country. Etymological variations sprout from this to include groups of citizens or inhabitants of the same country or nation assembled along party, factional or regional lines. For a recent example, ABC Radio National, The World Today, 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2014: On the day of Syria's Presidential election, the conflict is described as a "raging civil war".



“intrastate” war, has underscored most research on the subject.<sup>14</sup> An examination of the Syrian conflict’s history and present track reveals a substantially more complicated picture that domestic-level analyses alone cannot sufficiently explain. The conflict is characterised by ambiguous dynamics, myriad identities, and diverse, competing private and collective interests and behaviours that political scientist Stathis Kalyvas argues provide the fundamental structure of civil wars.<sup>15</sup>

Mary Kaldor observed that civil conflicts in modern states are often organised transnationally by various non-state actors who craft and claim identities that appeal to the common interests of individuals and groups “loosely-coupled” but independent of state structures and constraints.<sup>16</sup> Kaldor’s thesis is supported by an empirical analysis in Salehyan’s study of violent civil conflicts between 1951 and 1999. The analysis reveals that a majority of rebel “transnational insurgents” have used territories outside of their target states to mobilise and sustain their activities.<sup>17</sup> The location and relative independence of the actors that Kaldor and Salehyan describe enable the formation of cross-border networks to raise, secure and mobilise resources for oppositional political projects.

Central to this transnational phenomenon is the role of diasporas whose activities, according to an often quoted World Bank study, are associated with stoking and

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<sup>14</sup> Salehyan, Idean. 2006. *Rebels without borders: State boundaries, transnational opposition, and civil conflict*, PhD dissertation in political science, University of California, San Diego, p.241. Sourced on 6<sup>th</sup> June 2014 from:

<http://escholarship.org/uc/item/7rn3m2n8?query=salehyan>

<sup>15</sup> Kalyvas, Stathis. 2003. ‘The ontology of political violence: Action and identity in civil wars’, *Perspectives on Politics*, 1:3, p.475.

<sup>16</sup> Kaldor, Mary. *New and Old Wars: Organised Violence in a Global Era*. Stanford University Press, 1999. Kaldor’s observations are referenced by many scholars researching transnationality and civil conflict.

Adamson, 2005, p.37.

<sup>17</sup> Salehyan, 2006, pp.83-137. 55% of rebel groups included in the analysis had organised and mobilised outside of their home states.

sustaining civil conflicts.<sup>18</sup> According to Susan Wayland, the activities of diasporas can help explain the intensity and persistence and of ethno-political conflicts.<sup>19</sup> Congruent with the findings of those studies, political scientist Kristian Gleditsch has produced a body of empirical work arguing that transnational ethnic ties are linked with the onset of civil war.<sup>20</sup> Yossi Shain argues that these ethnic ties and the psychosocial affinities that diasporas have for their homelands impel them to engage in, even exacerbate and sustain, homeland conflicts.<sup>21</sup> Maria Koinova's study of diaspora mobilisation and radicalisation in secessionist conflicts also supports this correlation.<sup>22</sup> Those scholars concur that it is inappropriate to treat civil war as a domestic phenomenon because the risk of conflict and its recurrence is influenced by myriad participants and processes outside of the sovereign territory of the state in which the conflict is taking place.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, if transnational phenomena such as diaspora mobilisation are necessary conditions for conflict onset and recurrence, then just how internal is Syria's civil war? Further, what more is in store for Syria with the escalating violence and internal displacement causing massive and increasing cross-border dispersal of its citizens,

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<sup>18</sup> Collier, Paul and Anke Hoeffler. 2000. 'Greed & grievances in civil war', *Policy Research Working Paper 2355*, World Bank. The study suggests that civil conflicts resist resolution when linked to large diasporas; and that the activities of diasporas are strong risk factors for recurrent conflict. The study is referenced by several authors listed in the bibliography of this paper, including Idean Salehyan, Fiona Adamson, Maria Koinova and Yossi Shain.

<sup>19</sup> Wayland, Susan. 2004. 'Ethnonationalist networks and transnational opportunities: The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora', *Review of International Studies*, 30:3, pp.406 and 411. Wayland explains that the role of diasporas or transnational ethnic actors have been overlooked in the literature on contentious politics and conflict. She observes that transnational ethnic networks are formed by ethnic elites between diaspora communities and co-ethnics inside and outside the homeland.

<sup>20</sup> Gleditsch, Kristian Skrede. 2007. 'Transnational dimensions of civil war', *Journal of Peace Research*, 44:3, pp.297-298. Gleditsch does not define or apply the concept of diaspora in his research; rather he hypothesises that transnational ethnic linkages increase the risk of civil war onset.

<sup>21</sup> Shain, Yossi. 2002. 'The role of diasporas in conflict perpetuation and resolution', *The SAIS Review of International Affairs*, 22:2, p.125.

<sup>22</sup> Koinova, Maria. 2011. 'Diasporas and secessionist conflicts: The mobilization of the Armenian, Albanian and Chechen diasporas', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 34:2, pp.333-356.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, pp.333-334. Gleditsch, 2007, p.294. Shain, 2002, pp.125-127. Wayland, 2004, pp.415-419.

including opposition activists?<sup>24</sup> Will it cause transnational political activism to proliferate? Will it enhance the prospects for a sustainable political settlement? Or will it exacerbate, expand and prolong the conflict?

The escalating violence in Syria is steering scholars and policy makers to focus on transnational opposition groups that overtly espouse political violence, and how states are responding to the security risks they pose.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, the principal political opposition group that has mobilised outside Syria, the *National Coalition of Syrian Opposition and Revolutionary Forces*, and the role it is playing in the conflict spiral is sidelined. However, it cannot be ignored, firstly, because a relationship between diaspora mobilisation and homeland conflicts has been established in the scholarly literature; and, secondly, because facilitation of and participation in violent conflict is not the exclusive domain of militant groups and their opponents. This second point is evident in Fiona Adamson's study of transnational political mobilisation, in which she argues that violent and non-violent groups possess similar processes of formation and mobilisation. She observes that a given group may combine or interchange non-violent and violent frames and tactics as part of its grand strategy of securing and mobilising international support and resources to achieve political goals.<sup>26</sup> In this vein, all

<sup>24</sup> United Nations High Commission for Refugees. 2014. 'Syrian Regional Refugee Response Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal'. At 12th June 2014, there were 2,792,480 registered Syrian refugees and a further 65,708 awaiting registration; 1,100,486 (39.4%) are registered in Lebanon. estimated to comprise about 33% of the present number of inhabitants in Lebanon when including registered refugees, labour migrants already domicile in Lebanon, and transnationals who reside in both Syria and Lebanon who may or may not have familial ties. Sourced on 12<sup>th</sup> June 2014 from: <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

<sup>25</sup> Transnational groups such as al-Qa'eda and *al-Douliyya al-Islamiyya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham* (ISIS).

<sup>26</sup> Adamson, 2005, p.37-39.

Bercovitch, J. 2007. 'A neglected relationship: Diasporas and conflict resolution' in H. Smith & P. Stares (Eds). *Diasporas in conflict: Peace-makers or peace-wreckers?* United Nations University Press, Tokyo, p.27. Bercovitch argues that the extent of diaspora involvement in homeland conflict can vary at different points in the conflict cycle as marked by the relative degree of violence taking place. For this reason, it is necessary to examine diaspora formation and mobilisation at particular points in the progression of a conflict.

transnational politicised groups participating in the Syrian conflict form a “broader category of non-state political entrepreneurs”, each executing variant strategies and “repertoires of contention”.<sup>27</sup> Adamson’s study demonstrates why it is necessary to broaden the research beyond the militant groups committing violence to include the opposition groups advocating and exacerbating it. This study draws the *National Coalition of Syrian Opposition and Revolutionary Forces* (the NSC) into the centre to examine its transnational mobilisation processes, and to what extent they are consequences and causes of the escalating conflict.<sup>28</sup>

### **i.ii Aim and purpose of the study**

In this study, I aim to make a contribution towards understanding the transnational dynamics of the conflict in Syria. I also aim to make a modest contribution towards the body of research on diaspora mobilisation and engagement in civil conflict.<sup>29</sup> The study is built on two research questions. Firstly, how has conflict escalation mobilised Syria’s exiled political opposition? Secondly, how does transnational mobilisation of the exiled political opposition play a causal role in conflict escalation?

In relation to the first question, I present three core arguments about how conflict escalation influences diaspora mobilisation. Firstly, that it provides Syrian political

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p.32.

<sup>28</sup> NSC Fact Sheet. The NSC formed in November 2012 at the culmination of a three-day meeting in Doha between eleven peak political opposition groups, and eighteen national figures and dissident politicians. The meetings began on November 8th, 2012 and resulted in the November 11<sup>th</sup> agreement between oppositional groups and the Syrian National Council to establish the NSC. Member groups include the Syrian National Council, the Syrian Local Coordination Committees, the National Kurdish Council, the Democratic and Socialist Union Party, the Communist Labor Party, and six groups representing activists, business figures and scholars. Sourced on 26<sup>th</sup> May 2014 from: <http://en.etilaf.org/about-us/fact-sheet.html>

<sup>29</sup> Brinkerhoff, Jennifer M. 2011. ‘Diasporas and conflict societies: Conflict entrepreneurs, competing interests or contributors to stability and development?’, *Conflict, Security & Development*, 11:2, pp.115-143. Referring to the 2009 GW Diaspora Research Programme and the Nordic Africa Institute, Brinkerhoff identifies that research on diaspora engagement in conflict and peace-building is assessed by the programme as the weakest of its seven pillars.

entrepreneurs with a net increase in the opportunities for transnational brokerage of oppositional political structures and support. Secondly, that it shapes how the exiled opposition frames its political agenda in order to build and sustain legitimacy and international and domestic support. Thirdly, that it compels the exiled opposition to engage in outbidding processes to discredit competing opposition groups, which are active inside the Syrian state. With regard to the second question, I argue that diaspora mobilisation processes, including how the exiled opposition mobilises its resources, and how it engages in lobbying and persuasion in the transnational space, are conflict provoking and sustaining.

### **i.iii Method**

The study begins with a review of the scholarly literature on diasporas and transnationality in politics and international relations is undertaken. This is complemented with review of the peer-reviewed quantitative and qualitative research on transnational dynamics of civil conflict.

At the core is a single case study design in which I process-trace a set of five causal mechanisms of transnational mobilisation and conflict escalation as they pertain to the formation and behaviour of the NSC. There are multiple mechanisms and combinations of mechanisms that are likely to be at work, and it is beyond the scope of this study to consider all of the possibilities. In forming my hypotheses about mechanisms, I have drawn from a number of co-dependent branches of inquiry into transnational mobilisation, including brokerage by political entrepreneurs, the building of narratives and strategic frames, political strategies and practices, and procurement of resources and support.<sup>30</sup> I also reference the

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<sup>30</sup> Refer to Chapter One, section 1.1.3, for a description of those branches of inquiry and their theoretical origins.

approaches to mechanism identification used by Kristin Bakke in her study of transnational diffusion in the Chechen conflict and by Fiona Adamson in her study of the mechanisms of diaspora mobilisation in transnational wars.<sup>31</sup> The mechanisms selected for this study are transnational brokerage, strategic framing, outbidding, resource mobilisation, and lobbying and persuasion.

Consistent with Adamson's approach, I make a distinction between the mechanisms of diaspora and transnational mobilisation shaped by escalating conflict, and the mechanisms that affect conflict escalation. First it is necessary to examine mechanisms that explain how the NSC came to form and mobilise in order to understand the processes of conflict escalation. In chapter 2, I trace three mechanisms deployed in the formation and mobilisation of the NSC: transnational brokerage, strategic framing and sectarian outbidding. I hypothesise that conflict escalation shapes each of those mechanisms. Here, escalating conflict is the independent variable and the mechanisms of transnational mobilisation represent the phenomena or dependent variables to be explained.

Chapter 3 follows with an examination of the impacts of the transnational mobilisation of the NSC on conflict escalation. I hypothesise that the Syrian conflict is exacerbated and sustained by how the NSC deploys two mechanisms: resource mobilisation, and lobbying and persuasion. Here each mechanism is an independent variable affecting the dependent variable of conflict escalation.

<sup>31</sup> Adamson, Fiona B. 2013. 'Mechanisms of Diaspora Mobilization and the Transnationalization of Civil War.' In: *Transnational Dynamics of Civil War*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, pp.63-88.

Bakke, Kristin M. 2013. 'Copying and learning from outsiders? Assessing diffusion form transnational insurgents in the Chechen wars' in Jeffrey T. Checkel (Ed). *Transnational Dynamics of Civil War*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, pp.34-40.  
The method I administer is largely adapted from Adamson's study.

Process-level evidence of the five mechanisms is drawn and synthesised from a search and critical review of internet-based primary sources. Those sources include the public statements and reports published by the NSC, field research reports, policy research papers, and published interviews and statements with Syrian opposition figures. Primacy is given to the work authored by researchers and journalists who do or have done research inside Syria on Syrian politics, especially opposition politics. All sources are published in English or have been translated from Arabic into English by the respective publishers.

***i.iii.i On process-tracing mechanisms of mobilisation and conflict escalation***

Causal mechanisms have been defined as being processes that produce an effect or accomplish a purpose.<sup>32</sup> They are the relational and non-relational factors, both motivational-cognitive and behavioural, that affect the onset and course of civil conflict and violence. There is good agreement among scholars, including Checkel, Wood, and Bennett and Elman, that hypothesised mechanisms cannot be measured, observed directly or reduced to intervening variables; however, their implications can be observed. Those scholars concur that we come to know about mechanisms by tracing the processes that enable human agency. Accordingly, the process tracing method that they advocate is administered in this case study.<sup>33</sup> The

<sup>32</sup> Checkel, Jeffrey T. 2013. 'Transnational dynamics of civil war', in Jeffrey T. Checkel (Ed). *Transnational Dynamics of Civil War*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK, p.10. Checkel cites John Gerring when defining mechanisms.

<sup>33</sup> Bennett, Andrew and Colin Elman. 2006. 'Qualitative research: Recent developments in case study methods', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 9, pp.455-476.

Bennett, Andrew and Colin Elman. 2007. 'Case study methods in the international relations subfield', *Comparative Political Studies*, 40:2, pp.170-195.

Bennett, Andrew. 2013. 'Causal mechanisms and typological theories in the study of civil conflict' in Checkel, Jeffrey T. (Ed). *Transnational Dynamics of Civil War*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, pp.213-215. The theoretical basis for causal mechanisms is well established across the social science spectrum and concisely described by Bennett in his taxonomy of theories on social mechanisms.

focus is on composing a compelling narrative that displays the chain of causal relationships between dependent and independent variables, and that demonstrates the observable implications of the mechanisms have in fact occurred. In doing, careful attention is given to considering rival explanations, assessing the likely bias in the sources, and examining the structural context and structure-level processes in addition to individual agent-level processes so as to guard against Jeffrey Checkel's "dark side" of process tracing.<sup>34</sup> This requires the making of relevant references to the historical dynamics of the Syrian conflict. The purpose is not to provide a descriptive analysis of the conflict and its myriad complexities, but to reveal the processes of transnational political mobilisation, and how they are at once consequences and causes of conflict escalation.

#### ***i.iii.ii On conceptualising the NSC***

Throughout the discussion, I make recurrent references to "the NSC" for the purposes of expediency. They are not intended to suggest in any way that the NSC is a monolithic entity. Rather, I take the view that NSC is multifarious in terms of identities, interests and loyalties – an amalgam of various elites, activists, organised political parties, and tenuous political blocs. At times, its members behave in ways that make the NSC appear as unitary actor in the transnational space. Political unity is, of course, something to which the members and their supporters aspire. However, as the forthcoming chapters reveal, the NSC is an organised collective drawn from Syrians dispersed across many states. The NSC banner is a frame devised and deployed by political entrepreneurs for conveying a coherent and distinctly Syrian identity and discourse for the purposes of coalescing international

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Checkel, Jeffrey T. 2006. 'Tracing causal mechanisms' *International Studies Review*, 8:2, pp.362-370.

Checkel, 2013, pp.17,23.

<sup>34</sup> Checkel, 2013, p.23.



and domestic support for and participation in a defined political project. It provides a vehicle for appealing to and addressing the collective interests of its members and supporters, whether the latter reside inside or outside of Syria.

My view of the NSC combines both positivist and constructivist concepts of diasporas.<sup>35</sup> It is positivist because my conception of the NSC as a diasporic organisation coalesced by political entrepreneurs and other activists with a common identity and cause enables the study of its impact on the political dynamics within the modern Syrian state, including the causal chain of relationships between the dependent and independent variables identified above. It is also constructivist because, in order to understand the complex mechanisms underpinning the mobilisation of the NSC and conflict escalation, I am concerned with human agency. That is, who claims to belong to and participate in the politicised Syrian diaspora and why; and how those identities collectively or otherwise are at once affected by and acting to shape the course of the Syrian conflict.

#### **i.iv Map of the work**

In the first chapter, I establish the theoretical and methodological background for the case study. I examine how diasporas and transnational groups are conceptualised, and how they shape the study of contentious politics and homeland conflict. Chapter 2 examines a subset of three mechanisms of diaspora

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<sup>35</sup> In this vein, I reflect the conceptions discussed by the following authors:

Adamson, Fiona B. and Madeleine Demetriou. 2007. 'Remapping the boundaries of state and national identity: incorporating diasporas into IR theorizing', *European Journal of International Relations*, 13:4, p.497.

Koinova, Maria. 2010. 'Diasporas and international politics: Utilising the universalistic creed of liberalism for particularistic and nationalist purposes' in Rainer Bauböck and Thomas Faist (Eds). *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, pp.150-151.

and transnational mobilisation – transnational brokerage, strategic framing and sectarian outbidding – as they apply to the escalation of the Syrian conflict and the behaviour of the NSC and its members. Chapter 3 examines two mechanisms that relate to the impacts of the NSC’s mobilisation on conflict escalation – resource mobilisation and lobbying and persuasion. The study concludes with a look at how the findings of the case study synergise with the body of theory on diaspora and transnational mobilisation in civil conflict.

## Chapter 1 Diasporas and transnationals in “homeland” politics and conflict

*“Syria today is being exposed to a big conspiracy, the threads of which stretch from far and close countries...”*

President Bashar al-Assad, Address to the People’s Assembly, 30 March 2011

This chapter examines the theoretical and methodological background to the study, including the disciplinary issues associated with study of transnationality and the transnational space. The first section examines how diasporas and transnational groups are conceptualised in politics and the IR subfield. It begins with a discussion of the conventions and limitations of mainstream approaches to research. Further, it explains how the concepts of diasporas and transnational communities are evolving and influencing the study of contentious politics and armed conflict. I then discuss how scholars are turning the focus of their research to how politicised groups form and mobilise in the transnational space. Here the branches of inquiry that shape this study are described. The second section examines the phenomenon of transnational mobilisation in civil conflicts. It places a spotlight on the statistical research and what it tells us about the relationship between transnational mobilisation and civil conflict.

### 1.1 Conceptualising diasporas and transnationals in politics

Diaspora and transnational scholarship is a relatively contemporary field brought to prominence in the recent three decades as emerging technologies and the processes of globalisation have connected people with increasing speed and

efficiency across state boundaries.<sup>36</sup> It is a field that transcends all disciplines within the social sciences, and is centred on the cross-border ties that individuals and groups, as well as corporations and institutions, have nurtured for various social, cultural, economic and political purposes.<sup>37</sup> In their critique of the “mainstream” IR theory, Adamson and Demetriou observe that diasporas are often cast as unitary social identities acting within an otherwise “socially thin anarchic system” of monolithic states.<sup>38</sup> In that system, they are conceptualised as being dispersed and deterritorialised with respect to the home-state, and as possessing a dominant identity frame that usually corresponds with the national identity of that state. This is echoed by Thomas Faist who observes that there remains a propensity within the field to view diasporas and transnationals through a state-centric prism.<sup>39</sup> With primacy given to narratives around the global economy and security, political scientists, IR scholars and policy-makers are concerned largely with how (inter)state economic and security interests and behaviours are affected by the peripheral and penetrative activities of various non-state transnational actors and, therefore, how states can control or coopt those actors.<sup>40</sup> For instance, states are responding to the perceived, potential or actual threats to their authority and national security by adapting foreign policy and alignment processes to disrupt the resourcing and financing of transnational networks. Furthermore, they

<sup>36</sup> Vertovec, Steven. 1999. ‘Conceiving and researching transnationalism’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 22:2, p.447. Vertovec argues that the process of globalisation merely reinforce pre-existing social patterns evident in the diasporas and long-distance networks of old.

<sup>37</sup> Adamson, 2005, p.490. Adamson observes that transnational studies transcend the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, ethno-cultural studies and politics/international relations.

Faist, Thomas. 2010. ‘Towards transnational studies: world theories, transnationalisation and changing institutions’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 36:10, pp.1665-1687.

<sup>38</sup> Adamson and Demetriou. 2007, p.493. By “mainstream” IR theory, the authors refer to structural realism and state-centric constructivism.

<sup>39</sup> Faist, 2010, p.1667.

<sup>40</sup> Adamson and Demetriou, 2007, pp.489-526. Social activists, liberal NGOs and transnational corporations fall within the transnational sphere but function within state-sanctioned, regulated environments. In doing so, they are likely to adopt and promote structuralist norms (e.g. the liberal-democratic creed, human rights and green-politics) in pursuit of their goals. Faist, 2010. Adamson, 2005.

are considering how those networks can be harnessed to improve governance and security.<sup>41</sup>

However, diasporas, transnational communities and other deterritorialised ethno-cultural networks have long preceded the construct of the nation-state. This fact presents a methodological dilemma for IR scholars. The dominant state-centric orientation of political theory inherently limits the analysis of the transnational space as it does not sufficiently deconstruct the state into the basic social and political units that make up the various collectives in that space, including families, tribes, clans, social networks, communities and diasporas. Rather, those collectives are considered to be unitary, independent variables that are largely undifferentiated - as existential factors that explain the behaviour of sovereign states rather than groups of people whose behaviours require explanation.<sup>42</sup> State-centric approaches do not sufficiently examine the cognitive-evaluative and motivational processes that politicise and mobilise those collectives.<sup>43</sup> A *sovereignty fetish* leaves one ill-equipped to explain a range of transnational phenomena including those described by Yosef Lapid as “ethnic nationhood” and “political other-hood”.<sup>44</sup> For instance, how does one explain the emergence of transnational groups that adopt multiple identities frames that differ or compete with the identity frame of the nation-state? How does one explain the rise of supra-sovereign ideologies and aspirations espoused by the transnational phenomena of al-Qa’eda and ISIS?

<sup>41</sup> Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, Mette. 2005. ‘Transnational networks and new security threats’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*. 18:1, pp.7-13.

<sup>42</sup> Adamson and Demetriou, 2007, p.493. The authors argue that mainstream structuralism and state-centric constructivism fail “to capture the complexity and diversity of identities that inhabit the larger social world within which states are embedded”.

<sup>43</sup> Faist, 2010. Faist observes that IR theory has limited scope for analysing meso-level collective and micro-level cognitive-motivational processes.

<sup>44</sup> Lapid, Yosef, 1996 quoted in Adamson and Demetriou, 2007, p.493.

The limitations of state-centricity have compelled many scholars to turn from positivist, empirical investigations towards rich, phenomenological and ethnographic inquiries into political identities, pluralism and culture. This has been evident in the orientations of structuralists within the Middle East studies field such as Raymond Hinnebusch, Eyal Zisser and Gerd Nonneman who consider social and political identities and human agency when explaining state formation, foreign policy and state-society relations in Syria.<sup>45</sup> It is also evident more generally in the social constructivist leanings in the body of literature about diasporas and transnationality in politics and IR.<sup>46</sup>

### 1.1.1 *The evolving concept of “diaspora”*

Since political scientist William Safran sought to define what constitutes a diaspora in 1991, it has been concept subject to much conjecture, not least because of his criteria-based definition but also in relation to who can claim diaspora status. Safran’s six conditions for a diaspora require persons to be dispersed from a common ancestral homeland and to have developed a collective memory, mythology, commitment and consciousness about that homeland. They also require persons comprising a diaspora to be battling acceptance in host societies.

<sup>45</sup> Hinnebusch, Raymond. 2001. *Syria: Revolution from above*, Routledge, London UK.

Hinnebusch, Raymond. 2003. ‘Globalization and generational change: Syrian foreign policy between regional conflict and European partnership’, *The Review of International Affairs*, 3:2, pp.190-207.

Nonneman, Gerd. 2005. ‘The three environments of Middle East foreign policy making and relations with Europe’ in Gerd Nonneman (Ed). *Analyzing Middle East Foreign Policies and the Relationship with Europe*, Routledge, Oxon, pp.19-42.

Zisser, Eyal. 2006. ‘Who’s afraid of Syrian nationalism? National and state identity in Syria’, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 42:2, pp.179-198.

<sup>46</sup> Fierke, K.M. 2007. ‘Constructivism’ in Dunne, Tim, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith (Eds). 2007. *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, Oxford University Press New York, pp.168-169. Fierke states that constructivists view the international system as socially constructed and dependent on human interactions and historical, cultural and political norms and variances. For a range of scholarly literature on diasporas and transnationality that displays constructivist orientations, see Bauböck, Rainer and Thomas Faist (Eds.) 2010. *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam; and Checkel, Jeffrey T (Ed). 2013. *Transnational Dynamics of Civil War*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK.

Furthermore, they require those people who are considered to be outside the state but inside the people to possess the collective desire to return to the ancestral homeland when the conditions are appropriate.<sup>47</sup> Despite his political science roots, Safran omitted the language of politics and IR from his definition.<sup>48</sup> Nonetheless, the language of states has come to penetrate the literature about diasporas where scholars have focused on how home and host-states politically engage increasingly dispersed, mobile and resourced populations in order to control the challenges and threats they pose to state solidarity.<sup>49</sup> Those challenges and threats come about through amplified nationalism whereby national identity can be embraced more passionately by nationals living abroad than by the citizens of the home state.<sup>50</sup> Arjun Appadurai explains that challenges and threats also come about through participation in political projects that are “increasingly unrestrained by ideas of spatial boundary and territorial sovereignty” by people who are not of the state but who inhabit many states; and whose collective identities and interests can contest those conceived within the structure and territory of the state.<sup>51</sup> The analysis of the exiled political opposition in the

<sup>47</sup> Safran, William. 1991. ‘Diasporas in modern societies: Myths of homeland and return’, *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, 1:1, pp.83-99.

