

MASTERS OF PEACE 19

Lama Ismail

**Re-Imagining Peace:
Analyzing Syria's Four Towns Agreement
through Elicitive Conflict Mapping**



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For Noura

Foreword by Noura Ghazi¹

I am writing this foreword on behalf of Lama and her book, in my capacity as a human rights lawyer of more than 16 years, specializing in cases of enforced disappearance and arbitrary detention. And also, as an activist in the Syrian uprisings.

In my opinion, the uprisings in Syria started after decades of attempts – since the time of Asaad the father, leading up to the current conflict. Uprisings have taken up different forms, starting from the national democratic movement of 1979, to what is referred to as the Kurdish uprising of 2004, the ‘Damascus Spring,’ and the Damascus-Beirut declaration. These culminated in the civil uprisings which began in March 2011.

The uprisings that began with the townspeople of Daraa paralleled the uprisings of the Arab Spring. Initially, those in Syria demanded for the release of political prisoners and for the uplift of the state of emergency, with the hope that this would transition Syria’s security state towards a state of law.

Due to the violence inflicted on non-violent demonstrators, and the interference of Islamic groups and external states (whose agendas benefit their own policies), the uprising became a non-international armed conflict, which quickly developed into an international armed conflict. The most prominent external states in the Syrian armed conflict include Iran, Russia, Turkey, the US, as well as the countries supporting opposition groups such as the Gulf states.

Eight years of conflict have produced all that is conceivable of human rights abuses, such as indiscriminate shelling on civilians, arbitrary arrests, executions, disappearances, besiegement, hunger, and internal displacement. In addition, there is overdependence of all conflict parties on their patrons, not to mention the Israeli violations on Syrian territory. All of these abuses led to an economic, social and perhaps intellectual and moral collapse in the structure of Syrian society. Moreover, internal displacement and migration has largely separated and affected families.

I still remember the moment I first met Lama at the airport in Beirut. I was first drawn towards her name, since she shares the same name as my only sister, and the name of the daughter I would have liked to have with my husband, who has left this world without a chance of bearing his children.

We were travelling to Bosnia and Herzegovina on the most emotional trip of my life. What I recognized during this trip, is her passion and empathy towards her work. Later on, I called this trip, the trip of our friendship, because I really feel that I am on a journey with her, searching for inner and outer peace. Our friendship grew quickly and Lama became not just a colleague, but a dear friend, and working on the issue of those who have gone missing in Syria was what brought us together. She was and still is very passionate about her work. She is a young Lebanese woman who is working on a sensitive and complex issue.

1 Foreword translated from Arabic by author.

Since I left Syria, Lama has become a source of safety and support away from my family and country. I found in her my new home, one that is filled with love, support, trust, and hope.

Everything is beautiful about Lama, but this book was a turning point in the way I perceive her. My reading of this book was smooth and deep, as it discusses some of the most complex political and legal issues, in a poetic literary style, making me dive deeper with each word, each idea, and each feeling. I was stunned with the sources she consulted and the analysis of the Syrian conflict, wherein Lama has explained different types of violence, and different types of peace. She has looked at these issues from different angles including philosophy, psychology, sociology and international law. All of this to understand peace.

Since I have read this book, it has become part of my daily conversation with family, friends and work colleagues. It deserves to be considered as an important reference in explaining and understanding the Syrian armed conflict.

Lama has put so much effort and feelings into this book. She has shown her ability to hold space for diverging and sometimes opposing views without judgement. Her description and analysis is highly transparent, and stays away from judgement. What is evident in the book is her emotion for a burning country and an abused population.

As a final note, I hope to walk alongside Lama in her noble work. I look up to her as an Arab woman and hope to learn from a woman who is 10 years younger than I.

Beirut, August 2019

Noura Ghazi is a Syrian human rights lawyer. She has assisted over 1,000 detainees and has supported their families in Syria. She founded NoPhotozone Organization, a civil society organization which provides legal assistance and empowerment to detainees and their families. She is the author of a poetry book “Waiting...” (2015) which is dedicated to her late husband Bassel Khartabil who she married in 2012. Ghazi has spoken about human rights at the United Nations and the European Union and her work has been covered by BBC, the Telegraph, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal and Al Jazeera among others. Amnesty International named Ghazi as one of the “8 kick-ass women standing up for our rights.” She is on the advisory board of MENA Rights, and co-founder of Families for Freedom.

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Many people have read the manuscript for this book and offered me tremendous feedback. I especially thank Josefina Echavarría Álvarez and Noura Ghazi for their feedback on the content. I also thank my parents, sisters, and brother for their immeasurable support during the writing of this book.

Preface

This book is part of the Master of Peace Series.

It is primarily about the armed conflict in Syria. And it is also very much about me; how I relate to myself, which ultimately extends into how I relate to the Syrian conflict. It took me a while to put this work together and it offered me a chance to deeply reflect on the ways in which I understand peace and conflict.

I had many concerns in the writing of this book, how it could be perceived and what it could mean to different people. In the end, this process has helped me see the relational aspects emanating within, and from the silhouettes of conflict. It also made me confront my own authorship. Not Syrian and yet drawn to write about Syria, demonstrating the mesh of my understanding and potential misunderstanding of the complex realities of the Syrian armed conflict.

Ultimately, I wanted this book to address a multiplicity of authors since it tackles topics relating to international relations, sociology, philosophy, and of course, peace and conflict studies. I also sought to offer an understanding of Syria beyond the prevalent discourses of justice and security. This book does not aim to uncover a truth concerning the armed conflict in Syria or concerning the “Four Towns Agreement.” The aim is to simply put different viewpoints and discourses into conversation with each other, and listen. Really listen. What kind of perspectives emerge? The aim is also not to prescribe solutions. Instead, I aim to understand. What I hope to show is the human element entrenched in conflicts; found even in the disquieting feelings of otherness and the shrinking belonging of our world.

On a final note, I am grateful for you, my reader, for allowing me to share these ideas with you. These ideas are mixed with the stories of those who have enriched my life during the writing of this book.

Table of Contents

List of Abbreviations	16
List of Figures	18
1. Introduction.....	19
1.1. Author’s Perspective and Research Interest	22
1.2. Research Interest	25
1.3. The “Four Towns Agreement”	29
1.4. Elicitive Conflict Mapping.....	31
1.4.1. Themes of Conflict	31
1.4.2. Layers of Conflict.....	34
1.4.3. Levels of Conflict.....	36
1.5. State of the Art.....	37
2. Conceptual Framework	43
2.1. Violence and Peace.....	44
2.2. Modernity.....	45
2.3. Post-modernity.....	47
2.4. Energetic Peace.....	48
2.5. Moral Peace	49
2.6. Modern Peace.....	49
2.7. Postmodern Peace(s).....	50
2.8. Transrational Peaces	51
2.8.1. From Greek Tragedy to Modernity	51
2.8.2. Quantum Physics.....	53
2.8.3. The Movement Structures of Conflict	54
2.8.4. Healing and Reconciliation.....	58
3. Background Information.....	60
3.1. Prior to the Baath Rule.....	61
3.2. The Rise of the Baath Party (1963)	62
3.3. The Rule of Bashar al-Asaad (2000-Present).....	65

3.4.	The Syrian Conflict (2011-Present)	67
3.4.1.	Political Opposition	68
3.4.2.	Civil Society Initiatives	70
3.4.3.	Armed Opposition Groups	70
3.4.4.	Regional and International Intervention	72
3.4.5.	Negotiation Efforts.....	74
3.5.	Episode at a Glance	75
3.5.1.	What.....	77
3.5.2.	Who	78
3.5.3.	Where	79
3.5.4.	How and When.....	82
3.5.5.	Why.....	84
4.	The Themes: Securitization of the “Four Towns Agreement”	86
4.1.	Securitization of the Agreement	87
4.1.1.	Beyond the Episode’s Security.....	91
4.1.2.	The Syrian Security Apparatus	92
4.2.	Moral Reconciliation	96
4.2.1.	Beyond the Episode: <i>Salaam</i>	99
4.3.	Truth Discourses	99
5.	The Layers: Re-imagining Home and Land.....	103
5.1.	The Mental-Societal Layer: The Reign of the Mind	104
5.1.1.	Land Trafficking.....	107
5.2.	The Socioemotional-Communal Layer: Internal Homelessness	109
5.3.	The Sexual-Familial Layer: Family Separation.....	113
5.3.1.	Beyond the Episode: Disappearances in Syria	115
5.4.	The Spiritual-Political Layer: Reconnections	118
5.4.1.	The Pain of the Laws.....	119
5.5.	Beyond the Episode	123

6.	The Levels: The Broken Web of Relationships	126
6.1.	Top-Leadership Level.....	128
6.2.	Middle-Range Leadership Level.....	136
6.3.	Grassroots Leadership Level	141
6.4.	The Web of Relationships	144
7.	Conclusion	150
8.	References.....	156
8.1.	Image References.....	169
9.	Author's bio.....	170

List of Abbreviations

CIA Central Intelligence Agency
CSSR Civil Society Support Room

ECM Elicitive Conflict Mapping
ECT Elicitive Conflict Transformation
EU European Union

FFF Families for Freedom
FIDH International Federation for Human Rights
FSA Free Syrian Army

GoS Government of Syria

HNO Humanitarian Needs Overview
HTR Hard-to-Reach
HTS Hayat Tahrir al-Sham

ICRC International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP Internally Displaced Person
INGOs International Non-Governmental Organizations
IR International Relations
IRGC Islamic Revolutionary Group Corps
IS Islamic State

JN Jabhat al-Nusra

MSF Médecins Sans Frontières

NSAG Non-State Armed Group

OPCW Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons
OSE-S Office of the Special Envoy for Syria

PYD Democratic Union Party

SAMS Syrian American Medical Society
SARC Syrian Arab Red Crescent
SCLSR Syrian Center for Legal Studies and Research

SCM Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression
SDF Syrian Democratic Forces
SHARP Syrian Humanitarian Assistance Plan
SNC Syrian National Council
SRRP Syria Regional Response Plan
SSRP Syria Strategic Response Plan

UAE United Arab Emirates
UAR United Arab Republic
UFSS Union of Free Syrian Students
UIBK University of Innsbruck
UN United Nations
UNHCR United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNHRC United Nations Human Rights Council
UNOCHA United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNRWA United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees
US United States
UK United Kingdom

VDC Violations Documentation Center

WASH Water, Sanitation and Health
WoS Whole of Syria

YBB Yelda, Babbila and Beit Sahm
YPG People's Protection Unit

List of Figures

Figure 1: Bystander (June Lee 2015).....	23
Figure 2: Concentration of hard-to-reach and besieged areas in Syria (UNOCHA 2017a, 13).....	28
Figure 3: Life Cycle of Conflict (Lederach and Lederach 2010, 47)	56
Figure 4: Evacuations from the four towns (UNOCHA 2017b, 1).....	79
Figure 5: Map showing land held by Syrian regime and opposition groups (Osseiran and Solomon 2017)	88
Figure 6: Four de-escalation zones in Syria (Al Jazeera 2018a)	124
Figure 7: Actor’s Pyramid (Dietrich 2014)	128
Figure 8: Representation of Actor’s Pyramid for the “Four Towns Agreement” (Created by author)	137

1. Introduction

I hate the Middle East,
I really do.
I hate its listless trees,
these meandering alleys of garbage now bacteria in our throats,
these poisoned mute fish in a Mediterranean dazed,
rooms of babies born into sins or sects,
staggered into teenagers without eyes,
girls birthing tumors where once were orgasms,
men without spinal cords, bent into
old people calling out to the final croak,
and me, still here, with my fat and my rot and my words and my teeth always stinging.

----- Hind Shoufani, *Seven Songs for Syria* (2017)

I met the Palestinian/American filmmaker and writer Hind Shoufani² during a poetry night at an art exhibition in Beirut in 2017. She recited her poem beautifully and I knew at that moment that I wanted to include her work in my book. It is made up of seven parts, or as Hind calls them, songs, which I have spread across the chapters. Hind said that this poem is still a draft, a work in progress. But I think most writings, like this book, that explore aspects of people's lives are drafts. They are never finished work.

This book is about the many fissures and cracks of Syria. It is caught within a kaleidoscopic spectrum of emotions and realities that seem to make and unmake Syria the ragged, tormenting reality it is. But Syria adjusts in new realities. And through Syria, I continue to find and form my heart collectively. In this book, I try to connect different moments and thoughts with my readers. These moments are now shared by many people. This book is about a conflict that is full of sacred moments, of torment and salvation, signs that you can pin meaning onto or disregard. Through this book, I share snippets of the complex chorus of truths in Syria, which creates further complexity in the regional reality.

Yet, on the outset, when it came down to writing, the words were exhausted; things felt dry. Vague textures and specific moods emerged, and I could not tell how it could sound or how it could feel. At the beginning of this endeavor, I try to map my relation to the Syrian conflict, only to rediscover myself at the heart of it. In the second chapter, I explore the conceptual framework upon which I build my research, which offers an explanation of different forms of violence, and its circular nature in conflicts. Next, I provide a background on Syria's history, leading up to the Syrian armed conflict in 2011, followed by an in-depth description of the conflict episode, the "Four Towns Agreement," which entailed the transfer of populations from four towns in Syria in April 2017. After that, I analyze the conflict episode along the themes of harmony, justice, security and truth. Then, I explore the imbalances within the layers, traveling from the very personal aspects of family origin, to wider concepts such as the community and society. Finally, I describe the conflict parties involved in the conflict episode along with the actor's pyramid. The analysis reveals the importance of sustaining a platform for interaction between non-like-minded parties to the conflict and the importance of recovering the web of relationships hampered through conflict.

The method used for analysis is Elicitive Conflict Mapping (ECM). This tool allows me to explore a conflict episode from the Syrian conflict *not* as a conflict party. I try to map a conflict episode that is an excerpt from the Syrian war and treat it with respect, as it encompasses the lived experiences of many people who were involved: politicians, armed groups, militants, and the residents of the four towns. Surely, the challenge in the art of pursuing such a project is to "suspend judgment" as Lederach puts it (2005, 37). However, the purpose is not to flirt with positivism. The purpose is to research the

2 Hind Shoufani holds a Master in Fine Arts in film writing/directing from New York University and was also a writer in residence at the International Writers Program in 2011. Hind has been directing, producing and editing films for 20 years. She grew up in Damascus in her formative years, and still feels politically, spiritually and communally attached to her memories there.

conflict episode in a way that is similar to active listening, just way more challenging, as the things that have happened generate great pain that in many ways is unspeakable (Lederach 2005).

Understanding conflicts using an elicitive approach implies recognizing that conflicts are part of daily life. As such, this analysis does not provide a solution to violence since it does not believe in the guarantee of its non-existence. Lederach and Lederach (2010) adopt a circular understanding of social conflict and seek to change the political language that implies a linear development of violence. As such, Lederach and Lederach suggest that in the process towards nonviolent relationships, violent episodes are likely to occur (2010). What is important to note is that Lederach does not see the recurrence of violence as testimony to the failure of an agreement. Lederach understands that the nature of violence is cyclical making it likely to re-emerge. As such, one basic assumption of Elicitive Conflict Transformation (ECT) is the openness of all systems. Peace would be dead and tyrannous if it were a never-changing end-state. The “promise of static, closed, perfection is as sure to produce tyranny as its predecessor” (Friedman 2012, 7). Crutchfield (2011) argues that an ordered universe would be dead. Instead, chaos is needed for life’s dynamic mechanism, wherein useful randomness unfolds in nature.

In line with the elicitive approach, conflicts are seen as a lens to peek into the sediment issues at play (Lederach 2003). Conflict transformation becomes a means to address the deeper and blocked energy at the epicenter, which is generating the conflictive episode. In the case of the conflict episode chosen, the “Four Towns Agreement,” this can facilitate a platform to draft new agreements with the purpose of including the views of non-like-minded people and a focus on the recovery of the web of relationships. Nevertheless, if new agreements do not seek transformation at the epicenter and only address the episodic expressions of conflict, new agreements are likely to emerge that only create more frustrated and unmet needs within the groups affected. Especially in a highly volatile environment such as Syria, agreements concerning the grassroots levels need to be drafted with the epicenter at the core of any sustainable and lasting agreement.

“An episode of conflict is the visible expression of conflict rising within the relationship or system, usually within a distinct time frame. It generates attention and energy around a particular set of issues that need response. The epicenter of conflict is the web of relational patterns, often providing a history of lived episodes, from which new episodes and issues emerge. If the episode releases conflict energy in the relationship, the epicenter is where the energy is produced”. (Lederach, 2003, 31)

ECT provides the basic conceptual framework for my analysis. Authors such as Lederach and Dietrich situate their work within a branch of peace and conflict research called Transrational Peace Philosophy, which, like any school, has its own ontological assumptions. They acknowledge the potential of non-rational categories such as spirituality and intuition in conflict transformation. The approach is also elicitive and

non-prescriptive, making ECT the applied work of transrational peaces. Such theory will provide me with the foundation for analyzing the conflict episode of the “Four Towns Agreement” within the Syrian conflict.

Combining experiential insights and Transrational Peace Philosophy, the ECM model emerged as a tool that investigates the plurality of actions at play within a conflict episode (Dietrich 2013). The model aids in the understanding of conflict episodes and parties, and most importantly for my research, it assists in visualizing the dynamic nature of the “Four Towns Agreement” through different themes, layers, and levels.

1.1. Author’s Perspective and Research Interest

Since both peace and conflict are relational, there is always a perceiving subject that understands and contextualizes the experience of peace and the experience of conflict (Dietrich 2012). At the heart of the ECM model is the researcher, and it is key that the researcher is self-aware throughout the entire process. The researcher continuously changes during the writing process, and as Hamed puts it, “the researcher is searching” (2016, 5). As such, in this section I address my personal background in relation to the conflict in Syria; this is important for contextualizing my research endeavor.

I was born and raised in Beirut, Lebanon, a small country along the Mediterranean Sea. Much of my research is driven by the geographical location of my country and the implications that this has had on me. Due to the political tension in Lebanon and the armed conflicts with Israel, I grew up listening to the stories of war and violence committed against Lebanon. Israel was the perceived enemy, and the need for protection from this enemy grew in my own heart and mind.

With the outbreak of the armed conflict in Syria, the Lebanese-Syrian border became threatened by the presence of the Islamic State (IS). At that point, I started to perceive a new enemy: the IS. This was not only my perception but the general perception in Lebanon and as a result, the Lebanese and Syrian armies ran many military operations to protect the Lebanese borders from IS. These security measures made me feel safer. They made me feel protected from my perceived ‘enemy.’ Many men died during these military operations, from both the Lebanese and the Syrian army. The longer the war in Syria, the more men died securing the border, and the more I felt that I owed Syrians something. There were people risking their lives so that I could lead the life I had in Beirut, which drove me to assume that there was a shared responsibility of the world towards Syria.

I was so fixated on this concept of a shared responsibility towards Syria, that in every attempt to address politics during my graduate studies at the University of Innsbruck (UIBK), I took this particular image as a starting point. Always, my overriding purpose for including this was to create a dialogue that conceptually identifies and explores concepts of active and passive bystandership; in particular, the

ways in which this concept had endowed me with the realization of the crucial role and responsibility that falls upon me as an observer—how I observe and, more importantly, react to suffering.



Figure 1: Bystander (June Lee 2015)

In this art installation, artist June Lee (2015) accentuates the Bystander Effect³. In comparison with the bystander's body size, the outcast is large, signifying the breadth and severity of the outcasts' suffering and the indifference of the bystander. Furthermore, the modeling of the audience in this artwork rests on an ethical imperative: in different ways, it asks what behavior we will tolerate in the name of art – and, by extension, what we will tolerate in what other names. The unforgiving implication of such work is that there are no innocent bystanders.

“The deeper we venture into the larger context of global crisis, the more directly we are affected personally. Paradoxically, the epicenter of a persona's conflictive episode is as wide as it is deep, marking both innermost and outermost spheres. Therefore, those who maintain balance will be able to balance the world”. (Dietrich 2013, 227)

3 The term Bystander Effect was coined in 1968 after an American woman, Kitty Genovese, was murdered in front of 38 bystanders who witnessed the crime but did nothing to help. Darley and Latane (1968) established that in group situations, people are less likely to offer help since they wait for cues from others to intervene, and reassure themselves that someone else will help.

When I started working with Syrian refugees in Lebanon, I read articles from authors who were in support of the regime and from authors who were bluntly against it. Some were convincing and others were resounding the usual mantra of the deeply-modern version of the Syrian war. And there was little room for other narratives about the conflict. Political narratives rendered the Syrian people invisible, their struggle an afterthought, their massacre a non-event.

Even with that conviction, I felt that there was something missing from everything I read, something more human and relatable. Policy talk was geared towards stopping the violence using ‘sensible’ solutions, at the expense of diminishing all prospects of closure for Syrians. Ultimately, crimes will be “avenged, forgotten or redeemed on their terms, not on the whims of officials sitting in Washington, Moscow or Tehran” (Harling 2016). Perhaps the problem lies in the ways the political discourses around Syria are posited as inexhaustible, making the few that are well known overshadow the many that are equally worth knowing. As such, the political narratives surrounding Syria can be mapped in innumerable ways, with each scheme casting before the viewer a particular point of view.

The world of politics asserts and contradicts itself, ranging at extremes from a form of communicative rationality to episodic eruptions of resistance in a fragmented world. What seems to hold true for me is the ways in which politics weaves itself in-and-out of my relationship to the world. And within this, the question that poses itself is, how do I feel myself in politics?

The answer is that in politics, the world and the self begin to intertwine. What may be understood is that political aspects cover a holistic and comprehensive relationship of the human to the world. Hannah Arendt described the poetic impulse to engage in politics as “the impulse to enter, with other humans, through language, into the order and disorder of the world” (as quoted in Calhoun and McGowan 1997, 28). What may be experienced is the potency to be tendered within political life. What may be done is simply to embrace the world with compassion, “recognizing its afflictions as extensions or mirror images of the conflicts or delusions we nurture in ourselves” (Joanna Macy, as quoted by Woodhouse and Lederach 2016, 183). In that, politics is transformed from a kind of tragic theatre into a concept that appreciates the purposeful nature of the human struggle.

Through my experiences at Innsbruck, and the recognition of a human element in conflict, something within me changed. I am unable to really identify what it was, but it felt like the untying of a giant knot within. It provided Syria with a depth and profundity that made politics a quest for truth; truth in relation to something quite precise: what kind of world does one see from the point of view of two rather than one? The kind of world that I experienced after this was more hopeful; it was driven more by a plane of possibility of connectedness rather than a plane of hate. It even tendered the anger that the Syrian conflict had conjured in me. Buried under the rubble of politics and rude realism, I discovered a different part of myself; neither a child silver-lining politics, nor a servant of the hours that is all-too weary and cynical.

I chose the “Four Towns Agreement” as the conflict episode for this book because of my interest to write about Syrians who are still in Syria. I find that there is much research about the refugee issue because once Syrians leave Syria, the research becomes mostly about the countries hosting them. For this reason, I chose to write about an event in the Syrian armed conflict which encompasses the complexity of violence, security, and belonging within Syria.

1.2. Research Interest

The uprisings that began in 2011 developed into an armed conflict between the government in Damascus and a hodge-podge of armed groups such as Syrian armed forces, so-called moderates, Islamists and Kurds (Svoboda and Pantuliano 2015). The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) declared in July 2012 that the conflict in Syria has reached the level of civil war (National Public Radio 2012). According to interviews conducted by the Humanitarian Policy Group with politicians, there are 10-12 major groups, and a number of proliferating sub-groups (Svoboda and Pantuliano 2015). According to Boothroyd (2016), 150,000 groups are active across Syria comprised of armed men and defectors.

Cunningham (2016) explains that what makes the situation even more complex is the external support that is flooding Syria with troops, weapons and financial assistance, contributing greatly to fragmentation within the opposition. For example, the emergence of Islamist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) and IS has made the situation even murkier, as well as triggering airstrikes by the United States (US) and Russia (Cunningham 2016).

Another very divisive form of external support is armed actors from abroad, such as Iranian-trained fighters loyal to the government but separate from the Syrian army, Hezbollah and the National Defense Force (Svoboda and Pantuliano 2015). Cunningham (2016) argues that Syria’s fragmented actors and multi-party conflict has made it very difficult to identify who is responsible for which attack, making the environment within which humanitarian organizations operate ever more challenging.

The top three donors for the Syrian response are the US, the United Kingdom (UK) and Kuwait, to the two main funding streams: the Syrian Humanitarian Assistance Plan (SHARP), which covers Syria, and the Syria Regional Response Plan (SRRP), for Syrian refugees in the region (Slim and Trombetta 2014). International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), United Nations (UN) agencies such as the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) were present in Syria prior to the uprisings in 2011, primarily in their assistance to Palestinian and Iraqi refugees (Slim and Trombetta 2014). However, the international humanitarian system began its earnest engagement only in 2012, after the Syrian government granted the UN access to populations in need. As a result, provision of humanitarian assistance from Damascus

was granted to eight UN agencies and nine INGOs; and the number of accredited INGOs has gone up to 14 since then (Slim and Trombetta 2014).

In September 2014, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) in Syria, Turkey and Jordan, drafted their operations into a single response plan, the Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) and the 2015 Syria Strategic Response Plan (SSRP). As a result, the efforts brought together launched the Whole of Syria (WoS) approach in February 2015. The partnered efforts have achieved some notable successes, especially with regards to access of rebel-held areas, after the UN Security Council resolution 2165 that grants the UN access to enter Syria from the Turkish and Jordanian borders (UNOCHA 2016).

Despite these improvements in access, according to a 2015 report by the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS), since the beginning of the conflict in 2011, several sieges have intentionally denied people access to food, water and medicine, all of which have had devastating impacts such as starvation, dehydration and the spread of diseases. As such, persons of concern to humanitarian organizations in Syria continue to suffer from the scope and brutality of the violence, which can often be indiscriminate and sometimes deliberately targets populations of concern. In Syria, many tactics of war have led to widespread displacements due to the targeting of civilians, and the use of sieges has placed severe restrictions on their freedom of movement (SAMS 2015). As such, humanitarian actors face many obstacles in accounting for the protection needs of populations in enclaves and besieged areas (*ibid*).

Besieged areas in Syria include locations in Damascus, Rural Damascus, Homs, Deir Ezzor, and Idleb governorates (The Syria Institute 2017). However, data emerging from different active organizations concerning besieged areas are conflicting. According to UNOCHA (2016) report that as of December 2015, the total number of people trapped under siege amounted to 393,700, more than half of whom were besieged by IS in Deir Ezzor. In contrast, The Syria Institute (2016) reports that only the two towns of Foah and Kafreya in the Idleb province are besieged by non-state armed opposition groups (NSAGs); and that both IS and the Government of Syria (GoS) hold a siege around a group of neighborhoods in Deir Ezzor city (2016).

The outcome of the emerging different sets of data from different organizations is testimony to the fixation on ‘who is more of a perpetrator’ in Syria at the expense of dismissing prospects of closure for people. This has led to a donor-driven programming that funds ‘stabilization’ as the war worsens (Harling, Simon and Berthier 2017). Donors are supporting financially what they would like to see, short-term relief, often contributing to a “soft war” where humanitarian assistance comes to have political value (Braumen 2016, 7). With low prospects that the P5 + 1⁴ will agree on President Bashar Al Assad (Aaronson 2014), Syria turned into a platform for polarized humanitarian assistance in a context of East-West rivalry (Braumen 2016). Under these

4 The P5+1 are China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States; plus Germany (Aaronson 2014).

circumstances, Harling (2016) fears that spaces where Syrians can voice out their stories have been shrinking relentlessly, as most aid programs have become affiliated with either the regime or the opposition.

“The core [...] of the challenge [is] of linking a top-heavy international system with complex, fluid dynamics at the grassroots—a space where Syrians display the kind of agency that must be understood and harnessed if aid & development programs are to gain relevance and traction with the concerned”. (Harling, Simon and Berthier 2017)

UNOCHA Definitions

“Hard to Reach areas: is an area that is not regularly accessible to humanitarian actors for the purposes of sustained humanitarian programming as a result of denial of access, including the need to negotiate access on an ad hoc basis, or due to restrictions such as active conflict, multiple security checkpoints, or failure of the authorities to provide timely approval”. (UNOCHA 2016)

“Besieged locations: for the purposes of the Syrian conflict, a ‘besieged area’ is an area surrounded by armed actors with the sustained effect that humanitarian assistance cannot regularly enter, and civilians, the sick and wounded cannot regularly exit the area.” (UNOCHA 2016)

Moreover, in 2016, the UN reported monthly breaches in the 2139 UN resolution, which was adopted in 2014, wherein parties to the conflict exhibited repeated non-compliance to the resolution’s demand on the protection of civilians and ensuring humanitarian access, even in besieged areas (UN 2016a). The disregard for international humanitarian and human rights law have given way to the humanitarian catastrophes of the four besieged towns of Madaya, Az-Zabadani in Rural Damascus, and Kafreya and Foah in the Idlib governorate.

The situation in these towns was dire, as the sieges made movement of people and commodities very difficult. Cross-border convoys reached all these four towns in October 2015, and critical medical cases were evacuated via Lebanon and Turkey in December 2015 (UNOCHA 2016). Despite this, in January 2016 more than 40 people died of starvation in Madaya over several months of the GoS blocking humanitarian aid to that town (UN 2016a).

Recent data emerging from UNOCHA estimates that as of September 2017, hard-to-reach (HTR) areas across the country are homes to three million people, 420,000 of whom live in besieged areas (2017). The figures have improved compared to the previous months, with a noticeable decrease by 33%, specifically from 4.5 million to 3

million (UNOCHA 2017a). The improvements can largely be attributed to changes in access.

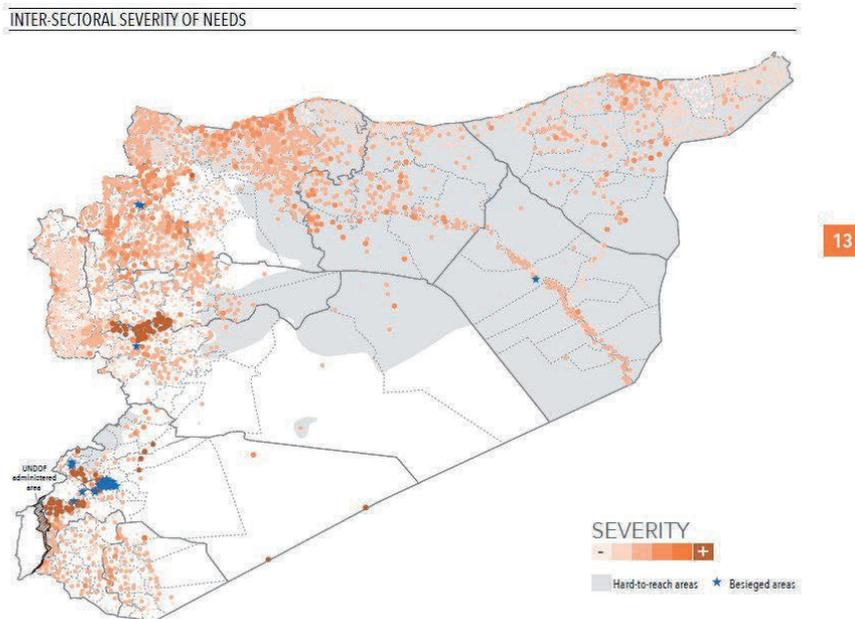


Figure 2: Concentration of hard-to-reach and besieged areas in Syria (UNOCHA 2017a, 13)

As mentioned previously, the Syrian conflict presents humanitarian actors with many obstacles in accounting for the protection needs of populations in enclaves and besieged areas. Humanitarian evacuations could be a response to these challenges, however only as a last resort and remain a temporary measure.

“Humanitarian evacuations refer to large-scale relocations of civilians, who face an immediate threat to life in a conflict setting, to locations within their own country where they can be more effectively protected”. (UNHCR 2016, 5)

In March 2017, an agreement was reached between the different conflict parties in Syria to evacuate the four towns of Madaya, Az-Zabadani, Foah and Kafreya: the “Four Towns Agreement” (UNOCHA 2017b). However, the evacuation was poorly organized and implemented, which created separate protection risks and even loss of life. Although the evacuation assisted those stranded in enclaves for long periods, there are undertones that hint how this humanitarian evacuation became manipulated for political and military ends (Amnesty International 2017, United Nations Human Rights Council 2017, International Federation for Human Rights 2019).

1.3. The “Four Towns Agreement”

In September 2015, negotiations between conflict parties in Syria brokered around an agreement to evacuate four towns, treat the wounded, and deliver humanitarian assistance to the people. This was the original “Four Towns Agreement” whereby some of the terms were carried out, such as the provision of humanitarian access and the treatment of the wounded, but the implementation did not fully occur (UNOCHA 2017b).

Another “Four Towns Agreement” was reached in late March 2017, whereby parties to the conflict stipulated the evacuation of four Syrian towns and the facilitation of access to humanitarian assistance. The evacuations were to be carried out from the four towns of Madaya, Az-Zabadani, Kafreya, and Foah. Madaya and Az-Zabadani, whose residents are mostly Sunnis, were under the control of the NSAGs in Rural Damascus and were besieged by government forces (UNOCHA 2017b). Evacuees from these towns were to be transferred to the NSAG-held Idleb governorate. Kafreya and Foah, whose residents were mostly of the Shiite domination of Islam, were under the control of the GoS and were besieged by the armed opposition in the Idleb governorate. Evacuees from these towns were to cross to the GoS-held Aleppo city.

The first phase of the agreement started on April 12, when the exchange of prisoners and dead bodies started between the parties. According to the UNOCHA report (2017b), government forces in Foah released sixteen prisoners and eight bodies, and NSAGs in the Idleb governorate released nineteen prisoners and one body. It also included the release of members of the Qatar royal family who had been kidnapped in Iraq. Their release became heavily tied to the negotiations and subsequent implementation of the “Four Towns Agreement” (The New York Times 2018).

On April 15, the second phase of the agreement was carried out where an estimated 2,350 people were evacuated from the town of Madaya, and 5,000 people were transferred from the towns of Kafreya and Foah. As part of the evacuation of the latter population, the evacuees were to be brought to a transit area on the western outskirts of Aleppo called al-Rashideen. While awaiting for their transfer to their final destination in Aleppo, a car bomb exploded killing 125 people. Since the explosion was in proximity to the evacuation buses, the majority of the victims were evacuees from Kafreya and Foah. In response to the explosion, cross-border partners exerted tremendous efforts and hospitals in Idleb, Aleppo, and Turkey provided patients with medical treatment.

A few hours after the attack, the process resumed and evacuees from Madaya reached Idleb city, and those from Kafreya and Foah arrived in Aleppo. On April 19, the last phase of evacuations took place. Five hundred and fifty people were evacuated from several towns in the Damascus governorate, Az-Zabadani (158 people), Madaya (100 people), Bloudan mountain (150 people) and Sarghaya (100 people). Three thousand people departed from Kafreya and Foah towards Aleppo. Disputes between the warring factions caused hours of delays, leaving the evacuees waiting on evacuation buses while disputes were resolved. Nevertheless, the “Four Towns Agreement” was

completed and resulted in the relocation of populations from Madaya, Az-Zabadani, Kafreya and Foah.

The evacuation agreement points to the need for creating and sustaining a platform for negotiations between the different conflict parties in Syria. Although the implementation process was a long and arduous task, conversations and discussions towards processes of peace and reconciliation are an important step. In his book *The Moral Imagination*, John Paul Lederach suggests that it is important to transform temporary peace negotiations into

“a context-based, permanent, and dynamic platform capable of non-violently generating solutions to ongoing episodes of conflict, which they will experience in the ebb and flow of their social, political, and economic lives”. (2005, 23)

In this, Lederach points to the ways in which visible expressions of conflict grow within a particular system, yet the ‘epicenter’ is the seat from which the conflictive energy is produced. The conflictive energy is tied up in the ebbs and flows of the relational patterns of the system (2005). Hence, Lederach (2005) urges us to consider that conflict transformation can only be successful if accomplished at the level of the epicenter. Addressing the visible manifestation of the conflict, which he terms as the ‘episode,’ is a means towards management and resolution, but does not work towards transformation. The episode could be temporarily resolved, without attending to the deeper layers, but this would make way for new episodes to reappear and emerge. Employing such an approach in conflict transformation is ‘elicitive’ since the method and direction of transformation is determined based on the relational energy of the conflict parties. ECT thus, “draws out, highlights, and catalyzes existing or communally held knowledge related to transforming conflicts between individuals, groups, and communities, while prescriptive approaches prefer prefabricated models” (UIBK 2017g).

The purpose of my research is to address the epicenter of the conflict episode in order to unearth deeper dynamics of the conflict by inquiring in an elicitive way into the agreement and its implementation. I see the details of the agreement as visible expressions of the conflict episode, revealing a deeper web of relationality that created energy and violence around its implementation.

My research question is: What does the episode of the “Four Towns Agreement” reveal about deeper themes, layers and levels at the epicenter of the Syrian conflict?

Therefore, I seek to offer institutional introspection from a Transrational Peace Philosophy lens to key protection and operational considerations, and minimum standards for in-country humanitarian evacuations in Syria. I accomplish this by examining the “Four Towns Agreement” in depth through the themes, layers, and levels that are often overlooked in modern political narratives, using the elicitive conflict analysis tool, ECM. It does so by synthesizing and building on pre-existing guidance as well as drawing from the lessons learned and tools developed by UNHCR and its partners from experience in contemporary conflicts.

1.4. Elicitive Conflict Mapping

At the heart of the ECM model is the elicitive conflict worker, who is connected to different ECM branches: principles, themes, layers and levels. The ‘principles’ pertain to correspondence, resonance, and homeostasis, all of which aid me, the conflict researcher, in orientation within conflict interventions. Correspondence establishes a non-linear relation between the inner and outer aspects of human beings within their encounters and conflicts (Echavarría Álvarez 2014a). Looking at the “Four Towns Agreement” through ECM, security becomes a relational issue and therefore, a systemic product. Inner security of those evacuated is reflected in the way they perceive the world. The second ECM principle is resonance, which describes the ability to be aware of both the physical manifestation of the conflict and the sediments lying beneath the surface; that is, to describe the correlation between the inner and outer aspects of human beings. It requires the ability to be aware of resonances and dissonances in order to be an authentic receiver and transmitter of conflict information. Within this model, dissonance between the inner and outer became unbearable, making physical violence possible, signified by the shooting and explosion during the implementation phase of the agreement (ibid).

Dietrich (2018) argues that within a complex and dynamic system, third party interventions can bring in either harmonizing or disturbing effects. Social systems evolve more internally differentiated within a more complex system. Within the dynamics of such an open system, homeostasis is the system’s strive towards dynamic equilibrium. In the interactions between intra-personal and inter-personal tensions and conflict, homeostasis is the renewal of balance and equilibrium leading to peace. The question that poses itself for this model pivots around the agreement’s ability to restore balance for the people involved. How did they react to their evacuation? Was the evacuation voluntary, or was it forced? The ECM model will allow me to address such questions related to the “Four Towns Agreement.”

1.4.1. Themes of Conflict

The ‘themes’ tackle the different thematic narratives of peace (energetic, moral, modern, postmodern and transrational) as played out within the conflict episode. Each of these variations of peace understandings generate themes of harmony, justice, security and truth found in the conflict episode in varying degrees. Dietrich calls them the “five peace family” (2013). This type of mapping reveals the dominant theme of the storyline for a clearer understanding of the conflicting episode, the “Four Towns Agreement” within Syria.

The five families of peace begin with the Energetic Peaces. The energetic peaces build on a holistic understanding of the interrelations between nature, society and the divinities. It represents itself in the manifestation of the All-Oneness of all being, where

the individual is always a part of a greater relationality. Examples of energetic peaces include notions of fertility and harmony, exemplified in the growth of crops, the reproduction of animals, and the health of humans (UIBK 2017a). Within such energetic interpretations, peace comes out of harmony, manifested in the balance between interrelations. In the case of disharmony, the reaction would be the destruction of oneself or the other (ibid). For the adaptation of this model, it may be perceived that the conflict destroyed the energetic connection with the land that once was fertile. This disharmony manifested itself in the experience of extreme hunger of people under siege.

The shift from energetic towards moral understandings of peace starts with the introduction of a higher and divine existence separated from the human worldly existence (UIBK 2017c). This assumption brings with it the dichotomies in morality of good and evil, right and wrong, true and false. This peace family builds on the notion of peace out of justice; driven heavily by the notion that justice will bring the good, the right and the truth. In seeking peace through justice, a linear perception of time unfolds where there is a constant projection into a better future. The better future can only be achieved once justice is restored. But what this often entails is revenge and “demands for food, housing, clothing, medical care, as well as access to sources of income, farmland, water, trade routes, resources, information” (UIBK 2017e). This is found within monotheistic religions, where a male, creator God provides the values of conduct, and obedience to these values brings peace. Given this hierarchy, the distinction between an ‘us’ and a ‘them’ becomes omnipresent.

Richard Rorty (1998) in “Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality” examines the role of sentiments in grounding our categorization of people. That is, Rorty (1998) explores the ways in which historical conflicts exacerbated the intensity of ethnic grudges; the outcome being the emergence of a sense of identity that feels conflicted with the ‘other,’ the latter being a person or population who does not belong to the social group. This sense of ‘other’ divides people and dehumanizes them, rendering labels such as “pseudo-humans” and “borderline cases” possible (Rorty 1998, 167-168). This peace family is significant for my analysis since moral understandings of peace assert reconciliation as the desired outcome of the agreement. Moral notions of peace also emerge by lending the hunger experienced by the people under siege, moral connotations.

