COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CIVIL WARS IN TAJIKISTAN AND SYRIA
AND LESSONS FOR SYRIA FROM THE TAJIK PEACE PROCESS

Abstract: The article analyzes the dynamics behind Tajikistan’s civil war (1992–1997) and unearthed some important geopolitical similarities between that conflict and the ongoing civil war in Syria. The author suggests several key lessons from the peace process that had effectively ended the war in Tajikistan to be considered for purposes of conflict resolution and reconciliation in Syria. These parallels and lessons are largely overlooked in existing conflict resolution literature.

Historically paramount, yet often forgotten, the Tajikistan Civil War of 1992-1997 was a tragedy that erupted at the onset of the country’s tenuous political future. Though the war devastated the nation, the way this armed conflict was ended is one of the very few successful cases of peaceful resolution involving multiple third parties and the political institutionalization of Islam – and the only successful peace process in the post-Soviet space. There are many lessons to be learned from the peace process implemented in Tajikistan, especially in the context of current armed conflicts being fought for control of the government.

Many look to the ongoing civil war in Syria with despair and point to the fractured violence, growing radical Islamist influence in the region, and uncooperative efforts of foreign states as reasons why this conflict cannot be solved in a constructive way. It is important to note that while these two civil conflicts are comparable, they are by no means identical. One of the crucial distinctions is the sectarian Islam which is a major factor in Syria’s civil war, but did not exist in Tajikistan. However, by analyzing Tajikistan, we are provided with a glimpse into a
historical case of successful internal, internationally facilitated peace process to end a bloody and heavily fragmented civil war between the central government and the loose opposition forces many of whom are Islamist groups of varying degree of radicalism.

I. Fallout of Fragmented Civil Wars

At the onset of the dissolution of the Soviet empire, most post-Soviet nations had declared their independence. Central Asian states were reluctant to accept the dissolution and were far behind other newly independent states in the arduous process of nation building. It was in the aftermath of the Soviet Union’s collapse that Tajikistan broke out into a bloody civil war between the unlikely union of radical Islamists, secular nationalists, and democratic liberals fighting against the ex-Communist government forces. Throughout the five-year period that the deadly war lasted the estimated death tolls were at nearly 100,000 people killed, along with total devastation of the country’s economy and infrastructure. According to the UN, there were also over a million refugees that were internally and externally displaced, making up more than one tenth of Tajikistan’s entire population.

In the early 2010s, two decades after the civil war first began in Tajikistan, a civil war has erupted in Syria that in some, if not many, ways closely resembles the regional, ideological and political-economic clashes for control of the government that occurred in Central Asia. Armed militias also composed of Islamists, military defectors, radical leftists, and liberal intellectuals are currently in the third year of combating against President Bashar al-Assad and the supporters of his regime. As of February 2014, estimates from the UNHCR declared 6.5 million people have been internally displaced, and an additional 2.5 million refugees currently being harbored in neighboring countries. And though the UN has stopped updating the running death toll in Syria since its last count of 100,000 deaths in summer of 2013, leading figures have put the number of deaths at over 140,000 people. Due to the massive amount of casualties, regional upheaval, humanitarian violations, and use of chemical weapons, this war has received a high amount of international concern along with foreign support on behalf of both the government and opposition forces.

Ironically, the modern Syrian state and Tajikistan are similarly fragmented because their borders contain a melting pot of factions, ethnic groups, and ideologies. This social structure composed of many factions changed the dynamics of the fighting in very similar ways. As previously mentioned, it forced ideologically opposed factions such as Islamists and democratic secular liberals to unite as one opposition against the government. The opposition forces in Tajikistan fighting against the ex-Communist government gradually formed a coalition called United Tajik Opposition (UTO) which was comprised of the Islamic Revival Party (IRP), the Democratic Party of Tajikistan (DPT) and Tajik nationalists.

The current opposition movement in Syria is also composed of both Islamic and secular groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, the Syrian Islamic Front, nationalists in the Free Syrian Army, and a variety of militant factions. While many within the Syrian opposition are fighting towards the common goals of democratization and nationalism within Syria, there is still much disagreement over the ideological
principles upon which the new government would be based. Much like in the case of Tajikistan, the fracturing within the Syrian opposition movement, among other things, seriously complicates the peace process and has left Syria “wracked by power struggles over ideology and personal ambition.”

