

University of Tampere
School of Management
Administrative Sciences

Conflict Transformation In Syria

Armenak Tokmajyan
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Supervisors:
Dr. Frank Möller
Prof. Dr. Sirpa Virta

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After the onset of the Syrian conflict in late 2011, the concept of “civil war” has become commonly used to describe the situation in Syria. Over time, new actors, of foreign as well as local origins, have joined the conflict, and thereby fundamentally changed some of its defining characteristics. As the complexity of the conflict has grown, identifying the specifications of the conflict has become arduous. This thesis contributes to the understanding of the type of the conflict in Syria between March 2011, when the first protests began, and late summer 2013.

The aim of this thesis is to investigate whether the two most dominant conflict databases, the Correlates of War (COW) Project and the Uppsala Conflict Data Program/Peace Research Institute, Oslo (UCDP/PRIO), and their respective conflict typologies, can identify the type of the conflict in Syria.

The databases provide a typological overview of hundreds of conflicts. This indicates that they should also be able to explain the type of the conflict in Syria. To test the ability of the databases, this thesis adopts the “most likely test case” approach, which is one of the approaches of single case study methodology. This particular approach suggests that the frameworks of the databases should be able to explain the chosen case; if they are not able to do so, then their validity would be lessened.

The empirical evidence indicates that during the identified timeframe, three distinct phases of the conflict can be observed. The first phase of the conflict is adequately identified according to the COW and UCDP/PRIO typologies. However, the databases fail to provide an adequate identification of the second and third phases due to the fact that the characteristics of the conflict do not match with any of the identified conflicts available in their typologies.

The study paves the way for further research about the Syrian conflict, especially since the war continued to be active at the time that this thesis was finalized. Despite the internality of the conflict, it has become increasingly internationalized, which raises challenges for COW

and UCDP/PRIO in identifying it adequately according to their current typologies. In addition to these main findings, the case study has also revealed some vulnerabilities regarding the databases' coding rules for internationalized civil wars.

Key Words

Syria, Civil war onset, internationalized civil war, conflict typology, Correlates of War, UCDP/PRIO conflict dataset, non-state armed group, level of violence

Table of Contents

ABBREVIATIONS.....	I
LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES.....	II
LIST OF MAPS.....	II
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. METHODOLOGY.....	5
2.1. Merging perspectives.....	5
2.2. Single case study: case design.....	7
2.2.1. Research objective.....	7
2.2.2. Research strategy.....	8
2.2.3. Case selection.....	9
2.2.4. Data formulation.....	9
2.2.5. Including/excluding data.....	10
2.3. Processing information.....	10
2.4. Conclusion.....	13
3. PHASE I: THE ONSET OF THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR.....	14
3.1. Understanding civil war.....	15
3.1.1. Correlates of War Project.....	15
3.1.2. UCDP/PRIO armed conflict database.....	17
3.1.3. Critical review.....	19
3.2. The Syrian war: an introduction.....	21
3.2.1. Low level violence.....	21
3.2.2. The first signs of organized armed opposition.....	23
3.2.3. The first emerging rebel groups.....	24
3.3. Empirical analysis.....	27
3.3.1. Locating the war.....	27
3.3.2. Active participation of the government.....	28
3.3.3. Rebel groups' level of organization.....	29
3.3.4. Sustained violence.....	30
3.3.5. Active resistance.....	32
3.3.6. Terms of participation.....	33

3.3.7.	The onset of the civil war.....	34
3.4.	Conclusion	35
4.	PHASE II: INTERNATIONALIZATION OF THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR.....	37
4.1.	The theoretical framework.....	38
4.2.	Mapping the actors.....	40
4.2.1.	The Syrian Governmental Forces.....	40
4.2.2.	The Free Syrian Army.....	46
4.2.3.	Jabhet al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham (JN).....	52
4.2.4.	Local salafis	56
4.3.	Conclusion	62
5.	PHASE III: WAS IT A CIVIL WAR?.....	64
5.1.	Identifying the status of the participants	64
5.1.1.	Correlates of War	64
5.1.2.	UCDP/PRIO Database	65
5.2.	The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham.....	66
5.3.	The Status of the participants.....	68
5.3.1.	COW and the Syrian War	69
5.3.2.	UCDP/PRIO and the Syrian War.....	72
5.4.	Revisiting the hypothesis	75
5.4.1.	First phase	75
5.4.2.	Second phase.....	76
5.4.3.	Third phase.....	77
5.5.	Conclusion	79
6.	CONCLUDING REMARKS	80
	APPENDIX 1: COW and UCDP/PRIO Conflict Typologies	83
	APPENDIX 2: Newspaper Articles and Videos.....	84
	Newspaper Articles.....	84
	Videos	97
	ENDNOTES	99
	BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	123

ABBREVIATIONS

BRD	Battle Related Deaths
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
COW	Correlates of War
FSA	Free Syrian Army
GF	Governmental Forces
IED	Improvised Explosive Devices
IHH	Humanitarian Relief Foundation
IRGC-QF	The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps – Quds Forces
IRGC-GF	The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps – Ground Forces
ISI	Islamic State of Iraq
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham
JN	Jabhet al-Nusra
KIA	Killed in Action
LAFB	Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abas
LH	Lebanese Hezbollah
NSA	Non-State Armed group
PRIO	Peace Research Institute Oslo
SANA	Syrian Arab National Agency
SIF	Syria Islamic Front
SLF	Syrian Liberation Front
SMC	Supreme Military Council
SNHR	Syrian Network for Human Rights
UCDP	Uppsala Conflict Data Program
VDC	Violation Documentation Center

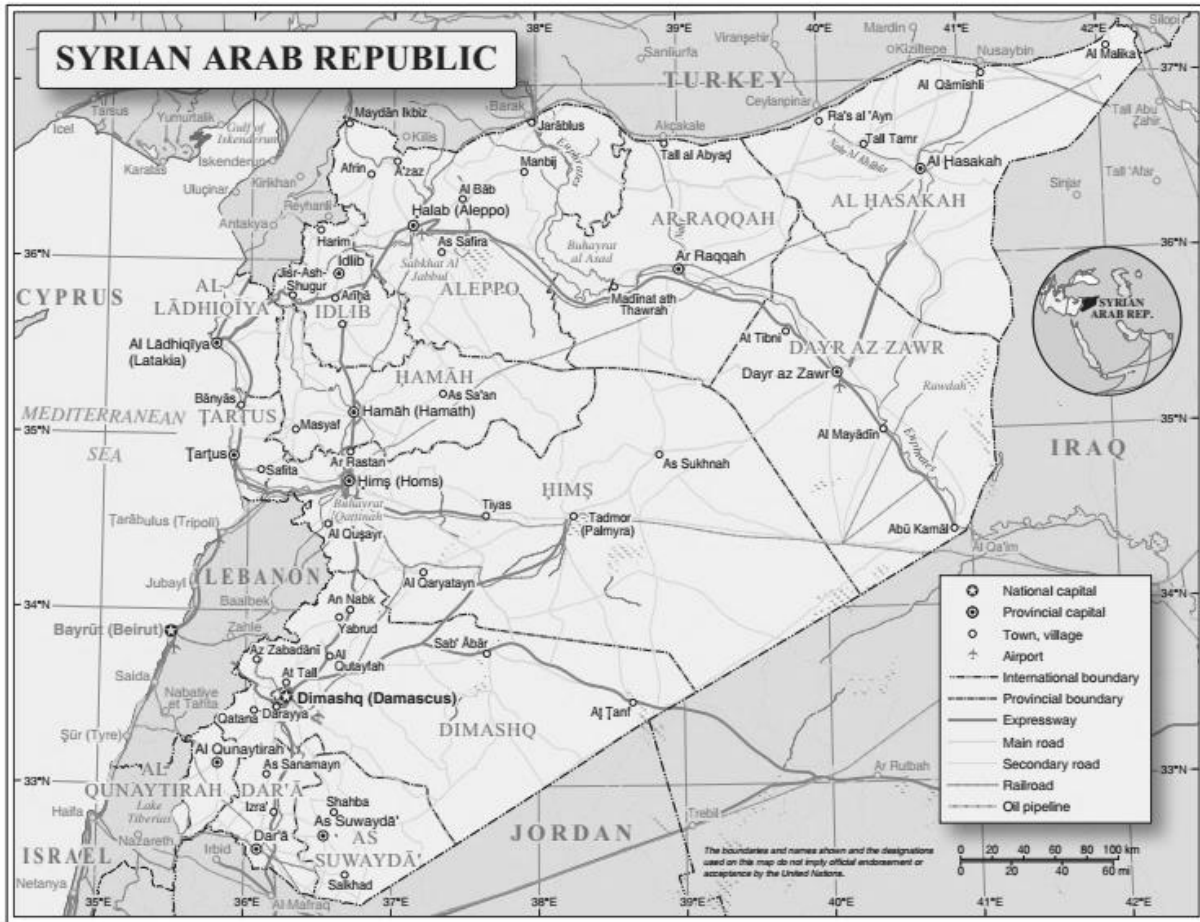
LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

Figure 1 Causes of monthly death rate in Syria: from March 18, 2011 to August 29, 2013.....	31
Figure 2 Syrian Governmental forces attrition data	31
Figure 3 Cumulative total deaths in Syria from March 2011 to October 2012	32
Figure 4 War participants decided from COW coding system.....	72
Figure 5 War participants decided from UCDP/PRIO coding system	75
Table 1 Battle Related Deaths (civilians excluded) from 27 September to 31 December 2011.....	34
Table 2 Battle Related Deaths (civilians excluded) from 1 January to 31 March 2012	34
Table 3 COW Project's Expanded Typology of War	83
Table 4 UCDP/PRIO Conflict Typology	83

LIST OF MAPS

Map 1 Syrian Arab Republic	III
Map 2 "The Campaign for North Syria"	41
Map 3 "Map of the Dispute in Syria"	42
Map 4 Areas Controlled by the Syrian Armed Opposition (up until May 2012)	49

Map 1 Syrian Arab Republic



Map No. 4204 Rev. 3 UNITED NATIONS
April 2012

Department of Field Support
Cartographic Section

1. INTRODUCTION

Civil war is a commonly used term to describe intra-state conflicts. Neither intra-state always refer to a civil, nor does conflict always refer to war. Hence, not every intra-state conflict is a civil war. To define an intra-state conflict as a civil war, it needs to have certain characteristics. Conflict researchers have long been studying and systematically identifying the characteristics of civil war in order to distinguish it from other types of wars. This research is based on two of the most dominant research projects, which have built a conflict typology to distinguish different kinds of conflicts.

In 1963, J. David Singer launched the Correlates of War (COW) Project to describe and understand war¹. The first COW handbook, *The Wages of War, 1816-1965: A Statistical Handbook*, was published in 1972. After ten years, the project issued the second handbook, *Resort to Arms: International and Civil Wars, 1816-1980*, where a list of civil wars was also included. Singer and his collaborator, historian Melvin Small, identified war based on two core principles: first, they distinguished war from other types of violence, by looking at the war casualties per year¹, and second they decided the war type according to the status of the participants. Based on these two principles, COW developed a coding system to create a list of wars stating their types, start date, end date and a short description. In spite of the changes that the project introduced to the coding system throughout the past decades, the two principles remained unchanged.

COW is not the only project that systematically studies war and accumulates data. In 2002, a similar dataset, the first version of “UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset”, was released. This project is a joint effort between Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) and Peace Research institute, Oslo (PRIO)². UCDP/PRIO dataset requires the conflict to have “an issue, an incompatibility”; the incompatibility can be either for control over government or territory³. For this database also, the status of the participants who fight over an incompatibility determines the type of the conflict and the war casualties define the level of violence or the intensity of the conflict.

Despite all the criticism that these sources receive, it is crucial to note that they made an important contribution by creating coding systems to distinguish different wars. Both

¹ The level of violence is measure by the war casualties because Singer and Small consider loss of human life a primary and dominant characteristic of war (Small and Singer (1982) *Resort to Arms: International and civil war 1816-1980*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage p. 205-206).

databases admit that war, as a phenomenon, is very complex; therefore, creating a system that is capable of explaining every war is an arduous task. By considering these factors, this thesis' primary aim is not to criticize the coding system of these databases, which are in constant development. The core objective is to question the principle upon which these two sources build their databases. This principle serves as the hypothesis of the thesis: do the level of violence and the status of the participants define the type of conflict.

To meet the objective of the research, this thesis adopts single case study methodological approach. The case study is class of events chosen from the Syrian armed conflict that started in late 2011 between the government and the armed opposition. In this manner, the thesis provides empirical evidence only about the class of events that enables to achieve the research objective and it ignores many important developments related to Syria but not to the objective of the case study.

The Syrian conflict is adopted as a “most likely” case which COW and UCDP/PRIO are “likely” to explain according to their typology of conflict. This particular approach of single case study is “especially well suited to falsification of propositions.”⁴ Accordingly, if the databases successfully explain the type of the conflict and if the identified conflict fits their conflict typology, then the case study enhances the validity of the theory, if the databases fail to explain the conflict, then the case study may weaken their validity. (See chapter 2).

The third, fourth and fifth chapters summarize the necessary empirical evidence about the Syrian conflict. Each chapter represents a phase in the conflict. The decision to divide the conflict into three phases is not accidental; from one phase to another, there is conflict transformation from one type to another. One of the arguments of this thesis is that the Syrian war did not remain as it was at its onset; over time, the key actors of the conflict multiplied and therefore changed the characteristics of the war.

The third chapter makes an important distinction between organized and unorganized violence; organized and disorganized rebel groups; effective resistance and one-sided violence. These and other distinctions are essential to distinguish conflict and war from other types of violence. The chapter starts with this theme because the beginning of the uprising in Syria is not the same as the beginning of the conflict. The first wide scale nonviolent protests against the Syrian government took place in March 2011 in Deraa, south Syria whereas the first organized armed activities against the government took place later in the year in central Syria.

The empirical data and the guidelines of the databases help to mark the onset of the armed conflict between the opposition umbrella organization called the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the government. It is not possible to mark the onset without identifying the participants of the conflict and measuring the level of violence by counting the war related casualties. Defining the type of the conflict at its onset and marking the start date are the objectives of the third chapter.

The fourth chapter looks at the international dimension of the Syrian conflict. After summer 2012, three important changes occurred on the Syrian conflict map. First, the armed groups in the opposition side multiplied. Besides FSA, there were other umbrella organizations or armed groups, which did not identify themselves with FSA. Second, while in the first phase the conflict was very much domestic, after summer 2012 it became significantly and increasingly internationalized. The local armed groups received funding and military support from a number of international and regional actors. Third, the internationalization was not solely limited to funding and military support; it also included the active and official participation of foreign combatants including troops of identifiable regional non-state armed groups. Arguably, these new characteristics changed the face of the war.

Throughout the third phase of the conflict, which started in summer 2013, the international dimension remained crucial for the survival of the both parties. However, the increasing role of the foreign component in the opposition side once again changed some of the characteristics of the war. In fact, in the hodgepodge of the Syrian armed groups, brigades, battalions, units, as the rebels name it, it is arduous to decide which component is more dominant in the armed opposition, the local or the foreign. Nevertheless, the increase of the foreign direct role in the Syrian intra-state conflict, challenges the internality or the ‘Syrianess’ of the conflict.

The third phase of the conflict can be challenging for both COW and UCDP/PRIOD databases. The multiplication of the participants in the conflict makes defining it rather difficult because both databases give a great importance to the status of the participants. When there is more than one distinct group fighting the same government, the status of the armed opposition becomes unclear especially when there is no clear dominant group.

At the end of the fifth chapter, the thesis correlates the empirical data with the databases to carry out the test. Each phase of the conflict is studied separately because each has a different

map of participants. Because this is a “most likely test case”, the two databases must adequately define the type of the war in each phase.

COW and UCDP/PRIO update their databases and introduce new coding systems periodically (UCDP/PRIO database updates every year). To avoid any future confusion it is worth noting that this thesis uses the latest updated versions available from COW and UCDP/PRIO projects. In 2010, COW issued its third handbook, *Resort to War: 1816-2007*, written by Meredith Sarkees and Frank Wayman⁵. The primary importance of this publication is not the listed wars but the updated coding rules, which differ from the previous issues. At the time of writing this thesis, UCDP/PRIO issued its latest “Armed Conflict Codebook 1946-2012” (v.4 2013)⁶. Whereas the latest presentation of data updates was presented by Lotta Themnér and Peter Wallensteen in July 2013 in a journal article entitled “Armed Conflict, 1946-2012”⁷.

2. METHODOLOGY

SAGE Research Methods Encyclopedia of Evaluation explains epistemology as one of the major philosophical domains concerned with the nature, sources and limits of knowledge. It answers the question: what constructs knowledge? In social sciences, this term refers on what scientific procedures the researcher will depend on to produce reliable scientific knowledge.⁸

There are three main epistemologies: objectivism, constructivism and subjectivism. The first, states that there is an objective ‘reality’, which needs to be discovered; the second believes that the reality is constructed; whereas the third claims that the subjects impose the meanings on the objects. The subjects still construct meanings but “do so from within collective unconsciousness, from dreams, from religious beliefs, etc.”⁹ Each of these epistemologies is associated, albeit not limited, to particular theoretical perspectives. Objectivism is closely linked to the positivist thinking, constructivism to the interpretivism whereas subjectivism can be exemplified by the postmodernist theories¹⁰.

This research does not depend only on one epistemology or one theoretical paradigm. The philosophical platform of this paper is constructed by merging elements from different epistemologies and hence theoretical paradigms. Solely depending on one perspective does not serve the purpose of the research. However, the subjectivist argument does not play a major role as the constructivist or the objectivist arguments do, since the theoretical paradigms of the research mainly derive from the latter two epistemologies. What follows is a short discussion about the research related arguments of the theoretical paradigms. Thereafter, the paper explains the chosen method for this research – single case study. Lastly, it elucidates the systematic use of primary sources, which is vital to the understanding of this thesis.

2.1. Merging perspectives

The positivist epistemological paradigm had been dominant from 1930s until 1960s¹¹. For positivists, like natural sciences, social sciences also operated on collecting ‘facts’ from ‘reality’, which is what can be seen, smelt, touched, etc. These ‘facts’ serve to produce generalization and end up with a scientific law¹². By contrast, interpretivism claims that the natural and social realities are distinct; if the former is possible to be generalized, the latter deals with unique aspects.¹³ In this manner, reality is constricted and it is subject to multiple interpretations. What follows is a discussion about some of the positivist understandings that are left out in contrast to the understandings that are adopted in this thesis. To complete the puzzle, the research depends on some of the constructivist argumentation as well.

- Is the researcher independent?

The observer cannot be fully independent different variables such as emotional, personal, environmental, mental, educational and cultural influence the observation process¹⁴. Even the implementation of statistical and mathematical tools leaves potential possibility of human bias. Hence, this research does not claim to be purely objective. Yet, the conduct of the research is not from a subjective perspective as symbolic interactionism or phenomenology methods (e.g.) would suggest¹⁵.

- Are the 'facts' facts?

The term 'fact' is rather problematic and deceptive. Positivists claim that the researcher should concentrate on the 'facts' in order to be able to generalize to a scientific law. On the contrary, constructivists would argue that the facts can be perceived differently from a researcher to another and therefore they suggest focusing on the 'meanings'¹⁶. This work does not necessarily negate the existence of 'facts' but also leaves the possibility of falsifying it. It also does not merely concentrate on the 'meaning'. Alternatively, it offers interplay of 'facts' and 'meanings' to generate case specific analysis; it utilizes 'facts' to produce 'meaning' rather than a scientific law.

- Feasibility

Realists argue in favor of adding to the knowledge that already exists. For this purpose, the researcher should systematically study and analyze the existing objects in the world (e.g. culture). The realist perspective argues that the phenomena out there in 'reality' are measurable¹⁷. This view largely suits the overall research plan since the research seeks to study and analyze an object, certain characteristics of an intra-state war, in order to add to the existing knowledge. Further, it insists that these objects can be measured, but how to measure it is debatable.

- Methods

Locating causal relation between the variables of a hypothesis and operationalizing the concepts are necessary for theory-guided research. This approach is associated with the positivist view. This paradigm studies large amount of case studies to generate scientific generalized law. In contrast, naturalistic inquiry, for instance, analyzes individual cases but it falls short of claiming causality because the inabilities of research design pre-specification¹⁸.

The research strategy of this paper lies between these two understandings. The research paper locates hypothesis (illustrated below) though it mainly deals with one case study.

Regarding methodology, the research method used here also has mixed nature. Because this research adopts notions from more than one theoretical paradigm, it also uses different research methodologies to conduct it. For instance, the deductive approach is associated with the positivist approach. It conducts a theory-guided research, operationalizes the concepts and then generalizes the outcome. While this research adopts the deductive approach, it does not aim at any generalizations. As naturalistic inquiry would suggest, the “phenomena can only be understood within their environment or setting; they cannot be isolated or held constant while others are manipulated”¹⁹. Even though the research does not decline the possibility of common segments amongst different cases, there are incidental and extraneous variables, which may differ from one locus to another.

2.2. Single case study: case design

2.2.1. Research objective

Specifying the research objective is a crucial initial step towards building a successful research design. George and Bennett argue that the “research objective must be adapted to the needs of the research program”²⁰. To fulfill this criterion, the authors identify six different theory-building research objectives²¹ and insist that the researcher must clearly identify which of the six types will be adopted²². The objective of this research is to carry out “most likely” theory testing.

This approach, as George and Bennett explain, aims to test a theory that is “most likely” to explain the case study. If the theory fails to explain the class of events chosen by the observer, it might raise serious questions regarding the theory. The theory testing process does not end at this stage; the authors argue that the observer should also consider an alternative theory. Meaning, the case should not be merely considered to be “most likely” for the given theory but also for an alternative one as well.²³

This research project tests COW (primary) and UCDP/PRIO (alternative) datasets. However, these two sources are not theories; they are inspired by and have some theoretical basis, but they are not theories. In the beginning of 1960s when David Singer initiated the COW Project, he did not hope to come up with an “integrated explanatory theory of war”²⁴. After five decades, Singer still thinks that the COW is “not yet an adequate theory.”²⁵ Peter Wallerstein claims that at least UCDP was introduced for theoretical and practical purposes.

Theories of conflict resolution compose an important part of the UCDP epistemology. Yet, UCDP or UCDP/PRIO is not a theory.

COW was founded because of the need to “understand the nature of war and determine whether it has been increasing or decreasing”. To achieve this objective COW suggested “to study it scientifically, to organize it, and to measure it carefully and consistently over a long span of time.”²⁶ The project is designed to question key concepts of realism, balance of power, military capabilities, interdependence and realist understanding of international System²⁷.

UCDP/PRIO also studies war scientifically; it categorizes conflicts and defines their type. The intensity of conflict, its pattern and its place of happening – whether it occurs between states or within state – are key research subjects for the dataset. However, it is not satisfied merely with collecting data and identifying the type of a conflict, but it also aims to help the resolution of the conflict. This is a key objective for the project²⁸. In this manner, COW and UCDP/PRIO have similar research methods but they differ in their final objective.

After clarifying the research objective, George and Bennett recommend the researcher to specify the case study²⁹. The case study is not a country or an event; it is a class of events of a historical happening³⁰. This research will concentrate on two classes of events in the Syrian conflict: the level of violence and the status of the participants.

After drawing the theoretical framework and clearly specifying the class of events, the research can be carried out and the test can produce different outcomes. If the case fits the two, primary and alternative, databases, then it is a good indication for both. If the case fits only the alternative one, then it weakens the first and all the credit goes to the alternative database. Finally, if both the primary and the alternative sources fail to explain the case, then the both will fail the “easiest test case” which will weaken the typologies.³¹

2.2.2. Research strategy

George and Bennett argue that in order to reach the research objective, a research strategy is needed. Research strategy setting covers early formulation of the research hypotheses and their elements. The authors argue that this approach, single case study, serves the purpose of theory testing very well though the generalization or theory building phase might be difficult.³² In this manner, the research tests the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis

The status of the participants and the level of violence describe the type of the conflict

The typologies tested in this research, describe the type of the conflict based on two factors: who is fighting whom or the status of the conflict participants and the level of violence. Therefore, because this is a “most likely” case study, the databases should be able to identify the type of the conflict in Syria. The identified conflict should be one of the conflict types categorized in each database’s typologies. (See Appendix 1, Table 3 and 4) If they fail, then according to George and Bennett, the theoretical sources should be reviewed³³.

2.2.3. Case selection

The case selection is another important step in realizing the research and it follows certain rules. The selection process should take place during the research design and not in the aftermath³⁴. Further, the selection should not be merely out of interest; it should be in accordance with the research objective and the strategy³⁵.

Following this logic, the research selects the case study primarily deriving from the research objective and sets the hypothesis (discussed above). To test the hypothesis it is necessary to adopt a case that passed through different phases of conflict and changed the type of the conflict from one phase to another. This research assumes that Syria is a potential example of this kind of conflict.