Modern peaces is the next peace family. It begins with the creation of the nation-state, which substituted religion’s moral system and introduced a mechanical understanding of the world. Rationality became the foundation, where knowing the world was only possible through the senses. With this, the universe was perceived as a vast machine, following the laws of nature, cause, and effect. As such, the universe is knowable, predictable, and can be repaired, managed, and perfected (UIBK 2017b). Regarding human beings, an atomistic understanding emerged, where there was an assumption of inherently individual units characterized by their individual responsibilities, autonomies and human rights (Mobus and Kalton 2015).

Within this family, peace emerges out of security. Peace becomes a final end-state of human evolution, enlightenment and civilization. This type of peace is a material one that can be measured and accumulated (UIBK 2017b). For the Syrian model I have chosen, this peace family will be very important since it carries the idea of a nation-state. Wimmer and Feinstein define the nation-state as “an independent state with a written constitution, ruled in the name of a nation of equal citizens” (2010, 764). Security is the nation state’s promise against attacks from foreign armies or internal crimes (UIBK 2017e). This promise is likely to construct aggressors and can turn into phobic security, where this fear creates an ‘other’ that is seen inherently aggressive (ibid).

Post-modern peaces emerged from the disillusionment to their counterpart, the modern peaces. The postmodern peaces are understood according to its orientation towards plurality, which created a foundation for the celebration of the multiplicity of lived experiences (UIBK 2017d). Within this multiplicity, the postmodern peaces do not seek the resolution of contradiction. Moreover, peace becomes contextualized based on each new concrete encounter and the ones perceiving it. As such, peace is out of truths, relative to each person’s human encounter (UIBK 2017d).

For this adaptation of the ECM, truth discourses are important for a discussion of the many truths emerging from the “Four Towns Agreement.” Within the conflict episode, there is no space for a multiplicity of truths. Instead, a dominant truth must prevail. This becomes evident especially in the discourses around the “Four Towns Agreement” where there is a strong emphasis on determining the main perpetrator in Syria in relation to the April 14 attack, which killed 125 people who originated from the evacuated towns of Kafreya and Foah (UNOCHA 2017b). As such, the search for truth in Syria is pursued within a modern not a postmodern framework. Postmodernity’s multiplicity of truths does not have space.

In Transrational Peace Philosophy, transrational peaces focus on the systemic balance between the themes of harmony, justice, security and truth (Dietrich 2013). The core assumption is that there is a natural strive for balance, termed as dynamic equilibrium, for the different peace families. In transrational thought, the aim is the unification between the postmodern and energetic cosmovisions. Contrary to the other peace families, the purpose is not to repair by external intervention. Instead, healing and integrating the different peaces is accomplished through internal forces, making it process-oriented. Transrationality combines rationality with transpersonal and spiritual expressions towards a holistic understanding of peace (UIBK 2017f).

Within this dynamic equilibrium of transrationality, each of the themes gains a relational aspect. Personal harmony within inter-personal encounters is understood as an unfolding between the material (physical and biological), intellectual and psychological processes. In this, contradictions are seen and trusted without annulling one force supremacy over another. The contradiction itself *is* the reality in all its manifoldness. Structural justice is no longer understood as a mechanistic satisfaction of a demand. Instead, it refers to the satisfaction of needs subjectively and communally, where growth is not an end in itself, but a process. Relational security is seen through socio-psychological processes where there is an awareness of how behavior affects the

local population. Truth becomes cultural, and refers to the respect and plurality that is found in different cultural environments (UIBK 2017f). The family of transrational peaces will allow me to consider the many themes pulling and tugging at the center and the peripheries of the “Four Towns Agreement.” The power of this type of mapping lies in the ways in which this allows me to contact, even to embrace, all of the episode's dimensions.

1.4.2. Layers of Conflict

After identifying the dominant theme of the conflict narrative, the next ECM branch inquires into the inner and outer ‘layers’ behind the conflict episode, all of which follow the seven chakra system of Yoga philosophy. The layers include inquiring into the persona and her sexual-family, emotional-communal, mental-societal, spiritual-political and global awareness layers. The last two layers are not part of applied conflict transformation work since they pertain to the perception of the all-oneness in all beings. While they are important for a holistic understanding of the layers based on the chakra principles, they are not part of the mapping of the conflict.

The first ECM layer is the dance of the persona. It is the most physical manifestation of the conflict episode. It encompasses the physical aspects that form the sensual world that humans live in (Dietrich 2013). In the next layer, under the sexual-familial layer, the security of sexuality and family origin become key factors. According to Dietrich (2013), sexuality is the energy of life and always influences behavior. In line with impulses of sexual attraction and rejection, sexuality is also a desire to adapt. For this security of the sexual energy, trust becomes key since it is harnessed through human relationships and the acknowledgement of personal experiences.

With regards to trust, this bears great weight within an understanding of the “Four Towns Agreement”. The residents of these towns were evacuated and left behind their homes and the lives they had so heartedly woven for themselves and families. The question that poses itself here concerns their trust in the evacuation agreement and whether their fears of building new homes were acknowledged. Family origin is also very significant at this layer. During the evacuation process, many families were separated and many family members were killed in the explosion, which entails a deep sense of loss of family origin. When family ties are broken, families find it extremely difficult to restore a sense of meaning and purpose to their lives (Lederach and Lederach 2010).

Given that community influences trust, the next ECM layer is the emotional-communal layer. The emotional-communal layer expands from the immediate family to the community, where the latter attends to the interpersonal need for belonging (Dietrich 2013). The community is a culmination of lived relationships that includes the previous two layers as well. Physical violence in communities emerges as a reaction to mistrust and fear from social insecurity.

I believe the emotional-communal layer will be essential for my model since blockages of “determination, ego, willpower, dynamism and expansion” often exist in this layer (Echavarría Álvarez 2014a, 66). In the context of the “Four Towns Agreement,” this becomes essential since the movement and relocation of the people from Madaya, Az-Zabadani, Kafreya, and Foah means “attempting to relocate a sense of place and purpose in a context where few things make sense and must constantly be negotiated” (Lederach and Lederach 2010, 13). Through the evacuation, they lost a sense of “at-homeness” in the world (Lederach and Lederach 2010, 63). Lederach and Lederach describe how the phraseology of ‘internally displaced people’ is deeply metaphoric at different levels, from physical displacement to emotional displacement and a sense of loss (2010).

Within the mental-societal layer, the ability to reason and create mental concepts is central. At this level, the person is able to become aware of all previous layers. Here, society is a social category that extends beyond the realm of the community. In addition, the need for control, domination and dogma are prevalent where a narrow and hermetic concept of society can emerge from the danger of delusion (Echavarría Álvarez 2014a). This can become violent since it links to absolute end-states. Here, ideals of home, country, and resistance are likely to emerge, all of which feed into the modern notions of peace. Lederach and Lederach (2010) argue that in settings of violence, people look for physical spaces and mechanisms for protection. Violence also produces a sense of internal insecurity, which largely shapes the way people react and perceive the world (ibid).

The spiritual-political layer goes beyond individual and conscious aspects of the ego, allowing greed and power-obsession to fade away. On an intra-personal level, the internal observer emerges from spirituality and observes without casting judgments. This is the ability to observe whilst not commenting with love, hate, pride or shame. It instead grows on silence and unconditional love towards everything. Within this layer, space and time are experienced as a continuum, transcending death and climaxing in the unity of humans in the all-oneness. The political aspect of this layer concerns the external observer that is compassionate but not judging in its observation. Compassion refers to feeling the suffering in oneself and others and being committed to alleviate it. The next and final layers in the ECM analysis are the global layer and the epicenter, where everything dissolves into a shapeless awareness rendering concepts of security and justice unimportant.

Observing the episode without judgment allows a human element to emerge through the conflict episode. It entails understanding the conflict parties in a systemic and holistic manner, which has the potential to impact and transform the episode. This means to closely look at an episode or an experience, which in my view, can give a better understanding of the conflict itself, and open up to possibilities of active listening to all parties. Certainly, there is only so much that can be done in Syria. The limitations faced by humanitarian organizations are very challenging, in terms of distributing food and medicine, offering protection, and hosting Syrians in host communities. There is,

however, the possibility to improve our listening and understanding, which may be more important than one might initially warrant.

1.4.3. Levels of Conflict

The next ECM branch concerns the ‘levels’ of the conflict pyramid. Drawing on the work of John Paul Lederach (1997) from his book *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, a conflict can be mapped at three different vertical levels, each with different actors: Top, Middle Range, and Grassroots Leaders. It was a time when Lederach viewed conflict in a more structuralist manner, where he believed it was clear the entities that fit within each level. In his more recent work, Lederach starts to view conflict in a more systemic approach, where there is no longer a clear-cut distinction of the levels. In his book *The Moral Imagination*, Lederach (2005) asserts that these levels interact not mechanically but dynamically, trickling across feedback loops through both top-down and bottom-up influences.

These layers of leadership are taken up by Dietrich (2013) within the ECM model to describe the different actors of the conflict and understand their position. This branch is also essential for my research to aid in a systemic understanding of the interaction between state-level, middle-range INGO work, and the grassroots base of society within Syria’s “Four Towns Agreement”. It will reveal both the connections and disconnections amongst these levels, making way for a deeper consideration of the dynamic relations surrounding the evacuation agreement.

The Top Level Leadership refers to the key political and military figures that possess great visibility within the conflict, making them largely inflexible. Their means towards peacebuilding is mainly negotiation. For this adaptation, the top leadership level includes the parties of the conflict that negotiated and agreed on the premises of the “Four Towns Agreement”. The top-leadership level has created a strictly tight net of relations that has excluded other societal groups. Transfixed by the fear of eradication, the conflict parties have crammed the residents of these towns with ‘real-politik’ ideas, while the cries at the grassroots remain too shrill to be heard.

The Middle Leadership Level comprises figures from the education, agriculture, business, journalism and humanitarian sector. They have access to both the Top and the Grassroots level, engaging in multi-track diplomacy peace activities such as workshops, capacity and relationship building. Within the “Four Towns Agreement,” the middle-range leadership include the ICRC, the Syrian Arab Crescent (SARC) and the UN who facilitated the evacuation of people from the four towns. Although middle-range actors are very important for inclusive civil society engagement, the power of the top-range leadership impedes the effectiveness of the work that Syrian civil society can play.

Finally, the Grassroots Leadership Level makes up the base and anchor of society whose leadership is based on a day-to-day “survival mentality” (Lederach 1997, 42). In the ECM model, connecting to the grassroots insights is important to gain a holistic

understanding of the conflict episode. Within this, the focus of agreements, such as the “Four Towns Agreement,” becomes on the people, and where the critical analysis of power structures is based on realities instead of normative assumptions. As such, a genuine understanding of the realities of the people is needed beyond the normative assessment of living conditions of nutrition, water and sanitation, health, protection and so on. In placing people at the center, the community efforts should, for example, begin to mend the broken relationship between Syrians from these four towns, which is as important as repairing the broken relationship between Syrians and the outside world. No ceasefire or peace-treaty, no governmental vacuum or governmental installation will last unless the relationships between Syrians are addressed (Harling 2017).

1.5. State of the Art

In their book *Contemporary Conflict Resolution* (2011), Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall assert that although peace and conflict research emerged in the 1950s, the philosophical discourses that affect it date back much further. They argue that this highly political discipline reflects and influences the political landscape. Peace and Conflict Studies has largely focused on European and North-American debates, offering Eurocentric perspectives. For this reason, *The Palgrave International Handbook of Peace Studies* (Dietrich et.al. 2011) is an important work which provides interpretations of peace from various cultural contexts. Because of the political nature of peace and conflict research, it has influenced political discourses and theories to a large degree. During the Cold War, heated debates emerged between the idealist and realist schools of thought which were separated mostly between the structuralism of European thought and the systemic debates of North America (Hamed 2016).

In order to thoroughly address the different aspects that my research question entails, I will approach it from a trans-disciplinary perspective, integrating the different disciplines that crosscut the many branches of this issue. For writing this book, it is essential to provide the reader with a thorough understanding of the basic assumptions on which I am basing my research. Previously I stated that my book explores a conflict episode, specifically the “Four Towns Agreement” through Transrational Peace Philosophy. Towards such an endeavor, the discipline of conflict transformation is important for me, and the works of Lederach (1997, 2005, Lederach and Lederach 2010) and Dietrich (2012, 2013, 2018) provide the main theoretical framework. As stated previously, the works of Lederach and Dietrich belong to a branch of peace and conflict research called transrational peace philosophy and its applied work is ECT. This approach to conflict is elicitive, not prescriptive, which renders non-rational categories such as spirituality and intuition important. This theory will provide me with the foundation for analyzing the conflict episode of the “Four Towns Agreement.”

The Moral Imagination (2005) is an interesting work by Lederach that presents the importance of understanding conflicts in terms of their relations. This relationship-centered approach entails exploring the physical and social geography of change

processes, noting that a process of conflict transformation seeks to rebuild the relations that have fallen. In addition, in their book *When Blood and Bones Cry Out* (2010), Angela and John Paul Lederach discuss how political language is oftentimes disconnected from the dynamic swirl of day-to-day life in a conflict zone. They explore healing and reconciliation in settings of protracted violence, arguing that violence is resilient within such settings, making violence reappear even after politicians classify the conflict as officially over. Other works by Lederach that are important for me are *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (1997) and *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (2003).

Since transrational peace theory emphasizes that a world without conflict would be dead, Francisco Muñoz's work *Imperfect Peace* (2006) is essential since he criticizes any notion of perfectionism in our world. He argues that violence is more easily perceived than peace because violence is a finished act, committed in a place and a time. It cannot be reversed. Peace on the other hand, is not a finished state and is always a work-in-progress. Complimenting this, Norbert Koppensteiner's *Beyond Postmodernity: Living and Thinking: A Nietzschean Journey* (2009) is important to explain the turn from postmodernity to transrationality.

Since I am using the ECM tool, I will resort to Wolfgang Dietrich's transrational model in *Elicitive Conflict Transformation and the Transrational Shift in Peace Politics* (2013) which affords a new lens with which to view and understand conflicts. It offers a holistic interpretation of peace since there are as many understandings of peace as there are individuals, as outlined in Dietrich's *Interpretations of Peace in History and Culture* (2012). Dietrich's *Elicitive Conflict Mapping* (2018) also provides me with the foundational work upon which I prepare my analysis across the different ECM branches: principles, themes, layers, and levels. For the adaptation of the ECM, I will also consult Echavarría Álvarez' works (2016 and 2018). Echavarría Álvarez uses ECM to understand the no-vote against the peace agreement in Colombia (2016), and a terrorist attack in Germany (2018). In both these works, she chooses a conflict episode and analyzes it across the branches of ECM. Although the adaptation to the context is different, her work has been extremely helpful to gain a deep understanding of the branches of ECM.

Johan Galtung's *Peace by Peaceful Means* (1996) offers many important contributions to the study of peace. Galtung (1996) understands that there are different forms of violence: direct and structural, where the former pertains to actions that deliberately intend to harm or kill someone, while the latter refers to actions that indirectly hamper someone's ability to reach their full potential. Galtung (1996) also differentiates between positive and negative peace. Negative peace is pessimistic, is the absence of violence, and is peace that is not necessarily achieved through peaceful means. Positive peace is optimistic, is preventive of violence, and is achieved through peaceful means.

In addition, the paper by Annette Büchs, "The Resilience of Authoritarian Rule in Syria under Hafez and Bashar Al-Asad" (2009) is particularly important for a modern understanding of how the al-Asaad regime maintains power. She argues that in Syria's case, there is a lack of clear distinction between regime and state since the regime has to a large extent been able to create and transform state institutions in its own image.

Other important works for the study of power in Syria include the seminal work of Volker Perthes (1997) where he analyzes the power of the security apparatus in Syria, which he considers the regime's most effective way at creating an atmosphere of fear. Raymond Hinnebusch's works "Party and Peasant in Syria: Rural Politics and Social Change under the Ba'th" (1979) and his *Syria: Revolution from Above* (2001) are both essential for understanding the rise of the Baath party in Syria. His works are particularly helpful to understand how the Baath party forged alliances across many sectors of society including peasants, middle-class intellectuals, and the rich Sunnis of Syria. Nazih Ayubi's work *Overstating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East* (1995) is particularly important for my discussion on the power tactics of the regime since he coins the term "tacit pact." The concept of a "tacit pact" reveals an inequitable relationship between the state and the individuals by creating dependency wherein the receiver of the economic rewards owes the distributor loyalty. Within this discussion, Lisa Wedeen's (1999) work *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* provides insights on the creation of a personality cult around the president in Syria and how this frames the understanding of citizenship in the minds and hearts of individuals.

For a discussion on the history of Syria, I resort to the work by the International Crisis Group (2004), which provides insights into the rise of the Baath party and the internal turbulences that Syria experienced up until 2004. This is complimented by the works of Zisser (1998) and Perthes (1997) who provide important insights on the Baath rule.

With regards to the "Four Towns Agreement," I relied mostly on the article written by The New York Times in 2018 which outlines in great detail the behind-the-scenes of the conflict episode, especially Qatar's role in facilitating the negotiations with the opposition groups. Other sources include the 2017 report by UNOCHA that describes the process of evacuations of the "Four Towns Agreement" and the main humanitarian actors involved. The research paper written by Böttcher (2017) explains the underpinnings of the conflict episode, and its political motivations for demographic change. Echoing this, the United Nations Human Rights Council's (UNHRC) report (2017) and the Amnesty International 2017 report on internal displacement is integral for a discussion regarding the agreement emerging as a forced displacement deal. Other sources that address the process of the "Four Towns Agreement" include news sources such as The National, Al Etihad Press and The Washington Post. Furthermore, to discuss the moral underpinnings of the "Four Towns Agreement," the works of Haneef (2011) and Bangura (2005) are essential. Their works aid me in understanding the Islamic roots of positive and negative peace, and reconciliation. In light of this understanding, the ECM model allows us to perceive the moral readings of the "Four Towns Agreement."

Since the "Four Towns Agreement" is a physical agreement, located in a particular place and time, the conceptualization of land and home become essential in the discussion on the layers of the conflict episode. For this, the work of Elden (2010) becomes essential to discuss the many conceptualizations of land, territory and terrain

and the ways that this metaphorical language affects our perceptions and understanding of home and the nation-state. Also, Foucault's *Questions on Geography* (2007) is essential for explaining the relationship between geography and the military, and its creation of a political notion of territory entrenched by concepts of power. Further, the sense of belonging and connection that people derive from their land is explained using Gregory's *The Dictionary of Human Geography* (2009), and Block's *Community: the Structure of Belonging* (2008). Lederach and Lederach's seminal work, *When Blood and Bones Cry Out* (2010), further compliments the discussion on home and belonging.

Since the question of nature, land, and territory are at the heart of my discussion on belonging, loss, politics, and power, the work of Étienne Balibar (2004) is important to understand how collective identities are assigned within structures of power. Further, Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* (1978) explains imagined boundaries and our territorialized identities. Another important work for this discussion is George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's book *The Metaphors We Live By* (1980) where they describe the ways in which we perceive and understand the world in an embodied manner. They argue that ontological metaphors make the world knowable through categorization. This is especially relevant for the analysis of the ECM layers of the "Four Towns Agreement," since each layer is understood as being physically embodied. Despite the importance of ontological metaphors in knowing the world through categorization and distinction, they make the connections invisible by blurring the areas where properties of the world are actually connected. Moreover, since the "Four Towns Agreement" opens up a discussion on displacement and modes of mobility, the concept of home becomes important. For this, the works of Shiva and Mies (1993) *Ecofeminism* and Braidotti's (2006) *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* are essential to discuss uprootedness in a time of forced exile.

In addition, the role of civil society actors emerges in the analysis of the 'levels' of the ECM tool. The analysis reveals that the middle-range level is very important for inclusive social cohesion and civil society participation. Researcher Thania Paffenholz's works are essential for understanding active and passive exclusion in political, economic, or social decision-making areas. Paffenholz also explains the important work carried out by civil society and the significant role they should be allowed to play for quality and sustainable peace processes. I also resort to Fetherston and Nordstrom (1995) who explain that a holistic and transformative perspective of peacebuilding is built on the internal traditions inherent in local cultures. In line with this, I also resort to Donais (2012) who emphasizes that external actors can support and facilitate, but cannot decide the type of peace to be built.

Other sources of information for my book include publications by different UN agencies, particularly the yearly Syria Strategic Response, the Whole of Syria Response, and the HNO. Such institutional documents provide me with necessary data and statistics regarding the humanitarian assistance issues within the four towns of Madaya, Az-Zabadani, Kafreya and Foah. Since so far, the list of references is quite Eurocentric, I also want to use sources from Syria. Local research initiatives such as Badael Project—a Syrian organization committed to strengthening civil society groups and

NGOs in Syria—produced an interesting report that assesses the work and challenges that civil society actors encounter in the conflict. In addition, Citizens for Syria is a local initiative that aims at strengthening relations between local organizations and international donors in Syria. They insist on the importance of the work that civil society does in highlighting human rights issues in Syria.

Other important works include Abd Al Karim's (2002) "Totalitarianism" which offers important insights about the regime's method of garnering support. At a political level, the regime relied on support from both Alawites and Sunnis. At the socioeconomic level, the regime received support from Sunni peasants, and the new middle class. His work is important since it sheds light on the political economy of the Baath rule, which provides a deeper understanding of the network of allegiance that the Baath rule crafted. In addition, Deeb's (2011) *Syria's Modern History: from the French Mandate till Summer 2011*, is essential for understanding Syria's political history, especially in relation to the social and political atmosphere that civil society movements found themselves in. According to Deeb (2011), although Bashar al-Asaad embarked on a political and economic reform movement in 2000, he was preoccupied with wanting to control the pace of the reform and fearing that reform would negatively affect Syria's struggle with Israel.

Deeb (2011) also explains that the 'Damascus Spring,' which was led by a group of lawyers, writers, and political analysts in Syria, was repressed by the government's highly nationalistic discourse. The 'Damascus Spring' of the early 2000s was a reformist movement which called for economic liberalization and democratic rule. The demands were unmet, and Deeb (2011) explains that these demands resurfaced in the 2011 demonstrations. This is complimented by the work of Hassan Abbas (2013) who explains the intellectual environment which emerged during the 'Damascus Spring' wherein by 2001, there were around 170 discussion forums being held to discuss once-taboo topics, such as public freedoms, human rights, and the fate of detainees and exiles.

In speaking about the initial uprisings, the works of Abu Najem (2011) and Khoury (2013) offer important insights into the pluralism and diversity of ethnicity and sects of the 2011 uprisings. Ajami's (2012) contributions offer important insights into the discussion on the nature of the armed conflict in Syria, in specific, in relation to the sectarian undertones of the conflict. Within the discussion on the political opposition in Syria, Daher (2019) is essential for understanding the emergence of the two leading political opposition factions and their patrons. Moreover, lawyer Anwar Al Bunni (2019), who is a leading figure in Syrian civil society, is essential for understanding initiatives led by civil society on universal jurisdiction.

For a discussion on disappearance in Syria, the work of Syrian lawyer Noura Ghazi is pivotal for understanding what it means to be a family of the missing. This becomes significant within the analysis of the sexual-familial layer, which explores aspects of the kidnapping of the 45 wounded individuals from Kafreya and Foah. Leila Al Shami's work (2018) is also important for the discussion on the emergence of Law. 10, which

allows government units to confiscate land without compensation. This contributes to the discussion of the pain of the laws and the institutionalization of land.

Therefore, throughout the book, I resort to a variety of authors and sources who offer different interpretations and faces of the Syrian armed conflict. The aim is exactly this: to put these authors into conversation without the need to reconcile their differences or to merge their opinions. This goes back to what I mention in the author's perspective. The aim of this book is to wonder: what kind of Syria would I see and understand from the point of view of many rather than one?

2. Conceptual Framework

A man gulps down the last few leaves of a morning glory plant he tended for years.
How could it taste so bitter.
I fed you so much time, thought of nothing but the sweetness of your green.
How could you not flower wheat, meat and juice citrus, ripe, ready, clean?
Orange, red, purple,
delicious pulp, seed for the kindling. Bitter, bitter, bitter.

A man gags, vomits the last few leaves of a plant he had to kill,
thinks of forgiveness for a murder that won't save him.

Outside the bombs orchestrate the shaking of bodies, shimmying in hunger.
Faraway men make more money from the promise of dinner.

A woman stirs a pot of black pepper, onions and rust ridden water,
looks at the dirt of all that's left
and thinks of minerals.

----- Hind Shoufani, Seven Songs for Syria (2017)

As part of this research endeavor, I previously stated that I am using the ECM tool in order to understand the themes, layers, and levels that are part of the conflict epicenter, which are feeding the conflict episode the “Four Towns Agreement.” In this chapter, I highlight the main conceptual framework that the ECM tool draws upon. As such, this section travels through concepts of violence and peace, achieving peace through peaceful and un-peaceful means. These concepts are then placed into the contexts of modernity and postmodernity as ways of understanding and relating to the world. This chapter also explores Dietrich’s (2012) five-peace family, which recognizes a plurality of truths, and hence, Dietrich coined the term “peaces.” This reflects the plurality in understandings of peace, as different people experience and relate to peace differently.

2.1. Violence and Peace

Galtung, the Norwegian sociologist who is a principal founder of peace and conflict studies, introduced three different dimensions of violence: direct, structural, and cultural. He asserts that destructive situations are not only caused by direct violence, but can also be caused by structural and cultural violence, which cyclically could lead to direct violence (1996). Zimbardo (2008) sees the latter two as very difficult to acknowledge and to resist.

Galtung defines direct violence as aggression that hurts the body, mind, or spirit of the self or of others. Hence, it could be verbal or physical aggression. Structural violence refers to aspects of political repression and economic exploitation that are upheld by marginalization in a society. Finally, cultural violence does not refer to cultures per se, but to aspects of culture such as religion, ideology, language, art, and formal sciences. These cultural aspects can be used to legitimize direct or structural violence. For example, stereotypes and beliefs based on religion or political ideology can be used to justify discrimination (which is a representation of structural violence).

In addition to Galtung’s contributions on violence, Galtung (1996) also greatly influenced the understanding of peace. Galtung has posited that there are two types of peace: positive and negative peace. He suggests that peace can be understood in relation to the absence or presence of certain social conditions. For example, negative peace refers to a condition where there is no direct violence. Therefore, negative peace is the absence of war. Negative peace often entails the suppression of aggressive energy in the society. This is signified by threatening society with punishment such as jail, death penalty, and cultural exclusion. As such, this negative peace is achieved by instilling in people fear of resorting to violence. In order to control and reduce actual and potential violence, negative peace requires the management of interpersonal and organizational conflict. Instruments for achieving negative peace include the military and the rule-of-law. Ceasefires and the signing of peace agreements between conflicting parties or countries are examples of managing conflict by suppressing and minimizing the symptoms of direct violence.

Positive peace is the “integration of human society” (Galtung 1964, 2). According to Galtung, examples of positive peace include improved communication and understanding, peace education, arbitration, conflict management and so on. While negative peace is seen as pessimistic, positive peace is seen as optimistic. Galtung (1964) derives his understanding of peace from health studies, where health is understood not merely as an absence of illness, but something more: the ability to resist disease. Adapted to peace studies, Galtung believes that two understandings are important: curative approaches aimed at negative peace, and preventive approaches aimed at positive peace. As such, it is important to understand the conditions for the absence of violence, and the conditions for peace. Peace is the absence of direct and structural violence. Galtung’s contributions to the study of peace lie in the necessity to research peace beyond the narrow vision of negative peace which aims at ending or reducing violence at a direct or structural level. Instead, Galtung calls for efforts to understand conditions for preventive violence. Towards such an endeavor, Galtung argues that peace and violence need to be looked at in their totality at all levels. For example, addressing inter-gender violence is as important as addressing inter-state violence. Promoting peace through peaceful means should address violence at all levels.

2.2. Modernity

The modern understanding of peace as a universal concept exists in the context of a “concrete societal project characterized by Newtonian physics, Cartesian reductionism, the nation-state of Thomas Hobbes, and the capitalist world system” (Dietrich and Sützl 2006, 283). In academia, this manner of relating to and understanding the world is called modernity. According to Esteva and Prakash, modernity has three main characteristics that they refer to as “modern sacred cows,” which are certainties that cannot be questioned by modern thought (1998, 9). (1) The myth of global thinking: entrenched in globalization is the idea that there is only one universal and valid way of understanding social reality. This represents the intellectual counterpart of the global economy. (2) Universality of human rights: which are based on Western notions and understandings, without taking into account differences in traditions, faith, and moral perspectives. (3) The myth of the individual self as distinct and distanced from people in communities.

Postmodern philosophers deconstructed these three sacred certainties of modernity. Jean-François Lyotard asserts that modernism is based on metanarratives (1984, 27), which legitimize scientific inquiry but are themselves not open for rational scrutiny. Lyotard’s point that legitimizing scientific inquiry with these three first principles is derived from Plato and his allegory of The Cave (Koppensteiner 2009). Plato’s work resurfaces in modern texts such as Descartes’ “Discourse on Method” (Koppensteiner 2009). Koppensteiner (2009, 15) argues that Plato’s The Cave is a story or a metanarrative because it can neither be proven nor refuted using its own premises. Since Plato’s allegory of the cave, Mediterranean cultures have given more importance

to reason as a way to determine the one unquestionable truth. For Wilber, modernity is the “*enlightenment paradigm*” (Wilber 2007, 86).

On the one hand, through the focus on logic, modernity has brought forward great developments in natural sciences using Newtonian physics and the ability to predict and control the world using natural laws. Under this light, humans relate to the world in a mechanistic way, where the world is knowable through the senses, and hence, can be managed and controlled. On the other hand, with modernity came a set of principles that were derived from the rightness of the one truth. This has implied that certain things and phenomena do not belong to the one truth, which has in turn, challenged humans in deciding how to understand and relate to non-truths. One way to deal with non-truths is to cut out their existence. As such, the human need for the elimination of wrongness was born. Along this line of thought, many peace theorists have suggested that much of the violence experienced by humans is derived specifically from attempts by persons or cultures to achieve peace by way of elimination (Dietrich 2006).

The academic discipline of International Peace Research was born at the beginning of the twentieth century following the violent events of World War I (Dietrich and Sützl 2006). In 1919, during the Paris Peace Conference, British and US American delegations deemed it important to establish research on International Relations (IR). The aim was to fix and resolve the violence that had been experienced during World War I and bring forth universal peace. Instead, World War II shocked the world with an escalation of violence and the inability to bring forth a system of one universal peace (Dietrich and Sützl 2006).

“[Peace research] institutions were to conduct their research for several decades and through another World War before it became acceptable among experts to suspect that it may be precisely this linear, universalist and reductionist basic assumption aimed at a paradise on earth, the one truth, the one and perpetual peace, the one world society, and the one civilizing process that carries in it the germ of a self-reproductive structure of violence, and that this kind of idea of salvation is in itself intellectual violence because it simply lacks respect for otherness and its secrets. How is one to treat others like members of one’s own kin if the difference among kins has long been eliminated through nationalization and universalization, and as long as the other is still considered synonymous with imperfection?” (Dietrich and Sützl 2006, 292)

Furthermore, derived from the idea of the truth, the universalism of modernity has brought forth clear separating lines of people and behaviors along dual categories: correct/incorrect, normal/abnormal, good/evil. Culturally, these have translated into social exclusion, discrimination and dictatorships. Those who do not fit the accepted categories have experienced the violent aspects of modernity (Dietrich and Sützl 2006).

2.3. Post-modernity

In attempting to establish the one truth of modernity, which is geared towards development and progress, Ivan Illich asserts “a worldwide war has been waged against people’s peace” (2006, 173). Dietrich and Sützl (2006) insist that a plurality of peace is needed for communities to organize themselves. As such, the philosophy of the many peaces offers an understanding of peace that is contextual, vernacular, and therefore, plural. This state of mind that is disillusioned with absolute truths is known as postmodernity. Postmodern thought was born in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century as a reaction to, and disappointment with modernism.

Postmodernity criticizes modernity’s promise of absolute truth and instead calls for pluralistic relativism. It is a “worldview characterized by anti-hierarchy, social construction of reality, strong equality, multiculturalism and relativistic value systems” (Wilber 2000, 50). In its relativity, postmodernity does not seek to replace the one truth of modernity with a new truth. Instead, it simply encourages disillusionment and skepticism with modernity, which ultimately causes doubt in the universalism of modernity’s promises. As such, a more contextual and relative way of relating to and understanding the world emerges. As such, postmodernity rejects the dual categories of modernity that align people and behaviors across an abnormal/incorrect scale. Drawing upon its relativity, people engaged in postmodern thought “... become aware of the relativity of those truths in whose absolute validity they used to believe. As a consequence, those truths have lost their binding character” (Dietrich and Sützl 2006, 283). The skeptical way of thinking towards modernity is a theoretical worldview that many authors were critically engaged in, such as, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Gianni Vattimo, Jean François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Michael Foucault and Jean Baudrillard (Koppensteiner 2009). Their contributions to literature all provide insights into the relativity of seemingly absolute modern truths.

Vattimo’s idea of ‘Weak Thinking’ (2006) is based on the notion of the ability and possibility to permanently transform our thoughts. He also refers to our ability to go well beyond metaphysics, not by rejecting it, but by distorting it. In his doctoral thesis, which was published in 1931, mathematician Gödel presented two Incompleteness Theorems, which have become a major contribution to the philosophy of mathematics and also peace research (Dietrich 2011). Drucker asserts that the mathematical logic that Gödel introduces proves, in a paradoxical manner, the “unprovability of consistency” (Drucker 2008, 87). The theorems explain that:

“[A] sufficiently powerful formal system has to be either incomplete or contradictory. It can be consistent or complete, but never both at the same time. If a system is in itself completely consistent, then there are fundamental truths that cannot be derived from it. That is why it is incomplete. But if the system is changed in such manner that it can take in those truths, that is, if completeness is striven for, then contradictions will appear in some places and it will be inconsistent”. (Dietrich 2012, 261)

Based on the discussions that Gödel was engaged in with other mathematicians and philosophers of his time, Drucker asserts that Gödel was highly aware of “the formal indefinability of the notion of truth” (Drucker 2008, 88). In addition, in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari (1987), introduce the botanic concept of the Rhizome to explain the connections and multiplicities that exist in nature. A rhizome is a plant system that lives underground and is horizontal in its nature. It produces the shoot and root systems of plants. The rhizome gives strength to the parent plant to grow vegetatively and survive difficult seasons and weather situations underground (Encyclopedia Britannica 2018a). Deleuze and Guattari (1987) contrast rhizomes with trees or roots, which have individual and hierarchical structures. Rhizomes, on the other hand, are multiple and horizontal nets. In philosophy, the concept of a rhizome is used to understand connections as opposed to hierarchical structures of inclusion and exclusion. Philosophically speaking, the concept of a rhizome delineates from the modern concept of individuum, which cannot be divided in modern thought. From a postmodern perspective, “the subject in this rendering is no longer indivisible and neither is it a single unit separable from its surroundings” (Koppensteiner 2009, 118).

In his book *Imperfect Peace*, Muñoz (2006) criticizes the modern understanding of peace as one that is a state of perfect, pure utopia. He asserts that such a state is simply unattainable, making modernity’s promise a violent one. Muñoz (2006) explains that modernity tries to achieve the ideal state of purity through violent means. Hence, there can be no absence of violence or conflicts. Instead, Muñoz (2006) proposes an understanding of peace as an unfinished project, one that is permanently under construction, one that defies the antagonistic dualisms of the pacifist/violent, good/evil. Muñoz (2006) urges us to explore moments and situations of fertility that arise between those rigid dual categories.

2.4. Energetic Peace

Energetic understandings of peace are present across all continents and across all times (Dietrich 2006). Yet, in general, they are associated more with indigenous and native pre-colonial communities in Africa and the Americas and in Eastern cultures. In these settings, peace is experiential harmony. It is peace that is felt and experienced by being nourished by Mother Nature and being in harmony with all visible and invisible things. Dietrich (2006) explains that although energetic peace is an ancient concept, it finds resonance in today’s Taoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and mystical traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Koppensteiner (2017) describes it as *philosophia perennis*, which was originally termed by Aldous Huxley in the 1940s. It assumes that timeless mystical experiences are the foundation of all institutional religions and their superstructures (Koppensteiner 2017). The mystical experience is usually beyond the realms of language (ibid).

In energetic practices, all that is, exists in relation to all other things. As such, the cosmos, nature, and society form a reciprocal relationship that is intricate and inextricable. When this cosmic relationship is balanced, it is experienced as peace. Energetic peace is a recurring experience that transcends the cultural context and intellectual epoch. It can be experienced by all existence at any place and at any time. Energetic interpretations of peace perceive the dualities of the Ying Yang as complementary rather than exclusive, and hence, the balance of these dualities is experienced as harmonious peace. From this, the universe becomes a relational whole, where all existence is interconnected, making even the smallest being important and related to everything else. All existence becomes divine. As such, the human is always relational.

2.5. Moral Peace

From energetic approaches, we move into a moral understanding of peace with the introduction of monotheistic religions: Christianity, Islam and Judaism. The transition from energetic to moral shifts the understanding of peace. Instead of local, peace becomes universal; instead of peace being experiential, it becomes understood; and instead of peace being based on harmonious relations, peace becomes based on categorical norms. In energetic perspectives, all being is divine. But with monotheistic religions came the separation between God and humans. As such, in moral understandings, the one male God, who is separate and supreme to the existence of humans, establishes the norms of the good and moral life (Dietrich 2012).

When Mediterranean cultures began to turn towards this understanding of an unquestionable truth dictated by a male God, the European world also endorsed this conception of peace into its institutions. For example, the philosophy of absolute norms encouraged the establishment of powerful institutions. This imposes a peacemaking imperative on all individuals to promote social fit and obedience to the holy book of norms. Given that there can be no perfect peace and justice on earth, Augustine and, later on, Thomas Aquinas derived a reduced right to just war for peace (*bellum lustrum*) (Dietrich 2006).

2.6. Modern Peace

Modernity shifts from moral understandings by replacing God with reason. As previously explained, modernity is a worldview that upholds a universal truth that is derived from rationality. In modern peace, God does not provide the book of rules and norms. Instead, the nation-state creates a system of obedience and social order through reason. The universe becomes knowable through the material objects, which can be analyzed and more importantly, improved. Scientific truth becomes the absolute truth which governs life and dictates right and wrong. Koppensteiner (2017) explains that the

emergence of modern concepts of peace was driven by the crisis facing the moral institution of the church, the disruptions within science and economy, the trauma of war, and the fear and hope that is instilled in people during the process of enlightenment and secularization. Hence, the need for security is born. The nation-state promises to fulfill the need of security for its people and ensures a ‘perfect peace’ (Muñoz 2006). Peace becomes contractually-arranged absence of violence (Koppensteiner 2017). The nation-state enforces normative conceptualizations to achieve perfect social order and justice. Under this idealization of peace, we find International Law, which derives from one absolute truth as dictated by nation-states.

2.7. Postmodern Peace(s)

Born out of disillusionment with modernity’s dystopia and failed promise, postmodernity emerges to insist that modernity did not bring peace, but only brought more violence. Postmodern thought criticizes modernity’s homogenizing attempts of achieving perfect utopias, security and universal development. All such attempts lead to violence and leave no space for others to exist. As such, postmodern scholars understand the human condition as one that is vulnerable, continuously adapting and becoming (Koppensteiner 2017). Postmodern thought rejects absolute truths of modernity, and instead calls for pluralist relativism, and a celebration of diversity. As such, postmodern thought does not offer a finished and perfected concept of peace. Instead, postmodern peaces exist contextually wherever life flows.

Following this, postmodern thought has led to different ways of understanding conflict. In modernity, conflict is the equivalent of wrongness, which is to be avoided and fixed using reason. Postmodernity calls for the inclusion of conflict as part of life’s process of transformation and becoming. For example, Galtung (1996) explains that conflict and violence are two different things. Conflict is creative energy that inspires social transformation, and violence is one possible way to deal with conflict. Peace is “what we have when creative conflict transformation takes place nonviolently” (Galtung 1996, 265). In postmodernity, there is a welcoming of plurality and relativism. As such, there is space for those who were violently excluded by modernity’s discriminating project: persons, groups, and ideas that delineated from modernity’s one truth. Integrating such realities opens up possibilities for experiencing different cultures of peace. However, postmodernity remains an entirely rational project of deconstruction (Wilber 2007). As such, postmodernity finds itself

“trapped in the limits of the explicability of things by modern means with which it continues to be a state of mind and continues to lead to anomy. It says: there are no universal truths, but that stance itself claims to be universally true”. (Wilber 2007, 92)

As such, the limitations of reason emerge, such that postmodern thought realizes that rational conceptualizations of the plurality of truths cannot bring harmony back.

Dietrich (2006) asserts that this is a fundamental pitfall of postmodern thought for Peace and Conflict research, which is also the starting point for his theory on transrational understandings of peace.

2.8. Transrational Peaces

Transrational peaces is a rather new approach to contemporary peace research. It follows the premise that rational and spiritual aspects of human perception are essential for an understanding of peace. Towards this integration, Dietrich explains that

“Galtung tried to redefine peace as the ability to transform conflicts by empathy, non-violence and creativity. Hence he crosses the Rubicon of postmodernity when he understands peace as an *attitude*, rather close to Gandhi’s definition of ahimsa, and not as a *status* anymore”. (Dietrich 2000, 13)

In so doing, Dietrich addresses this postmodern dilemma by arguing that not all truths of modernity have to be rejected in order to respect the existence of a plurality of truths. While plurality of truths might be incompatible with modernity, they are not necessarily conflicted with it. Along the same lines, Wilber (2007) describes modernity as being too narrow and limited. Following the Hegelian⁵ sense, transrationality tries to “lift” modern truths and integrate them with spiritual approaches. Dietrich explains that this type of integration opens up space for a postmodern recognition of a multiplicity of truths “but also to something beyond these (post-) modern notions” (Dietrich 2006, 37).