<sup>48</sup> Safran’s scholarly work may be more accurately described as interdisciplinary as it transcends politics and draws from social anthropology and ethnic studies.

<sup>49</sup> Brown, Garrett Wallace. 2013. ‘Diaspora, transnationalism, and issues in contemporary politics’ in Ato Quayson and Girish Daswani (Eds). *A Companion to Diaspora and Transnationalism*, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, pp.68-87. By language of states I refer to the territory, sovereignty and security of the nation-state.

Shain, Yossi and Aharon Barth. 2003. ‘Diasporas and international relations theory’, *International Organization*, 57:3, pp.449-479.

Also see Adamson, 2005; Adamson and Demetriou, 2007; and Koinova, 2011.

<sup>50</sup> Shain and Barth, 2003, pp.449-479. Koinova, 2010, p.152. Koinova explains that diasporas have been considered “long-distance nationalists” that participate in conflict-perpetuating activities in homelands. She argues that diasporas emerging from political conflicts tend to maintain traumatic identities attached to their homelands, diverting them from seeing potential avenues for conflict resolution.

<sup>51</sup> Social anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, 1996, quoted in Adamson and Demetriou, 2007, p.492. In response to such threats, the Syrian regime has consistently cast individuals and groups that oppose it as hostile foreign-backed agents. For instance, Syrians in exile are considered to be potential threats to state unity and security. Furthermore, the large Kurdish population has long

forthcoming chapters provides an example of this amplified nationalism in which dispersed political entrepreneurs of various identities and interests but common place of origin, unrestrained by the territory and apparatus of the Syrian state, have brokered a coalition with the common interest of contesting state ideology and governance in Syria.

More recent studies on diasporas have identified two key characteristics that are critical for examining their participation in and impact on homeland politics and conflict. The first is that a diaspora is formed and mobilised by transnational brokers and entrepreneurs who recruit through constructing and casting compelling narratives about intergenerational identities and the imagined homeland.<sup>52</sup> This is a phenomenon that anthropologist Caroline Brettell calls the “fiction of congregation”. It is fictional because the diaspora emerges from the mythology and imagined connections that foster group cohesion around collective values and interests.<sup>53</sup> Mythology and imagination is used by transnational brokers and entrepreneurs to inspire the establishment of organisational frameworks for sustained communication and collective action. The second characteristic is that membership of a diaspora is not conditional on possessing ancestral roots but can be attained through intermarriage as well as religious and political conversion.<sup>54</sup> To place these two characteristics in the Syrian context, such entrepreneurship, conversions and, therefore, shifting loyalties and alliances have been known to be

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been considered to be comprised of illegal immigrants and, therefore, excluded from political participation as a means to quarantine the state from Kurdish nationalist aspirations. In addition, opposition militias that have organised around a sectarian, mainly Sunni-Salafi identity pole are similarly branded as being foreign in constitution and means.

<sup>52</sup> Adamson and Demetriou, 2007, p.497. Political entrepreneurs use the globalised environment to articulate, politicise and activate various diasporic identifications and practices. Also see Adamson, 2005, pp.37-41.

<sup>53</sup> Brettell, Caroline B. 2006. ‘Introduction: Global spaces/local places: Transnationalism, diaspora, and the meaning of home’, *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 13:3, pp.327-334.

<sup>54</sup> Bauböck, Rainer. 2010. ‘Cold constellations and hot identities: Political theory questions about transnationalism and diaspora’ in Bauböck and Faist (Eds), pp.295-322.



characteristic of the Arabic-speaking peoples of *Bilad al-Sham* since the great Arab conquests of the 7<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>55</sup> Syria's history of recurrent conquest, territorial division and competing ideologies provide the conditions throughout Syrian society for accumulating, layering and shifting collective identity frames and loyalties. Those conditions have been present through the rearrangement of the Ottoman dominions and the partitioning of the Lebanon and Iskanderiyya under the French; through the formation and demise of the United Arab Republic; and through the rise of secular Syrian Arab nationalism under the Hizb al-Ba'th to the opening of sectarian cleavages in the 1970s and the present. The forthcoming chapters reveal that the mobilisation of Syria's exiled political opposition, despite coalescing for a common revolutionary goal, is characterised by shifting identity frames and competing interests and loyalties.

Further to these two characteristics, the factors said to affect the mobilisation of diasporas include, the opportunities and risks afforded to them by the political contexts of home and host-states, the organisational structures they form, and their access to and use of resources.<sup>56</sup> Those factors are more commonly associated with the study of social movements and, therefore, the application of social movement theory. A social movement approach posits the "myth of community" in which diasporas and other transnational groups should not be essentialised or considered to be ever-present collectives. Rather, they should be viewed as products of social mobilisation processes that take place in response to specific

<sup>55</sup> Kennedy, Hugh. 2007. *The Great Arab Conquests: How the spread of Islam changed the world we live in*, Phoenix, London. Kennedy writes about the collective tribal consciousness of the Bedouin leading up to and during the Arab conquests. They were crafted by tribal entrepreneurs and based on diverse and complex loyalties, shifting alliances and informal networks. Imagined, not biological, descendancy was essential for membership. Alliances were shaped by the struggle for resources and shifted in response to the relative success of the tribe or community.

<sup>56</sup> Shain and Barth, 2003, pp.449-479. Wayland, 2004, pp.415-419.

critical events, including violent conflict.<sup>57</sup> Explanatory concepts such as the “myth of community”, Brettell’s “fiction of congregation” and shifting identity frames call into the question the relevance of diaspora as a unit of analysis. As the study of diasporas has spread from its logical place in the disciplines of social anthropology and ethno-cultural studies into politics and IR, the concept of diaspora has been reframed to the point of not only convergence but conflation with a much broader sphere of transnational communities and their processes.

### **1.1.2 *Diasporas and transnationals converge***

Diasporas and transnational communities converge as they are characteristically deterritorialised and non-institutionalised conveyors of social, political, economic and cultural phenomena. Further, they proliferate and mobilise through wide-ranging social processes that frequently circumvent the regulatory powers of states. However, while the concept of diaspora does not encompass transnationality, it is commonly applied as the collective noun for any deterritorialised population irrespective of its constituency. This has impelled some scholars to claim that it is necessary to differentiate a diaspora from a non-diasporic transnational community.<sup>58</sup> This introduces a typological dilemma because the conditions for what constitutes a transnational community are, to some extent, synonymous with those for a diaspora. For instance, anthropologist Steven Vertovec observes that, like a diaspora, a non-diasporic transnational community adopts a range of identities and interests that are frequently based on place of origin and common cultural and linguistic traits. Furthermore, he argues

<sup>57</sup> Sökefeld, Martin. 2006. ‘Mobilizing in transnational space: A social movement approach to the formation of diaspora’, *Global Networks*, 6:3, pp.265–284.

<sup>58</sup> Bowen, John R. 2004. ‘Beyond migration: Islam as a transnational public space’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 30:5, pp.879-894.

Bauböck, 2010. Brettell, 2006. These authors argue that diasporic consciousness, identity and culture should be distinguished from non-diasporic transnational processes and activities.

that those identities and interests are negotiated within a variety of “habitats of meaning”, which stretch their socio-cultural and political activities across multiple worlds.<sup>59</sup> Rogers Brubaker is more direct. He argues that diaspora is a stance, claim or practice adopted by political and cultural entrepreneurs to mobilise and unite people around common identities and purposes.<sup>60</sup>

From both perspectives, distinguishing a diaspora from a non-diasporic transnational community is probably unnecessary. Viewing them as existential categories of analysis obscures the processes of their formation and mobilisation. Firstly, because the constituents of a group that develops a diasporic consciousness and character may well prove to be more cosmopolitan than it presents. Secondly, reliably distinguishing one group from another requires the application of some form of universally-endorsed master typology, which would only essentialise groups with reference to contemporary criteria. Attempting such distinctions or classifications risks ignoring what Yasemin Soysal refers to as the “historic contingency of nation-state, identity and community”.<sup>61</sup> This historical contingency cannot be ignored in Syria where conceptions of nation, identity and community are layered and under tension. Essentialising a Syrian diaspora is confounded by the myriad national, ethnic and religious identities and loyalties that pre-date the formation of the modern Syrian state and that continue to either complement, compete with, or supersede the Syrian national identity that has

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<sup>59</sup> Vertovec, Steven. 2001. ‘Transnationalism and identity’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 27:4, pp.573-582. Vertovec observes that transnationals may have memberships with two or more places, identities or nations; and that those memberships are portable and subject to change.

<sup>60</sup> Brubaker, Rogers. 2005. ‘The ‘diaspora’ diaspora’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. 28:1, pp.1-19. Brubaker describes “diaspora” as merely a stance, claim, idiom or practice adopted by few people other than political and cultural entrepreneurs. He suggests that it should not be used as a category of analysis when studying socio-political struggles; but rather the focus should be on the mechanisms of the struggle and whether or not it eventuates in bounded groups.

<sup>61</sup> Sociologist Yasemin Soysal, 2002, quoted in Sökefeld, 2006, p.266.

otherwise been conflated with state territory and interests.<sup>62</sup> Transnational religious networks provide a case in point. The exiled Syrian *ulama* have inspired the formation of transnational politico-religious networks that espouse supra-state identities, narratives and loyalties that are nonetheless borne from collective imaginations of an historical homeland, nation or global community.<sup>63</sup> Those identities, narratives and loyalties are diffuse and not defined or bound by any modern territorial or political borders. The most notorious example at present is *al-Douliyya al-Islamiyya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham* known commonly as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). True to its name and consistent with the concept of *Sahwa* (Islamic awakening), ISIS is rebelling against the secular Syrian state with the aims of substituting state sovereignty with transnational Islamic sovereignty and replacing Syrian-Arab nationalism with Sunnah Islam as the basic identity. In doing so, it appeals to and recruits from the radicalised *umma* within and beyond modern Syria, whose members value a return to the ways of the *Salaf* (ancestors) in the ancestral homeland of historical Bilad al-Sham. Conversely, groups have formed with identities contiguous with those of states, such as the Sunni-Salafi

<sup>62</sup> Since assuming the Presidency in 2000, Bashar al-Assad has crafted a robust Syrian nationalist campaign whereby the Ba’thist Pan-Arab identity has been reframed as a distinctly Syrian identity – one that is congruent with its geopolitical boundaries and its foreign and domestic policy pillars. Although intended to resonate with and unify all citizens, the conflict has now provoked divisions along kinship, ethno-cultural and religious identity frames.

<sup>63</sup> Pierret, 2012. Bowen, 2004.

Ozolins, Uldis. 2008. ‘Diaspora, Islam, Australia: Reflections on Australian Arab case studies’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, 32:2, pp.207-221.

Fullilove, Michael. 2008. ‘World wide webs: Diasporas and the international system’, *Lowy Institute for International Policy Paper 22*, Longueville Media, Sydney. As a counterpoint to Bowen and Ozolins, Fullilove disputes the diasporic character of transnational Islamic networks. In doing so, he applies a territorialised view of the centre or place of origin, emphasising the diversity of Islamic identities and that networks are bounded by theology rather than ethnic nationality. Fullilove’s view is contested by Ozolins who argues that western social scientists fundamentally misrecognise and exceptionalise Islam by ignoring their own analytical tools when faced with it in the transnational space, ignoring the historical tensions between modern states of the Middle East and national identity.

coalition known as *Jabhat al-Islamiyya al-Souriyya* (the Syrian Islamic Front), but which attracted the loyalties of constituents from multiple origins.<sup>64</sup>

Defining the groups that can lay claim to being Syrian is fraught with difficulty because there are people who adopt a diasporic consciousness based on a conception of their ancestral homeland, nation or place of origin that corresponds with but can transcend modern geopolitical boundaries. In addition, there are people with diasporic identities arising from their social affiliations and cultural affinities but not any ancestral roots. These issues are evident in the increasing attention given to the citizens of states outside of the Middle East who are providing material support for and seeking to recruit or be recruited into the various brigades of insurgents in Syria. For example, the Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) is monitoring Australian citizens at home and abroad who had joined the fighting. The ethno-cultural identities of those individuals are unknown; although one year earlier ASIO confirmed that it was investigating “hundreds of young Australia men of Lebanese background”.<sup>65</sup> The young men may or may not have Syrian ancestry or identify as Syrian and it is possible that they could conflate being Syrian with the territory of the modern state, with historical *Bilad al-Sham*, or with some other conception. Nonetheless, it is likely that they share a collective identity frame and consciousness that could be Syrian, Arab, Syrian-Arab, Syro-Lebanese or sectarian in orientation, and are

<sup>64</sup> The Syrian Islamic Front dissolved in 2013 and key member groups coalesced around the supra-sovereign identity and narrative of *Jabhat al-Islamiyya* (The Islamic Front).

<sup>65</sup> ABC News. 2013. ‘ASIO tracks young Australians in Syria’, 15<sup>th</sup> April. Sourced on 30<sup>th</sup> May 2014 from: <http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2013/s3737450.htm> Australian Associated Press. 2014. ‘Syria suspects under close watch: ASIO’, 29<sup>th</sup> May. The ASIO Director General, David Irvine, told the Australian Senate Estimates Committee that the organisation is concerned that Australians involved in the fighting are coming home and sharing their training techniques. Their activities are viewed by ASIO as potentially threatening to Australia’s national security. Some individuals have had their passports confiscated. Sourced on 29<sup>th</sup> May 2014 from: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/aap/article-2642589/Syria-suspects-close-watch-ASIO.html#ixzz33BOIjuAt>

rallying around a common discourse. Examples such as this demonstrate why it is prudent to examine the circumstances impelling people to adopt and participate in diasporic or transnational stances.<sup>66</sup>

In the Syrian conflict, many external groups claim or appear to be diasporic in origin; however, groups of various ideological orientations possess such similar characteristics that distinguishing the diasporic from the non-diasporic group does not enhance the understanding of the conflict's dynamics. This is because they are engaged in the same theatre of contentious politics and violent conflict, and because they have formed and adapted across great distances and international boundaries despite the (inter)national narratives and laws that could constrain them. It is also because they frequently share and shift constituencies, strategic narratives, practices and domestic ties. This is evident in Diane Singerman's observation that associational life in Middle East countries, whether cultural, religious or political, is highly networked. It occurs through diverse, complex and frequently informal networks of personal relationships that traverse social, economic and political hierarchies and territories. She argues that those networks provide the "key transmission belt" for building and organising around collective identities and ideologies.<sup>67</sup>

If diasporas only take shape when there is a collective consciousness and a unifying discourse arising from that consciousness, then they are not unitary or essential. Further, the proposition that there can be no community without consciousness and no socio-political effects without a related discourse applies to the study of all

<sup>66</sup> Brubaker, 2005, pp.12-13. Koinova, 2011, p.336.

<sup>67</sup> Singerman, Diane. 2004. 'The networked world of Islamist social movements' in Quintan Wiktorowicz (Ed). *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, Indiana University Press, Indiana, pp.143-163.

transnational communities as it does to diasporas.<sup>68</sup> In this light, constructivist explanations of diaspora mobilisation become all the more compelling.<sup>69</sup> For these reasons, the concept of diaspora has been absorbed into a field of transnational studies with a distinctively constructivist orientation. However, there is a view that the field shares theoretical space with liberalism.<sup>70</sup> This is because it is concerned not only with the processes of formation and mobilisation but also with liberal expansionist ideas about what constitutes the modern state. For instance, liberalist ideas frame who and what modern states consider to be domestic actors; and the extent to which those actors interject in domestic politics and shape the decisions and behaviours of states.<sup>71</sup> The liberal-constructivist position is adopted by political theorist Garrett Wallace Brown whose research examines the formation of transnational political communities, their behaviours and their effectiveness, as well as the processes that political regimes in homeland states use to engage them. Brown suggests that there is evidence that states seek economic, social and political relations with transnational communities in order to absorb them into a

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<sup>68</sup> Sökefeld, 2006, p.267.

Brubaker, 2005. Brubaker argues that diasporas and transnational communities converge. Brettell, 2006, p.329. Brettell argues that transnational communities encompass the diasporas of old.

<sup>69</sup> Koinova, 2010, p.150. Koinova explains that the constructivist approach asks questions about how diasporas emerge, who belongs to them, and how identities affect the political world or are affected by it.

<sup>70</sup> Panke, Diana and Thomas Risse. 2007. 'Liberalism', in Dunne, Tim, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith (Eds).. *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, Oxford University Press New York. p.90. The core assumption of liberalism is that domestic actors and structures influence foreign policy identities, interests and behaviours of states. Individuals and groups are considered to be independent variables that explain state behaviour.

<sup>71</sup> Shain and Barth, 2003. The liberalist view posits that the Syrian state would view a Syrian diaspora as a domestic interest group that, whilst "outside" the state, remains "inside" the Syrian people.

Shain, 2002, p.120. Shain argues that host states and other third parties recognise diasporas as independent political actors in homeland conflicts and try to influence them accordingly.

larger form of kin-state for the collective benefit of those residing within the state and beyond.<sup>72</sup>

### **1.1.3 *Beyond typologies: Turning to transnational mobilisation processes***

Both constructivist and liberal-constructivist approaches are less concerned with how diasporas and transnationals are defined and categorised. Rather, they are focused more on the processes of formation and mobilisation, and the processes that enable them to achieve the intended impact of their political projects. Brown and social anthropologist Martin Sökefeld concur that the study of transnational communities in contemporary politics and IR should be centred on those processes.<sup>73</sup> Their views synergise with Susan Wayland's case study of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora and Diane Singerman's analysis of highly networked Islamic communities, which span four branches of inquiry. Firstly, the structures and incentives providing opportunities for transnational mobilisation; secondly, the strategic and cultural frames around which members and supporters are recruited and mobilised; thirdly, the repertoire of collective action; and fourthly, the social networks on which they are based.<sup>74</sup> A synthesis of their arguments produces five co-dependent branches of inquiry that shape this study.

The first branch concerns the dynamics of transnational brokerage by the political entrepreneurs at the core of Syria's political opposition who produce, disseminate and control the collective narrative. Of primary interest are the network connections they generate and exploit in host and home states, and how they

<sup>72</sup> Brown, 2013, p.81. Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2005, pp.11-12.

<sup>73</sup> Brown, 2013. Sökefeld, 2006, pp.265–284.

<sup>74</sup> Singerman, 2004, pp.143-163. Singerman's analysis draws from political scientist and sociologist Sidney Tarrow's four-part inquiry into the dynamics of social movements. Wayland, 2004, pp.415-19. Wayland states that scholars of contentious politics generally agree that three sets of factors - organisational structures, framing processes, and changes in (transnational) political opportunity structures - account for the emergence of social movements and militant forms of collective action.



secure symbolic and material support for the political project. The second branch is concerned with the narratives that inspire and mobilise the political opposition, including the development and adjustment of strategic frames in response to escalating conflict. The third branch of inquiry concerns organisational structures. Key questions here centre on the structure of the political opposition and how it affects the development and execution of its political project from its place in exile. The fourth branch encompasses the actual political strategies and practices deployed. This includes examining processes of intra and inter-group collaboration and competition, and coalition and network formation. Finally, the fifth branch examines the efficacy and sustainability of the political opposition in relation to its strategies and goals. This includes identifying and analysing the impacts of mobilisation, such as how finance, material resources, and (inter)governmental support are procured and mobilised. These five branches of inquiry provide the foundation for studying the transnational mobilisation of the exiled political opposition in the Syrian conflict. Before proceeding with the case study, it is necessary to examine what is known about the transnational mobilisation and influence of political oppositions in civil conflicts.

## **1.2 Transnational mobilisation in civil conflicts**

Diaspora and transnational engagement in political conflict and civil war is not historically novel. However, the study of the phenomenon has expanded since the end of the Cold War with the processes of globalisation opening non-state political entrepreneurs to increased and accelerated levels of access to information, resources, infrastructure and capital. As a result, the capacities of dispersed peoples to form increasingly coherent networks for contentious political purposes have been enhanced giving them a strategic advantage over less mobile and

arguably more visible and vulnerable domestic actors. Recent scholarship on diasporas and conflicts stems from Collier's and Hoeffler's often cited statistical report on the determinants of civil war, which found that the probability of persistent or recurrent violent conflict increases by 36 per cent in states that have unusually large diasporas compared to 6 per cent in states with insignificant diasporas.<sup>75</sup> There is agreement among scholars that politicised transnational groups are evolving in scale and capacity to challenge state governance and alter the security environment in which states operate. For instance, studies by Cederman, Gleditsch and Salehyan confirm a correlation between transnational political activity and a measurable effect on the course of violent conflicts around the world.<sup>76</sup>

Fiona Adamson and Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni are among the scholars who have cited this statistical relationship; however, in doing so they remind us that such empirical correlations do not explain the underlying mechanisms of diaspora and transnational mobilisation in civil conflict. Their research, along with Wayland's, reveals that some members of a dispersed population are led, coopted and even coerced by well-connected and influential political entrepreneurs into contentious political activities against the government of their home-state.<sup>77</sup> Their participation includes providing ideational and material support to intra and

<sup>75</sup> Collier and Hoeffler, 2000. Adamson, 2005, p.41. Koinova, 2011, p.335

<sup>76</sup> Lars-Erik Cederman, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, Idean Salehyan and Julian Wucherpfennig. 2013. 'Transborder Ethnic Kin and Civil War', *International Organization*, 67, pp.407-408. Cederman et al are concerned with cross-border ethnic ties and the impact on conflict rather than the long-distance nationalism of diasporas. They conclude that transborder groups whose ethnic kin dominate homeland/state politics tend to have a conflict dampening influence. They find the opposite effect for intermediate size kin group. Gleditsch, 2007, pp.293-309. Salehyan, 2006.

<sup>77</sup> Wayland 2004, p.411 Ethnic elites employ these transnational ethnic networks to engage simultaneously in a variety of political activities in different states.

interstate dissidents, rebel organisations and insurgencies.<sup>78</sup> In this context, Adamson and Demetriou posit that the term *diaspora* is a prescription, not unlike Brettell's fiction of congregation and Brubaker's diasporic practice. In other words, it is a strategic frame deployed by political entrepreneurs for constructing identities and discourses for the purposes of coalescing support for and participation in collective cross-border action.<sup>79</sup>

Further, Adamson, Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Vertovec reveal that transnationally networked politicised groups and coalitions have three common characteristics that enable them to exploit opportunities for mobilisation. Firstly, they possess elastic and often decentralised organisational structures unhindered by institutionalised or centralised hierarchies, and which provide for rapid and flexible decision-making and action in response to environmental changes. This enables them to adapt, reform, and change their practices as information and conditions shift. Their decentralised flexibility or "refusal of fixity" serves as a device for evading and resisting repression. Secondly, they possess a relative lack of physical infrastructure, which allows them, when risks or threats necessitate it, to relocate with minimal cost. Thirdly, the dispersal of the membership enhances resource sharing and resiliency in the face of a repressive opponent when compared to domestic groups that are less able to evade the security apparatus that seeks to penetrate and dismantle them.<sup>80</sup>

Those three characteristics position transnational groups and coalitions well for making both constructive and destructive contributions to the course of civil

<sup>78</sup> Adamson and Demetriou, 2007, p.491. Diaspora mobilisation is being used by non-state and state elites to generate funds, resources and political support. Shain, 2002, p.125. Shain observes that diasporas can provide a lifeline of resources and weapons, serve as a source of recruits, act as a propaganda platform, and lobby to influence host governments and other international players.

<sup>79</sup> Adamson and Demetriou, 2007, pp.497-498.

<sup>80</sup> Vertovec, 1999, p.451. Adamson, 2005, p.31. Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2005, p.9.

conflict, many of which are indirect; some unintended. Jennifer Brinkerhoff argues that even when members of a diaspora are not directly engaged in activities with the intent of generating and sustaining conflict and violence, the contributions they otherwise conceive as being constructive can have a “darker side” comprised of unintended, adverse consequences.<sup>81</sup> For instance, Brinkerhoff identifies that the apparently benign contribution of funds for a given cause by members of a diaspora through remittances and philanthropy can have malignant results, whereby humanitarian assistance provided to sustain people under conflict is channelled through informal networks that are aligned with and, therefore, provide support for militant groups and their modes of violence. Further, any inequities that occur in the distribution of funds and resources through selection biases can provoke competition between the various groups in the domestic sphere. This can widen local cleavages and create new ones, inspiring political entrepreneurs to lobby support for the expanding needs of one group relative to their local competitors.<sup>82</sup> In effect, the non-violent acts of philanthropy and making remittances can translate into the advancement of conflict agendas, militancy and violent tactics in the field, hence exacerbating conflict.<sup>83</sup> This “dark side” of diaspora mobilisation is an important risk factor for conflict escalation in homelands to be considered in the forthcoming case study. There are additional risk factors to be considered.

<sup>81</sup> Brinkerhoff, 2011, p.119. Brinkerhoff argues that international advocacy for peace and human rights, campaigns for political reform and pluralism, and calls for justice for crimes against humanity can have unintended consequences.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, pp.125-128. Baser, Basher. and Ashok Swain. 2008. ‘Diasporas as peacemakers: Third party mediation in homeland conflicts’. *International Journal of World Peace*, 25:3, pp.7–28.

