

## Untangling Intra-State Armed Conflict Dynamics: Typologies of Conflict in Syria's Early Crisis (2011–2014)

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### ABSTRACT

*Among the Arab Spring revolutions, the case of Syria could be the one that retained global attention due to its impact on regional instability and humanitarian crisis. The long-lasting conflict, originating from demand for regime change in the country, involved the armed groups and was fueled by the intervention of great powers along with other external actors since the beginning in 2011. This study aims to describe typologies of conflict, taking the Syrian conflict as a case study, focusing on the competing interactions between the armed groups and placing it as an intra-state conflict during its first four years, from 2011 to 2014. This study employed the qualitative case study approach and armed conflict typologies to address the question. The results show that Syria's conflict was very complex, in which most of the armed groups fought against one another. While the conflict was leading to a form of war by intensity, it also represented other types of conflicts, such as civil war, state-formation or secessionist conflict, and non-state armed conflict.*

**Keywords:** Syria; intra-state armed conflict; crisis

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## INTRODUCTION

The revolutions in Arab countries known as the Arab Spring became a significant political event both in the Middle East and around the world. The term “Arab Spring” first appeared in Western media, referring to a wave of protests, riots, and armed uprisings spreading across the countries in early 2011 (Luerdi, 2016; Manfreda, 2011). Starting in Tunisia, where protesters demanded the resignation of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, the revolution later spread to several other Arab nations, including Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Syria, and others.

The subsequent effort to overthrow the regime in Tunisia inspired pro-revolution groups outside the country to try the same. However, not every Arab nation affected by revolutionary movements experienced a political situation identical to Tunisia's. In some cases, Arab leaders chose to make political compromises with pro-revolution groups, which lessened the intensity of the revolutions.

Among those caught up in revolutionary calls, the uprising in Syria might attract the most attention from the global community. What started as a movement demanding regime change gradually turned into a bloody conflict between pro-revolution forces and supporters of President Bashar al-Assad's government. Assad's refusal to step down pushed the pro-revolution groups, later called the opposition, to take up arms. Meanwhile, the regime's use of violent methods only intensified resistance.

Over time, several opposition groups, mostly composed of Islamists and nationalists, agreed to establish the Syrian National Council (SNC) as a provisional government and an alternative authority to the Assad regime. Founded in August 2011 in Istanbul, Turkey, the SNC acted as a coordinating body for these groups in their efforts to challenge the regime (Galdini & Shamsi, 2014; Luerdi, 2016).

Earlier, in July 2011, rebel groups also formed the Free Syrian Army (FSA), based in Antakya, Turkey, acting as a military wing to confront Assad's loyalist forces and capture several key and strategic cities (Galdini & Shamsi, 2014; Luerdi, 2016). However, the creation of both the SNC and the FSA did not immediately succeed in removing Assad from power or taking control of Syria's government. Instead, the conflict between opposition forces and the Assad regime intensified and became more destructive. By the fourth year of this violence, more than 2.4 million Syrians had fled as refugees to neighboring countries like Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt (CARE, 2014; Luerdi, 2016).

The Syrian revolution serves as a clear example of the failure of revolutionary movements in the Middle East. As the conflict in Syria continued and became more complicated, it caused serious security and political instability throughout the region and even risked dampening the revolutionary enthusiasm in other Arab countries (Dabashi, 2013). By its fourth year, the conflict remained deadly, with over 170,000 people killed, most of whom were civilians. (Huffingtonpost, 2014; Luerdi, 2016).

The involvement of armed groups from outside Syria fueled the escalation of the conflict. For example, Hezbollah, based in Lebanon, along with Shiite militias from Iran and Iraq, was supporting the Assad regime (Luerdi & Hakim, 2020; Spyer, 2014). These groups fought alongside Assad's loyalist forces and played an active role in armed operations against anti-Assad factions. On the other hand, some Islamist groups, often called Jihadists by Western media, that were affiliated with al-Qaeda also opposed the Assad regime, mainly operating in northern Syria (Luerdi, 2016; TIME, 2013). However, their goals were significantly different from those of the SNC.

