



Understanding Civilian Participation and its Implications: A Case Study on the Inclusion of Syria's Civilian Population in the Context of Violence

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Abstract

The Syrian conflict has evolved into a brutal civil war with widespread human rights violations. This paper examines the key drivers of the conflict, specifically focusing on the level of violence against civilians. The conflict in Syria originated from protests against the government, triggered by the harsh crackdown on demonstrators. The paper highlights the role of violence as a strategy employed by both the Syrian regime and opposition forces, resulting in significant civilian casualties and displacement. The violence has escalated due to the militarization of the opposition and the regime's attempts to regain control. Sectarian divisions, exacerbated by historical tensions and the impact of global warming, have further contributed to the conflict. The paper emphasizes the importance of the rule of law in preventing, mitigating, and resolving conflicts. Weak governance, lack of respect for human rights, and failure to respond peacefully to civilian protests have fueled grievances and the rise of extremist groups. Strengthening civil society and promoting good governance are crucial to reducing the risk of conflicts and civil war. The paper concludes that a unified Syrian opposition and a government without any influence are vital steps towards resolving the conflict, alongside international intervention and support. Upholding the rule of law and protecting the rights and freedoms of civilians are essential for restoring peace and stability in Syria.

Keywords: conflict, Syria, rule of law, human rights, peace

1. Introduction

The situation in Syria is the most current case of a brutal conflict which turned into a civil war resulting in massive human rights violations. The story of the conflict in Syria dates back to March 2011 with the start of protests against the government after the arrest of some teenagers who painted revolutionary slogans on a wall. The security forces opened fire to the demonstrators, killing many of them, which led to nationwide protest by the population, asking for President Assad's resignation.⁴⁴ The use of force by the government worsened the situation leading to even larger protests, which went to that extent that the opposition forces started to use arms. Eventually, the violence led to a civil war with rebel brigades being formed to confront the government trying to take control of cities. By the time of writing more than 400.000

⁴⁴ See: Syria: The story of the conflict, BBC News, available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26116868>

civilians result being killed in this civil war.⁴⁵

What started as a protest and then turned into a civil war against Assad, later on escalated to a conflict between different religious groups in the country. Especially, the situation got worse with the creation of the jihadist group Islamic State (ISIS) that took control of a large part of Syria and Iraq proclaiming the recreation of a caliphate.⁴⁶ Reports from the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic and United Nations shows that ISIS has caused huge terror in the country, including public executions, mass killings of rivals, members of security forces and religious minorities and also of taking hostages including Westerners.⁴⁷ After World War II, the formation of the United Nations led to two very important international achievements for safeguarding peace and stability after the War: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, both adopted in December 1948. Since then many new challenges have arisen that led to the generally accepted idea that state sovereignty should be upheld until the moment where it gets misused for killing people. In particular, UN is committed in preventing genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and ethnic cleansing. The Responsibility to Protect means that the permanent members of the Security Council have a responsibility not to veto when the world is confronted by these most heinous crimes.⁴⁸

The Syrian war is not yet towards its end and there are many unresolved questions among which three priority ones: the urgent need for humanitarian access to help civilians in need of assistance in areas across conflict lines, finding a political solution for bringing peace back to the country, and creating a system of accountability where all parties should be held accountable for the mass atrocities in Syria. External intervention is as important now as it was back in 2011 when it all begun. The main problem is that even though internationals have the responsibility to protect civilians, they often fail to do so because of political interests. Although there is an interest on the rise from the internationals for finding a negotiated solution, the question of finding a way to stabilize the situation in Syria in the coming years still remains big challenge.

2. The Syrian Key Drivers of the Conflict

"Drivers" of the conflict can be defined as some elements and processes that have the force to contribute to a conflict most likely a violent one. There is usually more than one driver of conflict in every situation. Reducing the causes of violent conflicts in only one is currently a big debate in the international arena, such as saying that Sierra Leone war was started only for the diamonds means oversimplification the real situation.⁴⁹

As in any conflict all over the world which is caused by drivers also Syria has its own drivers of conflict. According to a research study, there are different drivers of conflict in Syria among which the most important are the following:⁵⁰

- a) Level of violence against civilians
 - a. Degree of united vision and action within the opposition (military and political)
 - b. Level of strength of non-state extremist actors such as ANF, ISIL, and smaller Salafijihadi groups
 - c. Level of comparative foreign political, military and economic intervention

For the purposes of this study, out of the four mentioned drivers, I will be focusing only on "Level of violence against civilians" which is considered to be the main key driver of the conflict in Syria.⁵¹

3. What Caused the Rebellion and Conflict?

There were several historic moves that caused the citizens of Syria to start rebelling, leading to the huge conflict that was created afterwards.

