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**INTER-REBEL CONFLICT IN SYRIAN CIVIL WAR**

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### **Summary**

The following essays primary studies the case of the Syrian Civil War in the light of inter-rebel conflict theory. Starting with the background of the civil war, the essay continues with the further analysis of the relation between armed rebel groups, which are taking role in the war. There are three main hypotheses to be tested in the light of Syria case. These hypotheses are consecutively territorial control, the group strength and natural resources hypotheses. At the end, it is concluded that the theory can be supported and proven by the example of Syrian Civil War.

When Arab Spring had started in Tunisia at the end of the 2010, it was no wonder that the pursuit of democracy was going to spread out throughout the region in which people were ruled by non-democratic regimes, which were mostly quite unequal. The movement reached to Syria in the beginning of 2011 when finally the people of Syria started to rise up against the Assad regime for a more democratic life. Assad government took armed action against protesters, triggering the formation of armed rebel groups against governments. However, the pro-democratic fight against the Assad regime turned into an inter-rebel conflict when the armed rebels group started to fight against each other. In this essay, the inter-rebel conflict of Syrian civil war will be analyzed in the lights of the inter-rebel conflict theory which suggest that rebel groups tend to have problems within themselves when there is a difference between the strengths of the groups, when the groups have zones of territorial control and lastly when they in the areas with important natural resources such as oil.

As mentioned previously, Arab Spring had reached Syria at the beginning of 2011. It all started when a few young students had painted the walls of a building with drawings and sentences which were clearly criticizing the Assad regime. After the young students were arrested and tortured, the peaceful protests had sprung among the country in the hopes of for democratic reforms, more freedom and the release of the political prisoners. As the days passed, when the protesters realized that the regime was not willing to give what they are asking for and with the rise of the Arab Spring, protesters shifted their demands from reforms to the fall of the Assad government. As the uprising spread among the country, the protest was countered by violence from the forces of governments which led to the death of hundreds only in a few months and thousands being arrested. On June, the protesters decided to take armed action to be able to defend themselves against the harsh government forces. There were also divisions in the army because a part of the officers refused to attack the civilians and Free Syrian Army (FSA) was formed. In August with the support of western countries a coalition of anti-government groups was formed which was called the Syrian National Council. The council was not successful to bind up the opposition because the true opposition was consisting of many different groups in terms of ideology, ethnicity and sects (Yesil, 157). The first two months of 2012 were all about FSA forces and government forces attacking each other severely and trying to gain the control of the cities from each other. The attacks also affected civilians, especially because of careless attacks by government forces. By the end of April 2012, the approximate number of deaths was declared as 10.000 by the protesters. During months of the war between anti and pro Assad forces, in September 2012 21 Kurdish civilians were reported to be killed due to the sheltering by the Islamic state of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) which caused the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and The Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) to declare war against ISIL. This added another rebel group into the war. To counter, government armed Arab population in the Kurdish region against YPG to make sure YPG did not get too powerful in the region. In early November 2012, rebels made significant gains in northern Syria. Until the beginning of 2013, both Islamic rebels such as al-Nusra front and Kurdish front YPG had gained power as they started to get control of the villages in their territories. In March 2013, the problems between rebel groups started to arise. The inter-rebel fight worsened when the leader of one of the Sunni rebel groups ordered his soldiers to Alawites.

In the beginning of 2014 the inter-rebel conflict had risen between the Free Syrian Army, the Army of Mujahedeen, the Islamic Front and the Islamic state of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) when ISIL attacked to a region which was controlled by the rebels and killing two important commanders of the rebel armed forces. This was the beginning of the real inter-rebel conflict in Syrian Civil war. The context of the conflict was basically more moderate Islamic groups fighting against the radical ISIL and trying to cut down the power it has gained over the months. They were aiming to take the revolution towards a more moderate point. At this point al-Nusra, which was later on accused of being a branch of al-Qaeda, was also on the side of moderate Islamist rebels against ISIL. On the other hand, ISIL was trying to defeat its rivals against their victory over Assad government (White).

At this point, it is important to make a list of the rebel groups to make it easier to see the current complicated environment in Syria. First of all, there are three main rebel groups whose aim is to overthrow Assad. The first group is the local civilians who armed by themselves against the Assad regime and they are seeking a better life with more democratic rights. The second group is the combination of smaller groups from all around the world with the Islamic motivation and they are related to al-Qaeda, such as al-Nusra front. The third is the Free Syrian Army. In addition to these three main rebel groups, also other armed groups also exist in the region and they can be mistaken to be siding with Assad government. However, the reality is that these groups and government are fighting against one common rival, which is the Islamic Front and the Islamic state of Iraq and the Levant. One of these groups is PYD, and its armed branch YPG, which aims to form a Kurdish state in the northern part of Syria. The others are small radical leftist armed groups that use Syria as a base for their terroristic operations in the south region of Turkey. Lastly, Hezbollah and some other Iranian groups who support Assad government against ISIL (Yesil, 159).

