

The Leadership and Democracy Lab

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Leadership in the Syrian Conflict

This article has been produced by the efforts of the following members:

Rishita Apsani – *Team Leader on Syrian Leadership*

There has been widespread acknowledgement that organized violence in the twenty-first century is different from its twentieth century counterpart. Decisive high-intensity battles between states for geopolitical territory have been replaced with intrastate conflicts between substate actors and governments. Rebel groups in particular have become an important party to conflicts and, as such, a determining factor in a state's future democratic potential. While this dimension has been foregrounded by intrastate conflicts in West Africa and parts of Latin America, it is freshly being considered in the context of the Middle East. Indeed, in writing about the Syrian conflict, *The Economist* has characterized the recent three-week-long battle for Kobane, a Kurdish enclave along Syria's border with Turkey, as a "battle...between militias, not armies." Recognizing this, analysis must go beyond the dominant realist assumption that 'states are black boxes' and seek to understand 1) the organizational structure and leadership of rebel groups and 2) how these variables impact diplomacy, peace processes, and future regime characteristics.

Our research and writing seeks to explore these questions in the context of Syria and the related (and somewhat inseparable) conflict in Iraq. We hope to understand the foundations, ideologies, organizational structures, and key leaders of rebel groups in Syria, including the Free Syrian Army, the Al Nusra Front, and ISIS (or IS). The Assad regime will also be a key point of focus. In particular, analysis will be conducted on how the historical role of the Baathist party, the Assad family, and the state's military leadership are influencing developments in current day Syria.

We also hope to review literature on rebel groups in West Africa and Latin America to draw conclusions on how the organizational structure/leadership of rebel groups impacts democratic outcomes or future peace. Using a comparative lens, these trends can be applied to the Syrian case to make policy recommendations that will aid diplomatic and military action.