2.8.1. From Greek Tragedy to Modernity

Dietrich (2006) draws upon Nietzsche’s argument on Greek tragedy in *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (originally published in 1872) to explain the separation of the Greek Gods in relation to the change in experiences of peace. That is, Dietrich (2006) argues that when the Greek Gods of form (*Apollo*) and energy (*Dionysus*) were separated, the energetic harmonious experience of peace shifted to one that is conceptualized within moral/modern/postmodern frameworks. In Ancient Greece, the two Gods, *Apollo* and *Dionysus*, were not considered opposites or rivals. A conceptual change began with the transformation of society. For example, in Christian thought, *Apollo*, the God of form, evolved into the moral and rational Christian concepts of the one truth, rightness, and normality (Dietrich 2006). *Dionysus*, the God of energy, evolved as Satan, personifying error, wrongness, and abnormality (ibid). According to

5 Hegel uses the German word *aufheben*, which means to lift and preserve. Contextually, it follows the belief that opposites coexist or are reconciled (Inwood 1992).

Dietrich (2006), what follows is a suppression of energy and the reign of form that sweeps over the Mediterranean cultures.

Therefore, with Christianity, *Apollo* became associated with Christ and *Dionysus* with the dark. Previously known as form and energy, *Apollo* and *Dionysus* become Christ and Satan in Christianity, representing good and evil. Dietrich argues that this separation of the two Greek Gods “has created a psychic schism” that has largely influenced and determined Western civilization (2006, 37). Dietrich emphasizes that there is a strong connection between *Dionysus*’ flight in the classic tragedy, with the development of the Polis and the nature of the later Mediterranean cultures and their understanding of peace.

According to Wilber (1995), compelled by *Phobos* (fear), *Apollo* uses aggression to ensure heteronomy and the suppression of *Dionysian* energy. In modernity, this comes via the modern nation-state and institutionalized religions which reign like tyrants and impose their dogma globally.

“It opens space for a culture that constantly suppresses the energetic nature and desires within itself and so is reduced to the mere formal, from where is difficult to imagine energetic realities. Nietzsche calls this habit the white man’s disease”. (Dietrich 2006, 37)

From this discussion on philosophical dichotomy in Ancient Greece, Dietrich (2006) suggests that the suppression of *Dionysus* forms the foundation for the Psychoanalysis work of Sigmund Freud. Assagioli, who was a leading psychotherapist, capitalizes on Nietzsche’s concepts of form-energy Gods, and fuses it with oriental wisdom and enlightened European traditions. As such, he creates “psycho-synthesis” which refers to the potential among humans to integrate complexity into their minds regularly (Dietrich 2006). Later on, C.G. Jung developed his theory of the collective unconscious, which builds heavily on Freud’s concepts of suppressed sexual desires. He goes on to refer to the functional elements of the collective unconscious as *archetypes* (1969). Archetypes are universal structures of the psyche that make up the collective legacy of humanity.

Regardless of the individual character and differences in race, class, religion, or time, Jung (1969) argues that certain circumstances provoke the same thoughts, images, and feelings in all human beings. As such, Jung believes that all humans develop “archetypal potential” of our psyche, which is the result of personal experiences but also based on the archaic legacy of mankind (Jung 1969). In relation to peace studies, this is significant because Jung argues that each human has the potential for committing horrible actions but also has the potential for creating warm relations. The result depends on the circumstances and what they trigger. This is also very much in line with energetic perspectives of peace that recognize that evil and good are intertwined, and that there cannot be one without the other.

2.8.2. Quantum Physics

According to Dietrich (2006), European modern science was heavily influenced by Jung's archetypes, especially in understanding energy and matter. For example, through Quantum Physics, science understood that each particle is a carrier of the information of the whole universe. From this came the realization that, as Jung suggested, the energetic nature of every human being makes him/her "a carrier of the complete information of humankind" (Dietrich 2006, 39). Following this, psychologists and scientists delineated from the previously held notion of independent individuals or clear units, as understood from Newtonian physics and Psychoanalysis. Instead, they realized that the human psyche, behaviors, and material objects are heavily interconnected, echoing the classical myth of the interrelatedness of all things, known as Indra.⁶

Later on in Psychology, this understanding developed from Humanistic Psychology to what became known as Transpersonal Psychology through Abraham Maslow (1971). Transpersonal Psychology was developed at the Esalen Institute in California, bringing psychologists, scientists and peace activists together. Famous names include Frederick Perls, Carl Rogers, Roger Walsh, Erich Fromm, Ivan Illich, Marshall B. Rosenberg and Ken Wilber (Dietrich 2006). Dietrich (2006) points out that Paul Goodman began to link the mentioned names with the popular peace movement.

The twentieth century scientific notion of connectedness reveals strong links to the energetic understanding of peace. In the modern and postmodern conditions that humans find themselves in, transrational peaces do not necessarily refer to the ancient energetic experience of spirituality with the cosmos, nature and society. Instead, transrational peaces refer to twisting and integrating reason.

"It does not call for 'overcoming' modernity but rather for 'twisting' it in the sense of Heidegger, that is, integrating rationality and differentiating it from its divine status in the modern world, so that the a higher spiritual-rational consciousness of peace and culture [...] can be reached. Hence this paper does not call for a romantic illusion of earlier 'energetic' interpretations of peace, but for a courageous integration of morally based, normative concepts of peace and energetically based spiritual ones for a non-violent and fruitful approach of the existing cultures, which at this level could gradually twist the pain of what we nowadays call the 'clash of civilizations'". (Dietrich 2006, 26)

Drawing upon the introductory arguments by Joan Stambaugh in Heidegger's book *The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking* (Heidegger 1973), Koppensteiner (2009) argues that the concept of twisting refers to incorporating worldviews, without attempting to overcome, romanticize, or defeat the different teachings. As such, a transrational

6 According to Brook (2007), Indra's net is a Buddhist metaphor that demonstrates the interconnectedness of all things. The myth describes a web-like world that was created by God Indra wherein at every point of web-contact, there is a pearl. And all that has existed and continues to exist is a pearl in the net of Indra's world. As such, every pearl is connected to every other pearl, and every pearl reflects every other pearl in the web-like world. As such, everything exists by virtue of all other existence.

perspective understands the need to integrate all aspects of our human potential, and sees peace as one that is contextual and relational. Therefore, the roots of transrational peace philosophy is in postmodern thinking which was born as an academic discipline in the second half of the nineteenth century. Postmodernity was triggered by the frustration and disillusionment with modernity's dogmatic, homogenizing narratives about the universal truth, and ensuing exclusion of alternatives. In Syria, the uprisings that started in 2011 were largely also driven by the disillusionment with the moral and modern absolute truths of the Syrian regime. This line of thinking encouraged discourses of emancipation of excluded groups such as Kurds, Druze, women and the working class. As such, state discourses of homogenization of identities were challenged, making way for new understandings of realities being plural (Wimmen 2016).

Using a postmodern lens, Dietrich (2006) finds the radicalization of rational notions of peace highly problematic since they justify and legitimize the use of state violence against diverging groups. Any behavior or reality that delineates from the one/absolute truth of the state is punished and repressed, in order to preserve modernity's promise of security. In the context of the Syrian armed conflict, the demonstrations which began in Daraa in 2011 were suppressed by the military power of the GoS, killing and detaining hundreds of protestors (Al Jazeera 2018a). The GoS justified its actions on the grounds that it would restore social order and security in the country. Therefore, a modern understanding of peace is contractual, making modernity's peace a status. Dietrich (2006) argues that modern peace is just one of the many variations of peace, alongside energetic, moral and postmodern and transrational peaces.

Dietrich (2006) explains that rational means are insufficient to approach peace and conflict issues, and so, he proposes re-integrating energetic elements of our existence. By conceptualizing a world where there is more than one peace, the door to plurality is opened, allowing dualities to be perceived as forming a harmonious whole instead. The spiritual human component unifies the dualities of our world through our emotional capabilities of empathy and compassion. Empathy and compassion cannot be understood solely through rationality, nor can they be imposed by normative conceptualizations of the modern state. As such, from an energetic perspective, peace is an attitude not a status.

2.8.3. The Movement Structures of Conflict

Social healing is a concept that has not been as fully developed and explored as social reconciliation. Social healing is an emerging field (O'Dea 2004) that sits between individual healing and collective reconciliation (Lederach and Lederach 2010). In their seminal book, *When Blood and Bones Cry Out*, Lederach and Lederach (2010) explore the underlying metaphoric structures of wounds created by conflict and the distillation of imagery from the past years.

Lederach and Lederach (2010) frame their discussion and exploration of social healing in contexts pertaining to the temporal terms of the *midst* and *aftermath* of open violence. They argue that in contexts of systematic violence, violence is experienced before, during, and after the signing of peace agreements. This is usually not associated with whether, or the extent to which, peace agreements are adhered to (Lederach and Lederach 2010). Literature on the aftermath of armed conflict has gained momentum in recent years, echoing the multifaceted experiences that people face even after the signing of peace agreements, since patterns of violence are likely to re-emerge (Brisson 2002). As such, Lederach and Lederach (2010) point out that violence follows a repetitious circular pattern, not one that is easily linear.

Communities that find themselves in armed strife experience violence in “phoenix-like forms” (Lederach and Lederach 2010, 45). Violence is negatively resilient, re-emerging again and again in known and new forms. The declaration of a ceasefire does not mean the end or halt of violence. As such, healing and reconciliation work face dynamic and unpredictable settings, regardless of whether agreements have been signed. This opens up the discussion on the different views of movement structures of violence: cyclical or linear.

According to Lederach and Lederach (2010), authors who note the nature of conflict is cyclical include theorists such as Adam Curle (1971), Johann Galtung (1975) and Michael Lund (1996). On the other hand, a linear understanding of conflict developed as an analytical construct which emerged with the practical applications of negotiations and peace accords. The linear view of conflict argues that conflict unfolds in categorical phases.

Tracing the etymology of the word ‘analysis’ to its Greek origins reveals that it refers to breaking something apart. Applied to scientific study, this means deconstructing complex phenomena into smaller parts to understand the complexity better. Adopted to peacebuilding, this approach has been used to identify the wave of violence, as it increases and decreases, and the effects of the wave on the roles and activities. As such, a bell-curve image of the life cycle of conflict was created (Crocker, Hampson, and Aall 2001). The life cycle of conflict looks like a single wave, and describes the progression of conflict and its major phases, such as its escalation and de-escalation, and peacebuilding activities related to the phase. The wave begins at the pre-conflict stage where conflict is latent. The emergence of violence signifies the start of conflict. Then violence could escalate into open warfare. The top end of the wave-graph is the point where negotiations begin and aim to stop the conflict. Through negotiations, the declaration of a ceasefire or a signed peace agreement becomes possible, after which the conflict begins to regress and subside, and represents the post-conflict phase. “This tool presents the rise and descent of open violence as the defining characteristic in the cycle” (Lederach and Lederach 2010, 46-47).

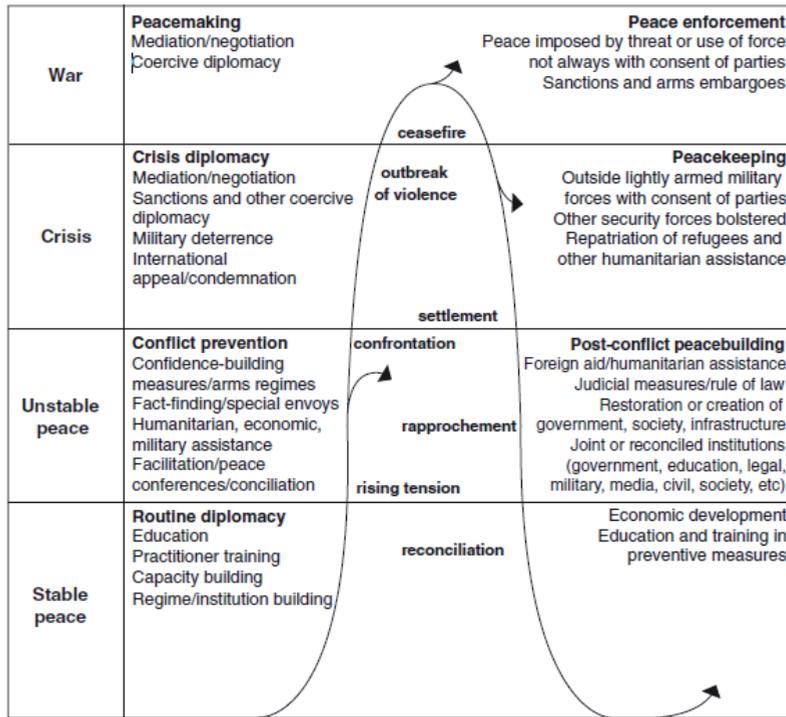


Figure 3: Life Cycle of Conflict (Lederach and Lederach 2010, 47)

Almost in parallel to the time that the bell curve emerged, UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali wrote his famous Agenda for Peace in 1992. In his document, he calls for a sharpened definition of roles of the UN in warfare settings in peacemaking and peacekeeping. He also referred to an unprecedented term in UN documents: post-conflict peacebuilding. Since then, the mid-nineties witnessed a wide acceptance of terminology such as post-conflict, post-violence and post-accord (Crocker, Hampson, and Aall 2001; Lund 1996). As such, post-conflict peacebuilding now exists as an academic specialization, with dozens of books devoted to the topic and its sub specializations.

Lederach and Lederach explain that “the metaphoric structure of this ‘post’ language builds around a view that conflict and peace flow in a linear and phase-based manner” (2010, 48). Under the wave-graph of the progression of conflict, healing and reconciliation are usually categorized in the post-conflict phase. The post-conflict phase emerges with the signing of peace agreements or enactment of ceasefires, and hence, post-conflict is associated with the termination of open violence. Following this logic, the need and potential of healing and reconciliation become important only after the halt of hostilities.

“The temporal and directional image embedded in this view is one based on seeing conflict as a forward-moving progression that fits and follows a metaphoric structure suggestive that social change is *linear and sequential*. The phase-based understanding, captured in prevalent linguistic terms like transition, pre-conflict, post-conflict, postaccord, post-violence and post-war, dominates the mainstream literature. In this widely accepted metaphoric framework, trauma healing and reconciliation become programmatically relevant tasks possible to achieve, and required to sustain wider political transition at the point a phase or stage opens with the signing of an agreement”. (Lederach and Lederach 2010, 48-49)

Lederach and Lederach argue that the metaphoric structure that is created by accepting the terminology of post-conflict stage are the implications that: “Conflict is linear. Peace is sequential” (2010, 49). In that sense, the accepted metaphoric structure implies that conflict and peace follow a linear system that is forward-moving and progressive. However, the lived community experiences reveal that the process of conflict and peace is much less linear, and much more fluid. Lederach and Lederach (2010) assert that local communities that find themselves in protracted settings of violence do not experience in a clear and linear sense the frontiers of the start and end of the post-conflict stage, healing and reconciliation, as suggested by the wave-graph. Instead, violence resurrects in repeated waves as both structural and direct, even in the midst of the post-conflict stage.

To elaborate on this, Lederach and Lederach (2010) resort to the works of Galtung (1975) and Adam Curle (1971) where they noted the need to understand violence as developing in different forms. As previously mentioned, Galtung (1975) drew a distinction between direct and structural violence. Direct violence refers to open fighting, the use of weapon with the intention of killing, and damaging the enemy. Therefore, direct violence is war in its systemic expression. Structural violence refers to patterns that impede the potential to live a full life. Different social factors increase structural violence such as diminishing political and economic structures and the inability of people to access basic needs. Such factors hinder the human potential.

In settings of protracted violence, people are exposed to both structural and direct violence. The resiliency of violence suggests its capacity to re-appear in new forms and replicate old ones. Despite efforts of the post-conflict stage to eliminate open violence and declare the conflict as officially over, people face the resilient patterns of violence. Lederach and Lederach (2010) insist that this is not seen as paranoia of the local people, but represents the resiliency of violence and the legacy of structural violence and armed conflict. As such, Lederach and Lederach (2010) affirm that the signing of an agreement does not end violence in its open direct form, or its less visible structural expressions.

In a similar vein, healing and reconciliation do not necessarily become programmatically possible with the culmination of negotiations and agreements. They cannot simply be initiated as if they were elements in a sequential, phase-based process of change. Lederach and Lederach (2010) urge us to realize that the political language of describing social dynamics is, in the end, a conceptual construct. Behavior and reality of the life of conflict are expected to fit within these linguistic markers. However, the categories created to capture certain social patterns use metaphoric structure that

describe but hide certain aspects of lived realities of people (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). By categorizing a period of the life of conflict as ‘post’ suggests that something is over and finished. By its very nature, this suggests that peace is sequential. Describing conflict with the metaphorical structure of the word ‘post’ might serve high-level leaders more than people whose day-to-day lives sees the conflict as unfinished, and in many cases, reappearing. This highlights the cyclical nature of conflict, not its linear progression as suggested by the bell-curve figure.

2.8.4. Healing and Reconciliation

In their lived experiences, healing and reconciliation are embedded in contexts where people face both conflict and peace. Healing and reconciliation do not exist in a vacuum, where they are achieved neatly and following the same order of the bell-curve figure. As such, they are captured better in dynamic relationships rather than within clear linear progressions. Yoder (2005) explains that even in settings of violence, people exhibit a strong ability to begin healing processes and engage in activities that go beyond securing survival needs. Yoder (2005) notes that the capacity to survive is in itself an act of creative resiliency. To face life-threatening situations, people create experiences and interactions that foster life-giving opportunities and spaces where relationships can gain solidarity and flourish (Yoder 2005).

Lederach and Lederach (2010) describe healing and reconciliation processes as seed-like potential that capitalize on the human capacity to survive and exhibit resilience. These human responses to violence do not follow the sequential phases of the bell-curve graph. Instead, these coping modalities surface during conflict and during the period designated as ‘post-conflict.’ A more accurate depiction of the latter would be “characteristics of both the aftermath of war and the rebirth of new forms of violence” (Lederach and Lederach 2010, 53).

In the midst of a never-quite-‘post-conflict’-situation, local communities face multiple challenges to create space for healing and reconciliation. Lederach and Lederach (2010) argue that healing and reconciliation are not necessarily seeds of ‘post’ conflict, but are constantly available, and are born and reborn in conditions of violence.

“These conditions are rarely conducive for the very thing they most hope to forge – a safe, flourishing and meaningful life. In other words, survival links resistance, resiliency and flourishing as simultaneously available and circular phenomena – whether during or after spikes of open violence – precisely because direct and structural violence are not experienced at community levels as linear and sequential, even though they may officially be presented as such”. (Lederach and Lederach 2010, 54)

Lederach and Lederach (2010) acknowledge the usefulness of using linearity and sequentiality to organize theory on the nature of change. They argue that this is especially relevant for the allocation of funding for peacebuilding projects. For

analytical purposes, Lederach and Lederach (2010) see it as an important endeavor that is often helpful to understand aspects of the big picture. They assert that many aspects of healing and reconciliation processes exhibit important patterns that follow a linear progression. However, what this creates is a dominant view that overlooks other realities that are part of healing and reconciliation in the midst and aftermath of conflict. When there is a dominant lens, it risks diminishing and hiding other aspects of lived realities. This metaphoric organization hides and reveals reality (Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

“The very systematicity that allows us to comprehend one aspect of a concept in terms of another... will necessarily hide other aspects of the concept. In allowing us to focus on one aspect of a concept ... a metaphorical concept can keep us from focusing on other aspects of the concept that are inconsistent with that metaphor”. (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 10)

Lederach and Lederach (2010) explain that the dominance of the linear lens hides aspects that are contradictory, and that echo the circular and repetitive depths and patterns of the healing and reconciliation processes. Given that these aspects of lived reality do not easily fit into the categories created for donors to organize their funding, they are often less explored, and at times, even disregarded. Such aspects become peripheral, and awkward for inclusion in program development, and structures of program evaluation. Therefore, the metaphoric organization of linearity and sequentiality are useful for observing broad views of conflict and change. When this construct becomes dominant, it leaves out aspects of lived experiences that reveal the circular patterns of healing and reconciliation.

In settings of protracted violence, communities experience a gap within national processes of signing peace agreements. The gap emerges between the increased expectations for change that follows from ending the armed strife and the simultaneous experience of exclusion and violence that communities experience even after formal peace agreements. This reveals significant metaphoric structures of the circular nature of conflict. During political transitions, people experience healing and reconciliation in turbulent, dynamic, and sometimes violent settings. As such, the linear progression of conflict is often not experienced by communities, because of the legacy of structural and direct violence – often stretched across decades – which reappear in new and old forms. The signing of a peace or ceasefire agreement does not mean that the violence is ‘officially’ over.

3. Background Information

I must eat less, I have told myself all year.
Perhaps for the entirety of the past decade.
Flab on my belly, a jiggle in my ass, reminders of being lazy.

Perhaps a diet of only writing for the cheeks of the child with eyes like sink smudged
dishes,
for the jawline sunken sharp of the man carrying only skin.

If we could eat language,
I would pour all the poems in my stomach into your hands.
All the words my beautiful mother ever said to me in twenty years, now at your lips.
Everything my father wrote on salvation for a century, at the back of your throat.
The thousand books they left me in our burning house in Damascus, warm in your
center.
I would never write again if it meant you could be full.
Fuck you, says the hum of the air conditioning of distant cities.
Your false humility can blow me, really.
Take your modest reflection on your gluttony and pander it elsewhere.

No one cares that you care.
Just, shut up.

----- Hind Shoufani, Seven Songs for Syria (2017)

As previously mentioned, in this book I analyze the conflict episode of the “Four Towns Agreement” using the ECM tool. For such an endeavor, I find it important to offer my readers background information about Syria in general and the Syrian armed conflict in specific. The first section provides a brief history of the rise of the Baath party up until Bashar al-Asaad assumed power in 2000 following his father’s death. I find that it is essential for my readers to understand Syria before Bashar al-Asaad’s time, for a more comprehensive analysis of any episode of the current armed conflict. The current armed conflict does not exist in a vacuum; rather it is highly influenced and driven by Syria’s modern history.

The second section discusses how the war started, the intervention of external states in the conflict, and the negotiations that took place during the period of the conflict. Within this, I try to offer an account of who participated in the uprisings in order to counter the common perception that the Syrian armed conflict only consisted of armed factions. The aim of this section is not to provide a full account of all the events and actors in the Syrian conflict, but to serve as background knowledge for my readers.

In the third section, I explain the conflict episode the “Four Towns Agreement” in detail. This offers information regarding the premises of the agreement, the parties and individuals involved, and the process of implementation. This will serve as the foundation upon which the analysis builds.

3.1. Prior to the Baath Rule

The history of foreign control over Syrian territory is vast, as it was occupied at different times by Amorites, Hittites, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Turks, and the French, among others. These different stages of occupation have rendered Syria populated by many different ethnic and religious groups. It also meant that Syria, as we know it today as a distinct entity, did not exist until it became under French mandate in 1920 (Hinnebusch 2004). During the Ottoman Empire, “Syria” included what today is known as Syria, and also Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and parts of Israel.⁷ At the end of World War I, the Ottoman Empire collapsed, and France established Syria and Lebanon as French mandates through the League of Nations, and Britain established Palestine and Jordan as British mandates (ibid). Again, this left the Syrian state under another foreign power, and the sense of national identity of Syrians was obscured since they previously identified with smaller units such as their city, tribe, sect, or larger identity such as the Arab nation, Islam, or the Empire (ibid). According to Hinnebusch (2004), Syrians also felt betrayed by Western nations because Syria had supported the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in return for the creation of an Arab state.

7 “Syria” was under Ottoman rule since 1516 (Hinnebusch 2004).

As such, there was fertile ground for political movements based on the desire to unite the many fractionalized ethnic and religious groups. To that end, Pan-Arab and Islamist movements emerged in Syria. Movements calling for a Pan-Arab identity were highly appealing in Syria because they called for the unity between tribal and religious sects under a common Arab identity. Following Syria's independence from the French in 1946, Syrian politics experienced a plethora of nationalist movements, namely Baath party and other Pan-Arab groups, Islamists, and Communists (Hinnebusch 2004). Within this environment, Syria experienced great political instability as governments were being overthrown through a series of military coups between 1949 and the 1950s.

The region witnessed the rise of the nationalistic and strong anti-imperialist leader Jamal Abdul Nasser in Egypt. He was very popular across the Arab world and in Syria. Nasser's popularity and influence made the US and Britain uneasy, especially that Nasser had strong ties to the Soviet Union. As such, they plotted to overthrow the Baathist coalition government which had strong ties to Nasser (Mufti 1996). Nevertheless, Syria and Egypt united in 1958 and formed the United Arab Republic (UAR), which lasted 3 years before being overthrown by an anti-Nasserite coup.

In March 1963, another military coup by forces loyal to Nasser, led to the Baath party seizing power in Syria and sought to reunite Syria with Egypt. This coup was different in that it was led by strong Baath party members, and hence was referred to as "the revolution from above" (Hinnebusch 2001). On the day of the coup, the Baath party passed Legislative Decree No. 1 of 8 March 1963 which brought the country into a state of emergency⁸. Following this, the Syria-Egypt allegiance disintegrated, and the Baath party exploited the state of emergency to purge Nasserists, Communists and other opposition groups (ibid).

3.2. The Rise of the Baath Party (1963)

The origins of modern-day Syria is linked heavily to the Baath Party and the country's military (International Crisis Group 2004). The Baath party's ideology is founded on the perception that Arabs form one nation, and are only artificially divided by the game of imperialism which sought to keep the Arabs weak and subjugated. As such, it sought unity among the Arab nation under a single state. In addition, its radical secular and socialist ideas made it very appealing to the public (International Crisis Group 2004). The army in Syria played a significant role in the history of modern Syria (International Crisis Group 2004). The Baath government's foundation was the army, the security services and the Baath political party (Seale 1999).

The Baath party was active across many parts of the region, including Syria and Iraq. It originally became appealing to ethnic religious minorities in Syria (such as

⁸ The emergency legislation put the country under the imposition of direct military control, otherwise known as martial law. Within such difficult circumstances, civil law and civil rights were suspended, and civilians were put under the application of military law (International Crisis Group 2004).

Druze, Christians, and Alawites), and to lower middle-class intellectuals (International Crisis Group 2004). Following Syria's independence from France, Sunni Muslims in Syria sought to weaken minorities' autonomy and power. As such, the Baath party appealed to these minority groups, as the Baath party stood out as a "pan-Arab, socialist, secular message" and emphasized the importance of the military as protection from the dominant Sunni population (International Crisis Group 2004, 1). According to Hinnebusch (1979), the Baath party recruited those who were previously marginalized, and those who were born outside the system of connections of Sunni dominance on which the old regime was born.

On March 8th 1963, the Baath party assumed power. This followed a period of internal tension, rivalry between political organizations, and military conspiracies. The coup, through which the Baath party came to power, involved officers from several Arab nationalism parties but was primarily led by Baathists. The Baath party managed to consolidate its power by acquiring key positions in the military and security forces which led to widespread influence across the country at large. With the Baath party becoming a key player throughout the 1960s, the other political parties disseminated and the Baath party experienced almost political monopoly. Even in its early days, the Baath party experienced deep internal divisions, which were driven by competing personal ambitions and differences along regional and religious aspects.⁹

"The center of power had moved from the political arena, to the army, to the Baathists within the military and, from 1966 on, to those Alawi officers who held dominant positions in both party and army". (International Crisis Group 2004, 2)

Given that the Baath party and the army were very closely related, a mutually reinforcing system of recruitment emerged wherein Alawites were disproportionately represented in the Baath party and in the army's senior positions. Although this meant that the rule in Syria was based on a narrow communal base, broader constituencies were also represented through a broad system of institutions. For example, the Alawites held for the first time core military and security positions. In previous regimes, Alawites held less influential positions, but during al-Asaad's time they openly became the power-holders. For example, al-Asaad appointed his kin¹⁰ and members of his personal followers to crucial security and military positions (Hinnebusch 2001; International Crisis Group 2004)¹¹. To ensure broader representation of Syria's populations, Al-

9 Internal tensions led to heightened rivalry between officers. For example, in 1966, a faction led by Hafez al-Asaad and Salah Jedid, resulted in the exclusion of the party's historic leaders, Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din Bitar (International Crisis Group 2004).

10 Specifically, members of al-Asaad's Qalbiyya tribe (International Crisis Group 2004).

11 Security services and intelligence agencies include Political Security and Military intelligence, which are subdivided into several branches: Palestine Branch, Investigative Branch, Regional Branch and Airforce Branch. General Security is divided into Investigative Branch, Domestic Branch and Foreign Branch. Each agency is responsible for its own prisons and interrogation centers, and it operates these in almost complete independence from the judicial and penal system (Middle East Intelligence Bulletin 2000).

Asaad meticulously placed the defense ministry, the vice presidency and the foreign affairs ministry under Sunni personnel (Zisser 1998).

Therefore, at the political level, al-Asaad's regime was founded on an Alawite/Sunni contract. At the socioeconomic level, the Baath rule sought to benefit Sunni peasants, the new middle class that emerged, those who live in remote areas and blue-collar workers (Abd Al Karim 2002). Syria's economy was based on a network of allegiance and corruption, where the government formed many trade unions and associations for different populations of society including peasants, workers, teachers, students, engineers and artists. These associations soon became instruments of support to the Baath party, and political surveillance of the Baath party over the activities and ideologies of these associations. Politically, the regime practiced tight control and violent repression by its security services.

The 1966 faction, led by Defense Minister Hafez al-Asaad, had gained significant control over all key security and military branches by 1970. In November of 1970, Defense Minister Hafez al-Asaad led the 'Corrective Movement' coup, which successfully validated the Baath party's legitimacy and established the military's supremacy over the party.¹² The coup also transitioned Syria into a new phase which ushered in a focus on Syria's relationship with Israel. During this time, Syria experienced unprecedented stability which was heavily focused on state and institution-building. It was also highly dependent on the emergence of al-Asaad's own personalized power, in contrast to the years of battles between collective leadership in the Baath party. Hafez al-Asaad represented firm and stable leadership (Zisser 1998).

From its early days of creation, the Baath's most threatening enemy was the Islamist opposition led by the Muslim Brotherhood, who were mostly concentrated in Sunni urban centers such as Homs, Hama and Aleppo. In these areas, there was a strong affirmation towards resisting an Alawite military leader. Tension between the Baath party and the Muslim Brotherhood turned bloody in 1982 when the Muslim Brotherhood led a violent uprising in Hama. The government responded with brute force, which resulted in the deaths ranging between 10,000 and 30,000 from both sides. Following the events of Hama, the Muslim Brotherhood no longer posed a threat to the Baath party as most of the former's leadership was either killed or exiled to Europe, Iraq, or Saudi Arabia (International Crisis Group 2004).

Shortly after the Hama events, the Baath party became threatened from within. In 1983, Hafez al-Asaad fell ill, and his younger brother Rifaat al-Asaad began plotting against him. Rifaat was the second most influential and powerful member of the Baath party after the president. He played a significant role in defeating the Muslim Brotherhood in the Hama events. Antagonism between the president and his brother grew, which forced members of the Baath party to take sides, splitting the army and the party. Following more disputes, Rifaat and 70 of those loyal to him were banished from Syria (International Crisis Group 2004).

12 In 1971, Hafez al-Asaad was elected as president with 99.2 percent of the vote (Reich 1990).

Another challenge that the Baath party faced in the early 1980s was the emergence of non-religious opposition which was comprised of trade unions and left-wing parties. They called for “democratic reform as a third way between Baathist authoritarianism and Islamism” (International Crisis Group 2004, 4). The Bar Association led professional unions and called for the end of the martial law and the establishment of a rule of law and a multiparty system. The government responded with disbanding the union’s elected councils, arrested union heads, and appointed Baathists to their positions. The communist party, led by Riad Al-Turk, also called for similar demands. The regime responded again with large-scale arrests to the leadership of the Communist Party (ibid).

The 1980s established the regime’s success against both religious and secular opposition through the use of repression, permitted through the emergency law. In the mid-1990s, the government lifted some of its repressive aspects and released detainees, some of them members of the Muslim Brotherhood. Hafez al-Asaad died on June 10, 2000 after 30 years of rule, longer than any of his predecessors. His rule had survived several internal insurgency movements, several conflicts with Israel and the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood.

3.3. The Rule of Bashar al-Asaad (2000-Present)

Following the death of Hafez, there was wide consensus that his son, Bashar, would succeed him, in what became the first Arab republican hereditary regime.¹³ The strength of the regime rested on Hafez al-Asaad which made the overdependence on Hafez’ rule and tactical balance of power both the regime’s strength and weakness in his absence. The balance of power crafted by Hafez was highly tactical, wherein modifications to the system could lead to sectarian and socio-economic rivalries (International Crisis Group 2004).

As such, Bashar emerged as the only candidate whose accession would not jeopardize the political equilibrium crafted by Hafez al-Asaad.¹⁴ Bashar inherited his father’s key titles, including Secretary General of the Baath and Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces (International Crisis Group 2004). He was appointed a difficult task: to inherit the system built by his father, and to continue to balance the political architecture (ibid).

I find it important to mention the ‘Damascus Spring’ of 2001, since it heavily relates to the 2011 uprising (Al Bunni 2019). The ‘Damascus Spring’ refers to the period between 2001 and 2002 characterized by intense activism and tentative political liberalization following the death of Hafez al-Asaad. The movement demanded

13 Originally, Bassel al-Asaad, Hafez’ oldest son was meant to be his successor, but Bassel was killed in a car accident in January 1994 (International Crisis Group 2004).

14 Bashar, who was 34 at the time, was younger than the minimum legal age to be president. The constitution was amended to lower the minimum age and enable Bashar to assume his roles.

political, legal and economic reforms. Given that Bashar had received Western education in London for three years, and given his young age, there were high expectations of his intention to modernize the country and fight corruption (International Crisis Group 2004).

Within this new atmosphere, between June 2000 and August 2001, the long-silenced civil society in Syria began to call for democratic opening and reform. Once taboo topics, poets and writers began calling for public freedoms, human rights, and the fate of detainees and exiles. Meetings were held and public discussions grew, engaging in topics relating to citizenship and governance (Abbas 2013). In September 2000, the petition ‘Manifesto of the 99’ was created and signed by leading intellectuals who demanded lifting the 1963 state of emergency, providing amnesty for all political prisoners, and allowing the return of political exiles. The manifesto also called for freedom of expression and the press. A further statement was signed by 1000 intellectuals and insisted on a multiparty democracy and ending the Baath political monopoly. The movement did not challenge the legitimacy of Bashar al-Asaad’s succession or demand regime change (Carnegie Middle East Center 2012).

Initially, the government responded with a series of reformist measures, where amnesty was granted for hundreds of political prisoners including both communists and members of the Muslim Brotherhood. The regime also shut down two notorious prisons, Al Mazza and Palmyra prisons. Political change was encouraging as the government approved other parties publish their own private magazines, *Ad-Dumari*¹⁵ and *Al-Iqtisadiyya*.

However, the initial encouraging response of the government halted in February 2001 when government officials accused the activists of endorsing neocolonial ideas by cooperating with Syria’s enemies and risking Syria’s stability (George 2003). As such, the regime tightened its grip again using censorship, exerted strict control over political activities, and launched a campaign of arrests against the key activists. Despite these pressures, in May 2003, a letter addressed to President Bashar al-Asaad was signed by 300 intellectuals, lawyers, and activists who affirmed that reform does not contradict the strategies, ideologies or the interests of the state. Instead, they asserted that reform would strengthen Syria’s ability to fight the US invasion of Iraq, and Israel (Daher 2019).

Deeb (2011) explains that the difficult regional circumstances of Bashar’s early years (the Palestinian *intifada* of 2000, the 9/11 attacks in the US, the invasion of Iraq by the US in 2003, the assassination of the Lebanese Prime Minister in 2005, and the Lebanese-Israeli war of 2006) was highly unsuitable for reform. For the regime, reform would have to be done in less turbulent time for the entire region (*ibid*). This is the rhetoric and discourse that the regime used to continue to postpone reform, until

15 The newspaper *Ad-Dumari* offered satire news coverage by the columnist Ali Farzat who sought to “kick the police out of the minds of Syrians” (translated from Arabic by author). *Ad-Dumari* would sell-out just hours after its publication, until in July 28, 2003 when the regime stopped allowing its publication (Deeb 2011).

spring 2009 when Bashar al-Asaad declared that the reform process would begin again, but was characterized as very slow, once again (ibid).

3.4. The Syrian Conflict (2011-Present)

Deeb (2011) explains that the reformist movement in Syria was divided. It ranged from radical leftist movements to extreme Islamists. As such, he notes that the reformist movement was unable to garner the support needed from the people against the Baath regime. What the general public understood was that the alternative to al-Asaad's rule is not a Western, liberal and democratic system, but a system that mirrors those found in pro-US states such as in Egypt and Tunisia, or perhaps an Islamic rule where the minorities would be completely subjugated. As such, the Baath rule continued to appear more acceptable and appealing to the general public. Despite this, Bashar al-Asaad promised the country reform but at a slow pace to ensure that the reform does not cause internal instability (Deeb 2011). But 10 years later and the reform still did not come, which led to the 2011 demonstrations.

There are many different accounts of how the Syrian conflict started, echoing the multiplicity of experiences and realities in Syria. The general outlook is that the Syrian conflict was inspired by the wave of demonstrations that swept through several Arab countries including Tunisia (Al Jazeera 2011a), Egypt (Al Jazeera 2011b), Libya, Bahrain, and Yemen (Daher 2019, Deeb 2011, Heydemann 2013). Within a few weeks, the protests garnered successful results in Tunisia and Egypt, progress in reform in Algeria, a civil war in Libya, and turned into a Gulf-backed military intervention in Bahrain, and a bloody repression in Yemen (Deeb 2011).

In January 2011, The Wall Street Journal interviewed Syrian President Bashar al-Asaad, who asserted that Syria was immune to such disorder and protests. He argued that despite economic difficulties faced by many Syrians, his administration aligned with the beliefs of the Syrian people, especially with regards to being resistant to US and Israeli political agendas (The Wall Street Journal 2011). He focused on security discourses where the need for defense against attacks or invasions from perceived enemies was highlighted. However, demonstrations started a few weeks after the interview (Encyclopedia Britannica 2018b), revealing the wide discrepancy between his realpolitik narrative and the clamoring truths of the people.

The initial major demonstrations began in the drought-stricken Daraa governorate in the South of Syria. The army responded harshly by killing hundreds and detaining many more. Within weeks, similar demonstrations appeared in other cities around the country. The demonstrations called for fighting corruption and ending the misuse of power (Daher 2019, Deeb 2011). There were also demands for the increase of public freedom through the abolishment of the emergency legislation of 1963, and the right to practice freedom of speech, assembly and association (Human Rights Watch 2011).

According to their report, the Syrian Center for Policy Research explain that the factors which led to demonstrations were rooted in "institutional bottlenecks" (2013,

9), reflecting the inability of formal institutions to allow larger segments of society to contribute meaningfully in political, economic, and social aspects (Syrian Center for Policy Research 2013). Hence, the uprisings in Syria operated in an environment of repression and inequality in wealth, creating an array of unmet needs amongst those unsatisfied with the regime (Daher 2019).

In response to the demonstrations, Syrian authorities resorted to broadly worded ‘security’ discourses and provisions, as laid out within Syria’s Penal Code. Examples of this include Syrian authorities releasing statements where they ban demonstrators from “issuing calls that weaken national sentiment” or “spreading false or exaggerated information” (Human Rights Watch 2011).

Despite the fact that the regime declared a series of reforms at the end of March 2011, including the abolishment of the emergency legislation, the cycle of violence spread across many cities in Syria and the slogan of the demonstrations turned into calls for overthrowing the regime (Deeb 2011). Deeb (2011) argues that the unmet reform promises of 2000 – which were inspired by the ‘Damascus Spring’ – led to the demonstrations of 2011.

According to Daher (2019), the initial uprisings were characterized by pluralism and diversity of ethnicity and sects. The majority were, however, Sunnis. The movement nevertheless showed unity of purpose. The people who engaged in the protests were activists who were involved in movements dating back before 2011, and some were secular democrats from religious and ethnic minorities (Abu Najem 2011; Khoury 2013).

Daher argues that the most prominent figures of the early days of the uprising were the same groups that had once benefited from the Baath Party’s social and economic policies (Daher 2019). Pondering over the geography of the protests (Idleb, Daraa and other small towns) reveals a pattern, wherein the once historical strongholds of the regime were now prominent areas of protest (Seifan 2013).

University students, young graduates, and youth also comprised an important segment of the uprising. In September 2011, the Union of Free Syrian Students (UFSS) was established and called for pluralistic democracy. The regime responded to UFSS with force and by July 2012, a quarter of all those killed in protests were university students (Daher 2019). As for the bourgeoisie of Syria, they initially adopted a passive attitude, and hesitated to participate out of fear over their economic interests (Abbas 2011).

3.4.1. Political Opposition

Without covering the entire scope of political opposition groups, I now explain some of the key groups and figures of political opposition. As such, in this section, I discuss the Syrian National Council (SNC) and the National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (generally referred to as the Coalition). I also address the National

Coordination Body for Democratic Change which is an opposition coalition formed inside Syria. The SNC and the Coalition both refer to opposition groups outside Syria.

In October 2011, the SNC was established. It includes individuals who were signatories of the Damascus Declaration of 2005, the Muslim Brotherhood, Kurdish groups, and individuals from local coordination committees. The overdependence of the SNC on foreign actors led to a rift between the interests of its patron states and its own motivations. This ultimately led to divisions over the fate of Assad (Daher 2019). Qatar and Turkey massively funded and supported the SNC. Western and Gulf states also supported the SNC initiative and in 2012, the SNC became recognized by more than 100 countries as being the main opposition reference (ibid). The SNC criticized opposition groups that welcomed negotiations and dialogue with the regime.

