Theoretical Limitations in Understanding Intra-State
Conflict and Violence: Syria as a Case Study

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January 2023

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Abstract

Theories of "greed" and "grievance" have been highly influential in interpreting the motivations of oppositional parties in civil wars around the world. Greed theorists emphasize material factors, especially the availability of primary commodity resources that can be seized and used to fund insurrection; while grievance theorists emphasize conflicts between social identity groups. Often such outlooks take a reductionist tone and ignore or dismiss considerations outside of their preferred explanatory framework. In the current article, I examine the Syrian war as a novel case study and evaluate the applicability of greed and grievance theories for clarifying the motivations underlying this conflict after the militarization of the uprisings in late 2011. The conclusions show that neither of these theories is sufficient in isolation, and indeed, that there are important contributing factors in the Syrian case that have not been highlighted by either the greed or grievance theorists. Based on this analysis, the article calls for cautious and robust attention to the rich details of each conflict case, bringing to bear a full toolbox of analytical strategies and the recognition that no two wars are the same.

Introduction

Although scholars have devised a host of theories to explain the drivers underlying the violent conflict in Syria, there remain surprisingly conceptual limitations in these analyses (Hinnebusch, 2019: 59; Daoud, 2020; Wedeen, 2019; Ismael, 2019). Examinations focused on political economy and ideological conflict tends to overlook the micro-level drivers of violent behavior. There is a notable gulf between scholarship that focuses on how sectarianism and material violence have contributed to the war in Syria (Hinnebusch, 2020; Darwish and Fakhoury, 2016), vs identity formation and the role of authoritarianism in suppressing cultural identities. At the same time, Patricia M. Thornton has discussed how the "depolarization and intertwining of identities" can contribute to conflict resolution (Thornton, 2007: 4). To a large extent, the limitations in the literature on the Syrian war derive from an over-reliance on the frameworks of rational choice theory (Eriksson, 2011) and political economy, while giving inadequate consideration to identity formation, sect constructions, and interpersonal dynamics (see Phillips and Volbjorn, 2018). I will show that while the analysis of rational costs and benefits among actors in the conflict has merit, it is not in itself sufficient to explain the warring parties' motivations.

Current analytical theories of civil conflict are often divided into the categories of "greed" and "grievance." Collier and Hoeffler (2000, 2002), for example, have argued strongly for the greed perspective, using data from 79 major twentieth-century civil conflicts to suggest that the warring factions and participants acted in pursuit of self-interested material gains. Their analysis was robust and included copious empirical data about conflict financing, recruitment, and natural resources, while largely dismissing issues of ideology and identity conflict as superficial. Such outlooks, and the overall views of political economy with which they are associated, help to overcome the perception that war is "irrational." From

the greed perspective, the rationality of conflict may be bounded or myopic in nature, but it is always based on actors' intent to improve their personal material positions. However, despite the value of this analysis, other scholars have raised important concerns with Collier and Hoeffler's study methods and sample choices, suggesting that they overlooked or oversimplified many conflict participants' motivations (see Bensted, 2011; Fearon, 2005; and Keen, 2000, 2005, 2012). The greed outlook is contraposed against numerous scholars who have emphasized conflicts of ideology and identity as the source of civil wars. Gurr (1970) was an influential proponent of this grievance perspective, drawing attention to identity-based discrimination and animosity as an instigator of violent conflict. Several decades later, Stewart (2000, 2005) developed the concept of "horizontal inequality," defined as a situation where people of similar abilities experience divergent outcomes due to cultural discrimination, and characterized such social conditions as the source of deep-seated grievances and resulting civil conflicts. It is important to note that the

analyses of "greed" and "grievance" applied in the Syrian war shall be valid only after the militarization of the conflict. In other words, framing theoretically the factors that have contributed to the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in 2011 needs a holistic approach that takes into consideration the impact of five decades of entrenched Baathist authoritarianism where Syrians faced various forms of material and psychological violence. The myriad forms of social and civil demonstrations where thousands of Syrians marched streets to challenge the rule of Assad in 2011 manifest Syrians' reclaim of agency.

In this article, I will discuss the application of the greed and grievance perspectives in the context of the Syrian warring militias. "A good way to test the usefulness of influential explanations of contemporary conflict," argued Cramer (2006: 11), "is to apply them to a single case; if they are good general explanations, which they claim to be, they ought to explain a particular case accurately." Following Cramer's logic, a detailed analysis of the Syrian conflict as a novel twenty-first-century case study (Eisenhardt 1989: 534) should offer significant merit in testing

the greed and grievance viewpoints. This is an important endeavor since in recent decades armed intra-state conflict and civil wars are emerging as the primary form of organized violence globally surpassing conflicts between states, which have steadily declined in prominence and impact since the end of the Second World War (Kaldor, 1999). Clarifying the drivers of civil conflicts can potentially improve strategies for heading off, mitigating, or resolving them, thereby avoiding a great deal of violence and harm.

