Which factors make a rebel group successful?

A case study of three rebel groups that operated during the Syrian Civil War: HTS, ISIS and SDF

Grigorios Tzikas

Study Number: 20235700

Master's Thesis – International Relations

Aalborg University

Supervisor: Jonathan Stavnskær Doucette

Date of Submission: 27th of May 2025

Number of characters with spaces: 108,968

Department of Politics and Society

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the factors that make a rebel group successful. In order to do so, a comparative case study is chosen. Three rebel groups that have participated in the Syrian Civil War with varying degrees of success are being compared in order to find out which factors made them successful or failed. The factors that are being tested are the ability to govern, access to rich natural resources, ability to mobilize recruits and foreign support or opposition. The three rebel groups, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria and Syrian Democratic forces were presented, as well as their historical and ideological origins. The indicators for the ability to govern were ten indicators, Executive, Councils, Justice, Civilian Taxes, Police, Humanitarian, Education, Health, Media and Diplomacy. The main rich natural resource in Syria was oil. The three rebel groups showed capabilities of mobilizing recruits in correlation to their territorial control. As various foreign powers intervened in the Syrian Civil War, the three rebel groups were greatly affected by their interventions. Through the analysis of the data, it was observed that a well-functioning government in combination with foreign support are crucial to winning a civil war, while access to rich natural resources and ability to mobilize recruits are less significant. Even though there are more than these four factors that determine if a rebel group is successful or failed, this thesis provides significant information in understanding the causes of a rebel group's success or failure.

1. INTRODUCTION

Peace and conflict studies are a well-developed field in International Relations. Academics are interested in finding the sources of violent conflicts and the ways they are being resolved. Such knowledge can help the global community prevent outbreaks of violence and resolve those that are already ongoing. As an increase in civil wars is appearing in the post-Cold War era, the interest in civil war studies has also increased. Academics are researching the causes of civil wars, the reasons for their long or short duration and the ways they are ending. Moreover, an increase in Internationalized Civil Wars has been observed.

The Syrian Civil War is an interesting example because its long duration and the large number of actors involved in it gives to academic researchers much data to analyse and work with. This thesis will study three different rebel groups and analyse the reasons for their success or failure. The time frame of the thesis will be from the beginning of the Syrian Civil War in March 2011 until the collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024.

The Syrian Civil War has its roots in the major unrest on 15 March 2011, when protesters took on the streets in the capital city of Damascus and in other cities of Syria, demanding the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad. The protests continued on for the next months and soon the situation escalated into a full civil war. For over the course of thirteen years, a wide variety of rebel groups, factions and alliances emerged. A large number of foreign powers got involved in the civil war, making it one of the most internationalized civil wars of the modern era.

The Syrian Civil War is still ongoing to this day. However, the defeat of the Assad regime was the first time that during the civil war there was a change of government and a group that was formerly a rebel group became the official government of the country.

This thesis will address the issue of the successes and failures of rebel groups. By following the paths of three rebel groups, **Hayat Tahrir al-Sham** (HTS), **Islamic State of Iraq and Syria** (ISIS) and **Syrian Democratic Forces** (SDF), the thesis will try to isolate the factors that make a rebel group successful or failed.

1.1 Defining Civil War

There are varying definitions of what constitutes a civil war. The general understanding is that a civil war is an armed conflict between organized groups within the same state. The terms civil war, civil conflict, and intrastate armed conflict broadly refer to a subgroup of armed conflicts that take place between the government of a state and an internal opposition group. Such conflicts are typically distinguished from interstate conflicts, which take place between states, and colonial conflicts, which take place between a state and a non-state entity outside of the state's core territory.[1] The specific definition and operationalization of intrastate, interstate, and colonial armed conflict that guide this thesis come from the UCDP/ PRIO4 Armed Conflict Dataset. Armed conflict is defined as "a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in

---

[1] Sambanis N., What Is Civil War? Conceptual and Empirical Complexities of an Operational Definition, (2015) The Journal of Conflict Resolution Vol. 48, No. 6, pp. 814-858, Sage Publications, Inc.

one calendar year".[2] If the government of a state is fighting an internal opposition group (or groups), the conflict is characterized as an intrastate armed conflict (ibid.). If the government of a state is fighting the government of another state, the conflict is characterized as an interstate conflict, and if the government of a state is fighting a non-state group outside its own territory, the conflict is classified as an extra systemic (colonial) conflict (ibid.).The Uppsala Conflict Data Program defines civil war as an armed conflict between a state government and at least one non-state actor, with or without foreign involvement and with a minimum of 25 battle-related deaths in a year. Small and Singer (1982) defined a civil war as "any armed conflict that involves (a) military action internal to the metropole, (b) the active participation of the national government, and (c) effective resistance by both sides." Stathis Kalyvas defines civil war as "armed combat taking place within the boundaries of a recognized sovereign entity between parties that are subject to a common authority at the outset of the hostilities."

1.2 Defining a rebel group

Rebel groups can be defined as armed groups with a discernible command structure that seek to violently challenge a state.[3] The terms 'violent non-state actor', 'non-state armed actor' and 'non-state armed group' have been used in international relations to describe rebel groups. However, these terms have wider meaning and can also be used to describe organized crime groups, private military companies, pro-government militias etc. This paper will use the term 'rebel group' to describe the subject it analyses, as it focuses on armed groups that want to overthrow or demand autonomy from a state government.

1.3 Defining 'Success'

The whole concept of a 'successful' rebel group is not something clear but it depends on the interpretation. While a rebel group is commonly thought as a group trying to overthrow the state government, the goals of rebel groups are often more complex than that. Rebel groups may be willing to negotiate concessions with the state in order to satisfy specific grievances. This paper will define success as how close the rebel groups came to achieve the goals that they defined in their ideological declarations.

1.4 Abbreviations:

This section is an index of abbreviations of groups and organizations that appear in the thesis:

HTS: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham

ISIS: Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

SDF: Syrian Democratic Forces

SOHR: Syrian Observatory for Human Rights

SSG: Syrian Salvation Government

DAANES: Democratic Autonomous Administration of North East Syria

---

[2] Gleditsch, N.P. and Indra de Soysa I., The Liberal Globalist Case, (2002) in Global Governance in the 21st Century: Alternative Perspectives on World Order. Stockholm (26–73)

[3] Larson J. M. and Lewis J.I., Rumors, Kinship Networks, and Rebel Group Formation, (2018), International Organization, Volume 72, Issue 4, pp. 871 – 903

CJTF-OIR: Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve

SNA: Syrian National Army

2. Methodology

This chapter will clarify how this paper and research method is set up. Firstly, the choice for a qualitative, comparative case study will be explained. Secondly, this chapter will describe the four theoretical questions that will constitute the basis for the analysis of our data. Finally it will describe the literature review and explain the research limitations.

2.1 Why comparative case study?

It was decided to make a comparative case study, comparing three rebel groups. As these three rebel groups co-existed in the same time period and in the same civil war the thesis can get the capability to compare the successes and failures of each group. A singular case study, while it would have given more ability to get an in-depth analysis of the successes and the failures of one rebel group, it would lack the factor of comparing what happens when a different route is taken.

2.2 Theory

This chapter will describe the four factors that will be compared, the reasons behind their choice, and the way they will be measured.

There are many factors that can be considered crucial for the success of a rebel group. The paper will analyse four factors that determine the success or failure of the three rebel groups. Relationship with the local population, access to rich natural resources, mobilization of local recruits and foreign fighters, foreign support and foreign opposition. These four factors are chosen because they come from different aspects of a rebel group's existence during a civil war. By analysing governance, economic, military and foreign relation factors we can paint a more complete picture of a rebel group's struggle during a civil war, from what we would have had if we only focused on e.g. military factors.

The first factor that will be studied is going to be the rebel governance in the controlled territories. The theoretical question that will be tested is going to be '*Does a well-functioning government increase the chances of a rebel group succeeding in a civil war?* In past research, it has been observed that rebel groups attempt to increase their legitimacy on the territories they control, by substituting state functions. In accordance with de-facto governance, they manage civilians and control territory. Armed groups first de-territorialize the region from central government institutions and then re-territorialise in line with their ideology and philosophy. In the context of state building, they use the rebel-civilian interaction, which creates legitimacy for the civilians towards the armed group. This correlation may help the armed group live longer.[4]

The way to measure the functionality of rebel governance will be checking how many aspects of government have effectively been replaced by the rebel polities.

The second factor that will be studied is going to be the economic management of the rebel groups. The theoretical question that will be tested is going to '*Does access to rich natural resources increase the chances of a rebel group succeeding in a civil war?* Past research

---

[4] Karakuş M., Non-State Armed Group's Durability Strategy: Instrumentalizing De-Facto Governance (2022), Journal of History School

has observed that rebel groups with access to rich natural resources have increased chances of being successful in a civil war. The Angolan Civil War for example was largely prolonged based on the ability of the Unita rebels to extract alluvial diamonds in the areas they controlled.[5] While past research has mostly focused on how the struggle for rich natural resources is responsible for the outbreak of civil wars and their prolongment, this paper will test if rich natural resources are a factor that increases the chances of a rebel group not only prolonging a conflict but eventually winning it.

The way to measure the quantity of rich natural resources will be to analyse the geographical distribution of natural resources of Syria and their quantities.

The third factor that will be studied is going to be the ability of rebel groups to mobilize recruits from the local population. The theoretical question that will be tested is going to be '*Does the ability to mobilize recruits from the local population and the ability to attract foreign fighters increase the chances of a rebel group succeeding in a civil war?*' Past research has observed that rebel groups that could mobilize large numbers of recruits and can attract foreign fighters have increased chances of succeeding. Larger rebel forces and access to more secure shelter are robustly associated with a greater probability of achieving a favourable outcome and a reduced probability of terminating in an unfavourable outcome. To achieve a favourable outcome a rebel needs access to internal shelter and large military forces.[6]

The way to measure the size of the recruits and the foreign fighters will be reports and estimates of the sizes of each rebel army.

The fourth factor that will be studied will be the support and opposition of rebel groups by foreign powers. The theoretical question that will be tested is going to be '*Does international support and a lack of international opposition increase the chances of a rebel group succeeding in a civil war?*' In past research, it has been observed that foreign military intervention in support of the government and no support for rebels, increases the chances of a government victory, while military intervention in support of rebels and no support for the government, increases the chances of rebel victory. Belligerents that have two or more foreign sponsors are four times more likely to survive through to the end of the civil war. Foreign assistance alters the balance of military capabilities between the belligerents, which, in turn, is responsible for influencing the form of warfare that emerges at a particular place and time in a civil war. The case study supported the theory.[7]

The way to measure the size of international support and opposition will be the description of events, actions and interventions in support or against the three rebel groups. An analysis of the balances of power between international forces will follow up.

2.3 Literature Review

The thesis will review literature related to the course and the events of the Syrian civil war and literature related to the three Syrian rebel groups, HTS ISIS and SDF. This will include literature on their ideological positions, their history, their governance, their economy, their military and their relations with foreign powers. In order to analyse the factors the made the

---

[5] Olsson O., Diamonds are a Rebel's Best Friend, (2006) The World Economy, Goteborg University
[6] Aronson J., Huth P., Lichbach M. and Chang K., (2015) How Rebels Win (and Why They Lose), (2015), Université de Genève
[7] Lockyer A., Foreign Intervention and Warfare in Civil Wars, Review of International Studies (2011), 37,2337–2364, British International Studies Association

Syrian rebel groups successful or failed, the source material that will be used in the thesis is going to be public declarations of rebel groups, reports by intelligence agencies, reports by NGOs, independent research by academics and independent research by journalists. The paper acknowledges that many of the data are going to be biased as it is not easy to for independent researchers to conduct research in rebel held-territories. To counter this obstacle, the paper will attempt to cross-reference the sources and see if there are corresponding or differentiating. Sources that cannot be cross-referenced will still be cited if they are considered valuable for the thesis.

2.4 Research Limitations

Before moving forward to the main part of the thesis, the limitations of the thesis are going to be mentioned. The first limitation is the fact that there are more factors that make a rebel group successful than the four ones that will be examined it the paper. For example, factors that will be excluded but have been measured in other research are: military technology, terrain differences, economic embargoes and atrocities committed towards local population. Therefore, the question on what a makes a rebel group successful can only be partially answered. The second limitation is the language barrier. The vast majority of the sources are going to be English language sources, as there is no knowledge of Arabic, Turkish and Kurdish (Kurmanj) languages. The thesis will only include very few local media written in their original language. As a result, the thesis may not be able to get a full picture of the situation in the territories of Syria.

3. Presentation of the three rebel groups

The belligerents of the Syrian Civil War were a wide variety of groups and coalitions. The four main currents of forces in the Syrian Civil war were: The Syrian government and its allies, The Syrian Opposition Groups, the groups operating in the territory of North Eastern Syria (also known as Rojava), and ISIS.

As the research question is '*what makes a rebel group successful?*', the thesis will leave out the Syrian government and its various allied militias and only focus on the three rebel groups HTS, SDF and ISIS. The thesis will also leave out the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (TSFA) which is also called Syrian National Army (SNA), because it does not operate as an independent rebel militia but it is directly controlled by the Turkish state. Furthermore, the Syrian Free Army (SFA) or New Syrian Army (NSA) will also be left out because it is controlling the area around the US military base in al-Tanf and it does not control civilian areas.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham was founded in 2017. It was formed on 28 January 2017 as a merger between several armed groups: Jabhat Fath al Sham (formerly known as Al Nusrah Front), Harakat Nur Al Din Al Zanki, Liwa Al Haqq, Ansar Al Din and Jaysh Al Sunnah.[8]

The ideology of HTS is Sunni Islamism and Syrian Nationalism but its rooted in Salafi Islamism. HTS had its roots to al-Nusra Front (Jabhat Fatah al-Sham) which was part of the international jihadist organization Al-Qaeda. Al-Nusra Front cut its ties with al-Qaeda and limited itself in Syria. HTS main goal was the overthrowing of the Assad regime rather than imposing a specific form of an Islamic government.

