

<b>Institution:</b> Queen Mary University of London		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 19 Politics and International Studies		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Informing and shaping public, media and policymakers' understanding of the international aspects of the Syria conflict.		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2012-20		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Dr Christopher Phillips	Reader in International relations	2012-present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2014-20		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b>		
<p>Dr Phillips's work on the International Relations of the Syrian civil war has been at the cutting edge of global research on the subject, subsequently informing and shaping public, media and policymakers' understanding of the conflict. On a public level, it has led to two exhibitions at the Imperial War Museum in London and Manchester, a BBC Two television documentary, and informed key journalists. At a policy level, it has informed and shaped UK policy in several government departments, notably the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, Ministry of Defence, and Ministry of Justice. At a wider international level, policy makers from the UN, NATO, the US National Intelligence Committee, other national governments, and a multinational corporation, ExxonMobil, have had their policies informed by Phillips's research.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning Research</b>		
<p>Phillips's research has sought to explain the international dynamics of Syria's civil war since its outbreak in 2011. When the project began, it was among the first to argue that the international aspects of the conflict were key to understanding its trajectory and any possible resolution, at a time when most policy and academic work was focussed on domestic factors. It also showed how a combination of domestic and regional structural shifts prompted many external states to pursue unachievable policies in Syria, which were ultimately harmful to their own interests.</p> <p>Phillips produced the first book to challenge the prevailing view at the time that the conflict was primarily a domestic conflict that later dragged in foreign powers. The research demonstrated that international factors are a key explainer of Syria's civil war [3.1]. Applying international relations theory and civil war theory to primary evidence in the form of elite interviews gathered in 14 countries, most in the Middle East, Phillips argues that Syria's civil war (2011-present) was shaped from the beginning by external powers. This international view of the conflict has become increasingly dominant among policy makers and the public, and the book has helped shape this [3.1].</p> <p>Based on field research from Turkey early in the project, Phillips published one of the first policy documents that outlined how Turkey would be impacted by the Syria conflict and argued that it was likely to be drawn into the war – several years before this actually happened [3.3]. The report was policy-orientated, published by the UK's top foreign affairs think tank, and was launched at a major public event attended by British and foreign diplomats [3.3].</p> <p>Based on field research in Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Phillips argued that each lacked the capacity to match their ambitions in Syria, resulting in repeated policy failures [3.5]. Applying identity theory to the phenomena of proxy war in Syria, Phillips argued that identity was not the main factor determining why foreign powers backed different fighters in Syria, with pragmatism the primary determinant [3.4]. These findings were presented to UK MPs and Lords in 2018 roundtable on Sectarianism in the Middle East.</p> <p>Alongside Phillips's individual research, he also designed and led a project at Chatham House: 'The Syria and its neighbour's policy initiative.' Based on applying nationalism theory to the Syrian</p>		

case, Phillips argues that the 'sectarian' elements of Syria's conflict are driven as much by modern factors, such as manipulation by foreign powers, as any ancient religious factors [3.2]. This project explored the regional dynamics of Syria's conflict, investigating the role of Syria's neighbours in the war and the blowback in those countries. It granted Phillips and his team access to stakeholders and policymakers in the UK, US and Middle East, producing a series of reports and research that informed policy makers' and public views of the conflict. Chatham House published the article 'What is left of Assad's state is eroding from within' [3.6], which built on *The Battle for Syria* [3.1].

From 2012 until 2020, Phillips produced one monograph and 18 academic articles, book chapters and policy papers (three co-authored) from the research. The primary research output, a monograph, *The Battle for Syria* was and remains the only book yet published on the Syria conflict that focusses primarily on the external drivers of the conflict.

### 3. References to the research

[3.1] Phillips, C. (2016). *The Battle for Syria: International rivalry in the new Middle East*. Yale University Press.

[3.2] Phillips, C. (2015). Sectarianism and conflict in Syria. *Third World Quarterly*, 36(2), 357-376. [doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.1015788](https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.1015788)

[3.3] Phillips, C. (2012). *Into the Quagmire: Turkey's frustrated Syria policy* (Report No. MENAP BP 2012/04) Chatham House.  
[https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Middle%20East/1212bp\\_phillips.pdf](https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Middle%20East/1212bp_phillips.pdf).