Background and Terminology

The Syrian war has seized global attention for multiple reasons, including concerns for the broader regional security, the resulting refugee crisis, the involvement of terrorist groups, and the indiscriminate violence of the Syrian Baathist regime. Groups opposed to the regime have rightfully rejected the term "civil war" to describe the conflict because they believe the term simplifies and rather belittles the miseries caused by the systematic violence used by Assad forces. Some outside analysts have also referred to the conflict as a proxy war between regional and international actors (Patty, 2018; Gani, 2015), and others have described it as a sectarian war (Pinto, 2019). Given the extent of its impact, it is striking that there is so little consensus on how to define or categorize this form of armed conflict. Scholars have developed various quantitative definitions of civil war; for example, the widely cited Uppsala Conflict Data Program regards 25 battle-related deaths per year as the minimum threshold for an "armed conflict" and 1,000 battle-related deaths per year as the minimum for a "civil war." Unfortunately, precise mortality figures are difficult to gather in Syria, and various factions are incentivized to understate or exaggerate death rates as a means of enhancing their political narratives. The death-rate measurement also omits the secondary effects of conflict on non-belligerents, including forced displacement and violence aimed at civilians (Kaldor, 2013). Some researchers have given up completely on identifying such measurements—Sambanis (2004: 815) argued that "It is not possible to arrive at an operational definition of civil war . . . too many cases are sufficiently ambiguous to make coding the start and end of the war problematic." In the current article I will use the term "Syrian war" in a loose fashion, recognizing these limitations, but also adopting the common outlook that the extent of political violence has for more than a decade remained at such a level that most observers regard it as a war (Maher, 2018: 14).

With the conflict currently approaching its twelfth year, over 350,000 verifiable deaths have been directly attributed to the conflict so far, which certainly meets the Uppsala criteria. The actual number of fatalities is almost certainly higher (World Bank, 2022). The conflict began as a civic uprising against the government of Syria and its leader, President Bashar al-Assad, which rapidly became violent as the regime moved to suppress dissent. Since then, many factions have entered the conflict, including the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Kurdish Rebel Fighters, the so-called Islamic State (Daesh), Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Hezbollah, and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The international community has also impacted the course of the war, with Russia and Iran backing the existing regime while Turkey and various Western powers supporting opposition groups. Syria is an ancient land with a rich history, home to diverse cultures, ethnicities, and religions. Its full history is beyond the scope of this paper, but some brief background will be useful for considering the application of the greed and grievance frameworks.

The country's population is extremely heterogenous, with significant minorities who identify as Alawites, Armenians, Assyrians, Druze, Palestinians, Kurds, Yazidi, Mhallami, Christians, Mandaeans, Turkmens, and Greeks, among others (Aldoughli, 2021a: 126). This has affected Syria's identity as a nation, as it emerged out of the wreckage of the Ottoman empire following the First World War. After several decades of French occupation and a succession of short-lived local governments, the Baath Party ultimately ascended to power through a military coup in 1963, heavily assisted by their promotion of a unified national identity. The Party pursued policies of pan-Arabism, socialism, and anti-imperialism. Subsequent land reforms and modernization helped to improve the economy but at the expense of rendering much of the population dependent on the regime's authoritarian control (Keilany, 1980: 223). The Party's heavy involvement in education, and compulsory military service for men, provided channels for state-nationalist indoctrination. Many Syrians at the time were supportive of these directions and viewed the Par-

ty's secularism and unity rhetoric to be an attractive replacement for the suppression of minorities under the Ottoman rule and the subsequent chaos and humiliation of colonial occupation. Due to its secular and socialist ideology, the Baath party attracted large numbers of Alawites and other religious minority groups, who eagerly joined the effort to integrate the diverse Syrian people into a single imagined national identity.

The economic policies of the Syrian government are tied to the patrimonial nature of the Assad regime, which has generally kept a close grip on the country's industry (Becker, 2005). In the early 2000s, when Bashar al-Assad replaced his father Hafez as Syria's president, a limited economic liberalization was introduced in an effort to stimulate growth (Abboud and Arslanian, 2009: 1). These structural reforms included a fair amount of deregulation, phasing out of energy subsidies, and streamlining the taxation process. Syria requested to join the World Trade Organization in 2001 and signed a free trade agreement in 2007 (IMF, 2016: 3). Private banks were allowed to begin operation in 2004, and in 2009

the Syrian stock market re-opened for the first time in over four decades. The government's debt was reduced significantly after 2003 as a result of Russia forgiving some of its outstanding loans. Overall, the economy was in a stable condition in the period running up to the outbreak of the civil conflict, with public debt standing at 31% of the Gross Domestic Product, low inflationary pressure, and non-oil growth averaging 4.4% over the period from 2000–2009 (IMF, 2016: 3).