There are few examples where over the course of the conflict typological transformations occurred: the conflict in Vietnam and in Afghanistan (See section 5.1.1). The decision to adopt Syria, however, is also associated with the fact that this conflict is contemporary and does not necessarily fit the criteria set by the theories. Accordingly, this research can add to already existing literature and contribute to theory development.

2.2.4. Data formulation

Undoubtedly, the data collection process is vital to the outcome of the analysis. There is hodgepodge of information regarding Syria, which makes processing data very difficult. For instance, in some case studies there is the problem of data unreliability or unavailability. Even though the Syrian conflict seems to be well covered, it is arduous to find reliable data related to the developments of the conflict.

Additionally, there is the danger of missing relevant important data because of the massive amount of information released about Syria every day. Another difficulty is how to deal fairly with different kinds of data sources. George and Bennett argue that regardless all these issues,

the data collection must be systematic³⁶. Due to the importance of this matter, a separate section explains the data processing details.

2.2.5. Including/excluding data

Any kind of case study deals with a story. The narrative is constructed based on the case related data that the researcher gathers. Case studies should synthesize the data to make it more coherent and manageable and therefore ready to study it in line with the theory³⁷. The single case study research should be a work that balances between the historical narration and theory related analysis. For social scientists, it is necessary to select the theory relevant data and analyze accordingly³⁸.

The researcher should draw the limits of the research question clearly before moving to the process of inclusion/exclusion of data³⁹. In this manner, only the information important or relevant to the research objective will be included. As George and Bennett argue, the crucial factor is not to touch the validity of the information and not to include the data that are keen to researcher's pre analysis judgment⁴⁰.

This process is vital for this research because the Syrian conflict has been covered from various angles and various observers. There is information released from ordinary citizens, journalists, academicians and politicians; there are analyses from economic, political, environmental and conflict perspectives. This research disregards any study, report or incident that is not related to the research question.

For instance, the period covered by the research witnessed many political developments related to Syria. Regardless of the importance of these developments, they remain of much less importance to the research. On the contrary, there have been some battles, which did not attract great media attention, though they occupy important space in the research.

2.3. Processing information

While there is no particular note about academic sources, it is necessary to clarify how the research deals with the following news sources: videos, news released by news agencies and news organizations. The use of news sources is unavoidable⁴¹, especially that the Syrian conflict is very recent.

First, news reports are often used merely to indicate a possible incident during the conflict. Most of the news reports that are used in this research contain 'facts' and analysis of the 'facts'. This research does not necessarily adopt the analyses given with the 'fact'.

‘Facts’, in this context, is the information that the news agency gives about a certain incident such as bombing, armed clashes, military offensive, defection cases and detention cases. The analyses, on the other hand, connect these incidents to the entire context of the conflict and suggest explanation or predictions. The formulation of the text clarifies whether the cited source is needed to refer to a ‘fact’ or it is cited because of the analysis that the author presents.

The second highlight is related to photographic/video materials. Do photography and video material describe reality? Gray argues that photographs, videos and films have been useful source of information for qualitative research⁴². However, this method remains another tool of representation, which is subjected to the risk of the filmmaker’s or photographer’s bias. Hence, “what the camera focuses on, and what it leaves out, is selective”⁴³. In sum, non-fabricated photographs or videos take part of the ‘reality’ into frames. The objects within this frame can be real though might not represent the ‘reality’.

The first type is amateur videos taken by ordinary citizens or army defectors. Despite the variety of such videos, especially during the ‘Arab Spring’, the only videos that are used here are statements made by Syrians who claim to be defectors from the Syrian Army. Therefore, these videos do not show any fighting or clashing scenes, they merely show militants who give statements such as their defection, creation of a battalion or condemnation of an incident.

The second type is documentaries made in extreme circumstance and sometimes with no license from the local authorities. In contrast to the former type, these documentaries are made by news agencies such as Aljazeera or Al-Arabiya or Al-Mayadeen. In this case also the treatment remains the same. The third kind of video materials are video news reports issued by some regional or international news agencies. These video materials are included with the news to make it more interesting for the reader, but what is important here is not what the video shows but what the commentator says, which is very different from the written version.

This indicates that without these video sources, especially the first type, the research will be merely based on secondary sources. Nay, many secondary sources such as Institute for the Study of War, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Washington Institute for Near East Studies, who have expertise about Syria, include similar video materials in their analyzes.

The second important highlight is related to the reliability issue. To overcome this issue the research adopts the space triangulation method, which means providing different sources about one ‘fact’⁴⁴. As Öberg and Sollenberg suggest, in case of availability, this research also presents evidence about one ‘fact’ by citing different kind of news sources, online newspapers, reports and academic articles⁴⁵.

Regarding the news agencies and the news organizations there are two criteria: distinction between international and regional or local sources, and ‘objectivity’ . While most of the international sources are in English, the regional or local sources are in Arabic. The Author’s knowledge of Arabic eases the access to the local and regional sources. Another basis for this distinction is the ‘value’ of the source. This does not mean that international sources are better than the regional ones, or the opposite, but it means that they cannot be treated similarly.

International news agencies are the ones that maintain wide audience from different continents. Most of these newspapers have certain level of credibility and are used in the academic sphere as sources. Nevertheless, for these newspapers, Syrian conflict is not necessarily a daily topic nor it is the major focus area. This list includes, the Independent, the Guardian, the New York Times, BBC, CNN, France 24, Times, the Wall Street Journal, NBC News, Russia Today, Haaretz, Reuters, Your Middle East, Middle East Online and Aljazeera.

On the other hand, the regional news agencies – including the local ones – have relatively limited audience because most of them adopt Arabic as the only language of writing. These sources do not enjoy similar credibility comparing to the former ones. Nevertheless, Syria is often the main topic and the newspapers are full of daily reports about Syria. This list includes, Alarabiya, Almayadeen, Alquds Alarabi, The Middle East, Alkhabar, Alryad and AlAhram Online, SANA, SNS, Al-thawra, Al-Ba’ath Newspaper and Almokhtasar.

In fact, the research does not consider any of the mentioned news sources as ‘objective’. A separate research is needed to investigate the underlying factors and funding sources of each newspaper. However, among the mentioned sources, there are obvious bias ones, which are even accused in fabricating news, videos and photographs. These sources can be branched onto two streams, one that supports the governmental narrative, and the other which backs anti governmental narrative. For instance, Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) is state owned news agency and hence it follows the state narrative. On the other hand, Aljazeera Arabic,

which is funded by the Qatari royal family, has clear anti-Syrian governmental approach in presenting the news.

This opinion about the ‘objectivity’ might face disagreement from other researchers. These doubts could be legitimate because measuring the validity of a news agency is an arduous task. But the research avoids using these sources as the only citation for an event. Instead, often the event is cited by different sources which have distinct orientation. In this manner, the research does not judge the source of being biased, but it cites such sources carefully because of the validity doubts that these sources might have. This strategy was necessary to maintain the validity of the research.

2.4. Conclusion

Research methods in the social sciences offer many varieties and options for the researchers to conduct their research. There are many theoretical paradigms, which explain the ‘reality’ differently; the choice of a paradigm significantly influences the research process. However, many researchers such as George and Bennett (2005) and Gray (2004) throughout their writings argue that mixing different methods can be beneficial for the research. As this paper illustrated, there are segments from different theoretical paradigms and theories. The adoption of this strategy is necessary to achieve the research objective and add to the existing knowledge in this field.

Nonetheless, this paper does not claim that this is the only way of conducting such a research. The main intention of this chapter was to explain how this particular thesis will be conducted. Therefore, the paper avoided any evaluation of any theory or theoretical perception. Concepts such as ‘reality’ or ‘fact’ are difficult to define and therefore there was no evaluation to any specific definition. However, there was clear statement about the use of these kinds of terms in the paper especially as some of them are very vital for the thesis.

3. PHASE I: THE ONSET OF THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

Civil war is a term used commonly to describe the conflict in Syria. It is possible to read this term in newspapers, journals and hear it from officials and diplomats. However, has Syria been in a state of civil war during recent years? If so, when did this war start?

Civil war is a very complex phenomenon. It is difficult to operationalize and measure – the Syrian war is a case in point. At the beginning, the developments started as protests against the Syrian authorities. Besides nonviolent protests, over time an armed opposition emerged, which believed in violence as a means to topple the government. However, the armed opposition cannot be treated as one coherent unit or the violence as a steady cycle. The former passed through different phases of organization whereas the latter varied in intensity.

The Syrian conflict went through different phases. During March 2011, the country witnessed the first considerable demonstrations. Until the end of summer, it was hardly possible to refer to any organized and capable armed opposition though the level of violence had already increased. The last three months of the year were critical to the identification of the conflict in Syria. From one phase to another, both the armed opposition and the level of violence differed. The FSA, which appeared as a scattered and unorganized set of groups, carried out minor operations against the security forces. Over time, these groups became more organized and effective. In tandem, the level of violence increased reaching war level. Over the course of the conflict, the participants' level of organization and effectiveness as well as conflict's level of violence play a deterministic both in defining the type of the conflict and its onset.

Theoretically speaking, various scholars and research institutes have tried to set an operational definition of civil war; nevertheless, available definitions remain insufficient. Therefore, it can be argued that there is no complete definition, which covers all aspects and characteristics of this type of war. Still, these definitions contribute to our understanding of civil war, its changing characteristics and helps to distinguish it from other types.

First, the chapter provides an overview of the COW and UCDP/PRIO databases' understanding of civil war. Even though these two sources are very dominant in the field, they engage poorly with certain characteristics of civil war such as level of organization and active resistance. Therefore, the chapter also presents a short critical review and provides other sources that discuss these matters.

Second, after the providing the conceptual framework, an introductory section follows to highlight the necessary class of events for carrying out the empirical analyses. Before moving

to the conclusion, the chapter answers the two key questions based on the empirical analyses: the onset of the conflict and its type.

3.1. Understanding civil war

3.1.1. Correlates of War Project

COW's operational definition of civil war derives from its understanding of war in general. This definition consists of two types of coding rules, which are vital to the understanding of this thesis. First, the general coding rules that imply of all types wars, including civil war; and second, civil war specific coding criteria. The first generalized coding rule is an answer to the following question: when does a war start? Any type of war starts when 1) the adversary party(s) declares war after which sustained combat follows; or 2) if there was already sustained military activities before the declaration, then the first day of combat is the onset date; or 3) if the sustained combat fulfills the threshold of battle related deaths (BRD), then the first day of combat should be recorded as the onset of the war.⁴⁶

Second, in their analyses, Singer and Small dedicated particular attention to the state as a central unit of analysis in the international system. They generalized that any state is a war participant if it suffered a minimum of 100 fatalities or at least 1,000 armed personnel engaged in active combat⁴⁷.

The third coding rule derives from the overarching definition of war: "sustained combat, involving organized armed forces, resulting in a minimum of 1,000 battle-related fatalities"⁴⁸. The definition starts with "sustained combat", which is a condition for all kinds of violent acts to be considered a war. The term 'sustained' follows two objectives. First, it distinguishes war from one-sided violence and second, it excludes hide-and-seek operations, which could result in a big number of fatalities without long period of military engagement⁴⁹.

The fourth generalized code is the level of violence measured by the BRD. In this regard, the COW project introduced consistency in 1997: all types of wars, to be distinguished from other types of violence, should meet the criterion of 1,000 BRD per year. This threshold includes the armed personnel who die during the battles and ones who die afterwards because of combat related diseases or wounds⁵⁰.

Finally, besides the level of violence, the status of the participants is key factor to define the type of the conflict. In other words, who is fighting whom? If a government of a state is fighting an armed opposition within its borders, and they fulfill the other necessary requirements, then the conflict is a civil war. If a state engages in war with other state, then

the war is inter-state war. If other actors are involved in the conflict, then COW looks which parties are making up the bulk of the fighting. For Singer and Small, the group that makes up the bulk of the fighters is the party that causes the greatest number of BRD⁵¹.

In addition to the general rules that apply on civil war and to other types of war alike, Singer and Small developed coding rules, which are particular to the civil war criterion. According to the COW coding rules, a war is classified as civil war if:

(a) *Locating the War*

- 1) The military combat takes place within the internationally recognized borders of an international system member⁵².
 - a. If the armed opposition within the state seeks to seize or change the central government then the civil war can be classified as “civil war for central control”.
 - b. If the armed opposition within the state seeks to gain higher level of autonomy, or complete independence, then the civil war can be classified as “civil war over local issues”.⁵³

(b) *Terms of Participation*

- 2) A government is an active participant if it actively involves in violent confrontations with the armed opposition by contributing at least 1,000 combatants or suffering 100 BRD within 12 months⁵⁴.

Armed opposition group(s), which is considered a non-state actor, is a war participant if it has 100 active combatants or suffers 25 BRD in 12 months⁵⁵.

(c) *Active Participation of the Government*

- 3) The state government must actively participate in the military activities against the armed opposition⁵⁶. The participation is not merely through employing the state army or the police forces; it also includes paramilitaries and civilian combatants who enter the war in the side of the government⁵⁷.

(d) *Sustained Violence*

- 4) The combat between the parties should be sustained⁵⁸.

(e) *Effective Resistance*

5) Concerning the Intra-state war category, which includes civil war, Singer and small find “effective resistance” crucial for sustainable combat. It is also necessary to distinguish the event from one-sided violence; the weaker party should be able to inflict upon the stronger party(s) at least 5% of the number of the battle related fatalities.⁵⁹

(f) *Level of Organization*

6) Both sides of the conflict should be well organized and possess the capacity to inflict death upon each other⁶⁰.

(g) *Civil War Onset*

7) The onset of a civil war requires at least 1,000 BRD per 12 months⁶¹.

3.1.2. UCDP/PRIO armed conflict database

The second database discussed here is the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Database (v. 4 2013). In general, the database requires the conflict to have an incompatibility over either government or territory, or both. At least one of the conflicting parties must be a state government⁶². Additionally, it distinguishes conflict in terms of intensity. The conflicts that record at least 25 BRD per calendar year without reaching 1,000 over the course of the conflict are considered minor armed conflicts whereas the conflicts that result at least 1,000 BRD in a calendar year are considered wars⁶³.

A significant difference between UCDP/PRIO and COW databases is that the former considers the civilians casualties who die as a result of military activities between the conflicting sides. In this manner, for UCDP/PRIO, BRD does not merely refer to the combatants but also civilians who die in combat⁶⁴. It is noteworthy that UCDP/PRIO codebook (v. 4 2013) does not mention anything about this issue.

Based on the latest version of UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset codebook, it is possible to develop an operational definition of Intra-state conflict (Intra-state war and civil war are identical in this research). The typology distinguishes between primary and secondary warring parties; the former create the incompatibility whereas the latter provide support to the primary parties (secondary warring parties are discussed in the next chapter).⁶⁵

The database organizes the conflicting parties in dyads. Regarding intra-state conflicts, a conflict dyad is two primary warring parties one of which is the government. An intra-state

conflict can include more than one dyad for example if three different opposition groups are fighting against the government over the same incompatibility.⁶⁶

Thus, an armed conflict is considered as an intra-state armed conflict when:

(a) *Locating the War*

- 1) A war takes place within the territory of internationally recognized sovereign state whose population rate exceeds 250,000⁶⁷.
 - a. Incompatibility concerning government: The war is over the central government.
 - b. Incompatibility concerning territory: the war is over the status of a territory within the state: e.g. secession or regional autonomy.⁶⁸

(b) *Terms of Participation*

- 2) Only primary warring parties form an incompatibility. To become a primary warring party and therefore a conflict participant, it is necessary to suffer at least 25 BRD in a calendar year⁶⁹.

(c) *Active Participation of the Government*

- 3) The government must be actively involved in the conflict. A state is:
 - a. Internationally recognized sovereign government controlling specific territory;
or
 - b. Internationally unrecognized government controlling a specific territory whose sovereignty is not disputed by another internationally recognized sovereign government previously controlling the same territory⁷⁰.

(d) *Sustained Violence*

- 4) None of the major sources that illustrate the coding rules of UCDP/PRIO discusses this matter⁷¹.

(e) *Active Resistance*

- 5) Gleditsch et al. briefly mentions the importance of the organized resistance by the rebel group⁷².

(f) *Level of Organization*

- 6) The sovereign government should fight an opposition organization(s) that is defined as non-state group performing under an announced name and using force to reach their objectives; the group(s) should be formally organized.⁷³

(g) *Civil War Onset*

- 7) A conflict starts when the parties fulfill the requirements and suffer 25 BRD. The intra-state conflict is considered a war only if the death rate exceeds 1,000 in one calendar year.⁷⁴
- 8) The start date of the war should be the same date as the first BRD. However, the date should be set only after the conflict realizes the required threshold criterion.⁷⁵

3.1.3. Critical review

Even though UCDP/PRIO and COW are well known sources and are extensively used in the academic field, many questions remain unanswered. There is an on-going debate amongst these, and other, scholars (such as Hegre, Sambanis, Strand, Fearon and Laitin)⁷⁶ about the BRD issue. Each source criticizes the other without offering different measures. These two sources are good examples; they put different thresholds and numbers but the principle remains the same. In fact, it is possible to argue for or against each of these criteria because each one follows certain dialectics.

Furthermore, this intense and often redundant discussion of BRD diverts attention from rather important factors of civil war that are mentioned in these definitions. For instance, the databases highlight the importance of the level of organization especially amongst the rebel groups but none provides sufficient explanation to help measuring this factor.

Another element, which remains marginalized in these two sources, is the understanding of effective resistance. The preceding definitions of effective resistance are rather general with no details and clarifications. For instance, the COW condition for the weaker party to account for at least 5% of the overall BRD, is based merely on the statistical data that the researcher can provide. In conflicts, such as the Syrian conflict, it is nearly impossible to provide accurate data. Accordingly, this criterion should not be the only criterion that measures the effective resistance.

In this specific research, effective resistance and level of organization are more central to the overall analysis. Because of the intensity of the Syrian conflict, the conflicting parties fulfill most of the numerical thresholds, such as the BRD. What remains matter of dispute is the ability of the rebel groups of projecting active resistance and acting as organized group.

These two factors are crucial to determine when the civil war started. Since above discussed sources do not provide any detailed explanation, it is necessary to refer to other scholars who provide an explanation.

Level of Organization

Heger et al. relate the level of organization to the hierarchical structure of the organization⁷⁷. They argue that the level of organization of a non-state actor can positively affect its performance. Therefore, they set three criteria to measure the level of the organization: agenda setting, accountability and specialization⁷⁸.

The ability to set a clear agenda by the leadership of the group is an important sign of organization. A lucid agenda enables the group to have a clear objective, set the goals of the organization and perform accordingly. Arguably, being able to create such an agenda indicates to tighter relationship between the leader and the follower.⁷⁹ Accountability within the group, on the other hand, increases the possibility of punishment and thereby increasing the level of responsibility. In a group where there is no hierarchy, the individual actions are likely to increase. Accordingly, if the group manifests accountability it can be a sign of a good level of organization.⁸⁰ Finally, when the group has a hierarchical order then there is a good chance of increasing specialization within the group. Similar to accountability, by allowing specialization within the group is an indication of the level of organization in the group.⁸¹

Effective Resistance

The active resistance of the rebel groups is very important. Cunningham et al. address this concept in the light of the following two criteria: the group's offensive capacity and its ability to resist and defend its strongholds against the stronger party⁸². Fighting capacity is defined as "the ability of the rebels to effectively engage the army militarily and win major battles, posing a credible challenge to the state."⁸³

Because of the relative impairment of the weaker party, it is difficult for small rebel groups to hold ground and create their safe zones. Moreover, sometimes it is more effective to adopt hit-and-run tactic to avoid a massive offensive by the stronger party. Therefore, territorial control is regarded as to be independent from the rebels' strength⁸⁴. Nevertheless, holding

groundⁱⁱ and being able to resist against government offensives is considered a sign of strength for the rebels⁸⁵.

Another indication of strength for the rebel group is the ability to mobilize troops because it can increase fighting capacity. The group, which is able to gather and mobilize greater amount of fighters, can be a serious threat to a government⁸⁶. Moreover, Asal and Rethemeyer argue that larger armies can contribute positively to the fighting capacity at least in three ways. The enlargement is likely to encircle skilled individuals, raise and maintain funding, and allow access to restricted information, material and places.⁸⁷

The last two criteria are the relative ability of the rebels to procure arms⁸⁸ and the age of the organization⁸⁹. It is crucial for the rebel group to have the necessary weaponry to be able to resist the offensives of the well-armed state forces. They should also be able to initiate offensives and inflict damage upon the adversary. The inability to secure weapons might be decisive for the future of the rebel group. Regarding the age, Asal and Rethemeyer argue that the organizational age indicates the ability of the group to successfully provide the necessary means to survive and to its experience⁹⁰.

3.2. The Syrian war: an introduction

The protests against the Syrian government started in March 2011. At the time, some civilians and defectors from the state institutions engaged in some violent activities. These activities, however, did not start as an organized rebellion. They were rather scattered attempts against the governmental forces (GF) (the components of the GF is explained in section 3.3.2), which occurred in different Syrian cities and towns.

According to the theoretical discussion, it is crucial to distinguish between organized and effective rebel groups, and scattered and unorganized armed activities. For this reason, I will briefly present how the unorganized armed activities turned into a rather organized and effective armed rebellion. The turning point is essential to the determination of the onset of the conflict.

3.2.1. Low level violence

One of the first major operations of the GF was in Deraa in late April 2011 when they regained the Omari Mosque, which was occupied by very poorly armed locals⁹¹. During this

ⁱⁱ It is important to note that the territorial can also have its different understandings. The level of territorial control can differ from one place to another and from one rebel group to another (David E. Cunningham, Kristine Skrede Gleditsch and Iden Salehyan "It Takes two: A Dyadic Analysis of Civil War Duration and Outcome" *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53 (2009): 581.)

operation, the local residents, especially young men, manifested weak, ineffective and unorganized armed resistance against the offensive⁹². The head of this armed movement, 23 years old Ibrahim Mousalimeh, testified that the group was composed of approximately 200 members who were armed with hunting guns and some AK47s⁹³.

Coastal areas also attracted attention during the first weeks of protest. According to news sources, the GF cracked down protests in Latakia⁹⁴ and Baniyas⁹⁵ in late March 2011. The period between mid-April and mid-May 2011 saw military operations in various places such as in Baniyas where the GF faced an unorganized military resistance. Mohammed Barout claims that in an interview of prominent local leaders, they explained that an unidentified militia took over the city and triggered sectarian violence⁹⁶. Moreover, on 13 April 2011, there was an ambush of a military convoy on a highway near Baniyas⁹⁷, possibly carried out by this unknown armed group. As a result, the GF carried an operation on 12-13 April 2011 where casualties fell from the ranks of security, military, protestors and unknown armed persons.⁹⁸

Homs, a major city in central Syria, also became an important locus for protests from the beginning of the uprising. In mid-April, the situation in Homs escalated and the range of protests increased⁹⁹. On 6 May 2011, the security and military forces conducted a major operation in the city and left hundreds of casualties. Unlike Deraa, in Homs the military operations did not calm the situation¹⁰⁰.

The early involvement of the local tribes in Homs escalated the situation and increased the possibility of armed confrontations. For instance, the al-Fawaira tribe, located in Homs region, turned against the government as early as 18 March when the security forces returned the body of Sheikh Badr Abu Mous, one of the tribal leaders, to his family¹⁰¹. Tribes in Syria possess large amount of arms especially in the border areas¹⁰². Even though this does not necessarily mean that the protestors in Homs were armed since March, it increases the possibility of violence because of the feud traditions (Blood for Blood).

These are not the only examples of unorganized armed activities; similar events took place in other places as well. For instance in Hama, the locals confronted the military intervention on Ramadan eve by limited armed resistance¹⁰³. However, until this stage, it is not possible to identify any effective and organized armed group. The level of the violence also remained far below the war requirements. In short, until this stage, Syria was not in a state of civil war.

3.2.2. The first signs of organized armed opposition

On 6 June 2011, 120 security forces died after an ambush set by an armed group in Jisr al-Shughour, a town in northwest Syria¹⁰⁴. Thereafter, the governmental forces sieged the city and conducted a two-day long operation¹⁰⁵. Eventually, on 12 June the city was under the control of the central government¹⁰⁶. Losing 120 security forces in one operation is undoubtedly a major defeat for the GF. Moreover, the Institute for the Study of war considers the incident as the first major challenge to the Syrian security and armed forces¹⁰⁷. In contrast, in this research that incident does not mark the onset of the Syrian civil war. The primary reason is due to the absence of any organized rebel group(s) which overtly stated its intention of, or took measures to, toppling the regime by using force.

In mid-June, defected colonel lieutenant Hussein Harmoush initiated one of the first attempts to organize an armed opposition¹⁰⁸. Hussein Harmoush, and soldiers under his command, announced their defection in Bdama¹⁰⁹ by releasing an amateur video, four days after the Jisr al-Shughour incidents¹¹⁰. In the recorded footage, Harmoush, referring themselves as “free soldiers”, stated that the main objective of their defection is to protect the nonviolent protestors. On 28 June 2011, Harmoush declared the establishment of the Free Officers’ Movement by issuing their first statement¹¹¹. In a number of statements, the Free Officers’ Movement claimed to be active against the GF in places such as Khan al-Sheikhun and Latakia. At least until August 2011, this armed group insisted on the continuation of the nonviolent protests and their main role as protectors of the protestors¹¹².