<sup>83</sup> Brinkerhoff, 2011, p.129

### 1.3 Transnational risk factors for civil conflict: What do we know from the statistical research?

Empirical studies have tended to explain civil conflict as a function of state-specific and macro-structural conditions and attributes affecting the countries in which conflict has erupted.<sup>84</sup> Those studies are typically dyadic, focusing on testing hypothesised correlations between a range of state-centric conditions operating at the domestic and regional levels (dependent variables) and the risk of conflict onset, duration or renewal (independent co-variables).<sup>85</sup> Those studies have established a number of inter-relating risk factors for civil conflict that are linked with transnational mobilisation.<sup>86</sup> I will briefly describe four risk factors that are relevant to the Syrian conflict.

The first risk factor, echoing Collier's and Hoeffler's statistical findings, is that civil wars resist resolution for longer and are more lethal (in terms of numbers killed) when there are large numbers of ethnic groups and, therefore, transnational ethnic ties in other states.<sup>87</sup> Kristian Gleditsch argues that with more ethnic groups and ties spanning international boundaries there is greater potential for external support for contentious political activities and, therefore, conflict.<sup>88</sup> This occurs through the exploitation of those ties to mobilise collective action and broker access and supply of resources. The concept of ethnic ties, however, is insufficient for explaining the nature and scope of cross-border ties with respect to Syria

<sup>84</sup> Gleditsch, 2007, pp.293-294. Salehyan 2006, pp.83-137.

<sup>85</sup> Gleditsch, 2007, pp.293-294. Gleditsch calls this a "closed polity approach" to researching civil conflict.

<sup>86</sup> Bennett, 2013, pp.221, 223.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, p.223. Salehyan, 2006, p.39. Wood, Elisabeth Jean. 2013. 'Transnational dynamics of civil war: Where do we go from here?' in Jeffrey T. Checkel (Ed). 2013, pp.238-240. Citing Cederman et al's ethnic power relations (EPR) database of 2010, ethnic power relations are said to have had a significant and substantial effect in about 50% conflicts since WWII.

Gleditsch, 2007, pp.301-302. Gleditsch correlates civil conflict with the number of ethnic groups that span national borders, inferring that transnational ethnic ties are involved.

<sup>88</sup> Gleditsch, 2007, pp.297-299.

because those ties can be based on nationalist, confessional, familial, communal and regional as well as ethnic identity frames. For this reason, in the case study I refer to domestic ties inclusively and only describe the specific nature of those ties when it is necessary to make a distinction.

The expanse of transnational ties is dependent on a second risk factor for civil conflict: authoritarian states are associated with transnational mobilisation.

Singerman argues that this condition pervades Middle East states, where the various repressive and exclusionary tactics practiced by authoritarian regimes prevent the development of institutionalised means for expressing needs and grievances. This “forces associational life to go underground” and abroad where collective identities can be consolidated and networked action devised.<sup>89</sup>

Singerman’s research finds parallels in Reinoud Leenders’ and Steven Heydemann’s study of the popular uprising in Dar’ā. The authors explain that long before March 2011 flashpoint, the “early risers” had developed transnational networks and retained a certain miscibility so as to remain outside of the surveillance of the state’s repressive security apparatus. This created a parallel socio-economic and political life with alternative centres of authority and collective identities taking shape, which were then harnessed for direct and indirect political opposition and resistance.<sup>90</sup> Leenders and Heydemann along with Singerman argue that those characteristics are a response to the systemic repression, political exclusion and corporatisation of society that has occurred under *neo-Mamluk* regimes like the

<sup>89</sup> Singerman, p.159. Adamson, 2005, pp.43-44.

<sup>90</sup> Leenders, Reinoud and Heydemann, Steven. 2012. ‘The onset of popular mobilization in Syria: Opportunity and threat, and the social networks of the early risers’, *Mediterranean Politics*, 17:2, pp.14-17, 139-159. The authors observe that the organisational grid of Dar’āwi society is networked along dense family ties extending into neighbouring states and the Gulf, largely through high levels of outbound labour migration that began in the 1950s and has substantially increased through the decades. Combined with the resulting economic dependency on foreign remittances, a distinct Hawrani regional identity has evolved that transcends state territories and identities.

Leenders, 2013, pp.278-279. Leenders, 2012, pp.419-434.

Syrian-Arab Hizb al-Ba‘th.<sup>91</sup> The repressive conditions force people to organise beyond the eyes and ears of the state and to recruit participants from a broader and often pluralist base.

Applied to Syria, the threats and opportunity costs for collective mobilisation against a pervasive, security apparatus and effective system of political repression are extremely high, and have compelled people to move across borders to neighbouring states and further afield where repression can be evaded and opportunity costs for mobilisation are lower.<sup>92</sup> The impact of systemic repression and political exclusion on transnational network formation and mobilisation is also evident in Thomas Pierret’s detailed study of the politicisation of the exiled Sunni *ulama*.<sup>93</sup> Pierret reveals that the intensification of the conflict forced influential Syrian clerics to seek safe havens abroad. From their host-states they have emerged to awaken religious networks throughout the Gulf, Europe and West Asia and participate in the formation of political groups, often rivalling one another like the Syrian National Council and the Syrian National Movement.<sup>94</sup>

In Syria, transnational mobilisation can be circular with members of politicised groups recurrently exiting the country for subversive purposes in addition to otherwise benign circular migration for education, employment and trade. It can also be unidirectional in which dissenting figures voluntarily emigrate or are forced into exile because of repression and conflict. Gleditsch and Salehyan argue

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<sup>91</sup> Singerman, 2004. Singerman uses Richard Bulliet’s 1999 description of the “neo-Mamluk” military regime that is often found embedded in secular-monarchical states; and that possesses an all-pervasive internal security apparatus.

<sup>92</sup> Bennett, 2013.

<sup>93</sup> *Ulama*: Arabic collective noun for learned religious leaders and scholars.

<sup>94</sup> Pierret, 2013, pp.216-18, 224-26, 234-38. The Syrian National Council was established in November 2011, largely comprised of exiled Syrian Ikhwan figures. The Syrian National Movement was formed in December 2011 claiming greater legitimacy over the former because it was not made from the old exiled Ikhwan but a younger network of activists, including those within the homeland.

that, once outside the state and its repressive reach, people seeking refuge are likely to become more confrontational than those continuing to reside within the state, with the likelihood increasing when they are domicile in states that rival their home-state.<sup>95</sup> From abroad, collective grievances are likely to transform into support for confrontation and violence because, according to Clifford, Koinova, Brinkerhoff, and Shain, the perceived violations and injustices causing people to leave their homelands are important emotive-motivational referents for transnational mobilisation.<sup>96</sup>

For Syrian activists and political entrepreneurs, (un)forced migration is one of very few paths to having a voice and influence in Syrian politics. It enables them to broker and participate in contentious political activities, including armed mobilisation, with the hope that the regime will succumb to external pressure.<sup>97</sup> Through circular or unidirectional migration and mobilisation, including cross-border movement of displaced Syrian citizens seeking refuge, transnational ties expand and deepen.<sup>98</sup> The proliferation of those ties is said to increase the willingness of people within the home-state to mobilise and confront government

<sup>95</sup> Gleditsch, 2007, pp.297-299. Salehyan 2006, pp. 63-72, 83-137, 145, 234. Salehyan argues that the propensity for confrontation is increased when seeking refuge in states that rival the home-state.

<sup>96</sup> Clifford, James. 1994. 'Diasporas', *Cultural Anthropology*. 9:3, p.306. Clifford argues that transnational connections - the shared state of being a displaced people - and the suffering, adaptation, struggle and resistance that goes with it may be as or more important than participation in "homeland" politics. Displaced people are more likely to maintain the trauma of displacement than others who migrate voluntarily for educational, employment and other life opportunities

Koinova, 2011, p.336. Koinova draws from the body of theory developed by McAdam and Tarrow when referring to the mechanisms of launching social movements in the transnational realm.

Brinkerhoff, 2011, p.125. Motivations for mobilisation include socio-cultural obligations, guilt and grievances with respect to one's place or country of origin; and the repression, coercion and violence that cause migration in the first instance.

Shain, 2002, pp.125, 128-134. A conflict that threatens the homeland's survival is an important mobilising force for diasporic communities, and enables them to build institutions, raise funds, and promote activism among community members who might otherwise allow their ethnic identity to fade.

<sup>97</sup> Brinkerhoff, 2011, p.124. Brinkerhoff argues that migration or exit is often necessary in order to have a voice in the politics of one's own country.

<sup>98</sup> Salehyan, 2006, p.39. Refugee communities are likely to support transnational rebels.



repression with various, often violent tactics.<sup>99</sup> The resulting militarisation of the conflict and the corresponding humanitarian emergency further inspires and bolsters collective action through the network of transnational ties.<sup>100</sup> However, the relative relaxation of constraints on mobilisation is not without consequences. Seeking sanctuary and organising outside of the state, especially when it involves brokering the support of other external actors can intensify the asymmetry between the opposition and the state when it comes to participation in conflict resolution or bargaining.<sup>101</sup> Furthermore, it can introduce and expand cleavages with and between local actors, thereby creating and reinforcing a domestic legitimacy dilemma.<sup>102</sup>

The third and fourth risk factors for civil conflict are co-dependent: the duration of conflict increases with support from host states for opposition groups, and recurrent conflict is linked to the relative strength of host-states. It can be argued that a strong host-state or state-sponsor possesses sufficient power to coerce an opposition group into serving its own strategic goals in relation to the home-state.<sup>103</sup> Conversely, relatively weak state-sponsors can have an enabling effect whereby an opposition group wields influence over the policies of sponsors to ensure alignment and sustainability of its political programme.

<sup>99</sup> Gleditsch, 2007, pp.297-299.

<sup>100</sup> Brinkerhoff, 2011, p.125.

<sup>101</sup> Salehyan 2006, p.39. Salehyan argues that the state is unable to monitor activities of the transnational opposition groups. Information flows and communication are constrained, impaired or distorted, increasing the level of distrust held by the state. The converse is also likely i.e. the opposition is less likely to be able to monitor activities of the state and becomes more dependent on secondary sources of information. Bennett, 2013, p.223.

<sup>102</sup> Shain, 2002, p.136. Shain explains that this can occur because of a "homeland-diaspora tug-of-war" in which domestic actors believe that their interests in a conflict should trump diaspora preferences. This can threaten members of the diaspora resulting in a struggle to define and serve national and popular interests.

<sup>103</sup> Bennett, 2013, pp.221, 223. Salehyan 2006, pp. 63-72, 83-137, 145, 234. Transnational mobilisation in states that rival the home-state increases the probability of an international dispute between those states.

The statistical research provides *prima facie* evidence of three key conditions that underpin the case study to come. The first is that transnational political mobilisation is positively correlated with repressive state systems. The second is that conflict escalation is positively correlated with widening and deepening transnational ties. The third is that conflict escalation is positively correlated with strong state support for transnational groups. Whilst these three conditions are important for understanding the role of the NSC in the escalation of the conflict, the correlations do not explain the underlying mechanisms of transnational mobilisation and conflict escalation. The research undertaken by scholars such as Gleditsch and Salehyan are limited in this regard because they are largely informed by the data that are bound by states and their institutions. Those databases lack dependable information of the often covert mechanisms of transnational mobilisation.<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, Jeffrey Checkel argues that the research methods used by political scientist in determining the causes of civil conflict are conceptually flawed. For example, Checkel identifies that Salehyan's quantitative research methods produce macro-level correlations that are not verified with process-level evidence in the corresponding case studies. The conceptual flaw lies in relying on quantitative methods to make inferences about causation when causation is a process-level phenomenon that cannot be quantified. However, causal processes can be traced in order to provide plausible explanations for statistical correlations.<sup>105</sup>

Martin Nome and Nils Weidman contribute further to the critique of the statistical research. For example, they argue that the risk factor described above, transnational ethnic ties, is used as proxy measure for conflict diffusion when, in

<sup>104</sup> Wood, 2013, pp.232, 242-243.

<sup>105</sup> Checkel, 2013, p.8

fact, it measures the conditions rather than the observable implications of conflict diffusion.<sup>106</sup> The lesson to be drawn into this study is that the use of quantitative proxy measures of transnational mobilisation and conflict escalation can produce incomplete and potentially misleading inferences about the NSC.<sup>107</sup> This is why it is necessary to examine the underlying causal mechanisms.

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<sup>106</sup> Nome, Martin Austvoll and Nils B. Weidman. 2013. 'Conflict diffusion via social identities: entrepreneurship and adaptation' in Jeffrey T. Checkel (Ed). pp.182-183. Wood, 2013, p.254

<sup>107</sup> Gleditsch, 2007, p.294.

## Chapter 2 Tracing the transnational mobilisation of the National Syrian Coalition

### 2.1 Introduction

*“In contrast to the quantitative literature which generally treats diasporas as unitary actors predisposed to become active in conflict –diasporas must be actively mobilised through the usual contentious political mechanisms of framing, tactical innovation and resource mobilisation”.*

Elisabeth Wood, 2013<sup>108</sup>

This chapter is concerned with tracing and explaining how the NSC has formed and mobilised in reaction to escalating conflict. The central argument is that the formation and mobilisation of the exiled political opposition under the banner of the NSC is wedded to conflict escalation. The analysis is centred on exploring three hypotheses. The first is that escalating conflict affords Syrian political entrepreneurs with a net increase in the opportunities for transnational brokerage of oppositional political structures and support. The second is that conflict escalation shapes how strategic frame of the NSC and its political project. The third is that conflict escalation, by spawning domestic and transnational rivals in the form of Sunni-Salafi groups, compels the exiled opposition to engage in a selective process of outbidding.

### 2.2 Transnational brokerage by Syrian political entrepreneurs

Tracing the mechanism of transnational brokerage can deepen the understanding of the formation and mobilisation of politicised diaspora and transnational groups. Adamson explains that transnational brokerage of symbolic and material support is undertaken by political entrepreneurs. Those political entrepreneurs mobilise

<sup>108</sup> Wood, 2013, p.251.

networks to transfer support in ways that can sustain conflict in the home state.<sup>109</sup>

However, I argue that the converse also occurs: that the escalating conflict provides opportunities for political entrepreneurs to mobilise and broker support. In this case study, the political entrepreneurs are the people who are producing, disseminating and controlling the NSC's narrative. They are the influential individuals who have developed the means to broker relationships between often disparate interest groups as well as various government sponsors for the purposes of shaping the repertoires of imaginable behaviour around a series of norms.<sup>110</sup>

The NSC has come to form and behave as it does through the organisation of diverse political figures and blocs, and their supporters. It is not a monolithic entity in the conflict but rather a product of and a tool for transnational brokerage by political entrepreneurs. Who are these entrepreneurs? Why and how did they come to form the NSC? How is conflict escalation affecting transnational brokerage and shaping the NSC's political project? These questions direct my analysis.

### **2.2.1 *Same voices, different name***

The formation of the NSC was intended to bridge the strategic and tactical cleavages between the domestic and exiled opposition. A broad coalition of opposition groups and figures, including armed revolutionaries, was considered essential for building a more inclusive and unified leadership front for securing

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<sup>109</sup> Adamson, 2013, pp.68-72.

<sup>110</sup> Shain & Barth, 2003. Shain and Barth refer to political entrepreneurs as "core members" of the diaspora – the organising elites who appeal for mobilisation of the larger diaspora. "Passive members" are available for mobilisation when the entrepreneurs call; and the generally uninvolved "silent members" comprise the larger pool of people who may mobilise in times of crisis.

Nome and Weidman, 2013, pp.175, 186. Nome and Weidman use the term "norm entrepreneurship" – a process that aids in facilitating collective action against the common political enemy. In this case the enemy comprises Bashar al-Assad and the ruling regime.

popular legitimacy inside Syria, and increasing its persuasive influence with outside powers.<sup>111</sup> Two years on, the NSC has positioned and sustained itself as the principal political opposition group with headquarters Cairo and recognised “embassies” in France, Germany, Qatar, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States.<sup>112</sup> Its present organisational structure and strategy are derived from those developed, adopted and modified by a core of political entrepreneurs who have been brokering relations and collective action as armed conflict ensued in April 2011. However, the origins of the NSC can be traced through the decade prior to onset of the current conflict. This is because its members include political figures, activists, intellectuals and groups that have organised on political platforms from which the narrative of the NSC has been derived. For example, the Communique of 99 of 27<sup>th</sup> September 2000 and the Association of Civil Society Friends were led by former Syrian parliamentarian, business leader and political dissident Riad Seif, who has played a central role in the establishment of the NSC. It was Seif who, on the 1st November 2012, led a “National Initiative” and the “heavy diplomatic manoeuvring” to form a more inclusive opposition and an interim government.<sup>113</sup>

Political entrepreneurs behind the Damascus Declaration and the Beirut-Damascus Declaration have also participated in the creation of the NSC. For instance, the Damascus Declaration of 18 October 2005 comprised a coalition of largely exiled opposition voices led by writer and political activist Michel Kilo. The Declaration communicated a platform for democratic change in a non-sectarian

<sup>111</sup> NSC ‘Mission Statement and Goals’. Sourced on 26<sup>th</sup> May 2014 from:

<http://en.etilaf.org/about-us/goals.html>

<sup>112</sup> NSC Fact Sheet. Sourced on 26<sup>th</sup> May 2014 from: <http://en.etilaf.org/about-us/fact-sheet.html>

<sup>113</sup> International Crisis Group. 2013. p.19. Seif led the “heavy diplomatic manoeuvring” with the US and Qatar to form the NSC, of which he became a co-vice president. Seif’s initiative was for the exiled opposition to prioritise the establishment of an interim government to administer “liberated” areas.

Syrian state. Kilo's coalition of secular figures forms one of three major political blocs of the NSC today.<sup>114</sup> At the time, the Damascus Declaration formed a pact with the exiled and largely London-based Syrian Ikhwan, which with its external alliances comprises a second major political bloc of the NSC. The observation here is that the NSC of today represents a continuity of opposition voices and programmes that pre-date the current conflict and that have re-surfaced in exile since the onset of armed conflict in April 2011.

In past years under conditions of relative stability, Syrian political entrepreneurs attempted to broker support from and forge alliances with outside governments and transnational agencies, those opposition voices and programmes but were effectively contested and silenced by the exclusionary and repressive machinery of the Syrian state.<sup>115</sup> Members of the Damascus Declaration and the Beirut-Damascus Declaration, including Riad Seif and Michel Kilo, were imprisoned for threatening the unity and security of the state and society.<sup>116</sup> From 2011 to 2014, the escalation of the Syrian conflict has given those same political entrepreneurs new air and exposure to a wider, more responsive global supply of supporters and sponsors. Opportunities for transnational brokerage have been optimised by their emigration to states in which they can directly consult and collaborate with Syrian opposition figures and groups who have long organised outside of Syria but were

<sup>114</sup> Lesch 2013, pp.89-90.

Pace, Joe and Joshua Landis. 2009. 'The Syrian Opposition: The struggle for unity and relevance, 2003-2008', in Fred Lawson (Ed). *Demystifying Syria*, SAQI and The London Middle East Institute, SOAS, London UK, pp.129-131.

International Crisis Group. 2013. p.4. Kilo brokered Saudi support and formed a bloc in June 2013 after the admission of secular figures to expand the NSC to 114 members.

<sup>115</sup> Pace and Landis, 2009, pp.129-131.

<sup>116</sup> Pace, Joe and Joshua Landis. 2006-07. 'The Syrian Opposition', *The Washington Quarterly*, 30:1, p.61.

The Beirut-Damascus Declaration of 12 May 2006 was a coalition of Syrian opposition and anti-Assad groups in Lebanon. It called for the normalisation of Lebanese-Syrian relations. The Syrian regime responded by arresting its member and issuing warnings not to forge alliances with outside governments and other transnational elements.

unable to secure domestic legitimacy for their alternative political programmes.<sup>117</sup> Their brokerage activities have been allowed to proceed relatively unchecked by a regime that has become pre-occupied with the fighting at home and increasingly isolated from its usual regional and international diplomatic ties.

The migration of political entrepreneurs, whether voluntary or forced as a consequence of the escalating conflict, is a significant intervening variable affecting the transnational brokerage that formed the NSC. Migration has enabled political entrepreneurs to physically organise with fewer constraints; however, it cannot be attributed to the escalation of the conflict alone. Long-standing structural processes, including systemic political exclusion and repression, are at its root. Four decades of rule under the Assad family systematically denied political competitors to organise and coalesce within the state.<sup>118</sup> The al-Assad regime has a long history of executing its foreign policy goals as a means to maintain popular legitimacy in the domestic sphere. In effect, it has been deterred from political reform that would undermine its foreign policy pillars and territorial security. During two decades of steady adaptation to the globalised world order, the Syrian regime oscillated the degree of restraint on the public relative to the degree of political, economic and social volatility in the region – seeking to coopt and appease the public in times of relative stability; repressing or suffocating it when

<sup>117</sup> Lesch 2013, p.91. Lesch quotes Ammar Qurabi of the UAE-based National Organisation for Human Rights in Syria who observed in 2009 that the Damascus Declaration and the National Salvation Front (a coalition of the Syrian Ikhwan and opposition figures including the former Syrian Vice President, Abd al-Halim Khaddam) were weakened by leadership choices and factionalisation, causing them to have no real influence inside or outside of Syria. Ziadeh, Radwan. 2013. *Power and policy in Syria: Intelligence services, foreign relations and democracy in the Middle East*, I.B. Tauris, London, p.73. Ziadeh observes that the various opposition groups in the decade to 2010 failed as they were unable to reconcile with Syrian society at large. He states this occurred because the political discourse remained grounded in authoritarianism. That is, they differed little in governance structures from the regime they wished to replace.

Pace and Landis, 2009, pp.120-143.

<sup>118</sup> International Crisis Group, 2013, p.1.



threats increase.<sup>119</sup> Under these conditions, the political opposition had little opportunity to acquire practicable political experience, including the means of evaluating its legitimacy and influence within the state.<sup>120</sup>

In chapter one I explained that repressive state systems positively correlate with transnational mobilisation. This is no less the case in the Syrian context. Many political entrepreneurs, including dissident intellectuals and members of the Syrian Ikhwan, migrated long before the present conflict began. Others, such as influential Sunni clerics and former political prisoners, migrated more recently as a consequence of the conflict and its violent escalation.<sup>121</sup> Common for all is that the persistent repressive tactics wielded by the Syrian state compelled them to leave Syria for the relative security offered by a range of host states. Those forced to migrate have been met with a net increase in opportunities and efficiencies for political mobilisation, and those who left voluntarily did so in search of those opportunities and efficiencies. Either way, their migration has opened up efficient pathways for transnational brokerage and those pathways have culminated in collective political mobilisation through the NSC.

The opportunities afforded to Syrian political entrepreneurs through migration corresponds with Salehyan's observation that mobilisation outside of the home-

<sup>119</sup> Pace and Landis. 2009, pp.120-143.

Cooke, Miriam. 2007. *Dissident Syria: Making oppositional arts official*, Duke University Press, Durham and London.

George, Alan. 2003. *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*, Zed Books, London UK and New York USA. Ziadeh, Radwan, 2013. Lesch, 2013.

<sup>120</sup> International Crisis Group, 2013, p.1. Pace and Landis, 2009, p.125. Quoting Ammar Quarabi, Joe Pace and Joshua Landis write that there is "no such thing as 'the opposition'. There are [only] individual activists and writers".

<sup>121</sup> Pace and Landis, 2009, pp.138-139. As armed conflict ensued, the regime released political activists who had been imprisoned for campaigning for political reform several years before the uprising. This was part of a suite of government concessions in reaction to growing resistance and violence. On release, many activists were compelled to emigrate.

state constrains the repressive abilities of that state.<sup>122</sup> Yet Salehyan makes his observation in relation to the conduct of insurgencies and, therefore, argues that transnational mobilisation increases the risk of civil conflict. In this case, the mobilisation of a cross-border insurgency was not the primary agenda, notwithstanding the political and material support that eventually crystallised for the Free Army.<sup>123</sup> Activists with limited political agency inside the state and various networked domestic insurgents groups had mobilised within the first half of 2011 calling upon their ties within the Syrian diaspora of activists, academics, business figures and organised parties like the Syrian Ikhwan to mobilise on their behalf and broker support for the “Syrian Revolution” in the international sphere. Organised opposition groups emerged in exile; however, it was well after the onset of armed conflict that those groups began to coalesce.<sup>124</sup> Whether or not the dispersal of political entrepreneurs prior to the conflict contributed to its onset is an open question and out of scope here. It is clearer that repressive political conditions and armed conflict moved Syrian political entrepreneurs to broker support for a coalition of diasporic political activists and organisations that otherwise would not have formed within the territory and under the surveillance of the al-Assad regime.<sup>125</sup> In order to demonstrate that transnational brokerage has in fact

<sup>122</sup> Salehyan 2006, p.39. Salehyan argues that it is difficult to conduct an insurgency unless the state’s repressive abilities are constrained. The state is constrained when mobilisation occurs outside the territory of the state.

<sup>123</sup> The NSC’s support for the Free Army is examined in chapter 3.

<sup>124</sup> Pace and Landis, 2009, pp.129-138. Some groups, such as the Damascus Declaration and the Jamal al-‘Atasi Forum, were derived from those that had formed in previous years as opportunities for mobilisation opened and, just as rapidly, closed. Political entrepreneurs involved in the Damascus Declaration (2005) and the Beirut-Damascus Declaration (2006) were imprisoned and dissidents were prevented from leaving the country in order to constrain political mobilisation outside of the state, which had occurred with the formation of the National Salvation Front – an alliance brokered in early 2006 by former Vice President Khaddam and the London-based Syrian Ikhwan.

<sup>125</sup> Wayland, 2004, pp.415-419. Wayland observes that political activists who emigrate from repressive societies are able to capitalise on the relative freedoms within numerous polities to organise and accumulate resources to an extent that was impossible in the homeland.

occurred, it is necessary to provide process-level evidence of the mechanism at work.<sup>126</sup> I turn here to that evidence.