It's goals according to the first speech of their leader, Abu Jaber, on 9th of February 2017, were to 'to topple Bashar al Assad's regime.'[9] On 17th September 2017, the Syrian General Conference was held in Idlib which agreed that 'the Islamic law as the only source of legislation and the need to preserve the identity of the Syrian Muslim people' and to 'the overthrow of the illegal regime with all its symbols and pillars and holding it accountable for its committed crimes, as well as liberating the Syrian territory from all the occupying forces, extending security and spreading justice in the liberated areas'.[10] In November 2017, the Syrian General Conference established the Syrian Salvation Government which governed the territory of Idlib. To summarize, HTS wanted to overthrow the Assad regime and form a new government based on Islamic law.
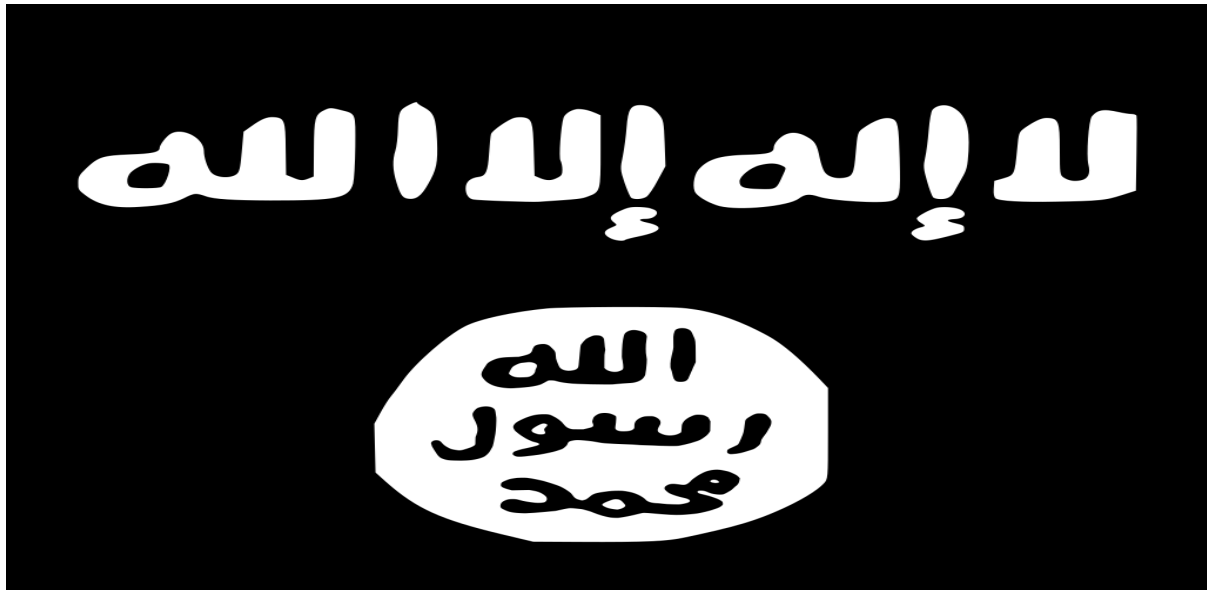
Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

---

[8] Joscelyn T., Al Qaeda and allies announce 'new entity' in Syria, (2017), Long War's Journal https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/01/al-qaeda-and-allies-announce-new-entity-in-syria.php

[9] Joscelyn T., Hay'at Tahrir al Sham leader calls for 'unity' in Syrian insurgency, (2017), Long War's Journal https://web.archive.org/web/20170211001547/https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/02/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-leader-calls-for-unity-in-syrian-insurgency.php

[10] The Syrian General Conference Faces the Interim Government in Idlib, (2017), Enab Baladi https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2017/09/syrian-general-conference-faces-interim-government-idlib/

Islamic State of Iraq and Syria was founded in 2013. It was declared on 8 April 2013 by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. It was a fusion of the Islamic State of Iraq with the al-Nusra front that operated in Syria. However, parts of the al-Nusra front disagreed with the merger and decided to be independent from it.

The ideology of ISIS is called unofficially 'Islamic Statism' and it is a blend of Sunni Islamist schools of thought such as Wahhabism, Salafism and Qutbism. It seeks to restore the Caliphate of early Islam and unite all Muslims in one single Islamic State.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the emir and later caliph of the Islamic State, in his declaration of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, declared the goals of his group as such: 'time has come to declare before the people of Al- Sham and the whole world that Jabhat Al-Nusra is only an expansion for the Islamic State of Iraq and part of it and we are determined after making Istikhara of Allah Almighty and consulting whom we trust in his religion and wisdom to continue in the journey of ascending of the group by passing all that will be said since the pleasure of Allah is above everything, and no matter what happens to us because of that so we declare keeping our trust in Allah abolishing the name of the Islamic State of Iraq and abolishing the name of Jabhat Al-Nusra, and joining them under one name "The Islamic State in Iraq and Al-Sham" and also uniting the banner which is the banner of the Islamic State the banner of the Khilafah Insha'Allah, Allah Almighty.'[11]

'The Islamic State decided to establish an Islamic caliphate and to designate a caliph for the state of the Muslims. The jihadist cleric Baghdadi was designated the caliph of the Muslims.'[12] To summarize, the Islamic State did not only lay a territorial claim on the states of Iraq and Syria but also claimed to be a Caliphate that has authority over all of the Muslims of the world.

Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

---

[11] Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Announcement of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, (2013)
[12] Deutsche Welle, ISIS declares 'Caliphate', (2014), Deutsche Welle

https://www.dw.com/en/isis-declares-leader-al-baghdadi-caliph-of-the-muslims-changes-name/a-17745538

Syrian Democratic Forces were formed in 2015. They were founded on 10 October 2015 as an alliance between thirteen groups: YPG/YPJ, Al-Sanadid Forces, Syriac Military Council, Burkan Al-Fırat Operations Center, Suwar al-Raqqa, Shams al-Shamal,- Lîwa Al-Selcuki, Brigade Groups of Al-Jazira, Jabhat Al-Akrad, Jaysh Al-Thuwar, Lîwai Al-Tehrîr and Lîwai 99 Muşat.[13]

The ideology of SDF is Democratic Confederalism. This ideology was started by Abdullah Ocalan, the leader of the Kurdish guerilla group PKK and the spiritual leader of the Kurdish Freedom Movement. Democratic Confederalism proposes the creation of a confederation of self-organized autonomous regions. Another important aspect of their ideology is feminism and the importance of the role of women in participation in political life. The SDF comprises of all-male and all-female units. The government is composed of co-chairs where one has to be male and the other one female.[14]

It's goals according to the press conference of its establishment on 11th October 2015 were 'the democratic unity of all Syrian peoples on the basis of women's freedom', 'the founding of a democratic Syria' and 'to fight the ISIS and forces attacking the peoples of Syria'.[15] Moreover, a political wing of the SDF was created, the Syrian Democratic Council. Its goals according to its founding conference on 9th of December were 'the forming of a democratic constitution to enable a production of solutions to the Syrian crisis through democratic peaceful discussion, dialogue and talk; to fight terror; to hold free and democratic elections required by the current process in Syria; to secure the faith, culture and identities of all

---

[13] Kurdish Question, Declaration of Establishment by Democratic Syria Forces, (2015), Kurdish Question
https://web.archive.org/web/20160224085811/http://kurdishquestion.com/index.php/kurdistan/west-kurdistan/declaration-of-establishment-by-democratic-syria-forces/1179-declaration-of-establishment-by-democratic-syria-forces.html
[14] Abdullah Öcalan, Democratic Confederalism, (2011), International Initiative
[15] Kurdish Question, Declaration of Establishment by Democratic Syria Forces, (2015), Kurdish Question
https://web.archive.org/web/20160224085811/http://kurdishquestion.com/index.php/kurdistan/west-kurdistan/declaration-of-establishment-by-democratic-syria-forces/1179-declaration-of-establishment-by-democratic-syria-forces.html

Syrian peoples; and to achieve social consensus on the basis of their democratic will.', to 'wage a political struggle to recover the country from the spiral of violence by means of its civilian and political power and with the participation of national individuals' and to 'be in dialogue with international institutions and methods to enable the transformation of Syria and development of a pluralist and centralist system'.[16] To summarize, the SDF didn't only struggle for the recognition of the autonomous administration in the areas it controlled but struggled for the overall federalization of Syria though not necessarily with military means.

Timeline:

2011-Outbreak of Syrian Civil War->2024-Fall of Assad regime

2011-2015 Free Syrian Army (FSA)-> 2012-2017 al-Nusra Front->2017-2024 Hayat Tahrir al-Sham

2013-2019 Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

2011-2015 People's Defence Units (YPG)->2015-2024 Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

Territorial situation of each group at the moment of its formation:

---

[16] Democratic Syria Congress, Final Declaration of the Democratic Syria Congress: "Towards building a free and democratic Syria", (2015) https://rojavainformationcenter.org/storage/2021/07/2015-Final-Declaration-of-Democratic-Syria-Congress.pdf

Situation of Syria in 1st of February 2017: HTS controlled territories appear with white colour.
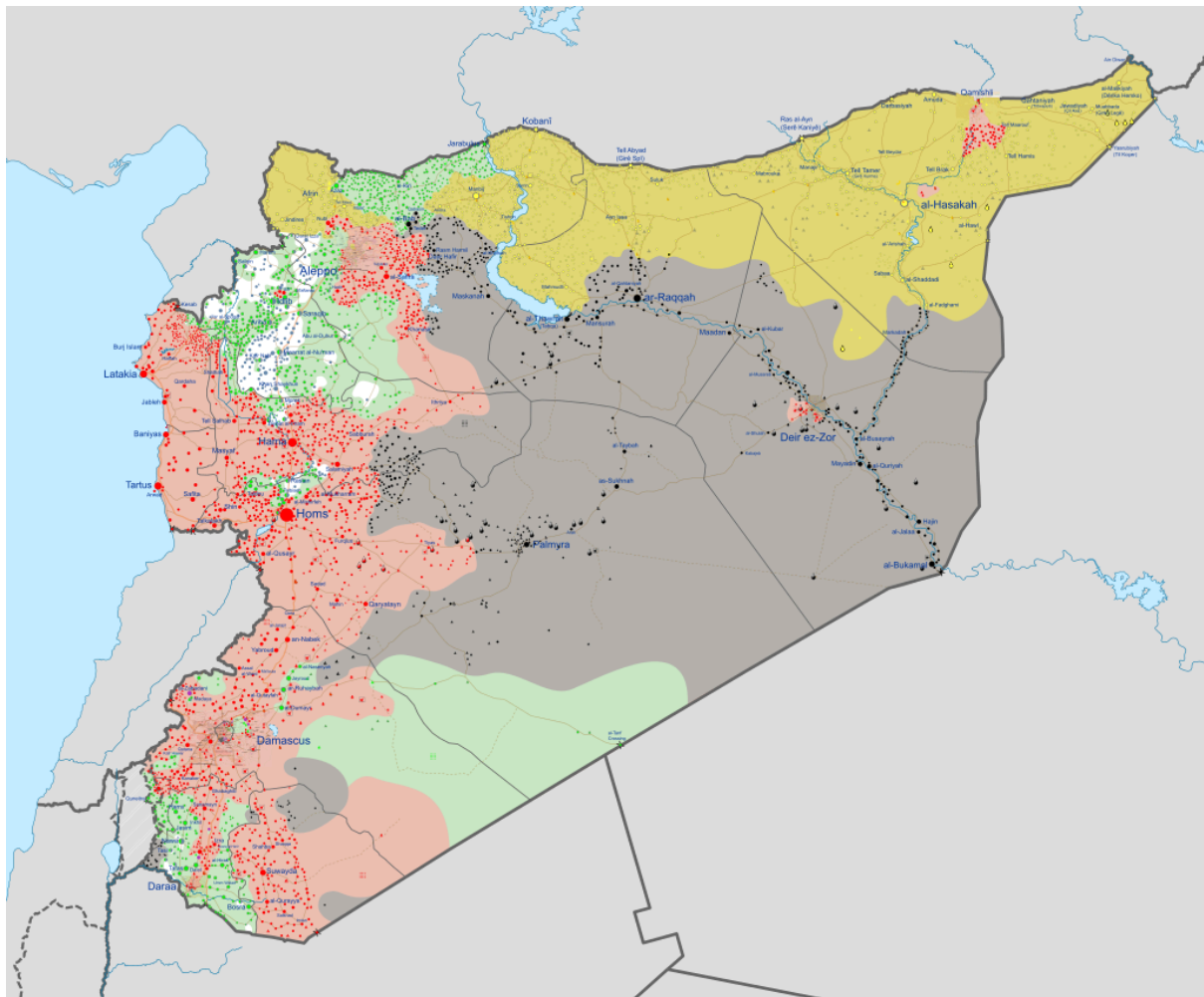
Situation of Syria and Iraq in June 2014: ISIS controlled territories appear with red colour.

Siria

Irak
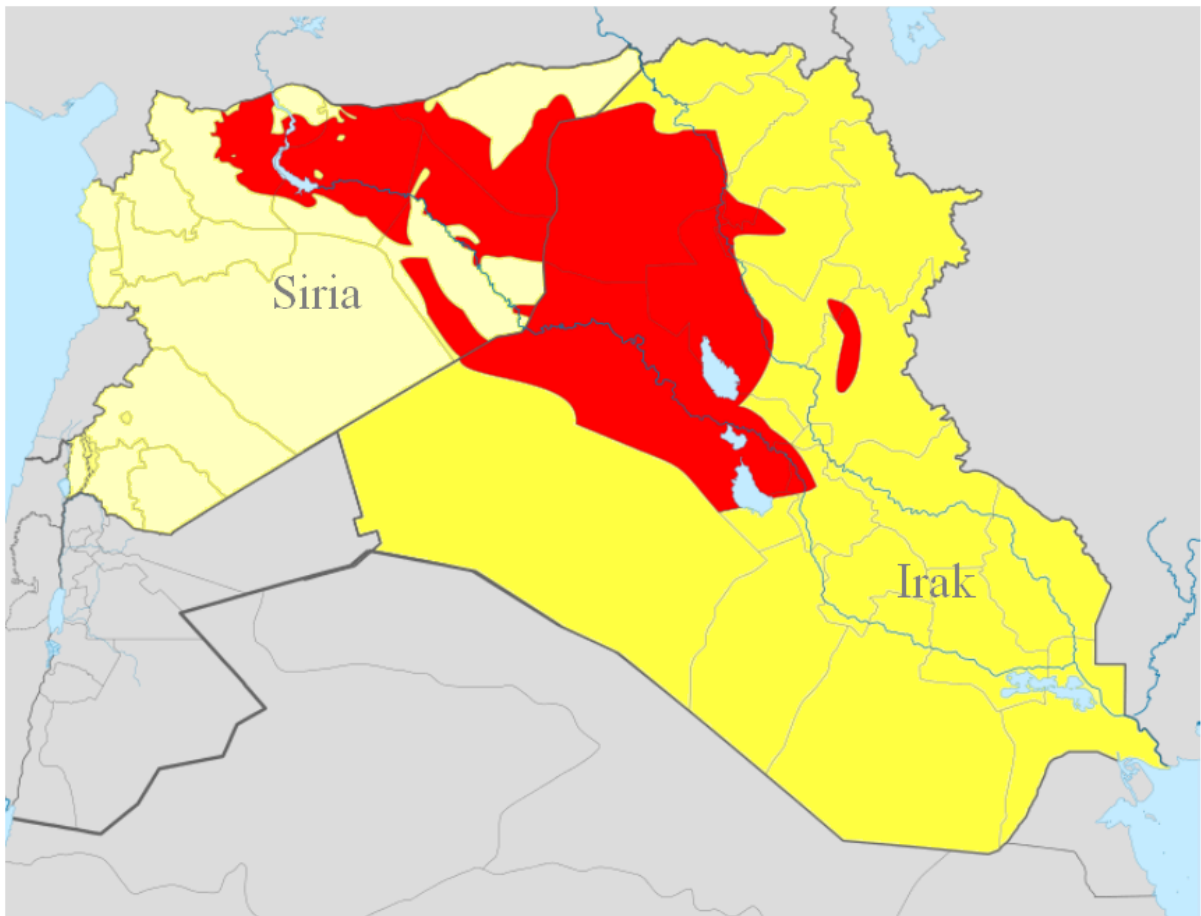
Situation of Syria in November 2015: SDF controlled territories appear in yellow colour.
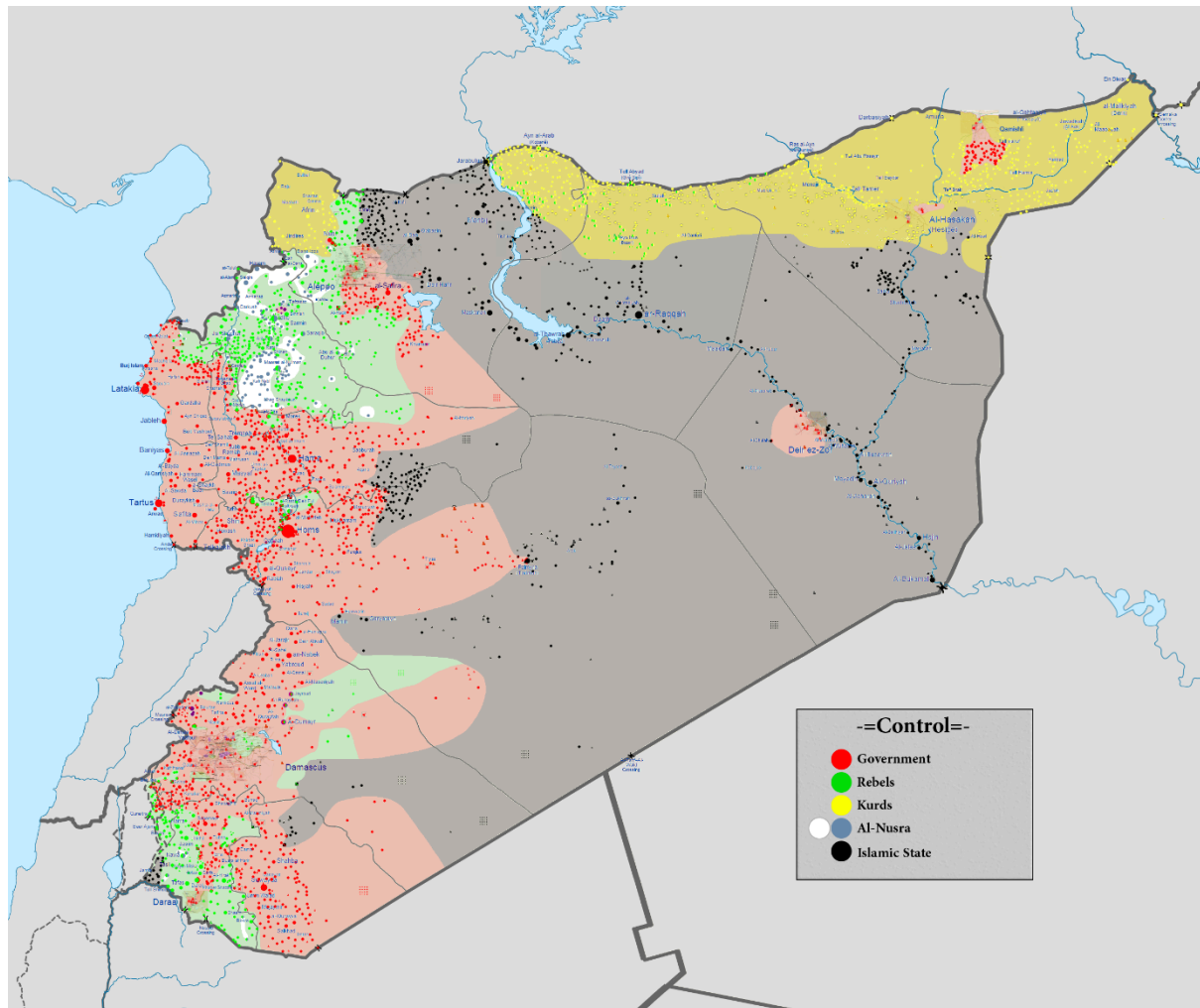
4. Does a well-functioning government increase the chances of a rebel group succeeding in a civil war?