At first glance, it is not hard to expect all the rebels cooperating against the Assad regime since; in fact, their common goal is to end the Assad regime in the region. It makes more sense for the smaller groups to come together to form a bigger and stronger resistance against the Assad government, which already have a strong military force and enough weaponry, which it does not hesitate to use on rebels. However, unlike what is expected and sounds logical, it is seen that there are many inter-rebel conflicts in the Syria region that causes the civil war to be spread out through a bigger portion of the land, forcing millions of civilians to leave their homes and escape out of the country in the hopes of having better living conditions. Then what might be the reasons of inter-rebel conflict in Syrian civil war although it does not make sense when it is not analyzed thoroughly?

One main hypothesis of inter-rebel conflict theory is that the rebel groups with zones of territorial control are more likely to engage in inter-rebel violence. As Pischedda points out the overlapping ambitious and conflicting interests over territorial control, causes rebel groups to be threats towards the existence of other rebel groups (9, Pischedda). In the light of this hypothesis, it can be argued that one of the main reasons of the inter-rebel conflict in Syria is the struggle over territorial control in the lands of Syria. The Free Syrian Army wants to keep Syria as one piece of land as the state of Syria it was before and wants to establish a more free and democratic regime instead of the oppressive ruling of Assad government. In the northern part of Syria, Kurdish armed group YPG wants to take the control of the land to establish an autonomous Kurdish state, which would be ruled by PYD. Apart from these two armed groups, perhaps the strongest one, ISIL wants to enlarge its territory through the lands of Syria and declare a radical Islamist state. At this point, it is seen that there are three different big and strong rebel groups who are claiming right, or saying, "have eyes on

the lands of Syria” would be more accurate, over Syrian lands. It is no surprise to see these armed groups being in a multi-sided war when their interests are clashing with each other. For each of them, the victory of others means a huge threat to their existence and the only way for them to survive is actually being consistent in their lands.

The second hypothesis of inter-rebel conflict theory is that the rebel groups that are militarily stronger or weaker compared to other rebel groups are more likely to engage in inter-rebel fights. This hypothesis is more likely to be proved by the way ISIL behaves in the lands of the Syria. ISIL had been getting stronger as it got closer and closer to the lands of Syria, enlarging its territory also enlarging the number of fighters. When it reached to Syria, it was at a point where it was arguably stronger than the Free Syrian Army in the means of number of militants and weaponry and way stronger than YPG without doubt. This situation encouraged ISIL to attack both the FSA and YPG because ISIL knew they were in a better position on the battlefield. Being stronger than others was a sign for ISIL that it was not that hard to achieve its goals and reshape the border of its new radical Islamic state. Additionally, when this theory is examined based on weaker group, it can be argued that the weaker group does not hesitate to engage in conflict because first, they do not have much to lose; second, if they win they will be in a better position than they had ever been. This was the motivation that laid behind YPG engaging in inter-rebel conflict. Their aim was to gain enough land out of northern Syria to establish an autonomous Kurdish state. What would they lose if they were not successful? Nothing, other than their lives, which they already gave up on when they decided to rebel. However, what would happen if they would win? They would be the great founders of a Kurdish state in the region. The way both the strongest and the weakest groups out of three can be seen as the proofs for the hypothesis, which was mentioned above.

The third hypothesis of inter-rebel conflict theory is that rebel groups are more likely to engage in inter-rebel fights if they are fighting in areas with important natural resources such as oil or natural gas. The control of the natural resources makes a rebel group better off in different ways. First, holding the control of natural resources gives a group the economic power in the region. By trading or using the natural resources, the group can be earning money, which can be used to power up their weaponries. Secondly, being in the charge of the natural resources would force other groups to be in good relationships with the group in the charge because they would need to use those sources too. Thirdly, having the control of natural resources would give a group the power to bargain with the state which they are in a fight with and the power to ask for more in exchange of the sources. When we apply these arguments to the Syria, it is seen that natural gas and oil fields are the main reasons of the fight over the resources. The main proof of this theory in Syria is the situation of the control of the resources since the beginning of 2014. In January 2014, the control of the main natural gas sources was in the hands of ISIL. It was reported by the international agencies that ISIL was selling gas to the Assad government and making fortunes out of it, which would eventually help them to power up their armies. Similarly, the Nusra front was willing to trade their oil resources with the government in exchange for electricity and relief from airstrikes and Assad government granted their wills (Hubbard). In addition to the trades between the government and the rebels, many witnesses also said that rebel groups also had been selling oil to civilians and local citizens in the southern part of Turkey with galloons at discount prices. All these trades supports the hypothesis of the inter-rebel wars over natural resources.

As a conclusion, as studied and analyzed above, it can be said that the theory of inter-rebel conflict, which offers three hypotheses, can be used to analyze the Syrian Civil War in details. The first hypothesis about conflict over territorial control can be clearly identified through the examination of the struggle over land between the Free Syrian Army, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and the Kurdish People's Protection Units. The second hypothesis which claims that the strength relations would lead to inter-rebel conflict can be studied through the observations on the power and military strength of these three rebel groups supporting the idea that the stronger and the weaker engage in conflict. Lastly the third hypothesis claims that the existence of natural resources on the region would cause inter-rebel conflict is proved by the fact that after rebel groups started to engage in trade of natural resources even with their rivals. Overall, the case of inter-rebel conflict in the Syrian Civil War is a solid example and proof of the inter-rebel conflict theory.

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