In late July 2011, another group of defectors attempted to organize an armed opposition. The new group announced the establishment of what is known as the FSA¹¹³. In an amateur video, Colonel Riad al-As’ad and six other officers announced that the “security forces that siege the cities ... are legitimate targets for us”. In the video Colonel Hijazi Hijazi appears as the vice commander of the FSA (sitting on the right)¹¹⁴.

In late September 2011, both armed groups, the Free Officer’s Movement and the FSA, merged under the latter’s name¹¹⁵. Even though these two initiatives to start and organized armed rebellion had significant impact on the later dynamics of the Syrian conflict, mere declaration or video statements are not sufficient to prove their actual existence, organization and capacity.

3.2.3. The first emerging rebel groups

By mid-October 2011, the FSA, via defected Colonel Ahmed Hijazi Hijazi¹¹⁶, claimed to have a hierarchical structure¹¹⁷. Colonel Hejazi named 22 battalionsⁱⁱⁱ that are fighting under the FSA flag. According to the Institute for the Study of War¹¹⁸, only four of these battalions manifested active resistance against the security and the military forces. Amongst these groups were Khalid bin al-Waleed in Homs and Omari in Deraa. Arguably, these two played crucial role in turning the conflict in Syria into a war. However, these groups were not the only ones, but the limited space here does not allow to cover all the active fighting groups.

Homs Province

One of the first major confrontations between the GF and the armed opposition took place in Rastan, Homs province, in late September 2011. Indeed, this was not the first attempt of the government to reestablish authority in the city. In late May 2011, the GF conducted a weeklong operation in the city after having surrounded it¹¹⁹. Nevertheless, during that operation there were no reports of active and effective resistance. Rastan was a major hot spot contested between the government and the rebels. After four months, the GF had to conduct another major operation in order to retake the city. This time, unlike the May operation the rebels in the city manifested active resistance and relative effectiveness¹²⁰.

The importance of this operation lies in the effective resistance shown by the defectors, who had accumulated in the town beforehand¹²¹. Unlike the preceding skirmishes between the government and the armed opposition, this time the opposition managed to resist and inflict harm upon the adversary. The main opposition group that was fighting was the Khalid bin al-Waleed battalion of the FSA. Colonel Hizaji Hijazi mentioned this group's name as an FSA subordinate in the Homs region.

Early references to this battalion date back to July 2011. Defected lieutenants, such as Amjad Mohammed al-Hamid and Ahmed al-Shamsi, talked on behalf of the battalion and declared the central Syria as their area of operation¹²². This group's hierarchy became more apparent after Major Abdul Rahman Sheikh Ali joined the group and became its commander¹²³. On 7 September 2011, Major Ali appears in a video accompanied with relatively large number of deserters including defectors originally from the city¹²⁴. Behind the soldiers, on the wall, it

ⁱⁱⁱ The terms 'Battalion' and 'Brigade' do not refer to any traditional military understanding. Rebel groups often appear and announce the composition of a 'battalion'. In other words, the name is self-proclaimed and should not necessarily reflect any traditional understanding of the concepts.

clearly indicates the name of the battalion, Khalid bin al-Waleed, and their affiliation to the Free Officer's Movement^{iv}.

Thus, the Khalid bin al-Waleed battalion was established in Homs, plausibly in Rastan, between July and September 2011. The four days effective resistance of this brigade against the GF's offensive in late September 2011 was a turning point for in the Syrian conflict. For This operation, the regular forces used 250 tanks and armored vehicles to recapture the city¹²⁵. After four days of clashes, the rebels withdrew from the city; at least two videos appeared stating the reasons of the withdrawal also indicating the heavy loses that they caused to the governmental forces¹²⁶. Relatively independent sources also referred to the performance of the armed group as effective¹²⁷.

Independent from the FSA proclaimed hierarchy, Khalid bin al-Waleed battalion itself has a hierarchical structure, which is an important indication of organization. It had several subordinate units, such as Farouq, Fadi al-Qasim and Hamza battalions, mainly operated in the central parts of Syria¹²⁸. Not all of these groups operated in Rastan, but all remained in the Homs region.

Abdul Razzaq Tlass, one of the members of Khalid bin al-Waleed, commanded the Farouq battalion. This group entered Bab Amr, a neighborhood in Homs, in early November 2011¹²⁹. From then on Bab Amr was out of government's reach and remained under constant shelling until February 2012. In early 2012, the GF escalated the operations in number of neighborhoods in Homs including Bab Amr¹³⁰. This increase in the military pressure on the armed opposition in Bab Amr continued until the end of February¹³¹. Eventually, the GF managed to control Bab Amr between 29 February and 1 March 2012¹³². After less than a day, the Farouq battalion 'tactically' withdrew from the area¹³³.

On the one hand, the numerical capacity of this group was estimated to be more than 1000 by February 2012¹³⁴ but the battalion did not resist more than a day. On the other hand, this incident had at least two important outcomes. First, a subordinate battalion deriving from Khalid bin al-Waleed battalion was able to hold ground for more than three months. Second, the long stand of Farouq battalion pushed the regular army to increase the level of violence by using more heavy artillery¹³⁵.

^{iv} At this stage, neither Hussein Harmoush was arrested nor was the Free Officer's Movement merged with the FSA.

Deraa Province

In the southern part of Syria, where the first considerable protests started, the insurgency already announced its existence in the first days of Ramadan – August 2011. On 3 August Qais Qata'nah, who defected in mid-July¹³⁶, stated the establishment of the “southern sector” of the Free Officers' Movement¹³⁷. According to his interview with an amateur journalist¹³⁸, Capitan Qata'nah fled to Jordan sometimes after his defection where he built contact with the Free Officer's Movements. He returned to the rough area of Lajaa¹³⁹, located in the north of Hauran Plateau in the Deraa Province, and established the Omari battalion with 17 other defectors.

Omari battalion was not the only armed group that operated in Deraa during October 2011. At least two other battalions had effective armed operation: the Shuhada' al-Hurriya and the Martyr Ahmed Khalaf. The level of communication between these groups is not very clear. Capitan Qata'nah mentioned his awareness of the other groups, though he did not refer to any cooperation¹⁴⁰. In contrast, Ahmad Khalaf and Shuhada' al-Hurriya brigades claimed that they carried a joint operation on the al-Mah al-Sourah road in mid-November 2011¹⁴¹.

It is very difficult to measure the level of effectiveness of these battalions especially because the armed groups did not seek to control land; instead, they followed hit-and-run tactic, which proved to be effective¹⁴². However, based on media reports¹⁴³, before October 2011, the named groups either did not exist or were not effectively active. However, in November 2011, there was noticeable increase in the level of violence and reported skirmishes between defectors and the regular forces¹⁴⁴. During an interview with the BBC on 16 November 2011, Riad al-As'ad (head of the FSA) mentions that the two strongholds of FSA are Homs and Deraa¹⁴⁵. Sporadic skirmishes and confrontations between the armed groups and the GF continued during December 2011 as well,¹⁴⁶ which is an indication of sustainable violence.

According to media reports, the main operation areas of the Omari battalion were limited to the southern borders of the Lajaa area. In mid-November, the battalion made appearances at least in Khrbet Ghazaleh¹⁴⁷, al-Namir¹⁴⁸ and al-Sanamain¹⁴⁹. In this manner, it appears that the Omari battalion conducted its hit-and-run operations in specific areas. Arguably, this group drew its operation borders and recognized its strengths and weaknesses. Amongst the armed groups in the Hauran region, Omari battalion had been one of the most effective¹⁵⁰.

In February 2012, four officers announced the creation of Deraa's Revolutionary Military Council; the speaker, Qais Qata'nah, mentioned seven battalions under the Military

Council¹⁵¹. The announcement of this hierarchical structure and claims of command and control indicates that the cooperation between some of the groups in the region had increased over time. However, it is also necessary to understand these factors within the context of the entire Syrian armed struggles because the Omari battalion remained far weaker than the Syrian Army and even less effective than Khalid bin al- Waleed battalion, which was the most effective armed group in 2011¹⁵².

The Syrian armed opposition was not limited to these battalions. However, because these battalions were active, organized and effective to a certain extent, this certifies that there had been an organized armed opposition before 2012. According to the information mentioned above about the establishment of these groupings and their operations, the armed opposition was created between July and late September 2011. At the beginning of this period, the armed groups in Syria were unorganized and ineffective, and did not pose major threat to the Syrian Army and the security forces. Over time, the number of these groups, the cooperation amongst them and their effectiveness gradually increased.

The major turning point in the conflict, which is crucial for this research, is the four-day operation in Rastan. This operation was not only a direct confrontation between rebels and the GF but also the beginning of a long lasting escalation. On the one hand the armed groups became increasingly effective¹⁵³, on the other hand, the government deployed more forces on the ground¹⁵⁴. Consequently, there was an escalation in the level of violence after late September 2011.

3.3. Empirical analysis

3.3.1. Locating the war

Even though the war in Syria has regional and international dimensions, it started on the Syrian sovereign territory. Syria gained its independence in 1946. In April of that year, based on the UNSC demands, the last French soldiers left modern Syria¹⁵⁵. Since then the Syrian Arab Republic, one of the founding states of United Nations¹⁵⁶ has been fully independent. The population of Syria exceeds 20 million inhabitants¹⁵⁷ and hence fulfills the criteria of minimum population rate imposed by the COW and UCDP/PRIOD databases.

At the onset of the Syrian war, it was possible to identify at least one incompatibility combining two sides, the government and the FSA, fighting over the central control. The first statement¹⁵⁸ of Riad al-As'ad, head of the FSA, was a clear indication that the armed group has the intention to topple the Syrian ruling government. In the statement, Colonel As'ad

clearly states that “toppling the [Syrian] regime” is one of their objectives. He also mentioned that the members of the “Army and Security forces who siege the cities” are legitimate targets for them. Further, he stated that the main goal is to establish a democratic Syria. These statements indicate that the group intended to topple the central government by using force (albeit this does not mean the rejection or the termination of the nonviolent movements). In short, this incompatibility between the government and the rebel groups is an incompatibility concerning the central government.

3.3.2. Active participation of the government

Since the beginning of the uprising in March 2011, the state, through its various apparatuses, became increasingly involved with the developments. However, since violence is central for the understanding of war, here the focus will be on two state institutions and one apparatus under the control of the state authorities. In this research, these three bodies are labeled as the governmental forces (GF) and they are: the Intelligence Services (or the security forces), the Syrian Army and the state sponsored militias.

During the first year, the role of the security forces had been more vital in comparison to the army. As explained above, after the confrontation in Bab Amr, which lasted until the end of February 2012, the authorities employed more heavy artillery in their operations and thus the role of the army became more apparent. However, the Syrian armed forces and the intelligence apparatus are closely connected and it is difficult to separate their activities on the practical level. This explains the joint complex operations that are usually conducted by cooperation between these three institutions.

The intelligence services, or *al-Mukhabarat*, actively participated in the operations military operations with all its four directorates: The Department of Military Intelligence, the General Intelligence Directorate, the Political Security Directorate and the Air Force Intelligence Directorate¹⁵⁹. Regarding the military, according to the Institute for the Study of War¹⁶⁰, the government mainly depended on the Republican Guard, the 4th Division and the Interdependent Special Forces Regiments. Beside these elite forces, the participation of 14th and 15th divisions was also noticeable. In general, more than 60% of the military forces did not participate in the conflict; the government depends merely on 65,000 to 75,000 soldiers whereas the Syrian Army in 2011 was estimated to have 220,000¹⁶¹ active soldiers without the reserve¹⁶².

The third element of the GF is the paramilitary groups that are supported by the ruling authorities. It is necessary to distinguish between at least two main paramilitary groups: the *Shabiha* (Ghosts) and the *Lijan al-Sha'biya* (popular committees)¹⁶³. The popular committees consist of civilians who armed themselves with the help of the government to protect their areas from the armed opposition¹⁶⁴. Even though the government is potential a source of weaponry, the driving force behind this motivation is the lack of security that the state used to provide. Therefore, these committees are not limited to any sect, religion, or ethnicity.

On the other hand, the 'Ghosts' are predominantly from the Alawite religious denomination and are mostly led by relatives of the President such as Fawaz and Duhair al-Assads¹⁶⁵. However, it is also important to highlight that even though the state significantly controls the activities of these militias, sometimes they act out of personal motivations¹⁶⁶. Hafez, Basel and Bashar al-Assads have detained and imprisoned members of their families and *Shabihas* who contested the state authorities.

3.3.3. Rebel groups' level of organization

By October 2011, there was at least one rebel organization, the FSA, which claimed to have a leadership and overt political objective – toppling the government. The hierarchy of the FSA can be studied from at least two perspectives. The first perspective is more general and investigates the structure of FSA as an umbrella organization. It was founded in July 2011 under Riad al-As'ad's leadership, but its possible structure became clear only in mid-October after the vice-commander of FSA, Hijazi Hijazi, declared it.

Hijazi counted 22 battalions, naming their areas of operation and most of the commanders. At that stage, the organization claimed to have at least chief and vice chief of staff and group commanders. Nevertheless, it is doubtful whether a young organization such as FSA already had a clear command and control structure. Moreover, FSA did not exist as one coherent group as its leaders claimed; rather, there have been groups who acted almost entirely separately though associated themselves with FSA. To avoid this complication, it is useful to study the hierarchy of the so-called FSA from rather narrow perspective, in other words, from its members' perspective.

The battalions that were discussed above manifested active presence and associated themselves with the FSA. Khalid bin al-Waleed, under the command of Major Abdul Rahman Sheikh Ali had subordinate groups led by some of its members. To name a few, the Farouq unit under Abdul Razzaq Tlass, the Fadi al-Qasim unit led by Captain Yousef

Hamood and the Hamza unit led by Ibrahim Mohammed¹⁶⁷. It was not possible to find any detailed information whether these groups had a clear agenda setting process by their leaders. Nevertheless, some information indicates that the leaders played important roles. For instance, the structure of Khalid bin al-Waleed became clear only after Major Ali took over the command even though the battalion existed before his defection statement.

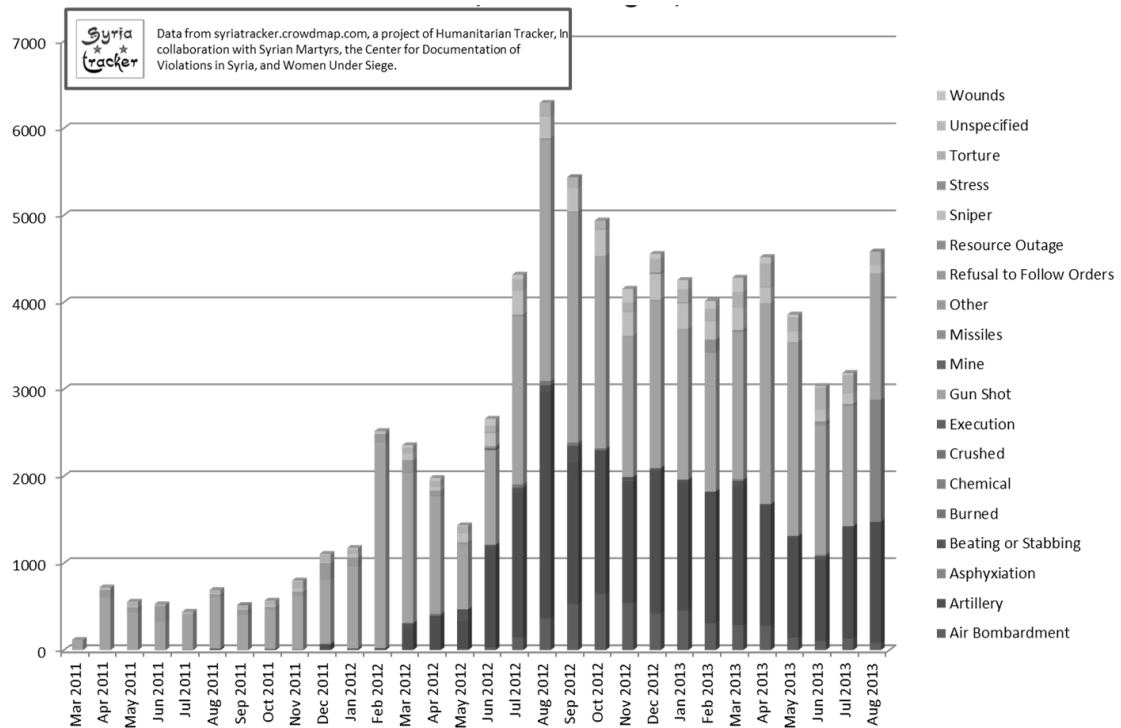
As discussed above, accountability is important for the organization of the group. However, the author did not encounter any evidence that would suggest that there was accountability within the structure of FSA or its groups. The only reference to this issue is the announcements of different FSA leaders promising to judge any violation of the law regardless of the identity of the causer.

Regarding specialization within each group, it is also arduous to verify any information. However, since defected soldiers joined these rebel groups, it is possible that each soldier contributed to the group with his skills. One example in Deraa shows that there might be relatively high level of specialization within some groups. Shuhada' al-Huriya battalion in Deraa claimed to have a subordinate unit called "Special Tasks Company"¹⁶⁸ who carried out special operations.

3.3.4. Sustained violence

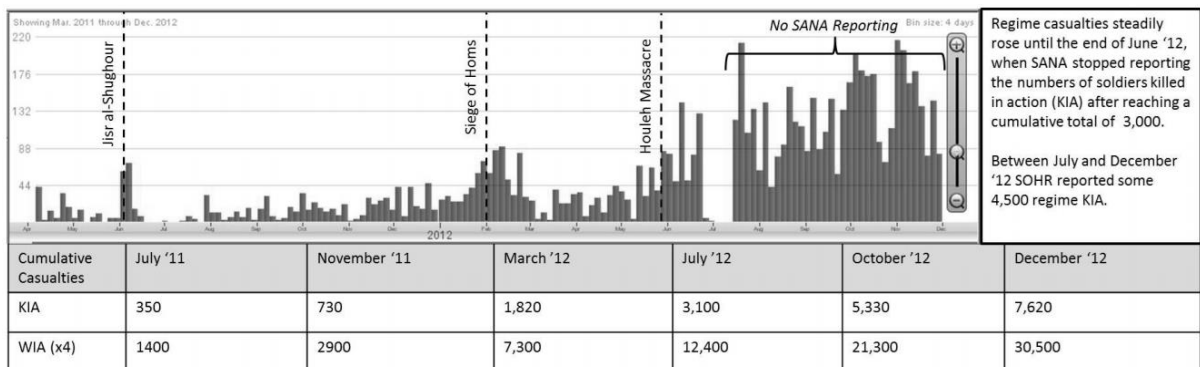
COW and UCDP measure the level of violence by the battle related casualties. Evidently the level of violence differed from one month to another (discussed below). After September-October 2011, there was sustained violence with different levels. Figure 1 shows that after September 2011 there has been constant fall in casualties by gunshot. The second figure specifies casualties of the GF. The first row of the figure shows the number of soldiers who were killed in action (KIA) whereas the second also counts the wounded based on the logic of four wounded for each killed. The last figure (3) highlights the suffering from both the GF and the armed opposition. To conclude, these three statistics suggest that the violence has been sustainable.

Figure 1 Causes of monthly Death rate in Syria: from March 18, 2011 to August 29, 2013.



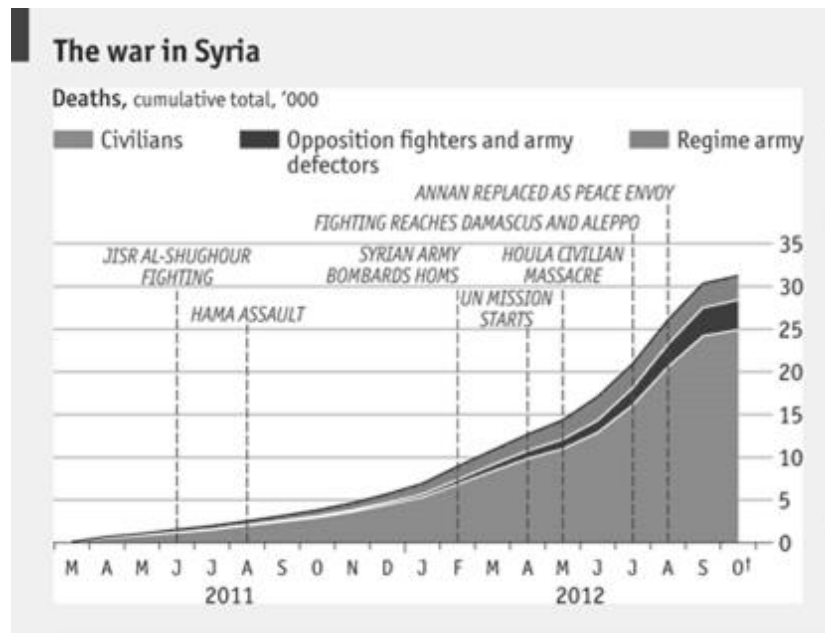
Source: Figure by Syria Tracker, September 5, 2013, accessed November 2013.

Figure 2 Syrian Governmental Forces Attrition Data



Source: data adopted from Holliday, "The Assad Regime," 28.

Figure 3 Cumulative total Deaths in Syria from March 2011 to October 2012



Source: “Syria” Statistics on Violent Conflict “blog,” accessed November 27, 2013.

3.3.5. Active resistance

Following previously mentioned measures of active resistance, it is necessary to highlight some examples. The first measure, holding ground, can be seen in different places and phases of the Syrian war during 2011. The battle of Rastan in late September 2011 is an example in case. The rebels who accumulated in the city obliged the government to abandon it. When the GF initiated the recapture of the city on 27 of September, the opposition was able to hold on for four days.

In the southern part of the country, and especially in Deraa, Omari battalion adopted hit-and-run strategy not being able to control a city entirely or partially. Nevertheless, their safe zone, the rough Lajaa area, remained out of the control of the government.

The third example is the armed opposition’s control over Bab Amr neighborhood for over four months – from November 2011 to February 2012. The Farouq battalion, which was a subordinate unit of Khalid bin al-Waleed, was able to hold ground in the third largest city of Syria, Homs. These examples indicate that these groups had the ability to hold on to their safe zones and sometimes even resist to offensives.

Some of these groups were even able to initiate successful offensives against government held locations. On 29 January 2012, a video appeared where Lieutenant Mohamed Ayyoub

claimed that Hamza battalion of Khalid bin al-Waleed partly controlled the city of Rastan¹⁶⁹. The following days, media reports wrote about the rebel's offensive in the city.¹⁷⁰ This incident indicates that some battalions had already started carrying out organized and successful offensives against the GF. Additionally, some rebel groups, who chose hit-and-run tactic and avoided direct engagement with the GF. However, these groups, such as Omari battalion, still carried out operations, targeted and engaged with the GF. For instance, this particular battalion had been active in at least three locations Khrbet Ghazaleh, al-Namir and al-Sanamain, without maintaining full control.

The number of the FSA fighters has been a hot topic for many news agencies to discuss. However, it is hardly possible to know the exact figure of the rebel fighters. It is possible to find many references to defecting soldiers during the last three months of November. The FSA, however, is not merely composed of defectors and not all the defectors join it. Hence, the exact number of fighters at this stage is unpredictable.

Nonetheless, in an interview with the BBC, FSA leader Riad al-A'sad, claims that by October 2011 the organization had 15,000 fighters. This number seems exaggerated, though the FSA fighters grew in numbers overtime. According to the Institute for the Study of War,¹⁷¹ by March 2012 the number of rebels was more than 5,000, distributed in different rebel groups. An expert in the Washington Institute estimated the number of rebel fighters to be already between 4,000 and 7,000 by January 2012¹⁷².

3.3.6. Terms of participation

Even though there is no accurate statistical data about the Syrian conflict, the grand scale of violence ease the calculations. The state was involved with much more soldiers, paramilitary-armed personnel and security agents than the COW requires it. The military personnel involved in the conflict from the government's side is estimated to be between 65,000 to 75,000 active combatants¹⁷³. In addition, the government participates in the war with its intelligence agencies and paramilitary-armed groups. On the other side, according to the above-mentioned statistics, FSA had more than 100 fighters and suffered at least 25 BRD.

UCDP/PRIO, does not consider any specific number of participants, but it requires the primary warring parties who compose the incompatibility – in this case, the Syrian government and the FSA – to suffer more than 25 BRD in a calendar year. According to the presented data, the parties fulfill the requirements of both UCDP/PRIO and COW.

3.3.7. The onset of the civil war

The onset of a civil war is closely interrelated with the BRD criterion. Regarding Syria, there is an obvious lack of reliable data. Hence, the sources used to identify the BRD determine the outcome. This research uses three sources to count the deaths: Violations Documentation Center in Syria (VDC), the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) and Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA).