This chapter will analyse the forms of governance that were established by the three rebel groups in the territories they controlled. There are three conditions to engage in rebel governance: the armed group must hold some territory within the state against which it is rebelling, Civilians must reside within this contested territory, and the group must have committed an initial act of violence against the state.[17] All three rebel groups are congruous with these three conditions, therefore it can be considered that they are engaging in rebel governance.

The goal of the chapter will be to measure how well-functioning was each rebel government established by the three rebel groups. In order to measure the function of each rebel government we will measure the 10 different governing activities, heavily inspired by the 11 governing activities Reyko Huang identified in her rebel governance database.[18] The 10

<hr>

[17] Kasfir, N., Rebel governance – constructing a field of inquiry: definitions, scope, patterns, order, causes., (2015) New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 21–46.

[18] Huang, R., The Wartime Origins of Democratization: Civil War, Rebel Governance, and Political Regimes., (2016) Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press

governing activities are going to be:, *Executive* (having executive leadership), *Councils* (having central or regional councils), Justice (having a justice system), *Civilian Taxes* (having a regularized system of money collection from civilians), *Police* (having armed law enforcement agents that are distinct from the rebel fighters), *Humanitarian* (engaging in humanitarian relief operations), *Education* (having an education system), *Health* (having a healthcare system), Media (having communication outlets) and *Diplomacy* (having relations with states or international organizations).

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham:

Executive

HTS occupied the Idlib province in Northwestern Syria. HTS was officially declared in January 2017. Initially, the 'general commander' or emir of HTS was Abu Jaber Shaykh. However, after October 2017, the position was transferred to Abu Mohammad al-Julani who remained the leader of HTS until the group overthrew the Assad regime. Julani had political and military control of the territories controlled by HTS.[19] The government established by HTS was the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), which was established in November 2017. The SSG, was governed by a cabinet of a prime minister, who gets voted by the General Shura Council, and eleven ministries (interior, justice, endowments, education, health, local administration and services, economic and resources, development and humanitarian affairs, higher education, and agriculture)[20] The ministers were either nonpartisan technocrats or HTS-linked prominent figures. Put differently; the armed group tried to receive acceptance by adopting representatives of prominent local families in the local councils.[21]

Councils

Upon its establishment, SSG, modified (since there were some that already existed) and established local councils. These councils have been responsible for General Administrations of Services (although an armed group formed this structure in 2013). In 2017, 156 local councils were operating in Idlib province with the following administrative divisions: 9% city councils, 30% town councils, and 61% municipal councils. Of these local councils, 86 operate in HTS controlled areas—14% city councils, 39% town councils, and 47% municipal councils).[22]

Justice

The justice system in the territories of the Salvation Government, operates through the Ministry of interior and the Ministry of Justice. The two ministries operate dozens of police stations and courts that oversee a significant number of cases, adopting a series of measures and procedures. The judicial institutions, including courts, administration

---

[19]Huffpost, Al-Julani is an interim commander of the "Liberation of Al-Sham" Authority. And this is the fate of its former leader,(2017) Huffpost https://web.archive.org/web/20171002165746/http://www.huffpostarabi.com/2017/10/02/story_n_18159996.html

[20] Hassan Ibrahim | Jana al-Issa | Razam al-Sawadi, *Al-Jolani: The one-man rule*, (2024) Enab Baladi https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2024/04/al-jolani-the-one-man-rule/

[21] Zaraee, N., & Shaar, K., The Economics of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, (2021) Middle East Institute
[22] Dassouky, A. Al. The Role of Jihadi Movements in Syrian Local Governance. (2017), Omran for Strategic Studies

departments, and police stations are headed by a group of Syrian elites and academics. The courts were operating based on Islamic Sharia law rulings. Their working mechanism and rulings are based on a "large number" of circulars issued by the justice minister," "In Idlib, persons, who are brought before the court due to criminal or misdemeanour personal claims, or for posing a threat to public security such as cells affiliated with the regime or the Islamic State, go through the regular judicial procedures: searches, investigations, confessions, gathering evidence, witnesses and others," In the territories run by the Salvation Government, the number of courts and judicial departments amounted to 25, with various judicial specializations, including military, civil, criminal, and administrative courts.[23]

Civilian taxes

In May 2017, under first SSG Prime Minister Muhammad al-Sheikh, the "General Monetary Agency For Cash Management And Consumer Protection" was formed, in order to regulate exchange operations and prevent monopoly and manipulation of currency rates in Idlib Governorate. In 2019, SSG formed the and Zakat (Alms) Department. Alms departments issued a decree obliging farmers to pay 5%, and olive farmers to pay 10% of their total crop value as alms. In September 2020, SSG created the Real Estate and Property Registry Office, which later issued new tariffs in Turkish Liras (TL) for the services (internet, telecommunication, and others). HTS had established the General Customs Administration to manage all gates and crossings on its borders. SSG has also imposed taxes on cars and motorcycles and levies on businesses and institutions such as pharmacies, restaurants, hygiene, electricity, and water facilities. Overall, it can be said that limited effectiveness of the taxation system was achieved due to the limited influence of HTS and the representation problem.[24]

Police

The SSG operated a police force through the Ministry of the Interior. When Idlib Police were temporarily suspended, the area was filled with the Sharia Police like justice system. The SSG has a grip, in terms of economic activities, of the border control or trade crossing (transport goods into or out of Idlib) both with Turkey (The Bab al-Hawa) and Regime-held (Al-Ais) areas. HTS had established the General Customs Administration to manage all gates and crossings.[25]

Health

Healthcare in the territories of the SSG was managed by the Ministry of Health. According to the ministry of health in 2022, it faced great challenges in the medical sector. Many of the medical centers have been rendered out of service after being targeted by the Assad regime. The ministry claimed that before the formation of the SSG, the medical sector was in a state of chaos and disorganization, which was seen by the work of unspecialized and

---

[23] Ali Darwish, Innocent here; convict there: two separate judiciaries in northern Syria, (2021) Enab Baladi
https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2021/02/innocent-here-convict-there-two-separate-judiciaries-in-northern-syria/
[24] Karakuş M., Non-State Armed Group's Durability Strategy: Instrumentalizing De-Facto Governance (2022), Journal of History School
[25] Karakuş M., Non-State Armed Group's Durability Strategy: Instrumentalizing De-Facto Governance (2022), Journal of History School

unqualified individuals. The SSG has taken upon itself to manage, organize and control the medical sector to improve it even with limited support."[26]

Education

The topic of education handled by the Education Directorate. In 2019, the government passed a resolution banning students granted elementary school diplomas by the Syrian government from access to high schools in HTS-held areas. Since 2015, universities were revived as private institutions until the government sought to bring them under its control through the Council of Higher Education.[27]

Humanitarian

As the only UN border crossing to Syria is controlled by HTS forces, they are also responsible for handling humanitarian aid and distributing it to the local population. SSG established civil bodies such as the Free Doctors Union or the Ministry of Local Development to manage humanitarian aid. [28]

Media

The Ebaa News Agency which started in 2017 operated as a propaganda agency for HTS. It mostly operated online through its website which covered the actions of HTS. Finally, the thematic landscape of ENA's productions constitutes a peculiar mixture of its opposing priorities. On the one hand, Ebaa paid a great deal of attention to portraying itself as an independent news agency. First, it utilized professional TV studios and equipment, as well as provided readers with dedicated reportages, documentaries and news. Second, there is no doubt that ENA's attention has been focused almost exclusively on local Syrian issues. This contrasts with the much more universal approach adopted by other Salafi-jihadist VEOs, such as al-Qaeda or especially the Islamic State. Third, it stepped away from religious-concentrated messaging, which has generally been considered a crucial element of digital jihad. And finally, from time to time, it did not hesitate to mention problems experienced both by HTS and inhabitants of rebel-held territories of Syria. On the other hand, a closer look proves that ENA has been completely dedicated to supporting HTS's radical Islamist agenda. It exploited Salafi-jihadist nomenclature. Ebaa's productions still praised martyrs and martyrdom, highlighted suicide operations, and made sure that audiences would perceive HTS as the only legitimate rebel power in Syria. Additionally, it expressed some interest in exploiting gruesome images of corpses in its messages, which is symbolic. To summarize, the ENA messaging strategy allowed its digital infrastructure to remain intact on the surface web. Simultaneously, it was not enough to convince an independent viewer that its productions should be considered as non-partisan journalism. Due to the reasons mentioned above, there is no doubt that ENA's primary function is to incite support of HTS among online audiences.[29]

[26] Levant 24, *Syrian Salvation Government Organizes Medical Sector of Idlib*, (2022) Levant 24 https://levant24.com/news/2022/10/syrian-salvation-government-organizes-medical-sector-of-idlib/
[27] Karakuş M., Non-State Armed Group's Durability Strategy: Instrumentalizing De-Facto Governance (2022), Journal of History School
[28] Peacerep, NAVIGATING FRAGMENTATION: HUMANITARIAN AID, BORDERS AND CONFLICT LINES IN SYRIA, (2023)

[29] Lakomy M., Crouching shahid, hidden jihad: mapping the online propaganda campaign of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham affiliated Ebaa News Agency, (2023), Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression, 15:3, 361-389, Routledge Press

Diplomacy

Even though HTS was designated as a terrorist group by Turkey, HTS and Turkey had a lot of unofficial relations. There was strong economic and political cooperation. Turkish foreign minister Hakan Fidan claimed in a 2024 interview that 'Turkey and HTS had excellent cooperation on sharing intelligence to fight against especially DAESH leadership. They helped them a lot, but because of the sensitivities, they didn't make it public at that time. But over the years they cooperated with them in providing intelligence on DAESH and Al-Qaeda related organizations.' [30]

Islamic State of Iraq and Syria:

Executive

ISIS at the peak of its power occupied many areas in central Syria and central Iraq. ISIS was a theocratic Salafist Islamist regime. The leader of ISIS was its emir, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. When ISIS declared a worldwide Caliphate, al-Baghdadi got declared its Caliph. Baghdadi, his Cabinet advisers and his two key deputies comprise the executive branch of the government, known as "Al Imara." The two deputies – Abu Ali al-Anbari and Abu Muslim al-Turkmani, were overseeing Syria and Iraq, respectively.[31] Below Abu Bakr, the caliph, and his two deputies enlist 12 local rulers called walis, a Cabinet comprised of eleven officials, three of whom operate a War Cabinet, and eight others who respectively oversee Councils on Provincial Administration (civilian matters like health), Military, Security/Intelligence, Religious Affairs, Finance, and Media.[32]

Councils

Shura councils were operated by ISIS. The Shura council – which reports directly to the executive branch – is the caliphate's religious monitor, appointed to make sure that all the local councils and governors are sticking to ISIS' version of Islamic law. The Shura Council, much like Western democratic structures, is a body of approximately 11 members that has the power to dismiss the Caliph should he fail his duties.[33]

Justice

In the territories controlled by ISIS the justice system was managed by the Bureau of Justice and Grievances (Diwan al-Qada wa al-Mazalim), a law and decision-making body. A top-down, organizational structure of the ISIS judiciary, as well as its interpretation and application of Shari'a law. The Bureau, along with the Islamic Courts and the Hisba Court, or

[30] France 24 English, Interview of H.E. Hakan Fidan, Minister of Foreign Affairs, (2024), France 24 English
https://www.mfa.gov.tr/interview-of-he-hakan-fidan--minister-of-foreign-affairs--france-24-english--20-december-2024.en.mfa
[31] Nick Thompson, Atika Shubert, The anatomy of ISIS: How the 'Islamic State' is run, from oil to beheadings, (2015), CNN World
https://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/18/world/meast/isis-syria-iraq-hierarchy/index.html
[32] Baskaran A., The Islamic State Healthcare Paradox: A Caliphate in Crisis, (2015), Inquiries Journal
http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/1054/the-islamic-state-healthcare-paradox-a-caliphate-in-crisis
[33] Baskaran A., The Islamic State Healthcare Paradox: A Caliphate in Crisis, (2015), Inquiries Journal
http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/1054/the-islamic-state-healthcare-paradox-a-caliphate-in-crisis

