


Section A		
Institution: University of St. Andrews		
Unit of Assessment: UoA19: Politics and International Studies		
Title of case study: The Syrian War: Helping Governments and International Organizations to Understand and Mitigate the Conflict		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2011 - 31 December 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by HEI:
Raymond Hinnebusch	Professor	01 September 1996 - present
Omar Imady	Research Fellow	01 February 2017 - present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: November 2013 - 31 December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
Section B		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>The Centre for Syrian Studies (CSS) research identified the causes and dynamics of the Syrian civil war and ways of ameliorating it. Through sustained engagement with the UK government and international organizations, CSS research informed debates and helped shape policy concerning intervention, diplomatic strategy, and reconstruction aid. CSS also engaged in extensive media outreach to provide needed context for the general public to understand the complexities of the crisis. Specifically, CSS research findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informed foreign policy debates within the UK government, from November 2013-2017, cautioning against intervention and focusing instead on humanitarian aid and diplomacy—recommendations that were ultimately congruent with adopted policies of refraining from military involvement and raising the UK’s humanitarian assistance profile. • Improved crisis diplomacy at the United Nations by encouraging more engagement with local Syrian actors and avoiding zero-sum measures, an approach largely adopted by the second UN Special Envoy from 2014-2019. • Emphasized the danger of continuing conflict by economic means in reconstruction efforts, leading the World Bank and the United Nations to recommend conditioning reconstruction funding on inclusivity by the Syrian government in their 2018-2020 reports. • Interpreted the crisis for the public, from November 2013-2020, via sustained engagement with live radio and tv media outlets reaching large global audiences (e.g. BBC Scotland, France24, Turkish TRT World, Arabic Euronews), including 23 interviews since 2018. Recorded appearances were further distributed via the Centre’s webpage and complemented with blog post analysis, with downloads of individual videos reaching up to 15,000 views. 		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>In 2011, mass protests broke out in Syria, demanding greater political freedoms and government aid in a time of deep economic struggle. What began as peaceful demonstrations, by 2012, had rapidly devolved into repression, violence, and ultimately a civil war with extensive international intervention. The Centre for Syrian Studies (CSS) reoriented its research to respond to this evolving crisis—and the widespread and pressing need across governments and international organizations to better understand the conflict and how it might be ameliorated. CSS research stood out, among an emerging body of recommendations initially dominated by advocacy groups and non-specialists,</p>		

for its scholarly approach and longstanding expertise in Syrian politics and history. The Centre's research findings focused on three key aspects of the conflict: its root causes and drivers, the obstacles to effective international response, and planning for reconstruction during an eventual post-conflict peace-building phase.

(1) The root causes and drivers of the Syria conflict

Beginning in 2011, CSS research explored the origins of the conflict and mapped the roles of key domestic actors, both within the regime and the opposition. Research findings traced how the secular non-violent protest movement was marginalized, leading to civil war instead of democratic transition. Especially important to this outcome were the Asad regime's use of violence against protestors, defections from the army, and the arming of the opposition by external regional actors [R1, R2]. Research findings further demonstrated how these international interventions became competitive, leading to proxy wars that prolonged the conflict, raised its costs, and drove increasing sectarianism (e.g. divisions between religious communities). As security dilemmas deepened between communities, by 2013 the country had fragmented into rival zones of regime and rebel governance, overlapping with spheres of external influence [R3, R4].

(2) Obstacles to an effective international response

CSS research also examined the policies of key states and international organizations toward the conflict, specifically analysing the obstacles to an effective response, the dangers of inadvertently aggravating the crisis, and how these might be overcome. For example, economic sanctions and the invocation of human rights norms (e.g. the 'Responsibility to Protect') tended to raise expectations of full-scale international intervention, thereby dissuading all sides from a compromise settlement. Covert interventions, wherein external patrons armed and funded local proxies, led to widespread expectations of continued resources and support that further prolonged and deepened the conflict [R3]. CSS research also examined UN diplomacy, finding that UN mediators had little leverage because none of the conflict parties could imagine co-existing with their adversaries or had any incentive to negotiate. The US and Russia were unprepared to pressure their clients into compromise and key actors were also excluded from talks, notably Iran [R5].