Following advocacy by the US and other Western states for the creation of a more inclusive and diverse Syrian opposition group, the Coalition was established in Doha, Qatar in 2012. There was hope by Western states that the Coalition would serve their interests (Carnegie Middle East Center 2013). The SNC then joined the Coalition and the new coalition initially had support from the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The initial patrons of the Coalition were Qatar and Turkey and later on Saudi Arabia. Ultimately, regional actors were keener on securing their own interests than on the effectiveness of the Coalition. The external support exacerbated divisions, especially with rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and the patrons' decreasing interest in al-Asaad's departure. Instead, Saudi Arabia was focused on fighting Iran's growing influence (Hennigan 2018). The rivalry between patrons, and the inability of the SNC and the Coalition to offer inclusive political strategies weakened it as an opposition body. Daher (2019) argues that this weakened position pushed these opposition bodies to legitimize the growing influence of Islamist factions and jihadist groups.

The National Coordination Body for Democratic Change was established in June 2011 and is a non-armed opposition coalition based in Syria. It was established with the aim of uniting the opposition's demands and calling for peaceful anti-regime protests. It is committed to the following principles: "No' to foreign military intervention, 'No' to religious and sectarian instigation, and 'No' to violence and the militarization of the revolution" (Carnegie Middle East Center 2012). Its main demands include peaceful protests as a means of securing basic demands, the release of political prisoners, allowing plurality of political participation, and lifting the emergency legislation.

The National Coordination Body and the SNC continue to be divided regarding negotiations with the GoS. When the early protests started, the National Coordination Body supported negotiations with the GoS and did not call for overthrowing the al-Asaad regime, contrary to the demands of the SNC. Another dividing point is the approach to the FSA. While it believes that the FSA played an essential part in the uprisings in Syria, the National Coordination Body rejects all calls to arm the FSA and rejects violent means. In addition, the National Coordination Body rejected the domination of the Muslim Brotherhood in the SNC and found it a misrepresentation of Syrian society.

3.4.2. Civil Society Initiatives

As previously stated, the ICRC declared Syria a civil war in July 2012 (National Public Radio 2012). However, according to Yassin-Kassab and Al Shami (2016), human rights activists in Syria disagreed with this qualification since they saw the conflict in Syria as mostly one-sided, with the government assaulting civilians and poorly-organized armed groups. As such, it is important to highlight non-armed political opposition that emerged in Syria, forming strong coalitions within both national and international spheres.

During the time of the Baath rule, civil society initiatives were often associated with the US and those who called for an active civil society were labeled as traitors and seeking to disrupt social order (Deeb 2011). Despite this, many opposition figures have established their own civil society organizations outside Syria and have become key players in the international arena. For example, human rights lawyer Anwar Al Bunni, who was one of the signatories to the ‘Manifesto of the 99’ and the ‘Damascus Declaration,’ was arrested for five years on charges of “spreading false rumors which might discourage the nation’s morale” (Al Bunni 2019). He has now established the Syrian Center for Legal Studies and Research (SCLSR) in Berlin, Germany. According to the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), human rights lawyer Mazen Darwish was also arrested for three years for his work to promote freedom of speech in Syria and for participating in a rally to call for the release of political prisoners (FIDH 2011). Darwish established the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (abbreviated as SCM) in Berlin. Both Al Bunni and Darwish are leading figures on international jurisdiction and their work has heavily contributed to French judges issuing international arrest warrants against three high-level officials in the Syrian government (Amnesty International 2018, FIDH 2018, SCLSR 2019, SCM 2019 and SCM n.d).¹⁶

3.4.3. Armed Opposition Groups

As stated previously, the GoS responded with force to the uprisings where the first protests led to the killing of around 100 people (Daher 2019). Daher (2019) states that the GoS launched a targeted attack on democratically-organized and secular activists. The regime felt threatened by the inclusive rhetoric of these individuals, since this undermines the propaganda that the regime was trying to spread about the movement being led by conspiring armed extremists and sectarian groups (Daher 2019).

16 The three officials include Ali Mamlouk, who is the Director of the National Security Bureau, Jamil Hassan who is the head of the Syrian Airforce Intelligence, and Abdel Salam Mahmoud, who is in charge of the Air Force Intelligence Investigative Branch at Mezzeh military airport in Damascus. This is the most notorious detention site with the highest rates of mortality in Syria (FIDH 2018). Mamlouk and Hassan are also the president’s most trusted advisors (FIDH 2018).

As the movement grew, so did the number of defections amongst the army. Many soldiers refused to shoot on protestors who were not carrying arms. Simultaneously, armed resistance began to emerge against security services. According to Boothroyd (2016), the release of Islamic radicals from prison facilitated the creation of armed groups. In June 2011, the GoS granted general amnesty to hundreds of prisoners who were identified as Islamic radicals (BBC 2011). The government presented this as reform in response to the uprisings (ibid). Boothroyd explains that many of the fighters released were part of armed resistance in Iraq. As such, upon their release, “they reconnected with their underground networks to form Islamic armed brigades” (2016, 44).

A few months later, a number of armed brigades were created and the FSA was established (Boothroyd 2016, Daher 2019). FSA was one of the most prominent NSAGs. By the end of 2011, armed resistance became the norm in Syria. Armed factions comprised of army defectors, and people who had taken up arms (Holliday 2012). There was little coordination between armed groups on political or strategic decisions (ibid). Holliday (2012) explains that FSA was based in Turkey, making it the umbrella comprising many other armed factions, and that in almost each governorate in Syria, armed opposition factions emerged. The growth of opposition factions grew after the GoS launched of attack on Homs (ibid).

Holliday (2012) asserts that in February 2012, the GoS exhibited the type of force and escalation it is willing to undergo in order to destroy the opposition group. In Homs, in a neighborhood called Baba Amr, the GoS enacted a one-month siege of an opposition enclave. This eventually forced the opposition fighters to abandon the area. However, while the regime was able to regain terrain, it did not defeat the armed opposition, as the latter regrouped, re-strategized, and began fighting in other areas. Holliday (2012) explains that in Hama in 1982, the force of the regime ended the insurgency and the uprising. However, Holliday (2012) explains that the regime’s 2012 strategy to escalate the attack on Hama had the opposite effect, which led to an accelerated growth of armed opposition groups. The latter have stretched out the national army’s capacities by forcing them to fight multiple battles and fronts at the same time (ibid).

“Regarding concerns that Syria’s armed opposition remains disorganized, it is important to distinguish between fragmentation and localized organization. The armed opposition has shown a propensity for organization at the local level. Insurgencies are inherently decentralized; finding a single leader who commands the allegiance of the grassroots resistance movement is not a reasonable expectation”. (Holliday 2012, 10)

As armed clashes between the regime and the opposition continued, foreign powers started getting involved directly with the armed opposition groups. External states such as Turkey, Russia, Iran, the US and the Gulf States, had competing objectives and were all frantically trying to sway the results to their advantage, wherein “foreign intervention and the armed opposition’s drift toward sectarianism had a mutually amplifying effect”

(Daher 2019, 7). According to Boothroyd (2016) many of the opposition resorted to robbery and smuggling to fund their operations. They often held checkpoints and forced travelers to pay taxes. They also took hold of oil fields and power plants, making way to “warlordism and infighting as some factions grew rich” (Boothroyd 2016, 52). In the following section, I provide brief information about major armed opposition groups in Syria. Going into more detail goes beyond the purpose of this research endeavor.

- The Free Syrian Army (FSA) was formed in 2011 by defectors from the Syrian army mainly but also from civilians who got armed. They received support from the US, Turkey and several Gulf states. In December 2016, the GoS gained its biggest victory against FSA when it recaptured Aleppo. As such, FSA now only controls limited areas in northwestern Syria. In 2018, backed by Turkey, FSA took control over the town of Afrin from the hands of the Kurdish rebel fighters. Afrin is at the Turkish-Syrian border (Al Jazeera 2018a).
- In 2013, IS emerged in northern and eastern Syria and in large parts of Iraq. It formed from off-shoots of Al-Qaeda. The executions they carried out against hostages and their use of social media to recruit foreign fighters sparked a wave of international interest in the group (Orozobekova 2016). They are funded largely by Qatar and Saudi Arabia (Norton 2016) and the US (Global Research 2014).
- Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, also known as Al-Nusra Front, have strong ties to Al-Qaeda. They are considered the second strongest group after IS in Syria. Since January 2017, it operates as part of the opposition coalition of HTS. Since 2018, it controls large portions of Idleb (Counter Extremism Project n.d.). In the context of the “Four Towns Agreement,” HTS were the opposition group that enacted the siege around the towns of Kafreya and Foah in Idleb in 2015 (UNOCHA 2017b).
- Other opposition groups include the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) dominated by the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG). They control the Kurdish areas of Syria, now known as Rojava, or Western Kurdistan. It was formed in 2004 and expanded rapidly during the Syrian conflict (The Kurdish Project n.d.).

3.4.4. Regional and International Intervention

Regional involvement by external states and foreign backing have largely shaped Syria’s conflict. For example, regional actors include governments of Shiite countries such as Iran and Iraq, and Lebanon-based Shiite group Hezbollah (Svoboda and Pantuliano 2015). They have supported strongly the al-Asaad regime by deploying forces to Syria to fight armed opposition groups. On the other side of the regional chessboard are Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia who supported the opposition groups in their attempts

to overthrow the al-Asaad regime (Svoboda and Pantuliano 2015). With IS emerging and shocking the world with brutal videos of executions, a coalition of states emerged that aimed at destroying IS forces (Al Jazeera 2018a). For example, in efforts to protect its borders, Turkish troops led several military operations against IS (ibid). The anti-IS coalition was led by the US and began its military operations against IS targets in 2014 (ibid). At the same time, the US funded other opposition groups with cash and arms.

Regional involvement also came from Israel's side, where Israel targeted Hezbollah in Syria by air raids, making the situation even more complex (Al Jazeera 2018a). In all of these examples, security discourses are the most prominent, where defense of nation-states and borders is the steering wheel for the policies of the countries involved. The two main international actors involved in the Syrian war are the US and Russia, with Russia involving itself more deeply on the ground. Former US President Barack Obama warned that the US would intervene militarily if there was use of chemical weapons in Syria (Al Jazeera 2013). On April 4, 2017, there were allegations that a chemical weapons attack had hit the town of Khan Sheikhoun in the Idleb governorate (Arms Control Association 2018). According to the report by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), there is evidence of the use of sarin and sarin-like gas (OPCW 2017). Pro-government forces, including Russia, have countered these claims arguing that the investigation carried out by the OPCW was done remotely in New York, The Hague and in a country bordering Syria (SANA News 2017). In response, the US directed its first military operation against al-Asaad's forces by destroying a Syrian air base with 59 missiles (Al Jazeera 2018a). The site is believed to be where the chemical weapons attack against Khan Sheikoun had been launched (ibid).

The US was involved in many covert programs in Syria. Perhaps the most notable is the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) training that began in 2013 as a covert program which intended to arm, fund, and train opposition groups against the al-Asaad regime (Al Jazeera 2017a). It was later stopped once the news was revealed to the public. The CIA spent \$500 million and trained 60 fighters before shutting down the program (Al Jazeera 2015). On the other side of international involvement is Russia's campaign. Russia began its military engagement in Syria in September 2015 when it launched a campaign against terrorist groups backed by the US (Al Jazeera 2018a). To strengthen al-Asaad's army, Russia deployed military advisers who helped train the Syrian army (ibid). With regards to the UN Security Council, perhaps the most significant roles have been played by Russia and China who have vetoed the West's plans of how to resolve the conflict in Syria (Al Jazeera 2018b).

According to the Syrian researcher, Akram Al Bunni, the international involvement in the conflict at the political and military level has been at the expense of internal conditions (2018). Away from any talk about the regime winning the war and the opposition losing, there is a need to acknowledge that the regime has lost its capabilities, and its sovereignty to make decisions, unable to sustain its rule without external support from Russia and Iran (Al Bunni 2018).

3.4.5. Negotiation Efforts

On June 30, 2012, the UN and country representatives including the US, Russia, China, France, UK, Turkey, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, and the European Union (EU) met during an international peace conference for Syria. This Geneva framework issued the “Geneva Communiqué” (UN 2012). The Communiqué proposed a six-point plan which focused on the creation of a transitional governing body to lead a political transition. The purpose was to create an agreed framework for negotiations which would garner a comprehensive political settlement (Roman and Bick 2017).

Roman and Bick (2017) argue that this “awkward compromise” is demonstrated mostly in the communiqué’s critical focus on a transitional body based on “mutual consent” (UN 2012), “which meant the Assad regime would have to approve its own negotiated demise” (Heller 2017b). The structure of negotiations was not assigned by the communiqué. A series of trilateral meetings between the US, Russia, and the UN in 2013 resulted in an agreement that the negotiations would take place between the Syrian government and a representative delegation from the opposition (Roman and Bick 2017).

In 2014, the regime and the opposition met again during the Geneva II talks (Heller 2017b). In February 2017, Geneva IV talks initiated, in parallel to negotiation efforts held as part of the Astana talks, which were sponsored by Russia, Iran and Turkey. This spurred fear that the Astana route would make Geneva’s efforts irrelevant. However, the Geneva process remained within a frame of indirect talks where the regime and opposition delegations met de Mistura’s team, but did not meet with each other. Heller (2017b) argues that the government delegation refused to speak about transition, and instead turned the talks on the need to crush terrorism, which is a label the regime assigns to all its opponents. On the other hand, the opposition delegation continuously focused on the need for a transition, which ultimately would amount to regime change.

Despite the uncertain future of the Geneva talks, Heller (2017b) argues that its continuity of the process is important. That way, the Geneva forum is available for a future point when a complete deal could be brokered, and hence, plugged within the Geneva forum to make it internationally legitimate. For a political process to be meaningful, many pieces would have to be set first. For example, Heller (2017a) notes that opposition groups believe that a political process might require a grand bargain between the US and Russia, or Russia’s ability to motivate major structural changes in the Syrian regime.

Heller (2017b) explains that “there is also the fear that, without Geneva, everything will become Astana.” The Astana talks began in December in 2016 and consolidated in January 2017 and were based on negotiations between opposition groups, Russia, and Turkey to evacuate the last rebel-held neighborhoods of Aleppo city (Heller 2017a). The sponsors of the Astana talks have been Russia, Iran and Turkey. Astana was presented as a format for brokering ceasefires wherein Heller (2017a) notes that the Astana forum is mostly for the three guarantor states to seal deals amongst each other.

In an interview held with a Western diplomat, the Astana format was viewed as serving primarily Russia and its political-military ends.

“And Astana has a qualitatively different feel than Geneva, one with which many Geneva attendees are uncomfortable. Geneva enjoys international political legitimacy and, interviewees told me, is based on principles they considered worthy and laudable. Astana skews more towards grubby deal-making, in a way that’s especially alarming for civilians mostly excluded from a forum for armed actors”. (Heller 2017b, 5)

Negotiations between the Syrian government and opposition factions have usually aimed to reach a military ceasefire, thereby transitioning the country. However, the fate of al-Asaad has been the main point of negotiations and peace talks (Al Jazeera 2018b). The UN facilitated the first round of peace talks in Geneva, Switzerland, between the GoS and opposition delegates in June 2012. The final round of talks was concluded in December 2017 when disputes over al-Asaad in a transitional government ended the talks.¹⁷

Eight years into the armed conflict, many Syrians have been forced to flee their homes and seek refuge elsewhere in the country or beyond (Al Jazeera 2018a). According to UNHCR, as of November 2018, there are over 5.5 million registered refugees from Syria and over 6.5 million internally displaced Syrians. Host countries with the highest numbers of Syrian refugees are Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan. According to Al Bunni (2018), it is impossible to conceptualize the Syrian conflict away from the humanitarian costs that it has entailed, in terms of casualties, injuries, detainees and missing persons, internally displaced persons, and migrants.

3.5. Episode at a Glance

The Syrian armed conflict has caused a massive influx of people seeking refuge in neighboring countries. In Syria, far more people are internally displaced within the country than outside it (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2017). Local agreements have been a means to implement an interim ceasefire and to provide aid and services to people. Such truces have stood as glimmers of hope in difficult situations. However, these agreements need to be linked to a broader process of peacebuilding in order to demonstrate a commitment to peace (Turkmani et al. 2014). In an effort to better understand the conflict episode, the ECM analysis requires unraveling answers regarding the “Four Towns Agreement” along 6 basic questions:

17 The UN special envoys for Syria have been Kofi Annan, Lakhdar Brahimi as Joint Special Representative of the Secretaries-General of the UN and the Arab League, Staffan de Mistura as special envoy and finally the current special envoy is Geir Pederson (Al Jazeera 2018a).

What:

- Exchange of bodies and prisoners between GoS and NSAGs
- Evacuation of a set number of wounded individuals and a set number of civilians and githers from the four towns
- Uplift of sieges and implementation of ceasefires across the four towns

Who:

- Regime and patrons: GoS, Lebanese Hezbollah, Iran
- NSAG and patrons: HTS and Qatar
- Evacuees from the four towns of Madaya, Az-Zabadani, Kafreya and Foah
- The United Nations was not a party to the agreement

Where:

- The agreement was sealed in Doha, Qatar after the spokesperson for HTS visited Qatar and finalized the agreement. The implementation of the agreement took place within Syria. In effect, the agreement clears the capital, Damascus, from the stronghold of the HTS and moves the opposition group towards the suburban areas of Syria, mainly the Idleb governorate. Regime supporters in Kafreya and Foah were given refuge in Aleppo, GoS-controlled governorate.

Why:

- Since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011, the four towns have witnessed several intermittent ceasefire agreements. Under the Office of the Special Envoy for Syria, negotiations in Istanbul between the warring parties resulted in the first ceasefire agreement and its implementation began on 22 September 2015. The agreement lasted for six months. By the end of 2016, demands for ceasefires shifted into ones for evacuation of people from the four towns. Under the patronage of Iran and Qatar, negotiations between the warring factions over the transfer of civilians resumed and also included the release of Qatari royal family members who had been kidnapped in Iraq. In return, Qatar pressured the opposition-group to release its prisoners and uplift the siege from Kafreya and Foah.

How:

- The agreement stipulated that the evacuees would depart to a transit area before arriving to the final destination. On April 14, 2017, an estimated 2,350 people from Madaya departed to the GoS-held Ramouseh garage area in Aleppo city and were to be transported to the NSAG-held Idleb governorate. In parallel, 5,000 people from Foah and Kafreya towns were taken towards the NSAG-held transit point in al-Rashideen area, and would finally be transported to the GoS-held area of Aleppo city. A car exploded at the al-Rashideen waiting area where evacuees were waiting to cross to GoS-held Aleppo, killing 125 people. On 19 April 2017, the second evacuation process took place from the four towns. By 19 April

2017, 2,900 people were transferred from Madaya and Az-Zabadani to Idleb and 8,000 people were evacuated from Kafreya and Foah to Aleppo. The towns of Madaya and Az-Zabadani were then handed over to pro-regime forces.

When:

- In a retaliatory dynamic between the GoS and the NSAGs, the four towns were besieged in 2015. Kafreya and Foah which were under the GoS-control became besieged by the NSAGs in March 2015. In retaliation, Madaya and Az-Zabadani which were under NSAG-control, became besieged by GoS and loyal forces in July 2015. After the humanitarian situation worsened in the four besieged towns, negotiations between the GoS and the NSAGs began in March 2017 and materialized in April 2017, specifically between April 12 and April 19.

3.5.1. What

On April 12, 2017, the first phase of the “Four Towns Agreement” initiated with the exchange of bodies and prisoners between the NSAGs and the GoS. A total of 16 prisoners and 8 bodies were released from the government-controlled town of Foah, and nineteen prisoners and one body was released from the NSAGs-controlled Idleb governorate (UNOCHA 2017b). The UNHRC produced a report which asserts that the agreement also included the release of 1,500 detainees by the al-Asaad regime (2017). According to the New York Times (2018), the “Four Towns Agreement” also involved the release of 28 Qataris who were kidnapped in Iraq in 2015. Their release became tied to the “Four Towns Agreement” and was used as a leverage point by the GoS to pressure the opposition groups to comply with the conditions stipulated in the agreement.

Following the exchange of prisoners and bodies, between the 13th and the 19th of April, a total of 2,900 people had been evacuated from the towns of Madaya and Az-Zabadani from the Damascus governorate to the Idleb governorate, and 8,000 had evacuated from the towns of Kafreya and Foah to the Aleppo governorate.

As the cease-fire and the truce was implemented according to the premises of the “Four Towns Agreement”, pro-regime forces initiated a reconciliation process. In that, certain individuals from the previously besieged areas were required to undergo this reconciliation process as a condition to remain in their towns, while others were not given the opportunity to reconcile. In July 2016, Legislative Decree No. 15 was established as the basis for reconciliation, whereby individuals and fugitives who turn themselves in and surrender their weapons are given amnesty (UNHRC 2017). According to the UNHRC, the vast majority of these individuals have been fighters and civilians, who are wanted by the government for defecting (2017).

Based on observations by the UNHRC, the reconciliation process allowed the government to categorize the fighting-age male populations of the four towns on the basis of allegiance. In effect, it filtered males aged 18 to 45 into two categories:

- Wanted individuals and armed men whose only choice is to leave the locality otherwise they risk detention
- Those who agree to pledge loyalty to the government and hence are permitted to stay in their towns

While the latter group is allowed to stay, they are forced to serve in governmental units. Forced conscription includes two alternatives: local units within the National Defense Forces or under the umbrella of a paramilitary force, or they serve at the front lines in the Syrian army after a six-month notice period. However, the reconciliation process was not comprehensive across the four towns. For example, reconciliation was not a viable option for all civilians in Madaya, as no reconciliation was offered to health-care personnel. Moreover, in Madaya, those who exhibited sympathy with opposition groups were not offered reconciliation. Those who were allowed to stay in Madaya pledged loyalty to the regime by providing fingerprint statements and undergoing background checks. As such, the UNHRC argues that the incomprehensive reconciliation process has, in effect, “induced the displacement of both fighters and groups of dissident civilians in the form of organized evacuations” (2017, 6).

3.5.2. Who

The “Four Towns Agreement” had been compiled in two years of negotiations between the GoS, NSAGs, and Third States. It stipulated the safe evacuation of people from the towns, evacuation of the injured, and access to humanitarian assistance (UNOCHA 2017b). The conflict parties that were directly involved in the agreement were the al-Asaad regime, the NSAGs and external third states. It was brokered by the al-Asaad regime and Iran on one side, and Qatar, representing the armed opposition on the other. The UN was not involved in the agreement (Böttcher 2017). Drawing upon the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the BBC reports that the specific groups included HTS on the side of the opposition groups, Hezbollah and Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Group Corps (IRGC) on the side of the regime, and Iran and Qatar as mediators (2017).

According to Böttcher (2017), Qatar played an important role in the 2017 agreement. Qatar’s prominent representation dates back to mid-December 2015, when a group of Qatari and Saudi nationals were kidnapped by Kata’ib Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed Shi’ite militia, while they were bird hunting in the Muthanna governorate in southern Iraq. Negotiations over their release were added to the “Four Towns Agreement” and the details were arranged in March 2017 in Doha, Qatar. Böttcher (2017) asserts that media outlets reported that Qatar paid millions of dollars to the Shi’ite militias and HTS, whereby HTS agreed to free a number of detained Lebanese

fighters in exchange for the release of the Qatari hostages. In a press release by Physicians for Human Rights, they asserted that the agreement was handled primarily by Iran (an al-Asaad patron) and Qatar (a prominent opposition supporter) and no regime officials were actually involved, demonstrating “the extent to which the war has spiraled out of any central control” (Osseiran and Solomon 2017).

3.5.3. Where

While it remains unclear where all the negotiations took place, Al Monitor confirmed that on March 26, 2017, Hussam al-Shafi (also known as Zaid al-Attar), spokesman for Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and political chief of HTS, visited Qatar to strike the deal (Mardasov 2017). With regards to the implementation phase of the agreement, the agreement can be seen as a means to clear the capital, Damascus, from the stronghold of the NSAGs and to move the opposition groups towards the suburban areas of Syria, mainly the Idleb governorate (UNHRC 2017). According to UNHRC, the evacuation of the Damascus-besieged populations and armed groups from the towns Madaya and Az-Zabadani to the Idleb governorate serves as a calculated warring strategy. In that, the evacuation achieves the removal of both opposition actors and their supporters to the northwest area of Syria (ibid).

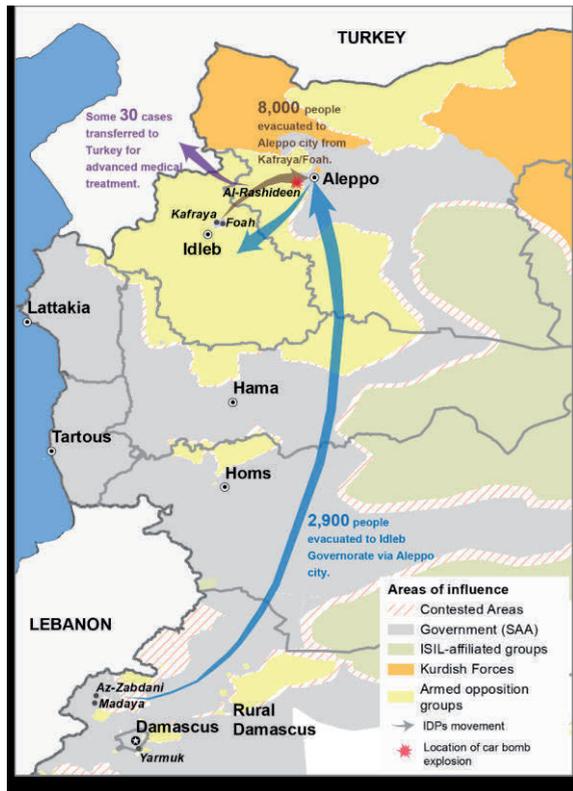


Figure 4: Evacuations from the four towns (UNOCHA 2017b, 1)

Going back to the reconciliation process conditions, those who are perceived to be sympathetic to opposition factions (including civilians, doctors, relief workers, activists, civil society staff and local council members), were not offered a chance to reconcile

and stay in their towns (UNHRC 2017). Those who pledge loyalty to the government are allowed to stay in their hometowns. As such, the population transfer can be seen as a pattern intended towards engineering changes in the political demographics of political support. In effect, what the agreement achieves is redrawing and reconsolidating the bases of support for the government in Aleppo and squeezing the opposition group factions in Idleb. By doing so, the regime is able to strike an offensive against the opposition groups in Idleb, without risking casualties to its Shiite supporters in the two towns of Kafreya and Foah (UNHRC 2017).

On April 12, the first phase of the agreement started with the exchange of prisoners and dead bodies between the warring factions. According to the UNOCHA (2017b), government forces in Foah released sixteen prisoners and eight bodies, and NSAGs in the Idleb governorate released nineteen prisoners and one body. It is unclear whether the Qatari and Saudi hostages were released in this initial exchange.

In the days following its implementation, the agreement was delayed and interrupted on several occasions. On April 13, a car bomb exploded outside the SARC office in Idleb city, and later that day, several mortar rounds struck the towns of Foah and Kafreya, wounding some individuals and damaging some of the evacuation buses (UNOCHA 2017b).

Nevertheless, the evacuations began on April 14 for all towns. The agreement stipulated that the evacuees would depart to a transit area before arriving to the final destination. And so, on April 14, an estimated 2,350 people from Madaya departed to the GoS-held Ramouseh garage area in Aleppo city and were to be transported to the NSAG-held Idleb governorate. In parallel, 5,000 people from Foah and Kafreya towns headed towards the NSAG-held transit point in al-Rashideen¹⁸ area, and would finally be transported to the GoS-held area of Aleppo city. Disagreements and disputes between the conflict parties over the implementation of the agreement resulted in some delays, with the evacuees sitting on the evacuation buses for several hours (UNOCHA 2017b).

On April 15, upon the arrival of both groups to the transit points, the agreement again faced disputes between the conflict parties, which resulted in a 12-hour delay. While negotiations were taking place, NSAGs allowed the evacuees to get off the buses, during which two vehicles (a car and a van) approached the evacuation convoy and started distributing snacks to the evacuees. Due to the 12-hour wait, the evacuees were hungry. When a bigger car approached, the NSAGs encouraged them to collect the food. At around 3:30 pm, the car exploded at the al-Rashideen waiting area, where evacuees from Foah and Kafreya were waiting to cross to GoS-held Aleppo. Local health authorities reported that the explosion killed 125 people, including at least 67 children, 13 women and 16 men, and the wounding of 413 people including 58 children, and 7 humanitarian workers (UNOCHA 2017b).

18 Al-Rashideen area is on the western outskirts of Aleppo city and is under NSAGs control (UNOCHA 2017b).

Following the attack, humanitarian organizations and cross-border partners in Turkey provided sporadic assistance to the wounded where 275 people were treated in hospitals in Idleb, 138 people in Aleppo and 30 patients requiring advanced medical treatment were transferred to Turkey. In the aftermath, it was found that 45 Shiite individuals went missing, because they were taken hostage by NSAGs after receiving medical treatment in Aleppo. According to UNHRC (2017), some hostages were later released after prolonged negotiations to swap one high-ranking opposition leader, but at least 15 remain missing, including one 4-year-old child who remains in captivity.

A few hours after the explosion, the agreement ensued and the evacuation buses from the towns of Madaya and Az-Zabadani reached Idleb, and those from Foah and Kafreya crossed to Aleppo. On April 19, the second evacuation process took place from the four towns, with the same operating procedures. Around 550 persons evacuated from Madaya and Az-Zabadani to Idleb city, and 3,000 people departed from Foah and Kafreya towards Aleppo. Interruptions and delays also made the evacuation process slower. Nevertheless, according to UNOCHA (2017b), Az-Zabadani is now completely empty of people.

According to interviews conducted by UNHRC, civilians shared that their decision to leave their besieged towns was involuntary (2017). For example, in Madaya, those who were interviewed stressed their desire to remain in their homes. Fearing forced conscription, they did not trust the government forces enough to stay. This atmosphere of mistrust caused many people to be reluctant to accept the regime's offer to reconcile because they feared detention. Many noted that they feared ever returning home, and some had given up on that prospect. Some recalled that their homes had been appropriated by pro-government forces, making a journey back home almost impossible.

In a similar vein, civilians in Kafreya noted that they did not want to abandon their homes, but the deteriorating siege conditions forced them to accept the evacuation plan. Several accounts recalled that increased attacks, malnourishment, and the outbreak of diseases made the evacuation agreement the only viable option. Interviewees from Kafreya also expressed their desire to return to their homes but were doubtful regarding those prospects (UNHRC 2017).

Testimonies from civilians over their involuntary evacuation from their homes show the delineation of such agreements from the clamoring truths on the ground. According to UNHRC (2017), the participation of the SARC during the evacuation plan for Madaya does not render the agreement lawful. Moreover, local councils have been created in opposition-held areas in order to maintain understanding with armed groups. Such memorandums have affirmed their capacities as quasi-civil governance bodies.

“Despite this, neither political leaders, such as local council representatives, nor military commanders, such as pro-Government or armed group fighters, possess the requisite authority to consent to evacuation agreements on behalf of individual civilians”. (UNHRC 2017, 7)

3.5.4. How and When

When anti-regime protests started in the summer of 2011, the people of the town of Madaya joined and rallied for political freedom and hoisted the flag of the revolution in the town's square (Amnesty International 2017). With the armed conflict escalating, the Syrian army began tightening its control over movements in and out of the valley where Madaya and Az-Zabadani are nestled. Their very close proximity to the Lebanese borders allowed Syrians to pass a single road from these two towns and make their way to Lebanon. In parallel, the towns of Kafreya and Foah are predominantly home to Shiite populations in the Idlib governorate, which is predominantly Sunni. In Syria, the Shiite population is generally known for being an avid supporter of the Syrian regime and Iran.

In 2015, the opposition group committed an offensive on the Idlib governorate, and established a stronghold around the two Shiite towns. And in March 2015, several armed opposition groups began encircling the two adjacent towns of Kafreya and Foah. The siege was primarily held by HTS and the Ahrar al-Sham Islamic Movement (The Syria Institute 2016).

Since Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah are interested in protecting these Shiite towns, the regime forces retaliated and encircled the two towns of Madaya and Az-Zabadani in July 2015. The GoS enacted a total siege which blocked the road to Damascus, and the towns' borders with Lebanon were encircled by the regime's Lebanese ally, Hezbollah. The only road to enter and exit the two towns was manned by pro-regime forces and checkpoints (Amnesty International 2017).

According to Amnesty International's report on mass displacement (2017), in Idlib, armed opposition groups attacked civilians using shelling and explosives, restricted the transport of humanitarian and medical aid, and stole medical supplies from aid convoys. The indiscriminate attacks on civilians violate international humanitarian law and, in some cases, amount to war crimes. For example, according to Amnesty International (2017), 3,000 people, the majority of them being civilians, were killed in Foah during the two-year siege, as a result of indiscriminate shelling and attacks. In addition, according to the Violations Documentation Center (VDC) in Syria, 51 civilians were killed by GoS attacks on Madaya between July 1, 2015 and April 14, 2017, mostly as a result of sniper fire (VDC 2017)¹⁹.

Since their siege in 2015, the four towns remained critically besieged by forces loyal to the regime including Hezbollah, Iraqi armed groups and the Syrian army, and from the opposition's side, primarily HTS. During 2016, humanitarian conditions worsened and by early September 2016, malnutrition was a major problem for all populations. The unavailability of basic goods and the price inflation made it very difficult for people to access food items (Amnesty International 2017).

19 The list of casualties has been published by the VDC in Syria (2017).

The humanitarian response to the crisis was inadequate due to difficulties in gaining access to the target populations. Access to the towns was granted in a tit-for-tat manner, where the GoS only allowed the UN access to Madaya and Az-Zabadani in return for the NSAGs granting humanitarian access to Kafreya and Foah. Following this retaliatory dynamic, between October 2015 and March 2017, the UN and its partners delivered aid to the four towns on nine occasions (Amnesty International 2017). However, on two occasions, humanitarian aid was unable to reach more than 60,000 people in the four towns for periods of four to five months in 2016 and 2017 (ibid). With the tightening conditions under which humanitarian organizations work, 65 people in Madaya died from starvation and malnutrition between July 2015 and May 2016 (Physicians for Human Rights 2016).

After immense pressure from the international community following these unfortunate conditions, the GoS allowed aid to be delivered to Madaya in return for the NSAGs allowing the same in Kafreya and Foah. Between the months of August and October 2016, only one UN interagency aid convoy managed to reach the four besieged towns. On September 25, a total of 49 trucks reached Madaya, carrying supplies for 38,000 people, and four aid trucks reached Az-Zabadani. Specific numbers of aid shipments to Kafreya and Foah could not be obtained (Amnesty International 2017). The aid shipment to Madaya carried basic food supplies and non-essential medical items. However, it lacked necessary goods such as fuel, important medical supplies, protein, baby milk and salt (Amnesty International 2017).

Between August and October 2016, negotiations over several small evacuations for severe medical cases were carried out, in a tit-for-tat manner from Madaya in return for evacuations from Foah. In August 2016, a total of 40 patients were evacuated for medical treatment. Four meningitis patients were also evacuated in September, and another eight people were evacuated from Madaya and Foah on October 6. Following this last evacuation, negotiations ceased and the “Four Towns Agreement” completely broke down. Reasons for the collapse of the agreement are conflicting. For example, according to The Syria Institute (2016), Iranian intermediary had suspended negotiations with the opposition local committee. However, according to The New York Times (2018), the opposition group had rejected the 2015 agreement since Iran had suggested swapping the residents from the four towns: residents of Kafreya and Foah would move to Madaya and Az-Zabadani, and vice-versa.

In March 2017, reports demonstrated that surrender negotiations were underway by various actors in different parts of the country. On the side of the government, negotiations were led by Russia, the Syrian government, and Iran. Each actor aimed for different results and hence diverged in their aims of the negotiations. For example, Russian negotiation efforts were more inclined to maintain the presence of Syrian civilian populations in their own land. In that, Russian desires diverged from those of Syrian and Iranian negotiators who supported civilian population transfers (Amnesty International 2017). One of these negotiation efforts resulted in resuming communication between the GoS and the opposition groups, and under the aegis of

third states. As such, the “Four Towns Agreement” was sealed in Doha, Qatar in March 2017 and contextualized in April (UNOCHA 2017b).

3.5.5. Why

Throughout the course of the armed conflict, the four towns have witnessed several intermittent ceasefire agreements. Under the aegis of the office of the UN Special Envoy for Syria in Istanbul, negotiations between the warring parties reached the first ceasefire agreement and began its implementation on September 22, 2015 (Reuters 2015). The agreement stipulated a halt to hostilities, delivery of humanitarian aid and the medical evacuations of the ill and injured under the supervision of the UN. The agreement lasted for six months. While negotiations were held to seal similar ceasefire agreements between 2015 and 2016, none of them managed to uplift the sieges or halt the hostilities (UNOCHA 2017b).

However, by the end of 2016, demands for ceasefires shifted into ones for evacuation of people from the four towns. Under the patronage of Iran and Qatar, negotiations between the warring factions over the transfer of civilians resumed (Amnesty International 2017). It also included the release of Qatari royal family members who had been kidnapped in Iraq. In return, Qatar pressured the opposition-group to release its prisoners and uplift the siege from Kafreya and Foah.

On March 30, 2017, UN humanitarian chief Stephen O’Brien notified that the warring factions informed the UN of the “Four Towns Agreement” to evacuate the people from Madaya, Az-Zabadani, Kafreya and Foah, to deliver aid, and to halt hostilities for nine months. After the exchange of prisoners and bodies between the GoS and the NSAGs, the evacuation plan started and by April 19, 2,900 people were transferred from Madaya and Az-Zabadani to Idlib and 8,000 people were evacuated from Kafreya and Foah to Aleppo. Madaya and Az-Zabadani was handed over to pro-regime forces.

During April 2017, negotiation efforts by Iran and Qatar sought to add the evacuation of three more towns, Yelda, Babbila and Beit Sahm, (abbreviated as YBB), as part of the “Four Towns Agreement.” However, people from YBB took the streets and protested against the idea of forced displacement (The Syria Institute 2017). In addition, as a later phase of the “Four Towns Agreement,” the negotiating bodies agreed that HTS would hand over control of the Yarmouk camp to the regime and would be evacuated out of the area. As such, in a retaliatory dynamic, on May 8, 2017, a medical evacuation was carried out for a group of HTS fighters from the Yarmouk and four ill patients from Kafreya and Foah (The Syria Institute 2016). However, the agreement to transfer HTS from Yarmouk camp faltered and the transfer of the remaining civilians from Kafreya and Foah halted. Eight thousand civilians continued to be besieged by the opposition groups and lived in dire conditions (Amnesty International 2017) until a new deal was reached in July 2018 which stipulated the

evacuation of the 8,000 people in return for the release of prisoners from government prisons (The Independent 2018, The National 2018b).

4. The Themes: Securitization of the “Four Towns Agreement”

A friend who painted dogs and undignified men who hurt her,
who sang delicious lines in our home,
flew off one day, and left me a lifetime of plants to feed.
I, who had not been green, forever.

They shot tall, loomed large in the room, kept going.
Travel plans were peppered with requests to keep them alive,
my curtains a new form of sunlight feeding,
fledgling shoots my secret earth, the fingers brown and happy.

I learnt how the sun is a kind siren, how we bend to her will, even when heavy.
How soil is a mystery, best left as magic.
Why father would not leave a war zone,
after thirty years of naming his plants.

I hunger for wider leaves, longer stems, a fluorescent green glow.
My plants pirouette, in air and light and water.
In them,
Mourning song of dead birds in the freckled hands of my father,
the blue eyes of my dead farmer uncle,
the sweaty chest of the dead Palestinian grandmother I never met,
the memory of dead roses on balconies that left Damascus, when mother did.

Do not touch my plants in disrespect, or hatred.
It will hurt you.

----- Hind Shoufani, Seven Songs for Syria (2017)

Using the ECM methodology previously presented, such an analysis of the “Four Towns Agreement” allows for a deeper understanding of the conflict epicenter. In that, the ECM model explores how themes of harmony, justice, truth, and security clashed within the negotiated agreement and those who were affected by it. Furthermore, it examines the conflictive aspects of each theme of the conflict episode, and each relevant conflict party of the agreement.

After adopting the principles of resonance, correspondence, and homeostasis across all the ECM branches, the next branch pertains to the peace families. Within this, analyzing the conflict episode of the “Four Towns Agreement” across the specific thematic emphases reveals the imbalances between these peace families. According to Dietrich (2012), all the thematic variations of peace are at play and sometimes at tension at the epicenter of a conflict episode. These themes include the following: notions of harmony within energetic understandings of peace, the theme of justice in their moral understanding of peace, the question and practice of security in modern notions of peace, and finally the plurality of truths within postmodern ideas of peace. For Dietrich (2012), it is the balance between these four themes that allows for a transrational understanding of peace to emerge.

“Transrational peaces send the human being on a lifelong quest in search for the dynamic balance in which ethical moments may manifest as characteristic of aesthetic ones, and aesthetic moments as topic of ethical ones. Harmony may be a function of security, security one of justice, justice one of truth, which in turn can only exist in harmony”. (Dietrich 2012, 268)

4.1. Securitization²⁰ of the Agreement

The context of the “Four Towns Agreement” is framed around a ceasefire, the exchange and/or release of a set number of bodies and prisoners, and the evacuation of a set number of fighters, civilians, and wounded individuals from Madaya, Az-Zabadani, Kafreya and Foah. Within each of these premises lies an over-emphasis on security. Yet, the question that posits itself is: does the “Four Towns Agreement” over-emphasize the security of the people or that of the state?