Diwan al-Hisba, are described collectively as the central judiciary, falling under the control of the Caliph and the Shura Council within the ISIS administrative hierarchy. Most understand the Bureau of Justice and Grievances in Syria as merely a complaints office (located in Raqqa and Aleppo) which heard the grievances of those living within ISIS-controlled territories, including against ISIS officials, fighters, and local emirs. However, much of this knowledge stems from ISIS' own dissemination of information. In July 2016, the group published a fifteen-minute promotional video entitled "The Edifice of the Caliphate," detailing and unmasking its organizational structure to the world and listing the Bureau of Justice and Grievances as simply one of fourteen bureaus that comprise the "State" organization. Documents suggest that, in line with its seventh century predecessor of an administrative court with broad oversight, the Bureau's jurisdiction was quite expansive.[34]

Civilian taxes

Yet, this expectation is contradicted by the case of al-Mayadin. Not only did IS collect revenue from civilians during 29 out of the 38 months that it controlled the district, but the group imposed seven different types of taxes and other revenue-extracting policies during that period. Many of IS's taxes and other revenue-extracting policies were drawn directly from the Quran and other texts upon which the group's belief system are based. Two obvious examples are zakdt and jizyah, a kind of excise tax historically imposed by Islamic states on Christians and Jews in exchange for their protection as religious minorities. Other revenue-extracting policies were not explicitly justified on the basis of such texts but nonetheless reflected and reinforced the group's ideology indirectly by (1) incentivizing conformity with its interpretation of Islam and (2) financing public goods provision, which was necessary to realize IS's ideological objective of governing people and territory through the establishment of a modern-day "caliphate" based on the model of Islamic statecraft first laid out by the Prophet Mohamed in the sixth century (Revkin, 2016) Many of the revenue-extracting policies imposed by IS in al-Mayadin appeared to be intended to incentivize civilian compliance with the group's ideology. For example, IS imposed fines on civilians who failed to comply with its strict dress code, which was based on the group's interpretation of Islam, including men caught wearing pants that fall below their ankles (ISTPI #856), in contravention of a saying of the Prophet (al Bukhari, 2005: Book 77, Hadith 5). Female farmers were fined for wearing insufficiently modest clothing, including colorful shoes, while working in their fields. Other fines were imposed to punish behaviors that violated IS's interpretation of Islam including fines on merchants who failed to close their shops during mandatory prayer times and men who failed to trim their mustaches as advised by the Prophet (al Bukhari, 2005: Book 77, Hadith 109). In other districts (Manbij and Raqqa), IS collected service fees to finance the construction of new mosques, providing additional evidence for a link between ideology and taxation (ISTPI #939, 1099). In another example of an ideologically-motivated tax imposed in al-Mayadin, IS announced that it would begin to collect a jizya tax from Christians in exchange for guaranteeing their protection. At the time, a local newspaper reported that there was only one Christian family left in the district of al-Mayadin, and IS presented them with three options: (1) convert to Islam, (2) pay the jizya tax, or (3) leave IS territory. Not only was the jizya explicitly grounded in IS's ideology, but it also served to incentivize the population's adoption of that ideology by imposing costs on non-believers.

---

[34] Syria Justice and Accountability Centre, Judge, Jury and Executioner: the ISIS Bureau of Justice and Grievances, (2020), Syria Justice and Accountability Centre

Police

There were four administrative bodies that were responsible for upholding law and order and security within ISIS' territory: 1) the Department of Judiciary and Grievances, a law and decision-making body, 2) the Department of Public Security (emni), a high profile and internationally infamous organization, 3) the Department for Religious compliance, the hisba, and 4) the more mundane and 'ordinary' shurta. The last two departments, the hisba and the shurta, operated as forces similar to what we call 'police', the hisba was more akin to a religious police, while the shurta was roughly similar to a regular police. The Department for Religious Compliance (hisba) executed and enforced these laws, decisions, and rules within and throughout the caliphate. In territories controlled by ISIS, members of the hisba were organized in field squads, hosted a main office in each department, and also employed special female squads. The hisba cooperated with the Islamic State's military security department in manning checkpoints and border crossings along with the Hijra Commission/ Committee to ensure both the flow of foreign fighters and the movement of goods and supplies across the border. If arrested, individuals would be brought to court or were transported to prisons. The police work done by the Islamic State Police, the shurta, was an essential component of the caliphate's appeal to people living under the rule of ISIS. Unlike the contemporary police departments that it came to replace, the Islamic State Police was part of the judiciary (Department of Justice and Grievances, Diwan al-Qada wa al-Madhalim), and its duties involved tasks that went beyond policing, such as mediation and conflict resolution. According to ISIS, its police employed, "legal specialists who reported to a senior jurist (known as a shari'i), who served as a direct link to judges in the courts." Evidence from the authors' police dataset supports the assertion that the legal specialists within the Islamic State Police seemed to try to resolve claims or complaints through mediation between the conflicting parties. Cases were only referred to the courts if the legal specialists could not settle the claims by themselves or if the alleged offenses were such a severe or capital nature that only a judge could mete out the punishment. Duties of the Islamic State Police included: operating police stations, handling complaints, manning checkpoints, conducting patrols, proving security (VIP and building protection), administering jailhouses and prisons, and operating a traffic police.[35]

Health

Healthcare in the territories controlled by ISIS is managed by The Health Department—The Diwan al-Siha. It is presented as a guarantor of health services along with establishing regulations for smoking, consumption of alcohol, recruitment of volunteers and medical personnel, pharmaceutical price controls, gender segregation, medical supply distribution, etc. Diwan al-Siha enforces rigid, segregationist, and gendered divides between physicians. These measures have been accused of resulting in reduced efficiency of hospital management, as males cannot treat females, and females cannot treat males unless given very specific permission. As consolation, ISIS maintains the health system by compromising on certain measures for women and men. ISIS permits a single hospital employee to travel to a city hospital controlled by other forces in order to acquire cash from government-approved banking facilities. ISIS sometimes allows certain female patients to see male physicians for concerns that do not relate to sexual organs. [36]

---

[35] De Graaf B. A. and Yayla A., Policing as Rebel Governance. The Islamic State Police. (The ISIS Files), (2021), Program on Extremism - George Washington University

[36] Baskaran A., The Islamic State Healthcare Paradox: A Caliphate in Crisis, (2015), Inquiries Journal

Education

The education ministry of ISIS was called Diwan of Education and Teaching of the Islamic State. The first of the Diwan's tasks was to dissolve the educational and administrative cadres in Raqqa's schools and make them take mandatory courses on Sharia. It called on them to repent and "purify their minds" to match its opinions on principles of nationalism, secularism, and democracy, which it believes are contrary to Islamic Sharia and must be corrected. With the start of the ISIS's first school year in Raqqa in October 2013, committees affiliated with ISIS were established. The first educational curriculum covered primary school for children aged seven to 11 years old. ISIS neglected subjects that had previously been taught, such as science, mathematics, art, and music. Many families have, out of fear of bombings, refrained from sending their children. According to the Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently campaign that anti-ISIS activists in Raqqa with, many families have chosen to homeschool their children. On November 25, 2014, the Islamic State reopened the doors of the University of Mosul in Iraq and renamed it the Islamic University. In Syria, it reopened al-Furat University in Deir Ezzor and Raqqa. It has recognized secondary degrees issued by the Iraqi and Syrian regimes as sufficient for students to enrol in university studies. However, many university professors refuse to teach because of fear and threats. Many working in education have decided to leave ISIS territories. According to an announcement from ISIS's Diwan of Education, ISIS has closed a number of university departments, including law, political science, archaeology, physical education, and philosophy, as well as departments specializing in hotels and tourism, for Sharia-related reasons. Given the Islamic State's need for medical experts, its Diwan of Education opened a faculty of medicine in Raqqa. After three years in the university, students obtain a medical degree and are allowed to practice medicine in health centers and hospitals throughout ISIS territories.[37]

Humanitarian

ISIS did not engage in humanitarian relief operations to address war-related humanitarian issues. However, it is important to note that in the territories controlled by ISIS there was a welfare system operating through the zakat. Citing the Quran, ISIS in identified eight areas of public spending for which zakat revenue can be allocated: (1) "The poor who live in absolute poverty"; (2) "The poor who ... can't meet their basic needs"; (3) "Those working to collect zakat (4) "To win the hearts of new Muslims;" (5) "To set free Muslim slaves or liberate Muslim prisoners"; (6) "Those overburdened by debts"; (7) "The mujahidin and jihad" and (8) "Travelers in need". Of these eight areas, four pertain to public goods and service provision: (1), (2), (6), and (8).[38]

Media

ISIS had a strong propaganda network. The first propaganda instrument of ISIS was the 'Al-I'tisam Media Foundation'.[39] In 2014 it created 'al Hayat Media Center' which targeted international audiences. The al Hayat Media Center produced the online magazine 'Dabiq'

http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/1054/the-islamic-state-healthcare-paradox-a-caliphate-in-crisis

[37] Al-Jablawi H., A Closer Look at the Educational System of ISIS, (2016), Atlantic Council https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/a-closer-look-at-isis-s-educational-system/
[38] Revkin M. R., Three Essays on the Microfoundations of Rebel Governance: Theory and Evidence from the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, (2019), Ann Arbor: ProQuest Dissertations & Theses
[39] Hamming, T., Jihadi politics: the global Jihadi Civil War, 2014-2019, (2022), Oxford scholarship online Political Science, London: Hurst & Company

which operated from 2014 until 2016. After 2016 it got replaced by the online magazine 'Rumiyah'.[40] Amaq News Agency was created in 2014 and it was one of the most infamous propaganda outlets as it published claims of responsibility for various ISIS actions. By mostly focusing on online propaganda targeting international Muslim audiences, ISIS attracted recruits from all over the world and expanded its activity globally outside of the borders of Iraq and Syria.[41]

Diplomacy

ISIS did not have any diplomatic ties with any other state. Its attempt to eliminate the Sykes-Picot line and establish an independent state within the internationally recognized borders of two independent states made it unpopular and a threat to global stability. In October 2014 a coalition of over 60 countries called Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) was formed in order to defeat ISIS.[42]

Syrian Democratic Forces:

Executive

SDF initially occupied Kurdish-majority territories in Northeastern Syria. After defeating ISIS it expanded to occupy all of the areas east of the Euphrates river. The current form of the government established by the SDF is called Democratic Autonomous Administration of North East Syria (DAANES).[43] DAANES has its roots on the Transitional administration declared by the YPG militias in 2013,[44] which later on became a federation of autonomous cantons and developed to reach its present form.

In 2014, the three cantons (Kobani, Qamishli, and Afrin) started establishing their own legislative, executive, and judicial organs and systems. The administration of the cantons is divided into three; the Legislative Council (Parliament), the Executive Council (Government), and the Justice Commission (Judicial). In addition to these, there are also boards such as the Supreme Election Board and the Supreme Constitutional Court. The duties of the Legislative Council include executive oversight and ratification of international treaties and conventions. The council can also authorise a member of parliament to form a government. While the parliament determines the members of the Supreme Constitutional Court, decisions on war, peace, amnesty, budget approval, and political and economic development plans are also under the authority of the parliament. In addition, the Legislative Council determines the democratic autonomous regions and their relations with the canton centers. Tel Abyad, which declared its democratic autonomous region in October 2015, accepted its autonomy and became a region of the Kobani canton. Established Municipalities and

---

[40] The Independent, Isis' new magazine Rumiyah shows the terror group is 'struggling to adjust to losses', (2016), The Independent
https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-propaganda-terror-group-losses-syria-iraq-a7228286.html
[41] Callimachi R., "A News Agency With Scoops Directly From ISIS, and a Veneer of Objectivity", (2016), The New York Times.
[42] Staff Sergeant Bryan Dominique, Inside the Coalition to defeat ISIL, (2015), CJTF-OIR Public Affairs
https://web.archive.org/web/20150714031347/http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2014/0814_iraq/docs/Inside_the_coalition_to_defeat_ISIL_3.pdf
[43] DAANES, Social Contract, (2023), DAANES
https://rojavainformationcenter.org/2023/12/aanes-social-contract-2023-edition/
[44] Allsopp H. and van Wilgenburg W., The Kurds of Northern Syria, (2019), Volume 2: Governance, Diversity and Conflicts

Regional Administrative Councils also have continued their activities directly under the president . There are 20 committees attached to the Executive Council, each of which functions as a ministry. Representatives of the committees also act as advisors to the president. The list of the committees is as follows: Foreign Affairs, Defence, Interior, Justice, Regional (Municipality, Population, and Urban Planning), Finance, Labor and Worker Placement, Education, Agriculture, Electricity Industry and Underground Resources, Health, Trade and Economy, Martyr Families, Enlightenment and Communication, Transport, Youth and Sports, Tourism and Archaeology, Religion, Women and Family, Human Rights Committee. It should be noted here that the local elements of the general security militias, YPJ or YPG, which are affiliated to the "Rojava self-government", act under the cantons' internal affairs committees.[45]

Councils

In DAANES, councils exist at four levels, organized like a pyramid stepwise from the bottom up. The base level is the commune. In the cities, a commune usually encompasses 30–200 households in a residential street, and in the countryside a whole village. The next level up is the neighbourhood, usually comprising seven to thirty communes. In the countryside, the second level is the village community, which usually consists of seven to ten villages. The third level up is the district, which encompasses a city and the villages in that city's surrounding areas, usually seven to twenty. The boards of the neighbourhood and village communities' people's councils represent their councils at the district level. Usually 100–200 activists come together in a district people's council. Here once again, the area commissions are formed and co-chiefs are elected. The highest level is the People's Council of West Kurdistan, made up of all the district councils. When it assembled in August 2011 for the first time, it elected the TEV-DEM for all of Rojava, consisting of 33 people (not including Aleppo).[46]

Justice

A striking feature of Rojava's system is the existence of the peace committees (in Kurdish, komîteya aşîtî), sometimes referred to as peace and consensus committees, at the two basic levels of the council system. They ensure social peace in the residential streets and the neighbourhoods, and resolve cases of criminality and social injustice. After the liberation that began on July 19, 2012, justice commissions (in Kurdish, dîwana adalet) were established for each district at the instigation of the TEV-DEM. In the first few weeks, the justice commissions consisted of groups of lawyers and opinion leaders in the communities who took charge of the liberated courts and prisons. At the level of the commune and neighbourhood, the peace committees have a dual structure. Mixed committees are responsible for resolving conflicts and handling crimes, while women's peace committees handle cases of patriarchal violence, forced marriage, plural marriage, and so on. At the next level up, the district, are the people's courts (dadgeha gel); they too were brought into existence by the justice commissions. The judges (dadger) who sit on them may be nominated by a justice commission or by anyone in the jurisdiction. The district-level people's councils advise on nominations; seven people are elected for each people's court. The upper levels of Rojava's justice system may resemble those in other states, but the

[45] Karakuş M., Non-State Armed Group's Durability Strategy: Instrumentalizing De-Facto Governance (2022), Journal of History School
[46] Knapp M., Flach A. and Ayboğa E., Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan, (2016) PlutoPress

base is much more democratic. At the close of a case in the people's court, one of the parties may bring the case to an appeals court (dadgeha istinaf). Rojava has only four appeals courts, two in Cizîrê and one each in Kobanî and Afrîn. At this level, the judges must be jurists; they are chosen by the people's court at the canton level. There is only one cantonal court (dadgeha neqit) to cover all three cantons. Finally, there is a constitutional court (dadgeha hevpeyman), whose seven justices ensure that the council system and the people's courts and the DAAs observe the Social Contract and the laws.[47]