Table 1 Battle Related Deaths (civilians excluded) from 27 September to 31 December 2011

	Governmental Forces	Opposition fighters	
VDC	778 BRD ¹⁷⁴	227 BRD ¹⁷⁵	
SNHR	–	450 BRD ¹⁷⁶	
SANA	463 BRD ¹⁷⁷	–	
Average	620.5	338.5	959 BRD

Sources: VDC; SNHR; Holliday, “The Assad Regime,” 28.

Table 2 Battle Related Deaths (civilians excluded) from 1 January to 31 March 2012

	Governmental Forces	Opposition fighters	
VDC	1403 BRD ¹⁷⁸	641 BRD ¹⁷⁹	
SNHR	–	786 BRD ¹⁸⁰	
SANA	748 BRD ¹⁸¹	–	
Average	1075.5	713.5	1789 BRD

Sources: VDC; SNHR; Holliday, “The Assad Regime,” 28.

As explained above, the battle over Rastan in late September 2011 is the beginning of the armed conflict. According to COW this conflict is war because the level of violence, represented by BRD (only combatants) within 12 months, exceeded the 1,000 threshold. As the table 2 illustrates, only between September 2011 and March 2012 (7 months) the BRD exceeded the 1,000. Consequently, the start date for COW would be 27, the start month is September and the start year is 2011.

With UCDP/PRIO the calculation differs for two reasons: first, the database also includes the civilians who die in combat; second, for this database, year is a calendar year and not 12 consecutive months. So if the BRD in 2011 did not reach 1,000, then the conflict will be coded as minor and not as war.

UCDP/PRIO updates its database every year. In the 2011 update the Syrian war was included. Lotta Themnér and Peter Wallensteen summarize the updates in “Armed Conflict 1946-2011” (2012) and classify the war in Syria as a struggle for the central control between the Syrian government and the FSA. Most importantly, they consider the conflict in 2011 as minor which means that the BRD (including civilians) did not exceed 1,000.¹⁸² However, it is not clear how the database reached to this conclusion because they do not provide any statistics or explanation¹⁸³.

The aim of this research is not to challenge the statistical information given by UCDP/PRIO. The two dominant sources who provide statistics, (VDC) and (SNHR), do not count the civilians who died in combat separately; they include these cases with the civilian casualties. Therefore, it is difficult to corner the exact, or even the approximate, number of the civilians who died during armed confrontations.

In summary, for UCDP/PRIO, the Syrian conflict starts in 1 October 2011 as a minor intra-state conflict. It turns to war only in 2012, when the BRD exceeded the 1,000. Both databases agree on the approximate start date. While for COW the type of the conflict is civil war already from September 2011, for UCDP/PRIO, the war starts in 2012 after three months of minor intra-state conflict.¹⁸⁴

3.4. Conclusion

To conclude, it is necessary to sum up the core components of this analysis before moving to the next chapter. The purpose of this chapter was to investigate the start date of the Syrian conflict after defining its type.

According to the main two sources, it is possible to identify the nature of the conflict by looking at the status of the participants and the level of violence. The former is measured by observation whereas the latter is regulated by the BRD threshold. After reviewing these and other criteria imposed by the sources, it was necessary to illustrate the gaps. Neither COW nor UCDP/PRIO has detailed criteria to define level of organization and effectiveness. Therefore, it was necessary to refer to other scholars since these two factors are vital to the identification of the conflict and its onset.

The thesis briefly presented the class of events from the case study – the Syrian conflict – which was necessary to carry the empirical analysis. After finishing the research, the two questions of this chapter were answered. The conflict started in September-October 2011. For

COW that was the onset of a civil war whereas for UCDP/PRIO it was the start of a minor intra-state conflict, which became intra-state war (or civil war) in 2012.

From the hypothesis perspective, the situation in Syria was clearly defined by the independent variables. The status of the participant, government verses local rebel group, and the level of violence successfully identified type a conflict, which exists in the conflict categories of COW and UCDP/PRIO. Even though it is possible to find many gaps in the coding rules, the result enhances the validity of the core argument of these two sources. This matter will be discussed in the chapter five.

4. PHASE II: INTERNATIONALIZATION OF THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

The Syrian civil war continued over 2012 and was to become increasingly intricate. The complexity of the conflict was increasing from the political, social, cultural, economic and military perspectives. This chapter, however, will concentrate particularly on two crucial developments. First, the multiplication of the key warring parties who constantly tried to restructure and reorganize their ranks. Second, the internationalization of the war due to direct and indirect, official and unofficial, intervention of foreign actors. These two variables undoubtedly further complicated the Syrian puzzle.

The situation of the Syrian government also changed. It lost more territories and became more concentrated in the major cities and population centers. The elements of the GF remained the same (Armed Forces, Security Forces and Paramilitaries). The conventional forces depended extensively on heavy artillery and the role of air power became vital. A major change was the interference of some foreign non-state actors in the side of the Syrian GF.

Until summer 2012, the FSA was the dominant actor within the Syrian armed opposition (Armed opposition refers to all opposing armed groups in Syria). It started as a small umbrella organization aiming to topple the government by force. During 2012, it went through many phases of restructuration and reorganization. This umbrella organization is considered a secular one because defectors from the army and security services, which used to be secular institution, established it. Throughout the conflict, FSA officials claimed to fight for democracy and a secular state.

At the same time, several other rebel groups emerged without necessarily identifying themselves with the FSA. The rise of these groups interweave with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism within the armed opposition bloc. It is possible to distinguish three main streams: Islamists, who believe in political Islam, in democratic processes and the notion of state. National salafis strictly practice Islam and their final objective is to establish an Islamic theocracy within the current borders of Syria. The global jihadists are fundamental followers of Islam, which they interpret very narrowly. They do not recognize the modern political structure and they seek to reestablish the Islamic Caliphate *Umma*. (See below).

However, it is necessary to note that this is a general description of the streams in Syria and the situation on the ground is much more complex since the borders among these groups are sometimes blurry.

From May to June 2012, there were clear indications of foreign involvement. Some regional and international actors overtly or covertly supported either the Syrian government or the Syrian armed opposition. The involvement of these actors was not limited to political but also included financial and military support. The foreign involvement became increasingly decisive for both sides. Assessing the degree and the type of foreign intervention are important to determine whether a conflict remains a civil war or turns to internationalized civil war. COW and UCDP/PRIO databases set criteria for internationalization of a civil war. The first section of the chapter highlights these criteria, which will serve as a conceptual framework for the empirical analysis.

The databases initially based their classifications on two factors: the level of violence and the type of the participants. While the level of violence remained far higher than the minimum requirement, the actors, especially in the opposition side, significantly changed. Therefore, the second section of the chapter maps the two participants of the civil war: the government and the armed opposition, illustrating the changes that occurred in comparison to the first stage of the conflict (discussed in the previous chapter). After mapping each key actor, a short assessment follows regarding the type and the nature of the foreign assistance that each actor receives. The conclusion critically discusses the internationalization of the Syrian war from the perspective of COW and UCDP/PRIO databases.

4.1. The theoretical framework

4.1.1. *Internationalized Civil War (COW)*

COW distinguishes several types of intra-state wars (see Appendix 1, Table 3). Within the category of civil war, they also distinguish between two types: civil war and internationalized civil war. Even though the latter is not a category of its own in the expanded typology, the authors code some of the civil wars as internationalized when there is foreign involvement.

The foreign element is defined by a state actor intervening on the side of the government or the opposition, by either contributing at least 1,000 fighters or suffering 100 BRD. As long as the foreign actors do not take on the bulk of the fighting from the conflicting parties, the conflict remains an internationalized civil war¹⁸⁵. COW decides the bulk of the fighting by “determining which party was causing the greatest number of battle deaths” during the

conflict¹⁸⁶. Albeit it is difficult to determine who makes up the bulk of the fighting, it remains a crucial measure to identify any war transformation (e.g. from civil war to internationalized civil war; from civil war to inter-state war).

The form of foreign assistance, however, remains a crucial question. Many civil wars have foreign actors involved without any official deployment of troops. In other words, foreign actors might interfere by sending weapons to the conflicting parties or provide financial and diplomatic support, which can be decisive for the warring parties, but do not interfere directly with troops. Singer and Small clarify this issue, “[b]y choosing a physical indicator of military participation, we ignore even the most blatant cases of financial and material intervention.”¹⁸⁷ Another important distinction is made between “official” and “unofficial” intervention of the foreign actor. This dichotomy is central for operational reasons because COW does not consider “unofficial” foreign involvement a form of internationalization¹⁸⁸.

In short, a civil war becomes internationalized when there are active troops of a foreign state participating in the war and they at least count 1,000 or suffer 100 BRD without taking on the bulk of the fighting. This narrow definition of internationalization undoubtedly serves best for operational purposes. Including many factors, and keeping the definition wide, can seriously hinder generalization. Nevertheless, this definition dismisses important forms of foreign support such as significant military, political and financial support; it also does not consider the possibility of foreign non-state actors officially intervening, with active troops, to support a conflicting parties.

4.1.2. *Internationalized Intra-State Conflict (UCDP/PRIO)*

Like COW, the UCDP/PRIO database distinguishes between two intra-state wars (See appendix 1, Table 4). The database has overall four types of conflicts: Extrasystemic armed conflict, inter-state conflict, intra-state conflict and internationalized intra-state conflict. Intra-state conflict refers to a government fighting a rebel group(s) and both are primary actors whereas in internationalized intra-state conflicts in addition to the primary actors the secondary parties must also be actively involved.

The codebook defines the primary parties as “those that form an incompatibility by stating incompatible positions.”¹⁸⁹ The secondary parties cannot form an incompatibility because they “are states that enter a conflict with troops to actively support one of the primary parties.”¹⁹⁰ In both intra-state and internationalized intra-state conflicts, the primary parties

should be active. In the case of the secondary parties, once they intervene in the intra-state conflict the latter shifts from intra-state conflict to internationalized intra-state conflict.

The UCDP/PRIO database criterion for intervention is conditioned by the secondary party's participation in the war with active troops on the ground. However, the number of the soldiers or the casualties is irrelevant; the secondary parties do “not need to meet the 25 BRD criterion to be included in the dataset; an active troop participation is enough.”¹⁹¹ In short, this typology also does not consider any form of foreign support, except the troop deployment, an indication of internationalization.

4.2. Mapping the actors

4.2.1. The Syrian Governmental Forces

Until summer 2012, the GF had clear advantage over the fragmented opposition. Nevertheless, the constant defection cases and increasing foreign support to the armed opposition started equating this imbalance. Arguably, May-June 2012 was a major turning point because of the overt and substantial financial, military and physical (with troops) support to the opposition (discussed below). These developments significantly changed the map of the Syrian conflict at least in four ways: the GF became concentrated in the cities, the rebels opened new fronts, such as the Aleppo front, the role of the pro-governmental militias, local or foreign, increased, and the Syrian armed forces intensified their use of air force.

Because of the lack of forces to secure the entire country, the GF concentrated more on the key cities and population areas. The overwhelming majority of the key cities remained under the governmental control, yet some of them, such as Aleppo, Idlib and Der al-Zor, were under blockade imposed by the opposition. The opposition became concentrated in the rural areas and organized their operations with considerable freedom¹⁹².

In summer 2012, the rebels opened a new front in northern Syria, the Aleppo front. Hitherto, they had uncertain control over some parts of Idlib province and small presence in west Aleppo. In May 2012, with the onset of the “Battle of Aleppo”, for the first time the rebels attacked the heart of the city bringing the fight from rural to urban areas. Ever since, the government lost control over the northern parts of the province and increasingly became isolated in the city.

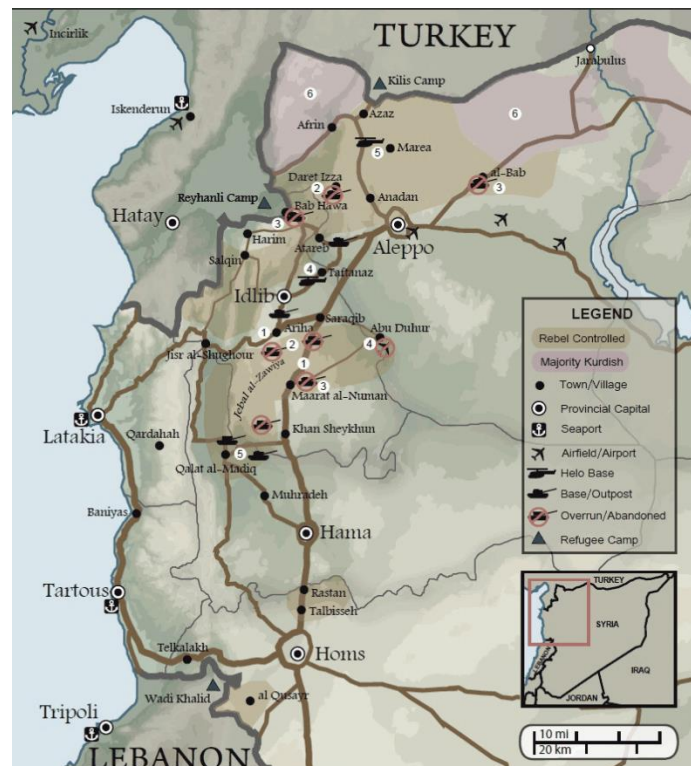
This development was to be of a great importance to the more fundamental opposition, which did not merely secure north Idlib and Aleppo, but also extended to the east, creating a huge area out of government's control (see the map 2 and 3). The increasing role of the air force

spurred the opposition to concentrate on the air bases. Between March and August 2012, the monthly airstrikes grew from 5-6 up to 120¹⁹³.

The three components of the GF remained the same. The Syrian government professionalized the popular committees (discussed in section 3.3.2.) by the end of 2012. With an Iranian assistance and logistic support, the popular committees received military training and the name of the organization changed to *quwat al-difa'a al-watani*, the National Defense Forces¹⁹⁴. The activities of these paramilitary groups was not covert, even Iranian Major General Mohammed Ali Jafari openly stated that Iran is sharing experience with some 50,000 pro-governmental paramilitary combatants¹⁹⁵. Other sources such as International Institute for Strategic Studies' Military Balance 2011 puts the number up to 100 000 fighters¹⁹⁶.

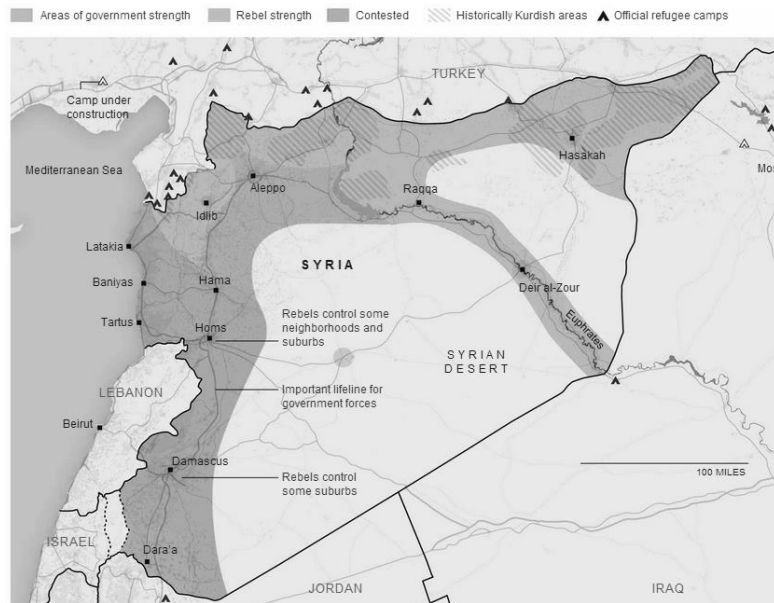
In addition to the local paramilitary forces, the Syrian government also recruited foreign paramilitary forces. The interference of these groups had an important impact on the performance of the Syrian GF. There are at least two foreign paramilitary groups functioning

Map 2 "The Campaign for North Syria"



Source: Map adopted from Holliday, Joseph. "The Campaign for North Syria," September 17, 2012.

Map 3 "Map of the Dispute in Syria"



Source: Stack, Liam and Pecanha, Sergio. "Map of the Dispute in Syria," *New York Times*, March 12.

in Syria, the Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) and Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abas (LAFA) militia, whose members are predominantly Iraqi Shiites (See below). Before going deeper in studying the role of these groups, it is also necessary to examine briefly what nature the Russian and Iranian involvement has in the Syrian conflict.

Russian and Iranian involvement

On the military level, Sergey Lavrov, repeatedly refused any similar scenarios to Libya (consider the military intervention in Libya in 2011) and hence hindered any kind of direct foreign intervention¹⁹⁷. The Russian authorities did not merely state its position in this regard, but also took some symbolic actions to show their intolerance to any direct military intervention. Throughout 2012, Russian warships repeatedly visited the Syria Port of Tartus, this continued also in 2013. During these visits, the warships plausibly transferred heavy weaponry to the Syrian Army, including Mi-25 helicopters that are effective for guerilla warfare.¹⁹⁸ Additionally, the Russian government supplied the Syrian Army with anti-air missile system claiming that it was part of an older deal, yet it was also to enhance Syria's capabilities in deterring any military intervention¹⁹⁹.

Russian warplanes transferred weapon to the Syrian Army. Some of these airplanes were even stopped on the way but the Russian authorities claimed that these deliveries were part of old deals between Damascus and Moscow²⁰⁰. Russia might have also provided some experts and advisors to the Syrian GF, but these claims remain unconfirmed²⁰¹. In this manner, the

Russian assistance on the ground remains limited; there is no evidence that there are Russian troops or even experts directly helping the Syrian forces against the rebels. Nevertheless, the political and military assistance that the Russian state is providing for the Syrian authorities is crucial for the latter party's survival.

The Iranian role in Syria is also crucial. Even though Iran does not have the diplomatic power on the international level as Russia does, it is a regional economic and military hegemon. Syria has a particular importance to the survival of Iran and its regional strategy. Hojjat al-Eslam Mehdi Taeb, a former military officer and close ally of Ayatollah Khamenei summarized the vitality of Syria by saying, "Syria is the 35th province [of Iran] and a strategic province for us. If the enemy attacks us and wants to appropriate either Syria or Khuzestan [in southern Iran], the priority is that we keep Syria."²⁰² Considering this variable, it is apparent that the Iranian government is playing an important role in backing the current Syrian leadership. But to what extent the Iranian military and intelligence services are involved, remains a matter of dispute.

Iran is involved in the Syrian case on many different levels. The focus here will be on Iran's role in providing information, advising and training to some components of the Syrian GF, facilitating and transporting weaponry to Syria; managing the foreign militias that are fighting with the GF. Arguably, several Iranian intelligence organizations, such as the Law Enforcement Forces and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security, share expertise and information with the Syrian Intelligence Services.²⁰³

The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps – Quds Forces (IRGC-QF) are responsible for Iran's external military operations. Hence, the presence of its IRGC-QF commander Major General Qassem Suleimani and the assassination of General Hassan Shateri in Syria²⁰⁴, indicate that this corps is involved in the Syrian conflict. Some media and intelligence studies reports claim that such commanders train and assist some Syrian army units and paramilitaries²⁰⁵. In addition to IRGC-QF, there are the IRGC Ground Forces (IRGC-GF) who are trained for counterinsurgency and therefore are suspected of having a crucial role in advising the Syrian GF²⁰⁶. In August 2012, the armed opposition in Syria captured 48 Iranians. Brigade Commander Mohammad Taghi Saffari was one of them²⁰⁷. It is difficult to believe that Commander Saffari was for a holiday to Syria.

Iran maintained three major supply lines, air, land and sea. The air bridge used to cross the Turkish airspace before the Syrian crisis but the Turkish authorities blocked it accusing Iran

of shipping arms²⁰⁸. Subsequently, the Iranian Air Force flew over Iraq exploiting latter's inability to control its airspace²⁰⁹. There are also ground routes from Iraq to Syria, which were suspected to be used by Syrian and Iranian authorities to transfer arms. By the time, the Syrian government increasingly lost most of the main border gates, though al-Walid/a-Tanaf gate in southeast Syria is still accessible. The Iranian warships constantly sailed to the Syrian coasts plausibly supplying Syrian GF or manifesting military strength to demonstrate their rejection of any kind of foreign intervention.

The last accusation that Iranian forces often receive is related to the management, training and financing of some of the pro-governmental militias in Syria such as the National Defense Forces²¹⁰. The IRGC-QF manages and finances the LAFA operations in Syria²¹¹. Despite all these accusations, Iranians did not have active troops on the Syrian territories. Even US intelligence sources deny the existence of Iranian troops in Syria, yet they insist on high-level coordination between the Syrian GF and the Iranian forces²¹².

Direct foreign involvement

Some of the regional allies of the Syrian government have utilized troops to fight in Syria. One of these allies is the LH, which is a Lebanese political party with a military wing with members mostly from the Shiite religious denomination. The other foreign actor, LAFA, is predominantly Iraqi Shiite militia based in Damascus. According to Phillip Smyth, three Iraqi militias provide the manpower for LAFA, namely, the Asaib Ahl al-Haqq, Kataib Hezbollah (not to be confused with Lebanese Hezbollah) and Kataib Sayyed al-Shuhada²¹³, all based in Iraq.

In fact, LH and LAFA do not deny their presence in Syria. The Secretary General of LH, Sayyed Hassan Nasr Allah, claimed that his forces are in Syria and will stay as long as they are needed²¹⁴. While the LAFA, propagates and encourages Iraqi Shiites to join the battle of defending *Sayida Zaynab* (a city where the Sayida Zaynab mosque is located where the remains for Zaynab, Ali's daughter and Prophet Mohammed's granddaughter rest), which is an important religious symbol for the Shiites. However, the activities of this militia was not limited to the adjacent area of the shrine.²¹⁵

In 2006, LH was tested against the Israeli Army when the latter invaded Lebanon. 33 days war ended with a historical victory of LH, where it manifested high level of organization, coordination, networking and effective guerilla warfare. Therefore, LH's fighters' skills and experience is valuable for the Syrian GF who is waging irregular war²¹⁶. LH also took direct

actions both on the Syrian-Lebanese borders and inside the Syrian territories. Between summer 2012 and spring 2013, the active involvement of LH was a matter of contestation; the opposition claimed that party's members were fighting with the GF since the beginning of the uprising²¹⁷ whereas Hassan Nasr Allah denied his party's official involvement in the Syrian conflict throughout 2012²¹⁸. He mentioned that the members who fight in Syria represent themselves,²¹⁹ who fight on the border, practice their right of self-defense.²²⁰

Many reports claim that LH had activities in Syria especially in defending the land routes that Iran, Syria and LH used to transfer weapons to Lebanon. For instance, in February 2012 LH actively participated in battles in Zabadani, near Damascus, which is a Hub for Iranian support to LH since 1982²²¹.

The other type of involvement was on the northeastern Syrian-Lebanese border where LH tried to cut the arms smuggling routes from Lebanon to Syria. For example in early 2013, the Lebanese Army cut the supply line that went through Lebanese town of Aarsal. This forced the opposition to use the al-Qusayr route, farther north, close to LH stronghold in the Bekaa Valley. LH tried to hinder the smuggling and therefore constantly engaged in fights with the Syrian armed opposition.²²² As a result of this clashes, reportedly many rebels and LH members died; in late September 2012 LH commander Ali Hussein Nassif was reported dead. The rebels claim that he was fighting inside al-Qusayr whereas Nasr Allah claims that he died during his "jihad duty" without specifying where²²³.

LH's overt intervention in Syria started in February 2013 in the al-Qusayr region. One month later, the GF initiated the "Battle of al-Qusayr", which was a rebel stronghold and strategic locus for weapons smuggling. This campaign ended with the victory of the GF and thousands of LH militiamen.²²⁴ During this campaign, LH leader publically announced his party's official and large scale active participation²²⁵.

The presence of the Iraqi militias can be understood in connection with the strategic alliance of Iran, Syria and LH. LAFA is a Shiite militia similar to, even derives from, the Shiite militias in Iraq, which had high-level of coordination with the Iranian Special Forces, Syria and LH during the US occupation in 2000s. According to LAFA statement, its task in Syria is to defend *Sayyeda Zaynab*'s shrine and the Shiite minority neighborhoods.²²⁶ The location of the city is also important for the Iranian, Syrian and LH military coordination and supply routes²²⁷.

Some specialists claim that the involvement of Iraqi Shiites in the Syrian war started already in spring 2012 and the establishment of LAFA took place in autumn of the same year²²⁸. However, the involvement of Iraqi fighters was only confirmed in early 2013 by different parties including LAFA²²⁹. An official statement of LAFA confirmed that the group was operating in Syria and it had both Syrian and Iraqi fighters. Abu Hajar, the leader of the militia, put the number of the group members at 500²³⁰ while specialist Phillip Smyth estimates between 800 to 2000 fighters²³¹.

Conclusion

Based on the analyses above it can be concluded that major powers such as Russia and Iran provided considerable logistic and political support. It is difficult to imagine how the Syrian government would have stayed in power without these two actors. Nonetheless, these two actors did not have any active troops on Syrian territory; their support was limited to training, military supply, political support and intelligence information exchange. This kind of support, according to the COW and UCDP/PRIO operational definitions, does not change the nature of the war from civil war to an internationalized civil war. In this manner, COW and UCDP/PRIO do not consider where international powers play rather decisive role in supporting one or another conflicting side without direct intervention.

