

Role of Non-State Actors in Syrian Conflict: An Analysis

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The Syrian uprising that began in 2011 led to the protest against Bashar al-Assad's regime due to the arrest of children in Daraa area. Through the growth of the violent response of the government, civil war continued for a long time because of sectarian complications and the participation of various contingents. Hezbollah was a game changer to the conflict because it supplied the military support to Assad for Syria that was important to its interests. 2013 saw an escalation of the war during the Battle of al-Qusayr as well as problems with coalition warfare being voiced. At the same time, Camp Bucca in Iraq was a home to future ISIS leaders like Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who declared jihadis' caliphate in July 2014 leading to extreme inter jihadist competition. The emergence of such processes indicated that local and regional war and conflicts intersect, requiring single diverse approaches to counter violent extremism in the Middle Eastern countries.

1. Introduction

The beginning of 2011 called the Arab awakening refers to the wave of revolutions in this region organized with the aim of overthrowing the strongest, longest serving, and oppressive violent regime in Syria under Bashar al-Assad to depict the progress from revolt to civil (Zuber & Moussa, 2018). The Syrian revolution spark has started in the city of Daraa where security arrested fifteen children after writing slogans on the wall of their school for freedom and the fall of the regime on February 26, 2011. In the middle of it, there was a call for demonstration which has been announced on the facebook page. Different areas including Homs, Daraa, Damascus and personalities of the country were assembled in this demonstration. Some said that the protests were in response to oppression and suppression of freedom after arresting young children in Daraa and humiliating their families while others say it is the regime led conspiracy to dismantle the Arab resistance front and spread anarchy in Syria. Some activists from the opposition used the social site Facebook to challenge the rule of Bashar Al-Assad, embraced the agitation of the Arab Spring protests launched against President Bashar Al-Assad and his family which has ruled Syria since 1971 under the authoritarian cover of the Arab Socialist Baath Party and had been ruling under the Emergency Law since 1963.

Young people of Syria were the ones who initiated the protests which called for an execution of political, social and even an economical transformation. They raised the slogan: "God, Syria, freedom ups" but the security forces and Syrian intelligence services and militias loyal to regime (Shabiha) confronted people with live bullets. To be precise, the Syrian revolution began on March, 18 under the motto "Dignity Friday". Protests have occurred in Daraa, Damascus, Homs, and Baniyas but the brutality of security was more in Daraa. So in that city four people were killed by Syrian security forces and the demonstrations for the rest of the week were filled with violence. The demonstrations began to extend for the first time in dozens of cities in Syria under the motto of "Pride Friday" including Hama, Latakia and several in Damascus and its outskirts (Albasoos, 2017)

2. Literature Review and Results

2.1 The Involvement of non-state

The battle over the future of Syria, includes several aspects and conflicts, a Sunni alawite sectarian conflict, a no holds barred campaign in different parts of Syria between Sunni salafi jihadist groups and moderate Sunni enemies, Kurds, Druze, Christians, Alawites, Shiites, and a theater of struggle for dominance in the entire Middle East between the Sunni Axis of Saudi Arabia and the Shiite Axis of Iran. Political and military allies, ethnical and religious minorities, and local stakeholders were also involved since they also seek to abide the outcome of the revolution. The state has slowly been plunged into the post-state of destinations and a war between religious and ethic groups. The intensity of the events in terms of the damage to state's infrastructure, institutions and the building up of non-state actors all over the country show the overall irreversible processes that are creating a new reality in the region, the new reality is significantly different from the more familiar pre-modern realities (Dekel et al., 2016).

2.2 Hezbollah's presence in Syria

Hezbollah has supported the Syrian regime from the start of the Arab Spring when the wave of protests arrived to Syria. From the beginning it was obvious that Hassan Nasrullah secretary general of Hezbollah saw the Syrian situation differently from other Arab Spring uprisings by dignifying the Assad's regime. Nasrullah also noted down that Syrians are not only a channel of weapon, but also the main support of Hezbollah, at the military level and at the level of its political, popular and social structure. The party denied its involvement in the Syrian crisis in their initial stage because this would change their image. In regards to comments on Hezbollah's intervention in Syria as well as in other Arab countries, Nasrullah denied any role after the uprising in Syria (Aloosy, 2022).