Civilian taxes

In the beginning, there was no taxing procedure in the regions of DAANES, and the administration raised money through tariffs and selling natural resources until 2017, when the administration started to collect income tax to compensate for public services.[48] The 2023 version of the DAANES Social Contract states in Article 35 that 'There are no taxes or fees outside of those which are legally stipulated.'[49]

Police

As the revolution in Rojava unfolded, one of the tasks of the new council democracy was to establish a force that would fit the people's aspirations and avoid the kind of party militias that plague South Kurdistan. The result was the Asayîş, whose name translates as "security forces." Security forces defend society and as such are to be distinguished from police, which defend the state. The role of the Asayîş is to make possible the free and self-determining activity of everyone within a diverse society. Physical safety is essential for a free and self-determining life. So in Rojava, if a city is attacked, the Asayîş will defend it alongside the YPG and YPJ. They counter spies from hostile forces. To handle "internal security," the Asayîş intervenes in conflicts that the peace committees can't resolve, often involving assaults and violence but also drug dealing. Asayish, composed of 26 official bureaus, is the police force to provide security in the region, which was established in 2013 at the time Syrian government forces withdrew. It has six central units: Checkpoints Administration, Anti-Terror Forces Command (HAT), Intelligence Directorate, Organized Crime Directorate, Traffic Directorate, and Treasury Directorate.[50]

Health

Developing a sustainable, free health care system constitutes an expression of Democratic Autonomy. Rojava's Social Contract affirms the right to health care for all in Article 30. in early 2012, Rojava established new health committees at the district level to discuss how, if the state should somehow collapse, health care could continue and be rebuilt on a social basis. These committees networked and came up with practical ideas. Once the liberation began, they proved highly valuable and their creation was a wise strategic move. Although the 2012 revolution terminated state authority in Rojava, the hospitals and other public health facilities remained open, and doctors did not emigrate (although over the next two years, many would). While the council system assumed control over other state and public

---

[47] Knapp M., Flach A. and Ayboğa E., Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan, (2016) PlutoPress
[48] Karakuş M., Non-State Armed Group's Durability Strategy: Instrumentalizing De-Facto Governance (2022), Journal of History School
[49] DAANES, Social Contract, (2023), DAANES
https://rojavainformationcenter.org/2023/12/aanes-social-contract-2023-edition/
[50] Knapp M., Flach A. and Ayboğa E., Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan, (2016) PlutoPress

institutions and services, it did not take over health care facilities. Rather, the health committees coordinated health policy, in consultation with the TEV-DEM.[51]

Education

The primary step was the blossoming of Kurdish-language instruction, first in community spaces and then in schools organized by the Kurdish Language Institute. the Celadet Bedirxan Academy for Kurdish Language, History, and Literature in Qamişlo. In the fall of 2013, the AZDW was founded in Qamişlo to systematically train teachers and develop the intended new education system. Similar academies were created in the other two cantons: the Viyan Academy for Kurdish Language and Education in Afrîn, and the Ferzad Kemanger Academy for Kurdish Language and Education in Kobanî. Language instruction still had many weaknesses in 2014, on May 26, the second session of teacher training was completed. Since then, many sessions have been conducted. After the liberation, Rojava's schools continued to use Arabic as the general language of instruction. But they dropped the course from the curriculum that taught about the Ba'ath ideology and Syria's ruling political system. A further important development has been the introduction of Aramaic-language instruction in schools with many Syriac students. The academies, by contrast, are centers of "people's education" that have played a crucial role in setting up the new society. They can be established whenever activists and social movements feel necessary, they are oriented to meeting the basic needs of the broad population, and they are open to everyone, educating activists and all interested people. They work from the principle that knowledge arises in relationship and in production processes and must be given back to society, for which the academies are a tool. Doing so requires changing educational methods, the use of buildings and tools, and even the daily life at academies, based on sharing and companionship. In Rojava, as of this writing, academies have been founded in the following subjects: Self-defence, Women, Youth, Ecology, Asayîş, Economy, Free Ideas and Thinking, Urbanization, Law and Justice, Sociology, History/Language/Literature, Policy and Diplomacy. The ideology commissions of the MGRK system are in regular contact with the academies.[52] In terms of higher education, in 2014, the Mesopotamian Social Sciences Academy in Qamishli; in 2015, the University of Afrin (teaching literature, engineering, and economics, including institutes for medicine) in Afrin; in 2016, the University of Rojava in Qamishli and the Mesopotamian Social Sciences Academy -the second public university in the Hassaka were established. With the Jineology classes, the school is encouraged to teach the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan.[53]

Humanitarian

The Kurdish Red Crescent is a humanitarian organization that was established in 12/12/2012 operates in the territories of DAANES. It cooperates with various humanitarian organizations such as (Cadus, Medico, Save the Children, Upp, PIN, Samaritan Purse, UNICEF, and WHO).[54] In the territories of DAANES there were IDP camps that had

[51] Knapp M., Flach A. and Ayboğa E., Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan, (2016) PlutoPress
[52] Knapp M., Flach A. and Ayboğa E., Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan, (2016) PlutoPress
[53]   Karakuş M., Non-State Armed Group's Durability Strategy: Instrumentalizing De-Facto Governance (2022), Journal of History School
[54] Heyva Sor A Kurd, Who are we?, (2025), Heyva Sor A Kurd
https://hskurd.org/en/who-we-are-2/

humanitarian support from various international organizations such as the UN. These were Al-hol camp, Ayn Issa camp and Roj camp.[55]

Media

The constitution of DAANES guarantees freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Based on these principles there are media that are either producing news in favour of DAANES or independent news. Hawar News Agency is a news agency affiliated with the DAANES.[56] A TV station called Rojava TV operates in the regions controlled by DAANES. In 2018, the Rojava Information Center was established.[57]

Diplomacy

DAANES didn't have any international recognition from any independent state. However, the parliament of Catalonia, which is not an independent state but an autonomous region of Spain, had recognised DAANES in 2021.[58] Moreover, while DAANES didn't have any international recognition, it had unofficial relations with various independent states such as France[59] and Italy.[60]

Table 1

Governing activities of the three rebel groups:

	HTS	ISIS	SDF
Executive	YES	YES	YES
Justice	YES	YES	YES
Councils	YES	YES	YES
Civilian taxes	YES	YES	YES
Police	YES	YES	YES
Health	YES	YES	YES
Education	YES	YES	YES
Humanitarian	YES	NO	YES
Media	YES	YES	YES
Diplomacy	YES	NO	YES

The findings from this chapter indicate that all three rebel groups had established highly sophisticated forms of government in the territories they controlled. While being inspired by different political philosophies, they were capable of conducting the ten governing activities presented in the chapter (albeit with varying degrees of success). The only exception was

[55] Rojava Information Center, North and East Syria: Displaced populations and refugee camps update, (2019), Rojava Information Center

[56] Hawar News Agency (ANHA), About Us, (2013), Hawar News Agency (ANHA) https://hawarnews.com/en/about

[57] Rojava Information Center, About Us, (2024), Rojava Information Center https://rojavainformationcenter.org/about/

[58] Nichols D., Catalan parliament officially recognises Rojava administration, (2021), Green Left https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/catalan-parliament-officially-recognises-rojava-administration

[59] NRT News, PYD leader Salih Muslim meets French President at Elysee Palace, (2017), NRT News https://web.archive.org/web/20180403112411/http://www.nrttv.com/en/Details.aspx?Jimare=14386

[60] Jinha News, YPJ Commander Nesrin Abdullah speaks in Italian Parliament, 2015, Jinha News https://web.archive.org/web/20180906052138/http://jinha.com.tr/en/ALL-NEWS/content/view/25309

ISIS who was not capable of doing humanitarian work and establishing diplomatic relations with other states.

5. Does access to rich natural resources increase the chances of a rebel group succeeding in a civil war?

This chapter will analyse the access to rich natural resources that each one of the three rebel groups had on the territories they occupied. The quantity and the value of the natural resources will be examined in order to reply to the research question that was set up.

Some of the natural resources that are available in Syria include petroleum, phosphates, chromium, manganese, asphalt, iron ore, salt, marble and gypsum.[61]

Syria's principal limestone quarries are located north and west of Damascus, especially near the city of Aleppo, which itself is built of limestone. Basalt, used for road pavement, is quarried in areas such as those near Homs and Aleppo. Marl is used in the cement industry; the main quarries are in the vicinity of Damascus and Aleppo and at Al-Rastan. Phosphate ore is mined in areas near Palmyra, and rock salt is extracted from the mid-Euphrates region. Asphalt and gypsum are also mined, and table salt is produced from the salt lakes. Syria has scattered reserves of chrome and manganese.

Petroleum in commercial quantities was first discovered in the northeast in 1956. Among the most important oil fields are those of Suwaydiyyah, Qaratshūk, and Rumaylān, near Deir al-Zour. The fields are a natural extension of the Iraqi fields of Mosul and Kirkuk. Petroleum became Syria's leading natural resource and chief export after 1974; production peaked in the mid-1990s, however, before beginning a steady decline. Natural gas was discovered at the field of Jbessa in 1940. Since that time natural gas production in Syria has expanded to form an important energy export; in addition, some of the country's oil-fired power stations have been converted to run on natural gas, freeing more Syrian petroleum for export.

Raw phosphates were discovered in 1962; some of the richest beds are located at Khunayfis, Ghadīr al-Jamal, and Wadi Al-Rakhim. Iron ore is found in the Zabadānī region. Asphalt has been found northeast of Latakia and west of Deir al-Zour.

Syria's primary source of power is derived from local oil supplies, and domestic natural gas reserves are becoming an increasingly important resource as well. Electricity is largely generated by thermal stations fired by natural gas or oil. With the exception of the Euphrates River, rivers flowing through Syria produce only small amounts of hydroelectric power. There are small hydroelectric stations, such as those on the Orontes and Barada rivers, and a larger hydroelectric development at the Euphrates Dam at Tabqa (inaugurated in 1978). However, insufficient dam maintenance, coupled with Turkish usage upstream and unpredictable precipitation, have decreased productivity.[62]

Syria's known oil reserves are mainly in the eastern part of the country in the Deir ez-Zor Governorate near its border with Iraq and along the Euphrates River, and a number of smaller fields are located in the center of the country. In 2010, Syria produced around 385,000 barrels (61,200 m3) per day of crude oil. Oil production has stabilized after falling for a number of years, and is poised to turn around as new fields come online. In 2008, Syria

---

[61] IAEA INFCIS, Syrian Arab Republic: Geography Geology
[62] Irvine V, Commins D., Smith C., Hourani A., Hamidé A., Scullard H., Gadd C., Ochsenwald W., Salibi K., Syria Economy, (2025), Encyclopaedia Britannica
https://www.britannica.com/place/Syria/Economy

produced 5.3 billion cubic metres (1.9×1011 cu ft) of natural gas, and two years later in 2010, it increased production to 7.8×109 m3 (2.8×1011 cu ft). While much of its oil is exported to Europe, Syria's natural gas is used in reinjection for enhanced oil recovery and for domestic electricity generation.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham:

HTS occupied most of the Idlib province. The areas HTS controlled were mostly agricultural. The currency used in the area was the Syrian pound but on June 2020 it was replaced with the Turkish lira. HTS relied heavily on economic relations with Turkey. HTS did not have access to any rich natural resources. The economy of the SSG was based not only and not so much on agriculture and retail trade, but rather on income from the transit of goods and UN humanitarian aid through the Bab Al-Hawa border checkpoint with Turkey.[63]

Islamic State of Iraq and Syria:

ISIS occupied a large part of central Syria at the peak of its power. During its six year rule of Syrian territories, it controlled agricultural and oil producing territories. According to a 2015 study by the Financial Action Task Force, IS's five primary sources of revenue are as follows: proceeds from the occupation of territory (including control of banks, oil and gas reservoirs, taxation (including zakat), extortion, and theft of economic assets),taxation of the non-Muslim population (jizya), kidnapping for ransom, donations by or through non-profit organizations, material support provided by foreign fighters, fundraising through modern communication networks.

ISIS at the height of its power in 2015, had access to oil fields in the Deir ez-Zor region of Syria and oil fields in Nineveh region of Iraq. After 2017, it slowly started losing territorial control of them until 2019 when it completely lost any territorial control in Syria.

In 2014, Dubai-based energy analysts put the combined oil revenue from ISIL's Iraqi-Syrian production as high as US$3 million per day. An estimate from October 2015 indicated the production to be about 34,000–40,000 barrels per day, sold at US$20–45 at the wellhead and generating an income of US$1.5 million per day.[64] Various other 2015 reports indicated that IS obtained 1.1 to 1.5 million dollars a day from selling of oil and its products. At the end of 2015, increased air strikes targeting oil production and distribution started to affect oil operations. Thus an estimate for March 2016 was a monthly income of about US$20 million.

Syrian Democratic Forces:

SDF occupied areas in Northeastern Syria. The territories it controlled were agricultural and oil producing. The government in the areas controlled by the SDF is called DAANES. The main sources of revenue for the autonomous region have been presented as: 1. Public properties such as grain silos and oil and gas in the Jazira Region, 2. Local taxation and customs fees taken at the border crossings, 3. Service delivery, 4. Remittances from Iraq and Turkey, and 5. Local donations. In 2015, the autonomous administration shared information about the region's finances where its 2014 revenue was about LS 3 billion (≈US$5.8 million) of which 50% was spent on "self-defence and protection", 18% for the

---

[63] Matveev I., Genesis and evolution of parallel economies during the Syrian crisis: A political economy view, Sustainable Economies 2024, 2(2), 63., Sin-Chn Scientific Press

[64] Solomon E.,Chazan G. and Jones S., Isis Inc: how oil fuels the jihadi terrorists, (2015)

https://www.ft.com/content/b8234932-719b-11e5-ad6d-f4ed76f0900a#axzz3rhwAkkfP

Jazira Canton (now Jazira Region), 8.5% for the Kobani Canton (now Euphrates Region), 8.5% for the Afrin Canton (later Afrin Region), 15% for the "Internal Committee" and any remainder was a reserve for the next year. As part of the social revolution various collective projects emerged such as workers cooperatives.

SDF had access to the oil fields in the Jazira region and after slowly capturing territory from ISIS in 2017 until 2019 it gained access to the oil fields in Deir ez-Zor.

Government lost control of most oil fields in northeastern Syria to Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014. Most of the lost fields were captured by the SDF in 2017 and were held under its control. Under an agreement between the Government and the SDF, some of the crude petroleum and natural gas produced in SDF-controlled areas was transferred to refineries and natural gas processing plants in Government-controlled areas in return for electricity and fuel. The proved natural gas and petroleum reserves in Syria were 300 billion cubic meters and 2.5 billion barrels, respectively, in 2020.[65]

The findings from this chapter show that the most important natural resource of Syria were oil and phosphates. Out of the three rebel groups, two of them had access to oil but not to phosphates, SDF and ISIS, while HTS didn't have access to any of them. ISIS at the peak of its power controlled the most oil fields as it also controlled oil fields in Iraq. After the collapse of ISIS in 2019, SDF became the rebel group that controlled the most of the oil fields.