### **2.1.2 Transnational brokerage of Syrian opposition coalitions: building political efficiency and legitimacy**

The first example of organised transnational brokerage came to prominence within the first two months following uprising in Dar'ā when an exiled opposition group calling itself the *National Initiative for Change* (NIC) issued a statement calling upon the regime is “to lead a transition to democracy that would safeguard the nation from falling into a period of violence, chaos and civil war”. Despite the otherwise pacifist ideas in the press release, it demanded that the Syrian armed forces should lead a militarised transition.<sup>127</sup> The NIC was coordinated by two political activists, Radwan Ziadeh and Ausama Monajed, who have been involved in the evolution of the exiled opposition and planning a transitional government to the present day.

Ziadeh's and Monajed's actions helped broker the *Syrian Conference for Change*, (SCC) which took place in Antalya from the 31<sup>st</sup> May to 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2011. Having secured the tacit support of the Turkish authorities for “the Syrian Revolution”, the conference brought together exiled opposition groups for the purposes of searching for “solutions that would save Syria from oppression and place it on the road to freedom and dignity”. The Final Declaration of the conference contained a

<sup>126</sup> Bennett and Elman, 2006, pp.445-476. Bennett and Elman, 2007, pp.170-195. Checkel, 2013, pp.17, 23.

<sup>127</sup> NIC Press release. 29<sup>th</sup> April. 2011. ‘National Initiative for Change Syrian Opposition demand the army to protect civilians and facilitate a transitional period’. The NIC claimed that “the Syrian population has completely lost faith in the executive authority”. The executive authority includes President al-Assad, his deputies, the prime minister, the parliament and the People's Council. Ziadeh's and Monajed's NIC was supported by 21 exiled political activists and 2 coordinators inside Syria. Sourced 6<sup>th</sup> July 2014 from: <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/national-initiative-for-change-program-of-syrian-opposition-the-liberal-wing/>

seven-point agreement for coordinating all of the activities in support of the revolution and a peaceful transition. It also provided the agenda on which transnational ties with opposition groups inside and outside Syria and support from states and international organisations were brokered.<sup>128</sup> Furthermore, it presented the opportunity for the Syrian Ikhwan to participate in opposition politics under a pluralist and secular identity frame. Even at this early stage, the Antalya conference was considered to be a moderate front for the Syrian Ikhwan – an accusation that has cloaked the political opposition in its various forms in the 3 years to June 2014.<sup>129</sup>

I depart the analysis briefly to emphasise that, in order to understand the politics underlying the formation and mobilisation of the NSC, it is necessary to appreciate the highly networked transnational organisation that is the Syrian Ikhwan. Its violent tactics during the uprisings against the Hafez al-Assad regime in 1970s and 80s explain the animosity and suspicion that the regime and sectors of Syrian society hold towards the NSC.<sup>130</sup> The subsequent dissolution and dispersion of the Syrian Ikhwan in 1982, and its emergence as an organised political force in the transnational space are testament to its resilience. A probing inquiry into its

<sup>128</sup> 'The Final Declaration of the Syria Conference for Change in Antalya'. 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2011. The Declaration called for the election of a transitional council that would draft and implement a new constitution, including free and transparent parliamentary and Presidential elections. The agreement consisted of demands for Bashar al-Assad's immediate resignation, "the toppling of the regime", and transitional power arrangements. It also stressed its "unequivocal rejection of foreign military intervention" whilst calling on "all Arabs, the Organization of Islamic Conference, the Arab League and the International Community" to "stop the violation of human rights" and to support freedom and democracy. Sourced on 6<sup>th</sup> July 2014 from: <http://www.lccsyria.org/583>

<sup>129</sup> Lesch 2013, pp.90-91, 112.

<sup>130</sup> Author's interview with Egyptian resident and activist working with the UNHCR in Damascus, May 2011. The interviewee stated that the Egyptian population at large was very concerned about the state going "fundi" (fundamental). Author's interviews with Syrian citizens between April 2006 and May 2011. The coalescence of the Syrian political opposition was taking place against a backdrop of amplified secular Arab paranoia concerning a resurgent Ikhwan in Egypt and an insurgent Sunni-Salafi current in Syria.

transnational political agenda is beyond the scope of this study and limited to analysing the role it has played in forming and mobilising the NSC.<sup>131</sup>

Returning to the SCC Declaration, the brokerage that proceeded culminated in the establishment of *al-Majlis al-Watani al-Souri* or Syrian National Council (SNC) in Istanbul on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2011.<sup>132</sup> At the time, the political entrepreneurs behind the SNC celebrated it as the largest and most influential organisation of opposition groups ever assembled and as the official representative body of the Syrian people and the revolution. It was comprised of “prominent parties and figures from across the ideological spectrum” including the Syrian Ikhwan.<sup>133</sup> Its formation in the wake of the fall of the Libyan regime is not likely to have been coincidental. Crisis Group observed that the formation of the SNC aroused expectations that it could replicate the achievements of the *Libyan National Transitional Council* in securing Western military intervention and taking executive power after the fall of the President.<sup>134</sup> This provides an example of how Syrian political entrepreneurs have sought to emulate the structures and strategies deployed effectively in other conflicts to serve their interests.

Concurrently, influential members of the Sunni ulama who sided with the revolutionaries had fled Syria to broker the formation of political opposition networks. Thomas Pierrett provides a detailed account of several influential clerics who, from the relative safety of exile in Turkey, emerged as political entrepreneurs

<sup>131</sup> For authoritative sources on the Syrian Ikhwan see: Pierret, 2013. Lund, Aron. 2013(a). ‘Struggling to adapt: The Muslim Brotherhood in a new Syria’, *The Carnegie Papers*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Middle East Program, May. For scholarly work on the Ikhwan in Syria see: Weismann, Itzhak. 2005. ‘The politics of popular religion: Sufis, Salafis, and Muslim brothers in 20th-century Hamah’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 37, pp.39–58. The Ikhwan cannot and should not be examined as a unified, monolithic body.

<sup>132</sup> Following a conference in Istanbul on the 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2011, the SNC was formed on the 15<sup>th</sup> September 2011 and formally established on 2<sup>nd</sup> October.

<sup>133</sup> International Crisis Group. 2013, p.3. The SNC included members of the Damascus Declaration, Local Coordination Committees, and the Kurdish Future Movement Party.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid, p.3

who espoused reformist liberal, pro-democracy discourses, with Islam as the primary cultural reference. For example, reformist sheikh Mu 'adh al-Khatib along with 'Imad al-Din al-Rashid and lawyer and former judge Haitham al-Maleh brokered the formation of the *National Salvation Congress*, which later joined the SNC. The SNC also directly attracted influential members of the exiled ulama.<sup>135</sup> By late 2011, the SNC was criticised for being dominated by Islamists, including veteran members of the Syrian Ikhwan. Key political figures began to direct their influence elsewhere, brokering support for alternative structures that could attract greater legitimacy in both the domestic and international spheres.

'Imad al-Din al-Rashid was the first to form a break-away group, *al-Tayyar al-Watani al-Suri* (the Syrian National Movement) to rival the SNC. He did so on the grounds that the SNC lacked the domestic legitimacy that the Syrian National Movement could claim through brokering a network of younger activists within the homeland.<sup>136</sup> Haitham al-Maleh followed in February 2012 by leading influential members of the 270-strong SNC to form the *Syrian Patriotic Group*.<sup>137</sup> Not unlike al-Rashid's group, the *Syrian Patriotic Group* was formed in response to the SNC's mounting public criticism of the SNC and it sought to distance itself from the Syrian Ikhwan and forge relations with the Free Army and other revolutionaries inside Syria.<sup>138</sup> In a race to secure domestic legitimacy, the SNC unilaterally

<sup>135</sup> Pierret 2013, pp.216-18. Members of the ulama sided with revolutionaries in the wake of the regime's forceful re-taking of Dar'a in May 2011. Sheikh Ana 'Ayrut from Banyas joined the ranks of the SNC. Others like Ihsan al-Ba'darani brokered support for the Free Army and SMC.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid, pp.224-6. The Syrian National Movement formed in December 2011.

<sup>137</sup> Oweis, Khaled Yacoub. 2012. 'Rift develops in Syrian opposition group', *Reuters*. 26<sup>th</sup> February. Al-Maleh was joined by 20 secular and "neo-Islamist" figures including the SNC's foreign policy spokesperson, Walid al-Bunni, Free Army broker, Fawaz al-Tello, founder of the Syrian Liberal Democratic Union, Kamal al-Labwani, and human rights lawyer, Catherine al-Talli. Al-Bunni, al-Tello and al-Labwani were participants in Riad Seif's forum for National Dialogue during the so-called "Damascus Spring" of 2000-01. Sourced on 6<sup>th</sup> July 2014 from:

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/27/us-syria-opposition-idUSTRE81Q02020120227>

<sup>138</sup> Abouzeid, Rania. 2012(c). 'As the Slaughter Goes On, the Syrian Opposition Still Can't Agree About an Armed Response', *Time*, 1<sup>st</sup> March. The SNC made the announcement on the 1<sup>st</sup> March

announced the creation of a military bureau to track, organise and unify armed groups inside Syria.<sup>139</sup> The announcement caused a rift with the Free Army leaders, revealing the perils of brokering domestic ties from abroad.<sup>140</sup>

The discussion so far reveals the opportunities for transnational brokerage exploited by Syrian political entrepreneurs but also the constraints. Whilst Adamson and Demetriou argue that diaspora groups are displaying levels of internal organisation and cohesion that increase their effectiveness, the Syrian case illustrates that brokering coalitions in exile is a reflection of the ever-shifting and deteriorating circumstances on the ground in Syria.<sup>141</sup> Transnational mobilisation has involved the circular pursuit of unity, organisational efficiency and political expediency, and domestic legitimacy. It has also progressively detached the exiled opposition from a popular domestic base. From its place within the transnational space, the NSC has no political presence leading Syrian society from within the state, and it has limited influence over the militant factions it supports in the field. Its preoccupation with building the structures of an inclusive and credible political alternative to the al-Assad regime has disengaged it from the domestic sphere, leaving it to react to the dynamics of the conflict.<sup>142</sup> This is complicated further by the efforts of Syrian political entrepreneurs who, consistent with Salehyan's observation of political groups repressed by home-states, have brokered

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2012. Sourced on 6<sup>th</sup> July 2014 from:

[http://www.raniaabouzeid.com/Rania\\_Abouzeid/Clips/Entries/2012/3/1\\_As\\_the\\_Slaughter\\_Goes\\_On%2C\\_the\\_Syrian\\_Opposition\\_Still\\_Cant\\_Agree\\_About\\_an\\_Armed\\_Response.html](http://www.raniaabouzeid.com/Rania_Abouzeid/Clips/Entries/2012/3/1_As_the_Slaughter_Goes_On%2C_the_Syrian_Opposition_Still_Cant_Agree_About_an_Armed_Response.html)

<sup>139</sup> Ibid. The SNC was to define and align Free Army missions in the field and supervise their execution.

<sup>140</sup> Lesch 2013, pp.197-198. The leadership of the SNC unilaterally claimed dominion over the militant groups that had adopted the Free Army banner. Free Army Colonel Riad al-Assad issued a statement denying the alignment with the SNC.

<sup>141</sup> Adamson and Demetriou. 2007, pp.489-526.

<sup>142</sup> International Crisis Group. 2013. p.19. Peter Harling observes that the NSC is plagued with competition for power between its constituent political blocs and their respective foreign allies. It is conflicted on matters of collective identity and strategy, thereby sustaining ambivalence and suspicion among the target groups from which it was seeking support in both the domestic and international spheres.

international support for the revolution.<sup>143</sup> Such brokerage has dominated the activities of the NSC's three major political blocs, leaving it vulnerable to the dynamics of regional power relations.

### **2.1.3 *Brokering state-sponsorship engages regional rivalries***

Relationship building and funding deals between the NSC's political blocs and the powerful Gulf-monarchies of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, who not only rival the Syrian regime but also each other, have placed the NSC within their spheres of influence. The vested interests of and competition between the Gulf-states have shaped the internal dynamics of the NSC to the extent that influential NSC personalities and their political blocs have been preoccupied with establishing an efficient governance structure and leadership that is acceptable to their respective Gulf-sponsors. This has marginalised the individual activists who hold seats. Further, it has constrained the brokering of the domestic ties that are necessary for gaining support within Syrian society for the NSC's political programme. The influence of the Gulf-states can be traced through providing process-level evidence of the inter-bloc politics at play and the turn-over of leadership.

The Syrian Ikhwan brought with it the state support it had brokered over decades of organisation in political exile, including that of the Government of Qatar, which has emerged as key patron of the international Ikhwani movement.<sup>144</sup> Forced to retain its base and structure abroad since its routing in Hama in 1982, the Syrian

<sup>143</sup> Salehyan 2006, p.49. Salehyan argues that they network with sympathetic actors in other countries because external actors are not exposed to the same repressive measures and are often better positioned to voice the concerns of the repressed.

<sup>144</sup> Lund, Aron. 2013(a)p.7. In January 2013, General Guide and member of the Hama faction Muhammad Riyadh al-Shaqfih denied that the Ikhwan enjoys state support any Arab or European country. Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party is a supporter as is Qatar. It is also funded by wealthy Syrian Sunni business families in the Persian Gulf in addition to numerous religious charities and mosque networks.



Ikhwan had grown isolated from a diminishing domestic base of support.<sup>145</sup> In order to reverse its ever-dwindling credibility within the state, it attempted to reframe its ideology by aligning with secular opposition figures. This is evident in its alliance building with the Damascus Declaration bloc, which gave it a secular cover, bolstered its influence, and secured the position of the SNC as the most powerful political bloc within the NSC.<sup>146</sup> The Syrian Ikhwan found itself holding 63 seats until the number of seats were expanded to 114 in June 2013.<sup>147</sup>

The June expansion of seats came about due to pressure from Michel Kilo's secular-democratic bloc, which had brokered the support of Saudi Arabia. This placed it in direct competition with the Syrian Ikhwan and [now former] Secretary General Mustafa al-Sabbagh's Syrian Business Forum bloc.<sup>148</sup> With substantial foreign backing, Kilo pressed the NSC to weaken the Syrian Ikhwan's influence by admitting secular figures to an expanded house.<sup>149</sup> Further to this, the moderate Islamist Ghassan Hitto resigned from the Prime Ministership.<sup>150</sup> His election and task of leading the formation of an interim government were undermined by

<sup>145</sup> International Crisis Group. 2013, p.7. Note that Turkey's and Qatar's support for the Ikhwan led to its positioning as the dominant bloc. Qatari diplomatic action at the Doha meetings helped secure this despite Riad Seif's calls for inclusiveness. Former Secretary General Mustafa al-Sabbagh also had Qatari backing and proceeded to dominate the NSC with the Ikhwan from its outset.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid, p.20-21. The forging of alliances with non-Islamists has been a pillar of the Syrian Ikhwan strategy, which is focused with the building of a democratic pluralist state, which sets it apart from its Egyptian Brothers. It is aligned with the strategy of the NSC and Crisis Group explains that this is clearly stated in a covenant on its website. Riyadh al-Turk is the founder of the Syrian Communist Party and member of the Damascus Declaration who was imprisoned for many years by the regime for his activism.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid, p.4. The June 2013 expansion resulted in an increase of seats held by activists (33%).

<sup>148</sup> Al-Sabbagh's bloc had brokered ties with Qatar, which was an open supporter of the Syrian Ikhwan.

<sup>149</sup> International Crisis Group. 2013, p.22. With Saudi and Western diplomatic support, Kilos' bloc pushed through an expansion agreement during the May 2013 meeting in Istanbul.

<sup>150</sup> BBC World. 2014. 'Syria opposition government head Ghassan Hitto resigns'. 8th July. Hitto was appointed PM on 18<sup>th</sup> March 2013 to establish an interim government. He resigned on the 8<sup>th</sup> July 2013 having made no progress in that regard. Sourced on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2014 from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-23232189>

perceptions that his appointment was the result of an Islamist-led alliance between the Syrian Ikhwan and the al-Sabbagh-Qatari bloc.<sup>151</sup>

Hitto's election and rapid demise is not an isolated example of the effects of brokering the support of foreign states. Evidence of foreign interference can be traced in the elections of other high office bearers. On the 6<sup>th</sup> July 2013, Ahmad Jarba was elected President. Jarba's long-standing Saudi ties enabled him to secure Saudi support for armed groups in the field.<sup>152</sup> He trumped the Qatari-backed al-Sabbagh in the election due to the shift of power towards the Saudi-backed secularists.<sup>153</sup> Jarba's predecessor, Muaz al-Khatib, was the first President of the NSC. A Sunni cleric and former Imam of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, al-Khatib was elected on his reputation within Syria as a dissenting voice. Like Jarba, he had been imprisoned by the regime for his political activism, and his ascendancy to the leadership can be attributed to the legitimacy afforded to him by his sacrifices and suffering. Unlike Jarba, al-Khatib did not have the weight of a political bloc behind him, even though he was said to be close to the Ikhwani current.<sup>154</sup> Consequently, he was unable to secure the kind of external or internal

<sup>151</sup> Lund, 2013(a), p.15. Hitto was elected on votes mobilised by the Ikhwan Qatar allegedly pushed members to vote for Hitto in line with its Ikhwan-friendly foreign policy. Al-Monitor. 2014. 'Former SNC leader explains decision to withdraw from coalition'. 17 January. Former Secretary General of the NSC Mustafa al-Sabbagh is an influential business leader who had nurtured relations with Qatar. He withdrew from the NSC ahead of the Geneva II conference in January 2014. Sourced on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2014 from <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2014/01/syria-national-coalition-leader-decision-withdraw-genevii.html#>

<sup>152</sup> The Syrian Observer. 2014(e). 'Who's who: Ahmad Assi Jarba', *The Syrian Observer*, 12 July. Jarba is a member of the Revolutionary Council of Syrian Tribes in the al-Hasakah governorate. Jarba's election was aided by some members of the Ikhwan breaking ranks to join Kilo's bloc. Sourced on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2014 from: [http://www.syrianobserver.com/Opposition/Opp\\_Who/Whos+Who+Ahmad+Assi+Jarba](http://www.syrianobserver.com/Opposition/Opp_Who/Whos+Who+Ahmad+Assi+Jarba) International Crisis Group. 2013, p.22. Ahmad Jarba replaced Christian democrat and former Syrian Communist Party member George Sabra who was acting President since Muaz al-Khatib's left his post in April 2013.

<sup>153</sup> These dynamics coincided with the Saudi-backed ousting of Muhammad Morsi's Ikhwan in Egypt.

<sup>154</sup> Lund, 2013(a), p.14.

support that better connected figures like Jarba could broker. Al-Khatib resigned in March 2013 in protest of the Ikhwani-Qatari backed election of Hitto and the general interference of Qatar and Saudi Arabia in the affairs of the NSC, including pressure to establish a government in exile.<sup>155</sup> Jarba was re-elected and saw out his second term. His successor, Hadi al-Bahra, like Jarba, has lived in and built close relations with Saudi Arabia.<sup>156</sup>

The turnover of leadership indicates that the organisational structure is being shaped by regional interests and competition as expressed through the NSC's rival political blocs. Whilst it is plausible that leaders are elected to satisfy the interests of foreign sponsors, the extent to which a leader is recognised and accepted among domestic activists is also an important element of the NSC's strategic frame.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid, p.15

<sup>156</sup> Reuters, Beirut, Wednesday, 9 July 2014. Hadi al-Bahra was elected on 7<sup>th</sup> July 2014. Sourced on 9<sup>th</sup> July 2104 from: <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/07/09/Syrian-opposition-coalition-elects-new-president.html>

<sup>157</sup> The profiles of leading NSC figures reveal a common legacy of sacrifice and suffering within Syria at the hands of the al-Assad regime.

### 2.3 Strategic framing: traversing international, regional and domestic cleavages

*“Because of the deep crisis in Syria, our country, and the struggle our people are facing, all political opposition factions and have come together in unity with the goal of overthrowing the Assad regime, ending the suffering of the Syrian people, and to make the transition towards a free and democratic country”.*

Mission statement of the National Syrian Coalition<sup>158</sup>

Strategic framing is a mechanism that political entrepreneurs construct and mould to attract and retain members of a collective and to persuade the engagement of various actors in the political project.<sup>159</sup> Nome and Weidman write of strategic frames as being the “grand narratives” that are rooted in the social identities that form and meet within groups, organisations, a networks, and coalitions.<sup>160</sup> They are devices that resonate with core members and are deployed in the public sphere order to communicate and align values and interests, to inspire a sense of belonging and obligation, to broadcast goals and pathways for goal attainment, and to set and respond to public expectations.<sup>161</sup> Strategic frames project and appeal to the hopes and aspirations of the collective and its target audience. Simultaneously, they can appeal to their fears and anxieties. They are also norm-laden, designed to inspire receptive people to adopt a framework of principles, an ideology or creed.

<sup>158</sup> NSC Fact Sheet. ‘Mission statement’. Sourced on 26<sup>th</sup> May 2014 from: <http://en.etalaf.org/about-us/fact-sheet.html>

<sup>159</sup> Adamson, 2013, pp.68-72. Political entrepreneurs cast, modify and promote strategic frames and tactical repertoires, which exploit culture, kinship and duty to rally collective resistance against a common enemy.

<sup>160</sup> Nome and Weidman 2013, p.177.

<sup>161</sup> Adamson, 2013, pp.68-72.

In the context of armed conflict, Nome and Weidman observe that strategic frames - whether they are coded and cast by the political elite, perpetrators of violence or the victims - provide foundations upon which conflicts unfold and are perpetuated. They argue that strategic frames, through enabling the diffusion of social identities or political subjectivities, form a necessary condition for armed conflict.<sup>162</sup> This has been observed by Adamson in her study of transnational networks. Here, conflict entrepreneurs move outside the state to frame the collective identity and its “grand narrative” in order to recruit a wide base of sympathisers, capital and other material support for waging their political project against the target state.<sup>163</sup>

Over the long-term, Nome and Weidman also argue that framing is conceived as a structure to agent process that leads to latent social adaptation, whereby people seek out emerging standards of appropriate behaviour in a given social context, and logically conform to those standards as they diffuse throughout a society.<sup>164</sup> In other words, framing is a socially constructive process where legitimacy is sought by the organisation and the agent. The scope of the case study does not involve examining such long-term implications of the NSC’s “grand narrative”. Rather, the focus is to unravel it in the recent tradition of Adamson and Bakke who demonstrate through process tracing that strategic frames are puzzles to be traced and explained rather than schemata that are ever-present.<sup>165</sup>

There is good agreement among scholars that political entrepreneurs almost invariably campaign on a frame of liberal values to democratise authoritarian

<sup>162</sup> Nome, and Weidman. 2013, p.176.

<sup>163</sup> Adamson, 2005, pp.37-41. This process of organising beyond the state to then challenge the state was described by Keck and Sikkink in 1993 as the “boomerang effect”.

<sup>164</sup> Nome and Weidman 2013.

<sup>165</sup> Adamson, 2013. Bakke, 2013.

homeland regimes.<sup>166</sup> This is no less the case with respect to the NSC's political programme, which is cast in its Declaration. The Declaration is built on a frame of commitments and principles that distinctly support the transition to a pluralist, multi-party liberal-democratic Syrian state, in which sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity are maintained. For instance, principle 3 of the Declaration states,

“Our goal is for a democratic, pluralistic Syria based on the rule of law and civil State, where all the Syrians will be equal regardless of their ethnic, religious and sectarian background. The NSC guarantees the rights, interests and the participation of all components of Syrian national fabric in shaping the future of Syria”.<sup>167</sup>

True to its name, the NSC has sought to project itself as not merely an oppositional group in exile but as an all-inclusive revolutionary force and alternative governing body for all Syrians. Official NSC documents and speeches made by its elected leaders recurrently address “the Syrian people” so as to reinforce its claim to be “comprised of a wide spectrum of political groups in Syria” and gaining “increasing support of the Syrian people living inside”. It is from this “large political base” that the NSC claims to derive its legitimacy.<sup>168</sup> Its call for support and participation spans “all groups and segments of [Syrian] society”, providing they adhere to the NSC's objectives and principles, which includes the fall of the regime. Even though it pledges to guarantee “the rights, interests and the participation of all components of Syrian national fabric in shaping the future of Syria”, the NSC only

<sup>166</sup> Adamson, 2005, pp.31-49. Brinkerhoff, 2011, pp.115-143. Faist, 2010, p.1680. Koinova, 2011, pp.333-356. Shain and Barth, 2003, pp.449-479.

<sup>167</sup> ‘Declaration by the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces’. Sourced on 17<sup>th</sup> May 2014 from :<http://en.etilaf.org/coalition-documents/declaration-by-the-national-coalition-for-syrian-revolutionary-and-opposition-forces.html>

<sup>168</sup> Ibid. Principle 14 of the Declaration.

welcomes those who are committed to realising “a democratic Syria”. It openly excludes “Bashar Al Assad and his close associates” who form the “regime of terror” from this project.<sup>169</sup>

A synthesis of studies by Brinkerhoff, Faist and Koinova produces a common view that diasporic organisations adopt the rhetoric of liberal values for three key purposes, which go some way towards explaining the application of NSC’s strategic frame. Firstly, liberal values are an instrument for communicating and reinforcing a political programme that corresponds with international norms of state sovereignty, plurality and human rights. The NSC’s adoption of those values is arguably designed to reassure and attract the support of dominant states and international institutions. Secondly, there is a common belief that liberal values can be effectively promoted and diffused to psychologically empower people to act for the purposes of advancing and protecting basic rights and freedoms. This is inherent in how the NSC links a democratic Syria with improving broad societal interests through ensuring political inclusion and ethnic, religious and sectarian equality. Thirdly, a liberal frame and the support it brings are believed to assert pressure on an authoritarian regime to reform and preserve human rights.<sup>170</sup> In this respect, the members of the NSC appear to have appointed themselves as the conduits for injecting Western norms into Syria.

These three purposes provide a limited explanation as to what has inspired the NSC to adopt a liberal-democratic frame. They imply that a circular process of

<sup>169</sup> Ibid. Principle 9 of the Declaration states, “There will be no place in new Syria for individuals who belong to the regime with blood on their hands and are involved in corruption”.

