

Fall 12-1-2017

Rethinking Civil Wars: An Overview of Literature and the Syrian Conflict Towards a Structural Definition of Civil War

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RETHINKING CIVIL WARS: AN OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE AND THE
SYRIAN CONFLICT TOWARDS A STRUCTURAL DEFINITION OF CIVIL WAR

by

Mphatso Moses Kaufulu

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate School,
the College of Arts and Letters,
and the Department of Political Science, International Development, and International
Affairs
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts

December 2017

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Published by the Graduate School



ABSTRACT

RETHINKING CIVIL WARS: AN OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE AND THE SYRIAN CONFLICT TOWARDS A STRUCTURAL DEFINITION OF CIVIL WAR

by Mphatso Moses Kaufulu

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Civil War is a term often used to classify a type of conflict which arises within states. This being so, the exact criteria upon which such a classification of conflict is arrived remains unclear. Additionally, political, dispensational and ideological currents have influenced the classification of conflicts within states by different scholars, so that the determination of conflicts as being civil wars rather than some other kind of intra-state conflict can seem arbitrary. Beyond just the academic implications of this arbitrariness are policy impacts as well. This is because the term civil war carries with it certain implications about the nature of the conflict, and as such, mandates sets of domestic, regional and international approaches for resolving it.

The idea of a civil war as a conflict which emphasizes civil processes as accompanying dimensions of military objectives is proposed to distinguish civil wars from other intra-state conflicts. The argument proposes that military forces aim to engender wider civil processes aimed at undermining the authority of a state, so as to realize specific political goals in domains controlled by that state. Domains controlled by the state, challenged during civil wars, include demographic (population based uprisings), politico-economic (balkanization of economic sectors and the establishment of political structures), geographic (captured state territory as well as natural resources), and international (establishing anti-state diplomatic linkages with outside actors). The Syrian

conflict – in a limited case study – is used as an illustration of how this classification of
can be undertaken.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the contributions of Dr. Joseph Weinberg for his overall guidance, Dr Marek Steedman for his generosity with his time, and Dr Edward Sayre for his support on the bureaucratic side of things. This project would not have been possible without their efforts.

DEDICATION

To my sister, for her love – and to my late parents for their faith in my sister and

I.

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CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

Definition of a *Civil War*

A civil war has been defined as a category of armed conflict between armed factions or groups within, and including the government forces of, the territorial boundaries of a respective state, often aimed at establishing a national or sub-regional government; achieving, sustaining and/or maintaining territorial control of a geographical region of state territory; achieving or defending autonomy; and even attempting to achieve secession. A critical dimension of civil war is that it differs substantially from an international war (a war involving multiple states, including great powers) in that the theater of conflict is largely confined to the geopolitical arena of a respective state within which the principle armed groups both reside, engage in battles and define their [military] objectives (Mingset, 2008: 218-221)¹. It is as such a war involving *citizens, residents or nationals*.

This definition not only focuses on the *kinetic exchanges* of territorially defined conflict, but also conceptualizes a civil war, critically, as a conflict whose sustainability along the dimensions of human, material, economic and social resources, is internally dependent. And by extension relegates most of the international dimension of a civil war such as the displacement of people into neighboring countries as refugees, the associated transnational ecological crises owing to the destruction caused by such conflicts as well

¹ Also Correlates of War (COW) classification or typology of civil war which provides a similar definition can be found in *The COW Typology of War: Defining and Categorizing Wars (Version 4 of the Data)* at <http://cow.dss.ucdavis.edu/data-sets/COW-war/the-cow-typology-of-war-defining-and-categorizing-wars/view>

as the economic disruptions to the regional economy among bordering states to the domain of “spill-over effects”. As a result of this, there are two general consequences. The first is that, analytically, there is a loss of sight of those factors which are able to sustain the conflict in spite of the interventions attracted by spill-over effects. The second is that, conceptually, it is complicated to ascertain when a civil war transforms into another type of conflict when interventions as well as externalities become the sustaining force of the war (see, Buhaug & Gates, 2002).

A strict application therefore of the definition of a civil war might reveal that civil wars only occur in extremely limited circumstances. Additionally, that many conflicts which have been characterized as civil wars might be some other kind of conflict with a civil dimension, such a geopolitical theater of battle (a country), a demographic element (an armed political faction), a conflict related body-count (a certain number of killed people over a specified period of time) or some other marker of nationality (such as a governmental force active in the fighting). Any one of these attributes of an active conflict could take precedence over definitional aspects of a civil war which essentially encompass domestic factors for the conflict’s sustainability.

Study Rationale and Research Question

This study aims to propose a possible strategy for determining how a type of conflict called civil war differs from other types of intra-state conflicts. The strategy proposes differences between civil wars and other types of intra-state conflict can be determined by examining sectorial processes (or civil processes) during the period of the conflict so as to establish the presence or absence of a

political challenge to the prevailing state. The sectorial or civil process can be assessed along the following dimensions:

- a. Demographic Factors: whether the conflict primarily fought by nationals, citizens or legal residents who refuse to recognize the authority of the current state.
- b. Economic Factors: whether the conflict is sustained by and whose resolution is obtained from balkanized economic activities previously controlled by the state.
- c. Political Factors: whether the conflict's political resolution obtains among the stated political objectives of the oppositional forces, so that should such objectives be forfeited, the conflict becomes unnecessary.
- d. Geopolitical Factors: whether the conflict has resulted in captured territory within the boundaries of the concerned state.

These sectorial or civil dimensions help to indicate civil thresholds about which a conflict becomes a civil war, so that the violence can be understood in terms of advances or gains along the civil thresholds indicated by these dimensions.

Additionally, these thresholds are merely extrapolations of the working definition provided in the introduction. They are critical in providing an issue-by-issue examination of the Syrian conflict – but more importantly, they also outline delimitations in the different dimensions of the working definition. In this way, factors which fall outside these delimitations can be examined as to their overall impact on a specific dimensions of

the conflict. This approach will become more apparent when the Syrian case is directly examined.

CHAPTER II – LITERATURE REVIEW

The *Two Scholarly Branches* in Civil War Studies

In this section, a review of civil war political science literature is presented. The aim of the review is to look at the usage of the term “civil war” in scholarly work. The corpus of scholarly work on civil war has been divided in this review into theoretical and empirical branches.² Theoretical studies are conceptual, and tend to have an underlying goal to understand “*on-the-ground sentiments*” in order to construct context specific paths towards settlement or indigenously achieved peace. Empirical studies are essentially those studies which employ a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods with the aim of acquiring data that reveals an important dimension of a conflict, and especially to reveal material drivers of the conflict.

These distinctions are not hard and fast: when looked at closely, both types of approaches involve a considerable usage of empirical data. The distinction between them is therefore one of emphasis and the standards against which various forms of data are allowed to qualify as evidence. In a review of *From Global to Local: Uncovering the Structural Causes of Civil War* by Enterline (2009), for example, the point is repeated that a mixture of personal experiences of the author coupled with references to what might be considered *arcane* social sciences studies and analyses undergirded the richness

² A similar distinction is found in Taydas & James (2011) in the second paragraph of page 2628 in the article: *Why do civil wars occur? Another look at the theoretical dichotomy of opportunity versus grievance.*

of that theoretical text. Such type of data, in a strictly empirical study would not qualify as the main source of evidence aside from anecdotal usage.

A final point: this distinction between theoretical and empirical approaches also helps to organize the discussion in this review for the purpose of demonstrating the usage of the term “civil war” in scholarly work, and thereby better demonstrating the fluid manner in which the term has applied to different contexts of conflict. Separate assumptions underlie the term civil war by the two branches of study, as will be seen below.

The Term Civil War in Theoretical Scholarly Practice

A lot has been written on civil war, both theoretically and empirically. Broadly, the theoretical literature (which encompasses desk reviews, and some limited qualitative approaches) has focused on conceptual aspects of civil war, even though little emphasis has been placed on what makes a civil war a *civil war*. It is largely out of such theoretical works that one finds most aspects of the working definition of this study. Interestingly, in spite of the conceptual work put into defining and characterizing civil wars, there is in general less of an emphasis on whether or not specific conflicts meet those criteria. Additionally, due to the intense focus on conflict resolution brought about by peace-building studies in the 1990s and onwards, civil war theoretical work has focused on reconciling working definitions of peace, reconciliation, reconstruction and stability (generally post conflict nation-building) with context specific factors which persist and fuel ongoing conflicts, or the remnant effects and impacts of dying or dead conflicts after the civil war period (Denskus, 2007: 656-659; see Toft, 2010: 7-8).

This preoccupation is largely due to the immense complexities which arise in the transitional period between an ending conflict, on the one hand, and a much anticipated progressive, nation-building peace on the other. And in a looping fashion, the eventual outcomes of such considerations frequently lead back to questions about what caused the civil wars in the first place as a means of trying to prevent them in the future. Kieh's (2009: 11) study on the Roots of the Second Liberian Civil War is poignantly illustrative of such an instance, in which he assiduously presents a case of how the second Liberian civil war was largely the result of contingent causes left unaddressed in the post first-civil war period. He defines contingent causes as those causes which arose from incomplete or failed transitional activities after the first civil war such as reconciliation, demobilization of active factions, and tame security sector reforms – which, left in such a state, became the new ingredients for a subsequent conflict. Case in point, there is no discussion in that study as to why the Liberian war should be seen as a civil war to begin with: this is taken as a given.

This focus on persistent factors is seen in other studies as well. Ghosn and Khoury (2011), for instance, looking at the Lebanese case identifies the difficulties of reconciliation in post-war Lebanon due to the characteristics of the actual fighting during that country's civil war, and the subsequent failure of government to address the nature of atrocity which characterized the fighting. Here, the focus is post-war reconciliation through the delivery of appropriate and equitable justice relevant to the character of atrocity in a given conflict. Once more, definitions are not as important as attempts at administering a relevant justice which speaks to a character of atrocity.