The second parallel between the two wars is the level of regionalism that exists within both countries. Pauline Jones Luong defines regionalism as the establishment of relations between people based on their shared territorial and local backgrounds. Ultimately, the goal of regionalism is to gain political control and resources for a specific region, therefore identities and allegiances are markedly aligned according to someone’s origin rather than to a central state authority. Although the war in Tajikistan did not begin only or primarily as a fight between clear-cut, full-shape armed regional factions, regionalism did dramatically influence how the violence spread so rapidly and lasted so long. The country became partitioned according to regions where the government mostly had control over the Northern and Southern territories of the country, while the opposition groups retained a presence in the center and the mountainous region of Pamir. Due to the fracturing of the Tajik society, the in-fighting among warring regional groups and violence escalated even further.

Similar signs of regionalism emerge in Syria when observing the geographical distribution of warring factions. Michael Van Dusen describes Syria as being organized around “agro-city regions”; the most significant being Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Lattakia, Tartus, Dera’a, al-Qunaytra, Suweida, and Deir ez Zor. The Syrian opposition has maintained a strong hold in the South East and South Western parts of the country, as well as portions along the Turkish/Syrian border. By sticking to a regionalist model, they have found relative success in recruiting new militants from these specific areas. As a result, the populations have been forced to side with the slant their specific region takes, whether pro-government or pro-opposition. As in Tajikistan, the fighting in the Syrian civil war has quickly spread as regions rise up against regions in efforts to gain the most political and economic advantages for their respective districts.

Distinct from regionalism is the concept of kinship-based networks such as tribalism, which added yet another dynamic to the fighting of both civil wars. There is much debate in the wider literature concerning the social and political networks within Central Asia and the Middle East, and whether they can be considered as tribal/clan-based ties. However, what is important, given the focus of this article, is that such ties can be considered informal types of network which rely on common relations and create ties amongst individuals. Furthermore, these networks, whether based on real or fictitious kinship, provide a level of unity and solidarity among groups, which highly influenced the strategy of both fighting sides.

Both Tajikistan and Syria saw massive mobilization in support and against the war efforts due to the “activation” of these kin-based networks. In Tajikistan, kinship type networks were utilized by the ruling elites to maintain support during the civil war. Idil Kilavuz who wrote extensively on the dynamics of the Tajik civil war agrees when he writes, “political elites in Tajikistan activated their relationships with people with whom they had previous connections. This mechanism mobilized people in different regions, and significantly contributed in the eruption and spread of civil
war.”

For instance, the winner of the 1991 contested presidential election Rakhmon Nabiyev of the then-dominant Leninabad clan specifically utilized these networks to his advantage when he organized pro-government supporters to hold counter demonstrations against the opposition and later form the National Guard. However, it was not only the government that employed the use of local networks; for it was also personal ties and kinship bonds that enabled the opposition to mobilize itself so effectively and gain support for the revolution throughout Tajikistan.

Correspondingly in Syria, Bashar al-Assad has relied on his own kinship type networks and alliances with various tribal leaders to maintain his position of power. Assad concentrated loyalties, resources, and opportunities to a very narrow family network and has been incredibly dependent on the Asad-Makhlouf clan. By relying on his family/clan ties, he lowered the likelihood of entrusting power to possible future defectors. He also activated these networks by requesting public statements of support from influential tribe leaders in front of state media, and to discourage their own tribesmen from joining the rebels. However many tribes refused to side with the government and have become a significant counter force in the uprising. Syrian tribal leaders announced the establishment of the Syrian Arab Tribes Council in Turkey in 2010, which aimed at activating tribes in the armed Syrian opposition. Also, the United States publicly acknowledged it has been “working with the Syrian tribes in order to achieve a political transition of power in Syria.”

Due to the heavy influence of not only regional, but also tribal/clan groupings, the conflict in Tajikistan became highly fragmented, and the same effect, often reinforced by foreign meddling, is currently materializing in the context of the Syrian civil war.