However, this is only part of the picture. Syria continued to struggle with widescale poverty and unemployment was consistently high. Despite the country's progress in areas such as women's access to education and declining child mortality, economic inequality increased following the liberalization reforms and there was a significant upturn in poverty rates after 2004 (United Nations, 2010). The country's rural populations saw few benefits from liberalization, and the rising inequality contributed to a growing impression that Bashar al-Assad was financially corrupt (Landis, 2012). A drought in the late 2000s further contributed to problems for

low-income and rural Syrians, particularly in the northeastern regions of the country, and some scholars have argued that weather and climate played a prominent role in the outbreak of hostilities (De Chatel, 2014). (Others have disputed this claim; see Selby et al., 2017, and Daoudy, 2020: 205). Perhaps most notably, younger Syrians suffered economically in the 2000s, as the upheavals of liberalization disrupted their expectations of predictable jobs and lowered the compensation of entry-level positions.

The Impact of "Greed"

Collier and Hoeffler (2000, 2002) suggested that civil wars were more likely to occur in countries with poor economic prospects. The overall growth of societal wealth, in this argument, tends to reduce the risk of conflict as the opportunity cost becomes greater (i.e., would-be insurgents have more to lose) (see also Dixon, 2009: 714; and Fearon and Laitin, 2003). In a similar fashion, high levels of overall economic inequality in a society may predict the emergence of conflict, as people on the lower end of the economic spectrum view the state as a valuable prize for conquest. This was certainly the case in Syria, which under Baathist rule suffered from extensive regional economic disparities and a consolidation of wealth and power in the hands of the regime (Landis, 2012). However, this theoretical contextualization of the outbreak of violence in Syria should not limit our understanding of material opportunities. The early phase of the demonstrations in 2011 was clear in their insistence on dignity, freedom, and democracy as key demands for political change. As such, greed as an explanatory tool for the break of civil resistance against the Assad regime is reductionist in its conceptualization of Syrians' endeavors for political rights.

For example, in analyses of civil conflicts based on the "greed" perspective, scholars often perform an informal cost-benefit analysis in line with rational choice theory, whereby individuals attempt to maximize their personal utility. If the calculatable utility is greater in civil conflict than in their current situation, individuals are inclined to turn to violent action to better themselves. At the heart of the argument put forward by those who endorse the greed theory of civil war is the contention that, "economic motivations and opportunities are more highly correlated with the onset of conflict than ethnic, socio-economic, or political grievances" (Ballentine and Nitzscke, 2005: 4). Or, as De Soya (2002: 398) expressed the argument, "there are fewer martyrs than opportunists." What is missing in this theory

when applied to the Syrian case is that the manipulation of material benefits among warring parties occurred only after the *proxicisation* of the conflict where regional actors intervened for security interests.

Under the greed framework, the material motivation for conflict is sometimes disaggregated into three components: financing, recruitment, and geography. Financing is often linked to the availability of lucrative natural resources that can be seized during the conflict, and there is strong evidence linking the outbreak of civil wars to the potential for plunder—especially of extractive or geographically constrained resources such as diamonds, petroleum, timber, or plant-based drug production (Collier and Hoeffler, 2000, 2002; Ross, 2004). The presence of such resources can allow insurgents to obtain an immediate and ongoing source of financing. Notable examples of this dynamic have included opium cultivation in Afghanistan (Piazza, 2012), diamonds in Sierra Leone (Gberie, 2012), and coca in Columbia (Jonsson et al., 2016). It is possible for some or all of the financing of civil conflict to derive from other sources, including sympathetic diasporas residing in wealthier foreign states, foreign states themselves, and multinational corporations with vested interests. However, Collier and Hoeffler (2004: 588) found that between 1960 and 1999, countries with abundant primary commodity exports had a 22% chance of experiencing a civil war, while countries with no such exports had only a 1% chance of such conflict (see also Collier and Bannon, 2003). The second component, recruitment, is defined by the local availability of impoverished individuals who would see an opportunity in fighting, most often young, unemployed, or under-employed men facing prospects of absolute poverty. The third component, geography, entails the presence of terrain that is difficult for state forces to surveil and control and thus increases the likelihood of a successful insurrection (most often, mountainous terrain).

It is unquestionable that Syria conforms to most of the characteristics identified by "greed" theorists as predictive of civil war. It is a country with substantial reserves of oil, minerals, and natural gas (Khatib, 2014), which are highly exploited by the ruling As-

sad regime and traded international- ly. At the time of the war's outbreak, the IMF (2011) estimated that oil sales generated over 3.2 billion U.S.$ per year for the state and accounted for 25% of the regime's revenue. Wenar (2013) described Syria as a "resource-cursed" country, following Ross's (1999) use of that term to explain how an abun- dance of natural resources encourag- es corruption, authoritarianism, eco- nomic fragility, and violent conflict. Some actors in the Syrian conflict, such as the Islamic State / Daesh, have relied strongly on pilfered oil revenues as a means of financing their military campaigns (Besenyő, 2016). Analysts such as Patel (2012) have argued that a Syrian economy grounded strongly in primary commodities that are im- mobile and easily looted or "taxed" by insurgents contributed strongly to the onset and spread of violent conflict.