It was not until August 2012 that distinctly clearer reports of Hezbollah's entry into the Syrian war emerged. In the case of Hezbollah it was only in April 2013 that the organization's secretary general Hassan Nasrullah confirmed that organisation was fighting in Syria. Hezbollah extended its involvement actively in the fight. The first serious battle for Hezbollah started in May, 2013 in al-Qusayr and involved from 1,200 to 1,700 Hezbollah fighters. They were the shock troops that the Syrian army helped out when it came to battle assistances and support. The actual number of the organization's soldiers posted at any given time in Syria is estimated to be between 4,000 and 5,000.¹⁰ Most likely they are active in the whole of Syria most probably in training and advisory capacities. Originally, they spent one week in Syria fighting before deployment was increased to several weeks as the war goes on (Shapir, 2017).

3. Battle of Al- Qusayr

Hizbollah has participated in both, coordinated and supplemented offense and defense activities. It performed cooperative operations with regime mass troops (armor and artillery), aerial-landing units, and active-duty surface-to-surface missile units. As for Hizbollah this party has also been involved in direct combat. From articles published by Syrian opposition actors, over 80 particular areas that Hizbollah was stated to have participated in military activities (White, 2014)

During the battle for al-Qusayr in April 2013, Hezbollah militants were said to have controlled some of the regime's weapons, Syrian T 55 and T 54 tanks and artillery and anti-tank missiles. The troops fought in urban and rural settings across lengthy ranges on multiple fronts something by that day unique to the party's escalation experience, as well as in coalition operations (Engelkes, 2014)

Hizbollah anticipated easy victory in Qusayr, however, the first hours of the fight might have given them a lion share, yet the day turned into longer than expected as the rebels did not surrender easily, in fact Hizbollah was surprised at the level of resistance it was receiving or possibly the loss rate it was experiencing. The rebels in what was described as a strongly organised ambush killed up to twenty-four Hizbollah fighters on the first day of the attack. When the attack started with a intensive shelling and air raids on Qusayr early in the morning and the progress of Hizbollah combatants from the south, east and west, together with Syrian Arab Army forces on the ground. The attacks advanced rapidly in the southern part of the town and reached the town hall. A Syrian activist in the opposition said it was amazing

how the Syrian Arab Army along with Hizbollah had managed to take most of the town within the first day, claiming they have taken 60% of it (Blanford, 2013). Hezbollah was controlling nearly all of the tactical aspects of the operation in al-Qusayr up to the point the organization was even providing orders to the Syrian troops (Nassief, 2014).

4. Camp Bucca

The specific contribution of the Bucca camp in the process of development of ISIS, with an emphasis on how the environment and mistreatment of prisoners may lead to extremism. Camp Bucca was a detention centre for American military in Iraq who detained large population of people linked to militancy. Factors that centred in the camp and the relationships that existed between detainees influenced the development of extremism (Speckhard, 2020). Baathist and al-Qaeda jihadist leaders were imprisoned together in Abu Ghraib and Camp Bucca, where they formed a bond to fight against a common enemy. (Chulov, 2014).

In 2004, al-Baghdadi was captured, imprisoned in Abu Ghraib and Camp Bucca detention centers for the duration of 2004-2005. There is even stated that he passed most of his time in Abu Ghraib which later became a sign of torture by American soldiers in Iraq. He was released later early that year together with other prisoners categorized as low-risk criminals. In 2006, al-Baghdadi's band of militants combined with others to form the Mujahideen Shura Council. Some other joined together several groups of Islamist militants which later was disbanded and gave birth to an organization called the Islamic State in Iraq known as at the time al-Qaida in Iraq (IV, 2019)

The Contant explained when Baghdadi was released from prison, he told the American guard at the gate, one day we will see you on the street, either here or in New York in 2010, the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, was killed, the leader did not forgive his enemies silently and did not forget. Eleven members of the Shura Council met with the new emir, only nine accepted Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. One of them, Jamal al-Hamamdani, was killed a few months later (Atwan, 2015).