II. Distinct Manifestations of Islam

Regional and tribal divisions were not the only causes of the fragmentation of violence in both civil wars. Strong Islamic fundamentalism played a distinct role in the uprisings. While the population in both Syria and Tajikistan is largely Muslim, due to its geographical isolation, the Soviet experience, and its relatively modern adoption, Islam in Central Asia is a more moderate and localized form than that one can find in parts of the Middle East. Most Central Asian Muslims do not share a universalist affiliation with global or broadly transnationalist Islamist movements. This dynamic also manifested itself during the Tajik civil war. With the exception of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) that was formed by Islamist exiles from Uzbekistan who joined the armed opposition in the Tajik civil war – the conflict was overwhelmingly fought by domestic actors.

This contrasts with Syria where many of the armed opposition’s Islamist factions increasingly acquire more radical and transnationalized Islamist character, including that of the Salafi-jihadi type. Other nuances include the momentum that its uprising gained after the “Arab Spring” revolutions. External involvement of foreign fighters in Syria has also been massively higher than it had been in Tajikistan during the civil war. Estimates place the number of Sunni foreign fighters who have engaged in the armed struggle in Syria at between 5,000 to 10,000 militants, from more than 60 countries. Shia fighters from Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon add nearly 10,000 fighters,
making estimates upwards of 20,000 foreigners involved in Syria’s uprising. Syria’s geographical proximity to other nations in the Middle East, the tumultuous environment of the recent “Arab Spring” movements, and the general oppression that has persisted over decades by authoritarian leaders has only fueled the level of interest and support from foreign forces.

Also, Islam in Tajikistan is almost entirely composed of Sunni Muslims (with a notable exception of the geographically compact Ismaili community) and never witnessed inter-sectarian (Sunni-Shia) violence that has been steadily growing in Syria since the conflict started. The increasingly sectarian character of the conflict in Syria has been fuelled and exacerbated both by the fact that Assad’s regime is dominated by the Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shia Islam, the grievances of segments of the majority Sunni population, and the numbers of Shia and Sunni militants that have poured into Syria from neighboring countries to fight in support of their respective sects. This reinforced sectarianism had fed into the broader regional context, with sectarian tensions rising across the Middle East. And in this increasingly polarized sectarian context,legalizing Sunni Islamist political participation seems more difficult and unlikely than it was in the overwhelmingly Sunni Tajikistan.

**III. Policy Options towards Reconciliation**

It wasn’t until the Tajik peace agreement was signed in 1997 that the state allowed Islamists to be politically assimilated into the government. It was an arduous process which simply began as informal talks between seven ordinary citizens. And it took Tajikistan eight rounds of inter-Tajik negotiations with representatives from all parties over the time span of four years to reach a viable agreement. The eventual agreement reached between the United Tajikistan Opposition and the Rakhmonov’s government gave 30 percent of executive positions within the government to the UTO, while the government retained 70 percent. It also legalized the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) and granted them access to the executive branch of the government on the basis that they would also agree to follow secular laws of the country. Furthermore, as there were now surpluses of inactive fighters, the UTO armed units were disbanded and incorporated into the regular armed forces of Tajikistan.

Two key questions thus emerge from analyzing Tajikistan’s peace resolution process. First, seeing the similarities exhibited between Syria and Tajikistan’s civil wars, how likely is it that the Syrian opposition would accept a similar accord where they gain some share of government seats and the incumbent president stays in power? And second, is it even possible to successfully legalize political Islam in a democratic Syria, or is the confessional/sectarian situation and the degree of radicalization and transnationalization of Islam in Syria too fundamentally different from Tajikistan’s to obtain such a result?

**Had we asked the first question six months ago, it would have seemed an impossibility to secure such a concession from a disorganized opposition, whose seemingly singular point of agreement was that the entirety of Assad’s regime must be replaced. Two rounds of negotiations at the Geneva talks have not brought warring parties within Syria to any sincere concessions or effective proposals, even**
after nearly three years of fighting. Yet, more recent developments have demonstrated that even the most relentless of stances could shift overtime, as the Syrian National Coalition of Opposition Forces presented the most detailed and conciliatory proposal yet to the government side on February 12th, 2014. Interestingly enough, the terms of a transitional government did not specifically demand President Bashar al-Assad’s complete removal from power. This unprecedented omission may demonstrate flexibility that echoes a similar agreement made by the Tajik opposition twenty years ago, which allowed the current president to remain in power in return for legal access to the political process.