In order to explore this, I begin my analysis by resorting to international humanitarian law to understand the key protection and operational considerations for in-country evacuations. Rule 129 of the ICRC *Customary International Humanitarian Law* stipulates that international parties to a conflict are not eligible to initiate the displacement of a civilian population, unless there is an imperative security demand to do so. Such a demand is justified on the basis of the security of civilians, for example to

20 Term first introduced by Ole Wæver in 1993 (Taurek 2006) where ‘securitization’ refers to a process where a certain issue is made a matter of security which then allows the use of extraordinary measures. It is not necessary that the threat is actually real (Balzacq 2005).

curb any grave danger from incurring to them (UNHRC 2017). Further, Rule 109 asserts that the evacuation of the wounded and sick individuals is an obligation at all times, and should not be limited to the evacuation period. In addition, according to the *Commentary on the Additional Protocols of 8 June 1977 to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949*, political motives and military necessities do not justify civilian evacuations (UNHRC 2017).

During the two years of the siege, both sides adopted a retaliatory dynamic. Within this sad orchestration, the residents of the four towns themselves were the most affected by virtue of their hometowns. As such, several reports find that the “Four Towns Agreement” is an agreement for the forced displacement of the populations from Madaya, Az-Zabadani, Kafreya and Foah (UNHRC 2017; Amnesty International 2017). According to the HRC, given that the residents were not allowed to freely decide neither on their movement, nor on their final destination, the evacuation efforts amount to an “unlawful order” (2017, 8). The report concludes that the evacuations do not fulfill the exceptions stated previously, in terms of security of civilians or military reasons, and hence, constitutes “the war crime of forced displacement” (2017, 8). By examining the details of the “Four Towns Agreement,” the April 15 attack on the convoy in al-Rashideen attests to the perilous and desperate journeys that evacuations are. During the transfer of the populations from Kafreya and Foah, a suicide bomb left 125 people dead and 45 people missing (UNHRC 2017). Moreover, those who were evacuated from Madaya and Az-Zabadani to the Idleb governorate were initially poorly accommodated in schools and in overpopulated camps for internally displaced persons (UNHRC 2017).

Further, with regards to the homes that were left behind in each of the four towns Madaya, Az-Zabadani, Kafreya and Foah, the UNHRC report found that the GoS has taken legislative action to confiscate land (2017). Upon the evacuation, the government dispossesses the populations of their left-behind homes and properties. It has also hindered the ability of transferred populations to register new or to retain old private properties. The GoS has raised legal and administrative impediments for property-ownership where it now requires in-person registration, making it virtually impossible for many evacuees to do so because of the severity of the fighting countrywide (UNHRC 2017).

Despite these conditions, opposition groups have reported that they accept deals with the regime because they want sieges to be uplifted and to bring security to their



Figure 5: Map showing land held by Syrian regime and opposition groups (Osseiran and Solomon 2017).

hometown. Since the opposition groups find themselves being defeated and losing territory, they also find such agreements an opportunity to regroup and re-strategize (Hinnebusch and Imady 2017). “After years of unrest, massacres and deadlocks, public opinion seems to shift in favor of the security and safety which the regime could deliver” (Lakitsch 2017).

Looking at these aspects through transrational lenses reveals that the “Four Towns Agreement” has been framed mainly as a security problem, which becomes an imbalance towards modern peace. Dillon (1996) asserts that within the imperative to act and preserve security, great insecurity is born, especially for those who are perceived to be a threat. By this token, the threat to the Syrian state is the presence of the NSAG enclave in close vicinity to the Lebanese borders and Damascus. The state is also threatened by the possibility of using the presence of the state’s Shiite supporters besieged in Kafreya and Foah as a leverage against the GoS.

Within the ECM analysis, the transrational lens sees an imbalance in the system towards maintaining the security of the state, at the expense of diminishing security for the residents affected by the “Four Towns Agreement.” At the core of a transrational understanding of a system is the recognition that the existing polis is open and not free of tensions. That is, under a new organization of the existing system, previous imbalances and dysfunctional relationships are also re-organized, creating new dynamic equilibriums and changes. Since changes push communities away from their comfort zones, changes can cause tensions. This means that the transfer of people from one town to another is bound to cause changes in the system. And within an open and transrational understanding, the system finds a new balance, one that is able to accommodate to the new human interactions. Therefore, the question of balance pertains to the ability of an open system to integrate the movement of the populations from the four towns. Such an event not only affects those who have to be evacuated, but those who host them in the new governorates. Therefore, an open system is never the same at any given moment in time.

In addition, the securitization of the “Four Towns Agreement” creates a strong sense of national identity between the populations from the NSAG-controlled areas in Madaya and Az-Zabadani, against those from the government-controlled areas of Kafreya and Foah. Echavarría Álvarez explains that when trust is restricted to only those who are culturally similar, “fear is externalized in the figure of the migrant” (Echavarría Álvarez 2014b, 181). In the context of the “Four Towns Agreement,” the figure of the migrant is represented in the internally displaced persons affected by the evacuation deal.

The Syrian conflict has created physical and societal threats between its own people, dividing the communities between regime supporters or regime opposition. Along these rigid divisions, the war has united political communities against ‘others.’ Transfixed by political identity features (such as being pro-regime, or pro-opposition), individuals have engaged in acts of political solidarity with the warring factions, without questioning ‘who we are’ (Echavarría Álvarez 2014b). From a transrational perspective, these rigid representations are far too reductionist and do not convey a realistic image

of the different people in Syria, who they support, who they oppose, and most importantly, who they are as Syrians. The crisis of representation is also clearly highlighted in the efforts by the GoS to empty Madaya and Az-Zabadani to ensure the security of its stronghold in Damascus. The presence of these ‘migrants,’ poses unequivocal threat to its centralizing power (Agamben 1998). Relationally speaking, the GoS takes measure to ensure its personal security.

The physical relocation of the populations from the four towns is an act that separates them from their social, cultural and economic networks. This creates alienation and intensifies mistrust. The creation of an ‘us’ that is different and distanced from a ‘them,’ feeds into an image of a collective homogenous ‘other.’ Under these circumstances, groups are unable to see personal stories in the ‘other,’ and hence, find it extremely difficult to build relationships of trust or healthy communication (Echavarría Álvarez 2014b, 181).

From a transnational perspective, the lack of trust prevents communities from establishing empathic relations, which ultimately hinders peaceful relations. Dietrich (2012) criticizes modern variations of peace for being grounded outside and beyond human relations. He argues that within such a modern understanding of peace, the securitization of migration issues²¹ becomes driven towards breaking relational bonds. Beyond the availability of humanity, it perceives insecurity as the failure in ‘resolving the conflict’ with technical knowledge. What it overlooks is the human element in conflicts: the people whose lives are affected and the stories they carry. Modern tools rely on data on conflict-ridden populations but cannot capture the perplexity of what it means to be a human in that conflict situation. “Herein lies one of the major pitfalls of modern notions of peace: to ground the ‘tools’ for solving violent conflict in legitimized state violence” (Echavarría Álvarez 2018, 117).

In light of the “Four Towns Agreement,” legitimized violence is highlighted in the use of sieges by the warring factions (state and non-state actors) as a tool of war. It also becomes visible when the context and conditions of the agreement are explored with scrutiny. The evacuation deal achieves some key points related to security: the uplift of sieges, the release of prisoners and bodies, and the transfer of people and wounded individuals to safer zones. However, the security dystopia of the “Four Towns Agreement” lies in the fact that the people’s decision to evacuate from the towns of Madaya, Az-Zabadani, Kafreya, and Foah was involuntary, their decision to return to their homes was almost impossible, and the evacuation exposed them to grave danger. What the agreement achieves is a higher sense of personal security for the state and the non-state actors, characterized by strategic land-control and the strategic protection of populations of interest.

21 For the context of the “Four Towns Agreement,” migration refers to the internal displacement of the populations affected by the evacuation deal.

4.1.1. Beyond the Episode’s Security

“In order to break the siege, you need to first break the silence surrounding it.”
Former resident from the besieged Yarmouk camp in Damascus, Syria (SAMS 2015, 4)

Beyond the episode of the “Four Towns Agreement,” local agreements in Syria have become a major strategy to coerce surrender of the opposition. The government presents the agreements as reconciliation efforts, but that reconciliation is initiated only after years of sieges and bombardment. The agreements result in the evacuation of armed groups, mass displacement, and the government’s control of previously opposition areas. “The population transfers on the now-infamous green buses have come to symbolize the dispossession and defeat” (Amnesty International 2017, 6).

The episode of the “Four Towns Agreement” serves as a stark entry point into a discussion of population displacement through reconciliation agreements as consequences of the armed conflict in Syria. Lichtenheld (2017) asserts that warring factions use population displacement as part of their strategic practices, amounting to an association between wartime violence and displacement that is often assumed but not interrogated. In this section, I use the episode of the “Four Towns Agreement” as a starting point to examine and discuss besiegement and reconciliation efforts that trigger mass displacement in the Syrian conflict across the different peace families, beginning with the modern notions of peace that stem out of security.

The work of Barry Buzan (1991), *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, is foundational in the world of IR and theories of security. Many theories of security have emerged since the end of World War II and yet there is no consensus over the general definition of security. The two classical schools of security in IR are the realist and idealist-inspired security ideas, which continue to inform academic and political understandings of security.

The realist school understands security in its relation to power, such that “an actor with enough power to reach a dominating position would acquire security as a result” (Buzan 1991, 2). In contrast, the idealist school understands security as a derivative of peace, where peace secures security for all. A second set of definitions places notions of national security in tandem with notions of identity. In that, national security becomes concerned with maintaining a certain way of life, in accordance with the needs of the people. Other understandings combine national security with the state’s ability to pursue its national interests, in any place in the world.

Within such discourses on security, it appears that Syria offers a confusing mix of failed agendas from the past and a hodgepodge of security sub-dynamics. For example, existing literature suggests that the deliberate displacement of populations succeeds in removing certain undesirable social groups in order to create homogenous territories (Walling 2000; Mann 2005). Also, research on counterinsurgency sees in forced displacement a response to information problems (Steele 2011; Zhukov 2014). Following the realist school of thought, such actions secure the power of the state.

Another lens to aid in understanding security beyond the “Four Towns Agreement” is the idealist school that understands security as a derivative of peace. In the context of the Syrian conflict, security becomes a product of ceasefires. For politicians envisioning the future of Syria, before anything else, a ceasefire is a starting point for any demonstrable good on the ground. Since the start of the conflict in 2011, there have been five attempts to establish a nation-wide ceasefire. Each ceasefire was negotiated by the conflict parties, under the aegis of third-states. Each of the attempts to halt hostilities in Syria came to an end (Al Jazeera 2017b).

What seems apparent for Syria’s peace-talks is that a ceasefire is not an end in itself as long as the purpose out of it is only to gain time. Repeatedly, ceasefires have been a mere alibi by the US and UN to pretend to have achieved something. Repeatedly, ceasefires have been taken by the regime and Russia to regroup and re-strategize. Each time, both coalitions have gained time, but Syrians have lost collectively. For officials tasked with ‘managing’ the conflict in Syria, conventional wisdom has rendered their efforts a political cycle trapped within the realms of what is expected of them: of speaking the language of ‘stabilization’ as the war worsens, and ‘dialogue’ in the absence of any basis for reconciliation (Harling, Simon and Berthier 2017). As such, solution-finders and top negotiators follow the default reconciliation narrative of attempting to bridge the conflicting factions while paying lip service to Syrian representation (Lundgren 2015).

Reconciliation, which is primarily a concern for religious topics and social psychology, has now emerged as a political category (Abu-Nimer 2001; Minow 1998). In Lederach’s book *When Blood and Bones Cry Out*, he describes the term ‘reconciliation as “a buzzword for politicians wishing to end wars they no longer seem interested in supporting” (2005, 3). David Crocker (1999, 60) asserts that the political arena has adopted a “thin” rather than a ‘thick’ understanding of reconciliation, whereby politicians use reconciliation in an effort to accommodate enmities and to promote coexistence. This type of ‘thin’ reconciliation does not tap into the entrenched divisions, but is a prescriptive recipe to control the bitterness in divided societies (Crocker 1999). Ignatieff (2003) coins it as a ‘cold peace’ whereby coexistence becomes possible without actually forgiving the crimes. As the war protracts, Syrians are gravitating towards more isolation from each other and those who often mean to help, fail to listen (Harling 2016). Sensible and reasonable solutions have been offered yet by failing to listen to the anguished subjectivities of the people, they have shown to be far removed from the realities on the ground (ibid).

4.1.2. The Syrian Security Apparatus

In Syria, the mainstream reading of security refers to something rather specific: the security apparatus. Within a modern understanding of the security of the nation-state, the Syrian regime’s security paradigm is understood in terms of its power (Büchs 2009). Given the dominance of the theme of security, I am compelled to offer my readers a

modern understanding of how the Syrian regime maintains security and power. As such, in this section, I travel through concepts of a modern understanding of power, one which perceives power as a thing; something that can be taken away. The aim is to demonstrate measures of maintaining security in Syria. Although the majority of the sources consulted for this section date back to before the Syrian armed conflict, I find it important to understand the context of the Syrian armed conflict.

According to Büchs (2009), studying comparative issues specific to Syria have focused on the study of coups and repressive institutions of the state. However, Büchs (2009) argues that coups tell us how regimes assumed power, but they tell us little about how they remain in power afterwards. Understanding the repressive state institutions through structural institutionalism is unable to form a link between the macrolevel and microlevel (Büchs 2009; Migdal 2001). Moreover, in Syria’s case, most functionalist approaches classify Syria as a subtype of “modern military praetorianism” (Perlmutter 1981, 42) or as a military system (Nordlinger 1997).

It is important to note the use of the terms ‘regime’ and ‘state’. The concept of the state is broader than the concept of the regime, where ‘regime’ typically refers to a broad organized system of rule (Calhoun 2002), government patterns within a space, and a specific form of organized power (Tripp 1989) where the regime possesses legitimate force within a territory (Mitchell 1991; Migdal 2001). While not equating both concepts, from a modern lens, the regime is studied and understood through an analysis of the state (Perthes 1997; Hinnebusch 1990).

In the case of Syria, Büchs explains that “the regime appropriates the state as a means of gaining the obedience and compliance of the Syrian people” (2009, 6). She notes that in Syria there is a lack of clear distinction between regime and state since the regime has in large been able to create and transform state institutions in its own image (ibid). Within such a modern understanding of the state, the issue of power becomes intimately intertwined as a means through which the state maintains obedience and conformity (Clark and Salloukh 2008). Hence, the need to conceptualize the state through an understanding of the forms of power it possesses (Wedeen 1999).

“The study of the regime through the state can then provide access to the power of the regime in so far as the Syrian regime, having appropriated the state, is exerting its power through and on the basis of that state” (Büchs 2009, 9).

Moreover, a discussion on power entails a discussion on state autonomy. According to Migdal (2001), state autonomy envisages the state as a coherent entity that is autonomous from societal forces. This stems from conceptualizing within a state a subjective nature which leads to its “authoritative intentions” (Mitchell 1991, 82), wherein the state is seen as possessing its own subjective ideas and plans. In his critique on state autonomy, Timothy Mitchell (1991) challenges the state-society border on the basis that the mechanisms of a political order extend beyond the state.

Büchs (2009) argues that the Syrian regime maintains obedience through material and ideational forms, in the form of a ‘tacit pact’.²² A tacit pact refers to an inequitable relationship between two parties²³. The weaker party is under permanent threat of exclusion from assets or coercion to ensure obedience. Despite these efforts, Heydemann (1999) notes that the continuous social unrest and the existence of opposition are clear indicators that the “tacit pact” as a form of domination and control is unable to produce the political stability it aspires to.

The material forms of power are political wherein political voice is traded for economic rewards. Through this, the weaker party ensures its inclusion economically, but is excluded politically. Ideational forms of power refer to an internalized frame through instilled fear, cynicism, and a concept of patriarchy. It refers to the state’s ability to manipulate images of power and authority. Both forms represent a “tacit pact” since the pact is between unequal parties.

Using a corporatist approach, Büchs (2009) analyses the power of the Syrian regime through its employment of punitive measures to ensure obedience and punish noncompliance. Lisa Wedeen (1999) argues that the successful ability of the regime to build “institutions of enforcement and punishment” (1999, 5) refers to the material interests which stem from the ability of the regime to control and withdraw material resources. This is referred to as ‘material’ power. Using a corporatist lens, Büchs argues that it allows for an understanding of authoritarianism beyond its repressive measures. Crystall (1994) explains that authoritarianism should not only be understood negatively; that is, by that which it is not, essentially democracy.

Punitive measures which ensure obedience attest to the Syrian regime’s successful means of coercion (Tripp 1989). As previously stated, the security apparatus in Syria includes the police, military forces, and security services. The security services are particularly notorious for their surveillance in an open fashion, through several legally unchecked nets that pervade “all parts of society, including the bureaucracy, the party and the army” (Perthes 1997, 48). The security apparatus is considered one of the regime’s most effective ways of creating an atmosphere of fear, wherein, as will be explained later, the power of the apparatus has been highly associated with the “personality cult around Hafez and Bashar al-Asad,” which has conditioned people’s behavior out of fear, as opposed to belief in the regime (Büchs 2009, 15).

According to Büchs (2009), the regime has maintained tight-grip control over the security apparatus through the employment of two methods. First, it has offered material incentives to members of the security apparatus, the *mukhabarat*, and hence, has created dependency. For example, the security apparatus offers material incentives such as employment, certain privileges, tax exemptions, higher wages than in other areas of state employment, and political status²⁴.

22 Nazih Ayubi originally introduced the expression “tacit political pact” (Ayubi 1995, 246).

23 In Transrational terminology, this relationship would be seen as imbalanced.

24 Many officials in the security apparatus end up holding key political positions in the government (International Crisis Group 2004).

Second, the regime conducts ‘checks’ which are meant to control and maintain balance across the forces of the security apparatus. This is intended to prevent independent coalitions from forming within the institutions (Perthes 1997). In addition, in order to increase its control over the security apparatus, every key official’s position was made directly dependent on the president, wherein people of trust owed the president their loyalty (Büchs 2009). Therefore, the Syrian regime successfully organized modes of punishment through creating an all-pervasive security apparatus which the regime maintains control over through a system of loyal patronage and effective ‘checks.’

According to Büchs (2009), power in Syria is also largely rooted in concepts of patriarchy. Images and symbols that are associated with the regime are manipulated, and hence, become internalized. According to Hisham Sharabi (1988), patriarchal values are rooted in the conceptualization of the family, clan, or religious sect in the Middle East. Ayubi calls them “blind sense of group loyalty” (1995, 166) which brings forth rituals of coercion. Lisa Wedeen (1999) explains that conformity to the patriarch ensures material wellbeing, while nonconformity is met with coercion and entails withdrawal of rewards. Ayubi (1995) explains that the regime has manipulated and mobilized these popular mentalities. For example, Büchs (2009) argues that the regime manipulates metaphors of the patriarchal family into its discourses to invoke support. Wedeen explains that patriarchal connectivity goes beyond specific families and extends towards a mythic, national family where al-Asaad is the paternal head (Wedeen 1998). This patriarchal metaphor frames politics as having no internal divisions (Büchs 2009), which mirrors the patriarchal understanding of group loyalty (Ayubi 1995).

Büchs (2009) explains that the president and the Baath party cannot be separated because they cannot be conceptualized in isolation. This has been achieved through the president presenting himself as the sole leader of the Baath party and hence, his policies are always in line with that of the party. Büchs (2009) explains that this has reduced the Baath party to a ‘personality cult’ around the two presidents, Hafez and Bashar al-Asaad. For example, the coup through which Hafez al-Asaad assumed power was called ‘Corrective Movement’ invoking metaphors that the president was restoring it to the true path of the Baath party.

Büchs (2009) bases her argument on Laitin’s (1986) ideas that the state defines the broad values and beliefs worth fighting for, but not the specific beliefs. In line with this, Wedeen (1999) explains that al-Asaad’s cult establishes the categories or frames of thinking about politics and “the ways people see themselves as citizens” (Wedeen 1999, 19). Wedeen argues that the frame put forth concerning the understanding of politics and citizenship is part of the process of “killing politics” (1999, 32). This creates a depoliticized and demobilized citizen. As such, through the “killing [of] politics,” an individual no longer poses a threat to the regime (ibid). According to Al-Khalil (1991), the regime achieves this by eliminating political freedoms, and disorienting citizens by annulling differences between individuals, and “between what belongs to the state and what belongs to individuals” (1991, 70).

In addition, Syrian researcher and activist, Michel Kilo, who was a signatory to the ‘Damascus Declaration’ of 2005, lived in Syria during both the rule of Hafez and that of Bashar. He was arrested twice and served three years in prison for charges of “weakening national sentiment and encouraging sectarian strife” (Institute for War and Peace Reporting 2009). He writes that people under oppressive regimes live dual, oftentimes antagonistic personas. One persona hates the system and “lives in the hope of salvation”²⁵ from it (Kilo 2014). The other persona is the public one, which rests on embracing the system, through public displays of allegiance. Kilo (2014) explains that the individuals who live the most extreme dual personas, are those who are very close to the oppressive regime, or as Wedeen (1999) would call it, part of the President’s cult. Kilo (2014) notes that the regime is driven by its insecurity, and hence, turned the country into a detention site, or as Kilo calls it, “a concentration camp.” The regime does not trust those in his cult or the weapons they carry, and as such, subjects his close proxies to strict surveillance and monitors their activities (Kilo 2014).

4.2. Moral Reconciliation

Without dismissing the promise of security by the modern nation-state, the transnational approach calls for a balance among the themes of security with notions of harmony, justice and truth (Dietrich 2018). Homeostasis, one of the principles of the ECM model, urges us to inquire into the ways in which the system seeks to balance itself. In the effort to find a dynamic equilibrium, notions of justice, as linked to moral peace, emerge as existing tendencies to counterweight the imbalance of the securitization of the “Four Towns Agreement.”

In 2012, the GoS created a Ministry of National Reconciliation under Ali Haidar (UNHRC 2017). Following this, a strategic vision was introduced by President Bashar al-Asaad to call for national reconciliation (*musalaha*) through local truces. Since the start of the Syrian war, local truces have been adopted and they varied according to the changing balance of power. They have ranged from what the regime calls reconciliation agreements to what the third powers term as de-escalation zones; from ceasefire agreements to surrender deals and evacuations. Grounded in moral readings of justice, the “Four Towns Agreement” emerged as a *musalaha* deal between the GoS and the opposition groups. How does such a *musalaha* fit into the logic of moral understanding of peace? Unraveling the word origins and the Islamic notions of peace are integral in capturing the mechanisms linking justice and peace.

From the perspective of peace and conflict research, peace is understood as the “reduction of direct, structural and cultural violence” (Galtung 1990, 223). A further distinction that Galtung proposes is that between positive and negative peace. According to Galtung, negative peace is the “absence of violence of all kinds” (1990,

25 Translated from Arabic by author.

31), and positive peace is “a cooperative system, beyond ‘passive peaceful coexistence’ one that can bring forth positively synergetic fruits of the harmony” (1990, 61).

Within the Arabic-Islamic understandings, reconciliation, which means *musalaha* in Arabic, stems from the word *sulh* or *sulha*. According to Haneef (2011), *sulh* is the Islamic equivalent of negative peace, which bears the understanding of halting hostilities or implementing truces. Haneef (2011) claims that the equivalent of positive peace in Arabic could be *salam*, which is a perennial relationship rooted in respect (Bangura 2005). “*Sulh* is absence of war while *salam* insists on promotion of social justice” (Haneef 2011, 126). Reconciliation, *musalaha*, is a means for peaceful conflict resolution, wherein the goal is to promote restorative justice and deter revenge against perpetrators. When reconciliation is successful, *salam*, or positive peace becomes possible. In the Arab-Islamic context, *salam* is associated with the idea of the nation, *ummah*, where all Muslims are one nation as a whole.

In light of this, the *musalaha* of the “Four Towns Agreement” becomes rooted within moral readings of social justice. It offers a somewhat counterweight to the modern reading of its securitization, yet simultaneously compliments it. For example, in response to allegations of the securitization of the “Four Towns Agreement” which triggered forced displacement and forced demographic change, the GoS and its supporters have strongly denied such sectarian motives. For example, Nasr Qandil, a Lebanese politician strongly affiliated with the regime, grounds his critique of the state securitization of the “Four Towns Agreement” in moral readings of the social justice of the *ummah*: a united Syria for all (Osseiran and Solomon 2017).

He asserted that the GoS had no interest in demographically changing the Sunni-Alawite-Shiite existing balance in Damascus. Qandil confirmed that Damascus and its suburbs is the regime’s stronghold and that there are still seven million Sunnis in and around Damascus, which attests against any claims of sectarian motives to the evacuation of the besieged populations of Madaya and Az-Zabadani from Damascus, based on their Sunni profile (Osseiran and Solomon 2017). As such, percepts of solidarity emerge among the regime’s discourses of the “Four Towns Agreement” as moral virtues grounded in social justice of the *ummah*.

Furthermore, since the start of the armed conflict, the Syrian regime has been diligent in *not* turning the conflict into a sectarian one in Syria. The uprisings against the regime initially adopted a nonsectarian approach. However, within a month after the first wave of protests in mid-March 2011, the rhetoric changed and sectarian perceptions came to prevail (Ajami 2012). However, despite this, Wimmen (2016) argues that it would be wrong to define Syria as experiencing exclusively, or even mainly, a sectarian civil war. Wimmen (2016) explains that many Syrian Sunnis continue to affiliate themselves with the regime, and that many Sunnis take refuge in government-held areas. This attests to the non-sectarian nature of the conflict. As such, the dividing line between regime supporters and regime opposition do not necessarily follow ethnic or sectarian affiliations (ibid)

Wimmen (2016) is also skeptical about attributing the current conflict to remnants of the tensions from Hafez al-Asaad’s time, as some have represented it. However, a

crippled and mismanaged economy might have been the immediate motivation for the uprising (Conduit 2016). This pushed a great portion of Syrians into grinding poverty, where economic grievances marginalized the rural population (ibid).

According to some researchers, the regime’s structure is more sectarian than the regime might admit or warrant (Heydmann 2013; Pierret 2013). The origins of sectarianism lie in the political behavior of the regime and the Hama events of the 1980s. In order to counter the uprising, the regime has been motivated to blame the sectarian strife on external states and international interference. The regime’s statements have warned against turning the uprising into a sectarian conflict, and have asserted that the protests are part of a Western conspiracy to entrench sectarian strife between Syrians. Conjuring up such scenarios was successful at invoking fear in the minority groups, especially Alawites and Christians, encouraging them to seek affiliation and protection from the regime. For example, although NSAGs-held areas are predominantly Sunni, most internally displaced people from opposition territories flee to government-held areas (Lichtenheld 2017). This attests to the regime’s welcoming of newcomers in their new communities under the GoS rule (Al Monitor 2014). Away from the logic of security, the GoS makes direct references to notions of common good and social virtues, and the right to hospitality for Syrians who are displaced by the war. Within this, there is an inherent moral reading of peace: “moral concepts of peace point from insecurity toward security, from injustice to justice, from error to truth” (Dietrich 2012, 114).

According to Dietrich (2012), a transrational perspective finds questions of common good and social justice problematic. He finds that moral understandings of justice are framed in painful experiences in the past and the promises of salvation in the future. Moral peace has little to do with the present and hence, it stops being related to current needs and realities. In reference to life under siege in the four towns of Madaya, Az-Zabadani, Kafreya and Foah, the people’s needs were grounded in the here and now. But what social justice in tandem with moral peace does, is that it turns the suffering and injustice that the people experienced into a chronic construct.

Beyond the siege, and beyond the previously lived siege experiences, morally oriented modes of narrations maintain the emotions and memories of the siege alive in the people. “Authoritative discourses recall situations of helplessness that cloud the present moment with emotions and memories that install the past and the future in place of the present” (Echavarría Álvarez 2018, 119). For this reason, Dietrich (2013) calls for structural justice where the current needs are not overshadowed by topics of past trauma and vows of future justice.

“In terms of the transrational shift, justice is addressed as an issue of the subjective and communal satisfaction of needs, rather than the mechanistic meeting of a demand. Growth is understood as a process, not in teleological terms as a purpose in itself. The focus is on what we already are and what we need right now, and not on what we should do in order to live up to the definition of a future ideal”. (UIBK 2017f)

4.2.1. Beyond the Episode: *Salaam*

As previously conceptualized, *Salaam* captures a relationship of wholeness, and is closely tied to notions of the *ummah*, the state. Based on a wide body of literature, Said (2001) compiles the five main approaches to peace in Islam:

1. Power politics: peace through coercive power
2. World order: peace through the power of law
3. Conflict resolution: peace through the power of communication
4. Nonviolence: peace through will power
5. Transformation: peace through the power of love

Each of the abovementioned approaches to peace is characterized by a distinct set of principles and values. The principles exist under more than one approach, henceforth, making the approaches diverse but carrying common elements found in Islam. The principles offer an understanding into the system of *salaam* in Islam. Within the Syrian landscape, these approaches are all at play to varying degrees. I see the approach of ‘Power Politics’ as the most prominent one within the Syrian landscape, wherein Islam is utilized to maintain power and social order. “This approach supports state authority, strives to maintain negative peace and accepts political necessities created by internal and external threats” (Haneef 2011, 128).

Under this approach, justice and social order are overemphasized (Haneef 2011). By this token, social injustice and oppression are seen as pervasive structural violence, which often provoke violent reactions from those who are oppressed. According to Khadduri, in Islam’s system of peace, justice “had to prevail, if necessary, by the sword” (1984, 162). What is worthy to note is that this approach does not advocate positive peace. It does not capture the wholeness and equilibrium of *salaam*. Driven by such notions of peace, this moral framework fails to envision a long-lasting peace for Syria. Incapable of envisioning a future for Syria, all parties pretend to fight like the alpha while exploiting their opponents’ own crimes. Despite this, most Syrians continue to fight the course out of fear of collapsing into a state of limbo where there is no longer anything to cling to.

As previously mentioned, the Syrian war has been largely characterized by failed attempts at nation-wide ceasefires, carried out at the whims of politicians in Washington, Tehran and Moscow (Sara 2019). No ceasefire or peace-treaty, no governmental vacuum or governmental installation will last unless an understanding of a perennial *salaam* is integrated; wherein a vision of a positive peace is integrated within reconciliation agreements.

4.3. Truth Discourses

In the context of the “Four Towns Agreement,” the needs of the people are assumed instead of understood and listened to. If the conflict of displacement is given space for

listening to the people living in the besieged towns of Madaya, Az-Zabadani, Kafreya and Foah, what would the “Four Towns Agreement” look like? Under this transrational vein, justice becomes structural since it grounds us into the roots of the present moments, in the roots of what it means to be human under siege. Within the everyday accounts of our humaneness, transrationality urges us to balance structural justice with a plurality of truths, where ‘strong thought’ (Vattimo 2006) is overshadowed by the many small, existing and contextual truths. In his book *Imperfect Peace*, Francisco Muñoz (2006) insists that peace research depart from understanding peace from its negative definition of violence.

This type of postmodern peace, as proposed by Muñoz (2006), implies to step away from ontological and epistemological premises of what peace *is* and what peace is *not*. Instead, he calls for the recognition of a plurality of truths, where peace is not a closed and secure notion, but an imperfect and procedural process. Understanding the “Four Towns Agreement” through the post-modern peace family reveals how little space exists for the many clamoring truths on the ground. This conflict episode in Syria has turned into a firm determination to search for truth, and sustained within the sphere of ‘strong thought,’ as Vattimo calls it (2006). The search for truth is not a postmodern one. Instead, the pursuit of truth is under a modern framework where truth refers to something quite specific: one perpetrator and one victim.

For example, it remains unclear who committed the April 15 attack in al-Rashideen that targeted the evacuees from Kafreya and Foah. Although no party claimed involvement, according to eyewitness reports gathered by UNHRC (2017), the car which exploded arrived from opposition-held areas. Also, the transit point of al-Rashideen is under NSAG-rule, including Nour al-Din al-Zenki (then part of HTS), Ahrar al-Sham and FSA groups (UNHRC 2017). The UNHRC reported that this type of attack, where explosive devices are planted into vehicles, has been “a modus operandi of extremist factions and some armed groups” (2017, 9). According to the UNHRC, HTS and Ahrar al-Sham have denied allegations of committing the attack (2017). In the aftermath of the attack, 43 people went missing, including elderly persons and children, after receiving medical treatment by the NSAGs. Following negotiations for the exchange of hostages, at least 15 remain in captivity.

The underlying tone is a strong search for truth and answers: one rigid truth and one straight answer, one perpetrator and one victim. The postmodern thematic notions of peace through a plurality of truths urges us to consider that there is more than one perpetrator and more than one victim, that there are as many answers to the “Four Towns Agreement” as there are human beings affected by it. Muñoz (2006) urges us to consider imperfect peace in contexts of diverse backgrounds, since peace is not a product of ‘untouched’ communities. Instead, within postmodern notions of peace, in their plurality, deep in their unfinished touches, and immersed in their uncertainty, one finds an imperfect and modest peace (Dietrich 2006). In postmodern peaces, everyday accounts of peace oppose “any aspect of a culture that can be used to legitimize violence in its direct or structural form” (Galtung 1990, 291).

Johan Galtung offers us a definition of a culture of violence wherein he urges us to consider the persons directly involved in the conflict. This is an essential step in elicitive mapping because at the core of the ECM model is the human, the human who experiences the conflict episode. In that, ECM allows us to explore the questions of harmony within an energetic understanding of conflict. The challenge of such a task is the unspeakable nature of the theme itself, where personal harmony lies in a realm beyond discursive narration.

To explain the energetic peaces, Dietrich (2012) uses examples of the Great Mother, the Holy Wedding and the Great Triad. They point us towards characteristics that delineate and yet compliment the other peace families. For example, energetic peaces do not hold a personified God as their creator. Instead, they call for the recognition of a primal energy as the source of existence. Energetic peaces do not see a separation between the universe and the human body, and perceive the mind and body as inseparable. With regards to truth, energetic practices of peace perceive relative truths instead of ultimate ones. Dualities do not exist, which allows for a smoother flow of energies. Finally, energetic peaces postulate that peace begins internally and flows to the outside world.

The question of personal harmony in the context of the “Four Towns Agreement” entails the crucial insight of perspectivity. As such, energetic understandings of peace are a question of experience, not of evolution or progress (Dietrich 2012). When “the individual experiences collective *energy*, conscious *transpersonal* harmony turns into the synonym for peace” (Dietrich 2012, 274). For the conflict mapping of internal displacement, it implies that the modern security management of displacement leaves little space for energetic notions of personal harmony among the internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Madaya, Az-Zabadani, Kafreya and Foah. Although internal displacement involves first and foremost a change in living conditions under the moral and modern promise of salvation and progress respectively, energetic concepts of peace are perennial “beneath the surface of a capitalistically commodified world” (Dietrich 2012, 53). Insights of harmony under energetic peaces shine through the fissures and cracks of moments, events and language wherein there is an everlasting search among internally displaced people to crack the door of the persona for peace.

Furthermore, from an energetic perspective, the episode of the “Four Towns Agreement” exposes a sense of hunger; physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Prior to the armed conflict, the towns of Madaya, Az-Zabadani, Kafreya and Foah were highly agricultural²⁶ (Amnesty International 2017). Since the enactment of the sieges in 2015, the agricultural infrastructure was destroyed, worsening the food security situation (UNOCHA 2017a). This had made hunger the most pressing problem facing the people living in those four towns. From an energetic perspective, there is a strong relationship between hunger and peace.

26 Syria was the only country in the region that was self-sufficient in food production (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 2015).

For life to flourish or survive, it seeks to be nourished. Nourishment manifests itself in different forms and under different contexts. From the moment a seed is planted deep within the earth, hunger manifests itself in the seed’s journey to find sunlight and water. The seed struggles to break the ground and flourish. A tree grows outward into the world. And below the ground, the tree digs its roots deeper into the Earth, and finds the sources of nourishment that help it grow. This journey of unfolding requires that the system in which the seed exists is able to satisfy its hunger to flourish.

But what happens when the system is unable to strengthen the seed’s ability for growth? What happens when lightning strikes the plant, severing its branches? The result is an exaggerated expression of hunger, leading to no or stunted growth. In the context of the four towns, the war severed the branches of the trees, polluted the water and poisoned the soil. As a result, the people living in those four towns experienced aggravated hunger for two years. The earth and the system that had once satisfied their hunger had become imbalanced and unable to provide the conditions for their growth. Anthropologically speaking, the situation of hunger in the four towns demonstrates a state of somatic *and* emotional hunger. However, in the rhetoric of development politics that feeds Syrians empty promises, hunger is seen as almost exclusively a physical imbalance that must be alleviated.

“[too] often, poverty and deprivation get covered as events. That is, when some disaster strikes, when people die. Yet, poverty is about much more than starvation deaths or near famine conditions. It is the sum total of a multiplicity of factors. The weightage of some of these varies from region to region, society to society, culture to culture. But at the core is a fairly compact number of factors. They include not just income and calorie intake. Land, health, education, literacy, infant mortality rates and life expectancy are also some of them. Debt, assets, irrigation, drinking water, sanitation and jobs count too”. (Sainath 1996, ix)

In the Syrian context, much like other conflicts, the existing power dynamics lend hunger a moral persona. That is, hunger comes to be perceived along the moral dualities of ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ depending on who is experiencing the hunger, and who is inflicting the hunger. The religious, regional, and ethno-political identities dictate the moral nature of the hunger. For example, the Syrian regime controlled the sieges around Madaya and Az-Zabadani, causing extreme cases of starvation and death. And the Syrian opposition groups maintained the siege around Kafreya and Foah, making hunger and starvation the most pressing need for the people trapped within the siege. Within this sad orchestration, these moral dualities come to exist in a perennial, perpetual and irreconcilable tug between power and resistance; between the individual’s desire to grow and survive and the collective (Syrian regime or armed opposition groups) desire to control. The result is skewed expressions of hunger, locked within the politics of scarcity and inequity.

5. The Layers: Re-imagining Home and Land

Was it one day, one breathe, one nap at a time, or an immediate persistent pang?
How long till the skeleton is truly and well displayed?
When did the limbs stop moving at will?

What is the difference between a day and a month of hunger?
Empty nostrils, useless tongue.
A month and three months of hunger?

Today I had four walnuts to eat.
A man barely enunciates his emptiness...his ribs speak of another story.

I hope the president feels victorious, feels powerful.
I hope our neighbor rebels, these militiamen in hell, celebrate all this winning.
I hope my children die quickly and their mother is not there to see them.

Seige. Like sayej in Arabic. To fence, to encircle, to protect.
To safeguard, to keep out, to keep in.
Seige. Sayej.
All our wars are the same. All our wars are the same.
We who do not fast on anything, are slow to feel.

----- Hind Shoufani, Seven Songs for Syria (2017)

Following the annotations of the previous chapter, ECM points us towards the strive of personal harmony to restore its dynamic equilibrium within the deeper layers beyond the physical manifestation of the conflict episode. The ECM layers mirror the chakra system of Yoga Philosophy, which was initially proposed by Sri Aurobidno (Dietrich 2018). Following this system of synchronicity, the layers travel through the basic material needs and reach the cosmic aspects of existence. By moving towards the layers, we encounter the third branch of ECM, which taps into the epicenter of the conflict, the seat where the conflict energy is nourished and from where it emerges to the surface of the conflict episode. As such, seeking to use reason and rationality to resolve the conflict episode rarely works, since the conflictive energy lies in the epicenter, which continues to fuel the episode and generates new forms of conflict. Within the ECM model, this branch recognizes the deeper layers of the conflict episode, the roots in which the conflict energies take solace and intertwine.

Previously in the research, I demonstrated that the “Four Towns Agreement” had been framed as a security problem within the fringes of conflict resolution, which focuses on prescribed solutions at the superficial level of the conflict episode. From an elicitive approach, the analysis interrogates into the deeper layers of the conflict epicenter and seeks to unravel the imbalances. The conflict parties identified *in/security* at the center of the problem: a ceasefire, the exchange and/or release of a set number of bodies and prisoners, and the evacuation of a set number of fighters, people, and wounded individuals from Madaya, Az-Zabadani, Kafreya and Foah. In other words, the securitization of the conflict episode addresses the perpetual suffering of life under siege pertaining to personal insecurity, food insecurity, land insecurity, and the existential insecurity of the conflict parties. Within this theme, peace emerges out of security. This type of peace is a material one that can be measured and accumulated (UIBK 2017b). The imbalance towards modern understandings of peace highlights an overemphasis on reason, rationality, and the mind’s dogma. In turn, this reveals an imbalance towards the mental-societal layer which is heavily governed by the mind.

5.1. The Mental-Societal Layer: The Reign of the Mind

The ECM layers are based on the principle of correspondence, wherein the inner and outer aspects are reflected in each other: “as within, so without” (UIBK 2017g). Correspondence establishes a non-linear relation between the inner and outer aspects of human beings within their encounters and conflicts (Echavarría Álvarez 2014a). Within this model for the evacuation of the four towns, security becomes a relational issue and therefore, a systemic product. Inner security of those who were evacuated is related to the way they perceive the world. In such an open system, with humans engaged in relations and conflicts, Dietrich describes a human as an integral unit of a bigger system; as a holon belonging “and part of bigger holons such as families, community, society, humanity, planet Earth and the universe or cosmos” (2018, 28).