4.1 From Al-Qaeda to ISIS: The Transformation of a Jihadist Movement:

ISIS can be traced back to early 2000s when the United States invaded Iraq. First it was affiliated to al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) led by the late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Al Zarqawi employed horrific methods, high visibility operations like targeting of sectarian audiences which created a reign of terror that drew followers and media coverage. The group was relabelled the (ISIS) after Zarqawi killed (Stern & Berger, 2015). It emerged from the-Qaeda belonging the city of two river which is also known as AQI before it broke away from al-Qaeda's branch in Syria Jabhat al-Nusra, it attracted thousand of local and foreign fighters from the former al-Qaeda networks (Zeline, 2014). Seven jihadi commanders moved from Iraq to north-eastern Syria to capitalise on that country's growing volatility in order to initiate a new Syrian branch of a resurgent ISIS. ISIL asked one of its most loyal operatives, Abu Mohammed al-Joulani, to establish a new cell in Syria. He would form the Jabhat al Nusra, it was a new movement in the Syrian civil war notable for its military strength and its reliance on suicide bombings. Before recently, al-Nusra indeed concealed its relation with ISIL and al-Qaeda for

several years. In return for providing it covert support, Baghdadi was promised some of the logistical and financial benefits that they reaped. Research done by the Brookings Institute on Jabhat al-Nusra discovered that in 2012, the group still relied on 50 percent of its funding from ISIL (Lister, 2016).

It began in 2013 when Baghdadi linked ISIL to al-Nusra in direct violation of al-Qaeda central and ordered Joulani to incorporate his group. Joulani turned down the offer and as a result hundreds of fighters died in a vicious battle where ISIL revealed it had no mercy not even for its brothers in arms. Soon it started creating a separate cell in Syria and showed remarkable capability in entering hitherto rebel occupied areas. In fact, when ISIL separated from al-Qaeda it was more active in moving towards the east and gains a lot of fighters of al-Nusra. It then focused on the rebels and not on the regime it was supposed to be fighting against with ferocity. By 2014, ISIL was able to capture Mosul from the defeated Iraqi army, Raqqa in Syria and the oil rich Deir Az Zor (Aljazeera, The rise and fall of ISIL explained, 2017)

4.2 A New Dawn: The Emergence of Caphila

Back in 2006, the ISIS described three legitimate processes for selecting an amir: the previous amir could appoint a new amir thus leading individuals within the state could come together to decide for themselves who should be the new amir a new amir could take power by use of force. This was different from the case of al-Masri that was selected to succeed al-Zarqawi within days, selecting the successor of Abu Omar consumed weeks. This implies that it appears that the style that was used to select Abu Omar's successor was a combination of the last two mentioned methods. Just as in the case of Abu Omar al Baghdadi, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi was a man about whom very little was known beyond Iraq. He was brought up in Samarra, a city in northern Iraq which is adjacent to Baghdad and was a member of a tribal group; he studied for a doctorate in the history of Islam. Among them, Abu Bakr became an Iraqi insurgent in the first years and immediately became a follower of al-Zarqawi. Leaving the prison for supporting the insurgency, Abu Bakr got a rather defiant reputation among the guards as well as among other prisoners as the ideological driven man, as a talented negotiator between different factions in the prison territory and among prisoners. Abu Bakr would go back to the fight and at some point, become the ISIS's governor in Mosul when it was the organization's focal point post-troop surge. Again, like Abu Omar, Abu Bakr was completely unknown to the international jihadi community; however, unlike him he brought a stronger resume of being a scholar, a militant best of all a manager (Fishman, 2021).

They dismiss al-Baghdadi's ability to declare himself as a caliph "29 June 2014." They also say that for people to elect a caliph, the rest of world's Muslims must agree and that it is a sin to place a caliph without consulting all the Muslims leading to disputes and internal wars. They quote the second caliph "Umar bin al-Khattab", "Whoever pledges allegiance to someone without consulting the Muslims he must not be followed nor the one receiving the pledge, lest they be executed." He critics say that ISIS has few tens of thousands of followers. In that case, if ISIS recognises the rest of the Muslims, who number over 1.5 billion, as believers, then al-Baghdadi cannot be a caliph because the Muslims do not accept him. And if ISIS believes all Muslims who are not its supporters to be unbelievers, then again, al-Baghdadi cannot be caliph because the group's supporters are too few to need a caliph (Landau-Tasserion, 2015).