In another example looking at the Angolan civil war, the possibility of *path-dependent processes* (such as the ways in which violence begets more violence so that it violates peace-time cost-benefit analyses of war among the warring factions) and *conflict-traps* (such as conflict induced low incomes, deep-seated hatreds, ethnic composition, and the de facto political economies which augment around different factions) are raised to explain the difficulties associated with maintaining stable peace after the conflict, while making the resumption of physical conflict likely (Collier & Sambanis, 2002: 5). In all the above cases, the civil wars examined are taken for granted as such, while the analyses are preoccupied by settlement and resolution matters in the post-fighting period. Approaches like this owe their preoccupation with conflict settlement to peace-building studies which have inundated theoretical studies, particularly into the late 1990s.

Prior to this peace-building inundation, theoretical work focused on *first-causes* of civil war. These causes took various characteristics but were seen as emanating from grievances which manifested along classist, ethnic, or racial dimensions (largely deploying relative deprivation theories in order to conceptualize the political nature of conflict-inducing grievances as distinct from ordinary grievance); politico-economic dimensions (especially in cases of predatory states which syphon wealth out of the population as well as cases of weak governments); and systemic dimensions which create, using rational choice assumptions, opportunities for conflict (such as low democratic participation among politicized or marginalized groups, anticipated gains relative to losses, and so on) (Taydas, Enia, & James, 2011: 2630-2637). Additional factors for civil conflicts were attributed to greed. Here, theoretical work comes to a fork

in the road: one strand builds towards a type of academic endeavor which forms a bridge between academic discourse and humanitarian as well as developmental professions, and the other into conflict prevention focuses through democratic economic integration.³

The Term Civil War in Empirical Scholarly Practice

Unlike theoretical studies, empirical studies have been less truncated around a few problematic themes. They have, rather, pursued in the last two decades a grounded methodological *modus operandi* to civil war studies. The advantage of grounded approaches to such studies is that data takes precedence over theoretical assumptions, and enables researchers to generate explanatory models given the available data. As a consequence, nagging questions about what a civil war is or is not are temporarily obviated in favor of classifications pertaining to the appropriateness of the available data in explaining a designated aspect of conflict. This is not to argue that the outputs of grounded methods have been entirely negative.

Firstly, it is out of such approaches for example that scholars have arrived at certain useful material determinants of civil wars as well as their settlements, most pertinent of which has been the association between low incomes per capita and conflict. Another pertinent association has been democracy and conflict, in which higher democratic practice within the society is inversely associated with civil war or conflict. Others include associations between geographical factors (such as size, terrain, and mineral endowment) and the likelihood of conflict (Buhaug, & Gates, 2002: 419-420). What is critical among such studies is that a measurable dimension in the form of an

³ This point is elucidated further in the final section of this review under Civil War and the Post-Cold War Period.

indicator lends itself to a variable which represents a traditional sector of society, such as the economy, democratic participation (governance) or geography, which in turn becomes the factor associated with the conflict itself (*see* Blattman, & Miguel, 2010: 15, 16, *also* Florea, 2017: 1-2).⁴ This is not a dismissal of such an approach, rather the point is to show that in deferring to a *grounded methodology*, the focus of empirical studies concentrates on relationships among different measurable aspects of conflict made available by data and prevailing data analysis techniques. As more data becomes available however, and as analytical techniques are updated, the previous dimensions of measurement which functioned as a sectorial representative for the association are improved so the models become more dependable and accurate. As a result of this mechanism, the associations between income and conflict for example have been increasingly challenged as newer data and better models have emerged.

In Djankov and Reynal-Querol (2010: 1037-1040) for example, they find that when country fixed effects are included in their models, the association between income and civil war was possibly spurious. They attributed this to time variant determinants which have an impact on both income levels in the concerned countries as well as outbreaks of civil wars. Moreover, when they narrowed their sample to just former colonies, such as those in Africa and Asia, they found that the association between income levels and civil war disappears once colonial strategies are included in the

⁴ Florea (2017) further splits empirical studies of civil war into two groups: associational or correlational studies, and *bargaining* approaches which see civil conflicts are resulting out of bargaining failure, akin to game theory and rational choice applications. In this study, both sub-divisions are encapsulated in grounded-approaches because they both follow the lead of available data and data analysis techniques.

analysis. Colonial strategies encompass indicators which capture European settler activities in the concerned colonies, such as European population size, mortality rates and so on. The results they found with colonial strategies included are robust to the inclusion of other historical variables such as the date of independence of ex-colonies as well as the identity of the colonizer. Other previous causes of civil unrest and war also become less prominent, such as ethnic composition or geographical size.

Under the same umbrella of economic associations with conflicts, economic variations alluding to severe income inequalities as well as spatial or demographic concentrations of economic wealth amongst some groups severely limit the extent to which a war can be attributed to income levels alone. In such settings, political economies organized around concentrated centers of wealth in a context of general economic deprivation might be better determinants of conflicts (Blattman and Miguel, 2010) because they effectively create multiple-microeconomic pockets within the country which are readily transformable into sub-economies conducive for supporting civil war factions. Such politico-economic factors can be compounded with other historical factors as well, so that some countries become structurally conducive for domestic conflict and even civil war.⁵

Moreover, the politicization as well as the rent-seeking behavior of military sectors and interested groups and parties during civil conflicts can increase the lifespan of a civil war. Uyangoda (2010: 109 - 110), for example, provides an account of this in the Sri Lankan civil war between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

⁵ The distinction between domestic conflicts and civil wars will be provided below.

(LTTE). In that case, military spending became so excessively politicized that overspending in the military votes of the national budget was the norm during the course of the conflict, something which effectively incentivized a war dependent economy in the wider society. The point here is this: the widespread destruction brought about by that war coupled with a budget whose spending was skewed to the defense sector fundamentally restructured the political economy as society's livelihood became organized around the one sector which was comparatively solvent.⁶ A similar situation was observed in Iraqi as well, which had become society whose domestic conflicts are sustained by sectarian forces' control over various natural resources, especially oil, which they then supplied through parallel markets to neighboring governments in order to raise revenues for supporting various groups.⁷

What seems clear therefore is that there needs to be a minimum level of income in order to sustain a war. This is akin to arguing that while civil wars are extremely destructive of the domestic economy, it is primarily this destruction which – up to a point – sustains them in so far as they produce *sub-economies* which augment business activities directly or indirectly around associated war efforts of the warring factions. To this extent, the domestic political economy at large suffers due to the civil instability induced by the war even while these *sub-economies* mushroom around the factions and

⁶ See also Murdoch & Sandler (2002: 96) for a reference to skewed public spending during periods of civil war.

⁷ See Moore & Parker (2007) The War Economy of Iraq. Middle Eastern Report (MER) 243(37). Source: <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer243/war-economy-iraq>. [Accessed: 09/05/2018 21:09].

their respective war efforts, and effectively provides economic and political rents for starting, fueling and sustaining conflicts.⁸

This argument is also especially important for differentiating between domestic conflict and civil war: a distinction which is extremely blurry in empirical studies of civil war. Put broadly, a domestic conflict comprises a form of sometimes violent civil unrest which seeks to disrupt a governmental or state system or some part of it – whereas a civil war creates a patterned, consistent and self-sustaining parallel system which challenges, or exists on the margins of, the primary one (Henderson & Singer, 2000: 276-277).⁹

Civil wars are thus structurally characterized by *functioning* semi-autonomous political economies which challenge or undermine a state order (*see also* Disaggregating Civil War, Cederman & Gleditsch, 2009) and whose violent dimension is only but one amongst many others. This is an important dimension of a civil war which might escape body counts or bullets fired for instance. That is to say, in a state of civil war, a society is not only inundated with the persistent violence of conflict – but also an emerging political

⁸ Collier (1999: 178-179) dichotomizes capital (both physical and human) into “exogenously dependent capital” and “endogenous capital”. He then demonstrates that as a civil war destroys institutions as well as the civil apparatus of the society, the most severe economic vagaries are associated with exogenously dependent capital (due to portfolio substitutions) while the endogenously dependent capital decays at a much lower rate. These can be understood as the structural transformations of civilian economy into a [civil] war economy.

⁹ Henderson & Singer make this important point but only in passing, which provides numerous avenues for examining case by case whether various conflicts qualify as civil wars. A civil war is essentially a structure with periods or moments of emphasis such as planning, fighting, regrouping, organizing, economics, politics, ethno-demographics, and so on.

dualism brought about a challenge on the prevailing state order. These structural aspects often cast a long shadow into the peace period after the last bits of fighting have stopped.

In sum, empirical studies of civil war have thus limited themselves through the parameters brought about by their own methods in terms of analytical techniques as well as the limitations inherent to the available data sets from inquiring into definitional aspects of conflicts designated as civil wars, and from developing a much more holistic programme. And as a result, conflicts have been taken for civil wars *de facto* provided data sets have reasonable dimensions of measurement that meet certain statistical requirements (*see again* Djankov and Reynal-Querol, 2010).

The Term Civil War and the Post-Cold War Period: Ideology and Liberalism

A final set of empirically orientated studies are those that provide some basis for non-data related classifications of a conflict as a civil one rather than some other type. Rather, they provide a general checklist that serves as a classification guideline. It often includes some or all of the following: numbers of conflict related deaths over a specified period, the existence of active *official* or *known* military groups, stated political objectives, spaces of contested authority between a state and other military group, the existence of a failing or failed state, conflict-related disruptions to public services and security, the demographic attributes of perpetrators and victims, access to the international arms trade, a history of prior conflicts, political systems and so on (Cederman, & Gleditsch, 2009: 489; Mingst, 2008: 218-219).