While some macroeconomic indi- cators looked promising in Syria in the 2000s, especially in comparison to oth- er countries in the region, these signals hid a profound issue of rising inequal- ity and poverty. A study published by the United Nations Development Pro- gramme found that "[Syria's] growth

was not pro-poor" (Abu-Ismail, 2011: 3). A boom in housing prices pushed many people out of the market, and disparities in living conditions and health outcomes surged. Many of Syr- ia's younger generations began to ex- perience frustration and stress related to a lack of economic opportunity or stability. Kabbani and Kamel (2007) found that youth were often excluded from the Syrian labor market and the benefits of liberalization because of their lack of experience and inability to secure startup capital. The World Bank found that during the 2000s the unemployment rate of Syrians aged 15–24 years hovered persistently at around 20%. As noted by the propo- nents of "greed" theory, citizens who feel that they have few assets and dim prospects in the economy are highly susceptible to recruitment into insur- gent groups (Patel, 2012: 6). For many young Syrians, joining armed militias may have been perceived as an oppor- tunity to enhance one's financial sit- uation or to flip the script on an eco- nomic status quo that had left them increasingly impoverished.

An additional factor that has been given only minimal attention in the

literature on "greed" and civil war, but that is highly relevant in the Syria case, is the greed of external actors. Cantin (2017) and Phillips (2022) have brought this consideration to the forefront in their discussions of Syria's position as an essential strategic interest for various other states. At the time that the civil war started, Syria was the largest international client of the Russian defense industry, and purchases from Russia accounted for 78% of the regime's weaponry (Borshchevskaya, 2013: 2). Russia has a naval base in the Syrian port of Tartus, which it has continued to upgrade and expand over the past two decades, and which houses over a dozen warships including nuclear-powered vessels. It also maintains a significant air base near the Syrian city of Latakia. These facilities are key military foothold for Russia in the Mediterranean, and Russia has long viewed propping up Assad's regime as crucial to its national interests (Blank and Kim, 2021; Harden, 2021). Meanwhile, the U.S. and other Western states have expressed tentative support for the insurrection, and have financed and trained moderate elements of the insurgent forces, in part due to the potential of this conflict to reduce Russian and Chinese influence in the region. This position is complicated by the Western goal of eliminating the Islamic State / Daesh, which is one of the most successful factions fighting against the Syrian regime (Tan, 2019). For external actors, the conflict in Syria heralds not only access to specific markets and natural resources but also an opportunity to secure a stronger global geopolitical position and exert influence across the Middle Eastern sphere.

The Tenacity of "Grievance"

Collier and Hoeffler (2004: 587–588) argued that rebel groups only adopt grievance discourses as a means to raise their legitimacy and that factors such as ethnic tensions, state authoritarianism, and the level of political rights have no statistical bearing on the outbreak of civil war. However, critics have accused this "greed" perspective of simply ignoring the role of more complex sociological factors. The quantitative analysis used in Collier and Hoeffler's statistical approach involves transforming complex social concepts such as ethnicity into numerical values, which can result in crude and reductive indicators (Gleditsch and Ruggeri, 2010). Collier and Hoeffler did not differentiate the intensity, scope, or duration of the wars that they evaluated, and they did not consider many aspects of the wars' context, including the fighters' stated motivations, differential motivations among different conflict participants, the speed of local social change, or the historical trajectories and norms of the countries' politics (Nathan, 2003).

Furthermore, Bensted (2011) pointed out that Collier and Hoeffler omitted indices of corruption, sources of armaments, the personality of political leaders, the management of natural resources, and many other potentially relevant factors that the "greed" theorists found difficult to quantify. Cramer (2006: 135) agreed, stating that, "the claim to predictive precision is spurious."