First and foremost, the lack of freedom and the high economic problems had led to dissatisfaction of the citizens towards the Syrian government, but it was never that potential as to cause a conflict turning into a war. At least, not until

⁴⁵ See: 'It's not a war. It's a massacre': scores killed in Syrian enclave, *The Guardian*, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/20/its-not-a-war-its-a-massacre-scores-killed-in-syrian-enclave-eastern-ghouta>; Human Rights Watch, Latest news on Syria, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/syria>

⁴⁶ See: Syria: The story of the conflict, BBC News, available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26116868>

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Failure to protect: Syria and the UN Security Council, Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect, Simon Adams 2015

⁴⁹ Drivers of violent conflict, Maria Kett and Michael Rowson, JRSM

⁵⁰ The Syrian conflict: A systems conflict analysis, ARK GROUP DMCC, 2016

⁵¹ The Syrian conflict: A systems conflict analysis, ARK GROUP DMCC, 2016

the harsh crackdown on protesters, which inflamed the public, raising the anger to a high level.⁵²

Second, in 2011, there were various successful uprisings that became known as the Arab Spring which caused the collapse of Tunisia's and Egypt's presidents. This gave hope to Syrian democracy activists that the same could happen in Syria. That is why they started organizing peaceful protests in March 2011, after the detention and torturing of 15 boys for writing graffiti in support of the Arab Spring, causing the death of one of them, a 13-year-old, after having been brutally tortured.⁵³ The Syria government response toward these protests was very harsh, by killing hundreds and imprisonment of many of the protesters. In July of the same year, the Free Syrian Army was formed by a rebel group from the military, aiming to overthrow the government. That is the moment when Syrian conflict started turning into a civil war.

While the protests in 2011 were mostly non-sectarian, the armed conflict created sectarian divisions. Most Syrians are Sunni Muslims, but Syria's security establishment is mainly composed of members of the Alawi sect, a member of which is also Assad. Sectarian conflicts existed since years ago, demonstrated by a military crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama in 1982, ordered by Bashar's father, which caused the death of tens of thousands of people.⁵⁴ Global warming is believed to have had a role in causing the 2011 uprising as well.⁵⁵ The severe drought that happened in Syria during 2007-2010 led 1.5 million people to migrate from the countryside to the cities, increasing poverty and social unrest.

Thus, as noted, the "key drivers of conflict" in the Syrian crisis, appear to be the regime⁵⁶, due to which there is high level of violence that inflame radicalization and sectarianism.

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) "OECD Definition of Fragility and Resilience" if a state has the above listed problems, it is believed to be easily drawn into a conflict or civil war:

- "Weak capacity to enforce rule of law and carry out governmental functions
- Lacks ability to develop mutually constructive relations with society – the social contract
- More vulnerable to internal and external shocks
- Resilient states exhibit capacity and legitimacy of governing a population and its territory
- Manage and adapt to changing social needs and expectations, shifts in elites and political agreements and institutional complexity"⁵⁷

In the Syrian case, the Syrian Government has almost all of these problems listed by the OECD, which led into the violent conflict started from 2011 and ongoing till then.

4. Level of Violence Against Civilians

First of all, violence against civilians is defined as physical violence against unarmed individuals by causing them injury, death, and/or psychological problems, and/or violence against their private property.⁵⁸ Prior to the start of the conflict, the authority of the state was exercised through the resort of violence in order to eliminate political rivals. Violence was the *modus operandi* of the Assad regime for security purposes.⁵⁹ So the violence caused from this conflict was not something new or unexpected for Syria. Because of this violence, millions of civilians moved out of their homes causing huge economic problems for the country.