The fact that there is an active foreign troop involvement on the side of the government by non-state actors makes both databases vulnerable. Both COW and UCDP/PRIO understand the foreign active intervention as the official deployment of troops by state actors and disregard the possibility of official participation of non-state actors.

In the Syrian case, the missing variables of the theory are apparent. Both LH and LAFA officially confirmed that they are operating on Syria by the side of the GF. These two groups fight with the government without making the bulk of the fighting. The number of LH fighters in Syria is estimated between 3000 to 4000 fighters²³² whereas the LAFA, as mentioned, is between 500 to 2000 fighters^v.

4.2.2. The Free Syrian Army

In the third chapter, the term FSA referred to the predominant armed group within the opposition in Syria. It can be argued, as some specialists do, that FSA has never been a coherent umbrella organization. Rather, it is a term, which stands for resistance army or the

^v COW considers all the non-state actors that participate in wars as *nonstate armed groups* (NSAs). LH and LAFA are considered NSAs. As war participants, they have different requirements. One of the requirements is to either have 100 active combatants or suffer 25 BRD. Hence, it is different than the state participants, which are required to have 1,000 combatants or suffer 100 BRD. (Sarkees and Wayman, *Resort of War*, 67.)

freedom fighters.²³³ This argument, nevertheless, does not deny that there have been repetitive attempts to establish a military organization consisting of armed battalions. The initiator of the FSA, Riad al-As'ad, alongside other members like Hijazi Hijazi, announced in several occasions that FSA encircles a number of battalions.

It is difficult to corner the exact meaning of the term FSA especially when there have been many successive military councils and councils which claimed to lead FSA. To simplify, it is useful to note that rebel groups, who identified themselves as FSA, tried to develop the structure of this umbrella organization. There have been many attempts to reorganize under different names. This section briefly explains the evolution of the FSA. All the consecutive military bodies, during this evolution, which identify itself with the FSA will be referred either by their specific names or in general as FSA.

The evolution of FSA (from summer 2011 to summer 2012)

In July 2011, defector Riad al-Asa'd announced the creation of the FSA and named the operating battalions under it²³⁴. Later on, in mid-October 2011 the vice-commander of FSA Hijazi Hijazi reported the wider structure of the organization²³⁵. At that stage, it was apparent that there was an umbrella organization coordinating the rebellion on the national level. Nevertheless, this coordination remained very loose and sometimes did not even exist. To overcome this issue, Colonel al-Asa'd announced the establishment of the Temporary Military Council of FSA to organize the armed opponents²³⁶. After this announcement, rebel groups in different geographic areas started establishing the Provincial Military Councils, such as in Homs and Damascus²³⁷.

Until that stage, it was possible to map the umbrella organization to a certain extent, though the coordination remained low. Since the beginning of 2012, the puzzle became more complicated because of the proliferation of initiatives and initiators who spoke as FSA representatives. For instance, Brigadier-General Mustafa al-Sheikh, who defected from the Syrian Army in early January 2012²³⁸, established the Supreme Revolutionary Military Council, which was distinct from the FSA and therefore surprised the leadership of the Temporary Council²³⁹.

This divergence indicated that the armed opposition was not solely represented by the FSA. However, in March 2012, the two councils agreed to merge as the Joint Military Command of the Syrian Revolution and both, Colonel al-As'ad and Brigadier General al-Sheikh, appeared

in a video confirming the information²⁴⁰. At that stage of the conflict, this new body represented the FSA.

This unification, however, did not work on the practical level. In May 2012, Qasim Sa'd al-Din, a field commander inside Syria, stated that only the armed opposition inside the country is entitled to represent the FSA and Colonel As'ad, who then resided in Turkey, "represents himself only"²⁴¹. This overt confrontation revealed another crucial issue, the internal/external leadership legitimacy dilemma. Leaders such as Colonel As'ad remained outside, unable to shape a capable leadership to guide the Syrian armed struggle and therefore lost their legitimacy. Instead, leaders such as Qasim Sa'd al-Din had more legitimacy in the eyes of the fighters.

This dilemma also highlights the absence of an armed struggle against the government on the national level. On the provincial or regional level, the situation was relatively better. Over time, the regional Military Councils in Homs, Hama, Idlib, Deraa and Damascus commanded the critical mass of the rebel groups, which claimed to operate under the FSA flag²⁴². Unlike the national and regional level, the within-battalion coordination and organization were on a higher level. Further, in terms of representation, the fighters identified themselves with the immediate militia leader rather than the entire institution²⁴³.

By June 2012, casualty rate and violence level reached unprecedented levels²⁴⁴. On the one hand, the GF carried a huge offensive to regain lost territories²⁴⁵, on the other hand, the rebels had the ability to defend themselves and hold their ground. This ability was partly because of the onset of the official and systematic flow of foreign fund and military support to the opposition.

Foreign involvement

Even though there had been some promises of political and military support already in February 2012, the almost unlimited support started flowing only in May-June 2012. Until then, the Syrian armed opposition's main source of weapons was the black market, weapons purchased from neighboring countries, mainly from Lebanon and Iraq²⁴⁶. The Turkish border remained inaccessible for systematic smuggling, this was also due to effective border control by the Syrian authorities²⁴⁷. In addition to this major source, the rebels used weapons already existing in the country, or bought from corrupt or sympathetic state officials or simply the soldiers defected with their personal weapons.

Map 4 Areas Controlled by the Syrian Armed Opposition (up until May 2012)



Source: Holliday, "Syria's Armed Opposition," 8

In mid-June 2012, in an article in Wall Street Journal, a US official uncovered that the CIA was coordinating with Qatar and Saudi Arabia to open logistic supply lines into Syria²⁴⁸. Simultaneously, the Syrian-Turkish border became accessible for the rebels to smuggle arms.²⁴⁹ Although the armed opposition still bought weapons from the black market, the flow of money greatly facilitated them to do so. In May, the Lebanese authorities seized a vessel coming from Libya, filled with weapons meant to reach the Syrian rebels²⁵⁰. Similarly, there were reports of Croatian weapons bought for FSA by Saudi Arabia and delivered by the Jordanian intelligence²⁵¹. In the same month, one opposition figure confirmed that large

amount of weapon shipments had already arrived inside Syria and more was yet to come in June²⁵².

Furthermore, the flow of money and military support raised crucial questions about the essence of the FSA. Essentially the FSA was established to be the national rebel movement, which will remove the ruling government and facilitate a transition period to a democratic and secular country. The actual situation, however, seemed to be different. The flow of money was obviously conditioned by the fulfillment of the political interests of the donors. The donors did not finance FSA as an umbrella organization but they granted to the groups within the umbrella that were ready to serve their political interests in Syria. In short, the foreign element, mainly foreign fund, became increasingly vital for FSA battalions to finance their war.

The Evolution of FSA (part two)

Attempts to make the FSA a coherent national organization continued. In September 2012, based on a new initiative, the Joint Command for the Revolution's Military Councils was established²⁵³. This body had a better structure with a well-defined chain of command including a General Command²⁵⁴ and fourteen regional councils²⁵⁵. The main task of this new leadership was to increase the level of coordination amongst the local major leaders. Even though this body offered a sophisticated structure, it soon broke apart.

By November 2012, both the political and the armed oppositions of Syria were divided. Since the beginning of the crisis, this factor significantly contributed to the survival of the ruling authorities in Damascus. Consequently, Qatar initiated a conference in Doha to unify the political opposition. During this conference, many militia leaders from Syria came to Doha and met with Qatari officials behind the doors. As reported, Qatari officials' main objective of this tacit meeting was to sideline the role of Saudi Arabia in the Joint Command²⁵⁶. However, during this meeting, most of the rebels that did not participate in the Doha meeting, announced the establishment of the Five Front Command from inside Syria²⁵⁷. This development once again hindered a possible unification of the armed opposition. Therefore, the outcome of the summit was merely on the political level; a new political body was created, the Syrian Opposition Coalition.

On the military level, the Joint Command and the Five Fronts Command existed until early December 2012 and both claimed to be the FSA. On 7 December 2012, major battalions in Syria, which claimed to be part of the FSA, gathered in Antalya to, once again, unify

ranks²⁵⁸. According to their final statement, signed by 261 representatives of the armed Syrian opposition, the Supreme Military Council (SMC) was established. This body was “considered the highest military authority in the Syrian Arab Republic.”²⁵⁹ Until the end of 2013, this body remained the representative of the FSA and one of the dominant actors in the Syrian conflict.

Foreign involvement

Since summer 2012, the foreign involvement noticeably increased reaching a level where the foreign donors decided the structure of the battalions inside the country. Saudi Arabia had strong leverage over the Coordination Office of the Joint Command, which was charged to coordinate among the provincial councils and also appoint and discharge field commanders²⁶⁰. The Saudi Officials lobbied the Coordination Office to appoint leaders who were loyal to the Kingdom without considering the local fighters’ stand²⁶¹. For instance, in the Military Council in the Coast, Brigadier General Hussein Kouliya was imposed on the fighting groups by the Saudi Arabia. Even though the rebels in that council dismissed his leadership and elected another commander, they had to work with Kouliya because he was a fundamental source of funding²⁶².

Conclusion

As the empirical data showed, there have been many attempts to reorganize and restructure the FSA. Over time, the SMC became one of the weakest coalitions in comparison to more religious fundamentalist groups that dominated the scene in late 2012 (see below). However, the SMC remained an umbrella organization, which tried to increase the dependency of its member groups and establish command and control.

Regarding the foreign involvement, the examples showed how influential the foreign actors were. The foreign actors orchestrated the influx of arms and fund into Syria, which undoubtedly helped the rebels to hold their position and even advance and gain more territories (See the map 4). There was noticeable achievement by the rebels from the beginning of 2012, when they controlled limited territory inside Syria, to late 2012 when they had large territories under their control.

Even though the foreign support significantly contributed to the achievements of FSA, it did not come without a price. By funding, states such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and US increased their level of intervention in the dynamics of the war. In other words, they did not merely help the rebels, but they influenced the developments of the conflict. This factor is an indication of internationalization of the conflict in Syria. Nevertheless, COW and

UCDP/PRIO do not consider this kind of foreign intervention as a sign of internationalization. Excluding this kind of international support because there is no active troop intervention from the foreign supporter can be misleading.

4.2.3. Jabhet al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham (JN)

The security conditions created as a result of the ongoing war made Syria an attractive land for global jihadists. Since the beginning of the Syrian war, there was a debate about the foreign fighters and the jihadist groups in Syria. Albeit not the only, these groups were major targets for the foreign fighters who joined the Syrian war from dozens of different countries. There are also many Syrian fighters in these groups and in most of the cases they compose the majority. However, even being Syrian, they do not recognize the modern state of Syria and they fight for an Islamic Caliphate. Subsequently, the uniting factor is the ideology rather than the nationality.

One of the major groups that has been active and effective since early 2012 is *Jabhet al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham* or the Support Front for the people of Levant (JN). This group proved to have strong ideological belief, hard membership requirements, and committed and capable fighters. Therefore, their role in the Syrian armed struggle is vital despite their relatively limited number of fighters. After more than one year of operation, JN revealed its sympathy to global jihadist transnational groups such as the so-called al-Qaida and the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). This uncovered relationship indicates that the group had ideological, financial and military support (including experienced fighters) from these groups. Such support, however, is not coming from state actors but from non-state actors; it is not local but international. This example raises questions about the essence of the term “internationalized” as the theoretical sources understand it.

The Emergence of JN

This group emerged to public in January 2012 by releasing a video statement where its leader, Abu Mohamed al-Golani, talked about their aims and strategies²⁶³. In the video, he “preached the people of Levant” that now the Nusra Front is there to protect them. The video does not refer any loyalty to any group whether local or transnational. Nevertheless, Abdul Rahman al-Haj argues that ISI, after assessing the situation in Syria in summer 2011, contributed to the establishment of Jabhet al-Nusra by supplying weapons, money and fighters²⁶⁴. Another narrative claims that the creation of JN was a result of amalgamation of individuals who shared the same ideology. Thereafter, they had support from neighboring countries when fighters from Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq joined the group²⁶⁵.

In fact, these two narratives are not mutually exclusive because the group consists of foreign as well as local jihadists coming from different places. In the video statement, al-Golani clearly states that the fighters are coming from different “jihad battlefields”, which includes the Syrian jihadists abroad. Some of their key members were in the infamous *Sednaya* jail in Damascus prior to the crisis. Amongst these jihadists was Abu Musab al-Suri, a member of JN and its initial ideologue, who was released after an amnesty issued by the president²⁶⁶.

Since the beginning of the armed struggle, JN distinguished itself from other groups including the ones affiliated with the FSA or the independent salafi groups, first by its ideology and secondly by its military tactics. The ideological pillar that the JN is based upon is certainly one of the most radical in Syria and the region. Already in the first appearance of al-Golani, there were many indications to believe that this group was similar to transnational jihadist groups such as Islamic State of Iraq and Taliban Pakistan. This factor explains why JN received a warm welcome from online jihadist networks that overtly support al-Qaida affiliated groups²⁶⁷.

On the tactical level, the group was keener to the ISI, which operated in the neighboring country after the US invasion in 2003, rather than the local opposition groups²⁶⁸. For instance, both groups mastered plantation of improvised explosive devices (IED) and carried out bombings amongst civilians²⁶⁹. Only between January and May 2012, the group declared its responsibility out in carrying at least twelve suicide attacks²⁷⁰.

Regarding the FSA, al-Golani condemned them because they cooperate with the “west and the United States” and such act is considered a sin. He considered the west the enemies who targeted many jihadists in different loci. In fact, this manifestation of ideological difference came also from one of the most influential jihadist scholars, al-Mundhir al-Shinqiti, who urged the jihadists in Syria not to join the FSA²⁷¹. In short, this group clearly distinct from the FSA and the foreign non-state actors like ISI played crucial role in its establishment.

The Foreign Element

Finance

In general, there is secrecy about JN like any other Jihadist organization in the region. As elucidated above, even the story of its creation is disputed. Therefore, there is not much information about how this group finances its military activities in Syria. Considering its strong fighting capacity, this group should have good financial supply²⁷². One supply line that experts recognize comes from the Islamic State of Iraq whose leader al-Baghdadi contributed

to the establishment of this group²⁷³. Thus, if JN is allied with other transnational jihadist groups, then it is plausible that it receives funding via their channels²⁷⁴. One other possibility, which has been circulated in the news reports and amongst area specialists, is the funding from private donors. Many individuals or non-governmental organizations, and not states, support groups like JN by sending financial aid²⁷⁵.

Besides the funding received from private donors, JN finances the war by booties that they gain after a successful campaign. Further, when JN group agrees to cooperate with other active battalions in a campaign, it preconditions to take the lion share of the booties.²⁷⁶ They also have significant revenue from the Syrian natural resources such as oil²⁷⁷. The hubs of natural wealth, however, are under constant fight between different armed groups.

Recruitment

The recruitment process in JN is a complex process and has many preconditions and requirements. The group does not recruit fighters from one source, its fighters come from different backgrounds. Even though the dominant narrative dictates that the majority of the fighters are non-Syrian, according to many reports, foreign combatants are only one source of recruitment for JN. The group also depends on new local recruits and Syrian jihadist expatriates who fought all over the world mainly in Lebanon and Iraq, and now they are back to Syria.

There are many indications to believe that the foreign element is existent in the JN leadership. By September 2012, the Homs Revolutionary Council confirmed that members from Fatah al-Islam²⁷⁸ (Palestinian extremist militia in Lebanon) came to Syria and trained members of JN. Palestinian and Lebanese sources certified that some of the Fatah al-Islam members died in Syria. Another important indicator is JN's *Majlis Shura al-Mujahedeen* or the Shura Council, which includes many influential foreign members²⁷⁹.

Many sources, including the official al-Nusra story²⁸⁰, claim that there are many foreign fighters in the JN ranks. This issue has been dominating the political and military discussion since the beginning of the armed struggle in Syria. According to the latest estimates, the range of the foreign fighters who fought the GF from late 2011 until December 2013 is between 3,000 and 11,000. According to the same sources, the vast majority of these groups fight with Jabhet al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq.²⁸¹ However, it is still difficult to say what percentage of the fighters in al-Nusra is foreign.²⁸²

JN also systematically recruits Syrian fighters in Syria. Because of the organization's wide reputation, many fighters aimed at getting a membership. For example, JN welcomed best fighters of the training camp called *Sheikh Suleyman*, established during the war near Aleppo.²⁸³ The relationship between the Syrian recruits and some of the key foreign leaders of JN is not always smooth, however. Interviews with rebels show that some joined JN because it was strong but when they discovered that the leaders are from Lebanon and Palestine, they left the group²⁸⁴.

During the course of the Syrian conflict, the Syrian government issued many amnesty decrees, which were supposed to release the detained protestors who did not even face a court or a judge. President Assad, who has the constitutional allowance to issue amnesty, ordered to release detainees who did not contribute to the killing of the Syrian people. However, as many sources illustrate, the government released many jihadist fighters who were detained after Syria and US came to an agreement around 2006 about Syria not sending fighters to Iraq²⁸⁵. The released extremists established or joined jihadist groups including JN. Some sources report that the speaker of JN, al-Golani, was a detainee in the *Sednaya* prison²⁸⁶. In sum, the foreign component is significant for JN, but it does not mean that all the fighters are foreign. Whereas the religious belief is the same regardless the nationality of the combatant.

Conclusion

In the case of JN the foreign involvement is also visible but not in the means of financial support but with actual fighters. As illustrated above, the financial backing of these groups come from private donors and trophies gained after successful military operations. According to the reports, no state actors directly support this group, as it is the case with the FSA. The main international characteristic of JN is the foreign fighters that are fighting in the Syrian civil war.

The foreign combatants, who are coming to Syria to support their brethren in religion without having any experience in combat, do not make a big difference. Conversely, who greatly contribute to the effectiveness of the rebel group are the foreigners who have previous experience in other "battlefields of jihad", as al-Golani put it. On the one hand, these fighters have extremely strong faith in what they are doing; they have established ideological background, motivation, fearlessness and courage. On the other hand, they have gained experience in fighting in different places such as Chechnya, Iraq and Palestine, which makes them career fighters.²⁸⁷ Even though the quantity of the combatants in jihadist groups as JN is

small, these groups are highly organized and effective²⁸⁸ unlike many battalions in FSA (e.g.)
289 .

The case of JN raises major challenges to the definitions presented by the COW and UCDP/PRIO conflict databases. Both sources bind the foreign involvement in civil wars with foreign states deploying their troops and ignore the possibility of non-official involvement. The Syrian conflict is the second after Afghanistan (thus far) in the modern history that attracts such a high number of foreign fighters²⁹⁰, yet the Syrian conflict cannot be considered an internationalized civil war (or intra-state conflict) because none of the foreign combatants is officially deployed by any of the states. Ignoring the presence of such huge number of foreigners challenges the operational definitions of COW and UCDP/PRIO. This inconsideration of the foreign involvement becomes more problematic if we consider the strong indications that the groups where the foreign combatants fight are often stronger, more organized, experienced and more effective than other local elements.

4.2.4. Local salafis

Emerging local salafi groups

Parallel to the rise of JN in the beginning of 2012, local salafi groups also emerged sometimes under the umbrella of FSA sometimes independently. One way to distinguish these groups from others is by looking to their objectives. Within the local salafis, there are two major trends: the ‘national’ salafis and the ‘moderate’ salafis who do not follow Salafism as an ideology, way of life and belief, but they might be sentimental to Salafism for different reasons including securing fund and foreign support.²⁹¹

Another type of distinction can be made according to their vision of the Syrian state and the model of the government that the rebels are fighting for. The ‘moderates’ generally believe in the political Islam; they think that Islam as a religion and political ideology should regulate the society and the political agenda of the state. These groups, however, find democratic processes such as elections compatible with their thinking. Furthermore, they stick to the notion of state and do not want to recreate the Islamic Caliphate or the *Umma*. The ‘nationals’ in general reject democratic processes and think that the *Sharia* should be the constitution. These groups hardly believe in any modern political systems or any kind of state.²⁹² However, it is necessary to note that these dichotomies are generalized, within each camp there are many competing or even rival streams.

The more radical groups increasingly and explicitly alienated themselves from the FSA. In contrast, the ‘moderates’ kept their channels open with both the ‘secular’ and the ‘radical’ groups. However, the doctrine of the battlefield does not always reflect this generalization; it is, for instance, possible to track close cooperation between some of the ‘secular’ groups affiliated with the FSA and JN. During the battle, sometimes the conditions of war dictates the nature of the relations by sidelining the ideological factor. Even though it is not possible to cover every single group, it is necessary to mention some of the influential groups which will help to the analyses.

Ahrar al-Sham was one of the first and prominent independent groups since the beginning of the rebellion. It came public in early 2012 and grew in strength and number since then. As a ‘national’ salafi group, it overtly adopted the jihadi ideology, welcomed foreign fighters and fought for the rule of God’s law. According to some reports, it had up to 20,000 members by the end of 2013. During this time, the group participated in many alliances and often made the backbone of the coalition.²⁹³ Suqour al-Sham is another example of a salafi group, established in late 2011 as a FSA affiliated group and adopted ‘moderate’ salafi ideology. Nevertheless, soon, it became an independent group with increasingly ‘national’ salafi ideology. In December 2013, the group had up to 9,000 members.²⁹⁴ Liwa al-Islam, which claimed to be distinct from the FSA battalions and adopted ‘national’ salafi ideology, was very active in the Damascus countryside in March 2012²⁹⁵. Most of these groups joined different alliances and collations mainly outside the FSA umbrella.

Thus, beside the FSA, relatively independent and radical groups started establishing their own coalitions without necessarily annulling their relations with the FSA. In June 2012, number of battalions established the Jabhat Thuwar Souria (the Syrian Revolutionaries’ Front). The coalition included Islamist groups such as Jaish al-Tawhid and Ahrar al-Sham battalions, which was the backbone of the coalition²⁹⁶. In August 2012, another coalitions appeared, Tajammu’ Ansar al-Islam (Gathering of Supporters of Islam), which included the Liwa al-Islam as well as other groups operating in Damascus region and affiliated with FSA.

What follows, briefly explains how these local salafi groups organized themselves after August 2012. The constant attempts of grouping ended up with the creation of two major salafi coalitions between September and December 2012: the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF) and the Syrian Liberation Front (SLF). This briefing is necessary to map the main salafi participants of the war and to highlight the international dimension of these coalitions. Foreign support is a key factor to the establishment of SLF and SIF. The supporters are

versatile with different political agendas, which affect the performance of these coalitions on the ground and make the conflict more internationalized.

The Syrian Islamic Front

In December 2012, eleven battalions unified their ranks under SIF declaring their ‘national’ salafi agenda.²⁹⁷ It encircles prominent salafi groups such as Ahrar al-Sham, Liwa al-Haqq and Haraket al-Fajer al-Islamiya which clearly state their salafi background²⁹⁸. However, it is necessary to make a distinction between this alliance and other global jihadist organizations such as JN. The Front clearly states its principles and goals on the one hand emphasizing the Islamic characteristics of theirs, on the other, referring to the necessity of the coexistence between the Muslims and non-Muslims.

In their charter,²⁹⁹ SIF clearly states its intentions of building an Islamic state, which “preserves the Islamic identity of [the Syrian] society” that possesses “complete Islamic personality” and where “Islam is the religion of the state, and it is the principal and only source of legislation.”³⁰⁰ It is possible to hear similar statements from organizations such as JN but the content in this case seems to be different. While most global Jihadist organizations have a radical stand from the non-Muslims, the Islamic Front tried to show a different image.³⁰¹

Abu Ezzedin al-Ansari, one of the leading figures of the SIF, originally from the Liwa al-Haqq, stated in an interview that “[w]e do not believe that we fit the description of what is popularly known in the west as ‘radical Islamists’ or ‘jihadists’”³⁰². One of the important principles that differentiates SIF from global jihadists is their goal which is closely related to the Syrian state³⁰³. Unlike the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, this group does not aim, at least officially, to establish an Islamic Caliphate in the world; instead, it clearly states that its project is limited to Syria. For instance, while defining its goals, the organization concentrates on Syria³⁰⁴; in the establishment statement there is no mentioning about *Umma* or Caliphate, instead they talk about the “beloved” Syria³⁰⁵.

Despite SIF’s official tolerant view, some the members, such as Ahrar al-Sham, which is the dominant group in SIF, have close similarities to JN. It also recruits foreign jihadists like JN and has a “postponed global jihadi agenda.”³⁰⁶ In contrast, Liwa al-Haqq, another SIF member, overtly distinguishes itself from JN and its ideology. This indicates that within the coalition not all the groups have the exact same understanding of Islam and the objective they are fighting for.

