# Swiss-ification: Syria's Best Chance for Peace[*]

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The humanitarian situation in Syria is dire, and government forces have now violated global norms and conventions prohibiting the use of chemical weapons against civilian populations. There is a controversy about whether the responsibility to protect can be met in a context where there is not a well-articulated or plausible path from humanitarian intervention to resolution of the conflict or even improved conditions. Here we point out that the conflict in Syria is fundamentally between sectarian groups that are geographically separated, and that a potential harm-minimizing outcome could be Swiss-ification, i.e., separation of belligerent groups into semi-autonomous political entities.

A map of the ethnic composition of Syria shows that ethnic groups are largely separated by region (Fig. 1). The current conflict is often characterized in terms of ethnic conflict [2, 3, 4]. As with the former Yugoslavia and other nations with heterogeneous populations, an understanding of how to prevent ethnic conflict can greatly influence policies and interventions designed to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in Syria.

We have shown that conflict arises when groups are neither well integrated nor well separated [5, 6]. In highly mixed regions, groups either don't develop strong

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collective identities or don't lay claim to public spaces. They are neither imposed upon nor impose on other groups, and are not perceived as a threat to other groups. Well-separated groups don't engage in conflict. However, partial separation with poorly defined boundaries fosters conflict. An effective way to limit conflict is to introduce appropriately located boundaries and partial autonomy as is present in the federal system of Cantons in Switzerland. Conflict might be prevented or minimized by political acts that create appropriate boundaries suited to the current geocultural regions rather than the existing historically-based state boundaries. Such boundaries need not mark the borders of states, but should allow each cultural group to adopt independent behaviors in separate domains. Such boundary formation has been a critical part of reducing conflict in Baghdad [7], Northern Ireland [8], and elsewhere.

The fighting between government and rebel forces in Syria has been concentrated throughout a narrow band in the populous west of the country that links Syria's largest urban areas—Aleppo, Homs, and Damascus—which remain divided battlefields [9, 10]. Rebels predominate in the north with government control in the south and coastal Alawite strongholds [10]. At the same time, increasingly frequent clashes are taking place between Kurdish communities and Islamist (Arab) rebels along the northern border [3]. Potential boundaries would seek to separate the Sunni majority from the band of Christian communities in the northwest, from the western (coastal) homeland of the Alawites, and from the Kurdish region in the north. Such separation would limit the ability of the regime to attack minority populations. It would also limit the power granted to any subgroup, mitigating concerns that extremist groups that may control local areas would gain control over the whole country with larger global implications. Initially autonomy may lead to complete separation into effective states, but this need not be the final peaceful solution.
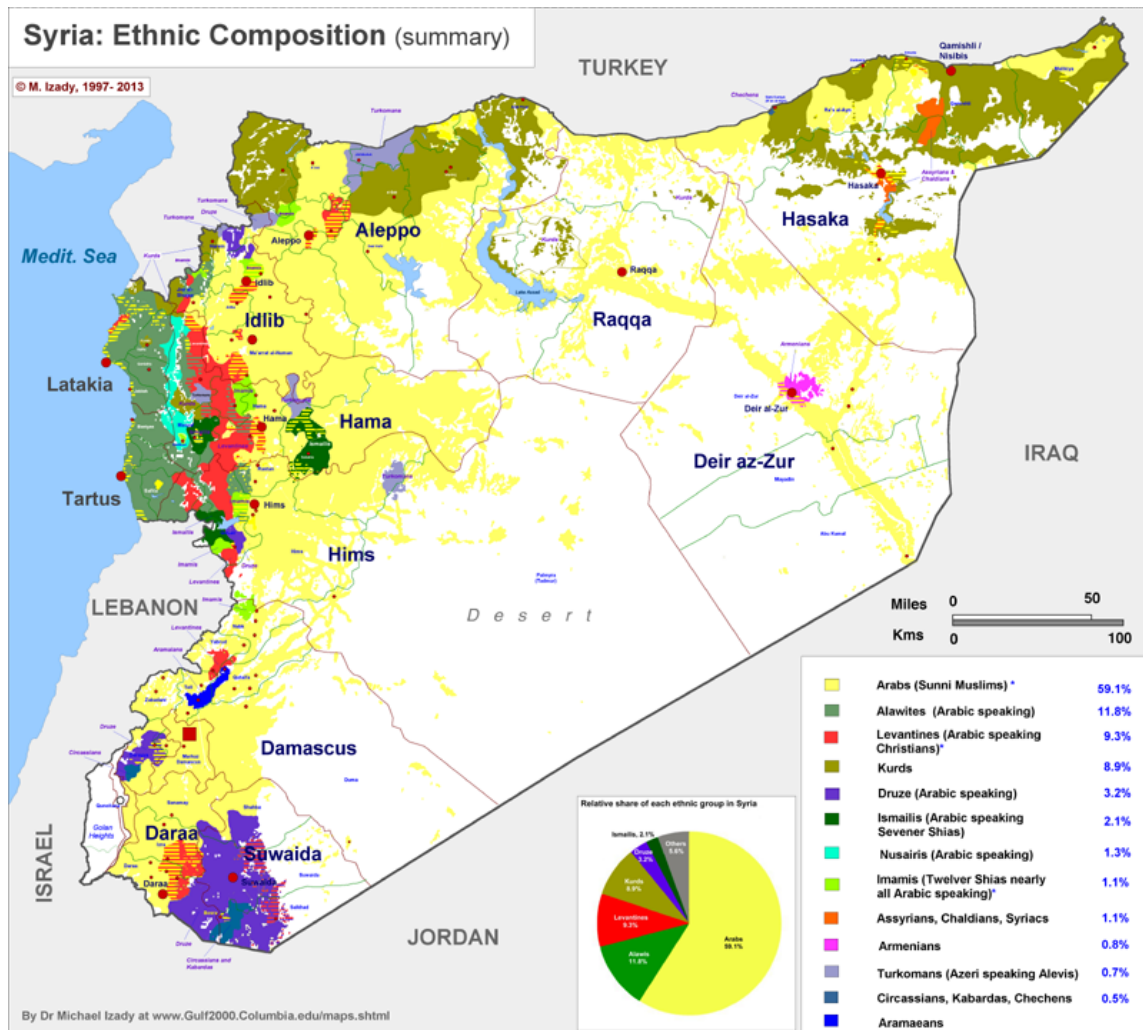
Figure 1: **Syrian ethnic composition** - Proportion of population shown in legend; Arab Sunnis
(59.1%), Alawites (11.8%), Christians (9.3%), and Kurds (8.9%).
Source: Dr. Michael Izady at http://gulf2000.columbia.edu/maps.shtml [1]

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