The mental-societal layer represents the *anabata*, the heart chakra. The modern Cartesian mind is dualistic, and hence, sees the heart and the mind separately, where feelings are associated with the heart, and the mind associated with the brain (Naranjo 2005). In contrast, in many energetic practices, there is no differentiation between heart and mind. For example, in Pali, the term *citta* is used to describe both. In languages where traditional mediation work was developed, such as Tibetan, no difference was made between heart and mind (Dietrich 2018). As such, the mental-societal layer urges us not to see them dualistically, but two parts of one whole. In this line, heart and mind become mutually exclusive. In practical work, not annulling supremacy of one over the other respects the reality that we are all contact boundaries at work. As such, in order to make decisions that make us feel safe, and not just secure, there needs to be an integration of the heart and the mind together. For example, whereas modern cultures offer individualistic interpretations of laws, energetic cultures encourage *collective* interpretations of laws that uphold social structures and encourage collective compliance (Vallejo 2011). As shall be explained later, the reign of the mind in the episode of the “Four Towns Agreement” translates into people experiencing pain of the laws.

Therefore, according to the ECM principle of correspondence, the intrapersonal layer of the mind and the interpersonal layers of the society affect the conflict episode, wherein destructive energies can emanate from and contribute to the dysfunction of the system. With the loss of the mind’s dynamic equilibrium, the destructive force of the mental-societal layer can generate great pain and destruction, even genocide. According to Dietrich (2018), the desperate effort of the mind to uphold and defend societal moral and organizational ideals gives way to mass destruction.

In the events leading up to, and revolving around the “Four Towns Agreement,” the Syrian context has shown us many scary glimpses of this destructive expression of the mind. In 2015, when the sieges around Kafreya and Foah were enforced by the opposition groups in Idleb, the Syrian regime and its allies retaliated and encircled Madaya and Az-Zabadani in Damascus. The tit-for-tat tactic accentuates the modern scientific approaches to conflict resolution. As such, tensions in the mental-societal layer reveal an overemphasis on the Cartesian mind, which navigates the dynamic equilibrium of the system. Within modern science, disturbances to the system are *reconciled* using mechanistic rationality. Following this logic, the “Four Towns Agreement” was a *reconciliation* deal prescribed as a solution for the sad tit-for-tat orchestration by the conflict parties. Hence, the rationale behind the “Four Towns Agreement” does not seek to end the cycle of violence that it finds itself entrenched within. Rather, the conflict and its proposed solution feed from the same pot of poison, creating and maintaining a sort of destructive dynamic equilibrium that is always on the brinks of exploding.

Therefore, the expression of the principle of correspondence in the mental-societal layer appears “in the mind’s constructively and destructively high ability of abstraction, which enables our emotional perception of interpersonal actions and bigger social entities to become imaginable in the first place” (Dietrich 2018, 70). Dietrich argues

that this holds specific interest for conflict intervention since conflict resolution is based on modern and postmodern concepts of the mind (2018). That is, conflicts are seen as societal irrationalities, which are resolved using more rationality. In that sense, even the non-rational subconscious dynamics of the conflict layers are rationalized; the result of which is a prescribed model for a dysfunctional system.

In the model of the “Four Towns Agreement,” the temptation for prescribing a reconciliation deal as a solution to besiegement and insecurity in Madaya, Az-Zabadani, Kafreya and Foah, drew upon the rationality of the Syrian, Iranian, Iraqi, and Qatari officials. The solution they prescribed, the “Four Towns Agreement,” was a result of drawing their own abstract concept based on their perception of a solution for the conflict episode, which they understood as a societal deficiency. They did so without engaging their own sexual-family or socioemotional-communal aspects into resonance with those involved in the agreement (those who were to be evacuated). “Their mind chides the involved parties when their relationships do not unfold according to the concepts of modern reason” (Dietrich 2018, 70). The officials who brokered the deal drew a different scenario of the conflict episode; they moved people, displaced them without allowing them a chance to reconcile their own fears.

Given that the Syrian context is overwhelmingly imbalanced by relational insecurity, this reflects in the overbearing weight of the ego in the mental-societal layer. Dietrich describes the perils of the ego:

“As long as there is an “I,” there will necessarily be a “you” and consequently there will be the specific fear that is fueled by duality... through this fear, we construct dualities such as identical and different, male and female, powerful and weak, ruling and submitting, belonging and exclusion, beautiful and ugly, right and wrong. As a result, unless the ego orientation is balanced by a corresponding amount of social consciousness, the hear skills of love, compassion and devotion are perverted into passion obsession with power and greed”. (2013, 217)

Pondering over the actual title of the deal, the “Four Towns Agreement” strongly asserts a physicality and a locality. In that sense, it is a very physical agreement, one that can be marked on a map. It asserts land as the pivotal point of the agreement among the parties to the conflict. In the mainstream reading of the conflict episode, the theme of security was translated into images and representations of ‘our’ and ‘their’ land. As such, these territorial representations conflate the imbalances in the themes with the imbalances in the layers. “The layers come much closer to dispelling illusions of representations and provide a systematic structure to seeing the epicenter beyond evident manifestations” (Echavarría Álvarez 2018, 122).

The evident manifestation of the conflict episode – the securitization of the “Four Towns Agreement” – conflates the three layers (sexual-familial, socio-emotional-communal, and the mental-societal) with security concerns. As such, the spiritual or polycitary layers are not recognized. To better understand this, I will use the following section to explain the land dogma of the nation-state, which is used as the vehicle for

the construction of the “Four Towns Agreement.” As previously mentioned, the overemphasis on security implies a peace driven by fear, scarcity and starvation; fear from the communal belonging of IDPs from Madaya, Az-Zabadani, Kafreya and Foah, scarcity and inequity of resources for the living, and starvation for growth, for accumulation and for power. In each of these, there appears to be an obsession with fear and an attachment and a sense of ownership to the towns in specific, and to Syria in general. The “Four Towns Agreement” is an expression of an imbalanced system and the trope of ‘land’ is an entry point through which to understand the deeper issues at play.

5.1.1. Land Trafficking

“Land is a relation of property, a finite resource that is distributed, allocated and owned, a political-economic question. Land is a resource over which there is competition. Terrain is a relation of power, with a heritage in geology and the military, the control of which allows the establishment and maintenance of order. As a ‘field’, a site of work or battle, it is a political-strategic question. Territory is something that is both of these, and more than these. Territory must be approached in itself rather than through territoriality, and in relation to land and terrain. Each can, of course, be read in what appears to be non-political ways: land as an aesthetic category; terrain in a scientific register; territory as the mere outcome of territoriality. Yet each of these is shot through with relations of power. There is a political economy to the environment, a political strategy to the impact of technology, and an understated politics to territoriality”. (Elden 2010, 804)

Hoebel (1949) emphasizes the significance of land by positioning it as the basis of human existence, and the single most important object of property. “All societies are territorially based, and most sustenance is drawn from the soil, either directly or indirectly” (Hoebel 1949, 331). In the *Grundrisse*, Marx (1973) recognizes that the emergence of land as a taxable asset was cemented by the creation of the modern nation-state. As such, Marx asserts that “the relation to the earth as property is always mediated through occupation of the land and soil, peacefully or violently” (1973, 485). Similarly, Lefebvre (1991) suggests that land is not limited solely to agriculture, but also to the subsoil and its resources; land is also the relationship between a nation-state and a territory. “And hence also absolute politics and political strategy” (Lefebvre 1991, 375). According to Anderson (1974), ownership of land and power are strongly linked. Given that land is a scarce resource that cannot be created, the distribution and redistribution of land is a significant economic and political concern for power (Anderson 1974).

Anderson asserts that conflict over land represents the struggle over its possession and the physical terrain on which the struggle takes place (1974). Terrain is the actual physical land that is sought to be occupied, and hence gains a strategic-military significance wherein terrain becomes concerned with security, management and territorial cohesion. Therefore, terrain is land that has political and military significance.

In his paper *Land, Terrain and Territory*, Elden (2010) claims that the etymology of the English word ‘territory,’ its French equivalent, *territoire*, and other related terms derive from the Latin *territorium*. Although it is a very rare term in classical Latin, its standard definition in the Middle Ages “is the land belonging to a town or another entity such as a religious order” (Elden 2010, 806). However, Elden asserts that there are disputes around the etymology of *territorium*, where some writers understand *territorium* not as a place around a town but rather as a place from which people are frightened. As such, *territorium* derives from Latin *terrere*, which means to frighten, and is itself derived from Greek *trein*, which means to be afraid and flee. This makes the term territory associated with fear and violence. “Creating a bounded space is already a violent act of exclusion and inclusion; maintaining it as such requires constant vigilance and the mobilization of threat; and challenging it necessarily entails a transgression” (Elden 2009, xxx).

Foucault (2007) explains that territory is both a geographical and a political notion, one that is encompassed and entrenched by concepts of power. He asserts that the strong association between certain spaces being geographical and strategic “is only natural since geography grew up in the shadow of the military” (Foucault 2007, 177). As such, Foucault notes that the explicit linkage between geography and the military becomes inscribed within the material soil and within forms of discourse that we exist upon. Doyle and Bennet (2002) recognize the reductionist materialistic understanding of terrain and therefore argue that terrain also encompasses the human interaction with the earth. Elden (2010) adds that in the mainstream reading of terrain, it comes to be perceived as a virtual landscape, one that is devoid of life; references are made to cities but not to those living there.

In light of this explanation, the “Four Towns Agreement” reveals a thoroughly contemplated and organized method of dealing with land, where the four towns are resources that are controlled, gained, and exchanged. The officials who brokered the agreement perceive the four towns, Madaya, Az-Zabadani, Kafreya and Foah, as strategic political terrain. What this achieves is a sentiment that ‘land’ is no longer a source *of* living and a resource *for* living, but a platform for plotting and for expanding (Al Shami 2016). Given the strong association between the state and its spatial territorial definition, the evacuation of the people from the four towns strengthens the geographical container of the responsible parties. In addition, Al Shami (2016) notes that forced displacement sounds very clinical and “it doesn’t capture the horror and heartache, the dislocation as families are severed from their lives.”

In the mental-societal layer, the Cartesian mind navigates the conflict episode towards a rational and mechanistic solution. On a rational level, the main premises of the “Four Towns Agreement” – uplifting sieges, evacuation of besieged people and wounded individuals, and the exchange and release of prisoners and bodies – is surely a desirable outcome. However, clarifying the episode along the axes of what, who, where, when, how and why, reveals that the “Four Towns Agreement” entailed much deeper engineered changes than the main premises mentioned above. The agreement does not start with an evacuation and release of people and prisoners, and does not end in the resettlement or integration of these individuals into new homes. Expressed as a material

clash in the conflict episode, the mental-societal layer demonstrates the need for control and domination, which carries linkages to absolute end-states and violence.

For example, the reconciliation process based on Legislative Decree No. 15 stipulated that those who turn themselves in and surrender their weapons are given amnesty (UNHRC 2017). This calculated modern ‘reconciliation’ allowed officials to categorize the fighting-age male population of the four towns on the basis of allegiance. In effect, it filtered males aged 18 to 45 into two categories: wanted individuals, who if remain, risk detention, and those who agree to reconcile and are allowed to stay in their towns.

While the latter group is allowed to stay, they are forced to serve in governmental units. As such, in the mental-societal layer, forced reconciliation and forced conscription can be seen as intended to reach an absolute end-state of territorial cohesion. In effect, what this achieves is a reconsolidated base of territorial support for the government in Aleppo. Moreover, as previously mentioned, there were negotiation efforts to add the evacuation of three more towns, YBB, and the Yarmouk Camp, to the “Four Towns Agreement.” This demonstrates the extent to which the deal is a platform from which to conduct political-strategic changes to the land (UNHRC 2017).

5.2. The Socioemotional-Communal Layer: Internal Homelessness

“Evacuation. It sounds like a humanitarian operation. The word conceals its brutality. Haunting drone footage shows a seemingly endless convoy of ambulances and green buses snaking their way through a destroyed and desolate wasteland. Those who leave their homes, the city of their childhoods, may never return. This is the Syrian Nakba. It’s a trauma both individual and collective. And its impact will be felt by generations to come”. (Al Shami 2016)

Following this discussion on land, it is clear that what the agreement overlooks is precisely what Doyle and Bennet (2002) and Elden (2010) are concerned with: that land comes to be perceived as a devoid space, empty of people. Essentially, what any evacuation entails is the movement and displacement of people. After the implementation phase of the “Four Towns Agreement,” a total of 2,900 people from Madaya and Az-Zabadani became internally displaced in the Idleb governorate; and a total of 8,000 were uprooted from Idleb to the Aleppo governorate. Hence, between the April 13 and April 19, 2017, 10,900 people became IDPs in Syria as a result of the “Four Towns Agreement.”

Lederach and Lederach (2010) explore the metaphorical meanings of the term ‘internally displaced persons’ or ‘IDPs’ in their book *When Blood and Bones Cry Out*. They argue that from a modern perspective, the term functions as a category to account for people forced to flee their homes and communities, but remain in the boundaries of their nation (Lederach and Lederach 2010). This category assists international agencies and governments to organize their data and count people eligible for assistance, and to

track their mobility. What is particular about their discussion is that they unfold the linguistic structure of 'IDPs,' and unearth the lived experiences of those who find themselves in that category. Lederach and Lederach (2010) argue that in settings of violence, people look for physical spaces and mechanisms for protection. Violence produces a sense of internal insecurity, which largely shapes the way people react and perceive the world. The pain that results from this displacement reveals itself in the need for social belonging and recognition, all of which feed into the socioemotional-communal layer.

Following the ECM principle of correspondence, the socioemotional-communal layer attends to the intrapersonal need for belonging and the interpersonal aspects of ego, dynamism, expansion and determination, with the latter representing the *manipura* chakra. Beyond our families and intimate relationships, we all aspire to feel recognized and respected in our communities. Being deprived of social interaction that fosters recognition to our attributes causes emotional harm to the "persona in her ego-aspects" (Echavarría Álvarez 2014a, 66). As such, recognition for our positions allows us to find our place and belonging in our community, which promotes dynamic equilibrium of the system.

The "Four Towns Agreement" provides a context in which the geographical land of communities attends to a sense of location, meaning and lived reality. The four towns of Madaya, Az-Zabadani, Kafreya, and Foah are much more than the physical space they occupy. They are communities of people, of homes, and of memories. What makes these towns communities is not only their spatial structures but the relationality of their people and the tender fragility of human connections. But what happens when individuals lose their community? What happens when individuals are unable to find their place in their new community?

In the socioemotional-communal layer, land comes to mean something different than in the mental-societal layer. In Atkinson's *Trauma Trails* (2002), she explores healing among aboriginal Australians and describes the relation between place and belonging. "Land holds the stories of human survival across many generations. Land shapes people just as people shape their countries" (Atkinson 2002, 27). She explains that 'place' is not only a geographic and time/space location, but it also links to people finding themselves, and creating a sense of location, name and meaning. In *The Dictionary of Human Geography*, Gregory describes home as "an emotive place and spatial imaginary that encompasses lived experiences of everyday, domestic life alongside a wider sense of being and belonging in the world" (2009, 253). As such, people derive a sense of belonging and connection from their land.

In the mental-societal layer, 'land' is discussed without references to the homes and the people who live there. In the process of uprooting people from the four towns of Madaya, Az-Zabadani, Kafreya, and Foah, displacement is discussed as the movement of the people into the geography of war statistics. In the socio-emotional-communal layer, the organizing category of IDPs sheds light on the lived experiences of people forced to flee their homes, "the abyss of people with no place, neither refugee nor functioning citizen" (Lederach and Lederach 2010, 36).

As such, the socio-emotional-communal layer allows us to capture the complex social realities of people displaced by the “Four Towns Agreement.” Lederach and Lederach (2010) describe the journey of discovery that internally displaced persons find themselves in. On a first level, displacement refers to the physical loss of place and land. On a second level, although IDPs remain in the same country, displaced communities feel lost in a country “that is familiar but no longer known” (Lederach and Lederach 2010, 59). Displacement sets people on a journey to locate oneself and their lives which “requires them to find a place to ‘land and live’ and to ‘discover and find’ who they are in this new landscape” (ibid, 59). In other words, displacement begins a process of recovery for a sense of belonging that they once had. At another level, rediscovering one’s place sets forth a process of relocating a sense of purpose; finding a place to land in, to arrive, and settle in; a place to latch meaning to one’s bearings, and signs that one can pin meaning onto.

In Arabic, internally displaced persons is *المشردين داخليا*, which translates literally into ‘internal homelessness.’ Lederach and Lederach (2010) explain that IDPs are not only internally displaced in their own country, but that they also feel displaced within themselves. The inability to locate oneself in a given setting means that people do not feel grounded in their lived experiences. Psychologically, and spiritually, the search for place and meaning is a deep inner process, which, when found, contributes to a sense of grounding and health. In many ways, this diverges from the mental-societal understanding of land, which derives a relation of power from spaces. In the socio-emotional-communal layer, belonging and rootedness derive from land. “It is constructed around physical and figurative locations; the nurturing of a land, digging deep into a sense of something that holds purpose and provides sustenance” (Lederach and Lederach 2010, 62). In his book *Community: the Structure of Belonging*, Block (2008) suggests that belonging requires spaces where meaningful conversations can be felt and heard. This allows for continuous interaction and context for social healing, where the “small group is the unit of transformation” (Block 2008, 93).

A discussion about displacement in the context of the “Four Towns Agreement” adds to the bitter reality that when people were evacuated from the four towns, they did not have the choice of their final destination (UNHRC 2017). In other forms of displacement, people flee from violence and try to find a place to settle at a considerable distance from their homes. However, the IDPs from Madaya, Az-Zabadani, Kafreya, and Foah were not able to choose or to find a new meaningful place for themselves and their families. They rode the infamous green buses and were transferred to Idleb and Aleppo and were forced to confront a new reality that they had not chosen (Amnesty International 2017).

That this was a forced displacement plan carefully engineered by the parties to the conflict reveals huge infringements to the willpower and determination of the people, all of which are central for the socio-emotional-communal layer. Forcibly displaced and forcibly relocated. And for many Syrians, the question of returning to their homes represents the longing to physically return to the place they once knew as home, and a spiritual return to the purpose and meaning that their lives carried.

Those who find themselves in the category of IDPs from the four towns find that they were excluded from decisions that shaped their futures (Amnesty International 2017). Those who were evacuated by the “Four Towns Agreement” were prevented from occupying their space and from exercising their willpower over their future. This produces blockages in the socio-emotional-communal layer particularly because those who were evacuated could not keep, find, or recover their place in the process of the “Four Towns Agreement.” According to Al Souriya Net (2017), the people from Kafreya and Foah felt that they were made part of a trade deal, where their evacuation was not cared for, nor was their final destination. As such, in desperate efforts to recover a sense of willpower and belonging, this can lead to actions that throw the system out of balance even more.

The dynamic equilibrium of a community is maintained when the positioning of its members is clearly structured. Using the ECM principle of correspondence, the effects of disturbances to the dynamic equilibrium intrapersonally and interpersonally becomes visible. Dietrich (2018) explains that on an intrapersonal layer, disturbances can be attributed to individual trauma and wounds to the persona’s matrix. On an interpersonal level, blockages to the dynamic equilibrium of the system can result from collective trauma, rigid social structures, and the material conditions of the social world. By correspondence, such circumstances leave the need for belonging and affiliation unmet, which translates towards the outside, and disrupts the dynamic equilibrium of the community and that of the persona. Dietrich (2018) asserts that this can develop into a never-ending cycle of violence that is self-feeding and self-justifying.

Beyond a certain limit, frustrated needs of affiliation that become solidified and entrenched into an imbalanced system intrapersonally and interpersonally can generate destructive behaviors. In the socioemotional-communal layer, given that there are more self-regulating factors involved than in the sexual-familial layer, communal dysfunctions are slower to be triggered. However, owing to the fact that conflicts in the socioemotional-communal layer are rooted in communal prejudices, their destructive energies and dysfunctions are long-lasting within their respective communities. And given that self-regulation encompasses more actors, when communities get out of balance they also release more destructive energy collectively. Therefore, physical violence is the destructive symptom of the *manipura* chakra. In Bali, the term *amok*, which is understood globally today, is used to describe the disturbance of homeostasis in the socioemotional-communal layer. “Originally from Bali, the term describes the kind of desolate constitution in correspondence with the intrapersonal emotional and interpersonal social layers that leads to the raging annihilation of self and others” (Dietrich 2018, 66).

With respect to the “Four Towns Agreement,” the destructive aspect of the socioemotional-communal layer is highlighted in the attack on the evacuation convoy on April 15, 2017. Upon the arrival of both groups (from Madaya, Az-Zabadani, and Kafreya, Foah) to their respective transit points, disputes between the parties to the conflict resulted in a 12-hour delay. Evacuees, who were forced to leave their homes and were waiting to reach homes which they had not chosen, waited on the evacuation

buses. They were scared and hungry. In al-Rashideen transit point, where evacuation buses from Kafreya and Foah were waiting, two vehicles approached and started distributing snacks. The area was under NSAG control, and those who were guarding the buses encouraged the evacuees from Kafreya and Foah to go and collect the food. In the unfortunate hours that followed, one of the cars exploded, killing 125 people, including at least 67 children, 13 women and 16 men, and the wounding of 413 people including 58 children, and seven humanitarian workers (UNOCHA 2017b).

No party has yet claimed responsibility of the attack. The UNHRC (2017) attest that the attack took place in a NSAG-controlled area and that the explosive car approached from NSAG loyal land, which hints that the NSAGs are responsible for the attack against the Shiite evacuees from Kafreya and Foah. Regardless who committed the attack, the socioemotional-communal layer aids us in understanding that those responsible for the April 15 amok have experienced exclusion themselves. The attack reveals deeply rooted feelings of loss, of fear, and of lack of willpower in the face of an agreement that would not allow them to keep, find or recover their place in their communities. This leads to the creation of shallow alliances and pseudo-communities amongst those who experience exclusion and loss of place. This pushes the system out of balance even further, deepening the disturbances of the dynamic equilibrium. This makes violence “negatively resilient, bouncing back [at the community] with new and old faces” (Lederach and Lederach 2010, 45). Hence, unwittingly a ceasefire and an evacuation, which are premises of the “Four Towns Agreement,” do not stop the violence, but lead to strengthening existing imbalances and create new ones.

5.3. The Sexual-Familial Layer: Family Separation

In the aftermath of the April 15 attack, 45 wounded individuals who were receiving medical treatment were kidnapped by the NSAGs. Following high-level negotiations, some hostages were released in a prisoner exchange of a high-ranking NSAG official and the wounded individuals from Kafreya and Foah. At least 15 people are still missing, including a four-year old child (UNOCHA 2017b). This incident is another face of the destructive aspect of the *manipura* chakra in the socioemotional-communal layer, and points us in the direction of the sexual-familial layer.

The sexual-familial layer in ECM reflects the *muladhara* and *svadisthana* chakra in Yoga philosophy. The security of family origin and sexuality are key factors under this layer. Sexuality is life energy and influences all aspects of our behavior. Dietrich (2013) explains that owing to impulses of sexual attraction and rejection, sexuality also emerges as a strong desire to adapt. To maintain the security of the sexual energy, trust is central since it is a product of human relationships and the deep acknowledgement of personal experiences.

In the context of the “Four Towns Agreement,” trust bears great weight for those who were evacuated from Madaya, Az-Zabadani, Kafreya and Foah. In light of this, it is important to consider whether families trusted the agreement and whether their fears of

building new homes were acknowledged. This becomes accentuated when observing the 15th April attack and kidnapping of 45 wounded individuals by NSAGs. To some extent, families who rode the evacuation buses had trust that their relocation to new communities was safer than remaining in their towns and risking detention (UNHRC 2017). To some extent, the families who evacuated together trusted that they would settle in their final location together (ibid).

With the events of the April 15 attack, the trust of families was broken. Families were killed, wounded, and kidnapped. Family origins were broken and ties between families were lost. This leaves an open wound for the families of martyrs and of the missing who lost their communities, are now lost in their own country, and have now lost their relatives. Their rights of mourning are compromised in their new communities. And they are faced with mourning the absence and unknown fate of someone they once loved. It is a continuous trauma, specifically because they cannot really 'land or settle' in their new community without knowing the fate of their missing family members. 'Who are we' as a family in this new community and after having lost parts of our family? In that sense, the sexual-familial and socioemotional-communal layer intercept and culminate the lived relationships of mistrust and social insecurity, as experienced by the community and by the individual families.

Not knowing whether those who are missing are dead or alive leaves the families in a state of limbo where relocating a sense of location and meaning is always tarred by the absence of their missing family members (Helmi 2013). The families suffer the pain of waiting to hear from or about their missing loved ones and waiting to be reunited (Ghazi 2015). In their 2018 report on enforced disappearances in Syria, the two Syrian civil society organizations Dawlaty and Women Now for Development conducted interviews with families of the missing. In one of the testimonies collected, one woman whose husband was detained and was later killed, says:

"The world has turned black. I could not have a sense of myself, I mean I felt like I was dreaming, could not believe that it had happened. I used to sit and wait for him. Even the days, I used to count them one by one. Today for example it has been 322 days, and the other day, it has been 250 days, and I count day by day". (39)

It is a daily struggle to maneuver through their lives as displaced individuals part of a displaced community from Kafreya and Foah and be confronted with a reality in which they are unable to settle or to move on. Their lives are on pause. The wound remains open, and becomes deeper with each passing day of not knowing the fate of their missing loved ones. There is a deep metaphoric structure which is active and resonates in families of those disappeared by conflict. Families have a need and a right to know the fate of their loved ones, and a need and right to memorialization (International Commission on Missing Persons 2018). When that is taken away from them, something deeply imbalanced is born. How can families recreate meaning and belonging in their new communities in the absence of their loved ones? Blockages of trust and creativity

in the sexual-familial layer emerge and attend to more than one aspect of their lived reality as families displaced by war and as families of the missing.

“It is not as if an “I” exists independently over here and then simply loses a “you” over there especially if the attachment to “you” is part of what composes who “I” am. If I lose you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself. Who “am” I, without you? When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do”. (Butler 2004, 22).

In the sexual-familial layer, sexuality also asserts itself as the “the need to be liked in the most intimate relations, to impress, to be loved, to be appreciated and receive affection” (Dietrich 2018, 62). In the case of the families of the missing, and families who have lost family members in the conflict, family separation refers to any relationship or intimacy they once had with the person who has been killed or disappeared. Dietrich (2018) argues that in the sexual-familial layer, given the creative power of sexuality, there lies great potential for transformation. However, in the context of the “Four Towns Agreement,” sexual frustration and a need for intimacy blocks the creative energy that is associated with sexuality.

Family separation will inevitably affect the life and future of those families and the many generations to come. What does it mean to lose a father, a sister, a son? What does it mean to wait for a mother or a brother to return home? Ultimately, it is such traumatic experiences which make and unmake Syria the reality that it is. People die. And they leave families behind who mourn them every day. This layer is incredibly significant for the understanding of the “Four Towns Agreement” since it highlights the lived experiences of families who have experienced loss in an already tragic context.

5.3.1. Beyond the Episode: Disappearances in Syria

The issue of disappearance brings the discussion towards another tormenting reality in Syria. According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights (2018), 95,000 people have been forcibly disappeared since the beginning of the conflict in 2011. This number includes arrests and disappearances committed by all parties to the conflict, including the GoS, NSAGs, Islamic factions, and the Kurdish self-administration forces, such as the Democratic Union Party (abbreviated as PYD) (Syrian Network for Human Rights 2018). The Syrian Network for Human Rights has documented 14,129 cases of death under torture at the hands of the main conflict parties (Syrian Network for Human Rights 2019).

According to a statement released by Amnesty International (2019), government forces have committed arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances, and subjected prisoners and detainees to torture (ibid). In some cases, these acts amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity (ibid). NSAGs have also committed such violations

of international humanitarian law such as abductions, torture and summary killings (ibid). For example, in areas under HTS-control, HTS have detained hundreds of people who are documenting abuses or who are protesting against the rule of HTS (ibid).

“Women, standing outside detention centers and holding photographs of their disappeared male relatives, have become an enduring image of suffering in Syria. It is an image which speaks to the essence of the violation of enforced disappearance: the taking of a loved one, the desperate search for information through official and unofficial channels, and the torment of those left behind. Those who wait are often the only visible trace of the violation”. (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2013, 2)

According to the New York Times 2019 article on Syria’s disappeared, Barnard discusses the reality of disappearance in Syria in relation to the time of Hafez al-Asaad, and calls it “the expanding gulag.” Barnard recounts the 1982 Hama events, when the regime arrested tens of thousands of people (2019). This again points to the importance of understanding the Syrian conflict in its historical context. Today’s prison system is part of a war effort to repress any civil protest or movement, and to push the opposition into an armed conflict that the GoS had a military advantage in (Barnard 2019). Syrian researcher and activist, Michel Kilo, who was also a signatory to the Damascus Declaration of 2005, writes about the people in As-Swayda in Syria who experienced detention campaigns. The activists in As-Swayda released a statement saying that “every detainee is a martyr in the making” (Kilo 2014, translated by the author).

Another family association was created in February 2017 called Families for Freedom (FFF). Families of the missing and the detainees came together and organized an influential family movement which calls on the GoS to provide families of the missing with information about their missing loved ones. FFF have also released a statement directed towards the delegations in the Astana negotiations, calling on the need to stop exchange prisoner deals since they are done in a tit-for-tat manner, and does not address the issue of disappearance in Syria (FFF 2017). FFF criticize the prisoner-exchange method since the prisoners that are chosen for these deals always involve high-level figures (2017). FFF also implore parties to move the file of detainees and missing away from military negotiations in Astana (2017). In a recent ICRC event in Colombo dedicated to the issue of the missing, the head of the delegation gave a speech where he addressed the effects of having missing family members:

“Behind every missing person there is a family...the families of missing persons are living in uncertainty and have little outlet for their anguish. Communities are profoundly affected by the disappearance of persons, as the suffering of individuals weighs heavily on the community as a whole”. (ICRC 2019)

Family therapist Pauline Boss introduced the concept of “ambiguous loss” to describe the experience of families of the missing (1999). She based the majority of her study on

families of American soldiers who went missing during the Vietnam war. Boss (1999) explains that when people disappear mysteriously, the inability for families to say goodbye continues to affect generations to come. When families do not experience seeing the body of a loved one who has died, they face difficult challenges about the presence or the absence of the person.

Going back to the “Four Towns Agreement,” there are parallels that can be drawn. Following the kidnapping of the 45 injured individuals, high-level negotiations led to a prisoner exchange deal where the GoS released a high-level NSAG official in return for the release of 30 of those wounded (UNOCHA 2017b). Again, this reveals the mechanistic meeting of a demand. It also shows, following FFF’s demand, that prisoner exchange deals are sealed when the release of high-level figures are involved. Disturbances to the system are *reconciled* using mechanistic rationality, without tending to the relational aspects of family separation.

Noura Ghazi, who is a member of FFF, also founded her own organization NoPhotozone which works on the issue of detention and enforced disappearance in Syria. NoPhotozone was created to provide legal aid and support to families of the missing and “to shed light on the stories that our eyes are not allowed to see, tales of arrest and torture, the tales of oppression and disappearance, the anecdotes that contain waiting, wrench, and hope” (NoPhotozone n.d). Noura Ghazi calls it an “open wound” that no political agreement can heal. Within these initiatives, storytelling becomes a form of resistance that preserves stories and tales that the regime seeks to hide. Noura Ghazi founded NoPhotozone for the legacy of her husband Bassel Khartabil who was detained, disappeared and later on, executed by the regime.

Noura Ghazi and Bassel Khartabil met during a protest in Douma in April 2011. They planned to marry a year after meeting for the first time. However, Khartabil was detained by government forces on March 15, 2012; a week before their wedding. Nevertheless, they married while Khartabil was in Adra prison (The Telegraph 2017) and they soon became known as the ‘Bride and Groom of the Revolution’ (Ghazi 2015). After his detention, his wife and other activists launched a global campaign demanding his release called #FreeBassel. Khartabil was a software developer for international companies such as Firefox and Creative Commons. He was an advocate for “open culture” and open source programming and sharing knowledge across the world. He saw the importance of the internet to connect cultures. In 2009, he co-organized an event called Open Art and Technology at the University of Damascus where speakers from Creative Commons were invited. It was the first open culture event in Syria. Khartabil was seen as starting a digital revolution in Syria.

The campaign was adopted by internet companies such as Mozilla (McAllister 2012), Global Voices (Global Voices 2012), and Creative Commons (Creative Commons 2012). Others joined in the campaign and issued statements calling for the release of Khartabil such as Al Jazeera and Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. On November 26, 2012 Foreign Policy named Khartabil one of the top 100 global thinkers (2012). In 2013, while still in detention, Creative Commons awarded him the Index on Censorship’s Digital Freedom Award (Creative Commons 2013).

In October 2015, Khartabil was transferred from Adra prison to an unknown location. His whereabouts remained unknown to his friends and family for two years. In August 2017, his wife, Noura Ghazi, discovered that her husband was executed a few days after his transfer in 2015. Many initiatives were created in his legacy including Ghazi's NoPhotozone Organization which supports families of the missing, and Creative Common's Bassel Khartabil Fellowship which supports individuals working on open internet communities (Bassel Khartabil Website n.d.).

As such, these stories continue to live in the collective and social memory of Syrians (Sharbaji 2016). The repercussions of the "Four Towns Agreement" go well beyond the dates of its implementation. For example, on December 9, 2018, two activists from Madaya, who were part of the "Four Towns Agreement" were arrested in Idleb by HTS. Hussam Mahmud and Hassan Younis, 30 and 27 years old respectively, were disappeared by an HTS patrol. Hassan's brother, Bakir Younes, was arrested two days later as well. Four days later, prominent media activist from Madaya, Amjad Al Maleh, was arrested. Before his arrest, Amjad had started to establish a center for forcibly displaced families in Idleb. This could be the potential reason for his arrest. Following the arrests, HTS took the personal belongings of Amjad and Hussam from their house, including computers and mobiles. Amjad, Hussam, Hassan and Bakir were prominent media activists from Madaya, who were advocating for the life of the siege on Madaya (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights 2017, SCM 2017 and SCM n.d, Syrians for Truth and Justice 2018). Their whereabouts are still unknown.

Returning back to the "Four Towns Agreement," this second incident of disappearance, which is directly linked to the conflict episode, shows that the agreement was not done in a static place and time, with a clear beginning and end. The repercussions are strong, and continue after the agreement was deemed as 'officially over.' The lived experiences of the families continue to be affected. The agreement does not live in a vacuum. It continues to live in the daily lives of the families from the four towns. This brings the discussion towards another ECM layer, wherein space and time are experienced as a continuum, transcending death and climaxing in the unity of humans in the all-oneness. In the spiritual-political layer, all aspects of the ego from the previously mentioned layers fade away; power, greed, willpower, love and hate subside, making way for silence and unconditional love towards everything, free of judgement.

5.4. The Spiritual-Political Layer: Reconnections

Who could live, who could breathe,
If there were not this inner glow of bliss?
Taittiriya-Upanishad (in Dietrich 2012, 16)

In the spiritual-political layer, we shift our attention beyond individual and conscious aspects of the ego. Given that this sphere lies outside the realm of self-awareness, it is

difficult to find the words, grammar and semantics of modern language to describe them. While modern and postmodern schools of thought have excluded this sphere, transrational peace research includes it in its epistemological interest. Despite that the Cartesian mind cannot observe or prove these aspects, nevertheless the trans-egoic spheres influence the conflict episodes in ways that cannot be ignored (Dietrich 2018). The spiritual-politicary layer refers to the *visuddha* in yoga philosophy and refers to our human aspects that lie outside of our mental or societal self-understanding. Most yoga systems go beyond the *visuddha* chakra and define the *sahasrara* chakra as the seventh one, which refers to the all-one. Within the ECM layer system, this would translate to the universal layer, the epicenter.

“Spatio-temporal awareness is intrapersonally positioned in front of the mental, emotional, sexual and physical aspects of being human in the same way that interpersonally it is positioned in front of the societal, communal and family aspects” (Dietrich 2018, 72). Dietrich (2018) explains that dynamic equilibrium in this layer is equally important as in the others. In the spiritual-politicary layer, blockages emerge from dogmas in the socioemotional-communal and mental-societal layers that perceive humans as egoistic beings. Nevertheless, with spiritual-politicary spheres, humans are perceived as experiencing feeling, thinking and doing in ways that are different from the individual or collective dogmas existing in the world. As such, this different way of being in the world is not fearful over its existence and allows humans to be connected in the unity of being. Dietrich (2018) argues that it is specifically this connection that has healed the influence of the Cartesian sphere, and stopped the mind from its capability to destroy the planet.

5.4.1. The Pain of the Laws

“Having expelled whole communities en masse from numerous Syrian cities and towns, a new law now allows the Assad regime to confiscate their properties, rendering their displacement permanent and radically transforming the country’s demography”. (Al Shami 2018)

The destructive force of spiritual crises emerges from efforts to solidify, interpret, and translate spiritual realms using rationality. That is, when spirituality is institutionalized into the episode, destructive energies are transferred into the rational and relational actions in individual, family, communal and societal contexts. In the context of the “Four Towns Agreement,” the pain of the laws envisaged and implemented distorts the relationships between people, and between people and land. This opens up a discussion on the energetic relationship of the interconnectedness of all beings.

Dietrich (2012) argues that peace begins in oneself, which shapes the relationship to other human beings, but also to all other creatures including animals, nature and the universe. Since energetic practices of peace assume a plurality of truths, societal questions are not configured by law, but by the relations of those involved. As such, all

decisions are made by taking into consideration the consequences of a decision on the relations between humans. Given that this is the first criterion, ethics and norms intended to help people orient themselves.

In light of this, the pain of the laws inflicted by the “Four Towns Agreement” points us towards the ways in which they have distorted and dismantled the relationships. The first criterion for the configuration of the “Four Towns Agreement” and its associated rules has been the immortality of the conflict parties. The “Four Towns Agreement” functions as a prescribed formula for power, while diminishing prospects for reconciliation. For example, the GoS took legislative action to confiscate land following the evacuation deal (Al Shami 2018, UNHRC 2017). When people leave behind their homes to be transferred to their final destinations, the GoS takes possession of their left-behind homes and properties. The GoS has also dispossessed those transferred by the evacuation deal with the ability to register new properties where it now requires in-person registration, making it virtually impossible for many evacuees to do so because of the severity of the fighting countrywide (Al Shami 2018, UNHRC 2017).

The GoS issued Law No. 10 on April 2, 2018 (SANA News 2018) which authorizes local administrative units within governorates, cities and towns to register property ownership within their jurisdiction. The law gives private property owners 30 days to register and provide proof of ownership. Otherwise, the GoS confiscates the land or property without compensation. The government asserted that his law would allow the redevelopment of areas damaged by war. Al-Shami (2018) argues that this inevitably allows the GoS to confiscate land and property in opposition-areas and prevent the return of people. Al Shami (2018) compares Law No. 10 to Israel’s Absentee Property Law of 1950 which authorized Israel to confiscate property from Palestinians who were forced out of their homes, and hence, transferring private property to Israel. “In this case the state wants to transfer property away from communities it will never be able to rule through consent, into the hands of loyalists” (Al Shami 2018). Essentially, what this portrays is the skewed mechanistic relationship with land.

In addition, Syria’s reconstruction is estimated at more than \$250 billion (Al Shami 2018). Al Shami (2018) notes that the regime will reward its allies through reconstruction efforts, and the material incentives found therein. Going back to Wedeen’s (1999) arguments, the regime has continuously rewarded loyalty with material benefits, and as such, Al Shami infers that reconstruction will allow the GoS to strengthen its political and economic power base (2018). For example, the GoS issued Decree No. 19 in May 2015 which granted local administrative units the authorization to begin reconstruction work and in return, they would be exempt from taxes (Al Shami 2018). As a result, public assets were transferred to private businesses owned by those loyal to the regime (ibid).

I believe it brings us to great proximity to the epicenter of the conflict; the seat where the conflictive energy settles and intertwines, and fuels the episode of the conflict. It is the disconnection between Syrians themselves and between Syrians and their imagined Syria and the rest of the world that instigates much of the conflict; the

strong need for owning and attaching to the land, for imagining pseudo-communities that rage in violence, and for mourning what rightly belonged to life.

The question of nature, land, and territorialization are at the heart of my discussion on belonging, loss, politics, and power. In drawing from Deleuze and Guattari's work, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987), Étienne Balibar understands territorialization as assigning “‘identities’ for collective subjects within structures of power, therefore to categorialize and individualize human beings [...]” (2004, 4). Edward Said (1987) in his conceptualization of orientalism explains imagined boundaries and the mentally constructed and territorialized identities. The moment an ‘us’ is created, a boundary with ‘them’ is drawn, regardless the proximity or distance between the two. “It is enough for ‘us’ to set up these boundaries in our own minds; ‘they’ become ‘they’ accordingly, and both their territory and their mentality are designated as different from ‘ours’” (Said 1978, 54). In their work, *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) explain that understanding entities, space, or land as bounded territories

“[...] allows us to refer to it, quantify it, identify a particular aspect of it, see it as a cause, act with respect to it, and perhaps even believe that we understand it. Ontological metaphors like this are necessary for attempting to deal rationally with our experiences”. (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 26)

While ontological metaphors are important to know the world by categorization and distinction, they blur the gray area where the dynamic and emergent properties of the world are connected. They make the connections invisible.