Although it is unlikely that the Syrian opposition would agree to Assad continuing his rule over the country (at least retaining the level of power he has now), this provision from an opposition coalition allows the possibility of establishing a transitional government which could include Assad’s contingents. As previously mentioned, the last round of the Geneva talks did not produce any serious concession on this level. However intermediaries of the political negotiations in Syria must continue to push for a similar series of talks modeled after the ones in Tajikistan: rounds of negotiations happening under the auspices of the UN, with the goal of meeting at least twice a year (for however long it takes) until compromise is finally reached, and the willingness to legalize Islamic political parties by giving them a percentage of government control.

This brings us to the second question: is it even possible to create successful democratic processes while at the same time legalizing political Islam in Syria following a peace accord? Although the Syrian war has now become a muddled sectarian conflict, it did not initially begin as one. The very roots of the opposition movement were not concerned with political Islam or the establishment of a Caliphate, but with the simple demand for democratic participation and secular freedoms from an authoritarian and oppressive government. It is the plea for democratic principles which is at the heart of every “Arab Spring” movement.

Academics like Oliver Roy believes that political Islam and democracy can certainly coexist, for “the obstacle to democratization does not come so much from the Islamist centrists, as from the conservative secular elites who are first and foremost anxious to lock up their power and to exclude the Islamists.” Sébastien Peyrouse agrees that when authoritarian governments in these regions invoke rigid control over Islamic fundamentalism, it inevitably results in the demand for political participation, along with risking further radicalization and reaction of a discontent Muslim population.

Though Tajikistan is certainly not the epitome of a democratic government and still sees widespread persecution against more radical forms of Islam and those out of the reach of state control, the probability of future conflict emerging for religious reasons has been reduced because moderate Islamists have been given partial political access. The compromise gave Tajik Islamists a degree of power and influence within the government, yet at the same time appeased the liberal nationalists and secularists who were afraid of the creation of an Islamic state. The outcome was the participation of the Islamist movement that has given up violence in a secular government which integrated seemingly antithetical ideologies and different political interests.
As of yet, Assad has refused to incorporate Islamist influence within the political process and has tried to violently suppress it. By appointing Islamic leaders who support the regime and implementing uneven suppression, he has sought to divide the various Islamic groups and currents which has further fueled sectarianism. Many Islamists endured years of imprisonment, torture, and oppression at the hands of the Syrian government. This ultimately drove many Islamists underground and further radicalized them in a violent way. Still, despite the presence of radical Islamists in Syria, a significant portion of the opposition forces are moderate, reformist Sunni Muslims who do in fact want some form of a more democratic government while keeping their underlying Islamic values. It is necessary to find a way to integrate them (and, as in the case of Tajikistan, transform them from militant actors to political actors) – both as a task in its own merit and to effectively solve the problem of radical Islamists with strong transnational connections and other extremist agents in Syria.

One case of moderate Islamists who are demanding participation in the mainstream politics of Syria is the recently united Islamic Front. Composed of seven different Sunni Muslim groups, the Islamic Front has become Syria’s most powerful insurgent bloc, and boasts a large number of troops which ranges anywhere from 45,000 up to 70,000. Unlike other radical Islamist groups that have emerged in the battle for Syria, the Islamic Front is composed of moderate Islamists who promote a “social Islam”, prevalent among the Sunni community in Syria. Its members have declared solidarity with and cross-sectarian equality for all Muslims, as well as a commitment to a political system that protects the rights of minorities. While obviously not promoting the type of democracy as commonly imagined in the West, its political heads have also announced their support of elections and a measure of political freedom built on institutions rather than an authoritarian rule. Furthermore, the Islamic Front has welcomed cooperation with the more secular Free Syrian Army. Both factions have criticized extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), and the Islamic Front has actively engaged in armed resistance against them.