(3) Post-conflict peace building and reconstruction

After 2015, global attention turned to the possibility of a post-conflict period in which a vast reconstruction effort would be necessary. CSS research identified the context in which reconstruction would necessarily occur and identified obstacles to its success. Most importantly, the research highlighted the exclusion of local actors and the zero-sum approaches through which the Syrian regime and foreign states were making reconstruction a continuation of the conflict by economic means. It highlighted how ordinary Syrians were the victims of this power struggle, including through the redistribution of property from opposition to loyalist actors by the Syrian government and the blanket US sanctions designed to inflict maximum pain as a prelude to regime change. Research findings also explored how the international community could come together and design reconstruction efforts to overcome this competition, by making increments of reconstruction assistance conditional on the government's adoption of more inclusive reconstruction approaches and pushing back against blanket sanctions. Initially delivered to the commissioning agencies in 2018-19, these findings were ultimately published in 2020 [R6].

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

The underpinning research, representative of a larger body of centre work, was formally published in peer reviewed international journals and edited books by prestigious international academic publishers. The research published in 2018-2020 had impact before these dates, having been previously commissioned by the UN ECSWA and World Bank to inform their own reports and policy recommendations.

[R1] Hinnebusch, Raymond. 2012. "Syria: from Authoritarian Upgrading to Revolution?" *International Affairs* 88(1): 95-113. DOI: [10.1111/j.1468-2346.2012.01059.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2012.01059.x)

[R2] Hinnebusch, Raymond, Omar Imady, and Tina Zintl. 2015. "Civil Resistance in the Syrian Uprising: From Democratic Transition to Sectarian Civil War." In, Adam Roberts, Michael Willis,

and Timothy Garton Ash (eds.), *Civil Resistance in the Arab Spring: Triumphs and Disasters, 2011–14*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 223-247. ISBN: 9780198749028, DOI: [10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198749028.003.0009](https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198749028.003.0009) <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/civil-resistance-in-the-arab-spring-9780198749028?cc=gb&lang=en&#>

[R3] Hinnebusch, Raymond. 2015. "The Syrian Crisis and International Security." In, M. Caveltly and T. Balzacq (eds.), *Handbook of Security Studies*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 291-301. ISBN: 978-1-138-80393-0, DOI: [10.4324/9781315753393](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315753393) <https://www.routledge.com/Routledge-Handbook-of-Security-Studies-2nd-Edition/Dunn-Caveltly-Balzacq/p/book/9781138803930>; <https://tinyurl.com/yypdm2bq>

[R4] Hinnebusch, Raymond. 2018. "From Westphalian Failure to Heterarchic Governance in MENA: The Case of Syria." *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 29(3): 391-41. DOI: [10.1080/09592318.2018.1455330](https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2018.1455330)

[R5] Hinnebusch, Raymond and I. William Zartman. 2016. "UN Mediation in the Syrian Crisis: From Kofi Annan to Lakhdar Brahimi." New York: International Peace Institute. <https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/IPI-Rpt-Syrian-Crisis2.pdf>

[R6] Hinnebusch Raymond. 2020. "The Battle over Syria's Reconstruction." *Global Policy* 11(1): 113-123. DOI: [10.1111/1758-5899.12779](https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.12779)

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words).

Throughout the Syria crisis, from November 2013-2020, CSS research on the root causes of the conflict, the obstacles to an effective international response, and the prospects for reconstruction were actively solicited by the UK government, United Nations, and World Bank. Through sustained engagement with these beneficiaries, CSS research findings informed important national and international debates over intervention, diplomacy, and reconstruction.—shaping adopted policies and recommendations. Moreover, CSS engaged in extensive media outreach, providing much needed context and information for the general public. Specifically, CSS research findings:

- cautioned the UK government against intervention and recommended focusing on humanitarian aid and diplomacy—advice congruent with the policies ultimately adopted;
- encouraged the United Nations to engage more extensively with local Syrian actors and avoid zero-sum measures, an approach adopted by the second mediator;
- shaped World Bank and UN ESCWA policy recommendations on reconstruction aid to condition incremental funding release on inclusivity by the Syrian government; and
- provided important contextualization of the complex crisis for the general public via sustained media engagement.