“When the Mind separates and draws barriers in the heart of...dualities, and the barrier becomes a real barrier so that there is no longer porous space for breathing, then you have dualism and then you have things cut off that should belong together and that’s the heart of all fundamentalisms and fascisms. And I think that keeping one’s imagination alive always keeps you in vital conversation with the othernesses that you tend to avoid or neglect”. (O’Donohue 2015)

Therefore, this invites us to imagine our world beyond binary identity formations. The rupture of society and the questions we are confronted with in the “Four Towns Agreement” in specific and Syria in general, attests to the significance of finding and recovering a sense of home amidst this homelessness. Going back to the term ‘internally displaced persons,’ a term which, on the mental-societal and socioemotional-communal layer designates a temporary relationship to citizenship and belonging, gains a new depth in the spiritual-political layer. “The possibility of being both literally housed and being at-home-in-the-world, at home in our bodies, and at home together”. (Metzger-Traber 2017, 21)

“What is home in a time of enforced exile, the age of the refugee? What can the expression to dwell mean in the era of homelessness? How is home to be construed when the circumambient world of life-giving elements—elements in the ancient pre-Socratic sense:

earth, air, fire, water—have become sources of pollution or death, in this age of environmental collapse and apocalyptic weaponry?” (Wyschogrod 1997, 187 in Metzger-Traber 2017, 3)

In their seminal book *Ecofeminism*, Shiva and Mies (1993) distinguish between different modes of mobility within globalization. “One group is mobile on a world scale, with no country no home, but the whole world as its property, the other has lost even the mobility within rootedness, lives in refugee camps, resettlement colonies and reserves” (Mies and Shiva 1993, 98, in Braidotti 2006, 60). Yet, the spiritual-political layer invites us to perceive how intimately connected we are across the different experiences of mobility. Thus, the concern of home and belonging is a spiritual connection to life, our families, and earth. In his phenomenological anthropology book *At Home in the World*, Michael D. Jackson (1995) asserts that the world is witnessing an era of uprootedness, where very few people live where they were born. This shows that the question of home and belonging affects us all, and is open for re-definition.

As such, in this section I am using the tools of modernity and postmodernity, where they reach their limit, and inquiring into ways in which we would apply the energetic principles of harmonization to connect to something larger than an anthropocentric perspective. In this part of the book, I am particularly weary of disrespecting the visceral loss of home, of entertaining unanswerable human conundrums with intellectual violence. And yet, I do believe that a feeling of grounded interconnectedness, and the rekindled connection with the all-one makes our belonging in the world held by the composition of our ecological selves. For me, this is very difficult terrain that I am treading on. I do not want to insinuate disrespect for the political homes and the larger political implications that this holds for those involved in the “Four Towns Agreement.” What I would like to endeavor is to ask: what happens if the intimate body, land, neighborhood, even climate, are felt as interconnected? Following this line of thought, I think life becomes a shared process of creation of our homes and our nation-states; a relation that we might not always see but that inevitably exists.

In an effort to reconceive political belonging, I find myself thinking about our most immediate home – our bodies. Our bodies, whom we are always in relation with, are constantly shifting and changing with our breath. Breathing is a process of interconnection with the world. When we breathe, we come home, we arrive, we land and we settle. By paying attention to our breathing bodies, we are able to recover a sense of grounding and stillness that has transformative repercussions (Hanh 2009). As beautiful as this is, the “Four Towns Agreement” forces me to realize that not all of us are free to breathe the air we have access to. Under the difficult living conditions in Madaya, Az-Zabadani, Kafreya, and Foah, people do not feel safe. And when people do not feel safe, they cannot breathe because they hold their breath, or worse, it is taken away from them. Koppensteiner explains that when we cannot breathe, we cannot live, and hence we cannot come home. Butler (2004) asserts that although our vulnerability

is universal, its distribution is determined by geometrics of power that ultimately are inscribed on our very bodies.

“The ‘disposable’ bodies of women, youths and others who are racialized or marked off by age and marginality come to be inscribed with particularly ruthless violence in this regime of power. They experience dispossession of their embodied and embedded selves, in a political economy of repeated and structurally enforced eviction”. (Sassen 1996 in Braidotti 2006, 60)

5.5. Beyond the Episode

“The exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons, are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience”. (Said 2002, 147)

In many ways, the “Four Towns Agreement” represents much more than a deal sealed in March 2017 following negotiations between the conflict parties, under the auspices of Third-States, which stipulated an evacuation deal from Madaya, Az-Zabadani, Kafreya, and Foah. The “Four Towns Agreement” reveals a perpetual reality and pattern across all the towns in Syria. The pattern of poor living conditions, bombings and killings, loss of homes, and displacement, repeats itself over and over again. The epicenter of the conflict, which, as described, appears to be the mechanistic relationship with land and the institutionalized spirituality, bounces back at Syria in different forms and faces. According to Amnesty International (2017), three other ‘reconciliation’ deals have been implemented between August 2016 and March 2017 under the auspices of international sponsors. The ‘surrender or starve’ strategy has in effect led to the displacement of thousands of residents from the following areas: Daraya, eastern Aleppo city and al-Waer. While there are differences in the agreements, they follow a similar pattern of sieges and bombardments.

The dominance of the mental-societal layer has shown itself in the ‘reconciliation deals’ signed in 2017 in Syria, but also, perhaps even more prominently, in the creation of ‘de-escalation zones.’ In May 2017, just two months after the signing of the “Four Towns Agreement,” a deal for a series of ceasefires was signed by pro-government states, Iran and Russia on one hand, and Turkey on another. It was signed during the Astana talks in the Kazakh capital, Astana. Angered by Iran’s involvement in the negotiations, the opposition delegates stormed out of the meeting (Al Jazeera 2017b). The new agreement was called ‘De-Escalation Zones’ which stipulated the cessation of hostilities for six months between NSAGs and GoS forces in four areas in Syria, home to a total of 2.5 million people (Al-Jazeera 2017b).

Zone 1: Idleb province, northeastern areas of Latakia, western areas of Aleppo, and northern areas of Hama. These provinces are home to one million people. The dominant NSAG faction is linked to Al-Qaeda.

Zone 2: includes the two enclaves of northern Homs: Rastan and Talbiseh where 180,000 people live. Similar to Zone 1, the network of NSAGs is dominated by Al-Qaeda fighters.

Zone 3: encapsulates Eastern Ghouta in the northern Damascus countryside which is home to 690,000 individuals and is controlled mostly by the NSAGs faction of Jaish Al-Islam.

Zone 4: includes the parts of Daraa and Quneitra provinces that are under NSAGs control. 800,000 people live in this zone.

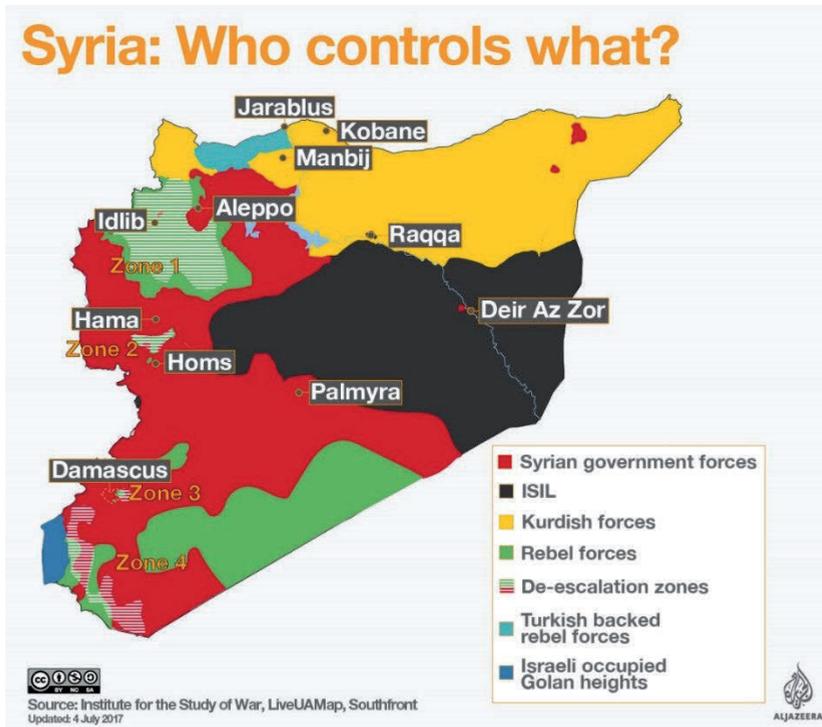


Figure 6: Four de-escalation zones in Syria (Al Jazeera 2018a)

Akram Al Bunni, who is a political activist in Syria and was detained for 20 years for his dissident ideas under Hafez al-Asaad’s rule, writes about the Astana talks in relation to the de-escalation zones. Al Bunni (2018) asserts that the Astana talks sidelined the negotiation efforts held at Geneva. Despite the latter’s inability to bring concrete steps, Al Bunni (2018) insists that there is a huge difference between an international conference which seeks to end the conflict in Syria based on Geneva’s 2012 Communiqué, and the Astana talks which is only a means of managing the conflict

through third states. Al Bunni (2018) continues that the 2012 Geneva Communiqué aligns with the needs of Syrians, while the Astana talks are minor steps towards decreasing the intensity of fighting by establishing de-escalation zones. Al Bunni (2018) also notes that the Astana talks demonstrate international consensus of Russia managing the conflict in Syria. More so, it comes as a way to decrease Iran's influence in the region, especially through Russia's military gains on the ground.

Similar to the "Four Towns Agreement," the de-escalation zone deal was signed outside of Syria, and under the auspices of guarantor states, Russia, Iran and Turkey. Again, the strong reign of the mental-societal layer in the Syrian war is envisaged in the deal, especially where land is referred to as zones; zones that can be exchanged, destroyed, and trafficked. This again reveals the disconnection from the connection to earth and the land they fight so fiercely for. In its arguments supporting the agreement, Russia has stipulated that the cessation of hostilities in the four zones will give space for focused attacks against the extremist groups such as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and the IS (Al-Jazeera 2017). In a similar vein to the "Four Towns Agreement," the aim of creating de-escalation zones is to uphold the state. The GoS will have more resources and weaponry to strike the extremist groups when it is not caught up simultaneously in clashes in other areas. Putting this in transrational terms, these measures increase the personal security of the GoS.

The "Four Towns Agreement" is a lens through which to observe the inner dynamics of the Syrian conflict. It has ultimately shown an orchestration of violence, a pendulum of displacement, and the lived realities and realities lost by the war. Here lies the challenge of the moral imagination, as Lederach (2005) terms it, to observe the episode, and more generally, to observe Syria, and not to attach my judgements to it. But to really look at it; to really listen to it. What is it telling me? What is screaming at me?

On that note, I move to the next branch of the ECM model, the levels of the conflict episode, and I pose the question: what are the different levels communicating to each other? Do they hear each other? Are there untold and hence unheard stories? Communication is key in this branch of the ECM since it affects the ways in which the levels of the conflict episode are connected and disconnected in their communication. The ECM levels assist in identifying the different actors and actresses who are involved in the conflict episode.

6. The Levels: The Broken Web of Relationships

A red stripe around a beige woolen hat.
Blanket, cheap, polyethylene or some such irritant cloth.
Held by unseen motherly arms, his child face the center of this world, collapsing.
Blunt nose, cartilage still strong.
A closed mouth, one that forgot its main purpose.
A jawline like a coast, full of sand on his tongue, water ebbing away.
Cheeks like a crater, impact in the form of bones.
Held up for a journalist, a photo in front of a modern looking building, clean white
stone walls.
The caption says... "My only dream is to have a piece of bread".
Have a piece of my liver, cooked in its own anger, crisp and succulent.
Have all the balloons in my lungs, popping to find you.
Have what is left of my imagination,
have my sleep, and my saliva.
Have my tears,
There is no place for them, anymore.

----- Hind Shoufani, Seven Songs for Syria (2017)

Dietrich (2018) bases the ECM layers on Lederach's vertical pyramid of actors for peacebuilding, which he originally proposed in his book *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (1997). In his more recent work, *The Moral Imagination*, Lederach (2005) grounds the blueprint pyramid in a systemic understanding of conflict, where the distinctions between top-leadership, middle-leadership, and grassroots levels are hazier than clear-cut. Dietrich takes up the vertical pyramid and adapts it into his multi-layered model, where he proposes the symbol of the Sri-Yantra to build the systemic approach wherein all levels of the conflict affect and feed each other in never-ending feedback loops (2018).

In the early version, Lederach (1997) only perceived a conflict surface, which he called the conflict episode, and three levels to the vertical pyramid: the top-leadership level, the middle-range level, and the grassroots level (Dietrich 2018). Lederach bases the distinction between the levels on the two contradictory approaches that were popular at the time: the top-down and bottom-up approaches. This structural understanding of conflict sees that state leadership, "the few 'up there,' would manage for the masses 'down there,' in which the Middle Range Leaders were serving as transmitters" (Dietrich 2018, 77). This originates in the neoliberalism of IR whose main concern is to engage in the cross-national conflicts of elite-governed nation states. With the introduction of the New Wars (Kaldor 1999) and violence being fought inside instead of between states, the bottom-up approach urged the governing elite to be responsible for the Grassroots. While the Top Leaders enjoy the clearest overview of the conflict, they suffer the least from the consequences of their decisions. On the other hand, the Grassroots suffer directly from the Top Leaders' decisions while having little knowledge or influence on the situation. At structuralism's best, the suppressed Grassroots compel the Top Leader oppressors to serve the best for the state. This would be brokered by the Middle Ranges. Lederach has crafted his model by weaving connections between system theory and these structuralist beginnings in order to create an interplay between these approaches. As such, these approaches are now connected by systemic feedback loops, trickling up and down across the vertical pyramid.

Incorporating the chosen conflict episode into the levels analysis reveals that at the top-leadership level are the local and international decision-makers of the "Four Towns Agreement." Their agenda is geared at conflict resolution and conflict management, making them highly inflexible. The UN, the ICRC and the SARC, who facilitated the evacuation, and other local organizations who took part in mediating the evacuation, are grossly located in the middle-range of the levels pyramid. Finally, those who directly experienced the aggressions of the evacuation find themselves in the grassroots level.

6.1. Top-Leadership Level

In the top-leadership level, we find the “institutionally legitimized representatives of the parties to the dispute, namely the political and military leadership” (Dietrich 2018, 77). It also includes businesses and religious institutions. Although this level encompasses a small circle of people, their decisions have great influence. Individuals in this level are characterized by their visibility, making them highly inflexible. The approach to peacebuilding in this level is to achieve a cease-fire or a cessation of hostilities. From that, broader political and negotiation work could culminate into an agreement that transitions the country from war to peace.

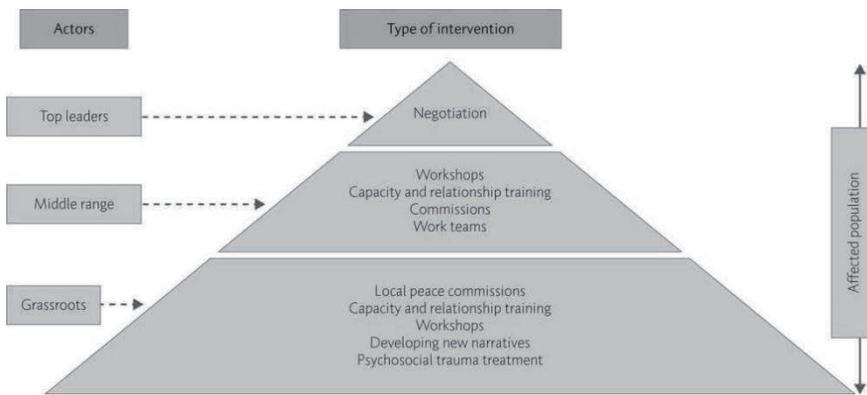


Figure 7: Actor's Pyramid (Dietrich 2014)

Drawing from the knowledge gained about the conflict episode, I find that the process of the “Four Towns Agreement” was announced at the top-leadership level and was built to a degree on elements of a middle-range initiative. Here lies a key dilemma in peacebuilding: how to link the diverse needs and activities of the different levels of the affected society. Confidentiality was a key element in this agreement. At the top-leadership level, the initial stages of planning, negotiating, and arranging the conditions of the agreement were kept confidential (The New York Times 2018). For example, a major confidential part of the “Four Towns Agreement” involved the release and exchange of hostages and prisoners (The New York Times 2018, Syrian Reporter 2017). Specifically, what remained mostly confidential was the release of the kidnapped Qatari hunters in Iraq, and Qatar’s role in brokering the “Four Towns Agreement” in order to guarantee the release (Al Etihad Press 2018, The New York Times 2018, Syrian Reporter 2017). Since the kidnapping event played such a significant role in signing the agreement, I will use this section to explain the actors involved in brokering the “Four Towns Agreement” and how the kidnapping event became strictly tied to the agreement.

In November 2015, a group of hunters, 25 Qataris, two Saudis and a Pakistani, entered Southern Iraq's Muthanna province to hunt the houbara bustard bird (Al Etihad Press 2018, The National 2016 and 2017, The New York Times 2018, and Syrian Reporter 2017). Nine of the Qataris were from the al-Thani family, one of the wealthiest dynasties in the world (The New York Times 2018). The group had chosen Iraq's Muthanna province for their hunting ground as it had become a stretch of land that was a haven for the houbara bird. Since the US-American invasion of 2003, the Muthanna province was devoid of people or visitors; to its north was IS-controlled land, making the Muthanna province a hardly-visited destination. The Qataris hired Iraqi guards to accompany their trip, and spent three weeks in the desert, giving passing Bedouins extravagant gifts in hopes of ensuring their safety (The National 2016 and 2017, The New York Times 2018).

Although the Iraqi government had granted the hunting party approval of entry, towards the end of their hunting trip, on the night of December 15, 2015, armed vehicles stormed the hunting camp and took the 28 members hostage (The New York Times 2018, The Washington Post 2018). When news of the kidnapping reached Qatar at 6 a.m., it sent the government and royal family into panic (The New York Times 2018). At first, it was unclear who carried out the kidnapping (The New York Times 2018, The Washington Post 2018). The hunting party had provided Iraq's Ministry of Interior the precise coordinates of their camp, and a few hours before the kidnapping, Iraqi government representatives conducted a surprise visit to the hunting camp. As such, Qatari officials suspected that the Iraqi government leaked information to the kidnapers (The New York Times 2018).

According to The New York Times (2018), the kidnapping incident highlights the vulnerabilities in Qatar's prominent economy. Lying between the region's Shiite power – Iran – and the region's Sunni power – Saudi Arabia – its natural gas deposits in its deserts and coastlines have provided it with a G.D.P. of \$181 billion with only 300,000 citizens. With regards to its political decisions, Qatar angered all sides of the region at once. It engaged with the Shiite rising powers of the region – Iran, Syria and Hezbollah – aggressively angering Saudi Arabia and the United States. In parallel, it used its money to broker diplomatic deals with Sunnis in Lebanon and Yemen. While hosting the largest American base in the region, Qatar also established *Al Jazeera*, frequently broadcasting anti-American news (The New York Times 2018).

Qatar's political approach backfired badly. At the start of the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, Qatar started funding the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood, for what it saw in it as being sympathetic to Sunnis. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, though Sunni, were infuriated by Qatar's bankrolling the Muslim Brotherhood out of fears of the groups becoming a threat to their states (The New York Times 2018, The Washington Post 2018). Another risky bankroll that Qatar carried out was its financing to Sunni opposition factions in Syria. Qatar envisioned the armed opposition winning the war and hence boosting Qatar's standing in the region. However, the reality was different. As the war dragged on, the armed opposition groups only became more extreme with time. And soon, Qatar was associated with funding terrorist groups (The

New York Times 2018, and The Washington Post 2018). “In the end, Qatar managed to make enemies on both sides of the worsening sectarian divide” (The New York Times 2018).

A few days following the kidnapping, the Qatari government established that Kata’ib Hezbollah, an Iraqi Shiite armed group, had kidnapped the 28 hunters (The National 2018b, The New York Times 2018, and The Washington Post 2018). Kata’ib Hezbollah is affiliated and receives funding from Iran, and is designated as a terrorist group by the United States (The Washington Post 2018). Kata’ib Hezbollah joined the fighting in Syria and fought alongside groups loyal to the al-Asaad regime. In response to this, Qatari officials sought intermediary help from the Iraqi government and Iraqi Shiite leaders to contact the kidnappers. This forced Qatar to reach out to an Iranian military general, Qassim Soleimani, seen as the most powerful military officer in the Middle East (The New Yorker 2013, The New York Times 2018, and The Washington Post 2018). Soleimani heads the Quds Force of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards and reports directly to Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (The New Yorker 2013, The New York Times 2018, and The Washington Post 2018). The Quds Force of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards is a highly secretive foreign policy instrument of the Iranian government that is part special operations force and part paramilitary (News Week 2018, The National 2018a). Given his profile and influence, I consider him to be one of the key actors in the Top-Leadership Level. He enjoys influence, is very knowledgeable of the events, and he is a highly public figure in the Syrian conflict.

Given his public figure and desire to influence the Syrian conflict, ransom money was of no interest to Soleimani as his visions had long been to prop up the Syrian regime (The New York Times 2018). Since the 1980s, Syria became Iran’s lifeline for funding the Lebanese Hezbollah with weapons. This was essential since Hezbollah acts as Iran’s arm in Lebanon. The armed conflict in Syria threatened the link between Iran and Lebanon. Fearing eradication, both Sunnis and Shiites from the region poured their sectarian struggles into the Syrian war. In that orchestration, the Saudis and their allies started funding the Syrian armed opposition groups, hoping to topple the al-Asaad regime, making Syria more Sunni-friendly and hence isolating Iran. On the other side of the sectarian chessboard was Iran, and specifically Soleimani, who saw Syria as Iran’s lifeline and ally (News Week 2018, The New York Times 2018, and the Washington Post 2018). Within this geopolitical game, the Qatari hostages became valuable bait (The National 2018b, The New York Times 2018, and The Washington Post 2018). For Soleimani, he saw in this situation an opportunity to pressure Qatar and the opposition factions, and in return, trench and consolidate Iranian influence in key areas within Syria (The National 2018b, The New York Times 2018, and The Washington Post 2018).

In this situation, many imbalances emerge. From a systemic understanding, power is always relational; it cannot be given or taken away, but can only be exercised (Lederach 1997). But in the orchestration between these competing states, power is understood from a structural perspective, and hence is driven by the desire to subjugate and conquer. The outcome of this is a winner and a loser. Returning to the previous ECM

branches (themes and layers), this is very much in line with the modern understandings of peace as derived from security and the overemphasis on the dogma of the mental-societal layer. However, from a systemic understanding of conflict, there are no winners or losers. There can only be a relationship that is either balanced or imbalanced; that is either crippled or open in its communication.

Shortly before the kidnapping incident, the UN facilitated a secret meeting in Istanbul in September 2015, where an envoy from Soleimani's force proposed an agreement known as the "four towns" deal (The New York Times 2018). It stipulated the same premises of the 2017 "Four Towns Agreement," whereby in a tit-for-tat manner, sieges would be uplifted from Madaya and Az-Zabadani, and in return, from Kafreya and Foah (ibid). While the details remained vague at first, The New York Times (2018) reports that the Iranians proposed swapping the residents of the towns, amounting to Sunnis from Madaya and Az-Zabadani being transferred to Kafreya and Foah, and Shiites from Kafreya and Foah being transferred to Madaya and Az-Zabadani. Iran presented this as a humanitarian effort to alleviate the suffering of those living under siege. The proposal was angrily refused by rebel spokesmen, due to the plan's sectarian calculus (ibid).

Following the kidnapping of the Qatari hunters, Iran gained a powerful leverage card over the NSAGs and more specifically, their sponsor Qatar (The National 2018b, The New York Times 2018, and The Washington Post 2018). Given that Hezbollah was the single group who enjoyed trusted relationships with all parties (Tehran, Doha and Kata'ib Hezbollah), delegates for Soleimani reached out to Qatar through the Lebanese Hezbollah and laid out the deal (The National 2017, The New York Times 2018). Using Hezbollah as an intermediary to Qatar allowed Iran to gain more control within ransom negotiations. Iran did not want the negotiations to result in a fast cash payment to the Iraqi kidnapers in return for the release of the Qatari hostages (The New York Times 2018). Instead, Iran sent a high-ranking Hezbollah proxy to Doha and explained the conditions: that the hostages would be released in exchange for Qatar facilitating the "Four Towns Agreement" (The New York Times 2018).

From a systemic perspective, this reveals that the relational field between the parties is impaired, driven mostly by incongruent communication that lacks trust and thrives on the threat of power. Those in the top-leadership are unable to listen to each other; unable to empathize with each other's needs. Given the relational field within-which the negotiations take place, it becomes evident that the outcome is not intended to bring balance to the relational system between those involved. Lederach explains that:

"...conflicts are by nature lodged in long-standing relationships. In other words, they are 'protracted' or 'intractable.' Part of the challenge posed by many armed conflicts is the long-term nature of the conflicting groups' animosity, perception of enmity, and deep-rooted fear". (1997, 14)

According to the interviews conducted by The New York Times (2018), the implications of the "Four Towns Agreement" meant little to the Qataris compared to

the release of the royal hostages, which motivated them to accept hosting a series of talks between the parties to the “Four Towns Agreement.” Iran, Hezbollah, and the militias. The New York Times (2018) reports that the parties to the deal met separately with the Qatari negotiators, with a heavy emphasis on the logistics of the deal. Iran’s initial proposal of swapping the residents of the four towns was abandoned. Instead, the deal stipulated that residents of the four towns are transferred to safer zones, with the future of each town to be dealt with separately (The New York Times 2018). Implementing a transfer deal in a volatile war zone is tricky, given the different demands of the parties (UNHCR 2016).

Months later and there was still no news on freeing the hostages. The Qataris were under enormous pressure from the al-Thanis to do what is necessary for the release of the royal family (The New York Times 2018). With their growing desperation, Qatar started exploring other rescue schemes. The New York Times (2018) reports that all other avenues explored involved a parade of money to middlemen who claimed they could ensure the release of the hostages. According to the Daily Star (2017) and The New York Times (2018), the ruling family’s desperation led them to contract an American firm called Global Strategies Council Inc., and paid them \$2 million upfront. The aim was for the firm to obtain proof of life, initiate communication with government agencies, and negotiate with the kidnappers for the release of the Qatari royals (The Daily Star 2017).

“The payment, disclosed in US Justice Department documents examined by the Associated Press, shed new light on the opaque world of private hostage negotiation in the Middle East in a case that now involves hackers, encrypted internet communication and promises of millions of dollars in ransom payments”. (The Daily Star 2017, 8)

According to The New York Times (2018), during the annual gathering of the Arab interior ministers, Qataris finally found the man with the right connections to seal the deal. In early April 2017, the Qatari interior minister met Qassim al-Araji,²⁷ the Iraqi interior minister in Tunis. Al-Araji affirmed that he enjoyed the right clout into the Shiite-militia world. Al-Araji refused to disclose to the Qataris the party who had the hostages, although according to the New York Times (2018), he knew that Kata’ib Hezbollah was responsible for the kidnapping. Al-Araji assured the Qatari minister that he had a plan to free the hostages but suggested that this remain secret and not to notify anyone else in the Iraqi government (The New York Times 2018).

One week after meeting al-Araji in Tunis, a crisis team was set up by Qatar, including Zayed Al Khayareen, the Qatari ambassador to Iraq, and Foreign Minister Mohammad bin Abdulrahman al-Thani, and Hamad bin Khalifa al-Attiyah, the emir’s personal adviser (The New York Times 2018, and The Washington Post 2018). In working through different channels to secure the freedom of the hostages, this event

27 There were charges against al-Araji for carrying out attacks against American troops. He was imprisoned twice by American forces in Iraq but later released for lack of evidence (The New York Times 2018).

became tied to the “Four Towns Agreement” (Al Etihad Press 2018, Al-Ghad TV 2018, Syrian Reporter 2017, Tahrir News 2017, The National 2018b, The New York Times 2018, and The Washington Post 2018). According to the New York Times (2018), \$360 million were to be paid to the Iraqi government, assumingly to finance a new port and embassy in Baghdad. When the negotiating team arrived with their 23 bags of cash, the money was seized at the Baghdad airport (Al Ghad TV 2018, Al Etihad Press 2018, Tahrir News 2017, The New York Times 2018). What the Qatari’s discovered was that al-Araji had greatly overstated his influence on the Iraqi government and the Baghdad airport. Haider al-Abadi, Iraq’s prime minister, was furious when he discovered Qatar’s scheme. He insisted that the money is not paid to the kidnapers, and so, the cash was transferred to Iraq’s Central Bank (Al Ghad TV 2018, Al Etihad Press 2018, Tahrir News 2017, and The New York Times 2018).

With al-Abadi impounding Qatar’s \$360 million, the carefully plotted “Four Towns Agreement” was now at risk. According to The New York Times (2018), the plan had been that the transfer of cash to the kidnapers, Kata’ib Hezbollah, would take place at the same time that the NSAG execute the “Four Towns Agreement.” The same day that the 23 bags of cash reached Baghdad, NSAGs were transferring Shiite individuals from Kafreya and Foah to Aleppo (Al Ghad TV 2018, Al Etihad Press 2018, Tahrir News 2017, The New York Times 2018). Two hundred miles south, people from Madaya and Az-Zabadani were being escorted to Idleb (ibid). That day, the Qatari negotiating team had to personally mediate and monitor the evacuation, while desperately trying to recover the 23 bags of cash (Al-Ghad TV 2018, The New York Times 2018). The Qataris tried to bribe Iraqi officials and Shiite militants with money, luxury apartments and offices in Doha and Dubai. All attempts were to no avail and al-Abadi kept the \$360 million with his circle of allies (Al-Ghad TV 2018, The New York Times 2018). In an effort to secure the cooperation of the NSAG in the “Four Towns Agreement,” Qatar also paid \$50 million to Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham (The New York Times 2018, The Washington Post 2018).

Towards the end of that day, the sad event struck the evacuees from Kafreya and Foah. While waiting at the al-Rashideen transit point, a car exploded killing 125 evacuees from Kafreya and Foah (Al Ghad TV 2018, Al Etihad Press 2018, Syrian Reporter 2017, UNOCHAb 2017, Tahrir News 2017, and The New York Times 2018). The event is a stark reminder of what this deal really entailed. It goes well beyond “back-room negotiations and bags of cash” (The New York Times 2018). It involved the transfer of people who left behind their homes as part of an imbalanced geopolitical scheme. The imbalanced relational field of the top-leadership level causes a ripple effect in the other levels, *relationally*. Since it is an open system, the 14-April explosion can be perceived as a tragic expression of the violent relationships in the top-leadership level, that have flowed and trickled through the other levels.

Despite the unfortunate events of April 14, the “Four Towns Agreement” resumed and was completed four days later. The events that took place after the “Four Towns Agreement” was completed are only reported by The New York Times (2018). According to The New York Times (2018), during that time, the Qatari negotiating

team were taken to meet a Shiite militia in the Karada neighborhood of Iraq, where the Qataris were shown a recent video of the hostages as proof of life. The Qataris quickly asked Iraqi authorities for permission to leave the country, although the bags of cash were still in Iraq's central bank. It seemed the Qataris had found a different route to satisfy the kidnappers. Almost immediately after, the hostages received news that they would be receiving showers and haircuts. It was time for them to leave. For 16 months, the hostages were kept in a dark, windowless basement in the South of Iraq. They saw the sun for the first after 16 months. The released Qataris were driven to a luxurious house two hours away, where the non-royal hostages were being held. The group learned that the non-royals were treated much better than the royals, the al-Thanis, with the former allowed adequate food, showers and respectful guards.

It took another two days before the hostages left Iraq. During those last two days, the al-Thanis were again treated like royalty. They were addressed with courtesy and provided with the finest traditional Iraqi dishes. The Qataris were addressed as guests and received many apologies from the attendants who had kidnapped them. On April 21, before leaving to the airport, the released Qataris were taken to Baghdad where the Intelligence Ministry held a farewell reception for them. After a two-hour flight from Baghdad to Doha, the Qataris were reunited with their families.

What remains unclear is how the hostages were released, when the \$360 million ransom was still impounded. One answer is that Qatar paid another ransom, of a similar amount, this time via Beirut. There is speculation that Qassim Soleimani himself made the final call to release the hostages (The New York Times 2018). The Lebanese Hezbollah maintain good control over the Beirut airport, and so, as far as logic goes, would ensure that the cash delivery pass through (The New York Times 2018). If it is true that Qatar paid these two ransoms, it would mean that Qatar paid at least \$770 million to release the hostages. But probably, it paid substantially more (The New York Times 2018). Although not confirmed, it is believed that the Qatari negotiating team paid generous bribes during their week in Iraq (The New York Times 2018). And so, it is highly likely that the total amount approaches \$1 billion. Qatari officials still insist that they did not make any payments besides the 23 bags that were taken to Baghdad (The New York Times 2018). They also assert that the money paid was to assist the Iraqi government in investment projects.

“Almost a year later, the effects of the Qatari ransom deal can still be felt, from Doha to Washington. The four towns in Syria are mostly empty — a few hundred stubborn people cling to their homes in the Shiite towns up north, and some remain in Madaya and Zabadani. The jihadi rebels in Syria also continue their battle, yielding a steady trickle of battlefield death and dismemberment. The deal appears to have deepened the divide between the rebels and the people they claim to represent”. (The New York Times, 2018).

Qatar's bargaining with militants over the release of their hostages became part of a larger feud between Qatar and its Arab neighbors (The National 2018b, New York Times 2018, and The Washington Post 2018). Weeks after the release of the hostages,

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) initiated diplomatic action against Qatar for paying money to Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood to broker the deal (ibid). It involved blockade on air travel in and out of Qatar (The National 2018b, The New York Times 2018, and The Washington Post 2018). However, between 2010 and 2014, Western governments, including France and Spain, have paid ransoms to organizations deemed as terrorist groups in order to secure the release of their kidnapped citizens (Public Radio International 2015, and The Telegraph 2016) and these European countries were not seen as cooperating with terrorist organizations (The New York Times 2018).

The details of Qatar's involvement in brokering the "Four Towns Agreement" reveals the extent to which the top-leadership level is dominant in Syria, and the extent to which the lives of royal families seems to be more valuable than the lives of the people living in Madaya, Az-Zabadani, Kafreya and Foah. The question that poses itself at this point is whether the "Four Towns Agreement" would have existed at all, if the Qatari royals had not been kidnapped. What would it have taken for the sieges to be uplifted? What other scheme would the fate of the four towns find itself tied with?

"What began as a brazen kidnapping eventually became a measure of the geopolitical forces tearing the Middle East apart, and of their human cost: corruption, sectarian hatred and terrorism. Everyone involved had something to hide — except, perhaps, the hopeless hunters who set it all in motion". (The New York Times 2018)

In contexts of protracted violence, the system is imbalanced: the themes of personal harmony, structural justice, relational security, and plurality of truths are not balanced. And when they are imbalanced, it is interesting to see whether the intention of the "Four Towns Agreement" was to restore the balance to the system. In the case of the "Four Towns Agreement," it is not. The intention of Qatar paying huge sums of money to broker the deal was to consolidate dysfunctional power and relationships. For example, this can be understood as consolidating the power and influence of the GoS in Damascus, making Damascus more homogenous in its support for the GoS, and consolidating the opposition group's perception that its patron, Qatar, is willing to pay large sums of money to orchestrate certain events.

From the perspective of the levels, the Top-Leaders level is composed of powerful actors such as: the royal Qatari family al-Thani, the Iranian military general Qassem Soleimani, the Iraqi Minister of Interior Qassim al-Araji, the Qatari negotiating team (Zayed Al Khayareen, the Qatari ambassador to Iraq, and Foreign Minister Mohammad bin Abdulrahman al-Thani, and Hamad bin Khalifa al-Attiyah, the emir's personal adviser), the high-level Hezbollah proxy, and Hussam al-Shafi (also known as Zaid al-Attar), who is the spokesman for Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and political chief of HTS. My perception is that the list undoubtedly comprises more actors whose names and profiles do not appear in the news articles, but were involved in the back-room negotiations.

The episode of the "Four Towns Agreement" reveals the operational power of the Top-Leadership level. That no Syrian official was involved directly in the deal exposes

the extent to which the relational field is crippled. In such a setting, power is diffuse due to the fragmentation and multiplicity of groups, weakened central control, and the autonomous and shifting nature of alliances (Lederach 1997). According to Lederach (1997), this makes it difficult to identify decision-making structures and assess whether the actions of the individual Top-Leaders fulfill the expectation of the groups they claim to represent. But what happens when those in the top-leadership level do not represent the people involved in the conflict episode? In that sense, agency of Syrians is taken away from them. In many ways, this results in a demolished pyramid where any discussion of themes is toppled with the realization that no harmony, security, justice or truth is being sought. The attention towards the role of the local actors and civil society grew during the 1990s, cultivating the idea of ‘peace from below’ which nurtures the resources rooted in the local people (Lederach 1997). Lederach’s pioneering work argues that a holistic approach to peacebuilding sees domestic and international actors as important, but they must recognize the visions for peace among local people. Lederach calls it “citizenbased peace making” (Lederach 1997, 94). This approach becomes especially significant in the discussion on the middle-range and grassroots level leaderships.

Moreover, according to Lederach (1997) international diplomacy has worked with a statist approach to face conflict in divided societies. The assumption is that conflicting groups operate based on the hierarchies of power between them. As such, it is important to have identifiable authority representatives on all sides of the conflict parties. But what happens when it is difficult to identify such representatives, as is the case in the Top-Leadership level of this ECM model? This has somehow made the top-leadership level head-less. It is a pyramid with no head, no real authority. The power is so diffuse in this level that there is no legitimate process of representation in Syria. And given that in times of war, military power is the focus (Lederach 1997), cultural, political and social power are overlooked. This brings up the discussion towards the Middle-Range leadership, where the influences of multitrack diplomacy are present in Lederach’s conceptualization. The “Four Towns Agreement” is an initiative that is not owned by Syrians but by the external states who brokered the deal. As such, in the next section, I will explain the importance of engaging the local communities in peace initiatives.

6.2. Middle-Range Leadership Level

The middle-range leadership is characterized by less public exposure than the top-leadership level, making actors in this level more flexible in their decision-making. This flexibility also allows them high mobility and access to and between the high and grassroots levels. They are often the implementers of decisions directed by the top-leadership level to the grassroots. They are mainly the networkers, those who are seen as the infrastructure for peacebuilding. The middle-rangers are quite critical for inclusive social change and civil society participation. Their mobility allows them to be transmitters of insights from the grassroots to the top-leadership level.

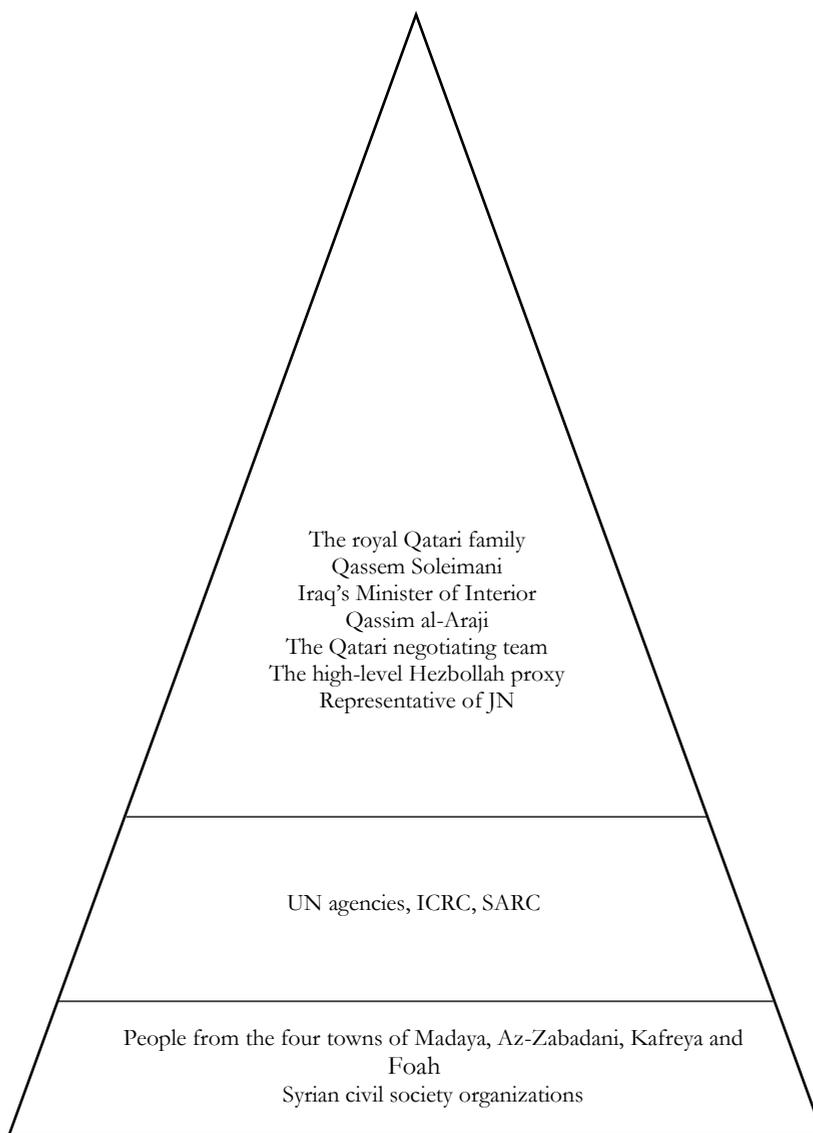


Figure 8: Representation of Actor's Pyramid for the "Four Towns Agreement" (Created by author)

In the context of the "Four Towns Agreement," the UN, the SARC and the ICRC can be seen as the implementers of the deal since they facilitated the evacuation of the people from the four towns. What is peculiar in this model is that the top-leadership

level is so dominant, that the middle-range level is unable to fulfill its own mandate. And given the power diffuse in the top-level, the middle-range actors find it difficult to reach coherent decision-making bodies in the top-leadership. Lederach writes that middle-range actors “have contact with top level leaders, but are not bound by the political calculations that govern every move and decision made at that level” (1997, 42). However, in the “Four Towns Agreement,” to what extent can the UN, the SARC and the ICRC act beyond the reach and decisions of the top-leadership level?