Table 2

Access to rich natural resources by the three rebel groups:

	HTS	ISIS	SDF
Petroleum	NO	YES	YES
Phosphates	NO	NO	NO

6. Does the ability to mobilize recruits from the local population and the ability to attract foreign fighters increase the chances of a rebel group succeeding in a civil war?

This chapter will discuss how the three rebel groups attracted recruits from the territories they controlled and how many recruits each group could mobilize. It will also discuss the phenomenon of foreign fighters joining their ranks. By using various estimates of the size of the military of each rebel group and other estimates such as reports of combatant deaths, it will try to estimate the size of each rebel army.

HTS and local recruitment:

HTS occupied territory in Idlib and it recruited Sunni Muslim Syrians. As it was an alliance of already existing rebel groups, it merged the existing armies and became a larger force. Estimates of its size vary. In 2017 it was estimated to have 31.000 fighters. Jaysh al-Ahrar (an Ahrar al-Sham faction), Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (previously known as al-Nusra Front, Ansar al-Din Front, Jaysh al-Sunna, Liwa al-Haqq, and the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement. During the merger, an estimated 18,000 members of al-Nusra joined the ranks of HTS. The formation of HTS caused groups belonging to the rival Ahrar al-Sham group to split and join HTS. It is estimated that Ahrar al-Sham was left with only 3,000 fighters. On the other hand,

---

[65] USGS, 2020-2021 Minerals Yearbook Syria [Advance Release]

the forces of HTS were estimated at around 31,000 fighters.[66] In 2018, HTS was estimated to control nearly 60 percent of Idlib province and to have 30,000 fighters (of which 10,000 are foreign).[67] In 2020, HTS was estimated to have between 15,000 to 20,000 fighters. In a report published in January, the UN gave a slightly lower estimate of between 12,000 and 15,000 fighters in Idlib associated with HTS, including many foreigners. Sources from the Syrian government on the other hand, estimated there are as many as 100,000 HTS fighters in Idlib.[68]

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights did not count the casualties of HTS independently and placed them within the numbers of Rebel and Islamist factions which had 80,641 casualties in total.[69]

Foreign fighters fighting for HTS:

The foreign fighters that fought for HTS were jihadists that arrived in Syria as part of various jihadist networks that were connected to Al-Qaeda, as HTS was originally affiliated with Al-Qaeda. As HTS attempted to be an Islamist group with a specific reach in Syria, it tried to limit the influence of non-Syrian fighters so as to not anger the local population. In 2018, HTS was estimated to have 10,000 foreign fighters. Xhemati Alban was a Sunni Albanian jihadist group that was part of HTS and consisted of about 60-100 fighters.[70] Liwa al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar was a jihadist group consisting of both Arabic-speaking fighters and fighters from the North Caucasus that was part of HTS and in 2015 it consisted of about 750 fighters.[71]

ISIS and local recruitment:

ISIS occupied areas in central Syria and Iraq and recruited Sunni Muslim Syrians and Iraqis. Its size varied as it was very large at its peak in 2015 and it started dwindling heavily in the next years until 2019 when it lost control of its last territory. At the height of ISIS's power in 2015, it controlled 40,000 square miles, where almost 8 million people were living there. It had somewhere between 35,000 and 100,000 fighters.[72] The estimates of the number of fighters in the ranks of ISIS in 2015 were heavily wide-ranging. In late 2014, the CIA estimated that the group had between 20,000 and 31,500 fighters between its Iraq and Syria holdings. An estimate by Rami Abdel Rahman, the director of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, was that ISIS has more than 50,000 fighters in Syria alone. The chief of the Russian General Staff estimated ISIS to have 70,000 fights of various nationalities. In

[66] Rida N., Syria: Surfacing of 'Hai'at Tahrir al-Sham' Threatens Truce, (2017), Asharq Al-Awsat https://web.archive.org/web/20170215122504/http://english.aawsat.com/2017/01/article55366551/syria-surfacing-haiat-tahrir-al-sham-threatens-truce
[67] Macaron J., A confrontation in Idlib remains inevitable, (2018), Aljazeera https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2018/10/17/a-confrontation-in-idlib-remains-inevitable/
[68] Zulfiqar A., Syria: Who's in control of Idlib?, (2020), BBC https://www.bbc.com/news/world-45401474
[69] Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Syrian Revolution 13 years on | Nearly 618,000 persons killed since the onset of the revolution in March 2011, (2024), Syrian Observatory for Human Rights https://www.syriahr.com/en/328044/?ref=almostmag.co
[70] Garofalo D., Albanian Jihadists in Syria., (2023), Daniele Garofalo Monitoring https://www.danielegarofalomonitoring.com/p/albanian-jihadists-in-syria
[71] Paraszczuk J., Now it's official: JMA has joined Jabhat al-Nusra, (2015), From Chechnya to Syria https://web.archive.org/web/20150924050403/http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=24140
[72]Jeffrey J. F., Briefing With Special Representative for Syria Engagement and Special Envoy for the Global Coalition To Defeat ISIS Ambassador James Jeffrey, (2019) US Department of State https://web.archive.org/web/20190507104644/https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2019/03/290654.htm

August 2014, Hisham al-Hashimi claimed that ISIL's total membership could be close to 100,000.[73] Fuad Hussein estimated that the number of militant fighters of ISIS was at least 200,000 men.[74] In 2019, it was estimated to have only 5,000-10,000 fighters left in Syria and Iraq.[75] In 2024, it was estimated to have 1,500–3,000 remnant fighters.[76]

According to a 2024 report by the SOHR, ISIS had a total of 41,374 casualties over the 13 years of the Syrian Civil War.[77]

Foreign fighters fighting for ISIS:

The foreign fighters that fought for ISIS were jihadists that arrived in Syria following the call for the creation of an Islamic State. ISIS wanted to transcend the barriers of nationalism and establish a global Islamic State. As such, foreign fighters had the same opportunities with local recruits in rising in the military and political hierarchy of ISIS. As of December 2015, approximately 30,000 fighters from at least 85 countries had joined the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).[78] In 2017, the UN estimated more than 40,000 foreign fighters from 110 countries travelled to join Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.[79]

SDF and local recruitment:

SDF initially occupied Kurdish-majority territories in Northeastern Syria. As it was an alliance of eight different groups, recruited people coming from different ethnic groups. YPG/YPJ consisted of mostly Kurdish militias, Syriac Military Council consisted of Syriac (Assyrian) militias, Al-Sanadid forces consisted of Arab militias and the other four consisted of multi-ethnic militias. After defeating ISIS it expanded to occupy all of the areas east of the Euphrates river and the number of Syrian Arab recruits increased heavily. In 2017, SDF had around 50,000 recruits, while in 2019, it had around 70,000.[80] In 2020, SDF's strength was estimated to be around 40 000 to 60 000 fighters, of which estimated 20 000 to 30 000 fighters were from YPG.[81] In 2023 it was estimated SDF had nearly 100,000 fighters overall,

[73] Gartenstein-Ross D., *How Many Fighters Does the Islamic State Really Have?*, (2015), War on the Rocks
https://warontherocks.com/2015/02/how-many-fighters-does-the-islamic-state-really-have/
[74] Cockburn P., War with Isis: Islamic militants have army of 200,000, claims senior Kurdish leader, (2014), The Independent
https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/war-with-isis-islamic-militants-have-army-of-200-000-claims-kurdish-leader-9863418.html
[75] United Nations Security Council, "Eighth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat", (2019) United Nations Security Council
[76] United Nations Security Council, S/2024/556, (2024), United Nations Security Council
[77] Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Syrian Revolution 13 years on | Nearly 618,000 persons killed since the onset of the revolution in March 2011, (2024), Syrian Observatory for Human Rights
https://www.syriahr.com/en/328044/?ref=almostmag.co
[78] Picker L., Where Are ISIS's Foreign Fighters Coming From?, (2016), National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER)
https://www.nber.org/digest/jun16/where-are-isiss-foreign-fighters-coming
[79] United Nations, SC/13097, (2017), United Nations
https://press.un.org/en/2017/sc13097.doc.htm
[80] Karakuş M., Non-State Armed Group's Durability Strategy: Instrumentalizing De-Facto Governance (2022), Journal of History School
[81] European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), Syrian Democratic Forces and Asayish, (2020), European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA)
https://euaa.europa.eu/country-guidance-syria/12-syrian-democratic-forces-and-asayish

out of which, 65,000 were Arabs.[82] According to a 2024 report by the SOHR, SDF had a total of 11,415 casualties over the 13 years of the Syrian Civil War.[83]

Foreign fighters fighting for SDF:

The foreign fighters that fought for SDF were internationalist volunteers that arrived in Syria in order to support the Rojava revolution against the attacks by ISIS. Their ideology varied from liberalism to far-left communism or anarchism. Unlike the foreign fighters in HTS and ISIS, the foreign fighters in SDF were not part of the military and political leadership. Their role was exclusively supportive towards the already existing structures of SDF and DAANES. There are 49 fallen internationalist fighters listed on the website of the Internationalist Commune of Rojava.[84] The website of DKP/Birlik (one of the factions that sent internationalist volunteers) lists 16 more making the total number of at least 65 fallen internationalist fighters.[85] The size of the foreign fighters in the SDF was estimated at around 400.[86]

The findings from this chapter show that the group that was capable of mobilizing the most fighters was ISIS. The second most capable was SDF and the least capable was HTS. The group that was the most capable of mobilizing foreign fighters was also ISIS, while the second most capable was HTS and the least capable was SDF. The findings show that there is a relationship between the size of rebel-held territory and the size of rebel armies. The more territory a rebel group controlled, the more recruits it had. ISIS at the peak of its territorial control had the most recruits but after losing its territorial control its size was limited to only a few insurgents. SDF gradually expanded its territorial control and the size of its army gradually expanded as well. Finally, HTS didn't have a large territorial expansion before the 2024 offensive and its army had remained roughly the same size.

Table 3

Recruit size estimates of the three rebel groups:

	HTS	ISIS	SDF
Highest Estimate	100,000	200,000	100,000
Lowest Estimate	12,000	20,000	40,000

7. Does international support and a lack of international opposition increase the chances of a rebel group succeeding in a civil war?

[82] Rustum M., Why Arabs are increasingly joining the SDF in Syria's northeast, (2023), Al Majalla https://en.majalla.com/node/295071/politics/why-arabs-are-increasingly-joining-sdf-syrias-northeast
[83] Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Syrian Revolution 13 years on | Nearly 618,000 persons killed since the onset of the revolution in March 2011, (2024), Syrian Observatory for Human Rights https://www.syriahr.com/en/328044/?ref=almostmag.co
[84] Internationalist Commune of Rojava, Internationalist Şehîds, (2025), Internationalist Commune of Rojava
https://internationalistcommune.com/internationalist-sehids/
[85] DKP Birlik, *ÖLÜMSÜZLERİMİZ*, (2025), DKP Birlik
https://komunarlar.org/olumsuzlerimiz/
[86] Martin N., Terrorism policing: the YPG/YPJ, an ally abroad but a danger at home?, (2019), Global Rights
https://globalrights.info/2019/01/terrorism-policing-the-ypg-ypj-an-ally-abroad-but-a-danger-at-home/

The Syrian Civil War was an internationalized civil conflict even from its early stages of the war. When international actors make the decision to be involved in any phase (hostilities or negotiation) of a domestic conflict, this conflict becomes internationalized.[87] Rival world superpowers and regional powers supported and opposed different factions during the war. This chapter will analyse the support and opposition the three rebel groups had from countries involved in the Syrian Civil War.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham:

HTS received informal support from Turkey even though Turkey had officially designated it a terrorist group.[88] Turkey, a regional power sharing a direct border with Syria, was already involved in the Syrian Civil War from its early stages. In 2015, Turkey together with Qatar and Saudi Arabia openly supported the Army of Conquest, a coalition of anti-government rebel groups that included groups that later on went to form the HTS.[89] In 2016, Turkey and Russia agreed to initiate the Astana talks as part of the Syrian peace process. In September 2017, on the sixth round of the Astana talks, it was agreed to implement a de-escalation zone in Idlib. In October 2017, Turkey established military observation posts in HTS-held Idlib in 2017 in order to act as buffer zones for HTS and the Syrian army, within the framework of the rules of engagement agreed by the Guarantor countries in the Astana process.[90] In September 2018, the Russian president Vladimir Putin and Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, reached an agreement to create a buffer zone in Idlib.[91] In 2020, after an offensive of the Assad regime's army against HTS-held territory, the presidents of Turkey and Russia, Erdoğan and Putin, met in Moscow for high-level talks and agreed to a ceasefire.[92] These interventions by Turkey halted the advances of the Assad regime's army against HTS and helped it into reorganizing and conducting its counter-offensive on November 2024.

Turkey in 2017 created a proxy force in Syria called the Syrian National Army (SNA) who was also known as the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (TFSA). SNA controlled territories in Northeast Syria, adjacent to the territories controlled by HTS.[93] SNA and HTS had rivalries and disputes regarding the territorial control in Northeast Syria. Nevertheless, SNA supported HTS in its offensive against the Assad regime in November 2024.

[87] Kraus J., (2017) The Internationalization of Conflicts: Theoretical Background, Conceptualization, and Contemporary Middle East Region, (2017) Vojenské rozhledy 26 (5), 23-32
[88] Evans D., Turkey designates Syria's Tahrir al-Sham as terrorist group, (2018), Reuters https://web.archive.org/web/20190529204952/https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-idUKKCN1LG1XU
[89] Sinjab L., Syria: How a new rebel unity is making headway against the regime, (2015), BBC https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-32540436
[90] TRT Haber, The first observation post was established in Idlib, (2017), TRT Haber https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/idlibde-ilk-gozlem-noktasi-olusturuldu-338682.html
[91] Karadeniz T., Al-Khalidi S., Syria's Idlib spared attack, Turkey to send in more troops, (2018), Reuters https://web.archive.org/web/20181203052807/https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-rebels/syrias-idlib-spared-attack-turkey-to-send-in-more-troops-idUSKCN1LY0T9
[92] Soldatkin V., Kiselyova M., Russia, Turkey agree ceasefire deal for Syria's Idlib, (2020), Reuters https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-idUSKBN20S161/
[93] Staff Reporter, Turkey-backed opposition to form new army in northern Syria, (2017), TRTWORLD https://www.trtworld.com/mea/turkey-backed-rebels-to-form-new-army-in-northern-syria-367931

Turkey and HTS had economic cooperation which was crucial for the survival and growth of HTS. Turkey controlled the most important transit routes for humanitarian assistance and trade with the HTS-controlled parts of Idlib, which it kept open.[94]

HTS faced opposition from Russia which supported militarily the Assad regime. The military intervention of Russia in support of the Assad regime started in September 2015.[95] The intervention targeted ISIS and various Syrian opposition groups that include the progenitors of HTS. Ever since HTS was created in 2017, Russia has supported militarily the advancements of the Assad regime against HTS, such as the Northwestern Syria Campaign in October 2017[96], the Operation Dawn of Idlib on April 2019, the Operation Dawn of Idlib 2 in December 2019[97], with the last one being concluded on March 2020 after an agreement to a ceasefire by Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Vladimir Putin. In November 2024 during the offensive of HTS against the Assad regime, Russia conducted airstrikes against HTS in support of the Assad regime but they were limited and unable to halt the advance of HTS with the last one being on the 6th of December.[98] On the 8th of December, Damascus had been captured and the Assad regime had officially fallen.