In principle, these guidelines of characteristics essentially focus on deviations from a normal state-society as it is conceived in the post-world war two – and then post-cold war – era. Here, civil war as a term captures societal abnormality against a

background of institutional assumptions about the normal society as it was conceived following the decline of civil wars in the West (typically Europe) and in the resolution of the cold war after Soviet collapse. Empirical studies that often deploy this type of classification are not interested in precise definitions about what civil wars may or may not be (see Henderson & Singer, 2000: 275). Rather, they are geared at forming a nexus between academic studies of conflict on the one hand, and international humanitarian activities as well as their organizational frameworks and working papers (in agencies like the United Nations, for instance), on the other – by presenting an academic discourse which is practical and immediately programmable for organizational bureaucrats, government professionals and various international experts. Some conflicts can thus become designated as civil wars in order to meet certain organizational expectations of abnormality along the aforementioned checklist rather than through a critical assessment of whether they are in fact civil wars.¹⁰

Kalyvas (2001: 99-100) calls this tendency to attention, addressing a similar vagueness of civil war classification which has become commonplace in recent studies, and which brings into sharp focus the nexus provided by academic practitioners connecting the scholarly and bureaucratic fields. The classification Kalyvas focuses on is

¹⁰ This is acknowledged in Sambanis, (2003) *Using case studies to expand the theory of civil war*, that prior to interest in civil wars by institutions such as the World Bank, academic studies were not canonized, so that research was disparate. After, however, interest and funding by the World Bank into uncovering the economic basis of civil war/conflicts, resulting in the flagship paper from a World Bank project by Collier and Hoeffler (2000) titled *Model of Civil War Onset*, a programs oriented approach to civil war *seemed* to ensue, even though it continues to be marred by professional and technical hurdles between the two camps of scholars and policy-makers. See also Mack (2002) *Civil War: Academic Research and the Policy Community*; the paper itself, ironically, is an illustration.

a distinction between *old civil wars* prior to the end of the cold war, and *new civil wars* after it. In this classification, Kalyvas notes that old civil wars are largely seen by academics and experts as ideologically driven, popular and collectivist in support, and furnished with clear political objectives. They are seen almost as noble causes inspired by contesting ideas. New civil wars on the other hand are seen as inherently criminal, depoliticized, private and predatory (Kalyvas, 2001: 100).

There are two explanations provided for this classification. Firstly, it is attributed to the tendency for human beings to valorize wars in which they themselves lived through and experienced as young men and women. Many of the scholars who now write about such wars have imbued them with high ideals and purpose, and have consequently infused into their analysis of recent civil wars an automatic negative bias. Secondly, it is attributed to entrenched and institutionalized views that wars that sought to address tangible grievances were fought and settled, culminating in a present world order in which sufficient avenues for reform and redress exist. It is out of this second point that new civil wars are seen as inherently criminal, privately motivated enterprises without any substantive ideological or political ends beyond mere opportunism and egregious violence (Kalyvas, 2001: 100-101). It is the result of these two expert biases that civil war studies find themselves aligned to a post-cold war ideological institutionalism (liberalism) when it comes to questions about their classification.

Further Considerations: Civil War Political Economies and Spill-Over Effects

So far, the term civil war has been discussed in its usage assuming that conflicts are strictly domestic or confined to the territory of the affected state. This was for the purpose of focusing the discussion on civil war thus far. An additional dimension that complicates

a civil war stems from the international arena, involving foreign states and international organizations (as a set of political interventions) and foreign factors (largely as a set of economic consequences of civil wars on the affected state: this could also include problems of demographic dislocation as seen in the Great Lakes region of Africa).

In the case of foreign states and their interventions¹¹, civil conflicts very often attract regional, international as well as multilateral actors who often express their involvement in a language of interests, humanitarian intervention, mediation and/or resolution. These efforts really entail attempts by intervening actors to mitigate against the spill-over effects of the conflict in their territories or the neighborhood of nearby states. As a consequence, spill-over effects can be described in terms as concrete as refugee influxes and depressed regional economic activity due to a nearby civil war, or as *abstractly* as maintaining the acting state's influence (or to try undermining another state's influence) over the state affected by the conflict vis-à-vis the wider region (*for potential motivations for state intervention, see Kathman, 2010: 991-994*). Interventions are thus, in spite of the language that accompanies them, often very partisan and directed at either preserving or enhancing the advantages of specific parties involved in the fighting. Adversely, they can have the effect of prolonging the fighting when intended settlements by intervening states

¹¹ "Intervention is defined as convention-breaking military and/or economic activities in the internal affairs of a foreign country targeted at the authority structures of the government with the aim of affecting the balance of power between the government and opposition forces" (Kathman 2010: 989).

require significant alterations in the conflict through support of the different fighting factions.¹² This also has the effect of increasing the complexities of resolving the conflict.

In the case of foreign factors, the effect which dominates the literature is the impact of civil war on trade, represented by international trade. From there, scholars examine the extent to which international trade affects the persistence or decline of the conflict. International trade in this instance is understood broadly, as the spectrum of commerce that characterizes a country's connection to the international economic system and not merely the aggregated balance of payments in the national current account. With this broad definition, an economy with a much diversified international trade portfolio or one which possesses *high-in-demand* commodities such as oil or mineral resources might find that international trade can sustain a civil war. This is because international trade can substitute for the deteriorating domestic economy. This effect becomes particularly compounded if the country in question has a large primary commodities sector and comparably smaller secondary and tertiary sectors. In such countries, international trade simply entails the exchange of much needed primary commodities with other countries for large amounts of foreign exchange through relatively straightforward supply chains, and very little further economic cooperation in subsequent value-adding sectors at secondary and tertiary levels (see Martin, Thoenig & Mayer, 2008: 545 - 549). These funds can then fuel the sub-economies of the civil war, to entrench and sustain a political and economic dualism beyond the theater of active fighting.

¹² Alternatively, as Kathman (2010: 989) puts it, "...intervention [is] a tool used by states to *influence* civil war dynamics."

The two broad horizons of foreign states and international organizations, and foreign factors however assume a measure of territorial and demographic integrity on the part of the state in which there is a civil war. But when looking at civil or domestic conflicts in the Great Lakes region of Africa, particularly Uganda, Rwanda, Congo and Burundi, additional foreign factors arise. These are demographic in nature, and originate from a historical situation in which a state comes into existence prior to the consolidation of a broad-based, universally accessible notion of citizenship. In such instance, civil conflicts sometimes take the form of demographic uprisings in rebellion to the population narrowly defined as, and privileged with, citizenship. These uprisings can be internal (were excluded groups rise to overthrow the ruling minority class of citizens) as well as external (were excluded groups, outside the geopolitical territory of the state, who see it as their place of legitimate residency organize and invade the state to overthrow the *citizened* minority).

Both these cases can be found in Uganda (which harbored many Tutsi exiles and even admitted them into the army – but never accepted them as citizens, rather classifying them as *foreigners*) and in Rwanda and Burundi (which were formerly a single state of Hutu majorities and Tutsi minorities, whose relationship to this day is fixated on preventing ethnic uprisings originating from mobilization in one state in order to overthrow the government in the other: this extends to bordering regions of the DR Congo as well) (Mamdani, 2002).¹³ The important contribution here is that a civil war

¹³ This source is a rather critical examination of this type of civil conflict, characteristic of the postcolonial Great Lakes republics. A concise adumbration of the postcolonial mission of Mamdani's argument can be found in Janzen (2003). The argument is: civil violence is often derivative as new political identities

structure can be organized demographically, and therefore extend beyond the physical boundaries of a state, especially if the nature of grievance has to do with historical (in *these* two examples, colonially instituted) bases of exclusion.

With these matters in mind, and especially the cross-border characteristic of demographically structured civil wars, it becomes apparent therefore to focus less on the outbound effects of civil wars into the neighboring region, and to emphasize the inbound effects into the civil war political economy. Doing so has three important outcomes.

Firstly, it provides a way through which the relative inputs of the inbound effects contribute to the overall sustainability of the conflict. Secondly, it broadens the issue-by-issue assessments of the dimensions provided for in the sub-themes at the onset of this study from simplistic “yes or no” qualifications. In doing so, a war can be designated as a civil war on the basis of its structural durability rather than on the narrow basis of whether a dimension or multiple dimensions violate a definitional criterion. In this way, issue-by-issue assessments can systematically transcend specific dimensions of a conflict to achieve a cross-issue analysis. And thirdly, that the analysis of a civil war appropriately moves away from manifest instances, such as violence, to a systemic examination of the robustness of its parallel political economic structure.

In this way, a civil war can truly become a creature on its own, distinct from domestic conflict on the one hand, and transnational, extra-systemic or cross-border fighting on the other. This is critically important because it reclassifies a civil war not only as a type of territorially defined armed conflict – but perhaps also as a goal towards

emerge in resistance to identities which are officially and formally acknowledged and protected by a limited state, and that where state acknowledged identities are absent, such violence is also absent.

which different factions aspire, because of its status relative to the prevalent state structure (this speaks to the cross-border problems as seen in the Great Lakes region of Central Africa as well)

CHAPTER III - THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

As seen above, civil war studies, have largely been driven by late, wider currents of consolidation led by the professional fields of humanitarian work. So that, until very late in the study of civil wars, studies had remained quite varied and disparate, be they theoretical or empirical. As a consequence, civil war theory as it stands today is largely a categorization of common themes, emergent out of specialized approaches to civil war studies in the aftermath of the professionalization of the *discipline* following the influences of the humanitarian sector.¹⁴

Theoretical classifications can as such seem quite arbitrary. For example, disciplinary labels of economic theory of civil wars can be placed on studies which use statistical and econometric methodology to understand civil war onset. In another instance, economic theories of civil wars can mean those studies which have been conducted by economists in which the focus of the study itself might be less driven by economic methodology, such as those studies which examine relationships between economic systems and civil wars. Similarly, theories which focus on institutional aspects of civil war are sometimes seen as neoliberal theories of civil conflict due to their emphasis on institutional norms, even though in other cases, the same studies can be seen as strictly “theoretical” particularly when the institutional analyses conducted are very

¹⁴ See Collier, Elliot, Hegre, Hoeffler, Reynal-Querol, & Sambanis, (2003). Later, Collier & Sambanis (2005) who co-authored the previous report state that prior to studies and projects supported by the World Bank, civil war literature was essentially *uncanonized*.

specific or local to the designated conflict, focusing on say contextual themes like area history, specific ethnic group formations, political processes and so on.