The growing strength of Islamist groups, like the Nusra Front and ISIS, further complicated the efforts of the SNC-FSA to seize territory and achieve regime change. These Islamist factions not only clashed with Assad's loyalist forces but also fought against the SNC-FSA. The situation was made even

more complex by the presence of Syrian Kurdish armed groups, particularly the PYD (Democratic Union Party), which was fiercely defending northern Syrian territory from other armed groups (Luerdi & Alfajri, 2018). Fighting between Syrian Kurdish forces, supported by Iraqi Kurds and Turkey's Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), and ISIS also drew international attention. These clashes increased the number of Kurdish refugees in the Syrian crisis (Luerdi & Hakim, 2020).

Foreign powers outside Syria, along with clashing interests among them, did contribute to the slow pace of conflict resolution. It was undeniable that Russia, Iran, China, Turkey, the European Union, the United States, and several Middle Eastern countries all had stakes in the crisis. As a result, resolving proved extremely difficult. Moreover, peace talks facilitated by the United Nations in Geneva failed to produce any agreement, as both the rebel side (the SNC-FSA) and the Syrian government remained firmly entrenched in their respective positions (Luerdi, 2016).

This study aims to describe the dynamics of Syria's crisis, framing it as an intra-state conflict and focusing on the conflicting actors and the types of conflict involving them during the early period of the conflict, particularly between 2011 and 2014. This study does not intend to oversimplify the crisis by omitting the roles of external powers' intervention (state and non-state actors), which were significant factors contributing to the severity of the crisis and the catastrophe for the people of Syria; rather, it aims to limit the scope of the study.

## METHODS

This research used a qualitative case study method to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon in a specific context. Data collection was carried out through library research, reviewing recorded sources such as books, scholarly journals, articles, and documents related to the study's topic. The data for this research were secondary, gathered from existing sources. This approach allowed for comprehensive analysis and interpretation of information to achieve an in-depth understanding of the problem studied.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

War can be understood in political philosophy, in which Clausewitz defines it as a violent act to force an opponent to meet one party's desire. In political philosophy, war is seen as something rational, national, and instrumental. The decision to use military force is based on rational calculations made by political authorities to achieve specific objectives. In this view, war is regarded as a legitimate instrument of state policy (Williams, 2008).

To understand the Syrian crisis, it is important to recognize that the conflict started with calls for Assad to step down, led by groups opposed to his regime. The Assad government was authoritarian, militaristic, and undemocratic. Assad ignored demands to give up power as Syria's leader and responded to anti-regime protests with violence, otherwise. His refusal to step down motivated opposition groups to organize, resulting in the creation of the FSA-SNC.

Assad chose to rely on military force and declared war on anti-regime groups or rebels. His decision to go to war was a rational move aimed at maintaining his grip on power in the name of the state. From the regime's perspective, the state forces were much more capable, equipped with superior military gear and

better-trained troops. Assad saw the opposition not only as rebels but also as threats to national stability, terrorists, and groups that were heavily dependent on external support.

Getting strong support from the permanent members of the UN Security Council, such as Russia and China, bolstered the regime's ability to launch military operations against anti-regime forces. In several military campaigns, the Assad regime carried out brutal attacks both on the ground and from the air against areas controlled by the SNC-FSA, which resulted in far more civilians being killed than rebel fighters. Assad seemed unconcerned about the war crimes committed, including the use of chemical weapons, as long as he maintained the support of those Security Council members.

The conflict in Syria could be described as an armed conflict, as the parties involved, the Assad regime's loyalist forces and rebel groups, both used weapons and engaged in violence against one another. Intense violence was often unavoidable and relatively well organized. This argument is reinforced by the definition provided by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), which defines an armed conflict as a contested issue that involves a government, a territory, or both, in which the use of armed force by two opposing sides results in at least 25 battle-related deaths (Williams, 2008).

