Explanations for the Onset of the Syrian Civil War

The Syrian civil war is one of the most pressing issues of our time, and thus far peace attempts have failed to solve it. Analyzing how the war began can inform the current diplomatic efforts to reach an agreement. This paper aims to prove that a combination of grievances, opportunities, and bargaining failures explains how the Syrian civil war began, whereas other issues such as demonstration and spillover effects are less compelling.

The origins of the Syrian Civil War are traced to March 2011 with peaceful protests of the Asad regime. The government was primed to respond with violence due to a governmental report that concluded the Tunisian and Egyptian governments could have prevented their regime transitions if they had responded more quickly with violence. Protestors responded to the violence with violence in turn until, in 2012, the peaceful protests had fully transitioned into civil war (Heydemann 54). This conflict cannot be viewed as a binary war because one study found over 1,000 distinct rebel groups are active in Syria (Fotini 9), and Fearon (2013) argues the civil war is now a proxy war between multiple international players such as Iran and Saudi Arabia (11). Since the beginning of the conflict approximately 400,000 Syrians have died, and it has caused one of the world’s worst refugee crises with over 5 million refugees and 6.4 million internally displaced people (“Syrian Civil War Fast Facts”). With little hope in sight for the end of the war it is vital to look at the reasons for the onset of this crisis starting with economic grievances.

Cederman et al. (2011) discuss how grievances, specifically horizontal inequality between ethnic groups, result in civil war through mechanisms such as the relative depravation theory (478). This article describes how when groups of people realize other groups have more resources it motivates them to demand more which can lead to violent conflict. The Syrian economy was struggling prior to the protests from inflation, tax policies that favored the rich and disadvantaged the middle and lower classes, and lower oil exports (Sorenson 29) Grievances were compounded by a four-year drought in 2006. Syria has little agricultural land, and this drought resulted in the failure of crops and the death of most livestock. The lack of food resulted in hundreds of thousands of internally displaced farmers looking for food, money, and work, but when they moved to cities they found competition with Palestinian and Iraqi refugees for resources. Overall two to three million farmers were categorized as living in extreme poverty due to drought conditions. Furthermore, the Syrian government had sold its wheat reserves the year the drought began and failed to provide food and other necessities to its citizens (Polk). Unlike Cederman et al. (2011) which argues ethnic groups use horizontal inequality to motivate its members to rebel, the first protestors did not use ethnic groups exclusively to protest the government’s policies. Even so, many people held grievances with the government over lack of food and resources, therefore ethnic mobilization was not necessary.

Another type of grievance that contributed to the Syrian civil war is political grievance. Cederman et al. (2010) describe how when members of an ethnic group are excluded from political power they are more likely to rebel (88). The Syrian government was controlled by the Alawite ethnic minority, and over 70 percent of the military was comprised of Alawites (Kurt 123). Alawites compose around 11 percent of Syria’s population while Sunni Arabs make up 65 to 70 percent of the population. There are other large ethnic minorities including Sunni Kurds representing around 11 percent of the population and the rest of the population is non-Sunni including Christians and Druze (Heydemann 56). Bashar al-Asad’s father who founded the military dictatorship in 1970 seized political control from the Sunni Arab majority (Sorenson 10). Therefore, the argument that political alienation leads to civil conflict appears valid because close to 90 percent of the population was not politically represented. Asad did institute mild reforms to appease select Sunni Arabs prior to the uprising, but these reforms did not prevent protests (Kurt 121). Therefore, grievances both economically and politically contributed to the onset of the Syrian war, but it is necessary to have the opportunity to act upon grievances for a civil war to break out.