Furthermore, while one problem with disciplinary classifications is that they are very late labels imposed on established specializations, there are also problems of classification which are conceptual and empirical: namely, studies which focus on factors for the onset of, as distinct from studies which focus on factors for the persistence of, civil wars. The former essentially assess and examine the *ingredients* from which a civil war can erupt, and as such tend to be historically oriented. In that historical orientation however, they too do specialize in economic, political, statistical and other disciplinary focuses. The latter look at conflicts after they begin, seeking to identify *path-dependent factors* which feed the conflict into a fully developed civil war. Specializations which focus on civil war persistence are thus to some extent theoretically and empirically distinct from specializations which focus on civil war onset even though they too tend to be further specialized into the usual disciplinary brackets. One can therefore find, say, economic theories of civil war persistence as distinct specializations from economic theories of civil war onset, which in turn can further be grouped into theoretical or empirical types of study.¹⁵

¹⁵ Bleaney & Dimico (2011) found in their study that these distinctions might be arbitrary, and therefore suggesting that onset factors become the persistence factors after the civil war has taken off. But they also suggest important qualifications among such factors. Geographical and demographic factors overlap across the onset and persistence demarcation because they extend into the war and serve as a kind of ingredient and fuel which is different from say economic factors like income. That is, geography and demographic factors are in some ways more fundamental to civil wars than other types of factors, which is not a total repudiation therefore of the onset and persistence distinction.

The classifications are thus disciplinary labels on already established specializations, and more specifically, attempts at transforming corpuses of a largely specialized, similarly inclined academic literature into classes of themes which are taken as types of theoretical frameworks. The classifications of theory in the next section of this study thus only help to organize the discussion towards a proposed theoretical framework which reflects matters raised in the literature review while pointing towards a suitable methodology for and subsequent analysis of the Syrian conflict that demonstrates a sufficient consideration of those matters.

This chapter will therefore end with a conceptual contribution to civil war.

Outline of Theories of Civil War

Keeping in mind the preceding discussion, this study *groups* civil war literature into the two broad theoretical branches, under which three more sub-divisions can be grouped as follows:

Theories of Civil War Onset

These are literature from a wide range of approaches focusing on what causes civil wars in the first place. This study has termed these literature as *Theories of Civil War Onset* owing to the prominence of a model which was developed by Collier and Hoeffler which attempts to bring together quantitative as well as qualitative data into a common framework of analysis (Collier & Sambanis, 2005: 3-8). Since that model came about, various contributions have been made to it emphasizing different dimensions of civil war onset. In general, these contributions can be further grouped into two categories. Politico-Economic Theories of Civil War Onset and International Relations of civil wars.

Politico-Economic Theories of Civil War Onset

Politico-Economic Theories of Civil War Onset can be further grouped into the following specializations, in which the disciplinary label indicates what the specific specialization focuses on as a primary determinant of civil war:

- i) Economic Theories
- ii) Political/Institutional Theories
- iii) Psychological/Cultural Theories
- iv) Rational Choice and Structure of Opportunity Theories
- v) Relative Deprivation and Political Grievance Theory
- vi) Constructivist/Sociological Theories

These specific specializations under the politico-economic umbrella can be further condensed into four primary groups, namely “economic opportunity and costs of war; the influence of state capacity; war as derivative of ethnic, religious, or other divisions; and conflict as the violent manifestation of grievances” (Testerman, 2012: 5). In this form, a multi- and inter- disciplinary approach to civil war is suggested even though in practice, there is often an emphasis on one or another discipline.

International Relations Theories of Civil Wars

International Relations theoretical approaches to civil war are obtained from literature which emphasizes the interventionist, diplomatic, *bi-* and *multi-* lateral dimensions of civil war resolution. Additionally, literature which is fit into this umbrella borrows from traditional perspectives of international relations studies, namely liberalism and realism. Very often, due to the subnational nature of the civil wars, scholars tend to be eclectic in

their application of liberalism and realism – so that they arrive at a triangulated position, balancing international involvements to civil conflicts, state activities and commitments, as well as the activities of the opposition.¹⁶

International relations theories of civil war however tend to view the state as a unitary entity which manifests its power in a consolidated manner in the international system (be it the self-help system of the realist worldview or through global institutions as held by the liberalist worldview). As a result, international relations theories of civil war have tended to emphasize the roles of external states which met this unified criterion alongside the interventions of global institutions in the resolutions of conflicts in affected states. To this end, international relations theories – often composed of a mixture of realist and liberalist positions – read like foreign interventionist theories, largely due to their inability to disaggregate the unified state into a field of fragmented actors.

When subnational possibilities emerge within international relations theories of civil war, they often revolve around models of regional and global economic and political integration: where if, say, economic integration is emphasized alongside realist or liberalist assumptions, the theories become neorealist and neoliberalist perspectives on civil wars owing to that economic emphasis to causation or causation (see Collier & Sambanis, 2005).

For a final point, international relations theories are almost entirely retrospective in their analysis of civil as well as general wars, so that their contributions tend to be

¹⁶ This balance is well illustrated in the triangulated approach in Doyle & Sambanis (2000: 779-782).

prescriptive in terms of how international actors (states and institutions with varying emphases) can help bring about conflict settlements so as to restore the integrity of nation states.

Theories of Civil War Persistence

These are literature focusing on the social, economic and political phenomena which characterize the period of active conflict, extending into the settlement period. Such a period is often very difficult to define especially since it is not clear cut when a domestic conflict or domestic instability achieves the status of a civil conflict, and when it ceases to be.¹⁷ This being so, emphases are placed on the following general themes, which can also be viewed as general research questions about why civil wars persist, restart and terminate:

- a) Theories of Civil War Duration
- b) Theories of Termination
- c) Theories of Recurrence
- d) Economic and Political Theories of Civil War Persistence

¹⁷ In *What is Civil War: Empirical and Operational Complexities of an Operational Definition (2004)* by Sambanis, an in-depth discussion is provided on the question of when or how a domestic conflict or civil unrest transforms into a civil war, and with that, how to demarcate the civil war period from the onset period and the post-civil war period. Additionally, and quite interestingly, Sambanis further problematizes the civil war by drawing on empirical (measurement) techniques and conceptual contributions rather than attempt to posit a new concept of civil war. In this way, Sambanis keeps to the traditional scholarly perspectives of civil war, advocating a refinement and consolidation of empirical requirements and theoretical (conceptual) contributions.

These theories are essentially prefaces for peacebuilding theories because they are difficult to extricate from post-civil war scholarly work in terms of subject matter: factors which cause a war to endure also seem to be the same factors which cause a progressive peace to fail to endure. There is as such less of a substantive distinction within the literature on civil wars to warrant a classification between persistence theory and post-civil war theory.

Theoretical Contribution: Civil War as a Parallel Structure

The theories outlined above illustrate the central concerns or intellectual inclinations for the civil onset and civil war persistence. Discernably, both types of intellectual focuses occur either retroactively with respect to civil wars which have already started and ended, or during the period of the civil war. Additionally, the classification of a war as a civil war is not necessarily drawn from the disciplinary emphases which form the primary approaches of the study. Rather, a civil war – already designated as such – is examined along the dimensions of emphasis denoted by the discipline offering the methods and techniques of investigation.

The effect of this type of approach is that civil war is uncritically taken as an abnormality in which a society deviates from a taken for granted status of stability and cohesion, as an integral and yet unacknowledged operational classification of a domestic conflict scenario. Consequently, therefore, theoretical work not only becomes inundated with ungeneralizable contextuality – but also situationally remedial, while empirical studies either focus on statistical associations or, at best, forms of comparative civil war

studies to identify statistically significant, and remediable abnormalities.¹⁸ In both instances however, the unacknowledged operational classification of a civil war functions through a focus on this societal abnormality (of civil war) as emanating from a fundamental anomaly somewhere within state-society.

In this study, the intention is to suggest a different outlook in which civil war, rather than being abnormal in this sense, could be seen instead as a situation in which dual polities and their economies arise parallel to each other, and where the primary political economy is challenged by an emergent one. And furthermore, that a war happening within the borders of a state only becomes a civil war once the case can be made that such a dualism has emerged alongside a military or armed aspect (through an assessment of the sectorial or civil processes outlined above). This is for the following reasons:

- i) To address some of the complexities which have to do with foreign intervention, especially where foreign intervention appears large enough to sustain the conflict, be it in economic or military assistance.
- ii) To address problems associated with international trade, especially where such trade seems to benefit and exacerbate the domestic conflict.
- iii) To address demographic aspects of conflict when the significant sections of the fighters are non-residents of the active conflict, as seen above in the Great

¹⁸ In Ward, Greenhill, & Bakke (2010), this point is made in which parameters already designated as theoretically interesting often become the basis for statistical analysis, so that the significance of certain measures such as GDP, for instance, is defined outside the situation of the civil conflict. Here, there is a call for the incorporation of “*outside-the-sample*” conflict predictors. There is still a quest for abnormality here.

Lakes Region in Africa, and quite notably in Syria. These are referred to as extra-systemic wars under Correlates of War typology of wars (see Reid, 2007: 2-5).

- iv) To address the complexities of battle-related deaths in cases where civil wars persist but the destruction of life seems to decline as well as the scale of destruction – that is, where a kind of normalcy returns even when the society continues to be in a state of internal unrest due to multiple centers of political authority (also, Reid, 2007).