Additional objections to the greed analysis have emerged from an analytical perspective, with scholars such as Fearon (2005) claiming that with more fine-grained data analysis the relationship between primary commodity exports and civil war does not hold up (Fearon looked at year-by-year data, whereas Collier and Hoeffler looked at five-year data; however Fearon also used a more expansive definition of civil war that included a larger number of conflicts). Similar critiques have been made by Ross (2004), Humphreys (2005), Murshed and Tajistoon (2009), and Mitchell and Thies (2012). Thus,

the empirical evidence that allegedly shows the predominance of greed at the onset of civil war is heavily contested. Perhaps an even more fundamental critique has been voiced by Keen (2000), who argued that greed and grievance inevitably interact with each other. Keen wrote in extensive detail about how a protracted conflict can allow faction leaders to consolidate profits through extorting "protection" money, controlling or monopolizing trade, exploiting labor, stealing aid supplies, and justifying martial privilege. To maintain a protracted conflict, however, Keen argued that leaders need to enflame grievances that will continue to motivate fighters even when material benefits at the individual level fail to materialize. Keen focused on the example of Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia, who plunged the country into more than a decade of wars of ethnic cleansing, and suggested that the resulting international sanctions that devastated the country's overall economy only served to increase Milosevic's control of resources. From the perspective of the common soldier, the greed motivation rapidly evaporated in this context, and another explanation is needed for

their continued willingness to participate in violence. In short, Keen suggested that greed and grievance are deeply interlinked, that their proportions may vary among different actors, and that civil conflict cannot be fully understood without considering both factors.

For grievance theorists, rivalry and perceptions of injustice between various social identity groups are regarded as a central factor in the onset and especially the continuation of violent conflict. As noted by Ballentine (2003: 5) the greed and grievance outlooks are somewhat incommensurate in regard to the variables that they consider and their methods of analysis. The Syrian conflict has often been described as a clash of identities between minority Alwaites and majority Sunnis (Balanche, 2018: xi; Lesch, 2012: 101). Today there is a significant trend in policy reports and academic scholarship toward describing Syrians through the lens of these sectarian and ethnic categories (Harling, 2012: 4). This shift is notable since, throughout the many decades of the Baath regime, Syrians have been prohibited from any public claim to sectarian political identities. The ho-

mogenization of Syrian identity, based on an overarching Baathist secular-national concept that intentionally negated ethnic and religious differences, was a long-standing strategy used by the Assad regime to suppress internal conflict and maintain political legitimacy (Aldoughli, 2020).

The outbreak of the war fragmented this tenuous national identity, and with all parties in the conflict receiving open support from external actors (who often treat the arena as a proxy for their own international conflicts), many Syrians have been cast adrift when it comes to forging new perceptions of who they are as individuals. When the nation is shattered, however, this tenuously shared ontological vision is lost. Analysts have discussed at length the clashes of sectarian identities during the war (Abdo, 2013: 38-9; Sullivan, 2014: 11), as well as the instrumentalization of sectarianism by various groups for propaganda purposes (Hinnebusch, 2019; Hashemi and Postel, 2017). These interpretations of grievances have often overlooked how the rise of sectarianism in Syria serves an even more basic ontological purpose in re-securing a sense of identity

in the wake of a lost national ideal and, more importantly, the manipulation of sectarian identities by different regional and militia actors.

Such missed understanding of the complexity of identity formation in Syria and the break of sectarianism as an outcome of the militarization of the conflict posits the limitations of the grievance theory. For example, the statistical approaches adopted by most greed and grievance theorists seek to establish correlations and probabilities, but they have little to say about human experiences of conflict, or about organizational processes for de-escalating it. Ballentine concludes that greed arguments "generate broad correlations that illuminate only part of the picture" (5). Grievance theorists argue that regardless of whatever other factors may be correlated with civil conflict, it is the formation of identity groups, the relative openness or rigidity of those groups, and the relative equity among such groups that holds the key to influencing peace and conflict outcomes (Gurr, 1970; Huddy, 2003; Klandermans and van Stekelenburg, 2019: 309; Stewart, 2000, 2005). Sanín and Wood (2014) have pointed

out that without the felt affiliation and organizing principle of group identity, the collective action necessary for factions to undertake a war would not be feasible. In an empirical sense, it is incontrovertible that military factions participating in conflicts—whether state-led or insurrectionist—rely heavily on identity concepts and in-group formations to maintain participants' motivation and loyalty. Some researchers have also attempted to measure identity-based grievance and demonstrate its links to violent conflict (Dyrstad and Hillesund, 2020; Regan and Norton, 2005). For the most part, however, the literature on grievance theory is generally based on case studies and qualitative arguments, invoking concepts such as identity, tradition, ethnicity, belief, and discrimination that can be hard to quantify or measure.