Abu Ezzeddin al-Ansari emphasizes that SIF has “nothing against Jabhet al-Nosra” and that the west misunderstands this organization³⁰⁷. Nevertheless, al-Ansari also thinks that SIF and JN are not the same, he argues that “if we were the same, we would have been in the same group.”³⁰⁸ Further, the leadership of SIF gently rejected some of the salafi groups’ suggestions that JN should join and lead the coalition³⁰⁹. SIF’s desire for a distinct identity became clearer when its leadership considered the FSA as ‘secular’ and cooperative with the “west”. For that reasons, the SIF rejected to be under the FSA umbrella, though there has been certain level of cooperation on the ground³¹⁰.

Syrian Liberation Front

According to the establishment statement in September 2012, the group had more than fifteen armed groups across Syria³¹¹. Nevertheless, it is not clear how far all these groups were connected to the newborn alliance. The most prominent and relatively strong members are Suqour al-Sham, Kataeb al-Farouq and Deir al-Zor military council³¹². This coalition is less coherent in terms of its members’ ideological background since there are ‘national’ and ‘moderate’ salafi groups³¹³. Abu Issa, the leader of Suqour al-Sham that has more than 4,000 fighters, is also the field leader of SLF. When Suqour al-Sham was established in northeast Syria, the group increasingly adopted ‘national’ salafi agenda but after joining the SLF it changed its policy³¹⁴. While in SIF Ahrar al-Sham dominates the coalition and steers it ideologically, the members in SLF have no clear dominant power³¹⁵.

Even though the group identifies itself distinct from the FSA when its leader refuses to take orders from its leadership, some of the armed groups in SLF are also members in different councils of the Supreme Military Joint Command³¹⁶. Some of the groups are active under both names, which makes drawing a clear line between these two coalitions difficult. The coalition also distinguishes itself from the SIF, which is considered more radical. In fact, there have been negotiations between the members of SLF and SIF before their official establishment in order to unify ranks but, as reported, this attempt failed because of the ideological differences³¹⁷. According to the founding statement, the group has four main goals: overthrow the Syrian Government; protection of all Syrians regardless their differences, nationalities and denominations; arms control and peacekeeping after the collapse of the government; uphold the Syrian sovereignty, unity and independence and adopt Islamic Law.³¹⁸

Funding

On the political and ideological level, each of these coalitions, SLF and SIF, have a common understanding and try to develop a central command. Even though they have not been considerably more organized and effective than the FSA, they became the initiator of a new type of large coalition, and therefore attracted foreign financiers. While most of the donors are private individuals or networks from the Arabian/Persian Gulf, there is also flowing fund from Syrian actors outside the country such as the Muslim Brotherhood. The financial assistance is used for different purposes including humanitarian, yet the bulk of the funding goes to the purchasing of arms. These private donors more often fund rebel groups individually within each coalition rather than fund the coalition as one body.

Often the fund is influenced by the donor's and benefactor's religious background. Many reporters and researchers agree that Kuwait is the safe harbor for collecting the money that comes from different gulf country residents. "The Popular Commission to Support the Syrian People" is one of the prominent and openly active networks that finances rebels in Syria; it is located in Kuwait and run by two local sheikhs, Hajjaj al-Ajami and Irshid al-Hajri³¹⁹.

This network has strong relations to SIF in general and Ahrar al-Sham in particular. It funded the Syrian Revolutionaries' Front (summer and autumn 2012) where Ahrar al-Sham was the predominant group. The Revolutionary Front later announced that it received \$600,000 from the Popular Commission³²⁰. In the same period, Ahrar al-Sham publically thanked Seikh al-Ajami for sending \$400,000 meant for the group only³²¹. Amongst the other groups of SIF that received assistance from this network was Liwa al-Haqq³²². Tajamou Ansar al-Sham fi Qalb al-Sham, SIF's strongest group in Damascus with up to 9000 fighters is another example of a group, which had separate fund from Qatari and Kuwaiti donors besides the SIF common financial aid³²³.

Some reports also argue that organizations such as Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH) based in Turkey provided financial assistance to the SIF. According to the same report, IHH is closely connected to Saudi based, financially very capable with years of experience, Al-Haamain Islamic Foundation³²⁴. Beside these Saudi Arabia and Kuwait based networks, SIF is suspected to have financial relations also with a Qatari network called Qatar Charitable Society. This networks has been active since 1990s and according to US governmental sources it supported persons such as Bin Laden³²⁵.

The available information about the interested donors of SLF is relatively limited. However, seemingly the mechanism and the principle are the same. The coalition was financially supported by prominent figure Muhammad Surur Zayn al-Abidin, a steel supporter of “Awakening” movement against the Saudi Monarchy³²⁶. Zayn al-Abidin is located in Qatar and supervises a fundraising committee, which provides financial, military and humanitarian support to the rebels in Syria³²⁷. The Muslim Brotherhood is also involved in funding this coalition perhaps because the ideological proximity³²⁸. SLF triggered some of the gulf states’ interest as well. According to Thomas Pierret, Saudi Arabia financed the group due to its considerable weight in Damascus’ eastern suburbs³²⁹.

Similar to SIF the groups within SLF probably had their own sources of funding. Al-Farouq battalions was one of the oldest armed groups and one of the dominant ones in Homs city. Al-Farouq, being one of the core groups of SLF, has strong support from Qatar and Saudi Arabia who assist the group in smuggling weapons from Turkey and Lebanon³³⁰.

Al-Farouq battalions also had relations to the Muslim Brotherhood and some sources claim that the party’s Civilian Protection Committee provided financial assistance³³¹. Suqour al-Sham, another prominent group of SLF, also had private donors besides the financial support that the coalition. Being one of the strongest and best organized groups in northeast of Syria, attracted many donors. In late summer 2012, the group released a video of the field Commander Abu Issa accompanying Bahraini supporters where he talks about the importance of their financial support³³². Abu Issa, overtly stated that SLF receives support from Syrian and non-Syrian individuals but denied to have any kind of support from any state³³³.

Conclusion

As the examples show, the foreign fund is vital for the survival of both SIF and SLF. Both groups claim to have financial sources from inside Syria in addition to the weaponry that they get after successful battles against the GF. However, without the foreign fund these coalitions cannot have high rate of recruitment and effective weapons. The ‘secular’ rebels constantly complained to the western donors that the jihadist groups are winning the recruitment battle simply because everyone is looking for money and they have money³³⁴. Nevertheless, such policies can follow political interests and not reflect the situation in the battlefield. For instance, the SMC is financed by states such as Saudi Arabia, and at least in terms of financial capabilities, state as Saudi Arabia has more resources than all the private donors

combined³³⁵. However, all these remain speculations because it is almost impossible to calculate who gets what.

Nonetheless, the bulk of the private money goes to the extremists³³⁶ who throughout 2012 proved to be at least as capable as the FSA representatives not just in fighting but in all aspects of daily life such as providing bread, water, healthcare and education. In other words, as the subsequent events in late 2012 and over 2013 (discussed in the next chapter) show, the fundamentalist alliances dominated the Syrian scene.

The considerable role that the foreign fund plays makes the Syrian war not limited to the state borders. As the examples showed, the fund coming from the gulf donors is politicized and follows certain objectives, which exceeds the Syrian crisis. It is observable that the foreign funding plays vital role in not only supporting the groups with arms but also by shaping the map of the conflicting parties in the opposition side. Nevertheless, COW and UCDP/PRIOD databases do not consider any type of foreign funding as an indication of internationalization; even the financial aid that contributes to the changing of the war dynamics and its actors.

4.3. Conclusion

Throughout the chapter, there were different examples of different types of foreign intervention. Foreign intervention, as a concept, is the basis on which to decide whether the civil war is local or internationalized. COW and UCPD/PRIOD operationalize this concept and they limit it to one factor – active participation of foreign troops in the civil war without making the bulk of the fight. According to this definition, the Syrian civil war from the beginning to 2012 until summer 2013 did not become internationalized because there have not been any active foreign troops in Syria representing any system member.

As the paper shows, this operational definition is too narrow to explain the role of foreign intervention in Syria. The databases exclude at least three types of foreign intervention, which played major roles in the Syrian conflict.

First, all the chapter coalitions discussed here had foreign financial support. It is difficult to imagine such armed opposition, with the number of its members and the acquired modern weapons, without any foreign support. The fund that flows is decisive to a level that the donors decide the hierarchy of the rebel groups; it is vital to an extent that it can unify or divide the rebels.

The rebel groups spend the money to buy weapons or they receive deliveries bought by foreign states³³⁷. Even though the rebels take over weaponry from the government, without foreign supply, especially at the beginning of the civil war, the rebels would hardly resist the well-armed Syrian Army. On the other hand, the government could not provide weaponry to its soldiers without constant Russian and Iranian logistic support. In short, both sides of the conflict depend on the foreign money to continue their wars.

Second, there are thousands of foreign combatants fighting against the Syrian GF. These fighters come from more than 70 countries around the world. However, because these fighters do not represent their own countries, COW or UCPD/PRIO do not take them into account. According to the latest statistics, there is be up to 11,000 non-Syrians fighting alongside the opposition. A considerable quantity of these fighters join the religious extremists such as JN. These fighters are not mere numbers, but also represent years of experience they acquired in Afghanistan, Iraq, Chechnya, Lebanon and Palestine. These fighters do not make the bulk of the fighting and they are not more than 10% of the rebels, yet their presence certainly enhanced the armed activities in Syria.

The Syrian war has been particular in this factor; in the modern history, few conflicts attracted such number of foreign fighters. The deliberate dismissal of unofficial foreign troops' role is misleading; it excludes one of the most important characteristics of this war.

The third means of foreign intervention that COW and UCPD/PRIO do not recognize is the official troop involvement of non-state actors. Secretary General Hassan Nasr Allah publically announced the presence of LH in Syria. As mentioned, estimates are up to 4,000 LH soldiers. Similarly, the leadership of LAFA, composed of Iraqi Shiites, announced that it is present in Syria and it has military activities in certain areas of the country. In line with the increasing role of such non-state actors, the theoretical sources should not dismiss their involvement.

To conclude, according to COW and UCPD/PRIO operational definitions the Syrian war remains a civil war and does not fulfill the criterion of internationalized civil war. While COW's latest update (2007) does not include the Syrian war, UCPD/PRIO already issued its latest updates. According to their armed conflict database (2013) the Syrian war is considered as type 3, which stands for "intra-state conflict" (civil war)³³⁸, and not type 4, which refers to "internationalized intra-state conflict" (internationalized civil war).

5. PHASE III: WAS IT A CIVIL WAR?

As the previous chapter elucidated, in 2012, the rebel coalitions within the Syrian armed opposition multiplied. FSA remained an important actor. Besides FSA, two other coalitions emerged, the SLF and SIF. In addition to these actors, the emergence of JN, as a small but capable group with global jihadist ideology, was noticeable. The status of these participants, however, remains a crucial question to investigate because this factor is central for COW and UCDP/PRIO to decide the type of the war in Syria. It is also important to test the hypothesis and see whether the type of the participants and the level of violence define the conflict.

With the beginning of the Syrian civil war in September 2011, there were few armed actors in the battlefield, which eased their identification. The Syrian GF fought group of local rebels who called themselves the FSA. Evidently, there were two major participants opposing each other. With the emergence of other armed groups and coalitions such as SLF, SIF and JN, the picture became more complicated since each of these groups find itself distinct from the other. Moreover, in April 2013 a new organization emerged called the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), which means the emergence of yet another actor. One of the objectives of this chapter is to explain how the two databases identify civil wars with multiple participants.

Thus far, the databases had similar operational definitions to distinguish civil wars from other types of violence and to track internationalization factor. The approach of dealing with multiple actors, however, is different. The COW disregards the differences between multiple armed groups and it exclusively gives more importance to the degree of coordination. Whereas UCDP/PRIO conditions that all the rebel groups should be fighting over the same incompatibility but it divides them to dyads. In each dyad the same government and a distinct group is coded. The first objective of this chapter is to describe the status of the participants based on these theoretical restrictions. The second objective is to revisit the thesis' hypothesis.

5.1. Identifying the status of the participants

5.1.1. Correlates of War

One of the fundamental coding rules of COW is mutual exclusivity. This rule does not allow coding several simultaneous wars fought by the same parties as separate wars. If a government is fighting an organized rebel group, it is coded as civil war and this type of war does not change unless other participants join and take the bulk of the fighting from one or

both participants. In other words, if the type of war is changed it means that there was a war transformation.

In 1960, a civil war started in Vietnam between the government of South Vietnam and the National Liberation Front. In 1965, the US took the bulk of the fighting from South Vietnam and therefore changed the type of the war into inter-state war. The mutual exclusiveness does not allow to code two wars at the same time, in this case civil war and inter-state war. One war ends another starts.³³⁹

The mutual exclusivity, however, does not exclude the possibility for a state actor to be involved in more than one war at the same time. For instance, one state can be involved in a civil war and in an inter-state war, as long as the adversaries of the government do not cooperate or fight together. The complication arises when the government engages in multiple wars within its borders; what if one government faces two distinct rebel groups? “COW has not had criteria for distinguishing between a single civil war involving many nonstate armed groups opposed to the central government and several simultaneous civil wars, each characterized by the same government fighting against a different NSA [non-state armed groups] or rebel group.”³⁴⁰

When there are many NSAs fighting the same government within its territories there are two ways to code the conflict. First, if two (or more) NSAs are fighting the same government in geographically distinct areas without any coordination then COW records two different civil wars. Second, if NSAs are coordinating in their fight against the government then COW records only one civil war. In other words, all the NSAs together are considered one participant fighting the government – the other participant. Since it is often hard to gather information regarding the coordination factor, COW is “utilizing negative coordination criteria ... multiple wars will be considered to exist unless there is specific evidence of coordination and cooperation between or among the NSAs.”³⁴¹

5.1.2. UCDP/PRIO Database

While COW does not have any specific coding rules for civil wars that have multiple NSAs, UCDP/PRIO offers an alternative. The database acknowledges the possibility that a government might fight more than one armed group, which appear to be distinct from each other. The dyadic dataset that UCDP launched in 2008, which is based on UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Database, enables the observer to identify the major armed oppositions³⁴². Unlike COW, it does not put the distinct armed groups under one name; instead, it utilizes the dyadic

approach to illustrate each major and distinct actor in the opposition side, which fulfills all the civil war criteria.

Thus, each dyad contains two parties, one is always a government and the other is a rebel group. If the government is fighting one armed group, then there is only one dyad. If the government is fighting three distinct armed groups over the same incompatibility then the war is coded to have three dyads.

The major challenge, according to the database, is how to recognize if a dyad is completely new or a mere continuation of an old one with a slight difference. Regarding the first side, the government, it never changes unless the conflict ceases from being an intra-state conflict. The complication is on the opposition side. The database has four rules to distinguish a new armed opposition from an existing one.

- Change of names does not change the dyad.
- When a rebel group splits and the newborn continues its struggle with the same terms then a new dyad should be recorded combining the government and the new group.
- If an already registered group joins in a tight coalition with another registered group a new dyad is coded.
- When a registered group joins a group that has not been registered previously there is no need for a new dyad.

The dyadic database of UCDP makes the identification of distinct armed groups in Syria easier. Moreover, it does not put all of the opposition actors in one basket and this factor is particularly important for Syria because of the versatile nature of the armed opposition. In this manner, the dyadic approach enlarges the number of the participants, though the context remains one single civil war between the government and the armed opposition.

Before investigating the Syrian actors from the perspective of the coding rules presented by the databases, it is necessary to provide a brief overview about ISIS, which emerged in April 2013 as actor in the Syrian war.

5.2. The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham

On 10 April 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) transnational organization, declared the merge of ISI and JN as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) under his command³⁴³. JN's reaction, however, was very negative. In an audio statement, its leader, al-Golani, clarified that he was not consulted by al-Baghdadi prior

to this decision and therefore he declined it³⁴⁴. Al-Golani instead recognized al-Zawahiri as his first point of reference and left the final decision to him³⁴⁵. Al-Golani's move revealed JN's direct relation to al-Zawahiri, the leader of al-Qaeda. These two incidents, revealed the connection between ISI and JN which had not been apparent during the first days of JN's creation.

The predominant narrative is that JN was established with ISI's help in late 2011 by providing the group with experts, fighters and fund³⁴⁶. US intelligence sources reported ISI activities in Syria already in February 2012³⁴⁷. The US government eventually listed JN, and not any other armed group in Syria, as a terrorist organization, which is an indication of JN's relation to al-Qaeda³⁴⁸. Throughout 2012, JN became one of the strongest groups in Syria despite its limited number of fighters. As explained in the previous chapter, JN contained many foreign combatants especially in the leadership circle. Ayman al-Zawahiri alongside ISI leaders, such as Abu Yahya al-Libi, urged Iraqi, Jordanian and Turkish jihadists to join the battle in Syria³⁴⁹. These jihadists mostly aimed at joining JN.

Beside supporting JN, ISI itself became increasingly involved in the Syrian conflict. It is very difficult to distinguish between the JN and ISI members in Syria before April 2013. One description of the situation would be that JN recruited foreigners and had foreign leaders but it was a Syrian jihadist organization with many recently recruited Syrian foot soldiers. ISI, on the contrary, was an Iraqi armed group, though it also had Syrian members, which expanded from its areas of operation in Iraq into Syria.

ISI mobility in and out of Syria is possible owing to the security situation in Syria and Iraq. Additionally, the organization already had established logistic networks linking Syria to Iraq, especially in the east, since 2004³⁵⁰. Iraqi state officials repeatedly warned that they have solid evidence about ISI's movement into Syria³⁵¹. Despite the warnings, it was not possible to find reports about ISI's activities in Syria. Since it eventually declared its presence, it is plausible that ISI was operating covertly under JN and other armed groups. In August 2012, a member of Homs Revolutionary Council said in an interview that JN is popular because most of its foot soldiers are Syrians unlike the ISI whose members are predominantly foreign³⁵². This indicates that ISI was present in Syria and operating at least since August 2012. Arguably, the media generally did not distinguish between ISI and JN.

JN had significant presence in many major front lines such as Deraa, Damascus, al-Qalamoon region and Aleppo. However, the organization has been stronger in the east already in

summer 2012³⁵³. JN's rejection to be part of al-Baghdadi's project ended up in an open war between, JN allied with other Syrian armed groups, against ISIS; this in-rebel war became public in January 2014³⁵⁴. After the refit in the organization, two bodies emerged JN and the ISIS. Some members supported al-Golani and allied with al-Zawahiri by staying in JN. Others denied JN's alliance to al-Qaeda and therefore joined national salafi groups such as Ahrar al-Sham. The third wave, mainly the foreign fighters, joined al-Baghdadi in his project of ISIS.³⁵⁵

Although it is difficult to say which group, ISI or JN, defected from the other, it is apparent that after April 2013 there were two groups: ISIS and JN. Arguably, who stayed in JN were the Syrian jihadists (*al-Ansar*³⁵⁶) who did not want to comply to foreign leadership prioritizing the war in Syria over the regional/global war³⁵⁷. ISIS, on the contrary, prioritized the regional/global war over the Syrian war and continued operating both in Iraq and in Syria. Most of its members are foreigners (*al-Muhajereen*) fighting in Syria³⁵⁸.

The main importance of this event is that the Syrian war gained yet another war participant, which opposed everyone including the government. Before April 2013, this participant was in Syria but it operated covertly. After April 2013, it transformed to ISIS and became a separate armed group fighting the government. However, the developments after April 2013 show that ISIS became more isolated and fought not just the GF but all other rebel groupings: JN, FSA, SIF, SLF the Kurdish armed forces and other rebel groups³⁵⁹. Despite the declared war against everyone, ISIS kept operating in Syria especially in the north and the east, which is a crucial indication of its strength and experience in such conflict circumstance.

5.3. The Status of the participants

Until April 2013, it is possible to identify at least four major armed groups that opposed the Syrian government: FSA, SIF, SLF and JN³⁶⁰. These groups contained a wide range of battalions and units including 'secular' Syrians and global jihadist foreigners. Both databases recognize that civil wars can have multiple opposition groups, with distinct characteristics. This thesis argues that Syria is one of these cases where there are many groups with different agendas. The subsequent discussion shows how COW and UCDP/PRIOD databases identify the war participants in summer 2013.

5.3.1. COW and the Syrian War

The Level of coordination among the armed groups

As mentioned above, when there are distinct rebel groups, COW investigates if there is any coordination among them. Rebels in Syria have a strong coordination network especially among the ones that operate in the same geographical area. Sometimes the coordination even includes members from more than two rebel coalitions. In fact, the ideological divergence among the rebel groups did not hinder the coordination of some of their battalions against the GF. Many examples indicate that there is coordination amongst all the identified groups.

SIF's backbone, Ahrar al-Sham has usually coordinated its activities with JN especially in the north where both have significant presence. In February 2012, both groups led a major offensive to overrun the al-Jarrah military airbase near Aleppo. After 48 hours of combat, the opposition managed to capture it³⁶¹. Two days later, the two groups also led another operation to take over the al-Thawra hydroelectric dam in the Raqqa Province³⁶². Even though these groups have ideological and political differences, they coordinate their military actions against the GF³⁶³.

Some of the FSA battalions also coordinate with JN. In October 2012, a FSA battalion called "Chechen migrants" and JN captured the Ta'aneh airbase near Aleppo, which also had scud missile facilities³⁶⁴. A similar relationship can be tracked between SIF and FSA. Since its creation in December 2012, SIF clearly distanced itself from other groups including JN and FSA; nevertheless, it emphasized in its charter that the coordination is necessary to topple the Syrian government. Media reports indicate that there is close coordination between SIF and FSA³⁶⁵.

In mid-October 2012, battalions from three coalitions coordinated an offensive in Idlib province and sieged the Wadi al-Deif airbase, a GF stronghold, until April 2013. The success of the rebel operation was mainly due to the coordination of three major rebel groups, FSA, SLF and JN. Jabhet al-Nusra's council of religious clerics took the organizational lead. The major participants besides the religious council were the Idlib Revolutionary Council from FSA and Suqour al-Sham from SLF. These three forces established four field operation rooms and each room coordinated between 30-40 battalions. This example indicates that the coordination is not limited to two coalitions.³⁶⁶

The Taftanaz operation is another successful offensive that was due to the coordination between three major coalitions in the north, JN, Ahrar al-Sham from SIF and Suqour al-Sham

from SLF. Taftanaz airbase near Aleppo was an important base for GF's air campaign against the opposition in the north. The airbase was under siege for a long time and it was overrun only after the coordination of these three groups³⁶⁷; "the rebels succeeded because they were able to concentrate adequate forces, coordinate their actions, bring heavy weapons to bear, and sustain the siege for months under state Air Forces attack"³⁶⁸.

When the Joint Command of the FSA was formed, the military leadership was not limited to the groups that identified themselves only with FSA. It also included some of the leaders of other major groups who either operated independently or were members of another armed coalition. This is one method of coordination between the core leadership of FSA and the influential commanders of other groups who reject to be part of FSA or take any commands from it. One example is SLF's Suqour al-Sham whose leader, Ahmed Issa, who is also SLF's commander, was incorporated to the Joint Command and then into the SMC.³⁶⁹

The previous examples show that all the major coalitions have some kind of coordination with each other. Sometimes the level of coordination was high especially when the groups planned major offensives. In other occasions, the coordination was limited to self-defense or *raison d'être*. While it is possible to easily trace the coordination between all these groups, it is relatively harder to monitor ISI's actions because before April 2013 ISI and JN were operating as if they were one body. When ISIS emerged, after April 2013, JN became almost a separate organization. This development facilitated the tracking of ISIS activities.

ISIS activities across Syria took different shape from place to place. Thus, after the separation some places such as al-Raqqah JN and ISIS were indistinguishable whereas in Aleppo and Deir al-Zor they operated separately³⁷⁰. Accordingly, the official separation between the groups' leadership did not necessarily reflect on the ground. With the emergence of ISIS, another noticeable change occurred in the in-rebel dynamics – overt in-rebel fighting. Being a hardcore and alien jihadist group, ISIS was often rejected by Syrian civilians as well as the armed groups. This triggered in-rebel fighting. More precisely, ISIS initiated a fight against all the dominant groups including JN. The tensions, however, were low until January 2014.

This growing animosity between ISIS, on the one hand, and other rebels, on the other, did not stop all these parties to cooperate against the GF. Additionally, ISIS spent considerable time in engaging with the rebels, yet it also opened different fronts with the GF³⁷¹. For instance in mid-August 2013, the commander in chief of ISIS, Imad Ahmad, a Palestinian national, was

killed in Salamiya, Hama province. Imad Ahmad was reportedly killed during a major offensive of ISIS against the GF³⁷².

ISIS led and participated in several joint offensives against the GF after April 2013. In August, ISIS participated in at least two major operations coordinating with other armed groups. The first operation called “Operation Liberation of the Coast” started on 4 August 2013 in Latakia province. JN and ISIS led the operation in coordination with Ahrar al-Sham from SIF, Suqour al-Sham from SLF and other groups. The offensive resulted in capturing 12 villages in northern Latakia. Besides the coordination on this level, these groups also coordinated with the local small armed groups³⁷³.

