

# Syria: Examining the Roots of the Present Civil War

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**Abstract.** *On the morning of January 4<sup>th</sup> 2011, as the dawning sun gilded the fruit stalls of the small Tunisian hamlet of Sidi Bouzid, a young street vendor immolated himself in a desperate and resounding response to the exponential boldness of the country's authorities. Fundamentally emblematic of a wider social resentment against the precariousness of Tunisian daily life, the suicide of Mohamed Bouazizi also proved to be the spark that ignited numerous blazes across North Africa and the Middle East, instantaneously laying the foundations of what is now known as the "Arab Spring". It is however in Syria that the tremors of this socio-political earthquake were the most acutely felt. Indeed, after more than five years of belligerence, with a death toll now surpassing the 400,000 mark and a migration crisis that has compelled millions to flee, the Syrian War has now reached an apex of inextricability that genuinely dismays the hopes of a foreseeable resolution (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 2016). In this context, it seems imperative to examine the roots of this intricate conflict in order to hopefully progress, incrementally, towards an eventual conclusion. Therefore, the task of this essay is to survey to fundamental causes of the Syrian War and to assess their relative ascendancy in its outbreak. To achieve this endeavour, we will engage in a critical utilization of the greed and grievance model sketched by Collier (2000) by drawing chiefly on the horizontal inequalities and social contract theories outlined by Stewart (2010). An initial chapter will therefore be dedicated to the establishment of the contextual and definitional milestones that characterize this conflict and a second chapter will examine its most central causes. Thus, we will advocate for an understanding of the causes of armed conflicts that emphasises on the symbiotic influence of greed and grievance incentives and that stresses the inescapable necessity of employing them in an individualised and context-based framework.*

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## **The Three Constitutive Layers of the Syrian War**

Any attempt at examining the roots of armed conflicts ought to apprehend the problem with nuances and prudence. Indeed, none of the major theorists that have examined the question have suggested that there is an overarching model with predictive certainty that would be germane to all scenarios (Sambanis & Collier, 2005). Hence, rather than aiming at universality and synthesis, the ambition of this analysis is to provide a patchwork of potential causes that, far from being mutually exclusive, seemed to have reinforced and amplified each other in that particular context.

Therefore, it appears compulsory, as a primary step, to engage in a categorisation effort and to outline the definitional and contextual boundaries within which this conflict lays. Thus, by attempting to label and to comprehend the very nature of this war, we will be better qualified to determine its inherent causes. Consequently, the purpose of this first chapter will not be to provide a narrative timeline of events, but will rather aim at shedding a light on the three constitutive layers that define and characterise the Syrian War.

### **1.1. The Civil War**

The first constitutive layer that typifies the Syrian War is, irrefutably, the intrastate struggle that has been igniting the country since the outbreak of the “Arab Spring”. Indeed, after several decades of relative stability induced by the authoritarianism of the Baath party, the nation plunged into a period of pure political pandemonium after the revolutionary tidal wave reached Damascus in January 2011 (Rodgers, Gritten, Offer, & Asare, 2016). Instantaneously, the leadership of President Bashar Al-Assad was assailed by numerous actors eager to capitalize on his faltering authority. In the vanishing days of that year, after months of uprisings oppressed in bloodsheds, it became ever clearer that Syria was politically and socially atomizing.

Exponentially, this polarization cemented and the conflict eventually became thoroughly in step with the broadly accepted definition of a civil war since the hostilities were taking place “within the boundaries of a recognized sovereign entity between parties subject to a common authority” (Kalyvas, 2006, p. 7). Indeed, on one side, the Loyalist forces, of Alawite descent (i.e. a branch of Shia Islam), are fighting on behalf of President Al-Assad and are holding Damascus, most of the bigger cities and the coastal lowlands. On the opposite side, a complex web of rebel groups scattered across the northern regions, mainly of Sunni lineage, are all aspiring at toppling the regime despite their ideological and political heterogeneity (Rodgers *et al.*, 2016).

Moreover, the mere scale of the upheaval and the exponential dualisation of the “monopoly on violence” clearly distinguish this belligerence from simple insurgencies or revolts (Weber, 2013). Hence, even though the outlines of both sides are still today rather blurred and malleable, it appears that the increasing atomization of these dif-

ferent factions has directly contributed to the breeding of power avidities and of political instability and has simultaneously confirmed the adequacy of the civil war label. Fundamentally, these internal struggles represent one of the main pillars on which the conflict now rests.