HTS has suppressed rivals in Idlib primarily in pursuit of self-preservation and dominance in the province. Its priority is to forestall further regime offensives, which with Russian air support had been threatening its de facto rule. A ceasefire, negotiated in March 2020 between Russia and Turkey, along with the insertion of Turkish troops, put a halt to those assaults, giving HTS space to move against groups that challenged its hegemony. It has dealt harshly with any that defy the ceasefire or its ban on operations abroad or against Turkish forces in Idlib. Freelance attacks on Russian or regime positions could bring retaliation from Damascus and Moscow, costing HTS its control of Idlib. Allowing jihadists to plan foreign operations from Idlib would hurt HTS's attempts to secure aid for the province and recast itself as a reliable negotiating partner. Such operations would strain its crucial, yet tenuous, relations with Turkey, the ceasefire's de facto guarantor, and could also trigger Western strikes and sanctions.[99]

Islamic State of Iraq and Syria:

[94] Iddon P., Are Turkey and the Islamist HTS group in Syria's Idlib allies?, (2021), Ahval https://web.archive.org/web/20230218032657/https://ahvalnews.com/hts/are-turkey-and-islamist-hts-group-syrias-idlib-allies

[95] Al Jazeera, Russia carries out first air strikes in Syria, (2015), Al Jazeera https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/9/30/russia-carries-out-first-air-strikes-in-syria

[96] Atallah K., How the Syrian army is working to gain control of road to Raqqa, (2017), Al-Monitor https://web.archive.org/web/20171028094240/https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/10/syria-regime-hama-raqqa-road-hts-islamic-state.html

[97] News Desk, Breaking: Syrian Army kicks off 2nd phase of Idlib offensive, (2019), Al-Monitor https://web.archive.org/web/20200209142837/https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/breaking-syrian-army-kicks-off-2nd-phase-of-idlib-offensive/

[98] Times of India, Russian Airstrikes Hit Homs-Hama Bridge; Fierce Clashes As Rebel Advance Stuns Syria Army, (2024), Times of India https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/videos/international/russian-airstrikes-hit-homs-hama-bridge-fierce-clashes-as-rebel-advance-stuns-syria-army/videoshow/116033590.cms

[99] International Crisis Group, Containing Transnational Jihadists in Syria's North West, (2023), International Crisis Group https://web.archive.org/web/20230307180851/https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena/syria/239-containing-transnational-jihadists-syrias

ISIS did not receive official support from any foreign power. Countries such as Turkey,[100] Saudi Arabia, Qatar[101] and USA[102] have been accused of covertly supporting ISIS. Nevertheless, all four countries denied the allegations and some of them such as Turkey and USA were actively involved in the battle against ISIS.

Foreign countries intervened militarily against ISIS. A US led coalition that provided air support to the SDF was called 'Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF–OIR)'. The operation started in October 2014. Russia started an operation on 30 September 2015[103], that provided air support to the Assad government. Those two operations which supported the SDF on the one side and the Assad regime on the other side, led to ISIS gradually losing control of its territories until it lost complete hold of its last territory on the 23rd of March 2019 after its defeat in the battle of Baghuz Fawqani.[104]

Syrian Democratic Forces:

SDF had military support by a US led military coalition called 'Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF–OIR)'. The operation started in October 2014. The operation's goals were to coordinate with other groups in order to destroy ISIS.[105] The operation was successful and SDF managed to liberate large parts of ISIS controlled territory, effectively capturing their last stronghold in March 2019. In addition to air support by CJTF-OIR, the SDF was being directly armed by the US, with equipment which include small arms, ammunition, heavy machine guns, and equipment to counter vehicle-borne bombs.[106]

The growth of SDF was seen as a threat by Turkey, because Turkey considered that a Kurdish led entity in its border could provide support to Kurdish insurgencies on the interior of Turkey. This led to Turkey intervening in Syria. Turkey has conducted four offensives in Syria during the Syrian Civil War. In all of these four offensives, Turkey was supported by its proxy force, the SNA. The first offensive was in August 2016, with the Operation Euphrates Shield[107], when it attacked ISIS and SDF. An important objective of the intervention was to not let SDF held regions of Afrin and Manbij to unite territorially. The second offensive was in

---

[100] Yayla A., Clarke C., Turkey's Double ISIS Standard, (2018), Foreign Policy
https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/04/12/turkeys-double-isis-standard/
[101] The Independent, Hillary Clinton emails leak: Wikileaks documents claim Democratic nominee 'thinks Saudi Arabia and Qatar fund Isis', (2016), The Independent
https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/hillary-clinton-emails-leak-wikileaks-saudi-arabia-qatar-isis-podesta-latest-a7355466.html
[102] Shabad R., Paul: ISIS emboldened after US armed its allies in Syria, (2014), The Hill
https://thehill.com/policy/international/210168-us-has-been-arming-isis-in-syria-sen-paul-claims/
[103] Al Jazeera, Russia carries out first air strikes in Syria, (2015), Al Jazeera
https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/9/30/russia-carries-out-first-air-strikes-in-syria
[104]Washington Post, US-backed Syrian force declares victory over Islamic State, (2019), Washington Post
https://web.archive.org/web/20190323113725/https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/us-backed-syrian-force-declares-victory-over-islamic-state/2019/03/23/fc0eb35c-4d34-11e9-8cfc-2c5d0999c21e_story.html?utm_term=.db6337371ca1
[105] Staff Sergeant Bryan Dominique, Inside the Coalition to defeat ISIL, (2015), CJTF-OIR Public Affairs
[106] Gibbons-Neff T., Ryan M., DeYoung K., In blow to U.S.-Turkey ties, Trump administration approves plan to arm Syrian Kurds against Islamic State, (2017), Washington Post
https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/05/09/in-blow-to-u-s-turkey-ties-trump-administration-approves-plan-to-directly-arm-syrian-kurds-against-islamic-state/
[107] AFP News, Erdogan says Syria operation aimed at IS jihadists, Kurdish PYD, (2016) AFP News
https://sg.news.yahoo.com/erdogan-says-syria-operation-aimed-jihadists-kurdish-pyd-092204994.html

January 2018, with the Operation Olive Branch[108], when it directly attacked SDF held Afrin and occupied it. The third offensive was in October 2019, with the Operation Peace Spring[109], when it attacked SDF held territories and occupied Tell Abyad and Serekaniye. The fourth offensive was in November 2024, with the operation Dawn of Freedom[110], during the offensives that led to the fall of the Assad regime, when it attacked SDF held territories and occupied Manbij. All of the military interventions of Turkey were targeting SDF held territories and tried to limit its territorial control in Syria.

Russia had an ambiguous stance on SDF, just as the Assad regime also had towards it. While there have been instances of cooperation[111], there have also been instances of conflict between Russia and the SDF.[112] In general, SDF was seen by Russia as a useful counterweight against ISIS and Syrian Opposition groups, while simultaneously a future opponent in its quest to help the Assad regime regain total control of Syria.

The findings from this chapter show that out of the three rebel groups, only ISIS faced international opposition but didn't have any international support. The other two rebel groups, HTS and SDF had both international support and international opposition from different actors and for different purposes. SDF had international support from the US-led CJTF-OIR coalition against ISIS, but this coalition did not support it the two times Turkey had launched ground invasions against it. The US-led coalition was a deterrent force towards Turkey who wanted to completely eradicate the SDF. HTS faced international opposition from Russia who supported the Assad regime. However, it had international support from Turkey who acted as a deterrent force towards Russia and it was capable of halting the advancement of the armies of the Assad regime towards HTS-held territory. The ceasefires agreed by Turkey and Russia in combination with the economic relations that had been developed between HTS and Turkey, gave HTS the ability to organize their forces and successfully conduct the offensive that overthrew the Assad regime.

Table 4

Foreign support and foreign opposition of the three rebel groups:

[108] Daily Sabah, Operation Olive Branch launched in Syria's Afrin to clear PKK, Daesh, Turkish military says, (2018), Daily Sabah
https://www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2018/01/20/operation-olive-branch-launched-in-syrias-afrin-to-clear-pkk-daesh-turkish-military-says
[109] Al Jazeera, Turkey begins ground offensive in northeastern Syria, (2019), Al Jazeera
https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/10/turkey-begins-ground-offensive-in-northeastern-syria/
[110] SOHR, With the support of Turkish drones, the factions of the "Fajr al-Hurriya" operations room attack several axes in the Manbij countryside" (2024), SOHR

https://www.syriahr.com/%d8%a8%d8%af%d8%b9%d9%85-%d9%85%d9%86-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%85%d8%b3%d9%8a%d9%91%d8%b1%d8%a7%d8%aa-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa%d8%b1%d9%83%d9%8a%d8%a9-%d9%81%d8%b5%d8%a7%d8%a6%d9%84-%d8%ba%d8%b1%d9%81%d8%a9-%d8%b9/739911/

[111] i24NEWS, 'Kurds attack Turkish-backed Syrian opposition forces with Russian help', (2015), i24NEWS
https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/middle-east/93884-151128-kurds-attack-turkish-sponsored-syrian-opposition-forces-with-russian-help
[112] Reuters, U.S.-backed alliance says Russian jets struck its fighters in east Syria, (2017), Reuters
https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-sdf/u-s-backed-militias-says-russian-jets-struck-its-fighters-in-east-syria-idUSKCN1C0118/?il=0

	HTS	ISIS	SDF
CJFT-OIR	NEUTRAL	OPPOSITION	SUPPORT
RUSSIA	OPPOSITION	OPPOSITION	NEUTRAL
TURKEY	SUPPORT	OPPOSITION	OPPOSITION

8. Conclusion

As the paper has shown, conclusions can be made regarding what makes a rebel group successful in a civil war. First of all, an assessment will be made regarding the success levels of each one of the three rebel groups:

The most successful rebel group was HTS. It has successfully accomplished its goal of overthrowing the Assad regime.

The second most successful rebel group was SDF. It didn't achieve its goal of federalizing Syria but it managed to survive after the overthrow of the Assad regime and it is currently negotiating its position in Syria with the new government of Ahmed al-Sharaa

The least successful rebel group was ISIS. It didn't achieve its goal of establishing an Islamic Caliphate and it lost its territorial holdings in Syria. ISIS only survived as an insurgent group operating in a low level insurgency.

Moving forward, an assessment will be made regarding the levels of how the three rebel groups scored in each one of the four criteria:

HTS had a functioning government that scored in all 10 points of governing. HTS did not have access to rich natural resources. HTS could mobilize recruits from the local population and attract foreign fighters. However, according to the estimates, their size was the smallest one of the three rebel groups. HTS faced international opposition by Russia, which provided military support to the Assad regime. However it had international support by Turkey which had pressured Russia into signing ceasefire agreements which halted the advances of the army of Assad.

ISIS had a somewhat functioning government that scored 8 out of 10 points of governing. ISIS had access to oil fields in Syria and Iraq. ISIS could mobilize recruits from the local population and attract foreign fighters. According to the estimates, their size was the biggest one of the three rebel groups. ISIS faced international opposition by a US led coalition and by Russia. ISIS didn't have any international support.

SDF had a functioning government that scored in all 10 points of governing. SDF had access to oil fields in North East Syria. SDF could mobilize recruits from the local population and attract foreign fighters. However, according to the estimates, their size was the second largest of the three rebel groups. SDF had international support by a US led coalition which supported it in its fight against ISIS. However SDF faced international opposition by Turkey, which attacked it two times and occupied part of its territory.

Out of these comparisons, it can be concluded that the two most important factors are a well-functioning government and the existence of international support and lack of international opposition, and the two least important factors are access to rich natural resources and ability to mobilize recruits from the local population and attract foreign fighters.

The concluding argument of the thesis is that a well-functioning rebel government with international support can successfully overthrow a state government, even if it does not occupy territories with rich natural resources and does not have a very large army. The reasons for this can be found in issues of morale. Government troops that have a well-functioning rebel government as an opposing force, and get less than expected military support by their allied foreign power, can easily surrender and defect to the advancing rebel army. Similar phenomena have been noticed before in the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, the anti-Ghaddafi opposition takeover of Libya in 2011 and the mujahedeen takeover of Afghanistan in 1992. In internationalized civil wars, foreign intervention in support of rebels or withdrawal of foreign support for governments can be crucial turning points for the outcome of the war. However, the micromanagement that the rebel groups do on the territories they control is an equally important factor that should not be underestimated.

The research done in this thesis has put forward interesting insights regarding what makes a rebel group successful in a civil war. From these insights, several recommendations can be derived for both academics and policymakers.

For academics, this thesis has noteworthy value. First of all, the findings of the paper showed that both a well-functioning government and foreign support together contribute to the success of a rebel group, so it would be interesting to see whether a new theoretical approach can be created by analysing data from past civil wars. Moreover, it is important to remember that there are more factors that influence the success of a rebel group than the four ones examined in the thesis, so this indicates that further research is needed in order to define the factors that make a rebel group successful. The factor of economic relations such as embargoes or economic support was not a focus of this thesis. However, through the example of Turkey and HTS relations, it appeared that it possibly played a major role in the development of HTS to a rebel force capable of overthrowing the government. Further research is needed in examining economic relations between rebel groups and foreign actors in civil wars.

For policymakers, this thesis has implications too. The importance of government structures and the dynamics in relationship with the local population in rebel-held territories need to be recognized and assessed. Conventional mindsets often seek to counterbalance emerging rebel groups that are considered a threat to national interests or regional stability. However, by attempting to understand the success of an emerging rebel group and reaching conclusions, a policymaker can assess the situation and seek an alternative option than that of directly confronting a rebel group. Costly and long-lasting civil wars can be replaced by peace agreements with the prospect of developing mutual trust.

9. Bibliography

Sambanis N., What Is Civil War? Conceptual and Empirical Complexities of an Operational Definition, (2015) The Journal of Conflict Resolution Vol. 48, No. 6, pp. 814-858, Sage Publications, Inc.

Gleditsch, N.P. and Indra de Soysa I., The Liberal Globalist Case, (2002) in Global Governance in the 21st Century: Alternative Perspectives on World Order. Stockholm (26–73)

Aronson J., Huth P., Lichbach M. and Chang K., (2015) How Rebels Win (and Why They Lose), (2015), Université de Genève

Kraus J., (2017) The Internationalization of Conflicts: Theoretical Background, Conceptualization, and Contemporary Middle East Region, (2017) Vojenské rozhledy 26 (5), 23-32

Karakuş M., Non-State Armed Group's Durability Strategy: Instrumentalizing De-Facto Governance (2022), Journal of History School

Guldstrand J., Non materialism matters (not): What makes some rebel groups more militarily effective than others? (2024), Swedish Defence University

Abdulkader H. Sinno, Organizations at War in Afghanistan and Beyond (2008), Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p. 289

Lockyer A., Foreign Intervention and Warfare in Civil Wars, Review of International Studies (2011), 37,2337–2364, British International Studies Association

Olsson O., Diamonds are a Rebel's Best Friend, (2006) The World Economy, Goteborg University

Huang, R., The Wartime Origins of Democratization: Civil War, Rebel Governance, and Political Regimes., (2016) Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press

Lakomy M., Crouching shahid, hidden jihad: mapping the online propaganda campaign of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham affiliated Ebaa News Agency, (2023), Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression, 15:3, 361-389, Routledge Press

Knapp M., Flach A. and Ayboğa E., Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan, (2016) PlutoPress

Larson J. M. and Lewis J.I., Rumors, Kinship Networks, and Rebel Group Formation, (2018), International Organization, Volume 72, Issue 4, pp. 871 – 903

Kasfir, N., Rebel governance – constructing a field of inquiry: definitions, scope, patterns, order, causes., (2015) New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 21–46.