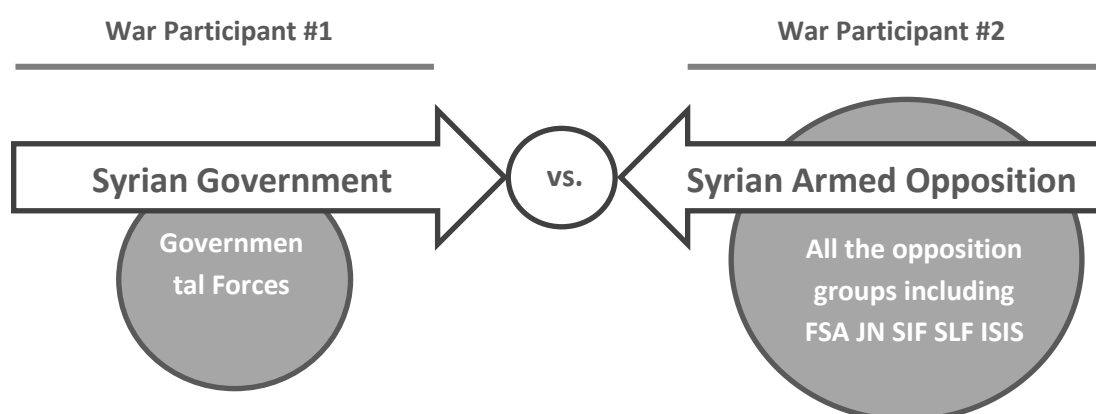
The second major operation was the capture of Mannagh airbase on 6 August 2013. The military base was under siege until June 2013 when the opposition managed to capture some parts of it. However, only in August the rebels managed to coordinate and overrun the airbase after ISIS sent a Saudi jihadi to blow his car before the rebels attacked the base. This was another significant victory for the salafi rebels and yet another indication of coordination between them³⁷⁴.

COW

According to COW, the coordination factor is enough to consider these distinct armed groups as a single participant. Hence, there are two participants in this war: the government and the armed opposition. The government is making the bulk of the fighting against the armed opposition, which makes up the bulk of the fighting on the opposition side. Taking these measures into account, the war until late summer 2013, was still a civil war for central control between a government and an armed opposition. (See the figure 4)

The major issue here is whether or not the distinct armed groups can be put in one basket and considered them one participant due to their coordination in the field. If these groups coordinate, they also fight each other, assassinate each other’s key commanders and occupy each other’s territories³⁷⁵. Arguably, the coordination that these groups have on the ground is a result of the conditions that they face in a given geographic location or a front. Coordination does not necessarily indicate that these groups have a common strategy. Consequently, from time to time, the interests of these distinct groups clash which partly explains the occasional in-rebel confrontations. Perhaps the best example was the ISIS coordination with major rebel groups including JN, despite their disagreements.

Figure 4 War participants decided from COW coding system



Even if we hypothesize that the coordination factor is enough indication to consider all the opposition actors as one participant, does this participant help to describe the war in Syria? putting JN/ISIS and ‘secular’ FSA in one basket is misleading because unlike FSA, ISIS is a non-Syrian organization, it has declared its political agenda that is not limited to the Syrian government, and it has an ideology which does not believe in the notion of state or a central government. However, ISIS was evidently smaller than the FSA but it was a very influential actor in the Syrian war. On the one hand, it is not possible to exclude groups such as JN and ISIS because of their crucial role; on the other hand, putting ISIS or JN and FSA on the same category is misleading. UCDP/PRIO database recognizes the importance of this factor and it offers the notion of dyad, which enables to trace different actors within one conflict.

5.3.2. UCDP/PRIO and the Syrian War

By the time of this research, UCDP/PRIO had already updated its armed conflict database and included the developments in 2012. Regarding Syria, the database identified two distinct rebel groups, which shaped two dyads. The first dyad included the Syrian government and the FSA whereas the second dyad included the Syrian government and JN³⁷⁶. Presumably, the database considered JN and ISI as one body because their distinctiveness was only discovered after April 2013.

UCDP/PRIO database provides very limited explanation about their decisions regarding the coding of the Syrian war. Peter Wallensteen and Lotta Themnér, in a short paper explain the main changes that occurred in the database during 2012. Syria took only a quarter of a page; the authors identified the actors, and described the situation in general. They highlight FSA and JN as two distinct actors in two dyads without referring to SLF or SIF and without explaining the measures they took³⁷⁷.

As explained in this chapter, UCDP/PRIO has four rules to distinguish new armed groups. According to these rules, the Syrian war in summer 2013 may have up to five dyads, with five rebel groups (FSA, SLF, SIF, JN and ISIS). However, these coding rules are not helpful at least to determine the status of FSA and SLF. Some of the SLF battalions fight within the coalition as well as within the FSA; the leadership of FSA encircles some key leaders from SLF (See: Section 5.3.1.) Yet, SLF is clearly a distinct rebel coalition than FSA. Hence, should FSA and SLF be one dyad or on two separate dyads?

Regarding JN and ISIS, UCDP/PRIO rules are clearer. There was an armed group fighting in the civil war, and at some point, the group split into two. In the JN-ISIS case, it is difficult to decide which one was the original group and which one the newborn. In either case, eventually after April 2013, there were two groups ISIS and JN.

What UCDP/PRIO database provided in this regard contributes to the understanding of the distinct participants of the conflict. Nevertheless, it is not sufficient to decide the dyads of the Syrian conflict. This thesis considers three dyads: dyad#1 government vs. FSA, SLF and SIF, dyad#2 government vs. JN, and dyad#3 government vs. ISIS (See Figure 5). This decision is based in the following.

What unites FSA, SIF and SLF fighters is the Syrian nationality. Within these coalitions, there are groups, such as Ahrar al-Sham in SIF or the Chechen Migrants in FSA, who recruited foreign fighters but the overwhelming majority of the recruits in these coalitions are Syrians. The recruitment issue is central because the Syrian war is internal. Both COW and UCDP/PRIO databases emphasize the internality of the civil war but they do not go into details regarding the recruits. The principle of civil war is that a local armed group(s) is fighting the central government to project a change and FSA, SLF and SIF do fulfill this crucial criterion.

These coalitions, however, come from different ideological backgrounds. FSA leaders represent the coalition as 'secular' institution which was initially composed of defectors and by the time civilians joined by carrying arms. Within the FSA, there are religiously oriented groups but FSA as an umbrella organization seeks to replace the Syrian government with a democratic political system. SLF is more religiously oriented. Within the coalition, there are Islamists and salafis who do not necessarily want a democratic state. According to its establishment statement, the coalition seeks to replace the Syrian government with an Islamic state where all Syrians, regardless of their ethnicity or religion, can live together. SIF

includes many fundamental salafi groups who insist on replacing the Syrian government with an Islamic theocracy.

It is necessary to note that even though these coalitions have conflicting ideologies, all the political projects are limited to the state of Syria and its government. Hence, in this case, it is not important what ideology or political agenda they have, what matters is whether their strategies are limited to Syria or not. The ideology becomes a determining factor when its carriers officially do not believe in the notion of state and governance. When the ideology dictates a project of creating a regional or global Islamic state where the Syrian government is an obstacle, then it questions the whole essence of civil war, as both COW and UCDP/PRIO understand it. While FSA, SLF and SIF, are not supportive of such a project, at least on the official level, the other participants JN and ISIS have such motives.

JN and ISIS have different statuses not just in terms of ideology but also recruitment. JN reportedly contains many Syrian combatants but the leadership of the group includes prominent global Syrian and non-Syrian jihadists. Furthermore, many foreign fighters aim to join JN since it is the dominant global jihadist group in Syria. These factors raise controversy about the 'Syrianess' of JN. ISIS is originally an Iraqi organization that expanded to Syria. Plausibly ISIS recruited Syrian fighters with global jihadist ideology by the time it extended into Syria, though the overwhelming majority of its fighters remain from the al-Muhajereen, the foreign combatants.

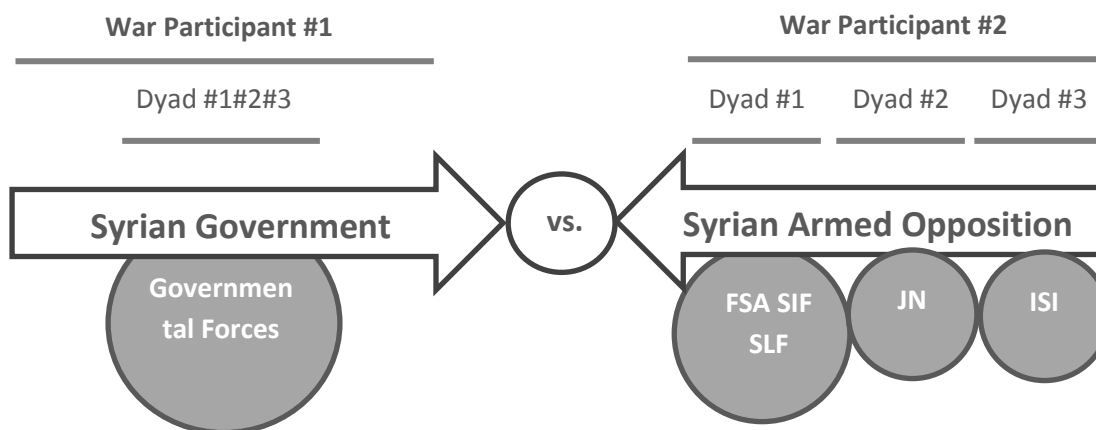
This clarification draws a rather clear line among FSA, SLF and SIF, JN, and ISIS (after April 2013). Despite the similarity of ISIS and JN, after their public confrontation the two organizations increasingly became distinct. Therefore, after April 2013 (until late summer 2013), it is necessary to distinguish between FSA, SLF and SIF, and JN, and ISIS. Accordingly, for 2013, this thesis considers three dyads.

The dyadic approach in this case is very useful. What remains a matter of opinion is which parties are eligible to initiate a new dyad. At least in this research, the principle of dyad is more significant subject of analysis rather than the number of dyads that the Syrian war might have.

The only remaining question in this section is whether the principle of dyad solves the problem of that COW coding system has regarding the multiple participants. There is no doubt that UCDP/PRIO coding rules enable the researcher to identify distinct groups within an armed opposition. It does not count all the armed groups as single unit disrespecting the

difference. However, this approach does not solve the problem entirely, because the image is clear when there is only one dyad but when there are multiple dyads then the bigger picture becomes blurry again (discussed below).

Figure 5 War participants decided from UCDP/PRIO coding system



5.4. Revisiting the hypothesis

As stated in the methodology part, the objective of this research is to carry a “most likely” case study by testing two conflict typology databases: COW – the primary source – and UCDP/PRIO – the alternative sources. Hypothetically, these two databases are “likely” to explain the type of the conflict in Syria. To test the databases, the research adopts the principle, on which COW and UCDP/PRIO lies, as the hypothesis of the research: the status of the participants and the level of violence describe the type of the conflict.

The test is carried out in light of the empirical evidence provided from the Syrian war, which had three major phases. The first phase of the conflict started with the onset of the civil war in September 2011 and ended in late summer 2012 (Chapter 3). The second phase started with the overt internationalization of the conflict, which started during summer 2012 (Chapter 4). The conflict remained internationalized at least until the time of the thesis writing process. The last phase starts early summer 2013, when the nature of the war significantly diverted from being a civil war.

5.4.1. First phase

According empirical evidence presented in the third chapter, the Syrian war started in late September 2011 between the Syrian Government and the FSA, an umbrella organization. Hence, in terms of the war participants there were two, fighting each other within the Syrian territory. The war between the participants caused 2,748 BRD between September 2011 and March 2012. According to the COW project, this conflict fulfilled the criteria of civil war.

The same argument can be made about UCDP/PRIO database. The only difference is related to the BRD. The database considers the civilians who died in combat and includes them in the counting of BRD. According to UCDP/PRIO database update in 2011, the Syrian conflict starts in September 2011 with one dyad, the government against the FSA. The conflict in 2011, however, is considered a minor. Only in 2012, the conflict turns to a war. The 2012 update of the database highlights that the Syrian conflict turned to a war and the estimated death toll was between 14,830 and 30,805 BRD³⁷⁸.

The empirical data shows that in the first phase of the conflict, the status of the participants and the level of violence defined the conflict as was civil war (or intra-state war), which is an identifiable type of war according to the COW and UCDP/PRIO conflict typology. This outcome indicates that the databases succeeded the “most likely” test case by being able to identify the war in Syria in the first phase.

5.4.2. Second phase

Throughout the second phase, the level of violence met the requirements of war level by remaining above 1,000 BRD a year. Additionally, in this phase of the conflict, two crucial developments took place. First, the conflict became increasingly internationalized; second, the number of armed groups multiplied.

The conflict became internationalized because the conflicting parties received decisive foreign financial support and welcomed foreign troops. On the government’s side, the involvement of LH and Iraqi militias (LAFA) was noticeable; they first had covert presence in Syria but later on declared their activities officially. On the opposition side, the creation of JN was significant. A non-state armed group, which contained many foreign fighters with global jihadist ideology. This challenged the internality of the conflict. Throughout 2012, some local armed groups tried to coin a coalition outside the FSA wing. By the end of the year there were at least two new coalitions SLF and SIF.

This thesis, in contrast, claims that the conflict in Syria after summer 2012 became internationalized not merely because of the foreign support of different kinds but also due to direct foreign involvement. Between 3,500 to 6,000 foreign combatants (LH 3,000 to 4,000 and LAFA 500 to 2,000) were officially fighting with the GF without taking on the bulk of the fighting. Among the armed opposition, approximately 3,000 to 11,000 foreign combatants fought against the government.

However, for COW and UCDP/PRIO these factors are not sufficient to make the civil war internationalized. Any kind of foreign assistance is not considered an indication of internationalization. Concerning the non-state armed groups who officially interfered in the Syrian civil war, are also not considered in the condign systems of the two databases. A civil war becomes internationalized only when a state actor intervenes with active troops without taking on the bulk of the fighting.

If we understand “internationalization” as the in this thesis, then COW and UCDP/PRIO do not have any category to which the Syrian war can fit. Even though COW did not include Syria in its updates yet, the current coding rules and the identified wars cannot fully explain the Syrian war. UCDP/PRIO, in their latest database update, 2012, they dismiss the role of foreign non-state armed groups’ official and unofficial involvement, in spite of their importance. In sum, if we adopt the definition of “internationalization” as COW and UCDP/PRIO databases define, then the war in the second phase remains a civil war.

5.4.3. Third phase

During the third phase, explained in the beginning of this chapter, the internationalization of the conflict continued with all means. The actors also increased in numbers. Both the FSA and salafi groups tried to reorganize their ranks, though they could not form one national opposition group. The picture in summer 2013 was as follows: the government, with the help of foreign militias, was confronting major opposition coalitions including, FSA, SLF, SIF, JN and ISIS. FSA became increasingly weak and unorganized. SLF and SIF remained strong coalitions relying on key members such as Suqour al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham, respectively. Despite the public animosity between JN and ISIS, both remained key combating, if not the leading, forces on the ground.

The disjunction of JN and ISIS in April 2013 was a major turning point in the history of the conflict. JN had already raised concerns about its ‘Syrianness’. After the break up, ISIS entered in the equation as a non-Syrian non-state armed group and further complicated the picture. Thus, not only JN but also ISIS challenged the principle of civil war in Syria. The main problem is that these two groups are key actors besides the local armed opposition. Hence, the major change from phase two to phase three was the rise of external actors at least as equally important combat force besides the national groups.

For COW, all these actors within the armed opposition are considered a one participant if they coordinate their actions against the government. As chapter five showed, there was a

significant level of coordination between all the mentioned armed groups. Accordingly, for COW the participants of the Syrian war would be the Syrian GF, participant #1, fighting the Syrian armed opposition, participant #2, as one participant.

Looking at COW coding system in light of the hypothesis shows that the level of violence and the status of the participants do not necessarily define the war. The first independent variable successfully defines the intensity of the conflict – war. Regarding the second independent variable, the image is more complicated. If we take the two participants of the war, as COW understands (see Figure 4), the type of the conflict cannot be precisely described. If the status of the government is clear as a participant #1, the status of the armed opposition, participant #2, is not clear because it is a hodgepodge of different kinds of actors, foreign and local. Therefore, the status of the participants does not necessarily define the war. In this manner, COW fails to explain the Syrian war in its third phase and therefore fails the “most likely” test case.

The alternative source, UCDP/PRIO, with its dyadic approach tries to fill the gap that COW leaves by putting all the opposition armed groups in one basket. In the dyad#1 (see Figure 5) the government is fighting FSA, SLF and SIF. This dyad refers to a civil war because a government is fighting a predominantly local armed group. In the dyad#2, the government is fighting JN, which after April 2013 became Syrian armed group with significant number of foreign fighters and with a global jihadist ideology. UCDP/PRIO 2012 database considered JN a local group with foreign fighters³⁷⁹. If we follow their interpretation, which is arguably not very precise, then the second dyad is also a civil war.

The third dyad#3 represents a war between the government and an external non-state actor within the government’s sovereign borders. Even though the 2013 update of the database is not issued yet, there is not any criterion where this war can fit. Furthermore, each dyad may be able to explain the war separately, but if we take the three dyads together then the same problem, as with COW, arises. Can all these participants together define the war? Or can these three dyads together define the war?

Studying UCDP/PRIO databases coding system in light to the hypothesis gives similar results as the COW. The level of violence successfully defines the intensity of the conflict, whereas the status of the participants, including all the participants in all three dyads, is not clear and hence it does not define the type of the conflict. Accordingly, the alternative database also fails to explain the type of the conflict in Syria in the third phase.

5.5. Conclusion

This chapter ended the research by fulfilling its objective. The entire research design was constructed to test two dominant theoretical sources, Correlates of War Project initiated by David J. Singer and Melvin Small and continued by Frank Wayman and Mreedith Sarkees, and UCDP/PRIO a joint project lunched by Uppsala Conflict Data Program and the Peace Research institute of Oslo. The objective of this research was to test theories, who take level of violence and the status of the participant as core measures to define any kind of war. To test this hypothesis, the research adopted the Syrian war as a case study.

The empirical evidence and the “most likely” test process showed that the first phase of the conflict perfectly fits into one of the categories of COW and UCDP/PRIO, civil war over central control or intra-state conflict over central control. The status of the participants was clear and the level of violence was measurable by the coding rules. Accordingly, the examination of the Syrian case verified the databases.

The second phase of the conflict in Syria challenged the coding mechanism of the theoretical sources regarding internationalization factor. The level of violence remained above the requirement, meaning that the conflict was identified as war. However, the participants, identified by COW and UCDP/PRIO did not necessarily define the war because some of the key actors not considered. Yet, this problem does not falsify the hypothesis because the issue is related to the definition of internationalization and not to the core principle that COW and UCDP/PRIO databases lies.

The third phase, unlike the previous phases, falsifies the hypothesis. While the level of violence, first independent variable, successfully defines the intensity of the conflict, the second variable fails to define the type of the war. By taking all the distinct participants of the Syrian armed opposition, their status becomes unclear because of their mixed characteristics. When the status of the participant is not clear, the type of the conflict cannot be decided. Consequently, this test concludes that the level of violence and the status of the participants do not necessarily define the war.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

With the scientific achievements of the human being, our understanding of the surrounding phenomena became increasingly complex. While war has always been a complex phenomenon, our perception of war developed by the time to become increasingly labyrinthine. Currently, it is possible to study war from dozens of different perspectives and not merely focusing on the physical violence or the status of its wagers. This research focused on intra-state armed conflict, and tried to identify type of the conflict according to the level of violence and the status of the participants.

The results of the empirical research show that the level of violence and the status of the participants can define the type of the conflict. However, it is not always the case. The Syrian conflict showed that at its first phases, both databases were able to identify the type of the war based on their typology. For COW, the conflict in Syria started in September 2011 as a civil war for the central control or (type 4) according to the COW war typology (see Appendix table 3). For UCDP/PRIO, the conflict at its onset is identified as internal armed conflict for the central control or (type 3a) according to their conflict typology (see Appendix table 4).

With the evolution of the conflict, the status of the participants changed thereby changing the type of the conflict. COW and UCDP/PRIO could not adequately define the new status of the participants and thereby failing to explain adequately the type of the conflict according to their typologies. Based on the findings, this thesis considers the official intervention of foreign non-state armed groups with active troops as an indication of internationalization. However, for the databases, the conflict in this phase remained a civil war for the central control and it did not become internationalized because there was no direct intervention from any state.

By looking at the conflict typology developed by COW and UCDP/PRIO (Appendix, table 3 and 4), it is not possible to identify this war. On the one hand, if we consider the war in the second phase a civil for the central control, then the internationalization factor will be completely dismissed. The empirical evidence in the thesis showed the significant change the occurred in the second phase comparing to the first one. On the other hand, we cannot consider the war an internationalized (Table 3, type 4a; table 4, type4) because there is no official troops intervention by any state. In short, the second phase cannot be adequately explained according to the COW and UCDP/PRIO typologies.

The same problem identified in the second phase becomes more complicated in the third phase. During the latter phase, in addition to the internationalization factor, some foreign NSAs started playing rather significant role, which jeopardized the internality of the conflict. This factor also makes adequate identification of the Syrian war according to COW and UCDP/PRIO databases not possible. Moreover, the key problem in this phase, which challenges the principle of the databases, is that the status of the armed opposition is not clear. If the status is not clear then it is not possible to identify the war according to that criterion.

The central problem of the COW and UCDP/PRIO principle is that in complex wars like the Syrian war, the status of the participants is not necessarily clear. What complicates the image even further is the number of the participants. As the empirical data showed, the conflict in Syria was not simply between the forces loyal to the government and a unified and coherent armed opposition. Within the armed opposition, for instance, it was possible to identify at least five distinct armed groups/umbrella-organizations, FSA, JN, SLF, SIF and ISIS. Each of these groups had a special status.

In fact, there is a status-consideration dilemma. On the one hand, adopting UCDP/PRIO database's dyadic system and organizing each distinct armed group with the government in one dyad is helpful to understand the nature of the dyad but not the entire conflict. On the other hand, considering all the conflicting armed groups a single war participant, as COW suggests, hardens the identification of the status of this participant owing to the mixture of different groups with different backgrounds.

Another factor that complicated the Syrian conflict in its third phase and raised challenges for COW and UCDP/PRIO databases is the absence of any clearly dominating armed group within the opposition. While, the GF clearly make up the bulk of the fighting on the government's side there is no dominant group on the opposition side. The first months of 2012, FSA and JN existed and fought the government. FSA as an umbrella organization had clear dominance and it made up the bulk of the fighting on the opposition side. By the time, other groups and organizations challenged the dominance of FSA, though until the end of summer 2013, there had not been any clear dominant actor.

In addition to the main findings of the thesis, the collected information about the Syrian war revealed some other weaknesses of COW and UCDP/PRIO regarding their coding system of internationalized civil wars. Both sources code a civil war as internationalized only if a

foreign state interferes in the war with active troops. If we follow this definition, then the second phase of the Syrian conflict is not an internationalized civil war.

This narrow definition ignores many different means of foreign support. As the empirical data showed in the fourth chapter, the foreign fund and military support were decisive for the survival of the key conflicting actors in the Syrian conflict. Furthermore, both databases do not consider that not solely states but also non-state armed groups can intervene directly and officially in a civil war. The Syrian armed conflict is a case in point where different foreign NSAs such as LH, LAFA and ISIS overtly take part in the combat in Syria. This issue, however, is related to the coding system that is imposed by each project. Thus, beside the main findings of the thesis, the research can also be a contribution to the developing of COW and UCDP/PRIODATA databases' coding systems and make them rethink about considering the role of the foreign NSAs in civil wars.

The conflict in Syria does not end with the third phase, identified in the thesis. The armed opposition is becoming increasingly versatile; there are groups who claim to be secular others fight for rule of God on earth; some fight for democratic Syria, some for an Islamic theocracy, some for regional Islamic state some for a global Islamic caliphate. The role of the fundamental religious groups is becoming more evident, but until the beginning of 2014, there had not been any dominant group. In sum, the status of the armed opposition is becoming more blurry, which makes identifying the conflict based on that factor difficult.

The discussed wars in Syria are not the only ones. The conflict started as a civil war and by the time, it not just transformed to other types of conflicts but also enabled to the occurrence of other wars within the country. For instance, by the end of 2013, a new war, identified as inter-communal war, became increasingly obvious among some of the key NSAs without the involvement of the government³⁸⁰. This indicates that there is a need for further research not just regarding the main conflict between the government and the armed opposition but also other incompatibilities that involve other armed actors. This research paves the way for such future research especially that the Syrian war is still ongoing.

APPENDIX 1: COW and UCDP/PRIO Conflict Typologies

Table 3 COW Project's Expanded Typology of War

Expanded Typology

I. Inter-state war (war type 1)
II. Extra-state war
a. Colonial – Conflict with colony (war type 2)
b. Imperial – state vs. non-state (war type 3)
III. Intra-state wars
a. Civil wars
i. For central control (war type 4)
ii. Over local issue (war type 5)
b. Internationalized civil war (Type 4a) ^{vi}
c. Regional internal (war type 6)
d. Inter-communal (war type 7)
IV. Non-state wars
In non-state territory (war type 8)
a. Across state borders (war type 9)

Source: adopted from Sarkees and Wayman, *Resort to War*, 46.