[3.4] Phillips, C & Valbjørn, M. (2018). 'What is in a Name?' The role of (different) identities in the multiple proxy wars in Syria. *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 29(3), 414-433.  
[doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2018.1455328](https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2018.1455328)

[3.5] Phillips, C. (2017). Eyes bigger than stomachs: Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar in Syria. *Middle East Policy*, 24(1), 36-47. [doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12250](https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12250)

[3.6] Phillips, C. (2015). *What is Left of Assad's State is Eroding from Within*. Chatham House.  
<https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/what-is-left-of-assads-state-is-eroding-from-within>

### Evidence of quality of the research

**[EQR.3.2]** Chatham House: 'The Syria and its neighbour's policy initiative' project ran from 2014-2017 and won international recognition, being awarded USD504,000 by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, GBP137,000 from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and GBP25,000 from NOREF.

### 4. Details of the impact

Phillips's research on the Syrian civil war has been influential in shaping public, media and governmental understanding of that conflict, which has, in turn, informed international policy.

#### Informing and shaping public understanding

Phillips's book, *The Battle for Syria*, was the catalyst for his invitation to design and curate a public exhibition on the Syrian civil war for the Imperial War Museum (IWM). The exhibition, 'Syria: Story of a conflict,' ran in London from April to September 2017 and in IWM North, Manchester, from February to June 2018, receiving over 250,000 visitors. The exhibition aimed to educate the public on the complexities of the conflict, especially the international dimensions, creating opportunities for moving away from the simplistic narratives found in the media. 86% of visitors canvassed stated that the exhibition had provided them with a deeper understanding of the causes, course

and consequences of the conflict and 65% stated that the exhibition had made them think differently about the conflict [5.1]. One visitor remarked that the exhibition gave them 'a better understanding of [the] history of conflict and [its] complexity,' while another said 'I will go away with a more comprehensive understanding.' Others noted 'It made me feel more closer to what is happening,' while one visitor stated 'I think this exhibition is really touching and it made me think how desperate these people are' [5.1].

*The Battle for Syria* underpinned the BBC documentary 'Syria: The World's War,' with Phillips acting as historical consultant, writing and editing scripts and approving footage before airing. The documentary aired on BBC Two in May 2018 and had over 2,000,000 viewers. *The Guardian* wrote that the film was 'tremendous and necessarily distressing' and that it, 'tells the story of what actually happened,' about which 'we need to be reminded' [5.8]. Phillips has also published over 50 shorter op-ed pieces in international news outlets, including *The Guardian* (print readership: 3,600,000; circulation: 111,953), *The Washington Post* (circulation: 578,482,00), *The Atlantic* (circulation: 462,175) and *Newsweek* (circulation: 48,733).

### **Informing and shaping media understanding**

Journalists working on the Syria conflict report that reading *The Battle for Syria* was key for informing and shaping their work.

The BBC's Chief International correspondent, Lyse Doucett, described the book as, 'indispensable,' stating that 'No other book brought together, with Phillips' depth of research and analysis, an understanding of the international dimension of the world's most complex and consequential proxy war. No other book examined these crucial factors with an ambition to understand each player's motives and interests and their impact on the ground – not by taking a side, but by tackling them from all points of view to achieve a fuller more nuanced comprehension...I carried this book with me from capital to capital as we conducted our work. It was the last material I read before every interview with a major player in Syria and the region, as well as London Moscow and Washington. We also consulted Phillips directly as we developed our own analysis on the ground. This book formed the backbone of my research and thinking on the international dimensions of a war.' [5.8]. Doucett is only one of many journalists whose work was shaped by Phillips's research.

*The Independent's* Patrick Cockburn called it 'one of the best informed and non-partisan accounts of the Syrian tragedy yet published,' while the BBC's Paul Wood called it 'a brilliant handbook for policymakers.' Meanwhile Ian Black of *The Guardian* called it 'the best by far that I have read on the regional and international dimension' [5.3]. BBC Producer Mike Rudin described *The Battle for Syria* as 'Matchless,' stating it 'provided the pillar of background research for our two-part BBC 2 series "Syria: The World's War."' He added that 'Without Dr Christopher Phillips' unique research our project would not have been possible' [5.8].

Without Phillips's research and advice, journalism on the Syrian civil war in the last five years would not be as comprehensive, effective and, as in the case of the BBC documentary, produced at all.