(1) Informing UK policy debates and response to the Syria crisis

CSS research explicitly sought to break through the highly polarized discourse over Syria and provide a deep grasp of the roots of the crisis while also exposing its multi-sided complexity and intractability [R1, R2]. Research findings cautioned against intervention, which could aggravate the crisis, and instead suggested focusing on diplomatic efforts and humanitarian assistance to conflict-affected Syrian communities [R3, R5].

Between 2013 and 2017, advice based on these research findings was regularly conveyed to UK government officials, informing evolving policy debates. Such consultations included with MI-5 (November 2013), the Prime Minister's Office (October 2015), the Foreign Affairs Committee (October 2015), the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (July 2016), and gatherings of senior military officers (April 2016; February 2017). According to the FCO Deputy Head of Research Analyst's section (and in charge of Syria), the Centre has "*consistently contributed to the policy debates on Syria within government throughout the past five years*", with its conferences and published volumes, "*essential aid to understanding of the conflict*" [S1]. In testimony to the Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, the Centre director underlined how the Islamic State was being utilized by regional actors such as Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia to advance their own interests [S2, pp.14-15]. The chair of the committee acknowledged this

testimony was “*extremely useful in setting out the international players and their interests*” (in the Syria crisis) and as a basis for their questioning of the Foreign Secretary [S3]. CSS was also invited in April 2014 to make a submission on humanitarian assistance to the International Development Committee, advocating that DFID pursue a new UN Security Council resolution that would grant access to Syria for humanitarian agencies and foster local partners. The UK’s relative caution in refraining from most military involvement in the Syrian crisis combined with its higher profile in humanitarian assistance is consistent with the analysis and advice provided by the Centre.

(2) Improving crisis diplomacy at the United Nations

CSS research further identified measures that could facilitate movement toward conflict resolution, specifically on how to improve crisis diplomacy. The UN International Peace Institute and Office of Political Affairs jointly solicited a study from the Centre on the efforts of the UN Syria mediators. The research findings recommended more balanced engagement with all stakeholders while avoiding zero-sum approaches that would damage the vital interests of any side [R3]. The resulting report was downloaded over 500 times (<https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/IPI-Rpt-Syrian-Crisis2.pdf>). It has become one of the most read IPI papers and, in the words of a UN official, is “*a controversial report, because it speaks boldly about a very sensitive subject [but, being] authored by two of the foremost experts on Syria and on mediation, the conclusions were able to withstand the criticism... [It is] the finest example of first-rate academics applying their knowledge to the policy world.*” [S4]

As a result, the subsequent mediator, the Special Envoy for Syria of the United Nations Secretary-General, “*engaged more...with local Syrian actors*” [S5]. The Special Envoy’s political advisor also acknowledged that the work of the Centre had provided “*many insights valuable to my work... Raymond Hinnebusch and myself had some stimulating conversations about the ingredients of successful UN diplomacy in the Syrian case, including impartiality and inclusivity, from which we both profited and which helped inform our views in our various capacities. Also, [they] produced a valuable study of the diplomacy carried out by [the previous mediators] which helped inform our thinking under the subsequent UN mediator*” [S5]. With a national level political settlement apparently out of reach, the Special Envoy turned to sponsoring localized de-escalations of violence. The Centre was then invited by the Berghof Foundation on behalf of the Finnish Foreign Ministry to research similar de-escalation agreements elsewhere, with a view to supporting these new efforts in the Syrian context [S6]. CSS identified considerable variance in context between local communities, especially the particular balance of power between factions within them, suggesting the need for decentralized solutions. Research findings also highlighted the strong potential for the regime to concede to localized solutions and power-sharing based on their own manpower shortages.