Armed conflict can be divided into several types (Williams, 2008):

1. State-based armed conflict, which involves the government of a country as one of the parties involved in fighting. This type of conflict can be classified as follows:
  - a) Inter-state armed conflict, which occurs between two or more countries.
  - b) Intra-state armed conflict, which occurs between a country's government and opposition groups within the same country. This category can be divided into: (i) civil war, which aims to take control of the current government; and (ii) state-formation or secessionist conflict, which involves fighting between the government and opposition groups based on territory, seeking to redraw borders or break away to form a new country.
  - c) Internationalized intra-state armed conflict, which occurs when a conflict between a government and domestic opposition groups is accompanied by military intervention from other countries.
  - d) Extra-state armed conflict, which takes place between a country's government and non-state actors originating outside its territory.
2. Non-state armed conflict, which occurs when organized, collective armed violence takes place without the government being involved. This type of conflict involves clashes between non-state or community groups within a country.

According to the conflict classification by the UCDP, the conflict in Syria is classified as a "state-based armed conflict" because of the Syrian government's involvement. Since the fighting occurred within the borders of a single country between the Assad regime and various opposition groups, it also fits the category of an "intra-state armed conflict."

In the early stages, the situation in Syria was described as a "civil war," involving the Assad government and the SNC-FSA. The opposition aimed to take control of the government by replacing the regime and establishing a democratic Syrian state. Over time, however, the rise and increasing strength of other actors made the conflict much more complex. The changing dynamics of the conflict are illustrated in the figure and the table below:

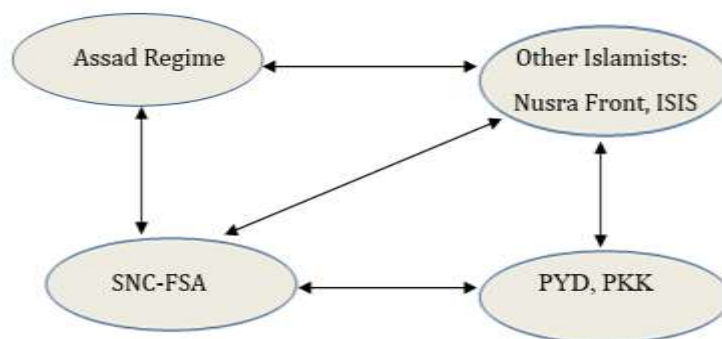


Figure 1. Illustration of actors involved in Syria's conflict

Source: the author's own illustration

**Table 1. Typologies of armed conflict**

Conflicting actors	Typologies of conflict
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assad regime vs SNC-FSA/Nusra Front</li> </ul>	civil war
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assad regime vs ISIS</li> </ul>	state-formation/secessionist
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>SNC-FSA vs Nusra Front vs ISIS vs PYD</li> </ul>	non-state armed conflict

Source: the author's own illustration

Initially, the Nusra Front aligned itself with the SNC-FSA, but it later withdrew from the umbrella group because it saw the SNC-FSA as serving Western interests and lacking true commitment to establishing an Islamic state in Syria as its goal. However, the armed group mostly fought independently and did not have the same level of strength as the SNC-FSA. According to conflict typologies, the fighting between the Assad regime and the Nusra Front can still be classified as a “civil war.” In contrast, the conflict between the Syrian regime and ISIS falls into the category of “state-formation/secessionist conflict,” since ISIS aimed to establish a new state, the Islamic Caliphate called the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), claiming parts of Syrian territory as part of this new entity.

Meanwhile, the fighting among the SNC-FSA, Nusra Front, ISIS, and PYD can be classified as a “non-state armed conflict,” since none of these actors represented state authorities. Each group sought to defend its own position while competing for control over territory within Syria. Though the Nusra Front and ISIS were both commonly labeled as Islamist groups, they operated on different principles and were even fighting against one another. On the other hand, the PYD had previously reached an understanding with the Assad regime to avoid confrontation, following a decision to grant autonomy to northern Syrian areas predominantly inhabited by Syrian Kurds (Gul, 2013; Luerdi, 2016).

The UCDP also classifies conflicts into three categories (Williams, 2008):

1. Minor armed conflict, which involves at least 25 battle-related deaths in a year, but fewer than 1,000 over the entire duration of the conflict.
2. Intermediate armed conflict, which records at least 25 battle-related deaths per year and has a cumulative total of at least 1,000 battle-related deaths, though no single year reaches 1,000 deaths.