### **Informing and shaping UK Government Understanding**

Phillips's research has informed and shaped UK government understanding of the Syria conflict. He has worked with the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) since 2012 as a consultant analyst. One FCDO analyst commented that 'Dr Chris Phillips has consistently contributed to the policy debate on Syria within government throughout the past five years as the pre-eminent UK expert on Syria's regional and international relations' [5.2]. He briefed the UK special representative to the Syrian opposition, the head of the FCDO Syria team and shaped future diplomats' engagement by recording five podcasts for the FCDO Diplomatic Academy. According to the FCDO, '*The Battle for Syria* and his regular think piece and academic articles - form one of the main bases for how the long-term strategic interests of Syria's regional and international partners are viewed' [5.2]. The head of the FCDO's Middle East Research team remarked that they used *The Battle for Syria* 'to learn lessons on the extent to which the past

positioning of international actors may have affected prospects for conflict resolution.’ They recommend it to officials who are new to working on Syria. [5.2]

Phillips’s research has also informed UK government policies relating to Syria. Phillips has acted as expert advisor to many government departments on the basis of his expertise on the Syria conflict. After reading his work, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) invited Phillips to brief the UK Chief of Joint Operations at Permanent Joint Headquarters Northwood (PJHQ) in 2014 and 2016. In 2019, he briefed the MoD’s Defence Intelligence, including operatives participating in operations in Syria and the Land Intelligence Fusion Centre. He helped inform the understanding of future field officers, giving lectures at the Royal College of Defence Studies (RCDS) in 2017, 2018, and 2019, and writing and delivering a day long training workshop at RAF Henlow. The Commandant of the RCDS remarked that Phillips’s contribution was ‘consistently outstanding’ and he helped prepare military officers and officials from over 50 different countries for leadership by aiding their ‘understanding of the strategic importance of Syria in the Middle East region as a whole’ [5.6]. After reading his research, parliamentary researchers invited Phillips to give evidence on Syria at the House of Commons’ International Development Committee and Foreign Affairs select committees. Phillips also advised David Cameron’s foreign policy team at Downing Street in 2015. After HH Judge Keith Raynor read *The Battle for Syria*, he invited Phillips to lecture at a conference of Judges authorised to deal with cases of terrorism, at the Royal Courts of Justice in 2016, as well as officers from the Crown Prosecution Service later in 2016. According to Raynor, ‘Dr. Phillips’ contribution has informed the legal landscape in relation to terrorism in The Middle East’ [5.7].

### Informing global policy

Phillips’s research has also informed foreign governments’ policies on Syria in Israel, Australia, Norway, Denmark and Sweden, all governments that have invited him to brief them on Syria. From 2018-20, he wrote and conducted several two-day workshops for the United Nations Institute for Training and Research. He briefed the 2013 NATO Parliamentary Assembly in Morocco. He has delivered four lectures at the NATO Defence college in Rome and two at the NATO Intelligence Fusion Centre, each time informing the approach of international policy makers on Syria. One NATO official stated that Phillips’s research allowed ‘members to deepen their understanding of the issues at stake’ [5.5]. Another official stated that Phillips allowed them ‘to look at new approaches to the Syria conflict, enhancing their analytical understanding in support of the Alliance’s intelligence function.’ In 2018, he briefed the US National Intelligence Committee in Washington DC. His research has been cited in NATO Parliamentary papers and for the Norwegian Defence Report [5.5].

In addition, Phillips’s research has also shaped the policy of a multinational corporation, ExxonMobil. In 2019, he briefed ExxonMobil’s MENA Senior Regional Leadership Team on the Syria conflict and how it may impact their operations. One of them commented that this ‘had a direct impact on improving the company’s approach to protecting its people, assets, and operations in Middle East’ [5.9].

## 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[5.1] [Data set] from audiences at IWM London and Manchester on what impact the exhibitions had upon them. [Corroborator 1]

[5.2] [Testimonial] FCDO [Corroborator 1 & 2]

[5.3] [Reviews] Battle for Syria by leading journalists

[5.4] [Figures] Washington Post and the Atlantic

[5.5] [Testimonial] NATO

[5.6] [Testimonial] RCDS Commandant

[5.7] [Testimonial] HH Judge [Corroborator 4]

[5.8] [Testimonial] Supporting letter from BBC Producer, Guardian review [Corroborator 5]

[5.9] [Testimonial] ExxonMobil