Murshed and Tadjoeddin (2007: 16) divided grievances into the components of relative deprivation, horizontal inequality, and polarization. Relative deprivation was first emphasized by Gurr (1970: 24–37), who defined it as the discrepancy between what a group of people believes they deserve within society vs. the conditions that they actually experience. Gurr concluded that such relative deprivation causes intense discomfort and frustration among people who experience it, which builds up even further the longer the relative deprivation continues, eventually leading to violent outcomes. The subsequent empirical literature has found that perceptions of relative deprivation were extremely common in civil conflict situations (Horowitz, 1985; Peterson, 2002), though some scholars have noted that perceived deprivation does not always lead to war (Oberschall, 1978; Brush, 1996). Relative deprivation often mirrors objective economic disparities, but this is not always the case. Groups with lower levels of resources may not always perceive themselves as deprived, and high-resource groups may feel deprived or disadvantaged when in reality they are not (Barbalet, 1992; Pettigrew, 2002: 368). Thus, this aspect of grievance reflects group belief structures and psychology as much as material conditions. The identities around which a sense of relative deprivation consolidates can vary greatly in their constitution, including eth-

nic communities, regional geographic communities, language communities, economic class or profession-based communities, and religious communities, among others. Regan and Norton (2005) found that feelings of relative deprivation emerged as much from perceived social discrimination as from material conditions, and that they were heightened when state authorities were seen as disregarding or disparaging the group's identity.

In contrast, horizontal inequality refers to measurable discrepancies between identity groups. This concept may be considered as derived from Gurr's (1970) work on relative deprivation, and academics do sometimes conflate the terms, but it is useful to distinguish the objective factors of horizontal inequality from the psychological or ideological phenomenon of relative deprivation (Murshed and Tadjoeddin, 2007). Horizontal inequalities also occur over numerous dimensions, including economic (income, land ownership, employment), social (access to healthcare, education, and influence in institutions), and cultural (freedom of religious practice, language, and dress) (Stew-

art, 2000). These varying dimensions of horizontal inequality can reinforce each other; for example, economic inequalities can create inequalities in access to institutions, which in turn perpetuate economic stratification. While researchers have found little relationship between civil war and the overall (or "vertical") level of financial inequality (Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Taydas et al., 2011: 2633), there are robust studies that show horizontal inequality between identity groups is strongly associated with violent conflict (Cederman, Weidmann, and Gleditsch, 2011; Stewart, 2005). While inequality in general may lead to anger and frustration, such conditions are much more likely to proceed into violent conflict when the marginalized individuals are consolidated into a group identity that also experiences social and cultural discrimination (Langer, 2008).

Finally, the factor of polarization refers to conditions in which society becomes divided into two relatively balanced oppositional groups, as contrasted against a spectrum of opinion or a hegemonic dominance. Scholars including Esteban and Schneider

(2008), Abu-Badera and Ianchovichina (2019), and Montalvo and Reyanal-Querol (2005) found that in recent decades political and social polarization has been strongly associated with the outbreak of violent civil conflict. In Montalvo and Reyanal-Querol's study, the likelihood of a civil war was found to be greatest for countries with ethnic polarization; that is, where two equally strong ethnic groups confronted each other. They argued that many prior examinations of ethnic heterogeneity and civil war produced weak or inconclusive results because they evaluated fragmentation (a plurality of identities) rather than polarization (Montalvo and Reyanal-Querol, 2005: 812). Additional scholars have concurred with the view that ethnic rivalries are the most likely forms of conflict to evolve into civil war, attributing this both to the strength of the identity attachment and to the ability of such groups to effectively organize and mobilize participants. In addition, it is common worldwide for state regimes to be grounded in ethnic identity and for leaders to favor the members of their own ethnic group while neglecting the needs of others (Cederman, Wimmer,

and Min, 2010; Denny and Walter, 2014). Esteban and Schneider (2008: 132) argued, however, that ethnic polarization is seldom distinct from other dimensions of identity. Factors such as class identity, geographic community, language, and religion may often overlap with ethnicity in complex ways during the formation of polar groups.

Grievance in Syria

Syrians expressed a great deal of concern with relative deprivation in the years leading up to the outbreak of the war, oriented primarily around religious identity and tribal affiliations. The normative theoretical explanation of the outbreak of violence in Syria has primarily conceptualized tension lines between the loyalist of the Assad regime, who were officially secular but slanted heavily toward the Alawite religious minority; and Syria's Sunni Muslim majority, which viewed the regime as corrupt and prejudiced in constraining Sunni expression and self-determination. Despite this horizontal inequality exploited by the Baath regime. In the lead-up to the conflict and after the outbreak of hostilities, both the government and the opposition forces accused their counterparts of employing sectarian agitation (Aldoughli, 2020).

There were also significant generational tensions between older Syrians who held the reigns of wealth and power, and younger citizens who perceived dim economic prospects and had little affiliation with the regime's Baathist ideology (Rais, 2004: 151). Hannafi and Muller (2017: 11) have demonstrated the extent to which these identity conflicts served as local triggers in the emergence of violent conflict.