Medina was defined as “dar al-islam” house of Islam by the Prophet Mohammed from where the Prophet launched his campaigns on Mecca. Similarly, IS is forcing Christian out of their places of living and demolishing places of worship and other historical and touristic landmarks for the purpose of cleansing the land. Even in military strategies the group aims at replicating the first Caliph, Abu Bakr by forming alliance with the tribes and the nomadic communities and targeting the rural people (Engelkes et al., 2015)

4.3 Defections and Loyalty Shifts

In his letter to Al-Qaeda ‘s number two Ayman al-Zawahiri has been against the merger between the Syrian-based Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State in Iraq (ISIS) to sort out a conflict that has been emerging between the two groups. This ruling comes when the ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi unilaterally announced the merger and establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which have led to withdrawals and disruptions among al-Nusra fighters. Zawahiri said Baghdadi unilaterally made a decision to declare the break up which drew attention to the necessity of al-Nusra in Syria but restricted Baghdadi’s jurisdiction to Iraq. There were indications that al-Nusra had a large number of fighters, especially foreign elements who switched allegiance to ISIL, creating problems of order and supply chain, especially in Aleppo. Both leaders wrote letters to Zawahiri asking for his intercession and he called for alliance between the groups. But it is still unclear which way Baghdadi will react to the Zawahiri’s ruling and how many of the many fighters who defected slipped away from al-Nusra will return (Atassi, 2013).

The al-Qaeda has formally cut its relationship with the (ISIS) big blow amidst continued crises in Syria. This move comes a time when Al-Qaeda leader Ayman Al-Zawahir has tried in vain to mediate between ISIS and Jabhat Al-Nusra about their differences. In an online statement, al-Qaeda announced that ISIS is no longer a branch of their own due to the group’s escalating attacks and refusal to follow certain rules that may unite all rebels, which have angered other groups as well. However, according to the information provided the USA officials pointed that ISIS remains an independent group and it does not require any support from al-Qaeda. Jabhat al-Nusra still operates only in Syria, and it is considered more moderate as an al-Qaeda branch. Subdivision highlights conflict within the jihadist movement, as different groups have appeared after the Arab Spring event (Sly, 2014).

4.4 Message to Opponents

Proposing Quran verses and Hadiths, Al-Baghdadi’s speech is the address “Say upon them to strive” it is exactly an appeal for endurance. He focuses on the aggressive continuation of the Islamic State and its activity in the world jihad which disproves the concept of defeat. Al-Baghdadi begins with quotes from Quran saying that Muhammad will conquer cities and commanding the Mujahideen to persevere even in difficult times. He calls for the overthrow of oppressive governments while portraying the Islamic State as a still forming organization still moving forward even with its losses. He defines a marked change in the scale of a more centralized control arguing for the first organized military operations across several nations. He paints the American requirement for the coalition support as vulnerability and says that Islamic State is still potent. He identifies four critical areas for his followers: the evangelism, the forgiveness to sinners, worship, and discussing issues on the injustices done to the Muslim.

Al-Baghdadi focused on the idea of defending Muslim people esp. women and children and portraying violence as justified. He condemns nationalist movements in the Middle East as being unable to defend their people unlike what the Islamic State does. He encourages those fighters to free detainees in prisons and IDP camps and guarantee that the fighters will be punished for their suffering. In general, Al-Baghdadi's speech serves to reestablish the support among the followers, to remind everybody that the ISIS plays the decisive role in global jihad and to explain the new operational paradigm to remain important and active (Almohammad & Ingram, 2019).

4.5 Tragic Consequences of ISIL's Massacres on Families and Communities

Syrian state media have blamed the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant group for killing 146 people in Syrian government-held districts in the eastern city of Deir Az Zor. Amnesty International claimed a monitoring group had said more than 130 people were killed. The Observatory said that at least 400 civilians including the families of the pro-government fighters were kidnapped. "There is genuine fear for their lives, there is a fear that the group might execute them as it has done before in other areas", added Rami Abdurrahman of the Observatory. State news agency SANA quoted ISIL as having carried out "a massacre where in at least 300 civilians" were killed majority of them women, children and elderly in Baghaliyeh (Aljazeera, ISIL 'massacre' reported in Syria's Deir Az Zor, 2016)

On the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) presents today its twelfth annual report on violations of women in Syria. A similar detection is made concerning the death of at least 28, 926 females with figures indicating that 117 of the females died through torture and others through other means and 11, 203 females continue to be detained or arrested according to information provided by SNHR and other 11, 541 incidents of rape cases were recorded (Syrian Network for Human Rights, 2023).