As touched on in the literature review, these dynamics of civil conflict make problematic the idea of civil war assumed in different literature on the basis that it is extremely difficult to delimit external factors' impacts on civil wars; and then subsequently, to classify a violent domestic unrest as a civil war if a large amount of foreign intervention, international trade, non-resident involvement, and low battle-related deaths are found in a conflict designated as a civil one. In short, the complexities of defining a civil war have to do with a proper accounting of the characteristics of intra-state conflicts brought about by these four considerations.

However, if a civil war can be understood as a type of parallel structure as suggested in this study, classification of what a civil war is need largely focus on assessments of whether a parallel structure has emerged in a domestic conflict which accounts for the four considerations (as well as the wider sectorial processes) so as – like the primary state being challenged – to solicit, attract or draw into its own system the requisite political, economic, geographic and demographic resources for its survivability or durability. In

this sense, a civil war can be seen as a type of system with different dimensions, which are spearheaded by militarized forms of organized violence.¹⁹

With such a holistic assessment, domestic conflict, civil unrest and other forms of intra-state conflict immediately achieve a different status than civil wars, while the expected characteristics of all conflicts (such as deaths, destruction, displacement, refugees and others) are viewed through a framework within which their overall impact or effect on the civil war is defined and determined in terms of the integrity of that parallel structure in relation to primary structure it challenges. One fruitful outcome of such an approach, for example, would be to avoid assuming that a larger death-toll indicates a larger civil war, or that the absence of destruction entails a less serious civil war.²⁰ Here, the seriousness of a civil war categorically depends on the robustness of the dual system especially in terms of the extent to which the challenging structure is entrenched in opposition to the primary one along different sectorial or civil processes. In this way, concerns about the destruction of human life, for example, appropriately become humanitarian concerns which more clearly become distinct from civil war

¹⁹ The military aspect challenges the monopoly of military force that a state has over its territory. Militarization during civil wars thus is not only intended for fighting but also to reject the legitimacy of the state's authority.

²⁰ Lacina (2006) in *Explaining the Severity of Civil Wars* notes that [conflicts designated as] civil wars have become less deadly over time (in combat related deaths), and are less likely in democracies or in states with powerful militaries: democracies are more inclusive and thus more adept at resolving tensions, and powerful militaries are adept at eliminating military oppositions. The approach suggested in this study additionally makes it possible to think about a civil war in which deaths might not exceed those in peacetime. At the inter-state level, the Korean peninsula provides an example of two countries technically at war but without the battle-related death-tolls.

resolution efforts since those would be primarily concerned with resolving the political and economic dualism.

CHAPTER IV – METHODOLOGY (DESK REVIEW)

Introduction

In this section, an approach towards the classification of a conflict as a civil war is presented. The approach is a combination of a very *limited* case study methodology²¹ and some criteria for identifying units or fields of analysis. The term *fields* appears here to indicate the structuralist approach, in which analysis can be conducted on units of analysis as they are traditionally understood in the social sciences as well as on strands or themes of *culture* or sociological currents contained in national literature, legislation, treaties, political ideologies, art, various types of histories, say ethnic or political, and so on. An additional dimension of fields pertain to physical features such as geography which also impact the politics, and as such, the civil war dynamics of a society.²²

Following this, a *limited* case study approach will also be presented. A case study is type of social science investigation in which the contextual issues surrounding a phenomenon are examined alongside a detailed look at the phenomenon itself. The primary purpose for undertaking case studies is in order to illustrate a thesis pertaining to some dimension of interest in the chosen phenomenon.²³ Obviously, the level of detail is predicated upon the question being answered, the accessibility of the thing being studied,

²¹ *Limited* because the Syrian case is only used in this study as an illustration in conjunction with other available literature rather than as detailed case from which the bulk of the discussion is drawn.

²² Here, fields can be understood as a different way for saying “sectorial or civilian processes”

²³ This is also a limited view of case studies. In Kohlbacher (2005), the case study is defined as a research strategy informed by the requirements of a research question, so that over time, case studies have become rigorous methodological approaches in themselves in answering certain types of research questions. In this vein, case studies are neither qualitative nor quantitative approaches.

and the thesis being illustrated. In this regard, the term detailed or sometimes, in-depth, entails meeting requirements which adequately illustrate the thesis given the question and the accessibility of the phenomenon.

Structuralism and Civil War

Structuralism

Structuralist approaches as philosophical and theoretical outlooks gained traction in the social sciences after the seminal work of the anthropologist Levi-Strauss even though an earlier work by Ferdinand de Saussure was perhaps the first major structuralist analytical undertaking in a study of societal life (Elliot, 2009). The primary concern of structuralist approaches is to reveal systemic functionality given a designated level of social or political analysis by identifying and understanding how different components of a chosen whole, the parameters of which are decided by the level of analysis undertaken, are of specific importance to that whole's integrity and durability.

It is important to clarify further that integrity or durability need not contain expectations of proper, desirable or constructive functionality. Rather, the whole's integrity can be understood as that which is conducive for the sustainability of the system in focus, even when that system might – as is the case in civil wars – in practice be destructive. This is similar to an idea already alluded to about *path-dependent* processes except that path-dependent processes of conflict, though self-propelling, are not understood systemically, let alone structurally. Instead, they are seen as factors of civil war persistence owing to reasons already provided in the review such as failures of reconciliation in the post-war period, or emergent propellants during the war period, such

as new grievances. Patterns to path-dependent processes thus follow a snow-balling or domino-effect logic rather than a systemic logic which would suggest functionality.

The scope of the phenomenon being studied is therefore determined by the level at which it can be viewed holistically – so that in turn, its *components* are also designated an automatic level of examination to the extent that such designation demonstrates their contribution to the critical functionality of that whole. To illustrate, in cultural studies for example, structuralism has been used to understand micro-level factors such as face-to-face and even intra-human relations, attempting to demonstrate the interconnectedness of wider cultural formats at the inter-human and intra-personal levels, and therefore revealing *death-hold* interdependencies between wider formats and their micro-level manifestations.

In later studies, most prominently those by Foucault²⁴, the interhuman and intra-personal levels are eliminated altogether to suggest a structuralism of abstract *sociological* forces (discourses) which operate at the meso- and mostly the macro- levels of society, from which they impose genealogies – of thinking, perceiving, legislating and interacting – that is, of political dispensations (see, Calhoun, Gerteis, Moody, Pfaffy & Virk, 2012; Callinicos, 1999; Chaffee & Lemert, 2009). The designated levels of analysis therefore are determined by requirements for demonstrating systemic functionality rather than some other commitment to units of analysis designated *a priori*.

²⁴ Most prominently *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (1989).

Structuralism and Civil War

As an approach, structuralism has not been explicitly used in political science studies of civil war beyond the ready similarities structuralism has with approaches which emphasize *path-dependent* processes. And where structural factors of conflict onset have been mentioned, they often allude to deficiencies in political institutions to integrate population groups in order to avert the development of strong grievances. But in peacebuilding studies (which, as already stated, share overlaps with conflict persistence studies), some forms of limited structuralist analysis of post-war societies have been conducted, particularly focusing on the periods of political integration after the decolonization movements on the African continent, and in the resolution of different conflicts which took place after decolonization (see, Green, 2016). In these studies, structures are seen primarily as institutions functioning within cultural dispensations of politics which offer up their own unique political possibilities for peace or for violence: the marked distinction being the cultural component (field or civil process) which inundates the view taken by scholars as to what institutions are in practice and how they *actually* function.

Additionally, structures have also included the relationship between human societal structures and geographical structures, so that economic, political and social outcomes experienced in the present can in some cases be understood as the result of relationships between historical phenomena and geographical ones. Outside of this limited application, structuralist studies of post-war societies have been either historical in nature (as seen in Mamdani's work already cited) or sociological in nature (as seen in Green, 2016).

Theoretical Application

In this study, the structuralist approach will be applied to the Syrian conflict along the civil processes outlined by this study. In demonstrating how civil processes arise as outcomes of the military component of the conflict, determinations about whether the conflict is a civil one or not can be made, in so far as the civil processes allude to the formation of type of parallel polity. This is important because it helps to escape some of the difficulties of classifying a civil war already identified elsewhere.

Data and Analysis

Data for the study primarily comprises of reports on Syria from reputable organizations (such as the United Nations – especially the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Bank (WB)), and media sources especially as such reports pertain to the structural evolution of the Syrian conflict since the onset of the conflict up to the present. *Commentary* about the conflict especially in the media, in a scenario in which different agendas and interests are quite apparent, will not be relied upon in this study: a lot of commentary is inundated with ideological prescriptions which seek to realize a particular outcome, be it the persistence of the Assad establishment or, one or another faction of the National Coalition and Free Syrian Army. Rather, fully sourced, referenced and corroborated media reports providing information about political, economic, territorial (geographical) and demographical shifts over time will constitute some of the data. As yet, academic literature on the Syrian conflict remains quite limited even in the online journal databases.

Analysis in this study will entail an assessment of the various civil processes revealed by the data just mentioned against the definitional requirements of a structuralist perspective of civil war, especially to link different characteristics of those processes during the period of conflict to the overall integrity of the conflict as a structural system. The aim is to present, on the path towards a classification, a criteria of examination.

In sum, the data is largely textual and primarily sourced from extant reports and media literature from the Syrian conflict as academic studies lag behind.