(3) Emphasizing inclusivity within United Nations and World Bank reconstruction recommendations

CSS research findings emphasized ameliorating the consequences of the crisis via broadly inclusive humanitarian assistance and reconstruction efforts that avoided continuing the conflict by economic means [R4, R6]. From 2018-20, the Centre engaged extensively with both the World Bank and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for West Asia (ESCWA) to develop best practices and actionable recommendations for Syrian reconstruction. The resulting reports reflected the Centre’s advocacy of more inclusive reconstruction and concern with blanket sanctions.

CSS signed a memorandum of understanding with UN ESCWA to collaborate on two studies of the Syrian conflict: [Syria at War: Five Years On](#) (2016), which examined the damage to Syria’s economy and need for much increased humanitarian relief, and [Syria at War: Eight Years On](#) (2020), which identified the political obstacles to reconciliation and reconstruction. The reports directly incorporated CSS research findings: advising powerful external actors to use their leverage over conflict parties to nudge them toward more inclusive strategies of reconstruction. An ESCWA official attested that its partnership with CSS had been “*strategic and synergistic*”

and the joint work, widely disseminated, had had “a major impact on policy-makers and stakeholders in building awareness and consensus” [S7].

The World Bank similarly commissioned CSS to provide research on the geo-political context of Syrian reconstruction [R6], as part of its “Building for Peace in the Middle East” (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/mena/publication/building-for-peace-reconstruction-for-security-sustainable-peace-and-equity-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa>) initiative—which was disseminated to government policymakers in order to build consensus on a pathway forward [S8, pp. ix, 15]. The research findings showed how reconstruction had become a continuation of conflict by other means, as part of the proxy wars being waged on Syrian soil by foreign governments and recommending making reconstruction aid incremental and conditional on demonstrated inclusivity by the Syrian government [R6]. CSS researchers presented their findings at World Bank workshops in June and October 2018 and in a final 20,000-word report, published in March 2019 and formally launched on 15 July 2020 with a virtual event attended by more than 5000 people worldwide (with a condensed version published in *Global Policy* in 2020, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1758-5899.12779>). The project manager affirmed that the “excellent research of the centre...helped the Bank to better articulate its thinking on reconstruction, peace-building and transition toward sustainable peace in the Middle East... [and] directly fed into the major report and recommendations on reconstruction and its operational applications [S9].

(4) Interpreting the crisis for the “attentive public” through the media

Dr Omar Imady, as Centre Outreach Officer, was regularly involved in conveying CSS research findings in the public sphere. From November 2013-2020, he appeared regularly on live broadcasts that reached millions of viewers around the world (e.g. BBC Scotland, France24, Turkish TRT World, Arabic Euronews, and Australia’s ABC News). Videos of many of these broadcasts, 23 since 2018, were posted on the Centre’s website (<https://www.inspired-by-syria.com/media>) with individual downloads per video ranging from 1,000 to 15,000 views [S10]. A Blog by CSS staff and fellows also provided regular interpretation of developments in the conflict (<https://www.inspired-by-syria.com/blog>), with 6,671 people (viewers) visiting 16,849 times in the last year alone (between 2019 and 2020), a significant level of traffic given the extended length of conflict and general public focus on the pandemic. This commentary helped clarify the complex issues in the conflict for the attentive public.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of ten references)

[S1] Letter from the FCO Deputy Head of Research Analysts Section and in charge of Syria.

[S2] Record of Hinnebusch testimony to Commons Foreign Affairs Committee: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmselect/cmfa/457/457.pdf>

[S3] Letter of acknowledgment from Foreign Affairs Committee Chair.

[S4] Letter from UN Official in relation to diplomacy on Syria.

[S5] Letter from the Advisor to the UN Special Envoy.

[S6] Invitation from Berghof Foundation to speak on local de-escalation zones.

[S7] Letter from the Senior Economist, Gender Justice, Population and Inclusive Development Cluster, UN ECSWA.

[S8] World Bank report, “Building for Peace: Reconstruction for Security, Sustainable Peace and Equity in MENA.”

[S9] Letter from World Bank senior manager in charge of the reconstruction report, “Building for Peace.”

[S10] Centre for Syrian Studies archive media engagement recordings: <https://www.inspired-by-syria.com/media>