Identity-based conflicts in Syria were heightened by the authoritarianism of the regime, which relied heavily on neo-patrimonial practices to maintain power. Political power tended to flow through patronage relationships and personal social connections rather than through institutions (Josua and Edel, 2015; Pitcher, Moran, and Johnstone, 2009: 130–131). This state of affairs contributed greatly to the perception that the regime favored Alawites and that other Syrians were treated unfairly (Hinnebusch, 2015; Salaymeh, 2018). While the Assad family had previously sought to co-opt other portions of Syrian society beyond their Alawite base (for example, by reaching agreements with certain Sunni leaders to bring them into the

loyalist fold), these arrangements began to fray in the 2000s as more Sunnis became overtly dissatisfied with the regime's secular constrictions on religion. In response, Assad began to play more on sectarian divides to shore up his base of supporters, often by stoking fears among Alawites and other minorities of a potential fundamentalist Sunni theocracy (Aldoughli, 2021b; Hinnebusch and Zintl, 2015: 285; York and Cornstange, 2019: 454).

Perceptions of relative deprivation among Syria's Sunni population had some basis in reality, as can be seen in the regime's discriminatory public spending and taxation. In addition, Alawites enjoyed tremendous over-representation in state employment under the Assads, a significant advantage in an authoritarian society where such positions were a principal avenue of personal advancement. In particular, the military and intelligence services became an entrenched method of upward mobility for Alawites, and holding such positions was "inextricably woven into the fabric of Alawite society" under the Baathists (Khaddour, 2013: 19). Alawites were assigned to offices with the best equip-

ment, the highest funding, and the greatest social prestige, while Sunni workers were systematically unable to obtain promotions (Wimmen, 2016: 7). Many such offices engaged in protection rackets or the extortion of bribes for access to public services (Ibid.: 8), further enriching their occupants. Thus, Alawites had professional and material advantages that precisely fit the definition of horizontal inequality. During the economic liberalization period of the 2000s, when state subsidies for low-income and rural Syrians were being cut, the structural opportunities handed to Alawites were a source of considerable disaffection in the country. Phillips (2015: 367) has argued that this situation decreased the social reach of the state, encouraging alternative substate actors to step into the welfare roles previously filled by the regime. As tensions began to rise, such organizations were well-positioned to mobilize and arm the communities that had come to depend on them.

Balanche (2018) mapped the geography of the civil conflict in Syria and found that in the cities of Baniyas, Latakia, and Tartus, where there was a significant mix of Sunni and Alawite pop-

ulations, protestors' demands focused strongly on ending pro-Alawite biases in public sector employment and reparations for existing biases. Balanche found that these conflicts were heightened by ongoing demographic shifts in which Alawites were migrating to rural areas and taking control of local power structures, leading Sunnis to feel increasingly under siege in their own communities. These groups had different behavioral and social norms around issues such as alcohol consumption, gender equality, and women's dress, however, Balanche's conception of the Sunni-Alawaite divide is reductionist in taking into consideration that the primary source of grievance was the imbalance of power and wealth that favored Alawites under the Baathist regime. In this particular outlook, grievance theorists overlooked how the process of sectarianization was a form of ontological security. Jennifer Mitzen's concept of ontological security is "security not of the body but of the self, the subjective sense of who one is, which enables and motivates action and choice" (Mitzen, 2006: 344). Mitzen uses this approach to discuss the irrational and oppres-

sive behavior of state agents that cannot be explained as a logical effort to create physical national security, but instead only as an imperative to protect the security of identity. Therefore, understanding the role of ontological security in the Syrian War can help to clarify the logic of competing identities that strive for survival. The continuation of the conflict reinforces identities that are based on demonizing the Other, and in fact, the prospect of breaking free of the conflict can generate threatening ontological insecurity. A central aspect of this type of identity formation is the collectivization of trauma and victimization narratives, in which any harm, historical or current, is propagated to all who identify with the group. There are long-term consequences of this collective victimization, as it may become the epicenter of group identity and the lens through which group members interact with political movements. Thus, inequality became strongly linked to group identity, setting the stage for the organized expression of grievance.

In the period leading up to the war, Syria experienced polarization as citizens from various backgrounds felt

compelled to affiliate themselves with either the Assad camp or with the fundamentalist militia camp. At the same time, Syria cannot be said to have experienced polarization, since in the period leading up to the conflict the political consensus fragmented, with numerous opposition factions emerging that had no loyalty to either the Assad camp or to the fundamentalist Sunni camp.

Conclusion

The case of Syria demonstrates the mutual utility of the "greed" and "grievance" frameworks for understanding the contractability of violence after 2011. The influential factors of primary resources available for plunder, a disenchanted population of young people available for recruitment, and a geography that could support a successful insurrection, were present in this case and thus correspond with the statistical predictions of the "greed" theorists. However, it seems unlikely that the violent conflict would have arisen in the same fashion, or become so protracted, were it not for how the Baath regime has systematically reinforced tension and inequalities among the country's religious and ethnic factions. This social terrain produced grievances centered around identity groups, which were easy for the warring parties to leverage and exploit when organizing the violence. It seems reasonable to state in this case that the failure of the Baath regime to establish an inclusive and plural national identity resulted in the rise of sub-state identities that

were manipulated, securitized and sectarianized by both local and regional actors. As such, the creation of a more balanced, pluralistic, and inclusive society, which allowed more space for diverse individual lifeworlds, would have helped to reduce the likelihood of violence. The creation of such a society in Syria may also be a key to ending the current war.