<sup>170</sup> Brinkerhoff, 2011, pp.115-143. Faist, 2010, pp.1665-1687. Social activists may adopt of world theory and structuralist meta-norms such as human rights to justify their causes and strategies. Koinova, Maria. 2010. ‘Diasporas and international politics: Utilising the universalistic creed of liberalism for particularistic and nationalist purposes’ in Rainer Bauböck and Thomas Faist (Eds). *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, pp.149-165.

norm diffusion has occurred as political entrepreneurs have been exposed to the structural and societal norms of their western and other relatively liberal hosts compelling them to adopt or emulate the dominant liberal democratic creed in constructing the master frame for collective action against the Syrian regime.<sup>171</sup> Leenders' studies of the "early risers" who led the uprising in Dar'ā observed that a similar process of norm diffusion was occurring through circular labour migration and the building of cross-border ties.<sup>172</sup> Whilst it may in part account for the liberal character of the master frame, it does not explain how broader regional interests and more discrete local cleavages are shaping its construction.

As previously discussed in relation to transnational brokerage, regional sponsors have played an important role in brokering the formation of the NSC and its internal politics. Equally, the behaviour of those sponsors is an intervening variable affecting strategic framing. It intervenes to the extent that non-democratic Gulf-states like Qatar and Saudi Arabia can use the veil of the NSC's liberal-democratic human rights oriented frame as a tool for pursuing their regional goals and interests in response to the escalating conflict. At the more discrete local level, the proliferation of opposition structures inside Syria, particularly militant ones, and the amplification of internal rivalries present substantial challenges to the NSC's master frame and legitimacy. Confronted with both regional and domestic presses and affordances that have emerged with the escalating conflict, the NSC has to balance its frame to ensure resonance with foreign states, local activists and a broader domestic base. Process-level evidence of these regional structure-to-structure dynamics and local agent-to-structure dynamics are traced below.

<sup>171</sup> Faist, 2010, p.1680. Faist argues that emigrants with transnational ties are much less subject to political control than those persons mainly residing in the home-state. He says this explains their propensity to become activists with a liberal creed.

<sup>172</sup> Leenders, 2012. Leenders 2013.



The formation of the NSC and its strategic frame came about in the wake of the United Nations-brokered *Action Group for Syria* conference that took place in Geneva in June 2012. The Action Group was convened to form a joint position on international action because of the “grave alarm” at the intensifying violence, destruction, human rights abuses and displacement, which stoked fears that a deepening conflict would have broader regional consequences.<sup>173</sup> At the time, the SNC had fallen into disunity on the questions of the arming of insurgent groups, western intervention, leadership and representation.<sup>174</sup> The *Final Communiqué* that resulted called for the implementation of a six-point plan and United Nations Security Council Resolutions 2042 and 2043. A comparison of the guiding principles framing the communiqué and the Declaration and principles framed by the NSC some six months later reveals an almost complete synergy. The rhetoric of the communiqué is definitively liberal-democratic in content and pitch, with the Action Group claiming to have consulted widely with Syrians to devise a plan for supporting a “Syrian-led” political transition catering for the democratic

<sup>173</sup> ‘Action Group for Syria Final Communiqué 30.06.2012’. Chaired by Secretaries-General of the United Nations and the League of Arab States, regional participants included Qatar, Turkey, Iraq and Kuwait. Other state participants included China, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States and France. The European Union High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy also participated. Thousands of people had been displaced, causing masses to seek refuge in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. Sourced on 5<sup>th</sup> September 2014 from:

<http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Syria/FinalCommuniquéActionGroupforSyria.pdf>

<sup>174</sup> International Crisis Group. 2013, p.3. SNC reluctance to take a clear position on arming the insurgency persisted from November 2011. During this time, the intensified siege of Homs amplified disagreements within SNC ranks.

Holmes, Oliver. 2012. ‘Facing dissent, Syrian exile leader changes tack’, *Reuters*, 15 May. SNC President Burhan Ghalioun resigned on the 10<sup>th</sup> June less than a month following his May 15 re-election having being perceived as a divisive figure. His resignation came amidst claims by more liberal SNC members that he was too close to the Syrian Ikhwan. His earlier re-election in February had already alienated and sparked the exodus of a number of member organisations. His May re-election amplified criticism of the SNC as being unrepresentative of secular activists and armed groups inside Syria, including mounting threats from the Local Coordination Committees that they would abandon the SNC. Ghalioun supported a process of negotiated political settlement and was opposed to arming the Free Army during much of his tenure until he announced his support for doing so after his May 2012 re-election. This supplied the pre-text for the NSC’s revolutionary frame and the formation of its military bureau. Sourced on 8<sup>th</sup> September 2014 from: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/15/us-syria-opposition-idUSBRE84E0G020120515>

aspirations of the Syrian people. Affirming the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of the Syrian state, the communique calls for political actors to compete fairly and equally in multi-party elections. It states that a political transition should uphold human rights, the rule of law, mutual consent, and non-discrimination whereby there is “*no room for sectarianism or discrimination on ethnic, religious, linguistic or any other grounds*”. It lays out the main steps for a transition, including the establishment of a transitional governing body (inclusive of members of the current government), the drafting of a new constitutional, and ensuring the continuity of government institutions. All of these ideals have been adopted by the NSC in its master frame.<sup>175</sup>

However, the NSC departs from the communique by omitting commitments to the disarming and demobilisation of armed groups, and a reconciliation process.<sup>176</sup>

Conversely, the NSC has a goal of unifying support for its military bloc comprised of the Supreme Joint Military Command Council (the SMC) and the Free Army and, therefore, supports militarisation of the conflict.<sup>177</sup> With regards to reconciliation, any dialogue or negotiations with the regime are prohibited.<sup>178</sup>

Placing those departures aside, the NSC’s master frame is synonymous with a

<sup>175</sup> NSC Fact Sheet. ‘Political Solution’. The NSC states that it is “committed to a political solution to the Syrian conflict built on the transition processes outlined in the [Geneva Communiqué](http://en.etilaf.org/about-us/fact-sheet.html) of June 2012, which stipulates that any future transitional governing body must be decided on the basis of mutual consent between parties to the conflict”. Sourced on 26<sup>th</sup> May 2014 from: <http://en.etilaf.org/about-us/fact-sheet.html>

<sup>176</sup> Action Group for Syria Final Communiqué 30.06.2012. The Final Communiqué states, “Action Group members are opposed to any further militarization of the conflict”.

<sup>177</sup> NSC Mission Statement and Goals. This is also evident in principle 13 of its Declaration that describes its relationship with the SMC Military Council through which it executes “well-planned and organized military operations”. Sourced on 26<sup>th</sup> May 2014 from: <http://en.etilaf.org/about-us/goals.html>

<sup>178</sup> NSC Principles and NSC Declaration. Its conciliatory approach is limited to, firstly, holding regime members accountable for their crimes through independent judicial trials and, secondly, not tolerating or allowing acts of revenge and retribution against any group in Syria. Sourced on 26<sup>th</sup> May 2014 from: <http://en.etilaf.org/about-us/principles.html> and <http://en.etilaf.org/coalition-documents/declaration-by-the-national-coalition-for-syrian-revolutionary-and-opposition-forces.html>

platform crafted by a group dominated by a Western bloc comprised of the US, UK, France and their regional clients, Qatar, Turkey, and Kuwait. With this ready-made narrative, the SNC heeded the Actions Group's demand that it "increase cohesion", and under Qatari and US pressure, they agreed to align with the broader base of opposition actors and groups that is the NSC.<sup>179</sup>

Whilst the NSC asserts that it "brings together the main Syrian opposition groups committed to ending the Syrian conflict and assisting Syria's democratic transition", the strategic frame designed to unify those groups is not a construct of the independent activities of political entrepreneurs.<sup>180</sup> Rather, it has come about through the combined influence of a bloc of states rivalling the Syrian regime. Scholars such as Nome and Weidman and Andrew Bennett argue that groups internalise political norms that bias the structural and societal contexts in which they mobilise and this no less applies to the NSC.<sup>181</sup> As it has formed outside of Syria in a Western-dominated context and because it "[calls] upon the international community to be more forthcoming" in supporting its mission and goals, it has been compelled to conceive a master frame that resonates and legitimises it with Western states and international organisations. Therein, a liberal-democratic frame can work as an enabler for the NSC's political project at least in the international sphere. Mark Hass illustrates this by observing that states are likely to aid ideological allies to promote change in a target state.<sup>182</sup> Hass' observation also infers that this results in a struggle for domestic power and legitimacy between rival states through ideologically-aligned proxies.

<sup>179</sup> International Crisis Group. 2013, pp.3-4

<sup>180</sup> NSC Fact Sheet. Sourced on 26<sup>th</sup> May 2014 from: <http://en.etilaf.org/about-us/fact-sheet.html>

<sup>181</sup> Bennett, 2013. Nome and Weidman, 2013.

<sup>182</sup> Lesch 2013, p.67. Lesch draws on observations made by Mark Hass.

This is where the liberal-democratic frame can complicate matters for the NSC in the domestic sphere. Cast to boost legitimacy and support for change inside Syria, the frame can otherwise constrain it because it does not necessarily resonate with the sectors of Syrian society that do not aspire to, are suspicious of, or are ambivalent towards, western liberal-democratic ideals. Shena Cavallo argues that, from a social movement perspective, foreign support can act on the opposition's strategic framing to challenge the Syrian regime's meta-narrative about the conflict.<sup>183</sup> However, the NSC's strategic frame risks having the exact opposite effect in the domestic sphere having been conceived outside the state, by individuals and groups associated with the Syrian Ikhwan, and with the facilitation of foreign rival states. This is enough to provoke mistrust and opposing positions among the same "Syrian people" it claims to represent, thereby confronting members of the NSC with conflicting interests and loyalties.<sup>184</sup>

Trust is confounded by two key variables. Firstly, partisan interests are at times sought under the guise of inclusive and democratic platforms.<sup>185</sup> There is the criticism that Saudi and Qatari-Ikhwani interests are being played out under the guise of the all-inclusive, secular, democratic frame. It is based on the view that the non-democratic Sunni-dominated regional rivals are supporting the NSC as a proxy for its designs on the future governance of Syria, including the remodelling of Syria's alignment with Iran and Hizbullah. It is also informed by the view that

<sup>183</sup> Cavallo, Shena L. 2012. 'From Daraa to Damascus: Regional and Temporal Protest Variation in Syria', Master of Arts dissertation, Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, University of Pittsburgh, p.38. The regime's narrative casts the opposition as self-interested, foreign-bred and religiously fanatical conspirators.

Lesch 2013, p.168-170. Prior to the formation of the NSC, Foreign Minister Walid Muallem called the SNC an "armed terrorist organisation".

<sup>184</sup> International Crisis Group. 2013, pp.13-14. Western ties have caused previously affiliated groups to denounce the NSC and align with Jabhat al-Nusra.

Shain, 2002, pp.128-134. Shain argues that homeland conflicts can confront diaspora leaders with a dilemma of dual loyalties and torn allegiances.

<sup>185</sup> Brinkerhoff, 2011, p.131.

the NSC provides an efficient front for the Syrian Ikhwan to rebuild its base and political influence inside Syria. The problem confronting the NSC is that these dynamics play to the Syrian regime's meta-narrative and risk polarising Syrian society. In addition, it confuses its Western benefactors who are concerned about rising Salafism in the region and the prospects for a secular post-Assad government.

Secondly, there is criticism that playing opposition politics in exile divorces the NSC members from the interests and aspirations of the Syrian citizens who are enduring the violence and insecurity. Such criticism frequently comes from within exiled opposition ranks. For example, former SNC President Abdulbasit Seyda stated that the NSC has been unable to draw a political vision for the revolution because the political entrepreneurs are divided, "not able to comprehend the democratic movement", and focused on marketing themselves as the solution.<sup>186</sup> Those two variables have caused the NSC to shift its strategic frame to align it with persisting local cleavages and to attract broader domestic appeal and support. This has not occurred through modifying its master liberal-democratic frame but rather through validating its revolutionary identity by means of leadership selection and commitment to support the armed insurgency.

On the matter of leadership selection, earlier in this chapter I explained that it is plausible that NSC leaders are elected to satisfy the interests of foreign sponsors. I also stated that the extent to which a leader is recognised and accepted among

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<sup>186</sup> Zaman Al-Wasl. 2014(b). 'Seyda: Opposition Lacks Political Vision, Favoritism Rife'. *The Syrian Observer*. Seyda succeeded Ghalioun in June 2012. He was an advocate for arming the Free Army and international intervention. Ironically, during his tenure Seyda, himself a Kurd and independent activist from al-Hasakah governorate, was heavily criticised by Kurdish activists for being self-interested and abandoning Kurdish aspirations for a Turkish-sponsored agenda. Sourced on 18<sup>th</sup> August 2014 from: <http://syrianobserver.com/Interviews/Interviews/Seyda+Opposition+Lacks+Political+Vision+Favoritism+Rife>

domestic activists is an important element of the NSC's strategic frame. This is evident in the instalment of leaders, from first President Muaz al-Khatib to current President Hadi al Bahra, as well as lower ranking office holders, who share track-records of activism, sacrifice and imprisonment inside Syria. This suggests that they are chosen to personify the revolutionary identity and project an empathy with inside activists and struggling civilians.<sup>187</sup> However, leaders through the ranks of the NSC have fallen victim to a phenomenon that has constrained political entrepreneurs throughout but also long before the onset of the conflict. That is the domestic currency of their sacrifices and suffering diminishes when in exile. This occurs because popular perceptions associate members of the NSC with rival states, foreign funding, and a Western-style strategic frame that easily characterises them as the unrepresentative “dupes of the West” who are domicile in five-star hotels and far-removed from the dire realities of the conflict.<sup>188</sup> Its dependence on external havens and sources of support considerably constrain the NSC's collective ability to project a credible, non-polarising face for bolstering domestic ties and political support.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> International Crisis Group. 2013, p.20. The profiles of National figures display common histories of political dissent, activism and imprisonment by the Syrian government under either Hafez al-Assad, Bashar al-Assad or both. A record of imprisonment and associated suffering at the hands of the regime appear to be essential qualifications for a leadership role in the exiled political opposition. They are broadcasted to gain and sustain the opposition's popular legitimacy in the domestic sphere.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid, p.11.

Lesch 2013, pp.63, 66, 89-90. Exiled opposition activists are often accused of collaboration with outside agents, as “dupes of the West”, with little knowledge or understanding of the socio-political situation given their absence from Syria. This creates a public image of exiled activists that Radwan Ziadeh says has proved hard to shake.

Ziadeh, 2013. Pace and Landis, 2009.

<sup>189</sup> International Crisis Group. 2013, pp.4, 24.

Lister, Charles. 2014. *'Dynamic stalemate: Surveying Syria's military landscape'*, Policy Paper, May 2014, The Brookings Institution, Doha Centre, p.5. Exiled SNC representatives have been ridiculed for being more familiar with the comforts of five star hotels than the realities of war-torn Syria. Sourced on 13<sup>th</sup> August 2014 from <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2014/05/19-syria-military-landscape-lister>.

On the matter of supporting the armed insurgency, the NSC founded the SMC to represent the dispersed and disjointed Free Army battalions and coordinate their strategic planning and field operations.<sup>190</sup> The initiative followed about two years of what David Lesch calls a “bifurcated oppositional arc” in which the exiled political opposition and the armed Free Army resistance inside Syria developed independently but were drawn together to project a representative and unified transnational opposition.<sup>191</sup> The shift in framing to a militarised position was a response to the mounting criticism from domestic activists as militant salafi groups were proliferating and competing with Free Army fighters for resources and arms. In this light, the shift was a response to persistent calls from revolutionary and civilian insiders confronting a deteriorating and increasingly desperate situation, which hardened the positions of otherwise pacifist political entrepreneurs. For instance, in a May 2014 interview, Michel Kilo explained that he and his side of politics are not people of violence and were against arming the revolution until the violence escalated he saw “no way back” from providing external support for armed insurgents.<sup>192</sup>

Contrary to expectations, adopting a militarised revolutionary identity has not enhanced the NSC’s domestic legitimacy. Although intended to improve insurgent coordination, acceptance of the SMC and unity under its aegis was short-lived. By late August 2013, Lebanese-Australian journalist Rania Abouzeid wrote that leaders

<sup>190</sup> NSC Fact Sheet. Founded in December 2012, the SMC comprised a 30-member command structure led by [now former] Chief of Staff Salim Idriss. Idriss had defected from the Syrian Army in July 2012. He was removed from his post and replaced by Brigadier General al-Bashir on 16<sup>th</sup> February 2014. <http://en.etalaf.org/about-us/fact-sheet.html>

<sup>191</sup> Lesch 2013, p.167.

<sup>192</sup> Political Memory. 2014. ‘A meeting with Michel Kilo’, *Al-Arabiya English*, 9<sup>th</sup> May. Kilo stated that he felt there was nothing one could do internally – it had all become external. He came to the view that the opposition had “no role to play in a compromise”. Sourced on 13<sup>th</sup> August 2014 from: <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/webtv/programs/political-memory/2014/05/08/A-meeting-with-Syria-s-Michel-Kilo.html>

from four of the Free Army's five fronts threatened to resign from the SMC stating that the NSC has no legitimacy due to "the lying promises of those states who claim to be friends of Syria".<sup>193</sup> Such statements from the front-lines demonstrate that the continued influence of Qatar, Saudi Arabia and their Western partners over the NSC's strategy tarnishes the legitimacy of the Free Army fronts and hinders the forging of effective transnational ties.<sup>194</sup>

The discussion reveals that conflict escalation has affected strategic framing to the extent that it is failing to account for the localised discourses of the conflict – a phenomenon that Stathis Kalyvas observes is not uncommon in armed conflicts.<sup>195</sup> He observes that political entrepreneurs often coalesce to construct "master cleavages" of a conflict, which attempt to accommodate but effectively homogenise the diverse "local cleavages" dispersed through a society. In the Syrian conflict, the NSC's master frame of the "Syrian people's revolution against al-Assad" is laid over a "Byzantine complexity" of local structures, grievances and rivalries. It dominates the international discourse of the conflict whereby local struggles are conceptualised and articulated through the prism and language of the master frame. In effect, it disguises otherwise persisting and multiplying local cleavages. This is a consequence of what Kalyvas calls an "epistemic preference for the

<sup>193</sup> Abouzeid, Rania. 2013. 'Syrian Opposition Groups Stop Pretending', *The New Yorker*, 27<sup>th</sup> Sept 2013. Abouzeid reports that the fighting men within Syria have long despised their political and military leaders-in-exile. She says it is common to hear them say, "We are in the *khanadik* [trenches] and they are in the *fanadik* [hotels]. In the minds of Free Army fighters, the NSC has not been able to persuade its state sponsors to provide assistance "worthy of the sacrifices of the Syrian people." Sourced on 6<sup>th</sup> July 2014 from: [http://www.raniaabouzeid.com/Rania\\_Abouzeid/Clips/Entries/2013/9/26\\_Syrian\\_Opposition\\_Groups\\_Stop\\_Pretending.html](http://www.raniaabouzeid.com/Rania_Abouzeid/Clips/Entries/2013/9/26_Syrian_Opposition_Groups_Stop_Pretending.html)

<sup>194</sup> International Crisis Group. 2013, p.11

<sup>195</sup> Kalyvas, 2003, p.478. Kalyvas reminds us that conflict and violence are exacerbated by enduring genealogies that are deeply embedded in "a micro-universe of conflict-ridden relations" among and between individuals, families, villages, regional communities, and various layers of the state.



universal” over the particular or ambiguous.<sup>196</sup> Brinkerhoff goes further by explaining that universal frames are constructed because political entrepreneurs, with increasing detachment from their homelands, become less effective at reading and navigating local grievances and events.<sup>197</sup> The problem for the NSC is that its master frame does not and cannot erase local grievances, and can cause it and its supporters to misrepresent the dynamics in specific governorates, cities, towns and villages.<sup>198</sup> For instance, the localised dynamics of the violence occurring in Dar’ā governorate bordering Jordan compared to those occurring in al-Hasakah governorate bordering Turkey and Iraq are likely to differ substantially because of their local governance structures, social and economic structures, ethnic ties, and cross-border relations. The local cleavages in either governorate may not be amenable to the NSC’s strategic frame.

Without a broad and penetrating base of trustworthy domestic ties, the NSC has no dependable means for evaluating the extent of its domestic support and legitimacy at discrete local levels, leaving it vulnerable to competition, subversion and rejection. That vulnerability has been borne out through the internal divisions already described, and also through competition with rival opposition movements. For instance, reports from the field have documented that militant Sunni-Salafi groups have been successful in switching the loyalties of NSC-aligned Free Army fighters.<sup>199</sup> Consequently, the NSC has been compelled to engage in a process of

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Brinkerhoff, 2011, pp.130, 134. “Conflict entrepreneurs” mobilising outside of their places or countries of origin can make inaccurate assumptions about local political, social and cultural systems and dynamics.

<sup>198</sup> Kalyvas, 2003, p.479.

<sup>199</sup> Abouzeid, Rania. 2014. ‘Syria’s Uprising Within an Uprising’, 16<sup>th</sup> January 2014. Not long before his removal from the Supreme Military Council leadership, General Salim Idriss was criticised for only having the ear of his Western supporters compared to the Islamic Front, which has the fighting men on the ground who listen to its leaders. This amounted to Free Army fighters switching loyalties towards rival armed groups. Sourced on 6<sup>th</sup> July 2014 from:

outbidding against its Sunni-Salafi rivals to build and, in some areas, regain local support. The effects of the escalating conflict on outbidding are examined in the next section.

## 2.4 Outbidding the Sunni-Salafi rivals: a transnational struggle for legitimacy

*“...the biggest threat in the region now is the sectarian one ... and this will have direct repercussions on us, you and on other states”.*

Bashar al-Assad, 2007<sup>200</sup>

*“It is vital to remember that Assad helped create ISIS”.*

National Syrian Coalition press release, 4<sup>th</sup> September 2014

Outbidding is a mechanism that occurs when rival groups compete and attempt to dominate each other by promoting and differentiating their credentials and value propositions to sectors of a society. The outbidding processes deployed are rooted in a group’s strategic framing processes, and are intended to distinguish it sharply from its rivals. Outbidding can aid the group in building its persuasive and coercive capacities to mobilise popular support, secure resources and lever against its opponents. Adamson observes that outbidding can involve a cyclic battle of positions that further polarises the rivals, causing them to adopt increasingly extreme positions and deploy similarly extreme tactics, including repression and violence.<sup>201</sup> In those instances, outbidding can cause shifts in strategic framing and even compel a group to deviate from the principles that constitute its master frame. Outbidding frequently involves one group broadcasting negative

[http://www.raniaabouzeid.com/Rania\\_Abouzeid/Clips/Entries/2014/1/16\\_Syrias\\_Uprising\\_Withi\\_n\\_an\\_Uprising.html](http://www.raniaabouzeid.com/Rania_Abouzeid/Clips/Entries/2014/1/16_Syrias_Uprising_Withi_n_an_Uprising.html)

<sup>200</sup> Lesch 2012, p.24. Quoting Bashar al-Assad’s 2007 speech to a Saudi audience.

<sup>201</sup> Adamson, 2013, p.70. Adamson’s study focuses specifically on ethnic outbidding and considers, albeit to a lesser extent, sectarian outbidding. Koinova, 2011, p.336.

evaluations of its rivals. In its most basic form, outbidding and the shifts in framing that accompany it involve a group defining its rivals with the binary language of “us versus them” or good and evil.<sup>202</sup> This is done to lever greater legitimacy and influence through exposing the faults and the threats that rivals present to the security and aspirations of a society.

The mobilisation of militant Sunni-Salafi opposition movements in Syria has brought increasing violence. They compete against the NSC aligned-Free Army fronts and each other for arms and capital, and as they battle for territorial dominance and the booty of state resources. By undermining the NSC’s principles of sustaining Syrian national unity, territorial integrity and sovereignty, the distinctly sectarian and supra-sovereign rhetoric espoused by the Sunni-Salafi movements, and their collective strength, increasing reach, and violent tactics, have drawn the NSC into a game of selective sectarian outbidding. The outbidding processes it deploys are “sectarian” having regard to its broad etymology, which includes adherents to particular political philosophies, including religious ideologies and their subdivisions. It is also “selective” because the NSC modulates its position according to the specific identity of a given rival. In the discussion below, I explain how this selective sectarian outbidding has come to infuse the NSC’s framing activities.

On the eve of the formation of the NSC, now former Vice President Suheir al-‘Atasi stated that the opposition is fighting on two fronts: the regime and extremist opposition groups.<sup>203</sup> The NSC has since conflated those two fronts with the escalating sectarian violence, and its approach to sectarian outbidding has

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<sup>202</sup> Bakke, 2013, p.36.

<sup>203</sup> Al-‘Atasi, Suheir. 2012. ‘Syrian opposition: A view from the inside’. Conference presentation at *Syria 18 months on*, London School of Economics, Middle East Centre, 20<sup>th</sup> September. From notes taken by the author.

followed suit. The spectre of a connection between the regime and sectarian violence in the current conflict can be traced to the views of Michel Kilo. In 2011, Kilo forecast two likely paths for the conflict. The first was a return to status quo with political and armed opposition groups acquiescing to the coercive and repressive apparatus of the regime. The second was that extreme Islamist movements would “move the street towards violence” where it might be capable of winning over sizeable sectors of society, which are not yet inclined towards political Islam.<sup>204</sup> At the time, Kilo warned of a dangerous scenario:

“The situation will be transformed from one of a struggle for freedom, justice and equality into another characterized by sectarian infighting, the extinguishing and termination of which will shatter society and destroy the state”.<sup>205</sup>

Kilo goes on to assert that the sectarian threat is amplified by the regime. He argues that the regime has vested interests in strengthening extreme Islamist movements to confirm its conspiracy theory and to steer the struggle into one between the Syrian state and the illegitimate, extremist “takfiri”.