### **1.2. The Cold War**

The second layer that is conspicuous in the Syrian War is the manner in which external actors are instrumentalising the conflict by using the country as a proxy battlefield. Indeed, numerous international actors have aligned with the domestic antagonists and have simultaneously triggered the hybridisation of the war, placing it in a grey area between a civil war and an international conflict. On one side, the United States and many other Western countries have offered their support to the rebels of the opposition (mainly to the SNC, the Syrian National Coalition), and to Kurdish forces (Chomsky & Erlich, 2016). Over the years, this assistance has partially taken the form of financial transfers and armament delivering but has been, in essence, chiefly diplomatic. These Western powers have subsequently engaged in sporadic campaigns of air strikes, but these interventions have never allowed the SNC to establish itself as a genuine alternative to the Assad regime (Rodgers *et al.*, 2016).

On the other side, Russia and China have formed a loosely-knit coalition that has endorsed the governmental forces and that still today serves as the guarantor of Assad's international legitimacy. Initially, the Sino-Russian support was merely diplomatic, both powers principally utilizing their veto prerogative inside the UN Security Council to impede any motion unfavourable to the regime (Chomsky & Erlich, 2016). However, as the conflict exacerbated, they began providing extensive military, financial and logistic support to Assad's troops, to the point where Russia even started conducting intensive air strikes on rebel-held territories. Therefore, it appears that these external powers are exploiting the Syrian War as a political device to further a wider diplomatic-strategic agenda and are instrumentalising these domestic antagonists to improve their global posture in relation to their international foes. Thus, in addition to its civil war ramification, the Syrian conflict is also gradually evolving into a novel form of Cold War.

### **1.3. The Holy War**

The final constitutive layer that structures the Syrian War is the mosaic of religious hostilities that, deeply rooted in history, constitutes a genuinely tenacious source of acrimony and that significantly complexifies the political landscape. Indeed, solely within its borders, Syria shelters adherents of numerous branches of Islam (Shias, Sunnis, Alawites, Sufis, etc.) as well as Druze, Yazidis and Christians (US Department of State, 2015). For centuries, these different religious affiliations have coexisted in the region, alternating between peace and antagonism, and they seem to have internalized a propensity to ghettoize in response to these historical enmities (Makdisi & Silverstein, 2006).

In parallel to the hostile nature of the spiritual scenery within Syria, a vast array of regional actors, propelled by political and religious interests, have also intervened in the conflict to support their coreligionists. On one side, the Sunni monarchies of the Persian Gulf have offered armaments and financial aid to the rebel factions in an attempt to counter the influence of their historical foe in the region, namely Iran. Among these Sunni states, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait have undeniably contributed to the tenacity of the opposition and some of these countries are even suspected of collaborating with more extremist groups like Daech, Ahrar-al-Sham and the Al-Nusra Front to further their politico-strategic agenda (Rodgers *et al.*, 2016).

On the other side, an heteroclitite web of Shia protagonists are deeply involved in the conflict to safeguard the leadership of President Al-Assad, a rare and crucial Shia partner in this predominantly Sunni region. Irrefutably, through its extensive financial and military contributions, Iran represents the foreground Shia ally of the regime and, accompanied by the Lebanese Hezbollah and several Iraqi militias that fight alongside the governmental forces, these actors have all intervened in Syria to secure the interests of their faith in the region. Hence, the Syrian war is yet another manifestation of the historical clash between Shiism and Sunnism and this rivalry undeniably adds another layer of complexity to this already highly intricate conflict. Ultimately, the war that has been riving Syria since 2011 is a fundamentally hybrid form of conflict that comprises civil, politico-diplomatic and religious ramifications and that encompasses a complex network of local, regional and international linkages. Thus, the three constitutive layers outlined above will represent the explanatory bedrock on which this essay will lay and will allow us, in the subsequent chapter, to apprehend the fundamental causes of the Syrian War in relation to their contextual underpinnings.

### **The Symbiotic Influence of Greed and Grievance**

In his seminal conceptualization of the causes of conflict, Collier (2000) elaborated a model that emphasized on an array of risk factors that, pertaining to the concepts of either greed or grievance, are believed to be increasing the prospects of war. On one side, the greed argument stipulates that actors in a situation of imminent conflict perform a cost-benefit analysis that lead them to perceive the potential profits of confrontation as being greater than its possible consequences (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004).