The analysis is a process of comparing the available textual evidence on Syria against the proposed structuralist definition of civil war. The entire effort is a form of *desk-review*

CHAPTER V – THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

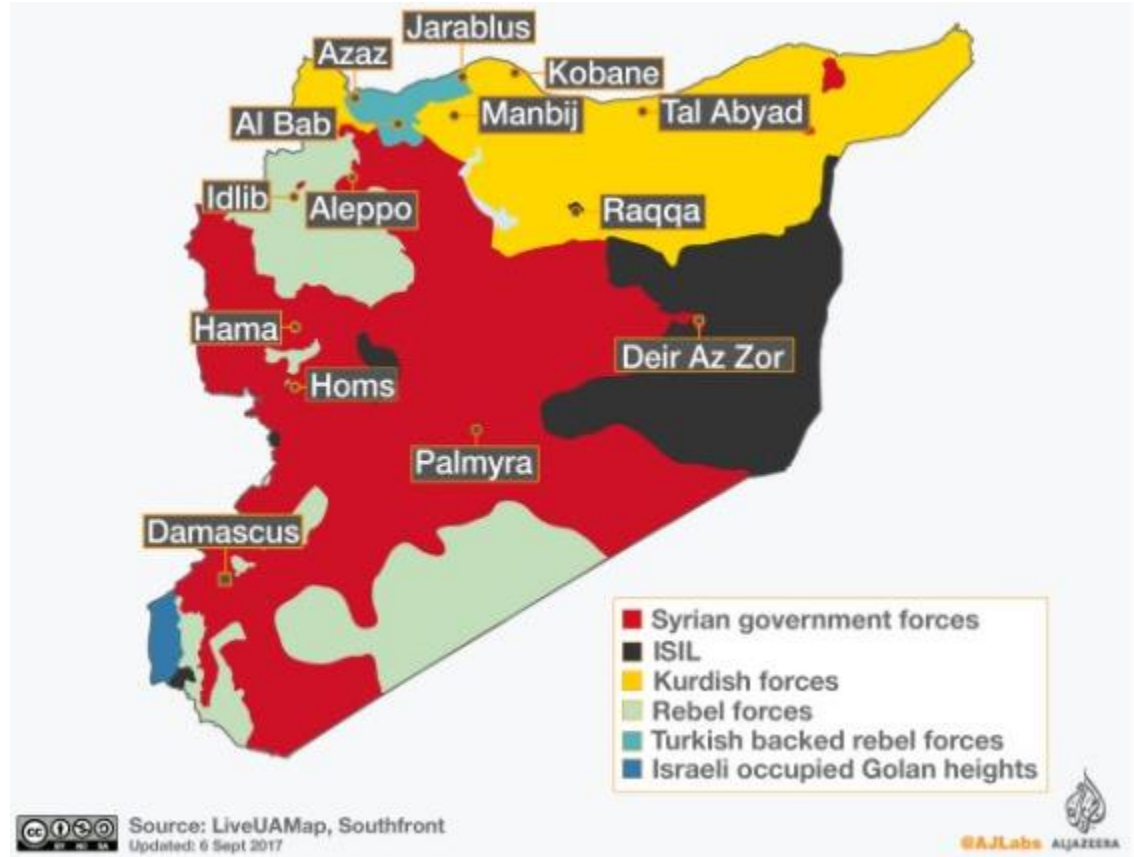


Figure A1. Figure 1: Map of Syria showing division of territory as of September 6th, 2017.²⁵

Introduction

In this section, a brief historical and political overview of Syria is presented, outlining the context leading up to the onset of the conflict. This, as will be seen, is quite critical for determining what the sectorial or civil processes are in Syria. A historical overview helps elucidate political stakes in the country so as to reveal what the strategical theaters of a civil conflict might be should one erupt.

²⁵ Source: Aljazeera Online <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/syria-civil-war-explained-160505084119966.html>

Secondly, the Syria conflict itself is presented, especially to outline and describe the general structural aspects of the conflict and how they have evolved over time. Interestingly, there is a logic to the apparent chaos which has engulfed the country whose trends are quite clearly visible in the structural trajectories outlined below.

Thirdly, a classification, in conjunction with themes already developed from the discussion so far undertaken is done in order to determine if the Syrian conflict can be seen as a civil war at the present time – or at any other time. In this instance, the idea of civil war as a political structure is brought into the discussion for an assessment.

A conclusion is then provided.

Overview of Syria

Political and Economic Conditions at Syria's Independence

In quite an extensive recent report published by the World Bank²⁶, Syria's political instability in the present period seems deeply interwoven with the political settlement arrived at after acquiring its independence from France in 1946. Prior to *this* establishment of the Syrian state, geography (heavily intervened by sheer size and desert terrain), had played a very significant factor in human settlement patterns of very diverse groups of people – and consequently, had influenced the economic and political developments which would later ensue.

The major geographical factor was the scarcity of arable land (as well as very limited opportunities for irrigation which helped centralize other territories in the region).

²⁶ The Toll of War: The Economic and Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria (2017).

Land suitable for agriculture was largely limited to the coastal and overlaying regions on the Western side of the Syrian territory, and the along the banks of the Euphrates, so that human settlement patterns and the resultant economic activities also stretched and scattered around these more conducive regions of the country. This geographical factor which complicated consolidation of quite a diverse demography of people would then be compounded by two additional political factors, namely empires and external economic linkages.

In terms of Empires, Syria was governed as one of the provinces of the Ottoman Empire which heavily subsidized in expenses as well as capacity the security needs in the territory. This role would then be taken up by France during the French Mandate in Syria.²⁷ It was not unusual, however, during this extended period of external governance, for various groups to take up arms and declare themselves *mini-states* before they were countered by the governing authority or by coalitions of different groups affiliated to it (such as the Bedouins, Druses, Kurds, and Circassians). So that, on the one hand, an indigenous central authority capable of providing comprehensive security over the territory failed to develop, and on the other, a culture of transient and tenuous coalitions of security providers vis-à-vis insurgency groups developed. Both of these conditions would be carried by the Syrian territory into independence.

In terms of external linkages, regional economies which had become integrated into the trade networks of the Ottoman Empire and other nearby economic centers, found

²⁷ The Ottoman Empire ruled Syrian provinces from 1516 to 1918, and the French Mandate ruled from 1920 to 1946 (World Bank, 2017: 4)

additional security both in their geographical zones as well as across their trade routes – so that security imbalances began to characterize the Syrian topography. Additionally, as Syria lagged behind other emerging nations due to these challenges, new disruptions and challenges emerged from those new nations. For example, the breaking away of Beirut and Alexandretta (Hayat) from historical Syria adversely affected Damascus and Aleppo economically. Additionally, old trade routes were being cut off as formerly accessible passages began to fall within the territories of new states – some of whom levied high tariffs for passage (World Bank, 2017: 7). Agreements between Britain and France after the Great War would bring about political partitions, and with them new political and economic arrangements in the region, further complicating and then force-consolidating the largely disaggregated Syrian economy and peoples into a fragile unitary polity.

The World Bank report states;

[After Syrian independence], the reinforcement of a centralized state came with complications... The policies of empires tolerated, if not emphasized, sectarian and ethnic differences. For instance, under the French administration, minorities were afforded autonomy and rights vis-a-vis neighboring ethnicities, and regional and communal representation was established in the Parliament. Centralization meant the complete absorption of certain groups, like the Alawites, into the young state apparatus and the exclusion of others, like the Kurds. Alawites became reconciled to common Syrian citizenship, and gave up the dream of a separate Alawite state (Tolls of War, 2017: 7).

These trends severely undermined an already precarious security problem: *forced* economic and political cohesion to generate a nation-state exacerbated divergent

political, social and economic interests, and reformulated subsequent ethnic grievances towards the new state.

The Ba'ath Party and the Rise Assads

The Ba'ath ideology as practiced in Syria after independence had roots in middle-class Arabic intellectuals of the 1930s and 1940s who were inspired by and involved in the nationalist activities which characterized that period of time in the wider region (including in places like Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Palestine) (Galvani, 1974: 5).²⁸ A nationalist-socialist and Arab renaissance organization, the Ba'ath Party was formed in Syria as a regional branch in 1947 after independence, to engender a political and economic program to entrench self-rule, and to safeguard modernization and industrialization through a state-led developmental program, which would also ensure Arabic cultural regeneration, as part of a wider pan-Arab vision for the region (see, Martini, York, & Young, 2013).

Inundated with its own internal ideological conflicts owing to its rather diverse grouping of revolutionary leaders and intellectuals, and while fighting off external pressures from younger nationalist movements, the Ba'ath party would nonetheless

²⁸ Devlin (1991: 1396) contends that pan-Arabic thought extends further back into the 19th century – but that it was the political dimension of this thought which awakened just before the Great War period when Arabs began to agitate for self-determination against the Ottoman Empire, especially against *Turk-centrism*.

continue to dominate the Syrian political landscape well into the 1960s.²⁹ A short-lived unification of Syria with Egypt under a single republic (the United Arab Republic) was initiated by the Ba'ath Party – a move which ruffled a lot of feathers among the some of the local chapters of the party in Syria. This led to a military rebellion resulting in the collapse of the United Arab Republic and some fragmentation within the party's ranks. The party's leadership then resorted to direct appointments of future party officials to try re-consolidate power. Top-down management of the party choked the democratic election of leaders within the party and worsened the already factionalized movement, sparking a 1963 military take-over which initiated an extensive purge of the old guard with new Ba'ath civilian leadership; this however did not prevent yet another coup by 1966 which ushered in Salah Jadid.³⁰

These events were, in retrospect, ridding the political landscape of strong opponents, fragmenting factions into smaller entities, and reducing the number of influential affiliated parties and movements in the political system, paving the way for the Assad dispensation following a final coup in 1970. From then on, a new political pragmatism was engendered involving a mixed-bag of economic and political tactics aimed at *permanently* ostracizing political opponents, and strangulating oppositional

²⁹ The cessation of present day Hayat to Turkey particularly exposed the party to stern criticisms and attacks from younger movements who saw this as a strategic failure by and a mark of competence of the older nationalists in the Ba'ath party (Galvani, 1974: 5).