Not more than a year later, Kilo’s prediction of sectarian infighting was taking shape and informing opposition strategy. The NSC’s response is cast within its Declaration, which asserts that it and the Syrian people “firmly reject and condemn” self-serving radicals and terrorists who espouse “extremist ideology or mentality”.<sup>206</sup> This is shared by the aligned Free Army fronts, which in its

<sup>204</sup> Kilo, Michel. 2011. ‘Syria ... the road to where?’, *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, 4:4, pp.440-441.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid, pp.440-441. Kilo wrote that sectarian infighting would descend the Syria as a state and society into a destructive conflict, pitting the political authority against traditional society. Despite its modernist demands, Syrian society would then adopt sectarian and factional demands that would fuel the war.

<sup>206</sup> NSC Declaration. The Declaration states “Our revolution and vision are for all Syrians. There is no room for sectarianism or discrimination on ethnic, religious, linguistic or any other grounds. We realize that there are radical/extremist elements in Syria which follow an agenda of their

Proclamation of Principles “rejects all acts of extremism committed by terrorist groups”.<sup>207</sup> Here, the NSC projects its liberal, all-inclusive frame against the more narrow representations of its Sunni-Salafi rivals by reinforcing that it reflects the “religious diversity that is a fundamental part of Syrian heritage”.<sup>208</sup> In its political framework and Declaration, the NSC does not name any extremist rival or collectively brand them as Islamist, Jihadi or Salafist or otherwise. This is the domain of its media centre, which publishes its position statements on such matters.

The NSC has been communicating a consistent antagonistic position toward ISIS and its supra-sovereign ideology and violent tactics since September 2013. Its statements of condemnation increased in frequency when ISIS commandeered the Iraqi city of Mosul on the 10<sup>th</sup> June 2014. They spiked further in response to the widely publicised executions of two American journalists in August and September 2014.<sup>209</sup> Casting it as “an enemy of the Syrian people” as evil and tyrannical as the al- Assad regime, the NSC has since acted quickly to harness the growing international horror and condemnation of ISIS to bolster its calls for increased international support for the “mainstream” Free Army fronts “to protect civilians

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own. We firmly reject and condemn all forms of terrorism and any extremist ideology or mentality as do the Syrian people”.

<sup>207</sup> Free Syrian Army. ‘Proclamation of Principles’. Sourced on 16<sup>th</sup> June 2014 from: [http://www.irinnews.org/pdf/fsa\\_proclamation\\_of\\_principles.pdf](http://www.irinnews.org/pdf/fsa_proclamation_of_principles.pdf) Also see NSC Fact Sheet. ‘The Free Syrian Army’. <http://en.etalaf.org/about-us/fact-sheet.html>

<sup>208</sup> NSC Fact Sheet. The NSC claims a membership comprised of Shia and Sunni Muslims, Alawites, Christians, Kurds, Druze, Armenians, Assyrians, and Circassians. Sourced on 16<sup>th</sup> June 2014 from: <http://en.etalaf.org/about-us/fact-sheet.html>

<sup>209</sup> Chulov, Martin. 2014. ‘ISIS insurgents seize control of Iraqi city of Mosul’, *The Guardian*, 11<sup>th</sup> June Sourced on 14<sup>th</sup> June 2014 from: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/10/iraq-sunni-insurgents-islamic-militants-seize-control-mosul>

Al-Arabiyya News. 2014. ‘Obama: ISIS has no place in 21st century’, *Al-Arabiyya English*, 20 August. Sourced on 10<sup>th</sup> September 2014 from: <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/08/20/Slain-U-S-journalists-s-mother-makes-appeal-to-ISIS-.html>

Al-Arabiyya News. 2014. ‘Al Jazeera ridicules beheading of U.S. journalists as Hollywood show’. *Al-Arabiyya English*, 5<sup>th</sup> September. Sourced on 10<sup>th</sup> September 2014 from: <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/media/digital/2014/09/05/Al-Jazeera-ridicules-beheading-of-U-S-journalists-as-Hollywood-show-.html>

against all forms of terrorism”.<sup>210</sup> Its reaction conforms to Adamson’s observation that non-violent networks capitalise on the high profile, politically charged violence of transnational networks to promote, legitimise and seek support for their plights.<sup>211</sup> However, tracing the onset of the NSC’s attempts to outbid ISIS reveals a more sluggish response to the threat. Its first statement condemning ISIS for “its aggression on the Syrian revolutionary forces as well as its continued disregard for Syrian lives” was released on the 20<sup>th</sup> September 2013, some five months after the ISIS had taken hold of al-Raqqa, arresting and executing citizens and repressing revolutionary activists.<sup>212</sup> In expressing its condemnation, the NSC claimed to represent the beliefs of the “moderate Syrian people”, their respect for religious diversity and rejection of ISIS’ “takfiri ideology and exclusionary behaviour” and criminality. The international outrage in the wake of the atrocities in Iraq provides a logical explanation for the NSC’s framing of ISIS. In contrast, the reasons for taking several months to form a position after ISIS had emerged to threaten the interests of the NSC and its Free Army proxies are less clear. A likely explanation can be found in how the NSC has positioned itself against other Sunni-Salafi movements, such as *Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham* (The Support Front for the People of Syria) and *Jabhat al-Islamiyya* (The Islamic Front).

<sup>210</sup> NSC Press Release. 8<sup>th</sup> June 2014. ‘Syrian Coalition condemns executions by ISIS’. Sourced on 14<sup>th</sup> June 2014 from: <http://en.etalaf.org/press/syrian-coalition-condemns-executions-by-isis.html>  
NSC News. 4<sup>th</sup> July 2014. ‘Syrian Coalition empowering Syrian rebels is the only way to fight ISIS and Assad’. Sourced 15<sup>th</sup> July 2014 from: <http://en.etalaf.org/all-news/news/syrian-coalition-empowering-syrian-rebels-is-the-only-to-fight-isis-and-assad.html>

NSC Press Release. 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2014. ‘Syrian Coalition calls on NATO members to combat ISIS in Syria’. Sourced 5<sup>th</sup> September 2014 from: <http://en.etalaf.org/press/syrian-coalition-calls-on-nato-members-to-combat-isis-in-syria.html>

<sup>211</sup> Adamson, 2005, p.38

<sup>212</sup> NSC News. 20<sup>th</sup> September 2013. ‘The Syrian Coalition condemns ISIS ...’. Sourced on 22<sup>nd</sup> September from: <http://en.etalaf.org/news/the-syrian-coalition-condemns-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-the-levant-isis-for-restricting-the-freedoms-of-citizens-and-says-isis-agenda-is-not-in-line-with-that-of-the-syrian-revolution.html>

Al-Hakkar, Firas. 2013. ‘The Mysterious Fall of Raqqa, Syria’s Kandahar’, *Al-Akhbar English*, 8<sup>th</sup> November. Sourced on 14<sup>th</sup> September from: <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/17550>

The first published evidence of the NSC's outbidding activities directed at Jabhat al-Nusra can be traced to April 2013. In early 2012, Jabhat al-Nusra had orchestrated suicide bombings of government buildings in heavily populated areas of Damascus and Aleppo and commenced its campaign to replace the Syrian regime with an Islamic state based on Sunni-Salafi jurisprudence.<sup>213</sup> The NSC released a statement "urging" Jabhat al Nusra to act in the interests of all Syrian nationals by supporting and protecting the freedom of all Syrian sects and concentrating its efforts on fighting the al-Assad regime.<sup>214</sup> Its position fell short of condemning Jabhat al-Nusra's actions, and merely implied that the Sunni-Salafi movement had stretched the boundaries and lost its way in the fight against a common enemy. As the NSC was working to unite and build support among armed opposition units in the field rather than alienate them, it cast Jabhat al-Nusra as a legitimate armed opposition force – a partner no less despite its ties to al-Qaeda and, at the time, to ISIS. In effect, the NSC did not differentiate ISIS from Jabhat al-Nusra until their ties were severed in mid-2013 amidst a dispute between ISIS and al-Qaeda leadership.<sup>215</sup> Until then, their actions but not their goals were accepted into the NSC's revolutionary frame. Thereafter, the NSC has sought to conflate the sectarian violence of ISIS with the regime's grand strategy and tactics. This is evident in several statements released within the 12 months to September 2014, in which it asserts that ISIS was created through the actions of the al-Assad regime and, to that effect, mimics the regime's sectarian tactics, cooperates with regime forces,

<sup>213</sup> International Crisis Group. 2012(b). 'Tentative jihad: Syria' fundamentalist opposition', *Middle East Report No. 131*, Damascus/Brussels, 12 October, pp.10-13. Jabhat al-Nusra emerged in January 2012 to wage jihad against the regime. Its sectarian rhetoric and violent tactics were more in common with al-Qaeda in Iraq.

<sup>214</sup> NSC Press Release. 14<sup>th</sup> April 2013. 'The Syrian Coalition denounces all positions that stand in the way of Syrian freedom and that do not align with the will of the people'. Sourced from: <http://en.etilaf.org/press/the-syrian-coalition-denounces-all-positions-that-stand-in-the-way-of-syrian-freedom-and-that-do-not-align-with-the-will-of-the-people.html>

<sup>215</sup> Jemmo, Hussein. 2013. 'Al-Qaeda's Internal Divide Grows in Syria', *al-Monitor*, 19<sup>th</sup> August. Sourced on 26<sup>th</sup> August 2014 from: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2013/08/al-qaeda-internal-divide-syria-islamic-state-jabhat-nusra.html>

and “goes against the holy teachings of Islam”.<sup>216</sup> Whilst adopting an unequivocal anti-ISIS position, the NSC is comparatively ambivalent towards al-Qaeda linked Jabhat al-Nusra. A critical review of NSC statements concerning Jabhat al-Nusra reveals that it shifts its framing of the movement.

In September 2013, the NSC’s Political Committee disassociated itself from Jabhat al-Nusra because of its al-Qaeda ties and an agenda that is “against the nationalistic project”.<sup>217</sup> Consistent with Kilo’s theory as described earlier in this section, and not unlike its framing of ISIS, some opposition figures dismissed Jabhat al-Nusra and its violent methods as devices of the regime used to validate its meta-narrative of the conflict.<sup>218</sup> Contradicting these positions, the NSC then rejected the United States’ proscription of Jabhat al Nusra as a terrorist organisation.<sup>219</sup> It went on to report positively on the movement’s capture of regime-supporting militants and its collaboration with NSC-aligned Free Army fronts.<sup>220</sup> Then in July 2014, the NSC indirectly demanded that Jabhat al-Nusra

<sup>216</sup> NSC Press Release. 28<sup>th</sup> September 2013. Sourced on 26<sup>th</sup> August 2014 from: <http://en.etalaf.org/press/a-denunciation-of-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-the-levants-attack-on-a-church-in-raqqa.html>

NSC News. 4<sup>th</sup> April 14. ‘Leaked document confirms ISIS links to Assad regime’. Sourced on 26<sup>th</sup> August 2014 from: <http://en.etalaf.org/all-news/local-news/leaked-document-confirms-isis-links-to-assad-regime.html>

NSC. Press Release. 4<sup>th</sup> September 2014. ‘Syrian Coalition calls on NATO members to combat ISIS in Syria’. Sourced on 26<sup>th</sup> August 2014 from: <http://en.etalaf.org/press/syrian-coalition-calls-on-nato-members-to-combat-isis-in-syria.html>

<sup>217</sup> NSC News. 26<sup>th</sup> September 2013. ‘Timing of the brigades statement is not appropriate but we should understand their concerns’. Sourced on 26<sup>th</sup> August 2014 from: Statement issued by UK-based Member of the Political Committee, Anas Al Abda: The NSC should not engage Jabhat al-Nusra in dialogue. Sourced from: <http://en.etalaf.org/news/the-timing-of-the-brigades-statement-is-not-appropriate-but-we-should-understand-their-concerns.html>

<sup>218</sup> International Crisis Group. 2012(b), p.10.

<sup>219</sup> NSC News. 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2013. ‘Identification of real terrorist in Syria is crucial to successful international solution’. Haytham al-Maleh stated that “the problem of the international community that it is unable to accurately define the terrorist side. It must have designated the Assad regime as terrorist before placing Al Nusra Front on the terrorist list”. Sourced on 26<sup>th</sup> August 2014 from: <http://en.etalaf.org/news/syrian-coalition-identification-of-real-terrorist-in-syria-is-crucial-to-successful-international-solution.html>

<sup>220</sup> NSC. Daily Newsletter. 14<sup>th</sup> November 2013. ‘Jabhat Nusra Front Captures 11 Members of Iran and Hezbollah’s Terrorist Militias’. Sourced on 6<sup>th</sup> September 2014 from: <http://en.etalaf.org/search/Nusra/Page-3.html?t=1410751524312&tpl=search>



“rethink” its Islamic state project and withdraw from rebel-held areas.<sup>221</sup> These shifting frames convey conflicting messages to Western sponsors whose support it seeks and, importantly, sinister messages to the many Syrian people who it claims to represent but who are threatened by Sunni-Salafi violence and domination.<sup>222</sup> The public anxieties inflamed by those messages are stoked further by the al-Assad regime’s unwavering narrative that it alone is the only buffer between the extremist opposition and its fundamentalist backers in the Gulf from installing a Salafi theocracy.

The NSC’s ambivalence towards Jabhat al-Nusra is hewn from its struggle for domestic legitimacy, particularly with its own aligned-Free Army fronts whose own leaders, as explained earlier in this chapter, expressed favour with the Islamic Front. Comprising seven Sunni-Salafi groups that merged in November 2013, the Islamic Front is Syria’s largest military alliance. Whilst three of its groups - Liwa al-Tawhid, Liwa al-Islam, and Saqour al-Sham - are aligned with the NSC’s military wing, the Islamic Front has dismissed the NSC as being Western-backed and unrepresentative.<sup>223</sup> Its guiding principles, as outlined in its manifesto, fundamentally compete with the NSC’s strategic frame because they reject secular democracy and mandate the establishment of an independent Syrian state with

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NSC Daily Newsletter. 17<sup>th</sup> February 2014. The Unified Military Command in Qalamoun, which consists of the FSA, Al Nusra Front, the Islamic Front and unaffiliated battalions repelled attempts by regime forces and Hezbollah’s terrorists. Sourced on 6<sup>th</sup> September 2014 from:

<http://en.etilaf.org/search/Nusra/Page2.html?t=1410751524312&tpl=search>

<sup>221</sup> NSC News. 19<sup>th</sup> July 2014. ‘Rebels call on Nusra Front to rethink establishing its emirate’. Sourced on 6<sup>th</sup> September 2014 from: <http://en.etilaf.org/all-news/news/rebels-call-on-al-nusra-front-to-rethink-establishing-its-emirate.html>

<sup>222</sup> Lesch 2013, pp.106-107. Lesch observes that the opposition is not doing enough to placate public anxieties and fears of a Sunnah Islam takeover

<sup>223</sup> Lister, 2014, p.2. The Islamic Front is an amalgamation of Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya, Liwa Saqour al-Sham, Liwa al-Tawhid, Jaysh al-Islam, Ansar al-Sham, the Kurdish Islamic Front, and Liwa al-Haq. It is said to be capable of deploying a total of approximately 50,000-60,000 fighters. Liwa al-Tawhid, Liwa Saqour al-Sham, and Jaysh al-Islam were aligned to the Supreme Military Council. Sourced on 13<sup>th</sup> August 2014 from <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2014/05/19-syria-military-landscape-lister>.

sovereignty under Islamic jurisprudence.<sup>224</sup> However, the Islamic Front concurs with the NSC's framing of ISIS. It also shares the views of ISIS as being a violator of Syrian sovereignty that "no longer fights the al-Assad regime" and as the misguided enemy of Islam and the Syrian people's revolution.<sup>225</sup> This is where the NSC, the Islamic Front and Jabhat al-Nusra converge. Despite their disagreements on tactics and their ideological differences concerning the future governance of Syria, this convergence facilitates cooperation between Free Army and Salafi militants.<sup>226</sup> In its quest to muster unity against common enemies, the NSC modulates its antagonistic tone against its otherwise ideological rivals by accepting their violent tactics into its master frame. Therefore, what amounts to the NSC's tacit approval of sectarian violence is re-cast within the noble revolutionary project of emancipating all Syrians from the Assad-ISIS nexus of tyranny.

The NSC is compelled to modulate its framing in this way to prevent its Free Army fronts from being absorbed into the ranks of its wide-reaching and increasingly dominant Sunni-Salafi tactical partners. The dilemma for the NSC is that its tactical partners are also its ideological opponents. They are developing alternative political programmes and competing against the NSC for domestic legitimacy. They are also well-resourced to deliver goods and services throughout Syria to local and often marginalised communities whose loyalties can be bought by such gestures.

<sup>224</sup> Abouzeid, 2013. Abouzeid observes there has long been a disconnect between those fighting and bleeding inside Syria and the political and diplomatic machinations of those in exile. Now they [the NSC] have publicly thrown in their lot with Jabhat al-Nusra.

Lund, Aron. 2014(a). 'The Politics of the Islamic Front, Part 4: The State', 17th January Sourced on 13<sup>th</sup> July 2014 from: <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54233>

<sup>225</sup> NSC. 20<sup>th</sup> September 2013. 'The Syrian Coalition condemns ISIS ...'. Sourced on 22<sup>nd</sup> September from: <http://en.etilaf.org/news/the-syrian-coalition-condemns-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-the-levant-isis-for-restricting-the-freedoms-of-citizens-and-says-isis-agenda-is-not-in-line-with-that-of-the-syrian-revolution.html>

<sup>226</sup> Lund, Aron. 2014(b). 'One Year of Jihadi Civil War', 9<sup>th</sup> April. Sourced on 24<sup>th</sup> July 2014 from: <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=55297>

Abouzeid, Rania. 2013.

In this case, the sectarian outbidding performed by the NSC against its Sunni-Salafi rivals is modulated by the presence of enemies in common, and less so by opposing political and religious ideologies. This is borne out by the NSC's unfettered naming and shaming of ISIS compared with its ambivalence towards Jabhat al-Nusra and its cooperation with the Islamic Front – three groups that aspire to variant brands of Islamic sovereignty that bring them into conflict with the NSC's strategic frame.

## Chapter 3 Tracing the impacts of mobilisation on conflict escalation

*“The Coalition will do everything in its power to reach the goal of overthrowing the Assad regime and bring victory to the revolution both inside and outside of Syria.”*

Mission Statement of the National Syrian Coalition

### 3.1 Introduction

The discussion in the previous chapter has laid out how the mechanisms of transnational mobilisation deployed through the NSC are borne from the escalating conflict. The purpose of this chapter is to trace how its transnational mobilisation contributes to conflict escalation. This is important because, in keeping with my chapter one analysis of diasporas and transnationals in “homeland” conflicts, it would be inaccurate to frame the NSC as a dependent variable that has no agency. It is also prudent to consider a counter-narrative to the NSC’s world view that the al-Assad regime alone is responsible for the conflict, including its sectarian dimensions.<sup>227</sup>

In this chapter, I build an argument that the NSC’s political motivations and machinations are conflict provoking and sustaining. This does not mean that its strategic agenda is to sustain the conflict. Nor does it mean that its legitimacy and survival are conflict dependent. Underpinning the argument are the observations made by Brinkerhoff of the “darker side” of politicised diasporas, in which their well-intentioned activities can have unintended, counterproductive and

<sup>227</sup> Mohsen, Amer. 2014. ‘Syria: The ‘comforting’ narratives of the conflict’, *Al-Akbar English*. 22 May. Mohsen, a political science doctoral candidate at Berkeley University, argues that it is too easy to assume that the regime alone bears all the responsibility for what is happening in Syria. He states that it is a comforting ideological narrative that assumes a world in which only the regime has agency. Sourced on 17<sup>th</sup> July 2014 from <http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/syria-%E2%80%98comforting%E2%80%99-narratives-conflict>

destructive consequences.<sup>228</sup> Two hypotheses are tested in this chapter. The first is that the Syrian conflict is exacerbated by the NSC's transnational mobilisation of resources. The second is that the Syrian conflict is exacerbated by the lobbying and persuasion processes deployed by the NSC. In forming those hypotheses, I have invoked Brinkerhoff's observations and made the assumption that the NSC does not engage in activities with the intent of escalating and sustaining conflict and violence. Through the case study, I draw on the correlations made in the quantitative research between transnational mobilisation and the risk of conflict escalation. The aim here is to carefully analyse the resources and influence that the NSC wields, how they exacerbate conflict, and to provide plausible explanations for those correlations.<sup>229</sup>

### **3.2 Resource mobilisation: factionalised resourcing begets conflict**

Resources include competent people, funding streams, armaments, information and communication technologies, and basic provisions for survival including water, food and shelter. They can be used to recruit people to a cause, broker transnational relations and support, provide meaningful occupations for a group's constituents, secure and distribute funds, establish and implement a political programme, and sustain armed resistance against rivals. According to Bakke, a transnational opposition's ability to effectively contest the state is a function of how it mobilises such resources.<sup>230</sup> Its relative power is determined by the quantity and coercive potential of the resources it can procure.

The ways in which a transnational opposition mobilises its resources can cause them to be perceived as purveyors of conflict and violence rather than champions

<sup>228</sup> Brinkerhoff, 2011, pp.119, 136-137.

<sup>229</sup> Wood, 2013, p.245. Wood states that examining mobilisation processes illuminates the quantitative studies about transnational ties and conflict.

<sup>230</sup> Bakke, 2013, p.39.

of conflict resolution and peace-building. This is because their alliances, funding sources, and highly networked but opaque distribution channels are regularly linked to supporting armed groups and their various modes of violence.<sup>231</sup>

Moreover, their biases in the distribution of funds and resources can create inequities in the domestic sphere, provoking competition and disunity between groups that would otherwise be strategically or, at least, tactically aligned. In this case, I trace how the NSC through its distribution of resources, advances conflicting agendas, supports militancy and, in effect, exacerbates violence.

Any study of how the NSC mobilises resources should begin by recognising that it is, predominantly, a coalition of opposition parties, groups and activists. Their coalescence brings about a shift in the scale and scope of the resources available to it. This shift is orchestrated to introduce efficiencies by increasing the width and depth of transnational networks through which resources are distributed.

Attempts at building such efficiencies also exacerbate conflict. This is evident in the efficiencies of scale and scope executed through the NSC's establishment of both its military wing comprised of the SMC and Free Army fronts, and its Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU). The former was established for the purposes of building ties with armed insurgent groups and improving the efficient delivery of financial and other material support to them. Whereas the latter was set up to distribute humanitarian aid and emergency supplies "equally and without discrimination" in partnership with Local Coordination Committees.<sup>232</sup>

<sup>231</sup> Baser, Bahar and Ashok Swain. 2008. 'Diasporas as peacemakers: Third party mediation in homeland conflicts'. *International Journal of World Peace*, 25:3, p.11. Brinkerhoff, 2011, p.

<sup>232</sup> NSC. 'About the ACU'. The ACU's goals include the effective coordination of the delivery of international assistance "regardless of gender, race, religion or political beliefs". Sourced on 20<sup>th</sup> September 2014 from: <http://en.etilaf.org/acu/about-the-acu.html>

Despite their intended purposes, the activities of the military wing and ACU create conflicting interests for NSC and agitate local cleavages, which have proven difficult to reconcile. Conflicting interests arise because, firstly, NSC-aligned and funded militants are participating in the violence and destruction that produces humanitarian emergencies.<sup>233</sup> Secondly, the many citizens who have come to require humanitarian aid include those who are fighting NSC-backed militants. Thirdly, the ACU stresses that it does not direct aid to groups for the purposes of achieving their political goals. Local cleavages are amplified because, first, the ACU has limited ability to provide aid to civilians injured and displaced by NSC-backed operations in contested areas and, second, aid may not be provided to people who are perceived to be sympathetic or aligned to the NSC's opponents. Those people in need who do not receive aid through the NSC-apparatus are often positioned to receive it from Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, which despite their reputations for brutality have secured local support for distributing supplies, and restoring and maintaining civil services. In effect, animosities directed towards the NSC translate into opportunities for extremist rivals to appeal to and remedy local grievances. For example, in Aleppo governorate, the NSC-aligned militants and Local Coordination Committees have received criticism for failing to coordinate civil services to areas in which they fought and sought to control. Local business people protest that their commercial activities have been disrupted to a lesser extent by the likes of Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, praising them for being better equipped to prevent looting and criminality than the fractious Free Army and Islamic Front.<sup>234</sup>

<sup>233</sup> Tactical collaborations between Free Army fighters and Jabhat al-Nusra have associated the NSC with atrocities.

<sup>234</sup> Dark, Edward. 2014. 'US strikes in Syria won't turn locals against Islamic State', *Al-Monitor Syria Pulse*. Dark writes that the popularity of ISIS is largely due to the failings of the Syrian opposition and the fractious rebel factions than with its own strength. 16<sup>th</sup> September. Sourced on 16<sup>th</sup> September 2014 from: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/09/syrians-support-islamic-state-refuse-us-strike.html>

By fostering local favour, the NSC's rivals have strengthened and expanded their control of territory from which they commandeer recruits and hoard resources, enabling them to invigorate the confrontation with regime forces and opposing insurgents.

Providing security through administering basic goods, utilities, and emergency supplies is necessary for gaining local support and cooperation. However, the NSC has yet to develop the necessary efficiencies to effectively mobilise its resources for those purposes, especially in conservative cities and towns in Syria's rural north-eastern quadrant. This is not just a consequence of its mobilisation outside of the state. Crisis Group identifies two additional reasons. Firstly, escalating military action by its rivals, most often led by the regime, increases the opportunity costs of channelling resources into civil administration.<sup>235</sup> Secondly, the NSC is preoccupied with directing its resources to coordinate and support the fractious armed opposition and to establish an interim government outside the state.<sup>236</sup> In effect, the NSC becomes weaker relative to its rivals in attracting the loyalties of traumatised local communities. That weakness is deepened by the relative lack of territory it governs through its militant proxies.