In this context, the advocates of greed explanations claim that avidity, economic enticements and the perception of confrontation as a rational investment to reach a desired outcome are the most potent catalysts of conflict. Therefore, the protagonists within a conflict are seen as rational actors motivated by the prospects of self-endowment and, as a result, pecuniary “motivations and opportunities (loot-seeking) are [believed to be] more highly correlated with the onset of conflict than ethnic, socio-economic, or political grievances (justice-seeking)” (Ballantine & Sherman, 2003, p. 58).

On the contrary, the grievance argument posits that conflicts are ignited predominantly by inter-group hatred, political exclusion and “social grievances such as inequality, lack of democracy and ethnic and religious divisions within societies” (Patel, 2012, p. 7). Thus, the foreground actors within a conflict are believed to be operating on behalf of a wider community in response to a perceived discrimination and their endeavours are usually anchored in identity and group membership. Therefore, the grievance argument postulates that these internalized and latent resentment strains are produced by societal structures that, over time, alienate certain groups within a country while simultaneously bolstering their incentive to antagonize (Ballantine & Sherman, 2003).

Yet, while Collier and Hoeffler seem to have catalogued greed and grievance as two autonomous and autarkic categories, we will argue that they rather constitute mutually reinforcing and interdependent components of an indivisible explanatory whole and that “conceptualizing [them] in terms of greed versus grievance has imposed an unnecessarily limiting dichotomy on what is, in reality, a highly diverse, complex set of incentive and opportunity structures that vary across time and location” (Ballantine & Sherman, 2003, p. 6).

In this context, it seems imperative to examine which of the risk factors inventoried by Collier and Hoeffler are applicable to the Syrian War and to assess how their interactions have facilitated the outbreak of the conflict. Firstly, within the greed category, the **primary commodity exports** factor has undeniably had a substantial impact in Syria since the country is highly dependent on its oil, mineral and natural gas reserves (CIA, 2016). Over the last two decades, this sector of the economy has monopolised around 25% of the country’s total GDP, a percentage that aggravates Syria’s vulnerability according to the Collier-Hoeffler Model (Fearon, 2005; CIA, 2016). Clearly, such a profusion of coveted resources is often synonymous with the prevalence and the intensity of conflict and is likely to act as an agent of instability rather than as a guarantor of prosperity, a paradox that is commonly known as the “resource curse” (Ross, 2015)

In the case of Syria, these resources have irrefutably been instrumentalised by numerous actors such as Daech, different rebel factions and the governmental forces that employed them as indispensable financial supplies and as potent political leverages. Hence, the lootable, easily-taxable and immobile character of these primary commodities, conjugated with the weakness of the Syrian regime, has undeniably created numerous windows of opportunities for the antagonists, allowing them to translate their bellicose designs into deeds (Patel, 2012). In that sense, the relationship between Syria’s natural resources and the outburst of the war can be explained by “the opportunities such commodities provide for extortion, making rebellion feasible and perhaps even attractive” (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004, p. 588).

Furthermore, in the Collier-Hoeffler Model, anaemic **economic growth and low GDP per capita** are identified as being influential conflict triggers. These risk factors are

indubitably ubiquitous in the Syrian scenario since, in addition to the relatively low growth rates of the pre-Arab Spring era, the country is now entangled in a cycle of consecutive years of economic decline. In 2015, Syria even reached an apex of depreciation, its economy having retracted by almost 10% (CIA, 2016). Moreover, the country now ranks as one of the poorest Middle Eastern state in terms of GDP per capita (US 5100\$ in 2014), a situation that thrusts 82% of its population under the poverty line (CIA, 2016).

This economic precariousness relates to the greed argument insofar as the inhabitants of low-income countries are generally more likely to have nothing to lose and to represent a fertile ground for rebel group recruiters (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). This inertia also substantially increases the appeal of the natural resources mentioned above since, in the lawlessness that war often implies, the looting of these primary commodities can represent a swift way to alleviate misery. Indubitably, these incentives would have lost a great deal of their allure in superior economic conditions.

Moreover, it seems that **youth unemployment** has also substantially contributed to the catalysis of the conflict. Indeed, the proportion of unemployed Syrians between the age of 15 and 24 has been hovering around 20% since the 1990's and has stayed well above 30% since the outbreak of the war (World Bank, 2016). This scarcity of economic opportunities has undeniably bolstered a potent sentiment of frustration and of dismay amongst these youngsters and the belligerents of the conflict have obviously capitalized on this disillusioned clientele whose members represent "prime candidates for recruitment" (Patel, 2012).