Syria is a military dictatorship which has important implications for the amount of economic and political capacity the regime wields (Kurt 122). As Fjelde (2010) states, military regimes have strong coercion capacity through their use of force, but she argues that military regimes are weak in economic co-optation and societal coordination. Co-optation and coordination is more important than coercion in preventing conflicts which makes military regimes more susceptible to civil war (200). In Syria, Asad’s regime did not have the resources to economically co-opt the citizens unlike many of the states in the Persian Gulf which gave their citizens money during the Arab Spring (Lynch 108). Asad did attempted to politically co-opt discontented Sunnis through “counter-social mobilization” which alleviated some Sunnis’ grievances, but at the same time Asad responded to protests with violence mitigating any benefits from co-optation (Kurt 121). Therefore, Asad’s government was unable to respond to grievances because it lacked economic and political co-optation powers and cooperation within society. The specific regime type of a military dictatorship contributed to the onset of the civil war because of its weak state capacity giving groups more opportunities to rebel.

Bargaining failures such as commitment problems and information asymmetries can be seen as one of the main reasons for why the civil war began when it did. Walter (2006) explains that information asymmetries contribute to civil war because both the state and the rebels are incentivized to hid their military capabilities to reach a bargain before fighting breaks out. Commitment problems lead to civil war when one side cannot adhere to an agreement that is formed (246). In Syria bargaining failure contributed to the civil war because Asad attempted some reforms of the government similar to those enacted in Jordan and Morocco to end the protests. He revised the constitution and held parliamentary elections in early 2012. Some political prisoners were released and he ended the state of emergency that had been in effect for almost fifty years. These concessions were combined with repression of protestors as well as civilians not protesting (Lynch 108). This created a clear commitment problem because protestors and civilians saw mild reforms combined with state violence which made them uncertain of Asad’s intention of real reform. The government responded to peaceful protests with violence, and protestors armed themselves in response which resulted in the formation of rebel groups. But, from the beginning the dissenting voices in Syrian were not unified, and they were unable to form a cohesive dissenting voice (Olanrewaju and Joshua 48). The lack of a cohesive dissenting group exacerbates information asymmetries and commitment problems because the Syrian government does not know the capabilities or resolve for the rebel groups because each has a different level of support and goals than the other. These could be contributing to the duration of the conflict by complicating any peace agreements attempted today.

From a transnational perspective, the demonstration and spillover effects are popular theories yet not as compelling concepts for the spark of the Syrian civil war as grievances, opportunity, and commitment problems. The demonstration effect states the flow of information from other countries about rebellion encourages others to rebel as well, but Salehyan (2006) argues the spillover effect of negative externalities such as refugee flows is a more compelling argument than the demonstration effect (336). The war began with peaceful protests similar to those in Tunisia and Egypt by presenting a non-religious and non-sectarian protest to the government and the world (Lynch et al. 1). Lynch et al.’s research found during the first six months of protesting Syrians maintained an Arab Spring narrative in their tweets, but in 2012 the tone of social media changed. This change marked the beginning of massing arms and donations from foreigners to establish rebel groups (5). This research shows the demonstration effect did influence Syrian protestors, but the escalation from peaceful protests to civil war diverged from the Arab Spring’s message on social media. In regard to the spillover effect, Syria had close to 250,000 Palestinian refugees, but these refugees had been there for decades which indicates this is not a compelling argument. Iraqi refugees fled to Syria after Palestinian refugees but constituted a small portion of the population at 100,000 people (Polk). Even so, some Syrian farmers felt competition with refugees for government resources which could have encouraged those citizens to protest government policy. Therefore, the presence of refugees may have contributed to already existing grievances, but it is unlikely that refugees were a main cause of the civil war. In this case it appears the demonstration effect is a more compelling theory for why the war began than the spillover effect contrary to Saleyhan’s research.

Through the use of existing civil war theories on grievances, opportunity, and bargaining failure, it is apparent these are the main reasons for the onset of the Syrian civil war. Other factors are less compelling such as the demonstration and spillover effects. By understanding how the civil war began it is possible to propose better peace settlements. Unfortunately, new elements have been introduced since the protests began in 2011 including foreign interests from multiple countries like Turkey and Russia, and terrorist groups such as ISIS. These new factors have added new interests, therefore addressing the grievances, opportunities, and bargaining failures that originally fueled the war would not be enough to end the war today.

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