When examining greed theories, it is important to note that most of the work in this area produces statistical correlations rather than case-specific analyses. While it may be true that factors such as primary commodity assets and absolute poverty are correlated with an increased risk of violence, many states have such features and yet continue to remain peaceful. The assertion of some greed theorists that social factors such as ethnic tensions have no bearing on the outbreak of civil war has been heavily critiqued (e.g., Gleditsch and Ruggeri, 2010; Nathan, 2003; Cramer, 2006; Murshed and Tajistoon, 2009); at the very least it seems

uncontentious that in the case of Syria, like many other war-torn countries, such group identities are a central feature of the factions' mobilization strategies. Empirical work examining the demands of opposition groups and the instigation of local clashes at the start of the Syrian war have consistently found that inequalities between identity groups (horizontal inequalities) shaped the perceptions of the participants and motivated them to violence (Balanche, 2018; Hannafi and Muller, 2017).

Following the analysis by Keen (2000) in the context of Serbia, it can reasonably be said that in the progression of the Syrian war, the greed and grievance factors became locked into a spiral of mutual reinforcement. The conflict has served to consolidate the power of wartime leaders in various Syrian factions, both in terms of more intensified loyalism and more centralized control of resources. The effect on the broader Syrian population, however, has been dire. This has led more Syrians to depend exclusively on in-group support networks, demonize and attack other groups, and seek to obtain relative privileges over other

groups. Thus, the greed and grievance motivations appear to exist in a symbiotic relationship.

The Syrian case supports the conclusion that both greed and grievance factors should be considered in analyzing the causes of the continuation of the Syrian conflict. Each of these frameworks provides valuable explanatory power, and they both seem relevant to explain the sustainability of militarization. Ignoring the greed argument would run the risk of overlooking important material indicators that herald an increased risk of violence, and overlooking the role of grievance would lead us to ignore central aspects of the social dynamics that have motivated participants and shaped the contours of the conflict. In truth, separating explanations of civil war into "greed" versus "grievance" theories may be regarded as imposing an unnecessarily limiting dichotomy, and forcing a simplistic or reductionist understanding. The intense and well-documented role that religious identities and rivalries have played in the Syrian war should particularly caution us about dismissing such factors in favor of a pure materialist framework. The ef-

fective analysis and response to such conflicts require an appreciation of the complex underlying human motivations that lead people to violence, which cannot be obtained through oversimplification.

It has been noted as well that both greed and grievance theories have undermined the social and political positioning of different groups during the conflict. For this reason, equipping this theoretical framework with ontological security and the understanding of the intractability of the Syrian conflict in part shows how manipulation of sub-state identities becomes linked to a need to annihilate the Other. Rather than falling into the trap of homogenizing Sunnis, Alawites, or any other sect/ethnicity in Syria, it is important to observe the struggle over identity and to recognize that much hinges on the question of, e.g., *what kind* of group affiliation one wants to be in *or* with. Integrating ontological security as a theoretical framework for greed and grievance theories brings these issues into the foreground and provides a better understanding of how Syrians are actively reconstructing their social reality and identities. The increasing

importance of sub-state identities in post-2011 Syria, whether ethnic, sectarian, or territorial, should be understood in light of the deeply personal process of psychological realignment resulting from the shattering of the national ideal and better explain the manipulation of material benefits by all warring parties. Although this process is taking place against a backdrop of instrumentalization and securitization of identity by multiple organizations, we should not disregard Syrians' agency as they navigate this conflicted terrain.

It should be noted that the specific observations made here are tied to a single case study, and cannot be generalized across all civil wars. This, also, is an aspect of avoiding simplistic and reductive analyses, as we should attend to the contours of specific cases in depth and not expect the weight of influence among factors to be the same in other national contexts. The precise terrain of religious and ethnic conflict in the Syrian case, for example, may not exactly map to other situations of identifying conflict in terms of its felt impact, imperatives, and alignments, an incommensurability that quanti-

tative metrics can easily overrun. It is also possible that detailed analyses of conflict situations may reveal contributing factors that are not well-theorized in *either* the "greed" or "grievance" literature. This was somewhat the case in my analysis of Syria when it comes to the presence of external state actors in the civil war—a phenomenon that has not received much prior attention in the comparative literature. Another such consideration in some civil conflicts might be natural disasters or ecological degradation. The possibility of such overlooked or under-appreciated factors should further motivate researchers to take each case of civil conflict as *sui generis* and to hesitate when reaching for standardized explanatory frameworks.

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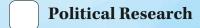
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