Table 4 UCDP/PRIO conflict typology

UCDP/PRIO conflict Typology

I. Extrasystemic armed conflict (type 1)
II. Inter-state armed conflict (type 2)
III. Internal armed conflict (type 3)
a. For the central control (type 3a)
b. For a territory (type 3b)
IV. Internationalized armed conflict (type 4)

Source: adopted from Gleditsch et al. "Armed Conflict 1946-2001," 619.

^{vi} This type is not included in their original table. The author included it to make it clear for the reader. To read more about internationalized civil war (see: Sarkees and Wayman, *Resort to War*, 42, 56-57).

APPENDIX 2: Newspaper Articles and Videos

Newspaper Articles

- “16 casualties in Syria from which 10 are soldiers during confrontations with the defectors.” [قتيلا في سورية 16] *Russia Today*, November 30, 2011. Accessed November 28, 2013. <http://arabic.rt.com/news/572973//>
- “25 Syrians killed in Deraa unrest.” *Middle East Online*, April 25, 2011. Accessed November 28, 2013. <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=45770;>
- “31 Syrian civilians were dead in the central and southern parts of Syria.” [مقتل 31 سورياً مدنيين وعسكريين وسط سوريا] *Alryadh*, October 11, 2011. Accessed November 27, 2013. <http://www.alriyadh.com/article674555.html>
- “40 soldiers and civilians dead during skirmishes in Deraa.” [مقتل 40 عسكريا ومدنيا في مواجهات جديدة في درعا] *BBC Arabic*, November 14, 2011. Accessed November 28, 2013. http://www.bbc.co.uk/arabic/middleeast/2011/11/111114_syria_killings.shtml
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- “Al-Qaeda probably responsible Syrian suicide bombings, US spy chief claims.” *The Telegraph*, February 12, 2012. Accessed February 14, 2014. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9087927/Al-Qaeda-probably-responsible-Syrian-suicide-bombings-US-spy-chief-claims.html>
- “Armed defectors attack the Air Intelligence branch in countryside Damascus.” [منشقون مسلحون يهاجمون المخابرات] *Middle East Online*, November 6, 2011. Accessed November 28, 2013. <http://www.middle-east-online.com/?id=120473>
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²³⁴ "Defected officers declare the formation of 'Syrian Free Army', 29-7-2011."

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al'As'ad: We decided to shape the military councils to protect the Syrian people and put serious effort to topple the regime” [العقيد رياض الأسد: "قررنا تشكيل المجلس العسكري المؤقت لحماية الشعب السوري والعمل على إسقاط النظام بشكل جدي"] November 17, 2013, accessed January 10, 2013 <http://www.france24.com/ar/20111117->; Richard Spencer, “Syrian army defectors attack intelligence complex,” *The Telegraph*, November 16, 2011, accessed January 10, 2014 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/8893690/Syrian-army-defectors-attack-intelligence-complex.html>; There is another narrative which claims that this was not Colonel Asa'd's initiative but it was a US project promoted by the Syrian Support Group (See Lund, “Syria’s Salafi Insurgents,”¹²)

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²³⁹ Qabalan, “Syrian Armed Opposition,” 5; “Defected brigadier general Mustafa al-Sheikh announces the establishment of the ‘Revolutionary Military Council’ for the ‘liberation’ of Syria” [العميد المنشق مصطفى الشيخ يعلن «تشكيل «المجلس العسكري الثوري» لـ «تحرير» سوريا] *Middle East*, February 7, 2012, accessed January 10, 2014 <http://aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=662508&issueno=12124#.Utb7ARC1aFE>

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²⁴¹ Qabalan, “Syrian Armed Opposition,” 6; “Deaths in Syria and disagreements in the Syrian Free Army” [قتلى في سوريا وخلافات في الجيش الحر] *Aljazeera Arabic*, May 31, 2012, accessed January 10, 2014 <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/609f4f8f-5792-4b8c-acbd-432c4d3fc6d6>; After this incident there was another unification attempt made by Major General Mohammed Hussein Haj Ali made August 2012. The initiative aimed to unify the leadership of the armed opposition under the “Syrian National Army”. Nevertheless, this project was not realized. (See: Qabalan, “Syrian Armed Opposition,” 8; Lund, “Syria’s Salafi Insurgents,” 12; “Major General Mohamed Hussein Haj” [اللواء محمد حسين الحاج علي], *Aljazeera English*, August 2, 2012, accessed January 10, 2014 <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/203723a1-3e29-4acf-a2f8-9fd4b74af6ba>

²⁴² Joseph Holliday, “Syria’s Maturing Insurgency,” *Institute for The Study of War*, (2012): 10,18 accessed February 18, 2014 http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syrias_MaturingInsurgency_21June2012.pdf

²⁴³ See O’Bagy “The Free Syrian Army” 19.

²⁴⁴ See: Holliday, “The Assad Regime,” 28; See: Holliday, “Syria’s Maturing Insurgency,” 9; “Syrian civil war: A rising death count,” *The Washington Post*, March 2011, accessed January 10, 2014 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/world/syrian-uprising-one-year-of-bloodshed/index.html>

²⁴⁵ Holliday, “Syria’s Armed Opposition,” 9

²⁴⁶ Ibid, 30-31;

²⁴⁷ Ibid, 31

²⁴⁸ Jay Solomon and Nour Malas “U.S. Bolsters Ties to Fighters in Syria,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 13, 2012, accessed January 10, 2014 <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702303410404577464763551149048>; see: Karen DeYoung and Liz Sly, “Syrian rebels get influx of arms with gulf neighbors’ money, U.S. coordination,” *The Washington Post*, May 16, 2012, accessed January 10, 2014 http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/syrian-rebels-get-influx-of-arms-with-gulf-neighbors-money-us-coordination/2012/05/15/gIQAAds2TSU_story.html; Eric Schmitt, “C.I.A. Said to Aid in Steering Arms to Syrian Opposition,” *The New York Times*, June 21, 2012, accessed January 10 2014 <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/21/world/middleeast/cia-said-to-aid-in-steering->

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²⁴⁹ Holliday, “Syria’s Maturing Insurgency,” 29; Rania Abouzeid “Opening the Weapons Tap: Syria’s Rebels Await Fresh and Free Ammo,” *Time*, June 22, 2012, accessed January 11, 2014 <http://world.time.com/2012/06/22/opening-the-weapons-tap-syrias-rebels-await-fresh-and-free-ammo/> ; also see: Jonathan Spyer, “Analysis: Syrian Civil War Enters New Phase,” *Global Research in International Affairs*, July 19, 2012, accessed January 11, 2014 <http://www.gloria-center.org/2012/07/analysis-syrian-civil-war-enters-new-phase/>

²⁵⁰ Holliday, “Syria’s Maturing Insurgency,” 29

²⁵¹ “The Politics of Sectarianism,” *Project on Middle East Political Science*, (2013):26, accessed January 26, 2014.

²⁵² Joseph Holliday, “Syria’s Maturing Insurgency,” 29

²⁵³ Qabalan, “Syrian Armed Opposition,” 9; O’Bagy “The Free Syrian Army,” 13

²⁵⁴ O’Bagy “The Free Syrian Army,” 11

²⁵⁵ Military councils of Idlib, Homs, Hama, Sahel, Aleppo, Raqqa, Hasaka, Qunaitira, Siweida, Deraa, Der ez-Zour and Damascus.

The members of the Joint Command were five: Brigadier General Mithal al-Bateesh, Brigadier General Salim Idriss, Brigadier General Abdel Najid Dabis, Brigadier General Zaki Loli and Brigadier general Ziad Fahd.

²⁵⁶ O’Bagy “The Free Syrian Army,” 15.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar play crucial role in both the Syrian armed conflict and the political struggle. Any study of this kind should take these two actors role into consideration. Their involvement in the Syrian crisis has changed many factors. As many sources indicate there is a rivalry and competition between these two rich countries to have the ‘upper hand’ in Syria. Accordingly, they support financially, militarily and politically the groups that are loyal to them and promise loyalty in the post-Assad era. See: “Saudi-Qatar Rivalry Divides Syrian Opposition,” *The New York Times*, January 1, 2014, accessed January 11, 2014

http://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2014/01/15/world/middleeast/15reuters-syria-crisis-qatar.html?partner=rss&emc=rss&_r=0 ; Fehim Tastekin and Timur Goksel , “Saudi Arabia and Qatar Vie for Influence in Syria,” *al-Monitor*, April 17, 2013, accessed January 11 2014 <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2013/04/saudi-arabia-qatar-vie-influence-syria.html#> ; Daniel Wagner and Giorgio Cafiero, “The Simmering Rivalry Between Qatar and Saudi Arabia,” *Huffington Post*, December 7, 2013, accessed January 11, 2014 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/daniel-wagner/the-simmering-rivalry-bet_b_3585424.html

²⁵⁷ “Unification of the Rebels inside Syria in five fronts”[توحيد كتائب الثوار السوريين بالداخل في 5 جبهات], November 5, 2012, accessed January 11, 2014 <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/11/05/247699.html> ; also see: O’Bagy “The Free Syrian Army,” 15

²⁵⁸ Neil MacFarquhar and Hawaida Saad, “Rebel Groups in Syria Make Framework for Military,” *The New York Times*, December 7, 2012, accessed January 11, 2014

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/08/world/middleeast/rebel-groups-in-syria-make-framework-for-military.html?_r=0

²⁵⁹ “Statement on the Formation of the Supreme Military Council Command of Syria,” *Carnegie Middle East*, December 15, 2012, accessed January 11, 2014 <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=50445> ;

Jeffrey White, Andrew J. Tabler and Aaron Y. Zelin "Syria's Military Opposition," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy for Near East Policy*, (2013):21, accessed February 19, 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus128WhiteTablerZelin.pdf> ; See the full structure of SMC "structure of the supreme military council" *Syrian Support Group Policy Blog* "blog," accessed January 11, 2014 <http://ssgpolicyblog.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/smc-structure.jpg>

²⁶⁰ O'Bagy "The Free Syrian Army," 11; see "The Politics of Sectarianism," 26

²⁶¹ see O'Bagy "The Free Syrian Army," 14

²⁶² O'Bagy 2013, 14. There are other examples given by the same source in the same page.

²⁶³ "The announcement of Jabhet al-Nusra" [الاعلان عن جبهة النصرة], accessed January 11, 2014 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q3ERodHVVHgo>; "Jabhet al-Nusra's leader, Conqueror Abu Mohamed al-Golani's word" [كلمة الفاتح ابو محمد الجولاني امير جبهة النصرة بالشام], accessed January 11, 2014 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wAf7aft92a4>

²⁶⁴ Abdul Rahman al-Haj, "Salafism and the Salafis in Syria: from reform to Jihad" [السلفية والسلفيون في سورية: من الإصلاح إلى الجهاد], *Aljazeera Center for Studies*, (2013), accessed January 11, 2014 <http://studies.aljazeera.net/reports/2013/05/2013520105748485639.htm>; usually affairs related to jihadists activities are vague and covert therefore the author crosschecked the information. See: "Syrian Islamist groups unite" [كتائب إسلامية سورية تتوحد], accessed January 29, 2014 <http://alhayat.com/Details/558955>; "The Politics of Sectarianism," 26.

It is also worth noting that this information was secret until April 2013, or before the ISI leader al-Baghdadi called the merge between JN and ISI under Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS), which was rejected by JN leader al-Golani. After this incident, many secrets leaked. For this reason, many article published before April 2013 do not refer to this issue for instance see: Elizabeth O'Bagy, "Jihad in Syria," *Institute for the Study of War*, (2012), accessed February 14, 2014, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Jihad-In-Syria-17SEPT.pdf>

²⁶⁵ O'Bagy "Jihad in Syria," 33-34

²⁶⁶ Al-Haj, "Salafism and the Salafis in Syria"; Hamza Mustafa Mustafa, "Jabhet al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham: From its establishment to its division," *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies*, (2013): 7-8, accessed January 12, 2014 <http://www.dohainstitute.org/file/Get/738cac08-b4c5-4c85-9643-4da5e1443951.pdf>; Holliday, "Syria's Armed Opposition," 34

²⁶⁷ ICG 2012, 10,12-13; Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Rise of Al Qaeda in Syria," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, December 6, 2013, accessed January 29 2014 <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-al-qaeda-in-syria>

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²⁶⁹ "Tentative Jihad," 11.

²⁷⁰ O'Bagy "Jihad in Syria," 33

²⁷¹ Aaron Y. Zelin "Jihadists in Syria Can Be Found on the Internet," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, October 18, 2012, accessed January 24, 2014 <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/jihadists-in-syria-can-be-found-on-the-internet>

²⁷² See: "Syria's jihadists," *The Economist*, December 17, 2012, accessed January 28, 2014 <http://www.economist.com/blogs/pomegranate/2012/12/jabhat-al-nusra> ;

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²⁷³ Al-Haj, “Salafism and the Salafis in Syria”

²⁷⁴ See: White, Tabler and Zelin, “Syria’s Military Opposition,” 27

²⁷⁵ For instance Saudi officials banned private donations to jihadist groups in Syria and they oppose the active support of the politicized Kuwaiti who uses Kuwait as a hub for Saudi donations See: Thom Pierret “external support and the Syrian insurgency,” *Foreign Policy*, August 9, 2013, accessed January 14, 2014 http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/08/09/external_support_and_the_syrian_insurgency
See also: White, Tabler and Zelin “Syria’s Military Opposition,” 27-28; also see Mustafa “Jabhet al-Nusra,” 13.

²⁷⁶ Mustafa “Jabhet al-Nusra,” 13; White, Tabler and Zelin “Syria’s Military Opposition,” 27

²⁷⁷ Ruth Sherlock, “Syria's Assad accused of boosting al-Qaeda with secret oil deals,” *The Telegraph*, January 20, 2014, accessed March 10 2014 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10585391/Syrias-Assad-accused-of-boosting-al-Qaeda-with-secret-oil-deals.html> ; Mohammad Ballout and Kamal Fayad, “Battle for Oil Intensifies Between Syrian Kurds, Jihadists,” *al-Monitor*, July 30, 2013, accessed January 10 2014 <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2013/07/battle-oil-north-syria-kurds-jihadists.html>

²⁷⁸ “Profile: Fatah al-Islam,” *BBC*, August 10, 2010, accessed January 29, 2014 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-10979788>

²⁷⁹ According to Mustafa “Jabhet al-Nusra” the Council consists of Abu Mohammed al-Golani, Ayman al Zawahiri (observer), Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Abu Ali al-Iraqi, Abu Mohammad al-Adnani and abu Maria al Iraqi and others

²⁸⁰ Rania Abouzeid, “Interview with Official of Jabhat al-Nusra, Syria’s Islamist Militia Group,” *Time*, December 25, 2012, accessed January 14 2014 <http://world.time.com/2012/12/25/interview-with-a-newly-designated-syrias-jabhat-al-nusra/>

²⁸¹ William Booth, “Israeli study of foreign fighters in Syria suggests Shiites may outnumber Sunnis,” January 2, 2014, accessed March 10, 2014 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2014/01/02/israeli-study-of-foreign-fighters-in-syria-suggests-shiites-may-outnumber-sunnis/> ; “Foreign Fighters in Syria,” *The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center*, (2013): 13-14, accessed January 14, 2014 http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/Data/articles/Art_20607/E_207_13_1157524947.pdf 13-14; Alex Spillius, “Number of foreign fighters in Syria nearly doubles,” *The Telegraph*, December 17, 2013, accessed January 11, 2014 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10523203/Number-of-foreign-fighters-in-Syria-nearly-doubles.html> ; Aaron Y. Zelin, “Up to 11,000 Foreign Fighters in Syria; Steep Rise Among Western Europeans,” *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, December 17, 2013, accessed January 11, 2014 <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/up-to-11000-foreign-fighters-in-syria-steep-rise-among-western-europeans> ; Aaron Y. Zelin “Who Are the Foreign Fighters in Syria?,” *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, December 5, 2013, accessed January 11, 2014 <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/who-are-the-foreign-fighters-in-syria> ; “Foreign Fighters in Syria: Still Doing Battle, Still a Multidimensional Danger,” *Foundation pour la Recherche Strategique*, 13 (2013), accessed January 11, 2014 <http://www.frstrategie.org/barreFRS/publications/notes/2013/201324.pdf>

²⁸² This unprecedented increase in foreign fighters in the side of the rebel groups should not be cut out from the context of the conflict, and specially the religious factor. The flux of the foreign fighters who are mainly Sunni fundamentalists should be seen as the result of certain kind of interpretation of the Syrian war. Groups like al-Nusra consider this war a holy war against the heretics (especially Alawites) who are killing Sunni Muslims. For example, the sectarian massacres, for which the *Shabiha*, Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite militias are accused, are a substantial motive for the Sunni fundamentalists to join the rebels. Moreover, the influx is also seen as a counter balance to the non-state actors that fight with the governmental forces such as Hezbollah, Iranian soldiers and Iraqi militias, who are either Shiites.

²⁸³ Mustafa “Jabhet al-Nusra,” 12.

²⁸⁴ O’Bagy “”Jihad in Syira,” 34

²⁸⁵ Some sources argue that the Syrian government was involved in sending jihadists to Iraq after the US invasion in 2003. To accomplish this policy, the government used Islamist rhetoric and encouraged religious fundamentalism. For instance, the Mufti of Syria encouraged the Muslims in March 2003 to respond to their

duty and go for Jihad in Iraq against the foreign invaders. Hitherto, this rhetoric was very uncommon in Syria. After the US troops left Iraq, the Syrian government retightened the control over the Islamists and detained many of them. Some activists and prominent opposition figures such as well know Haytham Manna argue that many Jihadi leaders of today were released from the Syrian prisons after the amnesties that the President Bashar al-Assad issued over 2011 and 2012. See: Mustafa “Jabhet al-Nusra”; al-Haj “Salafism and the Salafis in Syria”; O’Bagy 2012 “Jihad in Syria”

²⁸⁶ “The story of ‘Sednaya friends’: the three most powerful men in Syria!” [«أصدقاء صيدنايا»: أقوى ثلاثة رجال]، [في سوريا اليوم]، December 16, 2013, accessed January 17, 2014 <http://therepublicgs.net/2013/10/16/> ; al-Haj “Salafism and the Salafis in Syria”; Ibrahim al-Hamidi, “Islamic Battalions in Syria unite with a regional support hitherto to a political solution” [كثائب إسلامية سورية تتوحد بدعم إقليمي استباقاً للحل السياسي]، *Al-Hayat*, December 13, 2013, accessed May 14, 2014 <http://alhayat.com/Details/558955>

²⁸⁷ See: Safinaz Mohamed Ahmed “Jabhet al-Nusra and al-Qaeda .. Syria on the path of Iraq” [جبهة النصرة وتنظيم]، [القاعدة .. سوريا على خطى العراق]، *Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies*, accessed January 10 2014 <http://acpss.ahramdigital.org.eg/Review.aspx?Serial=119>

²⁸⁸ Aaron Lund, “Holy Warriors: a field guide to Syria’s jihadi groups,” *Foreign Policy*, October 2012, accessed February 29, 2014 http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/10/15/holy_warriors

²⁸⁹ Al-Haj “Salafism and the Salafis in Syria.”

²⁹⁰ Thomas Hegghammer and Aaron Y. Zelin, “How Syria’s Civil War Became a Holy Crusade,” *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, July 7, 2013, accessed January 10, 2014 <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-syrias-civil-war-became-a-holy-crusade>

²⁹¹ Al-Haj “Salafism and the Salafis in Syria” and O’Bagy “The Free Syrian Army” consider Ahrar al-Sham as a national salafi group; O’Bagy “The Free Syrian Army” considers Muslim brotherhood as ‘moderate’ salafis whereas al-Haj “Salafism and the Salafis in Syria” considers Liwa al-Haqq as ‘moderate’. See: Al-Haj “Salafism and the Salafis in Syria”; Also See “Tentative Jihad,” 20-21.

²⁹² O’Bagy “Jihad in Syria”; Also See “Tentative Jihad,” 20-21

²⁹³ Lund “Syria’s Salafi Insurgents,” 28-29; Qabalan “Syrian Armed Opposition,” 15-16; “Syria crisis: Guide to armed and political opposition,” *BBC*, December 13, 2013, accessed January 10 2014 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-24403003>

²⁹⁴ Qabalan “Syrian Armed Opposition,” 21-22; “Syria crisis: Guide to armed and political opposition”

²⁹⁵ Qabalan “Syrian Armed Opposition,” 19-20.

²⁹⁶ Lund, “Syria’s Salafi Insurgents,” 29; “Tentative Jihad,” 25

²⁹⁷ In January 2013, three of the groups in the Front, Ahrar al-Sham, Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya and Jamaat al-taliaa al-Islamiya, merged under the name: Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya. Similarly in February 2013, Katibat Suqur al-Islam, Saraya al-Maham al-Khasa, and Katibat al-Hamzah bin Abdul Mutalib unified under Kataeb Hamza Bin Abdelmuttaleb in Damascus and its countryside. Accordingly, the consisting battalions of the Front decreased to six. See: Lund “Syria’s Salafi Insurgents,” 26: for more details see: “The Syrian Islamic Front’s Order of Battle,” *al-Wasat* “blog,” accessed January 23, 2014 <http://thewasat.wordpress.com/2013/01/22/syrian-islamic-fronts-order-of-battle/>

²⁹⁸ Qabalan, “Syrian Armed Opposition”, 16; Lund “Syria’s Salafi Insurgents,” 17.

²⁹⁹ To See the English translation of the charter follow the link: “Charter of the Syrian Islamic Front,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, accessed February 12, 2014 <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=50831>

³⁰⁰ Lund “Syria’s Salafi Insurgents,” 16.

³⁰¹ Lund “Syria’s Salafi Insurgents,” 15,22; “Charter of the Syrian Islamic Front”

³⁰² Lund “Syria’s Salafi Insurgents,” 18.

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- ³⁰³ White, Tabler and Zelin “Syria’s Military Opposition,” 7
- ³⁰⁴ See “Charter of the Syrian Islamic Front,”
- ³⁰⁵ See Lund “Syria’s Salafi Insurgents,” 15.
- ³⁰⁶ White, Tabler and Zelin “Syria’s Military Opposition,” 28-29; Lund, “Holy Warriors”
- ³⁰⁷ Lund “Syria’s Salafi Insurgents,” 18.
- ³⁰⁸ Ibid, 18.
- ³⁰⁹ Ibid,” 18.
- ³¹⁰ Ibid,” 17.
- ³¹¹ White, Tabler and Zelin “Syria’s Military Opposition,” 18; “The founding statement of the’ Syria Liberation Front,” *al-Farok*, September 13, 2013, accessed February 14, 2014 <http://www.al-farok.com/archives/1049>
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- ³¹³ Qabalan “Syrian Armed Opposition,” 22
- ³¹⁴ Ibid, 23
- ³¹⁵ Noah Bonsey, “Liberation Front Represents Mainstream National Militant Alliance,” *Syria Comment*, February 11, 2013, accessed February 14, 2014 <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/noah-bonsey-liberation-front-represents-mainstream-national-militant-alliance/>
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- ³¹⁷ Ibid, 16
- ³¹⁸ “The founding statement of the’ Syria Liberation Front”; Qabalan “Syrian Armed Opposition,” 22; White, Tabler and Zelin “Syria’s Military Opposition,” 18
- ³¹⁹ Asher Berman “Syrian Rebel Use of Social Media,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute E-Notes*, (2012), accessed February 3, 2014, http://www.fpri.org/docs/MEMM_2012_10_Berman.pdf
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- Warrick, “Private money pours into Syrian conflict as rich donors pick sides”
- ³²² Lund “Syria’s Armed Opposition,” 24.
- ³²³ Ibid, 38.
- ³²⁴ Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Aaron Y. Zelin “Uncharitable Organizations,” *Foreign Policy*, February 26, 2013, accessed February 14, 2014 http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/02/26/uncharitable_organizations
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- ³³⁰ Lund "Syria's Salafi Insurgents," 11; "Victories of the FSA," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 1111 (2012), accessed February 14, 2014 <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2012/1111/re7.htm>
- ³³¹ O'Bady "The Free Syrian Army," 41
- ³³² "The statement of Souqur al-Sham's leader with the Bahraini deputies" [بيان لقائد صقور الشام مع النواب البحرينيين] accessed February 14, 2014 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oswZiTxOow4&feature=share> ; also see "Suqour al-Sham Reveals Sources of Funds," *Syria Survey* "blog," accessed February 14, 2014 <http://syriasurvey.blogspot.fi/2012/08/suqour-al-sham-reveals-sources-of-funds.html>
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³⁵⁶ In the history of Islam, al-Ansar refer to the Medina residents who helped the Muhajereen and the prophet to enter Medina and wage war for Islam. In the Syrian context, al-Ansar refers to the local jihadists whereas al-Muhajereen refers to the foreigners.

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³⁶⁰ Until April 2013, JN will include ISI fighters as well. After April 2013, JN becomes distinct group and the ISIS emerges.

³⁶¹ Bill Roggio, "Al Nusrah Front Seizes Control

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