3. War, which is defined as an armed conflict that results in at least 1,000 battle-related deaths in a single year.

Based on the UCDP's classification of armed conflict intensity, the conflict in Syria clearly falls into the category of war. Since the uprising began in 2011, over 170,000 people had been killed in fighting over nearly four years (Luerdi, 2016). In addition, the number of Syrian refugees climbed to over 2.4 million people at the same time (Luerdi, 2016).

While Clausewitz defines war as a form of political activity that uses violence, Bull describes war as organized violence carried out by political units against one another (Williams, 2008). Violence, in his view, does not qualify as war if it is not conducted in the name of political entities or directed at other political units (Williams, 2008). Bull's argument helps to reinforce the case for describing the situation in Syria as a war. Each political actor involved in the conflict (the Syrian regime, PYD, SNC-FSA, Nusra Front, and ISIS) attempted to weaken its rivals both politically and militarily, while fighting to gain control over territory.

The war in Syria, evolving into a global humanitarian crisis, did not automatically lead to a resolution of the conflict. Syria was becoming a major concern on the agenda of the United Nations and the UN Security Council, reflected in the many rounds of talks facilitated by these institutions. However, efforts to internationalize the conflict, ideally marked by the deployment of forces from other countries under an international mandate, never materialized during the four years of conflict. The resolution drafts conceived at the Security Council were vetoed by Russia, whose position within the Council was apparent to be a significant obstacle to settling the conflict.

Considering the UCDP's earlier explanation, the Syrian conflict cannot be labeled as an "internationalized intra-state armed conflict," despite outside interventions. For example, the airstrikes by the US-led anti-ISIS coalition did not give the conflict an internationalized aspect. These strikes were limited in scope, conducted solely from the air, and targeted only ISIS rather than forces loyal to the Syrian government. In fact, these strikes seemed to align with the interests of the Syrian regime, the SNC-FSA, and the PYD alike.

Talks involving the Syrian regime, the SNC-FSA, and other countries with stakes in the conflict, held at the UN headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, likewise failed to produce any meaningful progress. The Assad regime rejected the SNC-FSA's proposal to establish a transitional authority to serve as an interim government ahead of democratic elections in Syria. For the Assad government, a peaceful solution had to come from within Syria itself, without external intervention. The SNC-FSA, by contrast, maintained that peace could only be achieved if Assad stepped down, which would open the way for a democratic government (Al Jazeera, 2014).

The difficulty of reaching a conflict resolution could not be separated from the involvement of other states in Syria. Intervention is rarely neutral and often comes with clear biases, whether in support of rebel groups or of an embattled government facing a political crisis or revolution. As Betts (2009) argues, impartiality is often little more than a normative ideal in many cases of intervention. In practice, states and international organizations that intervene find it extremely difficult to avoid taking sides in the territory where the intervention takes place.

In the Syrian conflict, conflicting interests between the United States, the European Union, Turkey, and Middle Eastern countries on one side, and Russia, China, and Iran on the other, could be a key reason

why efforts to find a conflict resolution failed. The SNC-FSA received varying levels of support from Turkey and its allies, while the Assad regime was backed by Russia and its allies.

## CONCLUSION

The armed conflict in Syria, particularly during the first four years of the crisis, was leading to a war due to its intensity and casualties. The longer the conflict remained, the more armed groups emerged, took part, and complicated the situation within the country. The involvement of various actors demonstrates diverse typologies of armed conflicts dependent on their interactions, such as civil war (Assad's government against SNC-FSA), state-formation or secessionist conflict (Assad's government against ISIS), and non-state armed conflict (SNC-FSA, PYD, Nusra Front, and ISIS against each other).

As the Syrian conflict became increasingly difficult to resolve, the risk of rising casualties, especially among civilians, continued to increase. A meaningful resolution was only probable if the two major powers involved, the United States and Russia, could reach an agreement. In many ways, the Syrian conflict was becoming a display of the power and influence of both countries. As long as neither side was willing to reduce its interests, the war continued, and a resolution remained out of reach during the four years of the conflict. As time showed, without political compromise between these two veto-wielding powers, discussions at the UN Security Council remained little more than empty gestures.

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*Untangling Intra-State Armed Conflict Dynamics: Typologies of Conflict in Syria's Early Crisis (2011–2014)*

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