The Islamic Front not only provides a unified counter force against extremist groups, such as Al-Qaeda, who are vying for control of the government, but also a willingness to cooperate with more secular opposition factions. Therefore, just as the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan was politically legalized, these types of Islamic figures in Syria must play a role in the transition and reconstruction of Syria’s political system. Otherwise, the West will simply risk further alienating Syria’s largest insurgency group and incurring violence from Islamists who are denied a voice in the political dialogue.

**IV. The International Paradox**

Another key factor that is important to discuss in the context of Tajikistan and Syria’s civil wars is the international interest and involvement which has played a major role in development of both conflicts. For peace negotiations to succeed in Tajikistan, cooperation among all observing countries was absolutely vital. It was only when the third parties began to cooperate and engage with both pro-government and opposition groups, instead of unconditionally supporting one side, that successful
concessions were made. After all, it was the leverage and political pressure applied mainly by Russia, Iran, and the UN that convinced Tajik opposition and government agents to make dramatic compromises in the midst of the ongoing bloodshed.29

Since then geopolitical rivalries between Russia, the United States, and Iran have escalated, making substantial collaboration between the three seemingly impossible today. Furthermore, in contrast to Tajikistan, the Syrian peace process has been gravely complicated by the role of external actors who have their own interest in the final outcome of the protracted battle for power. Saudi Arabia and the United States have reportedly financed arms supplies and military training to the moderate opposition forces, while Iran and Iraq have provided Syria’s government with cheap oil to help it survive European sanctions.30 Additionally, Russia and China have repeatedly voted in the UN Security Council against stepping up pressure on the Syrian government and have openly condemned the opposition forces for trying to oust the Assad regime.

The high level of external manipulation and involvement, especially by regional powers, has turned Syria’s civil war into a regional proxy war, where each country is funnelling aid to its respective side in order to attain regional interests and leverage in the country. This divided approach by the international community has severely stalled any sort of resolution as each country seeks its own interests. George Gavrilis writes that “the greatest harm to mediation in Syria may have come from the disunited and competitive approach of the states in the anti-Assad camp.”31

In modeling international cooperation in Syria after Tajikistan's peace process, we find an unlikely international actor which can play a crucial role in the resolution of the civil war. Mehrali Toshmuhammadov writes that the Republic of Iran was able to use its prominence as a powerful Islamic state and cultural ties with the Persian-speaking Tajik populations, to convince the Tajik opposition to accept political concessions and “arranged active dialogue with other interested countries”, primarily with Russia.32 In fact, the final ceasefire agreement agreed upon by the opposition movement and the Tajik government was signed in Tehran, Iran, due to the efforts of Russian and Iranian mediators.33

As in Tajikistan, Iran also stands to play a unique role in resolving the Syrian crisis because Syria has been its long standing ally in the Middle East and Iran has a vested interest to pursue an end to the war. Mirroring Iran’s former role in Tajikistan, President Hassan Rouhani recently offered to help facilitate dialogue between the Syrian government and opposition factions in a constructive and cooperative way.34 Some involved in the peace process have recognized Iran’s importance, as even the current UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon invited Iran to officially participate in the preliminary Syrian peace talks on January 20th, 2014. He assured members that he’d received affirmation that Iran “would play a positive role in securing a transitional government.”35 Unfortunately, due pressure from the United States and other Western diplomats forced the UN to withdraw the invitation almost immediately after it had been issued.

Echoing the words of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, it is absolutely necessary that Iran should be invited to the negotiation table along with other intermediaries such as Saudi Arabia, Russia, and the United States.36 Hooman Majd, an Iranian-American journalist, also believes this should be the case when he states,
“if you want to solve a problem, then by definition you have to talk to the people you think are part of the problem. Iran was probably instrumental in getting Assad to agree to the Russian deal”\textsuperscript{37} (an agreement reached by Russian and the US on September 14, 2013, to destroy Syria’s chemical weapons that placed indefinitely on hold the prospect of US-led strikes on Syria). Without allowing Iran to participate in Syrian negotiations, Iran will continue to fuel the proxy war by financially and militarily propping up Assad’s regime, and thus extending the length of fighting.\textsuperscript{38}

The United States especially needs to recognize Iran’s participation as a valuable opportunity it cannot miss. Iran’s newly elected president, Hassan Rouhani, has shown promise of moderation and engagement, and even possible cooperation with the West, a situation that would have never materialized under the rule of former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.\textsuperscript{39} The timing of his election, and the ongoing war in Syria could potentially be vital for a rebuilding US and Iranian relations in an unprecedented manner. Looking towards the future, this scenario has become more promising as the United States and other major powers recently signed a deal with Iran to lift some of the economic sanctions, and freezing parts of Iran’s nuclear program in return.\textsuperscript{40} While it is certainly a positive step towards bilateral and international cooperation which could ultimately affect the collaboration in other international crises such as Syria, only time will tell if this historic move will bring peace to the region.