Bennett identifies that the control of territory in the home state is an important variable that provides "cross-border" oppositions with greater bargaining leverage against the governments of the home state and any host state.<sup>237</sup> In this regard, the NSC's lack of territorial control weakens its ability to lever its Western and Gulf-state backers to increase support for its militant proxies in the field. This works to strengthen the regime and the Salafi groups that are presently controlling territory.

<sup>235</sup> International Crisis Group. 2013, p.11

<sup>236</sup> Ibid, p.30.

<sup>237</sup> Bennett, 2013, pp.223-228.



The effect of territorial control on leverage, however, is not limited to the NSC's relations with states. It also affects its capacity to bring armed groups under its military wing, to outbid its Sunni-Salafi rivals, and earn civilian loyalties. The NSC has sought to direct its resources to remedy the situation, largely by attempting to consolidate a united and co-dependent front with the many and varied armed insurgent groups and by partnering with activists to improve basic civil services in the so-called liberated areas.<sup>238</sup> However, in doing so, its choices have had the quantum effect of supporting the conditions for escalating conflict.

The NSC's decision to resource the armed insurgency and, therefore, militarise its strategic frame has drawn it into fuelling confrontations and violence. Since its formation, the NSC has brokered the delivery of military equipment and supplies through its international and regional backers. By March 2013, the NSC was campaigning in France and the United Kingdom to have the European Union arms embargo lifted to increase the flow of arms through its SMC.<sup>239</sup> Then following the June 2013 Friends of Syria meeting in Doha, Chief of Staff Idriss confirmed that the Free Army fronts had received arms shipments.<sup>240</sup> Later in May 2014, NSC President Ahmad Jarba was talking-up the promises given by the United States to deliver arms to the military wing.<sup>241</sup> That same month, Charles Lister documented

<sup>238</sup> International Crisis Group. 2013, pp.29-30.

<sup>239</sup> Van Dam, Nikolaos. 2014. 'Syria: The West Should Stop Raising False Expectations', Paper delivered at the Heinrich Böll Foundation, Berlin, 19 May. Van Dam writes that the embargo was lifted at the insistence of the UK and France but there was no real change in arms deliveries i.e. there was no political will to arm any part of the opposition. Sourced on 13<sup>th</sup> August 2014 from <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/syria-west-stop-raising-false-expectations-nikolaos-van-dam/>

<sup>240</sup> International Crisis Group. 2014. 'Monthly updates'. February, March, April. Sourced from: [http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/6343/month-by-month-summary-of-developments-in-syria-\(u](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/6343/month-by-month-summary-of-developments-in-syria-(u)

Lister, 2014, p.14. In the background, Russia had earlier that month – June 4<sup>th</sup> - defended its planned delivery of MIGs and S-300 missiles to the Syrian military.

<sup>241</sup> The Syrian Observer. 2014(d). 'Jarba: The West has promised us weapons within weeks', *The Syrian Observer*, 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2014. Sourced on 18<sup>th</sup> August 2014 from: <http://syrianobserver.com/Interviews/Interviews/Jarba+The+West+has+promised+us+weapons+within+weeks>

that American-manufactured weapons had found their way to Free Army fighters operating in Aleppo, Idlib, Latakia and Dar'a governorates, and that the United States had expanded its programme of training NSC-affiliated fighters. The consequences, as Lister forecasted, have included "broad clashes and violence".<sup>242</sup> The NSC's efforts to mobilise military resources has a composite effect of widening the clefts between its political blocs, increasing competition among armed opposition groups, drawing foreign states further into the conflict, hardening its rivals, amplifying local grievances, and repelling civilian support.

The effects of arming the opposition were predicted by Haithem Manna who warned that pursuing a military victory over the regime is "impossible" and would "lead to radicalism, sectarianism, and to tearing the country apart".<sup>243</sup> Academics like Amer Mohsen concur to the extent that action by political entrepreneurs to arm the insurgency has created dependence on and inspired the interference of foreign actors, antagonised sectarian relations, and impaired the popular uprising.<sup>244</sup> If these outcomes were expected and inescapable, why then did the NSC take the militarised track? I argue that the covariables of domestic legitimacy and territorial control precisely shape the NSC's choices.

The NSC's formation as a political entity in exile without control over territory inside Syria produces inherent constraints on securing widespread domestic legitimacy and support for its political programme. Conversely, without domestic

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<sup>242</sup> Lister, 2014, p.14. Lister documents that small numbers of American-manufactured BGM-71 TOW ATGMs have reached Free Army organisations.

<sup>243</sup> Shuaair, Muhammad. 2014. 'Haitham Manna to Al-Ahram: Geneva a Waste of Time', *The Syrian Observer*, 18th February. Manna stated that, since November 2011, he had argued against arming the opposition. He claims that "the country is destroyed and there's nothing left to cry about". Sourced on 18<sup>th</sup> August 2014 from: <http://syrianobserver.com/Interviews/Interviews/Haitham+Manna+to+AlAhram+Geneva+a+Waste+of+Time>

<sup>244</sup> Mohsen, Amer. 2014. Mohsen argues that these factors combined have "brought us to civil war"

legitimacy the NSC is not likely to be able to sustainably secure and govern territory. This nexus of territory and legitimacy compels the NSC to use its resources to expand relations with and strengthen the internal opposition and, therefore, enhance its prospects for local governance.<sup>245</sup> Drawing on Koinova's theory of effective transnational coalitions - which posits that influence and viability are a function of the strength of both the "diasporic" institution and the "strategic centre" within the homeland - this is a necessary step for an organisation weakened by disunity and facing a fractious and mutating internal opposition.<sup>246</sup>

As described earlier in this chapter, the NSC has sought to expand domestic ties and strengthen the internal opposition through two tracks - its military wing and the ACU - and the effects have included the agitation of local cleavages, the opening of opportunities for rival militias, and the escalation of violent confrontations. Those effects are consistent with the respective observations made by Gleditsch and Brinkerhoff. Firstly, the building of transnational ties increases the willingness of groups within the state to confront their opponents.<sup>247</sup> Secondly, the transnational militarisation of conflict hardens and radicalises collective action.<sup>248</sup> There are complex dynamics underlying those observations that require explanation.

To arm the opposition, the political entrepreneurs leading the NSC have depended on resources brokered from Gulf-state donors and deals with Turkey to provide cross-border distribution channels. Its dependency on the Gulf-states in particular

<sup>245</sup> International Crisis Group. 2013, p.19. An exiled opposition has no reliable gauge for measuring its domestic support. It must, therefore, build domestic ties.

<sup>246</sup> Koinova, 2011, pp.344-45. Koinova argues that a weak "diasporic" institution and a weak "strategic centre" within the homeland amount to a "loose transnational coalition". A strong transnational coalition is characterised by a weak diasporic institution and a strong strategic centre.

<sup>247</sup> Gleditsch, 2007, pp.297-299

<sup>248</sup> Brinkerhoff, 2011, p.125

is due to the ambivalence of its Western supporters but also in the hope that it can win Western commitment, given that state-sponsored oppositions are more likely to attract international support.<sup>249</sup> As described in chapter two, Western ambivalence can in part be explained by the dominance of the Syrian Ikhwan through the Qatar-backed SNC bloc and the perceived threat it poses to the NSC's secular liberal-democratic frame. The Syrian Ikhwan's influence caused secularist political entrepreneurs like Michel Kilo and Haytham Manna, with Saudi sponsorship, to engineer a shift in scale towards civilian activist representation and curb the growing power of the Qatari-Ikhwani bloc. This was done to increase the NSC's appeal to Western benefactors and bolster its domestic relevance. However, Crisis Group observes that the shift in scale did not bolster the influence of civilian activists.<sup>250</sup> Rather the NSC continues to provide a platform for the two Gulf monarchies and the Syrian Ikhwan to pursue their respective goals concerning Syria's future. Therein, the NSC is subject to the "strong host" or, put more accurately in this case, the strong-sponsors who can regulate and manipulate how the NSC mobilises resources— a phenomenon that is perceived by the regime and sectors of Syrian society to be occurring.<sup>251</sup> Just as the "strong host theory" predicts, the influence of the NSC's sponsors over its resource distribution practices have provoked animosities and confrontations within Syria among the various actors, thereby amplifying the likelihood of persisting conflict.

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<sup>249</sup> International Crisis Group. 2013, p.19.

Al-'Atasi, Suheir. 2012. At the London conference, al-'Atasi stated that the opposition is forced to lobby the governments of Qatar and Saudi Arabia because of the lack of international support for the revolution.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid, pp.18, 25. Saudi-Qatari rivalry shapes the NSC's power distribution and internal rules. Individuals exploit those rivalries and blocs are installed with their backing. Gulf-donors are an obstacle to political coalescence and cooperation.

<sup>251</sup> Bennett, 2013, pp.221 and 223. The risk of recurrent conflict is linked to the relative strength of host states (strong host theory). It can be argued that a strong sponsor possesses sufficient power to coerce opposition groups into serving its own strategic goals vis-à-vis Syria.

The Kilo-Saudi led structural secularisation that occurred in June 2013 drew the NSC into the grand narrative of the sectarian conflict – a narrative contrary to its strategic frame, akin to the regime’s warnings, and one that fuels anxieties within sectors of Syrian society.<sup>252</sup> Recognising civilian anxieties about Wahhabi-Salafi and Ikhwani agendas within its ranks, the NSC has channelled resources to militants adopting the secular Free Army banner.<sup>253</sup> However, several Sunni-Salafi groups also function under the banner. Further, the common threat of the regime and ISIS has led to collaborations and a pooling of resources between Free Army fighters and the NSC’s ideological opponents, such as Jabhat al-Nursa and Ahrar al-Sham.<sup>254</sup> Whilst tactically advantageous against common enemies, by associating with al-Qaeda-linked and other Salafi groups the NSC is resourcing the very brand of sectarian violence that it claims to oppose. These tactical associations generate local distrust. They also validate the regime’s narrative, which it harnesses to, first, discredit the NSC among citizens who harbour anxieties about a Sunni-Salafi takeover and, second, mobilise its own domestic and regional alliances against its designated foreign-sponsored Islamist enemies. The regime is strengthened further as Western states are deterred from arming components of the NSC’s military wing because of the fear that weapons shipments could be misdirected to proscribed groups.<sup>255</sup> As this stunts the supply of weapons and other military resources, the loyalties of Free Army fighters are courted by better resourced competitors who do not share the NSC’s strategic goals but have the currency of strength, credibility

<sup>252</sup> International Crisis Group. 2013, p.9. Mohsen, 2014.

<sup>253</sup> Abouzeid, Rania. 2012(c). On establishing the military bureau, human rights activist Walid al-Bunni stated "We don't care who cleans the street ... but if it's going to be comprised of Muslim Brothers, or just for show it'll be a problem".

<sup>254</sup> Lister, 2014, p.14. Free Army groups coordinating closely with Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra achieved gains in al-Quneitra and Dar'ā in March 2014.

<sup>255</sup> Van Dam, 2014. Van Dam argues that the West obviously wants to avoid an Islamic extremist dictatorship at all costs but is unable to guarantee that arms provided to others would not end up in the hands of Islamic extremists? He states that the West wants to see a moderate democratic secular pluralist successor regime, but he thinks it is an unrealistic prospect. Abouzeid, 2013.

and leverage inside contested areas - weapons and ammunition.<sup>256</sup> Moreover, the conditions are created for opposition groups to compete over resources, local loyalties, and territory. This escalation can be further explained by the NSC's faction-oriented resourcing practices.

Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey are the providers of material and logistical support for the NSC's military bureau. The Gulf-states stream the weapons and military supplies, and, despite Ankara's denials, Turkey provides the safe haven and distribution centre.<sup>257</sup> This dependency has exposed the NSC to the rift between Qatar and Saudi Arabia concerning which groups should be armed. Field researchers attribute the rift to Qatar's support for the Syrian Ikhwan and observe that it shapes decisions about who is resourced. Manifestly, weapons and funds are streamed to selected insurgent groups operating under the Free Army banner, as well as competing Sunni-Salafi militias that have attracted Qatari or Saudi favour.<sup>258</sup> For example, the Saudi Arabia supports the Islamic Front, which is ideologically and strategically opposed to the NSC and has called for the re-orientation of the SMC and its Free Army fronts towards an Islamist political framework.<sup>259</sup>

<sup>256</sup> Abouzeid, 2013. Free Army fighter have turned to more hardcore Islamist elements, who—with their superior funding, supplies and discipline—have been pivotal in securing many rebel victories.

<sup>257</sup> Abouzeid, Rania. 2012(b). 'Syria's Secular and Islamist Rebels: Who Are the Saudis and the Qataris Arming?' *Time*, 18th September 2012. Abouzeid reveals that vital military supplies provided by Saudi Arabia and Qatar are transported with the help of Turkish intelligence to the Syrian border and to the rebels. Ankara denies its territory is being used to distribute weapons. Sourced on 6<sup>th</sup> July 2014 from:

[http://www.raniaabouzeid.com/Rania\\_Abouzeid/Clips/Entries/2012/9/18\\_Syrias\\_Secular\\_and\\_Islamist\\_Rebels\\_Who\\_Are\\_the\\_Saudis\\_and\\_the\\_Qataris\\_Arming.html](http://www.raniaabouzeid.com/Rania_Abouzeid/Clips/Entries/2012/9/18_Syrias_Secular_and_Islamist_Rebels_Who_Are_the_Saudis_and_the_Qataris_Arming.html)

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

<sup>259</sup> International Crisis Group. 2013, p.17.

Abouzeid, Rania. 2014. 'Syria's Uprising Within an Uprising', 16<sup>th</sup> January 2014. The Islamic Front doesn't recognise the NSC as legitimately representative of the Syrian opposition. Sourced on 6<sup>th</sup> July 2014 from:

[http://www.raniaabouzeid.com/Rania\\_Abouzeid/Clips/Entries/2014/1/16\\_Syrias\\_Uprising\\_Within\\_an\\_Uprising.html](http://www.raniaabouzeid.com/Rania_Abouzeid/Clips/Entries/2014/1/16_Syrias_Uprising_Within_an_Uprising.html)

Lund, Aron. 2013(b). 'Islamist Groups Declare Opposition to National Coalition and US Strategy', *Syria Comment*, 24<sup>th</sup> September. In its first "Communiqué", the Islamic Front calls for the

Concurrently, Lister observes that Saudi Arabia has turned to arming some relatively moderate groups in accordance with US regional policy.<sup>260</sup> Lister's view is supported by Abouzeid's earlier account of a Saudi project to weaken conservative Islamist groups by arming the *Syrian Revolutionaries Front* - a coalition of Free Army brigades formed in December 2013 to balance against the Islamic Front.<sup>261</sup> Qatar and its Ikhwan client, however, remain supportive of mainstream Islamist militias.<sup>262</sup>

The Syrian Ikhwan has crafted substantial influence within the exiled opposition since the onset of the uprising in 2011 and this continues within the NSC. Decades in exile has deprived it of territorial and organised support base within Syria. Aron Lund reveals that this has forced it to procure local loyalties and influence through targeted financing.<sup>263</sup> However, the proliferation of Sunni-Salafi militias, including those armed by the Saudis, causes it to compete for hearts, minds and governance.<sup>264</sup> In response, the Syrian Ikhwan has subverted the NSC military command to cultivate its own domestic militarised presence. Both Lister and Lund have extensively documented the scale and scope of this presence, which by 2014 consists of "dozens" of paramilitary units in several governorates.<sup>265</sup> It has achieved this through opaque cross-border distribution channels believed to be established

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unification of all military and civilian forces in an "Islamic framework". It vows to oppose Western strategy on Syria and put an end to the exiled opposition. It states that it does not recognise the NSC because it does not and cannot represent them. It rejects any leadership promoted by the USA, Turkey, France, Great Britain, the EU countries, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. Sourced on 13<sup>th</sup> July 2014 from: <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/>

<sup>260</sup> Lister. 2014, p.2.

<sup>261</sup> Abouzeid, 2014. Abouzeid reports that The Syrian Revolutionaries Front and Jaysh al-Islam are natural recipients of Saudi state-sponsored guns and money. They are conceived by other Islamists as part of a Saudi project to weaken them.

<sup>262</sup> Lister. 2014, p.2.

<sup>263</sup> Lund, 2013(a), p.3.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid, pp.7, 15

<sup>265</sup> Lund, 2013(a), p.2. Lister, 2014.

through individual agents rather than visible organisations associated with the official Ikhwani apparatus.

The territory-legitimacy nexus has inspired a race to fund and arm the opposition – a race between the NSC’s political blocs and their Gulf-state backers. Qatari-Saudi rivalry, an Ikhwani agenda and the interests of political entrepreneurs have diffused through the NSC to generate competition for military aid on the ground, exacerbating domestic frictions and dissent. Overall, new transnational alliances have been formed and have improved the tactical military power of armed groups and coalitions on the ground in battles against the regime and ISIS.<sup>266</sup> Nonetheless, factionalised resourcing has introduced perverse incentives and fragmented the opposition.<sup>267</sup> Armed groups are lured by the prospect of accessing funds and weapons but have no intention of cooperating with the NSC-aligned Free Army fronts and, least of all, with the NSC. The Free Army fronts are drawn into competition with Sunni-Salafi groups that are resourced directly by the Gulf-states and the Syrian Ikhwan; and then by necessity they pool their resources and join forces for tactical operations against common enemies.<sup>268</sup> Moreover, Islamist groups have coalesced around a common sectarian revolutionary frame to expand scale and share resources as evident in the formation of the Jaysh al-Islam, the Islamic Front, the Syrian Revolutionaries Front and, in August 2014, the Syrian Revolutionary Command Council (SRCC) to which the former three groups are aligned. Free Army fighters are collaborating with a number of the SRCC’s member fronts despite the fact that NSC and the Free Army do not officially recognise it. This situation is confounded by the fact that Islamic charities and personal networks concentrated in the Gulf also fund NSC-aligned groups. Private funding

<sup>266</sup> Lister, 2014, p.5.

<sup>267</sup> Lister, 2014, p.5. International Crisis Group. 2013, pp.12, 18.

<sup>268</sup> International Crisis Group. 2013, p.12.



has deterred some recipient militias from continuing their support for the NSC because of fears that they will lose their financial sources.<sup>269</sup> Consequently, the NSC's military command structure has been undermined, limiting its capacity to coopt otherwise autonomous local leaders and their militias, and fatally impacting its programme of unifying and strengthening the internal opposition.<sup>270</sup> By late 2013, the SMC and Chief of Staff Idriss were being denigrated by armed groups, Free Army and Salafi alike, for failing to provide sufficient military aid. Then in September 2014, the NSC issued a decree to dissolve the SMC and reform it "in consultation with revolutionary forces active on the ground".<sup>271</sup> In the decree it acknowledges the need to close ranks, reorganise and correct its mistakes.

Since late 2012, the NSC's action to distribute military resources has been driven by its need for legitimacy and influence within Syria. Arming a unified domestic opposition was intended to be an efficient means of shifting scale and power against its foes, gaining hold of territory and building local confidence in the NSC's political programme. However, transnational ties with the Gulf monarchies and factionalised resourcing have contributed to expanding and sustaining a proxy war, which has seen armed groups proliferating, coalescing, and competing. Sunni-Salafi insurgents and coalitions have been empowered, leading to the rise of an

<sup>269</sup> Matini, Samir. 2014. 'The Full Meeting with Sheikh Mouaz al-Khatib', *The Syrian Observer*, 23rd May 2014. The former NSC President quotes the concerns of some military commanders who fear they would lose financial sources if they supported the NSC. Sourced on 18<sup>th</sup> August 2014 from:

<http://syrianobserver.com/Interviews/Interviews/Samir+Matini+The+Full+Meeting+with+Sheikh+Mouaz+alKhatib>

<sup>270</sup> International Crisis Group. 2013, pp.12, 17. The SMC is described as "at best a loose weapon and supply distribution network" lacking ability to coordinate activity among groups meant to be under its aegis. Abouzeid, 2014. The undermining of the SMC subjects it to criticism. Chief of Staff Idriss is perceived as having no influence on decision-making, and the military bureau is considered to be "just an office" and corporate PR machine involved in the provision of non-military aid, small arms and light weapons.

Abouzeid, 2013.

<sup>271</sup> NSC Decree 1/220914. 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2014. 'Syrian Coalition Dissolves the FSA's Supreme Military Council'. Sourced on 26<sup>th</sup> September 2014 from: <http://en.etilaf.org/all-news/news/syrian-coalition-dissolves-the-fsa-s-supreme-military-council.html>

organised, radical and prominent Islamist opposition within Syria that weakens the NSC domestic ties, and contests its legitimacy and overall viability.<sup>272</sup>

These circumstances correspond with Koinova's observation that the rise of more radical competitors can weaken an opposition in exile and its transnational coalitions. She argues this in relation to the Chechen case, in which a weak transnational coalition dissipated through a clash of values and strategy between a secular Chechen diaspora and the growing Islamist "strategic centre". The Chechen diaspora then resorted to sectarian outbidding against its Islamist rivals, which emboldened the "strategic centre" to lobby for material and human resources from the Gulf and Pakistan, including foreign Wahhabi fighters from Saudi Arabia. The NSC is following a similar path but, as described in chapter 2, modulates its approach whereby it is uncompromising in its opposition to the extremist ISIS but supportive of the ideologically opposed Sunni-Salafi Islamic Front. The NSC has little choice but to select the battles for which it is most likely to gain international, regional and domestic support. The ISIS-Assad axis of tyranny is that battle and its transnational relations and resourcing practices are, at the time of writing, consumed by this battle. How the NSC resources the domestic opposition now in pursuing the demise of that axis could help prepare the conditions for a confrontation with a stronger Sunni-Salafi opposition in its wake.

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<sup>272</sup> NSC News. 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2014. 'Syrian Coalition Dissolves the Interim Cabinet, New One to Be Formed in a Month'. In deciding to dissolve the Interim Cabinet, the General Assembly acknowledged that it needs to move the government into the interior and employ Syrian revolutionary capabilities. Sourced on 26<sup>th</sup> September 2014 from: <http://en.etalaf.org/all-news/news/syrian-coalition-dissolves-the-interim-cabinet-new-one-to-be-formed-in-a-month.html>

### 3.3 Lobbying and persuasion: an uncompromising position leads to conflict advocacy

*“The Coalition fulfils [its] mission by voicing the concerns and aspirations of the Syrian people and by intensifying pressure on the international community to provide assistance on their behalf”.*

Mission of the National Syrian Coalition<sup>273</sup>

Political entrepreneurs who migrate to relatively liberal societies capitalise on their expanded freedoms to mobilise diasporic organisations and transnational networks for the purposes of challenging the laws, policies and civil administrations of homeland governments.<sup>274</sup> Eilstrup-Sangiovanni observes that they act through those organisations and networks to lobby and persuade international governments to procure ideational and material support for their political agendas.<sup>275</sup> Baser and Swain identify that diaspora groups act similarly to lobby groups and are increasingly making positive impacts on political compromises and conflict resolution in their homelands.<sup>276</sup> They also concede that diaspora groups can contribute to violent conflict by lobbying and persuading governments to fund and support conflicting actors in the continuation of warfare, and by destabilising political negotiations.<sup>277</sup> Frequently, the mechanisms of lobbying and persuasion are deployed within a liberal-democratic, human rights frame to further partisan interests, which despite the frame’s noble ideals can produce malignant effects. The diplomatic activities of diasporic and transnational organisations can nurture, embolden and expand insurgencies, increasing security threats and destabilising

<sup>273</sup> NSC Fact Sheet. ‘Mission of the Syrian Coalition’. Sourced from: <http://en.etilaf.org/about-us/fact-sheet.html>

<sup>274</sup> Baser and Swain, 2008, pp.9-10. Wayland, 2004, pp.415-419. Shain, 2002, pp.125, 128-134.

<sup>275</sup> Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2005, p.8

<sup>276</sup> Baser and Swain, 2008, pp.11-13.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid, pp.8-9, 21-22.

society and state. The malignant effects of resource mobilisation on the insurgent groups inside Syria were explored in the preceding section. I conclude this chapter by tracing how the NSC has deployed the mechanisms of lobbying and persuasion and the impact of those mechanisms on the conflict.<sup>278</sup>

Salehyan observes that external mobilisation raises the bargaining power of transnational opposition groups by intensifying information asymmetries about the intentions and activities of the parties to the conflict, and by introducing host governments to the bargaining process.<sup>279</sup> He argues that those two factors combine to increase the risk of persisting conflict because, firstly, the information available to the home-state government about a transnational opposition is scarce and untrustworthy. This works to the opposition's advantage whereby it can deceive and confound the government. Secondly, the engagement of a rival host-state increases the resources that the opposition can deploy to challenge the home-state. Salehyan constructs his argument from the perspective of the home-state. He emphasises that, under conditions of information asymmetry and rival state engagement, it is difficult for the home-government to dominate the opposition and craft a decisive victory. Concurrently, those conditions cause the government to mistrust its opponents, deterring it from conflict resolution and hardening its position.<sup>280</sup> Salehyan's theory provides, in part, an explanation for why the al-Assad regime has opted to pursue a battle of attrition against the political opposition. The theory can be turned to the perspective of the

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<sup>278</sup> For the purposes of the analysis that follows, I make no distinction between lobbying and persuasion because they are, in the political context, inextricable. Lobbying means soliciting governments and policy makers for the purposes of advocating for the passage or support of special interests. Persuasion means to influence or convince by argument. In this case, the NSC lobbies governmental and intergovernmental agencies in order to persuade them to adopt an advocated stance and to take prescribed action.

<sup>279</sup> Salehyan 2006, pp.40, 72-74. Bennett, 2013, p.223.

<sup>280</sup> Salehyan 2006, p.39.

transnational opposition in order explain the NSC's lobbying and persuasion activities and their impact on conflict.