Undeniably, youth unemployment has generated a significant amount of greed in these young jobless Syrians who, by joining a rebellious group or an Islamist militia for example, found a way to acquire what they perceived as their share of the pie and, concurrently, a sense of life purpose (Ballantine & Sherman, 2003). From a larger perspective, the paucity of socioeconomic perspectives in Syria has certainly fostered the impression of a clogged horizon that induced many people to engage in conflict as a last resort attempt to disrupt the status quo.

Additionally, despite the fact that it has been largely neglected by Collier and Hoeffler, the role of the **economic and political interests of external actors** must, in this case like in many others, be included in the conflict equation. With regards to Syria, this factor seems to be particularly relevant since the country represents one of the most vital client of Russia's defence industry, Moscow "accounting for 78 percent of Syria's weapons purchases between 2007 and 2012" (Borshchevskaya, 2013, p. 2). The Russian government also has strong economic and politico-strategic incentives to protect its last military foothold in the Mediterranean, namely the Tartouz base located on Syria's western coast (Rodgers *et al.*, 2016). On the opposing side, the Western support to the rebel factions seems to be propelled by a desire to balance Russian and Chinese influence

in the region. Indeed, the exponential involvement of the United States and of European nations in the war is far from being disinterested, but lies on crucial geostrategic and political interests. Hence, for all the external actors involved, the Syrian War is more than a mere regional influence contest but represents a paramount opportunity to affirm their position in the international hierarchy and to showcase their leadership in the Middle Eastern mayhem. Therefore, it is clear that the exogenous interventions in the Syrian conflict have been fuelled by opportunistic motivations that pertain to greed as understood by Collier and Hoeffler (i.e. of economic nature) but they were also induced by political greed, a notion that has been widely eschewed in their model. Ultimately, all of the greed-related incentives outlined above seem to have conjointly made the “constraints upon rebellion weak enough to enable violence to escalate to the level of civil war” while simultaneously adding a thick layer of rigidity and of complexity to this already intricate conflict (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004).

On the other end of the spectrum, several of the grievance-related factors proposed by Collier and Hoeffler also seem to be germane to the Syrian example. Among these, the persistence of profound **ethno-religious hatred** within the country has undeniably been a prominent conflict catalyst. Indeed, the antagonists within the Syrian War are not solely fighting on a political basis, but are also riven along numerous ethno-religious lines such as, inter alia, Kurdish, Arab and Yazidi lineages in terms of ethnicities and Sunni, Alawite and Shia Islam with regards to religious affiliations (Rodgers *et al.*, 2016).

Crystallized by reminiscences of traumatizing confrontations from the past, these ethno-religious fractures seem to rest on “primordial” foundations since they are clearly embedded in the deeply-rooted and abiding acrimony that has evolved between these historical foes over the last centuries (Kaplan, 1994). If these ethnic tensions might also have been “manufactured” by different actors that benefit from this fragmentation (Ranger, 2012), a quick historical review promptly reveals the preponderance and the inveteracy of primordial strains of ethno-religious tension in Syria.

Irrefutably, the most salient and resilient example of inter-group hatred in Syria is the one opposing Shia and Sunni communities. Rooted in centuries of antagonist coexistence, this abhorrence is exacerbated by the political landscape of the country that, for many decades, has favoured the Shia minority (roughly 10% of the population) at the expense of the Sunni majority (more than 70%) (Rodgers *et al.*, 2016). Indeed, since the 1963 coup instigated by the Baath party, Syria has been uninterruptedly ruled by the Assad family, of Shia affiliation, that progressively implemented a systemic culture of preferentialism in favour of its coreligionists (Crétois, 2016). Hence, as the socio-political and economic privileges of the few increasingly superseded the needs of the many, this asymmetry between the Shias’ power ascendancy and their actual demographic representation has gradually generated a potent sentiment of grievance amongst these marginalized Syrians.



Fundamentally, the political and economic discrimination that has been afflicting the Sunni majority for the last decades appears to be acutely attuned with the precepts of the **horizontal inequality** theory outlined by Frances Stewart (2010). Indeed, in her analysis of the causes of conflict, Stewart identified two types of inequalities: vertical and horizontal. While the “former refers to inequalities as measured on a societal level between individuals, the latter [denotes] inequalities between social groups, where one social group is marginalised compared to others” (Van Doorn, 2013, p. 2). Having distinguished these, Stewart posits that horizontal inequalities are a particularly influential source of conflict and that, when ethno-religious or cultural marginalisation overlaps with economic or political discrimination, this asymmetry is very likely to induce intrinsic grievances that can lead to violent confrontation (Stewart, 2010).