ISIS branch in the Syrian province of Raqqa released a video of the captives, five children under the age of twelve, who are thought to be from Britain, Egypt, Turkey, Tunisia and Uzbekistan. The five boys, all in military uniform, and looking to be around 10-13 years old are depicted holding guns, standing behind captured and kneeling Kurdish fighters between 10 and 13 years of age, are each shown in military attire, holding firearms and standing behind kneeling Kurdish fighters who have been captured and held hostage. What happens is nine minutes of footage which consists of the five children screaming "Allahu Akbar" (say the five children in Arabic meaning God is Great), after which the children shoot the five men. Among the five boys was a fair-skinned boy with blue eyes who was called in the video as Abu Abdullah al-Britani, and there were high chances that the young man was Joe Dixon, a British. His mother Sally Jones is believed to have taken him to Syria when she went to join ISIS in 2013. Divorced mother Jones, a former punk singer, took her son to live in Australia when the boy was around eight years old. She was infamous for her ISIS too active account, where she published 'kill lists and documented her desire to behead Christians. Her being featured in some provocative outfits, while showing ISIS connection, made her infamous and was labelled the "White Widow" (Brooks et al., 2021).

The hands of both victims were fastened to the two sides of the cross-shaped structure. I went to see the banner. The first text was: "This is the fate of those who oppose us." It struck me for a second that my 7-year-old son was with me, holding my hand, watching this horror move. As we continued his emotions grew and then asked me later why they were there? Why is there blood on their heads and bodies? I had to lie to him and tell him that they were waiting for ambulances to pick them up (Ponte et al., 2015)

5. Conclusion

The protest movement and the conflict in Syria that took an international turn shows the local agency and external factors where both nationals and the international community have had a hand in the conflict. Hezbollah's most important engagements, it filed the picture of warfare in urban settings and the tenacity of the rebels. Hezbollah expected a quick successful outcome but came across shocked by the stiff confrontation, which revealed the tenacity of the opposition fighters. This change in the type of war within Syria indicates other regional conflicts involving different players with their interest at heart. Like many other ISIS leaders such as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, it is in such facilities like Camp Bucca a detention center operated by the United States in Iraq that these people became radicalized. He described that such facilities acted as nurseries for extremism because detainees started networks that fueled ISIS's growth. This shows how jihadist movements transform themselves from al-Qaeda to ISIS and this paper seeks to examine how ideological divisions lead to the emergence of new militant group. Using historical fraternities, Baghdadi declared a caliphate and hence changed its strategy of recruiting members as well as justifying the acts of terror. But ISIS found it difficult in attaining recognition among the Muslim population, this reflected in Al-Qaeda's public shun, this showed the split in Global Jihadism. The impact on people of ISIS insurgent campaigns has been horrendous as evidenced by scores of cases of abuse of the civilian most devastating forms being the sexual abuses of women and children. The pain and the losses imposed on local population have had devastating concerns for regional stability and worldwide security, pointing to the need for the strategic internal and external approaches aimed at identifying and eradicating reasons leading to radicalization. The fight against ISIS cannot only be solved by military power and supports stronger measures with political solutions. In combating extremism, however, there is some necessity to redress such underlying real issues such as social ine behavior, political marginalization, and economic hopelessness. It is thus imperative that effective strategies and frameworks in each demonstrated area emphasize international cooperation, community resilience, human rights etc, proactive actions that foster the establishment of society structures that respect human dignity, and rights of all. The sad stories of all people affected by ISIS are also a soar telling of the importance of being extra cautious in an effort to fight and eliminate extremism. Here is no chance to achieve sustainable peace without acknowledging these complex challenges and initiating discussion and collaboration problem. If we are to seek as to why so much hate now exists in this part of the world, we have to confront our histories to lessen the conflict and start processes of reconciliations.

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