V. A Unified Opposition

Finally, it was the creation of a collective opposition bloc (the Unified Tajikistan Opposition) through pressure applied by foreign bodies, which was absolutely pivotal to implementing a successful peace agreement in Tajikistan. Not only was the UTO able to consolidate itself despite its previous fragmentation, but it formally recognized the leadership of Sayeed Abdullo Nuri, and his responsibility to negotiate a settlement on behalf of the UTO.\textsuperscript{41} Similarly, the number one goal of states supporting the opposition group in Syria, primarily the United States, EU, and Turkey, should be to continue the pursuit of consolidating the militant factions under a single unified leadership to counteract the fragmentation.

George Gavrilis agrees when he writes that, "it is incorrect to bash Russia for the violent stalemate in Syria. The diplomacy of states in the pro-opposition camp has failed to do two things that are essential to good mediation in civil wars: helping the fractured opposition coalesce into a \textit{de facto} and not just \textit{de jure} umbrella and reinforcing this with a local presence to monitor ceasefires among warring commanders."\textsuperscript{42} The ideological and political differences within the Syrian opposition remain one of the major factors that have stalled the negotiations. Islamist’s bent on an Islamic state and secularists who want democratic freedoms rival for the most influence in the alternative government.

The closest the opposition has come to creating a unified bloc for negotiation purposes has been the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces founded in Qatar, November 2012. This coalition consists of a council of 60 seats with representatives from other local councils, and has had the support of the free Syrian army along with the backing of Western powers. Its recently elected
leader Ahmad Assi al-Jarba was a former political prisoner and Sunni Muslim from one of the most prominent tribes in Eastern Syria. As the main force representing the Syrian opposition at the Geneva peace negotiations, the National Coalition has provided a level of cohesion and formality among the divided opposition groups. Until recently however, it has been wracked by a series of resignations of its leaders, which has dramatically affected its legitimacy as a functioning cohesive body. Maintaining a strong leadership under al-Jarba, along with pursuing joint collaboration with the Free Syrian Army, and with the previously mentioned Islamic Front would serve to further enhance the unity and effectiveness of the opposition’s role in any future political process.

VI. Conclusion

One of the biggest challenges facing Syria’s conflict resolution is overcoming the power struggle among international mediators such as the United States, Russia, and Iran. The world powers must combine pressure to create a power sharing agreement while allowing Iran’s presence at the negotiation table. Another challenge is that both mediators and the parties to the Syrian conflict should recognize that the political transition process will never be successful in achieving such a power-sharing arrangement and political reforms until the Syrian Islamists, under negotiated conditions, are given a seat in the new government, or else risk forcing them into a “violent, conspiratorial underground.” Finally, it is vital that the varying factions within the Syrian opposition can consolidate into a collective force under a single leadership which includes parties from all major domestic factions involved, including the Islamic Front.

Ultimately, the negotiation and mediation process that led to the peace agreement in Tajikistan remains a highly relevant example of resolution of a deadly and fragmented civil war, in spite of sub-national regional divides, clan and intra-religious differences. The three main lessons from the peace process in Tajikistan for Syria are: (a) the readiness to reach out and involve the Islamist core of the armed opposition in both peace process and subsequent power-sharing agreement, (b) the ability to unite the bulk of the opposition under one political program; and (c) the combined pressure from the US, Russia, Iran and the UN that further decreased both sides’ confidence of an outright unilateral military victory, encouraged Track-2 civil dialogue and helped bring parties together for political dialogue. Learning from international cooperation on, and political comprise in, Tajikistan in the 1990s could certainly contribute to the search for ways to end Syria’s deadly war.

ENDNOTES

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