Dassouky, A. Al. The Role of Jihadi Movements in Syrian Local Governance. (2017), Omran for Strategic Studies

Matveev I., Genesis and evolution of parallel economies during the Syrian crisis: A political economy view, Sustainable Economies 2024, 2(2), 63., Sin-Chn Scientific Press

Revkin M. R., Three Essays on the Microfoundations of Rebel Governance: Theory and Evidence from the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, (2019), Ann Arbor: ProQuest Dissertations & Theses

De Graaf B. A. and Yayla A., Policing as Rebel Governance. The Islamic State Police. (The ISIS Files), (2021), Program on Extremism - George Washington University

Abdullah Öcalan, Democratic Confederalism, (2011), International Initiative

Zaraee, N., & Shaar, K., The Economics of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, (2021) Middle East Institute

Syria Justice and Accountability Centre, Judge, Jury and Executioner: the ISIS Bureau of Justice and Grievances, (2020), Syria Justice and Accountability Centre

Hamming, T., Jihadi politics: the global Jihadi Civil War, 2014-2019, (2022), Oxford scholarship online Political Science, London: Hurst & Company

Allsopp H. and van Wilgenburg W., The Kurds of Northern Syria, (2019), Volume 2: Governance, Diversity and Conflicts

Web Sources

Joscelyn T., Al Qaeda and allies announce 'new entity' in Syria, (2017), Long War's Journal

https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/01/al-qaeda-and-allies-announce-new-entity-in-syria.php

Joscelyn T., Hay'at Tahrir al Sham leader calls for 'unity' in Syrian insurgency, (2017), Long War's Journal

https://web.archive.org/web/20170211001547/https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/02/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-leader-calls-for-unity-in-syrian-insurgency.php

Enab Baladi, The Syrian General Conference Faces the Interim Government in Idlib, (2017), Enab Baladi

https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2017/09/syrian-general-conference-faces-interim-government-idlib/

Kurdish Question, Declaration of Establishment by Democratic Syria Forces, (2015), Kurdish Question

https://web.archive.org/web/20160224085811/http://kurdishquestion.com/index.php/kurdistan/west-kurdistan/declaration-of-establishment-by-democratic-syria-forces/1179-declaration-of-establishment-by-democratic-syria-forces.html

Democratic Syria Congress, Final Declaration of the Democratic Syria Congress: "Towards building a free and democratic Syria", (2015)

https://rojavainformationcenter.org/storage/2021/07/2015-Final-Declaration-of-Democratic-Syria-Congress.pdf

Ibrahim H., Al-Issa J., Al-Sawadi R., Al-Jolani: The one-man rule, (2024) Enab Baladi

https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2024/04/al-jolani-the-one-man-rule/

Darwish A., Innocent here; convict there: two separate judiciaries in northern Syria, (2021) Enab Baladi

https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2021/02/innocent-here-convict-there-two-separate-judiciaries-in-northern-syria/

Levant 24, Syrian Salvation Government Organizes Medical Sector of Idlib, (2022) Levant 24

https://levant24.com/news/2022/10/syrian-salvation-government-organizes-medical-sector-of-idlib/

Peacerep, NAVIGATING FRAGMENTATION: HUMANITARIAN AID, BORDERS AND CONFLICT LINES IN SYRIA, (2023)

France 24 English, Interview of H.E. Hakan Fidan, Minister of Foreign Affairs, (2024), France 24 English

https://www.mfa.gov.tr/interview-of-he-hakan-fidan--minister-of-foreign-affairs--france-24-english--20-december-2024.en.mfa

Baskaran A., The Islamic State Healthcare Paradox: A Caliphate in Crisis, (2015), Inquiries Journal

http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/1054/the-islamic-state-healthcare-paradox-a-caliphate-in-crisis

Thompson N., Shubert A., The anatomy of ISIS: How the 'Islamic State' is run, from oil to beheadings, (2015), CNN World

https://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/18/world/meast/isis-syria-iraq-hierarchy/index.html

Hosam al-Jablawi, A Closer Look at the Educational System of ISIS, (2016), Atlantic Council

https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/a-closer-look-at-isis-s-educational-system/

Hawar News Agency (ANHA), About Us, (2013), Hawar News Agency (ANHA)

https://hawarnews.com/en/about

Nichols D., Catalan parliament officially recognises Rojava administration, (2021), Green Left

https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/catalan-parliament-officially-recognises-rojava-administration

Irvine V, Commins D., Smith C., Hourani A., Hamidé A., Scullard H., Gadd C., Ochsenwald W., Salibi K., Syria Economy, (2025), Encyclopaedia Britannica

https://www.britannica.com/place/Syria/Economy

Rida N., Syria: Surfacing of 'Hai'at Tahrir al-Sham' Threatens Truce, (2017), Asharq Al-Awsat

https://web.archive.org/web/20170215122504/http://english.aawsat.com/2017/01/article55366551/syria-surfacing-haiat-tahrir-al-sham-threatens-truce

Zulfiqar A., Syria: Who's in control of Idlib?, (2020), BBC

https://www.bbc.com/news/world-45401474

Macaron J., A confrontation in Idlib remains inevitable, (2018), Aljazeera

https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2018/10/17/a-confrontation-in-idlib-remains-inevitable/

Garofalo D., Albanian Jihadists in Syria., (2023), Daniele Garofalo Monitoring

https://www.danielegarofalomonitoring.com/p/albanian-jihadists-in-syria

Jeffrey J. F., Briefing With Special Representative for Syria Engagement and Special Envoy for the Global Coalition To Defeat ISIS Ambassador James Jeffrey, (2019) US Department of State

https://web.archive.org/web/20190507104644/https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2019/03/290654.htm

Gartenstein-Ross D., How Many Fighters Does the Islamic State Really Have?, (2015), War on the Rocks

https://warontherocks.com/2015/02/how-many-fighters-does-the-islamic-state-really-have/

Cockburn P., War with Isis: Islamic militants have army of 200,000, claims senior Kurdish leader, (2014), The Independent

https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/war-with-isis-islamic-militants-have-army-of-200-000-claims-kurdish-leader-9863418.html

Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Syrian Revolution 13 years on | Nearly 618,000 persons killed since the onset of the revolution in March 2011, (2024), Syrian Observatory for Human Rights

https://www.syriahr.com/en/328044/?ref=almostmag.co

Rustum M., Why Arabs are increasingly joining the SDF in Syria's northeast, (2023), Al Majalla

https://en.majalla.com/node/295071/politics/why-arabs-are-increasingly-joining-sdf-syrias-northeast

European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), Syrian Democratic Forces and Asayish, (2020), European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA)

https://euaa.europa.eu/country-guidance-syria/12-syrian-democratic-forces-and-asayish

Internationalist Commune of Rojava, Internationalist Şehîds, (2025), Internationalist Commune of Rojava

https://internationalistcommune.com/internationalist-sehids/

DKP Birlik, ÖLÜMSÜZLERİMİZ, (2025), DKP Birlik

https://komunarlar.org/olumsuzlerimiz/

Martin N., Terrorism policing: the YPG/YPJ, an ally abroad but a danger at home?, (2019), Global Rights

https://globalrights.info/2019/01/terrorism-policing-the-ypg-ypj-an-ally-abroad-but-a-danger-at-home/

Iddon P., Are Turkey and the Islamist HTS group in Syria's Idlib allies?, (2021), Ahval

https://web.archive.org/web/20230218032657/https://ahvalnews.com/hts/are-turkey-and-islamist-hts-group-syrias-idlib-allies

International Crisis Group, Containing Transnational Jihadists in Syria's North West, (2023), International Crisis Group

https://web.archive.org/web/20230307180851/https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena/syria/239-containing-transnational-jihadists-syrias

Paraszczuk J., Now it's official: JMA has joined Jabhat al-Nusra, (2015), From Chechnya to Syria

https://web.archive.org/web/20150924050403/http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=24140

Picker L., Where Are ISIS's Foreign Fighters Coming From?, (2016), National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER)

https://www.nber.org/digest/jun16/where-are-isiss-foreign-fighters-coming

United Nations, SC/13097, (2017), United Nations

https://press.un.org/en/2017/sc13097.doc.htm

Huffpost, Al-Julani is an interim commander of the "Liberation of Al-Sham" Authority. And this is the fate of its former leader,(2017) Huffpost

https://web.archive.org/web/20171002165746/http://www.huffpostarabi.com/2017/10/02/story_n_18159996.html

Washington Post, US-backed Syrian force declares victory over Islamic State, (2019), Washington Post

https://web.archive.org/web/20190323113725/https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/us-backed-syrian-force-declares-victory-over-islamic-state/2019/03/23/fc0eb35c-4d34-11e9-8cfc-2c5d0999c21e_story.html?utm_term=.db6337371ca1

Sinjab L., Syria: How a new rebel unity is making headway against the regime, (2015), BBC

https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-32540436

Yayla A., Clarke C., Turkey's Double ISIS Standard, (2018), Foreign Policy

https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/04/12/turkeys-double-isis-standard/

The Independent, Hillary Clinton emails leak: Wikileaks documents claim Democratic nominee 'thinks Saudi Arabia and Qatar fund Isis', (2016), The Independent

https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/hillary-clinton-emails-leak-wikileaks-saudi-arabia-qatar-isis-podesta-latest-a7355466.html

Shabad R., Paul: ISIS emboldened after US armed its allies in Syria, (2014), The Hill

https://thehill.com/policy/international/210168-us-has-been-arming-isis-in-syria-sen-paul-claims/

Karadeniz T., Al-Khalidi S., Syria's Idlib spared attack, Turkey to send in more troops, (2018), Reuters

https://web.archive.org/web/20181203052807/https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-rebels/syrias-idlib-spared-attack-turkey-to-send-in-more-troops-idUSKCN1LY0T9

Soldatkin V., Kiselyova M., Russia, Turkey agree ceasefire deal for Syria's Idlib, (2020), Reuters

https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-idUSKBN20S161/

Gibbons-Neff T., Ryan M., DeYoung K., In blow to U.S.-Turkey ties, Trump administration approves plan to arm Syrian Kurds against Islamic State, (2017), Washington Post

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/05/09/in-blow-to-u-s-turkey-ties-trump-administration-approves-plan-to-directly-arm-syrian-kurds-against-islamic-state/

Callimachi R., "A News Agency With Scoops Directly From ISIS, and a Veneer of Objectivity", (2016), The New York Times.

https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/15/world/middleeast/a-news-agency-with-scoops-directly-from-isis-and-a-veneer-of-objectivity.html

AFP News, Erdogan says Syria operation aimed at IS jihadists, Kurdish PYD, (2016) AFP News

https://sg.news.yahoo.com/erdogan-says-syria-operation-aimed-jihadists-kurdish-pyd-092204994.html

Daily Sabah, Operation Olive Branch launched in Syria's Afrin to clear PKK, Daesh, Turkish military says, (2018), Daily Sabah

https://www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2018/01/20/operation-olive-branch-launched-in-syrias-afrin-to-clear-pkk-daesh-turkish-military-says

Al Jazeera, Turkey begins ground offensive in northeastern Syria, (2019), Al Jazeera

https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/10/turkey-begins-ground-offensive-in-northeastern-syria/

Staff Reporter, Turkey-backed opposition to form new army in northern Syria, (2017), TRTWORLD

https://www.trtworld.com/mea/turkey-backed-rebels-to-form-new-army-in-northern-syria-367931

SOHR, With the support of Turkish drones, the factions of the "Fajr al-Hurriya" operations room attack several axes in the Manbij countryside" (2024), SOHR

https://www.syriahr.com/%d8%a8%d8%af%d8%b9%d9%85-%d9%85%d9%86-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%85%d8%b3%d9%8a%d9%91%d8%b1%d8%a7%d8%aa-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa%d8%b1%d9%83%d9%8a%d8%a9-%d9%81%d8%b5%d8%a7%d8%a6%d9%84-%d8%ba%d8%b1%d9%81%d8%a9-%d8%b9/739911/

Reuters, U.S.-backed alliance says Russian jets struck its fighters in east Syria, (2017), Reuters

https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-sdf/u-s-backed-militias-says-russian-jets-struck-its-fighters-in-east-syria-idUSKCN1C0118/?il=0

Heyva Sor A Kurd, Who are we?, (2025), Heyva Sor A Kurd

https://hskurd.org/en/who-we-are-2/

Times of India, Russian Airstrikes Hit Homs-Hama Bridge; Fierce Clashes As Rebel Advance Stuns Syria Army, (2024), Times of India

https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/videos/international/russian-airstrikes-hit-homs-hama-bridge-fierce-clashes-as-rebel-advance-stuns-syria-army/videoshow/116033590.cms

Al Jazeera, Russia carries out first air strikes in Syria, (2015), Al Jazeera

https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/9/30/russia-carries-out-first-air-strikes-in-syria

Atallah K., How the Syrian army is working to gain control of road to Raqqa, (2017), Al-Monitor

https://web.archive.org/web/20171028094240/https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/10/syria-regime-hama-raqqa-road-hts-islamic-state.html

News Desk, Breaking: Syrian Army kicks off 2nd phase of Idlib offensive, (2019), Al-Monitor

https://web.archive.org/web/20200209142837/https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/breaking-syrian-army-kicks-off-2nd-phase-of-idlib-offensive/

Solomon E.,Chazan G. and Jones S., Isis Inc: how oil fuels the jihadi terrorists, (2015)

https://www.ft.com/content/b8234932-719b-11e5-ad6d-f4ed76f0900a#axzz3rhwAkkfP

Rojava Information Center, About Us, (2024), Rojava Information Center

https://rojavainformationcenter.org/about/

NRT News, PYD leader Salih Muslim meets French President at Elysee Palace, (2017), NRT News

https://web.archive.org/web/20180403112411/http://www.nrttv.com/en/Details.aspx?Jimare=14386

Jinha News, YPJ Commander Nesrin Abdullah speaks in Italian Parliament, 2015, Jinha News

https://web.archive.org/web/20180906052138/http://jinha.com.tr/en/ALL-NEWS/content/view/25309

Other:

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Announcement of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, (2013)

IAEA INFCIS, Syrian Arab Republic: Geography Geology

USGS, 2020-2021 Minerals Yearbook Syria [Advance Release]

Staff Sergeant Bryan Dominique, Inside the Coalition to defeat ISIL, (2015), CJTF-OIR Public Affairs

https://web.archive.org/web/20150714031347/http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2014/0814_iraq/docs/Inside_the_coalition_to_defeat_ISIL_3.pdf

United Nations Security Council, "Eighth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts

in support of Member States in countering the threat", (2019) United Nations Security Council

United Nations Security Council, S/2024/556, (2024), United Nations Security Council

DAANES, Social Contract, (2023), DAANES

https://rojavainformationcenter.org/2023/12/aanes-social-contract-2023-edition/

Rojava Information Center, North and East Syria: Displaced populations and refugee camps update, (2019), Rojava Information Center

Image sources:

Image 1

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_Hay%27at_Tahrir_al-Sham.svg

Image 2

https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_the_Islamic_State_of_Iraq_and_the_Levant2.svg

Image 3

https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_Syrian_Democratic_Forces.svg

Image 4

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Syrian_civil_war_01_02_2017.svg

Image 5

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Territorial_control_of_the_ISIS_ve.png

Image 6

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Syrian_civil_war_01_11_2015.png