In that respect, it is clear that the seeds of conflict have been ubiquitous over the last decades in Syria. Indeed, on top of the political marginalisation of the Sunni majority, Syria is also one of the most unequal Middle Eastern country in terms of income distribution (GINI index), its different regions are very unequally endowed in terms of infrastructures and public services and the development of rural areas is severely hampered by the concentration of socioeconomic opportunities in urban areas (Achy, 2011). These considerations are particularly striking in the northern and southern regions of Syria where the infrastructure dearth and the socioeconomic precariousness are exceptionally acute (Abu-Ismaïl, Abdel-Gadir, & El-Laithy, 2011).

Hence, the marginalized groups within the Syrian population have allegedly engaged in this conflict in an attempt to rectify these inequalities while the advantaged groups have simultaneously sought to safeguard their privileges using the same methods (Patel, 2012). Therefore, the patent overlap between these “culturally-defined” units and the asymmetry of their corresponding political and economic means has certainly been one of the most meaningful source of grievance in Syria and has surely constituted one of the paramount causes of the outbreak and of the escalation of the war (Stewart, 2010).

Additionally, Stewart’s insights on **social contract** also seem to be thoroughly compatible with the Syrian example (Stewart, 2013). Rooted in the seminal works of the Enlightenment philosophers, this theory argues that a tacit agreement bonds the citizens of a nation, who agree to renounce to some of their rights and freedoms, with their government, that is expected to provide “services (e.g. security, health, education, sanitation) and reasonable economic conditions (e.g. employment)” (Patel, 2012, p. 12). When applied to the explanation of armed conflicts, it is the degradation of these elemental services and of these basic economic conditions that fosters the impression of the nullification of the social contract and that incites people to withhold their compliance to state authority.

The voiding of this fundamental agreement has been manifest in Syria over the last few years, the government having failed to provide even the most rudimentary living



standards to a vast proportion of its citizens. Under these circumstances, it appears that the depreciation of the Syrian social contract has severely undermined the legitimacy of the regime's authority and has simultaneously shaped an unstable political landscape that greatly facilitated the upsurge of conflict. Hence, all of these grievance-based incentives, severely aggravated and magnified by the numerous greed "opportunities" outlined above, have symbiotically contributed to the bolstering of Syria's "preferences" for conflict and have paved the way towards war by ripping at the very seams of the country's social fabric (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004).

## **Conclusion**

Evidently, for the sake of concision, other potentially decisive factors such as the ubiquitousness of active conflicts in the region, the predisposition to confrontation induced by a long history of war and the impact of climate change manifestations such as droughts have been deliberately eschewed in this examination of the roots of the Syrian War (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). Yet, throughout this analysis, we have endeavoured to underscore the way in which greed and grievance have symbiotically interacted in the outbreak of the conflict while arguing that it is considerably more fruitful to assess how they have mutually reinforced one another than to aim at hierarchizing their relative explanatory clout (Berdal, 2005). In this context, it seems clear that the compartmentalized interpretation privileged by Collier and Hoeffler represents an analytical inaccuracy from which we ought to move away.

Indeed, it is evident that the profound socio-political, cultural and economic grievances within the country and the omnipresence of influential greed inducements such as the enticing presence of coveted primary commodities, the country's anaemic economic growth and meagre GDP per capita and the endemic youth unemployment, have vastly exacerbated and fuelled one another over the years (Ballentine & Nietzsche, 2003). As the war intensified, these greed and grievance factors have become exponentially trapped in a spiral of mutual reinforcement and they collegially contributed to the increasing complexity and rigidity of the confrontation. Over time, these symbiotic and mutually constituting trends have generated a unique political landscape where "the preferences for rebellion [were] atypically strong (grievance) while the constraints upon rebellion [were] atypically weak (greed)" (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004, p. 5). Conjugated with a social architecture that was corroded by numerous horizontal inequalities and with the exponential subversion of the country's social contract, these structuring factors have eventually become inextricably interlaced and have ultimately cleared all the impediments on Syria's path towards war.

Therefore, in hindsight, it seems that it is the examination of the interactions between these different trends, the symbiosis between greed and grievance, that is the most fruitful way of assessing the Syrian War and, more broadly, all instances of armed con-

flicts (Cramer, 2005). In the end, it seems essential to bear in mind that this war, like all wars, is a fundamentally dynamic and singular phenomenon that inexorably requires a nuanced, adaptive and individualised assessment. Ultimately, only through such a context-based and multidimensional examination will we be capable of implementing the right policies in response to the right conflict.

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