The answer is very little. Very little can be done without the top-leadership level granting the middle-range actors permissions for access and action. The clearest and most stark image of the dominance of the top-leadership level over the middle-range actors is the fact that the four towns of Madaya, Az-Zabadani, Kafreya, and Foah were all besieged. They were physically encircled by the power of the top-leadership level, represented by forces loyal to the regime and the NSAGs. Despite many pleas by the middle-range actors to uplift the siege from those four towns, their voices remained unheard. The SARC, the ICRC and the UN were not allowed to enter the four towns and deliver assistance, or to evacuate persons who required medical care, except when the top-leadership level granted them permission to enter. The power of the top-leadership level reigns over the middle-range actors, limiting their ability to work or fulfill their mandates.

In 2015, the four towns became besieged. In March 2015, top-leadership actors from the NSAG side besieged Kafreya and Foah in Idlib. In a retaliatory dynamic in July 2015, top-leadership actors loyal to the GoS enacted a siege around Madaya and Az-Zabadani in Damascus. Under siege conditions, humanitarian conditions worsened, and were made even worse by price inflation, making access to food items very difficult (Amnesty International 2017). Although the SARC, the ICRC, and the UN pled for humanitarian corridors for the four towns, their requests for access were frequently denied. Between October 2015 and March 2017, which is the time between the start of the sieges and the agreement to uplift them, the actors of the middle-range delivered aid to the four towns on nine occasions (Amnesty International 2017). However, on two occasions, humanitarian aid was unable to reach more than 60,000 people in the four towns for periods of four to five months in 2016 and 2017 (*ibid*). Under the tight conditions that the middle-range actors worked, starvation and malnutrition worsened, causing 65 people to die in the town of Madaya between July 2015 and May 2016 (Physicians for Human Rights 2016).

Following these dire siege conditions, and after immense pressure from the international community (including the ICRC, the UN, and the EU), an agreement was reached whereby in a tit-for-tat manner, aid delivery was allowed in the towns Madaya and in Kafreya and Foah. As such, between August and October 2016, one UN interagency aid convoy reached all four besieged towns. During that period, 49 supply trucks reached 38,000 in Madaya and four aid trucks reached Az-Zabadani. The specific numbers of aid shipments that reached Kafreya and Foah could not be obtained (Amnesty International 2017). The supply trucks to Madaya contained basic food

supplies and non-essential medical items but did not deliver necessary goods such as fuel, essential medical supplies, baby milk, or salt (Amnesty International 2017).

Furthermore, the mandate of the middle-range actors includes carrying out medical evacuations. But the dominance of the top-leadership level has challenged this. For example, in order to evacuate people who required immediate medical care, long negotiations were held between August and October 2016 (Amnesty International 2017). As a result, again in a retaliatory orchestration, the middle-range actors were given permission to evacuate people for medical reasons from Madaya, in return for evacuations from Foah. In August 2016, 40 people were evacuated for medical treatment, four people were evacuated in September for meningitis treatment, and another eight people were evacuated in October (Amnesty International 2017).

In the implementation of the “Four Towns Agreement,” the UN, the SARC and the ICRC facilitated the evacuation of the people from the four towns. During the delays at the transit points, the middle-range actors dispatched a mobile clinic at the Ramouseh garage, where people from Madaya and Az-Zabadani were waiting, and sent assistance trucks to al-Rashideen, where evacuees from Kafreya and Foah were waiting. Following the attack at the al-Rashideen transit point, the middle-range actors transferred wounded individuals to different hospitals in Syria and bordering Turkey (UNOCHA 2017b).

Therefore, middle-range actors in the “Four Towns Agreement” face major challenges in their mobility. Their mobility is largely determined by the top-leadership level and hence, their decision-making power is reduced as the relational field with the top-leadership level is hampered. This reveals disconnections in communication, and the way the power of the top-leadership level is exercised impedes the effectiveness of the middle-range. Within this ECM model, the middle-range actors are not implementers of the “Four Towns Agreement” but are puppets in the maneuvering hands of the top-level actors. Their space is limited, giving way to an imbalanced pyramid. This imbalance dismantled the apparatus of the middle-range leadership, forcing it to accept ‘reconciliation’, in a diverging yet similar way that ‘reconciliation’ was forced upon the grassroots-level.

As previously stated, the middle-range level is also very important for inclusive social cohesion and civil society participation. In the conflict episode of the “Four Towns Agreement,” the top-leadership level challenges this, imposing its power in ways that lead to exclusion of civil society. According to Paffenholz (2015c), exclusion is the main reason why groups resort to violence. Paffenholz (2015c) explains that there are two types of exclusion: active and passive exclusion. Active exclusion refers to situations when power-holders proactively exclude groups from political, economic, or social decision-making. Passive exclusion is more subtle, and refers to groups who are unable to assert their power in negotiations. Armed groups are often subject to active exclusion and women are often subject to passive exclusion (Paffenholz 2015c). While most attempts at inclusivity by the UN tends to focus on addressing passive exclusion, remedying active exclusion is also crucial for quality and sustainability of peace processes (ibid). In her briefing paper on broadening the participation in peace

processes, Paffenholz (2015a) makes it explicit that inclusion is not enough in-and-of-itself, but it is the quality of inclusion that is significant. That is, the ability of previously-excluded groups to make meaningful contributions to negotiation processes, to feel heard and seen by the other parties is essential for sustainable peacebuilding. This opens up the space for a relationship to form, or to reform between groups who, in settings of protracted violence, have experienced deep-rooted animosity towards each other.

Lederach (2005) explains that in settings of conflict, a key part of how societies as a whole change and move towards new ways of relating and organizing their lives together depends on the willingness of societies to act. In other words, “movement away from fear, division, and violence toward new modalities of interaction requires awareness, action, and broad processes of change” (Lederach 2015, 3). Within this, the number of people who engage in this movement is important, but by looking deeper at how this shift happens, it becomes evident that what authenticates a social shift “is the quality of the platform that sustains the shifting process that matters” (Lederach 2015, 3).

The ongoing Geneva talks, which aim to end the Syrian war, can be seen as a platform that is trying to achieve peace in Syria by engaging Syrians in a social shift. The Geneva talks have included formal meetings that engaged the UN Office of the Special Envoy for Syria (OSE-S), Staffan de Mistura, and 39 political civil society groups (Paffenholz 2015a). In January 2016, under de Mistura’s leadership and guidance, the OSE-S established the Civil Society Support Room (CSSR) at the UN’s Palais des Nations in Geneva (International Peace Institute 2018). The CSSR is intended to give Syrian civil society a secure physical place at the UN where they are able to meet and engage among themselves and with the OSE-S, other UN agencies, as well as UN member states during official talks (International Peace Institute 2018). According to the International Peace Institute (2018), in line with de Mistura, the CSSR focuses on garnering a political rather than a military solution to the Syrian war. De Mistura has previously emphasized that military victory to one of the conflict parties will not bring peace to Syria; only an agreement that is agreed upon unanimously can do so (International Peace Institute 2018).

“Civil society consists of a large and diverse set of voluntary organizations and comprises non-state actors and associations that are not purely driven by private or economic interests, are autonomously organized, typically show civic virtue, and interact in the public sphere”. (Paffenholz 2015b, 108)

In the case of the “Four Towns Agreement,” the UN was not involved in brokering the deal, which in turn, results in the exclusion of the Syrian civil society organizations enrolled in the CSSR. This is a clear example of active exclusion where there is a proactive act on behalf of those in power-positions (at the top-leadership level) to impede the decision-making of civil society organizations. Paffenholz asserts that connecting Track I (top-leadership level) and Track II (middle-range leadership) is

essential for negotiation efforts and peacebuilding (2015a). The connections can often be led and facilitated by civil society, where in an organic manner, information is channeled between civil society and the top-leaders. Giving civil society space and a voice at the negotiating table is essential because it is often civil society actors who raise issues relating to human rights, while warring factions will often neglect or disregard this.

According to Rana et al. (2014), civil society activists were among the first to be persecuted, detained, and in some instances killed during the uprising by both the GoS and NSAGs. Despite this, they continue to play an essential role in balancing the influence of a variety of military, political, economic groups. Moreover, Syrian civil society has played a key role in highlighting human rights issues in the Syrian war, such as documentation and advocacy. Citizens for Syria, is a Syrian organization, which has produced a mapping of the role and challenges faced by civil society. It reports that the number of civil society actors that have been established between 2011 and 2017 is much higher than the total of civil society organizations since 1959. This points to the pressing need and concern of civil society in the Syrian war (Citizens for Syria 2017).

Fetherston and Nordstrom (1995) explain that a holistic and transformative perspective of peacebuilding is built on the internal traditions inherent in local cultures. External actors can support and facilitate, but cannot decide the type of peace to be built. In the same vein, Donais (2012) urges international actors to provide space for local actors to create peace that is rooted and driven by their visions; a locally produced peace. Donais takes a critical perspective of international actors for being “both the producers and marketers of the liberal-democratic product (the only product available on the market), which local actors are expected to buy, and subsequently own” (Donais 2012, 32). In conflict settings, peace can never exist in a vacuum, but is always part and parcel of the local culture, and is always subject to local adaptations, resistance and interpretations (Leonardsson and Rudd 2015).

6.3. Grassroots Leadership Level

At the grassroots level, the “Four Towns Agreement” gains a different understanding. The grassroots is part of the local culture and forms “the base of society” (Lederach 1997, 42). In contexts of protracted violence, people in this level find themselves in a day-to-day struggle to secure water, shelter, food and safety. Their leadership is governed by a survival mentality. Leaders in this level include community leaders and mobilizers who have an intimate understanding of the fear and suffering of the grassroots level. Although civil society actors were excluded from the negotiation table of the “Four Towns Agreement,” at the grassroots level, they created social spaces across division lines by engaging in relief activities to cater for the needs of the arriving evacuees.

In the context of the “Four Towns Agreement,” the grassroots level encompasses people who were transferred from the four towns of Madaya, Az-Zabadani, Kafreya,

and Foah. It also includes people who decided to stay in their towns and accept reconciliation. These actors and actresses were most affected by the “Four Towns Agreement” and had the least decision-making power in brokering this deal. The deal was made on their behalf and they were forced to accept it. According to interviews conducted by Amnesty International (2017) and the UNHRC (2017), people who were transferred from their homes shared that their decision to leave their besieged towns was involuntary.

For example, people who were interviewed from the town of Madaya, affirmed their strong desire to remain in their hometown. However, given their lack of trust in Legislative Decree No. 15 – which offers amnesty from “all punishment” for those who “turn themselves in and lay down their weapons,” (Ezzi 2017) – they feared and did not trust government forces enough to stay. As such, this mistrust motivated many people from Madaya to accept the deal because they feared detention if they stayed in their hometown. Moreover, many people from Madaya feared ever returning home, especially after they learnt many homes had been appropriated by pro-government forces. This puts the grassroots level in a very difficult situation where their decision to leave their homes is involuntary and the journey back home almost impossible.

People from Kafreya found themselves in very similar situations. Through interviews with the UNHRC (2017), people stressed that they did not want to leave their homes, but the difficult siege conditions motivated them to accept the deal. Several people affirmed that in the face of increased attacks and deteriorating health conditions, the evacuation agreement became their only option for survival. Most people from Kafreya expressed the desire to return to their homes but many had given up on those prospects (UNHRC 2017). As such, the involuntary evacuation reveals just how disconnected the top-leadership level is from the realities of the grassroots level. The dominance of the top-leadership level extends far across the pyramid, crippling the middle-range leadership actors, and in many ways, suffocating the grassroots level with policy talk and high-level agreements.

Moreover, in the context of reconciliation agreements in Syria, reconciliation delegations were formed as a means to link the grassroots and the top-leadership level together. Such local councils have been created in opposition-held areas in order to maintain understanding with armed groups. According to Ezzi (2017), reconciliation delegations included persons loyal to the official establishment of Syria and these delegations have affirmed their capacities as acting on behalf of governance bodies. Ezzi (2017) affirms that the regime rehabilitated some opposition leaders and promised them amnesty if they supported the reconciliation efforts. These leaders were granted “a monopoly over representation in these towns and cities and transforming them into mediators between the people and the state” (Ezzi 2017). The regime also rehabilitated and offered amnesty to people considered as ex-convicts. For example, in Madaya, the regime recruited a merchant into the reconciliation delegation between the opposition and the GoS, whose brother led an armed group affiliated with ISIS (Ezzi 2017).

“Despite this, neither political leaders, such as local council representatives, nor military commanders, such as pro-Government or armed group fighters, possess the requisite authority to consent to evacuation agreements on behalf of individual civilians”. (UNHRC 2017, 7)

Despite the divisive effects of conflict, people continue to transform the conflict by creating relational spaces where interaction is possible. Violence creates sharp divisions, especially along lines of collective identities, leading to social relationships being defined by these divisions (Lederach 2015). As such, the social impact of conflict is very wide. In these settings, social spaces become very important since people find themselves organizing and creating a social life with people from different sides of the conflict. By necessity, communities besieged by violence create relationships across the lines of conflict to cater for their needs of schooling, healthcare, shelter, and transportation. Lederach (2015) calls these points of relationships social spaces. Social spaces expand the web of relationships across division lines.

For example, during the implementation of the “Four Towns Agreement,” local grassroots organizations engaged in relief activities organized by the middle-range actors to manage the arrival of the evacuees to their final destination. For example, according to UNOCHA (2017b), in Idleb, local actors prepared two reception centers, dispatched child protection teams, and provided awareness-raising sessions on the prevention of family separation to 427 children and 178 adults. Psychosocial first aid sessions were provided to 427 children and risk education materials were distributed to 614 people. Four children who had gotten lost during the evacuation process were reunited with their families. Two medical clinics were dispatched and four community health teams were sent to the reception centers. They screened a total of 366 children using initial rapid assessments, where four children were found to be suffering from moderate acute malnutrition. No severe malnutrition was found amongst the children. Ninety-five mothers were given infant and young child feeding counselling. According to UNOCHA, food, shelter, and water, sanitation and health (abbreviated asWASH) assistance were provided in Idleb city (2017b). Under these circumstances, communities as a whole were transferred from their towns and communities as a whole hosted them. While both communities were challenged by the “Four Towns Agreement,” hosting the newcomers created a different horizon and lens of action. Unlike the brokering of the “Four Towns Agreement” itself, it did not take on political features, but initiated a platform of relational capacities and social spaces.

Similarly, local civil society actors in Aleppo city also facilitated the arrival of the people from Kafreya and Foah. A collective shelter in the east of the city was prepared to host people coming from Kafreya and Foah (UNOCHA 2017b). According to the SARC (UNOCHA 2017b), 4,500 were initially hosted there before leaving to take shelter elsewhere. The collective shelter was previously a cotton factory which was turned into a shelter by the SARC. The SARC created partitions in its large halls, creating 1,540 small spaces where IDPs are able to take shelter and privacy. It ensured that all people arriving from Kafreya and Foah received mattresses, hot meals and ready

food rations. Since Aleppo is under the control of the GoS, the Department of Health in Aleppo city installed mobile clinics in the collective shelter, and the SARC installed water points. SARC offered psychosocial support to the IDPs.

What the ECM analysis of the levels reveals is the decreasing ability of the middle-range and grassroots level to be heard. The dogma of the top-leadership level is heavily tied to the dominance of the modern peace and the mental-societal layer in this ECM model. The dogma of security translates into a fixation of the mental-societal layer for the actors of the top-leadership level. As such, the emotional-communal and sexual-familial layer, which are associated with the grassroots level, are overlooked. The top-leadership level actors of the “Four Towns Agreement” sees the grassroots level as a category in war statistics. It sees land as terrain, as a relation of power. It sees the agreement as a strategic move to gain money and power over the opposition and its patronage, Qatar, further consolidating a dysfunctional relationship and system. Ultimately, the ECM analysis of the levels shows the little space that is left for the top-level leadership to see through. It sees through a tightly-knit web governed by dominance and power. This limited vision translates into other episodes of the Syrian war. In general, the disconnection between the different levels of leadership is high, making decisions at the top-leadership level far removed from the clamoring and many truths at the grassroots level.

6.4. The Web of Relationships

Understanding the actors of the conflict episode along the ‘levels’ pyramid gives space to practice active listening to the conflict parties. A transrational approach to peace encompasses all sectors of society and all parties to the conflict. It seeks to address sediment issues of the conflict episode, beyond the immediate physical manifestation of the conflict. In that, concerns of the broad system and subsystem are listened to, contributing to an understanding of peacebuilding that is a process, not an end-state.

In the context of the conflict episode chosen, the “Four Towns Agreement,” the dynamic across the levels highlights the ways in which the decisions taken by those in the top leadership affects those in the grassroots level. Lederach (1997) cites two variant quotes by Professor Ali Mazrui, which belong to two different times and understandings. In its first version, Mazrui writes: “When two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers.” In the post-Cold War era, Mazrui creates a variant quote: “When two elephants make love, it is still the grass that suffers.” In the “Four Towns Agreement,” this seems to purvey a certain reality in Syria, where parties at the top leadership disagree, negotiate, and fight, leaving the grassroots level at the receiving end.

What is significant about this is what it reveals about the interconnections between all the levels and actors of the conflict episode. This is in line with Lederach’s view that the relationship between conflict parties is both the basis of conflict “and its long-term solution” (Lederach 1997, 26). “Relationships, it is argued, are the centerpiece, the beginning and the ending point for understanding the system” (Lederach 1997, 26).

Lederach (1997) urges us to look at relationships as whole systems, and to understand the knits and tugs of the dynamics and substructures. Lederach (2005) explores the metaphoric structures rising from healing and reconciliation. He explains that social healing is “an intermediary phenomenon located between micro-individual healing and wider collective reconciliation” (Lederach and Lederach 2010, 6). Although the term ‘social healing’ has not been widely studied, it is considered an emerging field that addresses the wounds created by conflict and large-scale trauma (O’Dea 2004). Thompson (2005) describes social healing as the healing of social wounds without resorting to ways that punish the evil that has incurred. Green (2009) describes social healing as the reconstruction of social relationships after war. In postwar communities, she sees social healing as preceding reconciliation, and necessary for restoring relations for coexistence. “Often a prelude to reconciliation and forgiveness, social healing can emerge through initiatives that rehumanise broken relations, rebuild trust, normalise daily life and restore hope” (Green 2009, 77).

Given that the conceptual framework of my research lies within system theory, healing processes are understood not as linear processes. Instead, it is seen that the nature of social healing adapts to change and movement. This taps into the metaphoric structures of healing and reconciliation, that by their very structure, provide insights into their multifaceted nature. As such, particularly in settings of protracted conflict, the way we make sense of our lives is not a linear concept. Instead, there is a plurality of lived experiences of how we construct meaning around our lives and our purpose. Following such metaphor shifts away from linearity, Lederach and Lederach (2010) recognize that social healing focuses on the local community, and their need to locate their voices individually and collectively.

“Voice suggests a notion of movement that is both internal, within an individual, and external, taking the form of social echo and resonance that emerges from collective spaces that build meaningful conversation, resiliency in the face of violence and purposeful action. These terms suggest an important metaphor shift with reference to how we understand individual and social processes, a shift based on an understanding of change that reflects the nature and movement of sound”. (Lederach and Lederach 2005, 7)

Lederach and Lederach (2010) understand the concept of social healing as not necessarily associated with forgiveness or restoring broken relationships. They see healing as permanently dynamic, and at the level of real-life, face-to-face relationships, the possibilities of a vigorous reconciliation may be incomplete or even impossible. “As such we propose to de-link social healing from politically expedient notions of reconciliation as a onetime event” (Lederach and Lederach 2010, 10). In contexts of violence, reconciliation does not exist in a vacuum. Instead, people engaged in healing are faced with the continued threat of violence. This is the complex reality of communities in the aftermath of violence. Aspects of healing or reconciliation are not experienced “in a neat, sequential order” (Lederach and Lederach 2010, 10).

Although discussions on social healing and reconciliation address post-conflict communities, I find them very valuable to the context of the conflict episode, the “Four Towns Agreement.” The “Four Towns Agreement” is framed as a ‘reconciliation deal’ by the GoS and is under the Ministry of Reconciliation in Syria (UNHRC 2017). In that model, reconciliation is pursued as a means to superficially disengage the affiliations of the conflicting parties. However, from a transrational perspective, which looks at the system as a whole, reconciliation aims to engage conflict parties in a human relationship. Reconciliation work assumes that a relationship between conflict parties is an encounter between persons and the activities they hold in their respective positions. These activities should be geared towards restoring the broken relationships between people in divided societies.

“Reconciliation must find ways to address the past without getting locked into a vicious cycle of mutual exclusiveness inherent in the past. People need opportunity and space to express to and with one another the trauma of loss and their grief at that loss, and the anger that accompanies the pain and the memory of injustices experienced. Acknowledgment is decisive in the reconciliation dynamic. It is one thing to know; it is yet a very different social phenomenon to acknowledge. Acknowledgment through hearing one another’s stories validates experience and feelings and represents the first step toward restoration of the person and the relationship”. (Lederach 1997, 26)

Reconciliation allows for the expression of fears from the past and for the future in an encounter where the present is framed by acknowledging the past and envisioning the future. For such an encounter to be born, people and their ‘enemies’ must meet and confront the fears they find in each other. Lederach (1997) suggests that reconciliation necessitates acknowledging the painful past in order to validate the wrongs committed, and then allowing space for letting go and a new beginning to be articulated. This means that there is no winner or loser in conflict settings; there are no fragmented or broken parts. Instead, there is the joining of truth and forgiveness for the purpose of social restructuring. Reconciliation also takes time. Similar to processes of social healing, reconciliation is not linear. It does not necessarily begin after the signing of a peace agreement. Understandings of a linear progression of conflict do not match the lived experiences of people. “Most local communities affected by decades of armed conflict do not experience violence, reconciliation or healing as having such clear frontiers of where they begin and end, as portrayed by the dominant metaphoric structure’s phase-based descriptions of conflict and peace.” (Lederach and Lederach 2010, 49)

According to Lederach, the nature of contemporary conflict is characterized by fear of neighbors and of family members, making “the emotive, perceptual, social-psychological, and spiritual dimensions core, not peripheral, concerns” (1997, 29). As such, any effort directed at transformation must be rooted in social-psychological and spiritual dimensions; all of which have been seen as lying well beyond the realm of international diplomacy. Reconciliation work lies specifically in this: “the capacity to

imagine relationship, the insusal to fall into dualistic polarities, the creative act, and the willingness to risk” (Lederach 2005, 14).

In response to W.B. Yeats’ poem “The Second Coming” (1996) where he describes the inevitable nature of the world falling apart, Lederach, in his seminal work, *The Moral Imagination* (2005), he tries to understand what holds the world together in the first place. His simple answer comes in full circle: “the invisible web of relationships” (75). Lederach (2005) explains that the center of social change is weakened with the collapse of relationships. As such, rebuilding relational spaces that hold things together is essential. According to Lederach (2005), relational spaces create social energy that is both deviating and simultaneously unifying, making peacework the art of understanding relational spaces as the place from which energy derives and returns for purpose. As an analogy, Lederach (2005) explains that the sun emanates life-giving energy, from which all planets are held in a certain order and derive their sense of direction. On a communal level, family is that central point from which we move into the world, and simultaneously return to for identity and purpose.

“There exists a force that pushes out and pulls in, and in so doing creates a ‘center that holds ... the center of building sustainable justice and peace is the quality and nature of people’s relationships. A key to constructive social change lies in that which makes social fabric, relationships, and relational spaces”. (Lederach 2005, 76)

From this emerged a relationship-centered approach to peacebuilding which sees relational connections as the source for conflict response processes. Lederach (2005) notes that understanding the spatial geography of relations, and their patterns of conflict, affords a new lens and the moral imagination with which to understand the fabric of human community and conflict. He argues that this approach specifically explores that which is not always visible: the web of relationships, which entails exploring the physical and social geography of change processes (Lederach 2005). As such, this approach explores relationships through social crossroads, connections, and interdependence.

Lederach’s pyramid describes peacebuilding efforts of the Top-Leadership levels as ‘top-down approaches.’ Efforts emerging at the base of the pyramid, called the grassroots-level, are called ‘bottom-up’ approaches to peacebuilding. Lederach also explains the ways in which the levels interact across vertical and horizontal lines. Vertical capacity describes relational spaces across the pyramid vertically, linking people up and down in the society. As such, it represents links between the local communities with the high-level politicians. The pyramid levels interact through horizontal capacity as well, where relationships across people and groups in the same level cut across identity divisions. Vertical and horizontal linkages meet at the center of things and integrate each other’s elements.

Lederach (2005) uses the analogy of web-weaving to explain peacebuilding processes. He describes web-making as a continuous and dynamic process of occupying space, where a web that took one day to form might not exist the next day. Translated

to a communal level, this shows that space and connections are never static. Lederach (2005) explains that spiders understand space strategically in order to create cross-linkages that connect points together into a net. They do so several times a day, even though this might put them at potential risk. Lederach (2005) argues that this is a lesson in the art of spatial thinking. This refers to a process of building networks across the pyramid and within the same level for strategic social change.

The web is built center-out; it expands from the center and creates visible connections to anchor edges. This results in intersections across points while keeping the center a strong hub. As such, the web is able to receive blows and structural damage to one part without damaging or losing the rest of the web. The strength of the web comes from creating coordination at the center, without centralization. Adapted to the levels pyramid, in the “Four Towns Agreement,” the imbalance lies in the centralization of power at the top-leadership level, losing the interdependent connections to the rest of the levels. Within the conflict episode, the top-leadership level created a strict and limited circle of interaction that is closed, allowing little movement and interaction with the rest of the levels. This makes the whole web of relationships in the “Four Towns Agreement” vulnerable to break. And as such, the whole web is likely to break.

Lederach (2005) explains that the relevance of web making to peacebuilding lies in the understanding that, within settings of protracted violence, constructive change is the art of weaving and restoring relational webs across social spaces. The structure of connections has to be built in an unpredictable environment, with the ability to continuously adapt to a dynamic geography. The art of peacebuilding lies specifically in creating links between non like-minded people and those who are not like-situated.

“Peacebuilders, no matter their location or persuasion, must eliminate the erroneous notion that change can happen independently of people who are not of common mind and are not located in similar social, political, or economic space. This is true of high-level diplomats as much as local community workers. Interdependence is. Period. Constructive change and peace are not built by attempting to win converts to one side or another, or by forcing one or the other’s hand. Web making suggests that the net of change is put together by recognizing and building relational spaces that have not existed or that must be strengthened to create a whole that, like the spider’s web, makes things stick”. (Lederach 2005, 85)

In the context of the “Four Towns Agreement,” we find that efforts of active exclusion are prevalent. Groups with differing ideas are considered threats, and hence, the power of the “Top-Leadership Level” is exercised in a way that tries to restrict their abilities to engage and relate. The relational space is hampered and the interconnections are lost. The web is imbalanced and instead of holding things together, the web breaks, giving way to violent expressions of unmet needs, such as the April 14 explosion.

Lederach (2005) concludes that the art of peacebuilding lies not in creating the solution itself, but in creating platforms that generate creative and constructive responses. Platforms offer space to processes and ideas to emerge. In peacebuilding, efforts have fixated on building a platform that “produces a solution and then deconstruct the platform, assuming the solution has permanency. Experience suggests

the opposite. Solutions are ephemeral. Permanency is found in adaptive platforms capable of continuous response” (Lederach 2005, 85). Platforms offer relational spaces the ability to interact creatively and adapt to a continuously changing environment.

7. Conclusion

Eat the books. No one will read again.
Eat the blood-soaked hair of corpses, platelets placating your gnaw.
Eat shit.
Eat bones. Boil them for stock.
Eat the eyeballs that do not blink.
Eat the hands that no longer hug.
Eat the tongues that cannot kiss.

Eat rats. Eat the dogs and the mewling thin cats and the fallen sea gulls.
Eat the leftover sinew of others who have gone.
Eat orange peels and weeds and dry pita bread scrounged from trash.
Eat trees, and flowers and bushes from the raped roads.

Pull out your teeth,
falling like your cities before them,
sit,
read all of the stop-signs posted,
now slashing their wrists.

Think of bees and honey, of aubergines and garlic.
Lick if you can the hairs around your mouth, think of salt, how you once swam without
knowing what it meant.

Think of us, counting our calories, buying fertilizer for indoor plants in the air
conditioning, painting the pots colors to brighten up the new cycle, spruce up the
silence creeping up our walls.
And then hate the Middle East. Really really hate it.
Hate it till the last rib cracks, till the final fall, till the cameras find you.
Your skeleton now is a garden of untouched moss.

----- Hind Shoufani, Seven Songs for Syria (2017)

In this book, my aim was to answer the question: What does the episode of the “Four Towns Agreement” reveal about deeper themes, layers and levels at the epicenter of the Syrian conflict? Towards this endeavor, I began the journey with unpacking my personal relationship to the Syrian conflict, following the perception that “the personal is political.” This allowed me to engage with the security discourses I had endorsed, which then led the inquiry towards the imbalances and frustration of a deeply-modern narrative of the Syrian conflict. This was followed by the realization of the complexity, depth and dimension that is overlooked by a modern rhetoric on the Syrian war, endowing me with the understanding that the political narratives surrounding Syria can be mapped in innumerable ways. The purpose of my research endeavor lies specifically in this: in listening to the different and oftentimes, opposing narratives, surrounding a conflict episode of the Syrian war.

I take the conflict episode, the “Four Towns Agreement,” as an excerpt of the Syrian conflict, an entry point which affords a lens into the epicenter and sediment issues fueling the conflict episode. This inquiry allowed me to unearth deeper dynamics of the conflict by inquiring in an elicitive way into the agreement and its implementation. I posit the details of the agreement as visible expressions of the conflict episode, revealing a deeper web of relationality that created energy and violence around its implementation.

Having explained the parameters of the conflict episode, I move towards examining the conflict episode using a transrational worldview and the ECM as the methodological approach for the book. Given that transrationality transgresses the limits of modern thought, the inquiry elaborates on the circular nature of conflict and the openness of all systems. By doing so, I highlight that peace is never an end-state, but it is a continuously changing and dynamic experience. The essence of this approach lies in understanding that if peace were a perfect end-state, it would be dead and tyrannous. Instead, adopting a circular understanding of social conflict recognizes conflict as part of daily life, and does not provide a solution to violence since it does not believe in the guarantee of its non-existence. By integrating relational and energetic understandings to conflict, I understand that the world is a relational whole constantly moving towards a state of dynamic equilibrium.

Through chapter 2, I address the conceptual framework that guides my research inquiry. I move through concepts such as Galtung’s direct and structural violence, and negative and positive peace that are essential for understanding different expressions of violence and peace. After that, I explain modernity and postmodernity as manners of relating and understanding the world, and their adaptations to Syria’s “Four Towns Agreement.” Modernity’s dogma prescribes peace as a universal idea, which is achieved through the institutions of the nation-state. Modernity derives from Cartesian logic, where the world becomes a vast machine that can be measured and perfected. From this, the understanding of peace derives from security. This conceptualization of peace has allowed for the discursive construction of the identity of an ‘enemy’ among Syrians. A process of exclusion of perceived ‘enemies’ is implemented in the name of peace, specifically, enforced displacement of groups not affiliated with the state, in the case of

the chosen conflict episode. Postmodernity emerged out of disappointment with modernity's violent and discriminatory project. Instead of one universal peace, postmodernity called for the inclusion of a plurality of understandings of peace, where peace is a never-ending process, never perfect and never finished. In the context of the "Four Towns Agreement," there is little space for postmodern thought, highlighting the dominance of the security narratives of modernity. The latter has repressed demands for recognizing the relativistic views in Syria concerning political reform. Security discourses reign and dominate.

In chapter 3, I offer background knowledge of Syria, the Syrian armed conflict, and the conflict episode. Through this chapter, I aim to demonstrate the circular nature of conflicts, wherein conflicts do not exist in a vacuum. Instead, it is important to understand conflicts in their own contexts. By describing the "Four Towns Agreement" across the axis of what, where, why, who, when and how, it becomes clear that the agreement involved the release of prisoners and bodies, the evacuation of citizens from four towns and the halt of hostilities. The description also highlights that many political representations were involved in the drafting and implementation of the agreement. For example, representatives from Qatar, Iran, Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria set out the parameters of the "Four Towns Agreement."

Through the ECM analysis, it appears that the "Four Towns Agreement" was also so much more than its main premises of evacuations and ceasefires. In chapter 4, I take the "Four Towns Agreement" a step further and analyze it based on the thematic emphases of harmony, justice, security and truth. The analysis finds an imbalance towards security, further consolidating a dysfunctional system of security in the name of peace. The "Four Towns Agreement" appeared to be a carefully engineered plan of enforced displacement to consolidate the regime's presence in Damascus. As such, the security of the state is overemphasized, not that of the people of the four towns.

The imbalance towards security implies a peace driven by fear, scarcity and starvation; fear from the communal belonging of the IDPs from Madaya, Az-Zabadani, Kafreya and Foah, scarcity and inequity of resources for the living, and starvation for growth. For me, what is most significant about the thematic analysis is how the dysfunctional system came to lend hunger, under the siege conditions of the four towns, a moral persona. The moral nature of hunger became determined by moral dualities of who is experiencing the hunger and who is inflicting the hunger. Within an imbalanced system that does not support the growth of the collective or of the individual, exaggerated expressions of hunger are born, both physical and emotional. The war in Syria destroyed the land and poisoned the soil, creating a system of stunted growth for the people living in the four towns.

In chapter 5, the analysis moves on to tackle the imbalances across the layers of the conflict episode. In line with the analysis of the thematic emphases, the dogma of reason was overemphasized, largely shaping the way people relate to the land they inhabit. The "Four Towns Agreement" posits a locality and a physicality where the theme of security translated into images and representations of 'our' and 'their' land. As such, these territorial representations conflate the imbalances in the themes with the

imbalances in the layers. In this chapter, I use the trope of 'land' as an entry point for a discussion of deeper sediment issues at play. There appears to be a fixation on fear and an attachment and a sense of ownership to the towns. The securitization of the "Four Towns Agreement" conflates the three layers (sexual-familial, socio-emotional-communal, and the mental-societal) with security concerns. As such, the spiritual or policitary layers are not recognized. In the context of the "Four Towns Agreement," a relationship of property emerges where land can be exchanged, destroyed, and trafficked. This reveals the disconnection from the spiritual connection to earth and the land fought for. Essentially, this reveals the mechanistic relationship with land and brings us much closer to the epicenter of the conflict: the disconnection between Syrians themselves and between Syrians and their land.

In chapter 6, I analyze the conflict episode across the different levels of leadership. In this, there is a better understanding of the political overtones of the negotiations and implementation concerning the "Four Towns Agreement." As such, the analysis reveals the disconnections between different levels of people, and the dominance of the top-leadership level. This has destroyed the web of relationality among the levels of leadership. As such, the "Four Towns Agreement" consolidates already dysfunctional relationships and dynamics, by restricting the net of decision-makers and excluding non-like-minded groups. The dominance of the top-leadership level translates into efforts of active exclusion of groups with differing ideas. As such, the influence of the top-leaders restricts the ability of other groups to engage. The result is that the relational space is hampered. The breaking of the web of relationships gives way to violent expressions of needs, such as the attack on the evacuation buses from Kafreya and Foah. For me, what is the most significant about this chapter is in understanding that in settings of protracted violence, such as in Syria, relationships matter. It is not all high and policy talk. Instead, constructive change lies in restoring relationships across social spaces. And the art of peacebuilding initiatives requires restoring connections in a volatile and unpredictable environment.

The analysis of the "Four Towns Agreement" using ECM has allowed me to inquire into a conflict episode and understand the many ways that it can be understood and the many ways that it has affected different people. Despite this, a limitation of this research pertains to the fact that I did not conduct first-hand interviews with people who were involved in the "Four Towns Agreement." Given that the analysis acknowledges a plurality of truths, interviewing people would provide the book with different truths and experiences. This only sparks further interest in me, humbles me, and reminds me that my analysis is only one among many, as there are as many understandings of the "Four Towns Agreement" as there are people who were affected by it. Within this relativistic pluralism lies many possible answers and interpretations of the conflict episode.

Secondly, the "Four Towns Agreement" included several phases: evacuations of the four towns, exchange of prisoners, and the hand-over of Yarmouk camp to the regime. My analysis does not focus on the last phase of the agreement, which means that there are parts of the agreement that are not necessarily part of the analysis. The last phase of

the “Four Towns Agreement” faltered and was not implemented until a new deal was reached almost a year later. For future research, this opens up a deeper discussion towards the many interruptions that the “Four Towns Agreement” witnessed during the implementation. The interruptions could be seen as the disputes between the parties during the evacuation process which led to the evacuees waiting on evacuation buses for 8 hours, the April 14 attack against the evacuees from Kafreya and Foah during the first day of implementation, and finally, the failure to carry out the last phase of the agreement. I believe that the interruptions are visible expressions of frustration with the deal and violence against what the agreement actually entails.

The last phase of the “Four Towns Agreement” which included the transfer of HTS from Yarmouk camp and the release of 1,500 prisoners held by the regime faltered and the transfer of the remaining individuals from Kafreya and Foah halted. Eight thousand people continued to be besieged by the opposition groups and lived in dire conditions (Amnesty International 2017). On July 18, 2018, a deal was reached where the remaining people besieged in Kafreya and Foah would be evacuated to government-held territory in exchange for prisoner releases from regime jails (The Independent 2018, The National 2018b). Press TV (2018) state that the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (2018) reported that the deal was reached between Russia and Turkey, while other sources assert that Iran had reached the deal with HTS (Press TV 2018, The Independent 2018, The National 2018b.). Almost 7,000 people were evacuated from Kafreya and Foah, 34 prisoners who were captured by Hezbollah during its siege of Madaya and Az-Zabadani were released, and 1,500 prisoners were released from regime prisons.

As such, the repercussions of the “Four Towns Agreement” are still felt today. Like Lederach (2010) explains, the start and end of agreements are not experienced mechanically. The “Four Towns Agreement” and its implications continue to live and affect the lives of thousands of people. It is not just an agreement, but a personal journey of trying to find one’s place in new and continuously changing environments. The depth of the “Four Towns Agreement” goes far beyond its premises of halting violence, exchanging prisoners, and evacuations. It is so much more. Ultimately, studying the “Four Towns Agreement” boils down to deepening the understanding and answers of peaces through the many implications it leaves behind, and the many that still echo today.

Finally, I ask myself why I chose the “Four Towns Agreement” as my entry point. In hindsight, I perceive it as a pinnacle of the Syrian war, where an association between war, displacement and death is more assumed than interrogated. There are so many versions and realities of what sparked the “Four Towns Agreement,” who it involved, and what it entailed. I find that it is an expression of the conflict as a whole, with large and wide implications depending on who is experiencing the “Four Towns Agreement.”

On a personal level, I have grown in many ways through the writing of this book. Criticizing a system is also tied with criticizing oneself. At times, I found the book challenging my fundamental paradigm of security. I found security entrenched in fear

and insecurity. Instead, what I seek now is safety. If so far I built a habitat rooted in a conflict party, then in my book, I hope to let go of these attachments and ponder over another kind of habitat – the connections I made with Syrians. Rather than parties, I encounter a variety of relationships, of turbulence and how to recover. And through these relationships, I continue to form my heart collectively.

Syria has and continues to provoke an inner storm within me as I search for answers and understanding; and the inner resolution of maybe never finding that understanding. Through this book, I have come to learn that I have a choice: I can live and die in a world that I perceive as inherently violent. Or I can live a life where I constantly reflect on the ways in which I relate to the world and celebrate the plurality of peace. I choose the latter. I choose to live a life of continuously re-imagining peace.

8. References

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9. Author's bio

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Masters of Peace is a book series edited by the UNESCO Chair for Peace Studies at the University of Innsbruck. It has been founded to honour outstanding works of young academics in the field of Peace and Conflict Studies. It is reserved for selected Master theses of the Innsbruck School and published twice a year. The Innsbruck School follows the principles of Transrational Peace Philosophy. It defines peace as a plural and regards all aspects of human nature relevant for the understanding of peace and conflict. Its applied method is Elicitive Conflict Transformation, a pragmatic approach to conflict rooted in Humanistic Psychology that entrusts the responsibility for finding alternative options of behaviour, communication and encounter to the conflict parties. Facilitators provide a safe frame, tools and methods for this quest without imposing their own solutions on the parties.

In March 2017 during the armed conflict in Syria, the “Four Towns Agreement” was sealed as a reconciliation deal between the government and the armed opposition under the auspices of Iran and Qatar. Using the methodology of Elicitive Conflict Mapping, Lama Ismail makes use of the “Four Towns Agreement” as a conflict episode, i.e. a window to explore the agreement as an expression of the conflict as a whole, with large and wide implications depending on who is experiencing it. Beyond the prevalent discourses of justice and security, this research puts different viewpoints and discourses into conversation with each other. At the epicentre of the conflict, the analysis shows how visions of peace collide, layers of conflict extend beyond families and communities, and relational spaces between different groups of people are made visible. The analysis of the “Four Towns Agreement” reveals the complex conflictive landscape in Syria and the many ways it can be understood. In recognizing this, what kind of world emerges from the point of view of many rather than one?

This book is a timely contribution to the reading of the Syrian conflict for students, researchers and professionals interested in the region, as well as those conversant with the fields of international relations, sociology, philosophy, history, international law and peace and conflict studies.