The conflict had accelerated so much as to the militarization of the opposition. This militarization is a result of two vicious cycles: first the impunity of the regime which leads to political oppression and exclusion, causing the rebellion of the oppressed and excluded; second is when the regime starts losing control of some areas which increases the level of

⁵² See: Syria's civil war explained from the beginning, AL JAZEERA NEWS, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/syria-civil-war-explained-160505084119966.html>

⁵³ See: Syria: The story of the conflict, BBC News, available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26116868>

⁵⁴ See: Syria's civil war explained from the beginning, AL JAZEERA NEWS, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/syria-civil-war-explained-160505084119966.html>

⁵⁵ See: Syria's civil war explained from the beginning, AL JAZEERA NEWS, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/syria-civil-war-explained-160505084119966.html>

⁵⁶ Comment: Not the regime itself but the regime's reaction or failure to react to demands for more equitable service delivery, including allocation of resources (especially water and oil revenue) and the absence of accountability in the Syrian system (press, media, parliament) while at the same time, proximity to Lebanon's media provided ample alternative sources of news and criticism.

⁵⁷ OECD Definition of Fragility and Resilience, available at: https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/states-of-fragility-2016_9789264267213-en#page162

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

insecurity between political parties.⁶⁰ In cases of such armed conflicts, civilians are always caught in the middle of the fight, experiencing the violence that is associated with such conflicts. This case is easily visible in the Syrian case.

Syrian regime uses violence against civilians as a war strategy, the reason behind this is that the government thinks that violence will cause the civilians located in the areas held by the opposition to migrate, depopulating in this way the areas under control of the opposition and force those left behind to surrender.⁶¹ On the same way have acted also the opposition, by blocking civilians from profiting from the regime services to show their power. Thus, in cases of armed conflicts, the civilians in both areas, that of the opposition and that of the regime, experience violence, by one or the other party of the conflict. The violence becomes more severe in cases when the opposition gains power and authority over certain areas where it creates its own administrative institutions.⁶² In order to suppress these attempts of autonomous areas, the regime attacks those areas without any discrimination, regardless as such, if the areas have schools, hospitals etc. These vicious cycles of violence have been going on in Syria for years. The violence of the conflict did not seem to have an end, causing international intervention for Humanitarian aid towards civilians.

5. The Role of RoL in Preventing, Mitigating and Resolving the Conflict

Conflict have always existed in all societies at all times and were not necessarily all times negative or destructive. Conflict have even proven to be a major force for positive social change. In states where the political and social systems are well managed and human rights are safeguarded and protected, the conflicting interests between different groups of civil societies and the government are managed peacefully.⁶³ The contrary happens in countries where there is poor governance. In such countries, grievances, dissatisfaction with the ruling and disputes are more likely to become violent.⁶⁴

The government has a responsibility to whom? to rule in such a way as to minimize the potential for conflicts. This is a complex issue which requires high level of organization and strategic thinking in terms of the rule of law and the protection of human rights so as to make the civil society happy. A weak state represents a considerable problem in the context of conflicts and increases the need for international assistance.⁶⁵ Governments that do not respect human rights led to higher conflicts as well. Responding to civilian protests by armed attacks causes fear and a sense of the need for protection. This leads also to the rise of extremist groups. Moreover, this is what has contributed to the exodus of Syrian refugees causing also the humanitarian crisis outside Syrian territory. The lack of any action from the international community has given more power to the Assad regime and led opposition to not take into account laws of war during its actions of protection and fight against the Assad regime.⁶⁶

The starting point to eliminate or at least decrease the possibility to such problems arising should be to strengthen the parameters of civil society and to increase governmental action towards securing the rule of law. There should be an intersection between reducing the risk of conflicts and civil war and promoting good governance. In this context, the governments of most countries should find a solution for the problem of growing urban populations, a challenge many countries are facing. An effective urban planning is necessary to resolve the increasing poverty and the widespread of slums. This strategy should include also protection of the citizens in cases extreme natural events, in order to prevent the increase in poverty and migration⁶⁷. Moreover, a government that responds to protests in a peaceful manner, listening to the requests of the protesters and promising to take them into consideration, and actually proving that those requests were taken into consideration, by real actions towards improvement of dissatisfaction of citizens, is another way of acting that would decrease the possibility of riots, conflicts and civil wars.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, this paper takes the stance that a strengthened Syrian military and political opposition and Assad's resign are two indispensable steps towards resolving the Syrian conflict. If instead the Syrian opposition remains fragmented,

⁶⁰ See: Annex 1

⁶¹ *The Syrian conflict: A systems conflict analysis*, ARK GROUP DMCC, 2016

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Making Peace Last – a toolbox for sustainable peacebuilding*, Ricigliano, Robert, 2012

⁶⁴ *Preventing Violent Conflict*, DFID, available at: <http://www.conflictrecovery.org/bin/dfid-conflict-prevention-may07.pdf>