³⁰ In 1958 the United Arab Republic – a union of Egypt and Syria, led by Nasser and initiated by the Ba'ath party leadership – would be formed which forced a liquidation of different political organizations in Syria under a single-party umbrella and pushed non-nationalist left movements underground like the Arab communists (Devlin, 1991: 1400).

political movements, complemented by policies of limited but calculated interventions in the wider region through the Arab League (not the Ba'ath party) to eliminate external linkages to domestic politics such as those with Iraqi branch of the Ba'ath party (Galvani, 1991: 9; also see, Siegman, 2000).

All the while, political power was becoming centralized through institutions created to fortify the central government even as state participation in the economy grew further. Moreover, minority coalitions in the diverse wider population (with the Alawites, Druses and Arab Christians) as well as large sections of the mainly rural population were more strategically consolidated under a nationalist agenda without, aside from rhetoric, *real* wider pan-Arab aspirations and engagement (see Devlin, 1991).

In Sum, the first Assad government was able to use the opportunities afforded by the cycle of coups and their purges to finally construct a streamlined, authoritarian government. Stability had been acquired through repression and centralization – but the seeds of divisions remained in place within the Syrian society which, now deep into its independence, had never addressed. The historical divisions brought upon it by population diversity as well as geographically induced political and economic activities owing to scattered and dispersed human settlement patterns would lessen in their magnitude due to the strong and at times violent state-repression.

Onset of the 2011 Syrian Conflict and Complexities

The origins of the Syrian conflict are widely attributed to a combination of domestic and regional factors. Domestic factors largely revolve around state repression and the multiplicity of political and economic grievances and stakes already within Syria,

accruing from the country's independence history and especially in the political settlements of its population diversity. For minorities, for example, such as the Christian and Druzes – state repression under a government which upholds religious equality is more acceptable than the possibility of an Islamic government dominated by the large Sunni majority. Also, the possibility of an intensification of such ties with other regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and the Iraq Sunni populations in the border regions of Syria and Iraq make prospects of a post-Assad Sunni government less palatable.³¹ For the Alawite minorities, a group to which Assad himself belongs, proximity to state power and other forms of political rents (especially their inclusion as full citizens at the dawn of the republic) over several decades have helped formulate pro-government sentiment (Martini, York & Young, 2013: 4-5). The Sunni majority itself is not a monolithic block characterized by a militant type of grievance against the Assad government. Long standing social ties with neighboring countries has produced familial ties which traverse ethnic and religious demarcations, helping to moderate hard *either-or* attitudes towards the Syrian government. There has also been, overtime, inevitable cultural and social mixing within Syria itself in the various regions.

Additionally, while predominantly Sunni, varieties of Islamic interpretations and therefore political stances are commonplace within the Sunni majority so that opposition to the government could be viewed along a continuum from civil to militant. It is too

³¹ Perthes (2006: 34) mentions that during the Iraq invasion, some Sunni Mosques in Syria recruited Syrian fighters to go to Iraq for Jihad. After the Iraq war subsided, many of them returned home, and have targeted the Assad government as part of the general opposition as well. Such militants are not open to the prospect of a minority-friendly post-Assad society.

simplistic to assume that the content of all Sunni Muslim opposition to Assad is overwhelmingly militant.

Pockets of pro-democracy activists also constitute part of the political typography of Syria. Many of these, working within wider regional and international networks for Middle-Eastern democratization, focus on a whole range of issues such as women's rights, civil equality across sexual and any other orientations, and so on – espouse a model of governance which is closer to the western liberal models. These type of pro-democracy activities also constitute a type of political grievance but one which is neither militaristic nor widely supported in the wider public in view of Syria's own nationalistic rhetoric as well as prevalent cultural-religious attitudes towards such views about civil rights and governance more generally (see, Deasy, 2013).

In the north of Syria, there is the Kurdish stalemate with the Syrian government which has persisted over several decades, after the Syrian state effectively withdrew from the region. The support for Kurdish autonomy and cessation is fragmented in the wider population even among the Sunni majority – so that in managing the Kurdish issue and preventing them from declaring northern Syria a stand-alone Kurdish state, the government pursues a policy viewed with shifting ambivalences by the wider Syrian public including among the Sunnis.³² In short, grievances run rife – but their content and the extent of their militancy is quite varied owing to internal political complexities.

³² The Sunni majority in Syria is made up of 50% Sunni Arabs and 20% Sunni Kurds. The religious affiliation notwithstanding, there are Arab and Kurdish ethnic tensions in the North-Eastern parts of Syria as well (Perthes, 2006: 35).

Regionally, the so-called Arab Springs are thought to have energized hopes for loosening state repression and engendering a pro-democracy trajectory within Syria as was happening in other Arabic countries. As a result, peaceful protests demanding reforms began in Deraa around January of 2011. As the protests grew, the Syrian government responded with excessive force, resulting in several hundreds of deaths and arrests (including torture).³³ At this point, up until July, the protests did not have an armed component until defections occurred within the Syrian Government Army ranks, leading to the declaration of a Free Syrian Army (FSA) – a separate militia from the national government – whose intention was to overthrow the Assad government.³⁴

Over the next few months clashes between Syrian government forces and the Free Syrian Army would intensify even as the civilian protests continued in various Syrian cities. Additionally, more militias (including hardline Jihadists) would mushroom in different parts of the country, common in their opposition to Assad, but varied and even at odds in their political objectives – and sometimes reckless in their military activities in civilian populated centers (Aljazeera, 2017; Martini, York & Young, 2013). These simultaneous forces would blur the critical political distinctions among this general current of opposition to Assad – and would roughly be seen, especially by outside observers, as a common, broad-based, united front against a tyrannical and unpopular

³³ See Report on Why is There War in Syria (BBC, 7th September, 2017).

³⁴ See a report by Aljazeera, *Syria's Civil War Explained from the Beginning* (Aljazeera, 25th September, 2017).

government, whose fighting force was the Free Syrian Army.³⁵ By extension, the political and military objectives stated by the Free Syrian Army – of regime change – would be christened also as the objectives of the wider opposition. Under these auspices, Syria had acquired its mantle of civil war by the end of 2011.

Political Structures in the Syrian Conflict

The political structures relevant to the classification of the conflict as a civil war in the Syrian case are thus to do with sectorial or civil processes *explicitly aimed* at overthrowing Assad and his government with a military component. In this study, the proposition is that such types of processes with a military component fall into two aspects. The first aspect is described and finalized below because it has to do with political and military objectives. The second aspect represents the civil processes – and as such leads assessments of the systemic components which make an armed, militarized domestic conflict become a civil war.

Aspect One - Expressed Political and Military Objectives of the Opposition

Only the Free Syrian Army, comprised of defecting officers from the Syrian Army have stated the overthrow of Assad as a political and military objective. Furthermore, only they harbor and lead this ambition to overthrow Assad military as an indigenous grouping of people.

³⁵ Martini, York & Young (2013: 3) describe the so-called Free Syrian Army as a “hodge-podge” of fighters, loosely organized opponents of Assad with arms – who do not constitute a single military entity. The Free Syrian Army is made up of unaffiliated opponents of Assad with different visions, who are not all allies of each other.

Prior to their defection, the protests – growing as they were – did not constitute a civil war. Nor did the excessive force unleashed by the government of Assad in retaliation to the growing protests. It is important to indicate this from the onset to emphasize the proposition this study is making about how to look at civil war.

Heavy-handed governments in the face of protestations fall into various techniques employed by autocratic, totalitarian or authoritarian regimes who use coercion, repression, fear and terror to induce docility in their societies (see Arriola, 2013; Gallagher & Hanson, 2009). In such instances, the state remains unitary or centrally consolidated – and protests take the form of demands for inclusion through expansions of political and civic spaces to enable public participation in governance. To varying extents, totalitarian regimes do make tame consensus here and there – to deflate political tensions, consolidate new coalitions, and to disperse political and economic rents – foremost among which tend to be limited economic liberalization.

Assad himself has in the past dangled economic reforms to stave off such tensions especially after he tenuously succeeded his father in 2000 (Perthes, 2006). He also came out a few times to promise additional political reforms as the protests and the violence increased during the first year of the conflict (as a bargaining chip for peace) and in subsequent years (as part of his post-conflict reconstruction policy). This was all in keeping with a standard approach by Syrian governments of cautious *liberalization*. Excessive force in a context of protest could thus constitute other serious infractions of basic human rights up to fully fledged crimes against humanity.

Additionally, such activities, in and of themselves, can also attract “responsibilities to protect” by outside actors in the form of multilateral or big power interventions (Doyle, 2011). In both scenarios, the infractions and the interventions, do not constitute a civil war. In the latter case, the resultant fighting could reasonably be seen as a military engagement between the tyrannical regime and the outside forces in a war of intervention (paradoxically, *a humanitarian war*). The mushrooming instances of sporadic, opportunistic violence due to the breakdown of security would raise the levels of fatalities, suffering and destruction – but they too would not constitute a civil war due to an absence of a political objectives defined and emanating locally – and an inability to become organized as a unified force relative to their political objects within the fighting.³⁶

The prospects for civil war in Syria are thus confined to the breakaway by some military leaders from the Syrian army to form their own fighting force with a stated

³⁶ What blurs the situation of conflict here is the simultaneous erosion of the legitimacy of the government due to its atrocities which might create domestic resistances fighting alongside the external interveners.

military and political vision.^{37, 38} *That* vision had two basic components. The first was the refusal to recognize the prevailing central authority (the Assad government). The second was to organize and sustain a military force intended for the overthrow the Assad government. This was tantamount to declaring that as long as Assad and his adherents retained the reins of power, the Syrian state would remain illegitimate and unrecognized by its military and other defectors. This formation of an entity within the Syrian territory, openly opposed and hostile to the current government, and opposed to internal structures of reconciliation, is what constitutes the first aspect (and a key criteria) of the civil war.