Contrary to Salehyan's assertion, the NSC's bargaining power in relation to the regime is not raised but rather diminished because of three main factors. Firstly, external mobilisation has left it with loose domestic ties and constrained its capacity to directly control territory and resources. Secondly, the main state-sponsors of its political blocs, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, rival the regime but also each other, which subjects the NSC to accusations of disunity and advocacy on behalf of regional powers. Thirdly, information asymmetries develop with continued exclusion from the domestic political sphere, bringing advantage to the opaque and mutating regime apparatus.<sup>281</sup> This nourishes a long-entrenched and deepening mistrust of the regime, and deters the NSC from negotiating a political settlement. These three factors combine to shape the NSC's platform, which is to lobby for continued warfare in a battle for the state. Therein, the impact is as Salehyan's theory predicts: the conflict escalates. The strength of domestic ties, control of home-state territory, and the relations with and between state-sponsors are important covariables affecting the relationship between lobbying and persuasion, and conflict escalation. Traced below are the salient dynamics shaped by those covariables.

The NSC's lobbying for Western military intervention, including the arming of moderate opposition forces, corresponds with its lofty goals of doing "everything in its power" to overthrow the al-Assad regime and the establishment of a transitional

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<sup>281</sup> Kodmani, Bassma and Félix Legrand. 2014. 'Arab Reform Brief: Spotlight on Geneva while Syria Sinks in the Quicksands', *Arab Reform Initiative*, February. p.4 The regime's advantage in the field is evident in the authors' claim that the NSC-backed Free Army fronts have been systematically infiltrated and delegitimised by the regime operatives.

government.<sup>282</sup> From late 2012 to early 2014, the NSC made no headway with its Western supporters despite having a liberal-democratic strategic frame and persuading international governments to recognise it as a legitimate representative body for the Syrian people. Its persuasive abilities were impaired by Western anxieties about the identities and agendas of the armed groups, the prospects of empowering an extremist Sunni-Salafi current, invigorating sectarian animosities, and regionalising the conflict. Absent a Western sponsor for the revolution inside Syria, the NSC was impelled to lobby other rival governments, namely Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, which have been forthcoming to the extent described earlier in the discussion on resource mobilisation.

The NSC's response to Western ambivalence corresponds with Bennett's observation that the loss of host government support can force opposition leaders to broker support elsewhere in the wider diaspora community, including sympathetic third-party governments and from within the homeland (in the NSC's case, various militant groups).<sup>283</sup> Lobbying of the Qatari, Saudi and Turkish governments has exposed the NSC to their regional interests and rivalries, which have become manifest in divisive bloc politics, and the factionalised and subversive resourcing practices already described in this chapter and the preceding chapters. Channelling of resources to moderate and not so moderate Sunni-Salafi groups, both independently and through the official NSC military wing, has brought those states deeper into a confrontation with the regime and its allies, Iran and Hizbullah. Multiple consequences for the NSC also emerge. The NSC is easily dismissed by the regime and sectors of Syrian society, firstly, as providing a Syrian-nationalist cover for the geopolitical aspirations of Middle East powers and,

<sup>282</sup> NSC. 'Mission Statement and Goals'. Sourced from: <http://en.etilaf.org/about-us/goals.html>

<sup>283</sup> Bennett, 2013, pp.223-224.

secondly, as the secular mask for a Sunni-Wahhabi-Salafi socio-political agenda. Those perceptions contribute to polarising Syrian society, militants and civilians included, widening the divide between local cleavages and the NSC's master frame, and reinforcing its domestic legitimacy gap. These perceptions and asymmetries undermine domestic trust in the NSC's capacity to represent and advocate for the Syrian people in the international sphere. They also deepen the gulf between the NSC and the regime, therefore, making a political settlement to the conflict more remote.

On the prospects of reaching a political settlement, Baser and Swain observe that diaspora groups tend to advocate political views that can constrain and “spoil” negotiations otherwise intended to mitigate and resolve conflict.<sup>284</sup> This is no less the case for the NSC, as revealed in the prelude to and the proceedings of the UN-brokered Geneva II negotiations of January-February 2014. The NSC's lobbying agenda is built entirely on gaining international support for its interim government, for which it claims to have the support of the Syrian people, and a post-Assad “transition roadmap”.<sup>285</sup> In pursuing its agenda, the NSC's commitments to refrain from “any dialogue or negotiations with the regime” and to exclude Bashar Al Assad and regime associates are uncompromising.<sup>286</sup> This has created rifts between the NSC's political blocs and with domestic opposition groups on the unthinkable notion of facing regime negotiators in Geneva.<sup>287</sup> Crisis

<sup>284</sup> Baser and Swain, 2008, pp.9, 13.

<sup>285</sup> Syrian Expert House. 2013. *Syria Transition Roadmap*, Syrian Center for Political and Strategic Studies, Washington DC. Participants in the Syrian Expert House transition roadmap project included many members of the NSC blocs and units mentioned throughout this paper including Haythem al-Maleh, Michel Kilo, George Sabra, Ahmad Jarba, Ghassan Hitto, Salim Idriss, Suhair al-'Atasi, Walid al-Bunni, et al. The group claims that the Syrian people appear to be supportive of the formation of a government within Syria rather than in exile.

<sup>286</sup> NSC Principles. NSC Declaration.

<sup>287</sup> Shuaair, 2014.

Group was prompted to strongly advise the NSC accept a political process with the regime or risk further depletion of its international and domestic legitimacy. For the negotiations to yield an agreement, the NSC had to be prepared to adjust its strategic frame, freeing it from unwieldy pre-conditions.<sup>288</sup> This would require it to relinquish its uncompromising position and engage with the al-Assad regime in planning a transitional arrangement rather than hoping to impose its preconceived roadmap. It would also require the NSC to negotiate in the interests of the millions of traumatised and displaced Syrians who endure violence and insecurities, rather than serve the political ideals and aspirations of its leaders, political blocs and regional-backers.

The Geneva II negotiations broke down as the parties failed to engage in meaningful discussions on confidence building measures and, least of all, a political solution. The NSC did not shift its positions on the removal of Bashar al-Assad, government formation and the transition roadmap. The regime refused to discuss them and neither party presented alternatives to militarised conflict.<sup>289</sup> Rather, by sustaining its calls for arming the opposition and Western intervention to aid removal of the regime, the NSC's participation in Geneva II promoted conflict escalation.<sup>290</sup> Its unwavering commitments deterred it from paving a way

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Matini, 2014. Al-Khatib called for "direct negotiations with the regime to stop the bloodshed and resolve many of the problems away from the stagnation of the international community". Allouni, Tayseer. 2013. 'Al-Qaeda leader in Syria speaks to Al Jazeera' Al Jazeera English, 19<sup>th</sup> December. Abu Mohammed al-Joulani, leader of Jabhat al-Nusra, stated "We will not recognise any results that come out of the Geneva 2 Conference, nor will the children or women of Syria. Those taking part in the conference do not represent the people who sacrificed and shed blood. Sourced on 18<sup>th</sup> August 2014 from:

<http://syrianobserver.com/Interviews/Interviews/AlQaeda+leader+in+Syria+speaks+to+Al+Jazeera>

<sup>288</sup> International Crisis Group. 2013, pp.29-30. Crisis Group advises that this would allow Assad's fate to flow from the implementation of a negotiated rather than a pre-conceived vision.

<sup>289</sup> International Crisis Group. 2014.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid. March and April 2014. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported there were more people killed every day since beginning of the Geneva II than any other time during the



to end the crisis in the first instance and nullified its already weak bargaining power.<sup>291</sup>

The NSC's lobbying agenda and reticence to compromise can be explained by the interplay of three factors. The first, as observed by Brinkerhoff and Shain, concerns the exiled nature of the NSC's members. From their safe havens abroad, they are absent from the dire realities of daily life under conflict and are unlikely to directly endure the consequences of their collective decisions and behaviours. This makes it easier for them to remain steadfast with respect to its designs on a post-Assad world.<sup>292</sup> In short, external mobilisation introduces conflicting interests, which can translate into a regard for organisational principles and goals over local grievances. Drawing again from Brinkerhoff and Shain, the NSC's lobbying agenda and inflexibility are a result of the disproportionate influence afforded to diaspora groups over policies and decision-making processes.<sup>293</sup> Here, the political entrepreneurs in exile are self-appointed the privilege of designing and executing a grand political programme, absent critical parties to the conflict, Bashar al-Assad and key regime figures. The conditions for a negotiated settlement are not created and the crisis persists. For this reason, the NSC is held in contempt in domestic circles as being unrepresentative, detached, and insincere with regard to its human rights-oriented liberal-democratic frame. NSC President Ahmad Jarba was aware of

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war. The regime left the talks emphasising the need to continue fighting terrorism. It proceeded to intensify its offensive to secure areas bordering Lebanon.

Zaman Al-Wasl. 2014(a). 'Sabbagh: Disagreement with Jarba on Policy, Not Goals', *The Syrian Observer*, 5<sup>th</sup> May. Former Secretary General Mustafa Sabbagh said he believed Geneva II to be a waste of time whilst significant military changes on ground did not seriously threaten the regime. Sourced on 18<sup>th</sup> August 2014 from:

<http://syrianobserver.com/Interviews/Interviews/Sabbagh+Disagreement+with+the+Jarba+on+Policy+Not+Goals>

<sup>291</sup> Mohsen, 2014. Mohsen is highly critical of the NSC's approach to Geneva II. He states its error lies in refusing to negotiate with the regime whilst being unable to bring it down.

<sup>292</sup> Brinkerhoff, 2011, p.116. Shain, 2002, pp.128-134, 136-138.

<sup>293</sup> Brinkerhoff, 2011, pp.136-137. Shain, 2002, pp.128-134, 136-138. Shain observes that diasporas promote views of identity and interests of the people in the homeland that are not always congruent with the views of those people nor those of the government.

the domestic legitimacy crisis during the Geneva II talks. Conceding the loss of support within Syria, and despite the stalemate and escalating violence, his response was to claim that the NSC's steadfastness had attained a strategic victory for the Syrian people and the revolution.<sup>294</sup> Sifting through Jarba's speeches, the victory to which he refers is that the NSC gained the "international support" it was seeking.<sup>295</sup>

By the account of its own members, the NSC's lack of progress towards establishing an interim government and executing the transition roadmap is attributed to "internal disagreements" and "bickering resulting from regional and international political interference".<sup>296</sup> Therein lies the second and third factors affecting the NSC's lobbying and persuasive capacities – the influence of its principal sponsors in the Gulf, and of Western policy-makers. With regard to the former, the strategic interests of Qatar and Saudi Arabia provoke internal political disagreements and equivocation to the extent that international and domestic interest groups perceive that the NSC is coerced by the Gulf monarchies to adopt a given stance.<sup>297</sup> For example, Lister and Crisis Group observe that the rivalries between the Saudi and Qatari-backed political blocs became manifest in the split

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<sup>294</sup> The Syrian Observer. 2014(a). 'Jarba's Speech at Conclusion of First Round of Talks at Geneva', *The Syrian Observer*, 3<sup>rd</sup> February. Jarba blamed the failure to achieve an agreement squarely on Bashar al-Assad and the regime. He argues that the NSC's reason for participating in the talks was to gain necessary international support, which he claims was forthcoming. Sourced on 18<sup>th</sup> August 2014 from:

[http://syrianobserver.com/Speeches/Res\\_Speeches/Jarbas+Speech+at+Conclusion+of+First+Round+of+Talks+at+Geneva](http://syrianobserver.com/Speeches/Res_Speeches/Jarbas+Speech+at+Conclusion+of+First+Round+of+Talks+at+Geneva)

<sup>295</sup> The Syrian Observer. 2014(c). 'Jarba: The West has promised us weapons within weeks' *The Syrian Observer*, 23<sup>rd</sup> May. Jarba talks-up the "unprecedented" political activity and practical steps the NSC has taken, including participation in Geneva II, to secure Western pledges to arm the Free Army. Sourced on 18<sup>th</sup> August 2014 from:

<http://syrianobserver.com/Interviews/Interviews/Jarba+The+West+has+promised+us+weapons+within+weeks>

<sup>296</sup> Syrian Expert House, 2013, p.34

<sup>297</sup> International Crisis Group. 2013, p.29.

Lesch 2013, p.172. Lesch explains that the NSC is widely considered to be a puppet of exiled Syrians and their foreign-aligned interests.

vote narrowly favouring the NSC's participation in Geneva II. This was evident in the Qatar-backed, Syrian Ikhwan-dominated SNC's initial refusal to attend.<sup>298</sup> The SNC eventually capitulated and, given the enduring stance of its members to ensure the exclusion of al Assad and his regime associates from a future Syria, its presence at Geneva II sealed the fate of the talks. However, Saudi Arabia has engineered considerable influence within the NSC courtesy of its alignment with Kilo's democratic bloc, the June 2013 restructure, and the election of its preferred Presidents. In the lead-up to Geneva II, Saudi Arabia and its Islamic Front beneficiaries orchestrated the replacement of Qatar-linked Chief of Staff Salim Idriss with Saudi-favoured anti-Iranian Abdul-Ilah al-Bashir al-Noeimi.<sup>299</sup> The Saudi-confected instability in the military bureau further amplified Western ambivalence towards arming the opposition, causing the NSC to reframe and invigorate its efforts to lobby Western policy-makers.

David Lesch argues that the influence of Western policy-makers can be traced to the proliferation of Western diplomatic and academic conferences focused on a post-Assad era.<sup>300</sup> Adding to this, Nikolaos van Dam observes that Western states began to conflate conflict resolution with the removal of Bashar al-Assad.<sup>301</sup>

Contrary to the provisions of the Geneva Communique, pressure mounted from the United States for the political opposition to construct a unified post-Assad

<sup>298</sup> Lister, 2014, p.6. The SNC's withdrawal is also attributed to its protest at Saudi-supported Ahmad Jarba's re-election to the Presidency on 5 January 2014. International Crisis Group. 2014. 'Monthly updates'. On 18 January 2014, less than half the NSC members voted to attend Geneva II and over one third withdrew from the vote.

<sup>299</sup> Lister, 2014, p.6. Idriss was replaced post-Geneva II on 16 February 2014. In December 2013, he was driven into exile in Doha by the Islamic Front. Lister says that Idriss' demise split loyalties within the military wing (with 50% remaining loyal to Idriss) and restored inertia within Western policy-making circles. ICG mthly updates. March 2014. The attempt to replace Idriss was rebuffed by regional commanders inside Syria. Sourced from [http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/6343/month-by-month-summary-of-developments-in-syria-\(u](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/6343/month-by-month-summary-of-developments-in-syria-(u)

<sup>300</sup> Lesch 2013, p.259.

<sup>301</sup> Van Dam, 2014.

vision.<sup>302</sup> The NSC adopted the Western policy direction as it emerged with the expectation that lobbying on an aligned platform would yield the support needed to remove the regime militarily. Consequently, the NSC became an organisation without agency. It is dependent entirely on foreign resources for implementing its militarised strategy and attaining its goals, and it has no latitude for political compromises to end the conflict. Moreover, the NSC has associated itself with Western-determined aspirations for Syria, which breeds resentment among sectors of Syrian society who expect the exiled opposition to lobby on behalf of local Syrian interests.<sup>303</sup>

Manoeuvring within the transnational space provides the NSC with the opportunity to conceive and promote an alternative political programme for Syria. Unfettered by the repressive tentacles of the Syrian regime, the NSC lobbies governments freely to gain ideational recognition and material resources for its uncompromising post-Assad programme. However, the transnational space also imposes constraints on the conception and execution of its programme. From abroad the NSC confronts loose domestic ties, intensifying and expanding local cleavages, and shifting loyalties. It attempts to remedy these by lobbying for an expanded militarisation of the conflict expose it to penetration by and the coercive influences of competing regional powers and Western policy makers. Shaped by these conditions, its strategic choices have steered it towards conflict advocacy. This has become more pronounced since Geneva II and the destabilisation of the military wing, and with the violent territorial expansion of ISIS.

As the focus of Western governments is diverted from the tyranny of the al-Assad regime to confront the ISIS threat, the NSC has persisted with efforts to persuade

<sup>302</sup> International Crisis Group. 2013, p.11.

<sup>303</sup> Lesch, 2013, p.172.

them to provide military aid to the Free Army fronts and “vetted groups within the armed opposition”.<sup>304</sup> In order to resonate with Western interests, it has reframed its lobbying tactics to conflate the al-Assad regime with the brutality and terrorism of ISIS. Since international alarm intensified as ISIS commandeered Mosul in June 2014, it has cast this frame with increasing vigour to campaigning with slogans such as “Assad is the root cause of ISIS. It must be defeated alongside ISIS” and “The longer we wait [to arm to opposition] the greater the [ISIS] threat will grow”.<sup>305</sup> As the United States leads an international coalition into Iraq and Syria, the NSC frames itself as the “moderate opposition” fighting a “two front war against Assad and ISIS”.<sup>306</sup> It is exploiting lobbying opportunities through the United Nations, multilateral talks and mainstream media to expand the scope of the international coalition’s mission to include the destruction of “the dictator Bashar al-Assad”.<sup>307</sup>

The NSC’s reframing of its strategy and lobbying efforts is an example of how the interests of states shape the policy of a diasporic, transnational organisation.<sup>308</sup> It is

<sup>304</sup> Holman, Zoe. 2014. ‘Syria Feature: Opposition Appeals for British Help to Stop the Bombing’, 9<sup>th</sup> July. Holman interviews Radwan Ziadeh: Ziadeh speaks of talks with British politicians and NGOs on the matter of providing on-the-ground-assistance to insurgents against the regime and ISIS. Sourced on 9<sup>th</sup> July 2014 from: <http://eaworldview.com/2014/07/syria-interview-opposition-appeals-british-help/>

<sup>305</sup> NSC Facebook Page. The post of 27<sup>th</sup> September reads: “The longer we wait the greater the threat will grow. No more destruction. No more ISIS and Assad”. Sourced on 30<sup>th</sup> September from: <https://www.facebook.com/SyrianNationalCoalition.en>

Nemr, Mohammad. 2014. ‘FSA: No terror is comparable to Assad’s terror’, *Al-Monitor*, 30<sup>th</sup> September. Free Army commanders are critical of the US-led coalition’s action against ISIS because it does not deal with the regime. Major Abu Qusay states “No terror is comparable to Assad’s terror”. Sourced on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2014 from: [http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2014/09/fsa-syria-response-to-us-strikes-is.html?utm\\_source=Al-Monitor+Newsletter+%5BEnglish%5D&utm\\_campaign=61dee17cef-October\\_1\\_2014&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_28264b27a0-61dee17cef-93105617](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2014/09/fsa-syria-response-to-us-strikes-is.html?utm_source=Al-Monitor+Newsletter+%5BEnglish%5D&utm_campaign=61dee17cef-October_1_2014&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_28264b27a0-61dee17cef-93105617)

<sup>306</sup> NSC Press Release. 29<sup>th</sup> September 2014. ‘President al-Bahra to Appear on The Daily Show with Jon Stewart’. Bashar al-Assad is accused of sponsoring the creation of the terrorist group, ISIS. Sourced on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2014 from: <http://en.etilaf.org/press/president-al-bahra-to-appear-on-the-daily-show-with-jon-stewart.html>

<sup>307</sup> Ibid.

<sup>308</sup> Singerman, p.159.

not possible to observe whether or not the NSC has been coerced by its state supporters in the West and the Gulf into adopting its stance. However, it is unlikely that coercion has occurred because the shift in framing is not a departure from NSC grand strategy but rather a tactical change in emphasis to retain international recognition and legitimacy, and an efficient means of persuasion. Nonetheless, it is likely that the NSC's strategic frame and uncompromising goals have been shaped by a diffusion of ideas mediated through the relations between its members and blocs, and their state-sponsors.

The discussion in this chapter reveals that the NSC faces incentives in the regional and international spheres that, according to Wood, make it difficult for a transnational organisation to conceive and execute a truly independent political programme that serves the interests of the people it claims to represent.<sup>309</sup> The NSC's responses to those incentives threaten its viability as a legitimate representative body for the Syrian people. Moreover, its strategic goals and lobbying agenda have moulded the NSC as an advocate for the escalation of military conflict, which widens and deepens the gulf between it and the millions of Syrian citizens who endure the consequences.

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<sup>309</sup> Wood, 2013, pp.234-235.

## Conclusion

*“Those outside the people will have no legitimacy”.*

Rime Allaf <sup>310</sup>

Research on civil wars demonstrates that various transnational actors influence the onset, trajectory, duration and recurrence of conflict. The quantitative research, in particular, tends to view diasporas as unitary actors predisposed to engaging in conflicts within in their home-states and, therefore, as predictive risk factors for civil war. However, there is a compelling body of evidence that diasporas are actively formed and mobilised through mechanisms of contentious politics; and it is through the processes of their mobilisation that they can exacerbate conflict or contribute to its peaceful resolution. I have applied a mechanism-oriented approach in this thesis to systematically examine the mobilisation of Syria’s exiled political opposition and its relationship to the escalating unrest and violence in Syrian. For this study I set out to answer two questions. Firstly, how does conflict escalation mobilise Syria’s exiled political opposition? Secondly, how does transnational mobilisation of the exiled political opposition play a causal role in conflict escalation? To answer those questions I put forward a set of five mechanisms and analysed process-level evidence of their observable implications in regard to Syria’s principal political opposition group, the NSC.

In relation to the first question, the NSC has formed and behaved to a large extent in the manner predicted by the theory of diaspora and transnational mobilisation. Dispersed from the homeland because of state repression and the onset of armed conflict, Syrian political entrepreneurs took advantage of the opportunities

<sup>310</sup> Lesch, 2013, p.173

afforded to them outside of Syria to mobilise and unite a diasporic coalition around amplified nationalistic and revolutionary aspirations.<sup>311</sup> Furthermore, the NSC has crafted a strategic frame that adopts Western liberal-democratic values and international sovereignty and human rights norms, but not entirely of its own making. Transnational brokerage of Western and Gulf-state support - all rivalling the al-Assad regime - exposed the NSC to their influence. Those states have shaped the NSC's strategic frame and facilitated international recognition and, in doing so, have also constrained the NSC's domestic legitimacy.<sup>312</sup> Here, the NSC confronts the dark side of transnational mobilisation. That is, transnational brokering and framing for the purposes of expediting state support allows local cleavages and interests to be dominated by external interests, leaving the NSC struggling to gain a popular base of support within the homeland. That struggle has opened opportunities for Sunni-Salafi militias inside Syria and drawn the NSC into a process of outbidding its ideological rivals for local ties and loyalties, as well as political influence both inside and outside Syria. The case study shows that this process of outbidding can bring a diasporic organisation into conflict with its strategic frame and the interests of its external backers. It can also aggravate cleavages with and between local actors.

This brings us to the second question: how does the transnational mobilisation of the NSC play a causal role in conflict escalation. In chapter 3 I argue that the NSC's militarised resource mobilisation agenda is shaped by a "territory-legitimacy nexus", which comes with organising outside of the state and not having control of territory inside the state. The nexus drives the NSC to build domestic ties in order

<sup>311</sup> Brinkerhoff 2011, pp.116, 136-137. Singerman, 2004, pp.143-163. It is observed that politicised "diasporans", first, tend to be relatively more nationalist than domestic actors and, second, they possess range of motivations and associated behaviours vis-à-vis their countries or places of origin that can stoke distrust among members and factions.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.



to improve its prospects for securing and administering territory by proxy, without which it holds no bargaining power against the regime and no political influence with local communities. The lobbying of Western and Gulf-state support and the resulting inequities in resource distribution have created competition between armed groups for resources and empowered rival Sunni-Salafi coalitions. In addition, its lobbying practices and persuasive abilities have depleted the NSC of the necessary agency for implementing an independent political programme and bargaining a political settlement and transition. Detached from the day-to-day trauma and insecurity experienced by ordinary Syrian citizens, the NSC remains uncompromising with respect to its goals of overthrowing the regime, persistent in its pursuit of Western military support, and unwavering in its militarised revolutionary frame. This amounts to conflict advocacy.

This single case study makes a contribution towards understanding the myriad and complex transnational dynamics of the Syrian conflict. The NSC's structure and narrative are borne from the conflict and, therefore, its impact and sustainability are wedded to it. The formation and mobilisation of the NSC conforms to the theory of diaspora and transnational mobilisation.<sup>313</sup> This is supported by the evidence of how the escalating conflict has invigorated and dispersed Syrian political entrepreneurs to broker transnational support and mobilise around a collective identity frame and compelling grand narrative. The study reveals that the politicised diaspora is not some ever-present monolithic body but one that is moulded by influential political entrepreneurs and their external supporters as the "stance" and "prescription" for them to express and advance their political interests and aspirations. Moreover, the impact of the NSC's mobilisation is consistent with the body of theory that considers diaspora mobilisation to be a necessary condition

<sup>313</sup> The relevant body of theory is explained in chapter 1, sections 1.1 and 1.2.

for civil conflict.<sup>314</sup> This is evident in process-level evidence of how, from its external sanctuary, the diasporic organisation has brokered the support of strong states that rival the regime, intensified asymmetries, and then turned to resource the strategic centre in a battle for the state.

Quarantined from the escalating brutality, killings and insecurity, the transnational space has provided unparalleled opportunities for the political opposition; but where transnational spaces facilitate, they also constrain. Nizar Qabbani was aware of this when he dared to write about his imagined homeland. In exile, he was free to write from afar without constraint and to cast ideas that resonated broadly with those who shared his grief for a fragmented Syria that was wrestling competing ideologies in a struggle for national unity. However, as he neared the end of his days, he recognised the limits of his political legitimacy. From his foreign home, he had adopted and exported ideas that were detached from the day-to-day plights of the peoples inhabiting modern Syria. What Qabbani encountered as an individual in the transnational space is similarly encountered by Syria's political opposition in that same space today.

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<sup>314</sup> The relevant body theory is largely explained in chapter 1, section 1.3.

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**Declaration**

I certify that the work in this thesis entitled *Transnational mobilisation and escalating conflict in Syria: An anatomy of Syria's exiled political opposition* has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree to any other university or institution other than the Macquarie University.

I also certify that the thesis is an original piece of research and it has been written by me. Any help and assistance that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself have been appropriately acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are declared within the thesis.

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