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *The Syrian Conflict: Driving Forces of Balances and Imbalances*, By Serdar Ş. Güner and Dilan E. Koç

⁶⁷ *Making Peace Last – a toolbox for sustainable peacebuilding*, Ricigliano, Robert, 2012

causing its weakness, the conflict is likely to continue and even get worse. Thus, a possible solution would be a unified Syrian opposition and a government without Assad are the only ways to stop the Syrian conflict.⁶⁸ A new government based on the rule of law would be more credible and necessary for the civilians to calm down and start regaining trust on their government, thus leading to the dissolution of the conflict. Governments, but also the opposition parties in any country where conflict has arisen should stop viewing civilians as objects of proving their power to the opposite party of the conflict and rather start considering them as the key target of protection by both parties, in order to gain credibility, recognition and protection from the international community. It should be stressed nevertheless, that in the case of Syria, a diminution of the conflict without international intervention is impossible.

The rule of law could have been a preventative measure, if it was respected, but it cannot be upheld at this moment in time without the support from the international community who still seems to be unwilling or reluctant to act. This is a humanitarian crisis which needs international intervention since it is clear already that the two conflicting parties are unable to find a middle way of communication to mitigate or resolve the conflict. If the government of Syria does not change its policies and structure, the conflict does not have any ways to mitigation or of being resolved. It is a complex situation which needs a multiple action from different areas and actors to be taken, where all actors need to be having the same goal, restoring peace and stability in the country, removing fear from the civilians and protecting basic human rights and freedoms of the citizens.

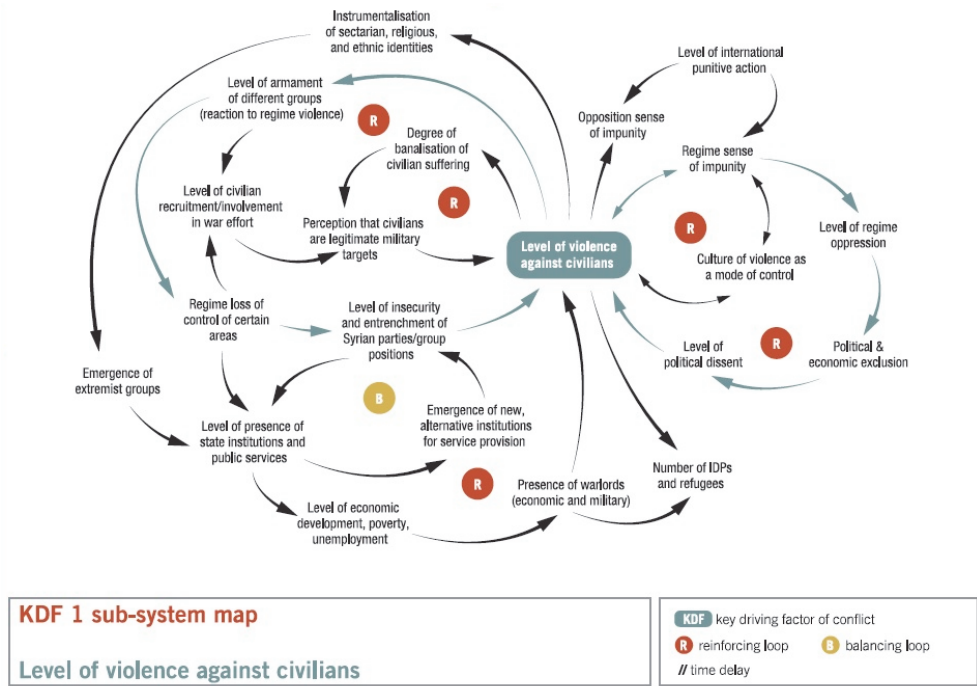
Practitioner's Reference List

Since the war is still ongoing, there is not much research in the field, so literature is almost scarce. There is a need for extensive research and statistics in order to help create a better overview of the situation and draw conclusions and strategies on how to intervene and have an impact.

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⁶⁸ *The Syrian conflict: A systems conflict analysis, ARK GROUP DMCC, 2016*

Annex 1: Key Driver factor of conflict KDF (Level of Violence against civilians) Sub system map⁶⁹



⁶⁹ KDF 1 (Level of Violence against civilians) Sub system map, "The Syrian conflict: A systems conflict analysis, ARK GROUP DMCC, 2016"