Aspect Two – The Parallel Political Structure(s)

The second aspect of a civil war is the generation of a parallel structure which challenges the current one. It describes a type of conflict where the opposition is able, beyond disrupting the central authority's control over a territory, to organize and sustain a consistent oppositional orientation to that central authority. This might entail some form of demographic cohesion against the central authority through which the opposing force

³⁷ In Young, Stebbins, Frederick, & Al-Shahery (2014) looking at the Syrian conflict in relation to Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan, the *fact* of Free Syrian Army's existence as a force of non-committed groups composed of defectors, Jihadists, volunteers, foreign fighters and locally oriented protectionist forces is severally repeated. Additionally, al-Nusra – a group designated as a terrorist organization by all international actors relevant to the Syrian conflict was seen by the National Coalition (the body in charge of the Free Syrian Army) as an effective ally against Assad, and therefore a group worthy of being part of the Free Syrian Army forces. To their disappointment, the US and western allies refused to recognize al-Nusra in their strategy against the Assad government.

³⁸ See also a report, citing Reuters, titled *Hardline Rebels Launch Big attack on Syrian Government near Hama* in The National. An attack carried out by Jabhat al-Nusra (a breakaway from Islamic State) participates alongside rebel forces of the Free Syrian Army in the North-Western region of Syria.

finds leverage (such as in the case of a population supporting cessation); or, it might entail a large enough, fully united force under a common command whose objectives are articulated by a centralized leadership; or, even a terrain-aided oppositional group whose power in challenging the state is embedded in making some sections of territory ungovernable: here, one finds natural resource-based oppositions as well.

In particular, such a parallel political structure seems to require; a readiness to use arms by a domestic force and a theater of primary opposition embedded in some sector of the society which traditionally falls under the central authority's jurisdiction (such as geography, a regional economy, a demography, a separate militia and so on). The force aspect of this is critical because in ordinary conditions, including during periods of civil unrest, the state retains the monopoly of the use of armed force and does not experience an organized, armed force aimed at overthrowing and replacing the state's government. So that the presence of oppositional currents with an armed component is by definition a challenge upon state power.

Though this is necessary, it is not by itself a sufficient condition. What completes it is the seizure away from the central authority's jurisdiction of an additional sector of the society to produce the force's theater. It is under this second aspect of civil war that the Syrian conflict can be assessed. This assessment begins with the Free Syrian Army (as the entity which declared its overthrow agenda) followed by a review of any additional societal sectors *seized* from the Syrian government which constitute the civil processes of a militarized challenge to state authority.

The Civil Processes of the War Effort of the Free Syrian Army

The Free Syrian Army is primary fighting force for the National Coalition – an over 60-member body put together by regional and international actors – to lead the numerous on-the-ground activities aimed at toppling the Assad government. The Free Syrian Army on the one hand, and the protests early on during the conflict on the other, helped signal an opportunity for the many sectarian interests in Syria to commission militias in wars of their own against the Assad government. This is not surprising considering the history of repression and the demographic tensions in Syria.

As a consequence, a grand, disaggregated opposition against Assad entered the conflict. Its sheer size obtains from the many different groups, including Jihadists ones, some of whom have regional players such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey (Young, Stebbins, Frederick & Al-Shahery, 2013). Also, massive territorial gains by Islamic State especially in the eastern parts of the country helped weaken the Syrian govern further and allow the rebel groups associated with the Free Syrian Army to make advances of their own. Under such circumstances, the government forces were overwhelmed – and probably well on their way to defeat by 2015. It is as such within reason to suggest that the severity of the conflict might be owed to the multiplicity of unaffiliated fighters, including foreign ones, engaged in war against Assad’s government rather than the fighting activities of the Free Syrian Army on its own wherever such fighting might have been coordinated by the National Coalition.³⁹

³⁹ The decline of Islamic State in the Syrian offensive with Russian assistance to retake territory has reduced the prospects of the Syrian conflict for the Free Syrian Army, as reported in USA Today by Michaels (2017).

Russia would then join the conflict on the side of the Assad government in the second half of 2015, and with Iran, beginning to push back, through joint operations to reclaim the swaths of territory lost to the different militias – mostly made up of Jihadists. As of September of 2017, the Free Syrian Army – as reported in the New York Times – had so dwindled that it was no longer capable of realizing its stated goal of regime change, thereby leaving the primary anti-Assad powers in Syria to be the *extra-systemic* forces of Islamic State to the East, the Kurds to the North East (a region from which Syria already withdrew), the Turkish backed rebels to the north (primarily to counter the Kurds), and Hezbollah to the South East (repelling Islamic State and also aiming to keep the supply lines open from Iran through Syria) (Hubbard, 2017).

The point here is this: perhaps still committed to regime change, the Free Syrian Army does not have a viable sector from which it can seriously challenge the central authority even with external support outside of the general state of chaos generated by numerous actors. Also, when the Free Syrian Army is considered along the other civil processes, such as economy, geography, demography and polity, the Free Syrian Army has neither held nor commanded control over any significant sectors of the society. It appears therefore that its strength was realized from the external support given to its

fighting *affiliates* who created an aggregate condition of chaos potentially capable of collapsing rather than overthrowing the Syrian government.^{40, 41}

Strictly on these terms, Syria is not in a state of **civil war** – rather it is in a state of some other type of war, unrest, insurrection, insurgency, extra-systemic invasion and so on. The case for a civil war was probably most applicable prior to Russian involvement when, with international support, the Free Syrian Army, understood as a force made up of defectors, might have been able to sustain a war against the Syrian government – aside from the other militias stretching the government’s security forces across numerous fronts.

External Actors

There are many external actors in the Syrian conflict. However, external interventions on the side of warring factions need not violate a criteria for establishing a civil war provided the oppositional force is lead domestically⁴², and has some ability to leverage civil processes against the central government to challenge its power.

⁴⁰ See Gilbert (2016), Perry (2016) and Williams (2016) were different rebel groups, including Jihadists, attack the Syrian Kurds. Both entities received support from US agencies (the CIA and the Pentagon). Also, Bulos, Hennogran & Bennett (2016) in the Los Angeles Times report CIA backed groups attacked by Pentagon backed groups. The Free Syrian Army is demonstrably not an entity with a consistent command over a wide coalition – this is a basis for considering the Syrian conflict a case of multiple insurrections and insurgencies owing to decades of repression enjoined only by a common enemy.

⁴¹ Hall (2016) reports on the deep divisions within the different groups which constitute the Free Syrian Army.

⁴² Otherwise the conflict amounts to a type of invasion. Where invading forces work with internal forces to challenge a government: *that* might amount to an intra-state conflict.

Similarly, Russian and Iranian involvement on the side of Assad's government does not affect the definition of civil war in this perspective, because the political challenge which wages a war on the state is independent of what international resources the state can mobilize to thwart that opposition. International alliances are as such an integral component of a state's power which it exercises over its territory; and the extent to which an internal group can forge its own *international alliances* as did the Free Syrian Army through the National Coalition could be understood as a type of civil process aimed at undermining a sector traditionally reserved for the state.

Summary

Why Syria May Not Be a Civil War

When considered from the structuralist perspective, in which a war has to meet the requirement of establishing at least a dual political entity, this study suggests that there are sufficient groups for calling into question if in fact the Syrian conflict is a civil war. This is because once much of the *noise* is removed so that one focuses primarily on the stated political goals and their practicalities, one finds no real entity on the ground which would constitute an organized challenge to the Syrian government. Additionally, there are no significant sectorial seizures in Syria from which leverage for advancing the cause for war is acquired. Territory seized by rebel forces, in their wide varieties, really constitutes territory fallen out of government control – that is, territory in which the Syrian government fails to project and institute its authority rather than territory under an alternative entity (Deasy, 2013).

Furthermore, large sections of the Syrian population remain uncommitted to the war, and often find themselves being used as human shields trapped in towns and cities, in different battle zones. Within Syria, there are a large number of displaced people fleeing embattled areas – not to mention the large numbers of refugees settled outside the country in neighboring states.⁴³ The presence of extra-systemic forces like Islamic State along with historical grievances – in a region in which there is constant jostling for power through the sponsoring of different groups of militias – it is overly simplistic to assume that ferocity of the fighting is directly the consequence of battles between pro-Assad and Free Syrian Army forces. Rather, the chaos is more general – and the state being a principle authority in the territory, by default, becomes the embattled and threatened structural entity. As such, without Russia and Iran stepping up their support for Assad in 2015, most likely the Syrian state would have collapsed and thereby revealing rather fragmented nature of the so-called opposition over battles of succession.

In order to qualify as a civil war – and not some other type of domestic instability – the Free Syrian Army should have at least constituted a united oppositional front capable of challenging the Syrian state in the terms set out by itself aside from wider condition of chaos. Instead it appears as though the chaos is what helped elongate the forces viability in the war – a viability that some became unsustainable after the Assad, with the help of his allies, began to push out and beat down the other forces of the conflict, especially Islamic State. As of September, 2017 some members of the National Coalition are

⁴³ The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports 6.3 million internally displaced people, 4.5 million of whom are in hard-to-reach besieged areas. Link here: <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/syria-emergency.html>

reporting pressures from the international community to consider an alternative route for the future with Assad still in place. These are effectively the signs entailing that a civil war is over, and that what remains is the violent instability brought about by the repressed forces awakened following the protests and defections in 2011.

The most appalling outcome of this war has been the loss of human life. This sheer viciousness and horror of this war in terms of such losses of life cannot be overstated. Please read the instructions in the USM Guidelines and refer to the examples for headings, tables, figures, chapter titles, appendices, etc. As you insert your material remember that you must work with paragraph marks turned on, so that you can see the formatting. Leave the section break (next page) in place wherever you see it. Use the styles set up in the style ribbon for your headings, etc. (never copy and paste headings or anything else connected with the styles). For further instructions, please contact the Reviewer.

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