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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.

The world order has been changing especially in the last decade. The conflict between states have left its place to more regional but also international rebellions. The big event “Arab Spring” which is more right to call the bloody Arab Spring is one of the best examples of both regional and international conflicts. 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. However, the pro-democratic fight against the Assad regime interestingly 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 which was also called as Syrian Civil War. On March 2011, the civil uprising which was due to the demand for a new democratic regime has turned into a civil war because of the violent suppression and heterogeneous structure of Syrian resistance (Orhan, 36). To understand the aim of this paper, it is necessary to mention about some specific events like emergence of different groups in this inter rebel conflict. 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. However, indifference of government led this rebellion turn into the will of fall of the Assad government. As the uprising spread among the country, the protest was countered by violence from the government forces which led to the death of hundreds only in a few months and thousands being arrested. According to the United Nations report, on June 2013 90,000 people were killed and in 2015 it jumped up to 250,000 people (BBC news, 2016). So, with the influence of Arab Spring, Syria has started to shape itself. However unlike other Arab Spring countries, there picture was different. The resistance in Syria turned into a world-shocking inter-rebel conflict.

This essay will follow with the important factor in this inter-rebel conflict. Due to Syrian Civil War, the interest groups have benefited from the weakness of the government that they acquire a chance to empower themselves (Orhan, 37). Because of the geopolitical position and heterogenous structure of region, which resulted in high tension between Sunni and Shia, the rebellion has evolved as inter rebel conflicts. In this conflict, there are many interest groups like Free Syrian Army(FSA), Democratic Union Party(PYD) and Kurdish People’s Protection Units(YPG) which supports Kurds

rights and most importantly the ISIS. The PYD is a political party but YPG is armed group whose tied to PYD in Rojava (Paasche, 78). On June, some Syrian opposition fighters decided to organize themselves under the name of Free Syrian Army (FSA) and they have started to deal with government forces to defend themselves (Rodenhauser, 264). To proof this chaos, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry says that Syria is “on the brink of an international armed conflict (Rodenhauser, 264). The interesting point is that 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). Also, not just by Syrian National Council, but also it is tried to be solved by UN Security Council. For example, UN representative in Syria says that there is need to transitional governing body to solve Syria’s problem (AMUNC, 24) These are some proof that people observes more than just civil war, there are internationally different groups who rebel what they against, and tried to be solved by international organization because of the various structure in this conflict. However, despite all these efforts, there is nothing to go well. In 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. For example, In Damascus and Aleppo, there are many attacks which are done with the aim of taking control of cities/ The attacks also affected civilians, especially because of careless attacks by government forces. Some Kurds had to left their own area like in Northern Iraq in 1992 (Murphy, 2013, pg.33). 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. Mainly, it is obvious that there are two groups who compose of opposite of Assad and supporter of Assad (Birsal, Kodaman, 26). Firstly, 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. They can be also called as seeker of peace (Birsal, Kodaman, 26). 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 (Birsal, Kodaman, 2012, pg. 26). The third is the Free Syrian Army. Also, despite all Assad regime's tyranny, there are groups who support Assad government (Yeşil, 159.) In addition to these, there are also many groups in this civil war. 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 Kurdish issue is very problematic in Syria because they all face with suppression by Syrian regime since 2000's. For example, Syrian regime denied Kurdish citizenship in 1962, but it finally change in 2011 (Murphy, 33). Therefore, the rise of Kurdish movement in Syria is very critical and important in terms of the course of events in inter rebel conflicts. For Gunter, It can be said that the rise of Kurdish nationalism in south Iraq has challenged the existing political map in that area. It is known that on July 2012, PYD emerge as new factor in Syrian civil war (Gunter, 102). Because of the fact that government's bad attitude toward Kurds, especially considering pulling out, Kurds suddenly become more autonomous in that area that have a potential to Middle east Borders (Gunter, 103). 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.

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 (Pischedda, 9). 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. Both Syrian and Kurds want to have territorial control. For instance, While Syrian Kurds state post-state entity defining in Westphalia's definition, ISIS wants to caliphate state (Gunter, 102). Also, 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. According to Murphy, it is so ironic that Arab Springs more serve to Kurds than Arabs, because Kurds have been establishing their own army and security in there, especially like Aleppo (Murphy, 34). Apart from this chaos, perhaps the strongest group, ISIL wants to enlarge its territory through the lands of Syria and declare a radical Islamist state (White). 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. Also, it is right to say that there are no clear victor in this fighting although groups have advanced their both weapons and close combat because fighting is still ongoing and Syria is much more complex when compared to other cities experiencing civil war.

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 (Pischedda, 7). The reason for it can be because of trust and courage resulting from militaristic power. The world has been experiencing the scary power of ISIL in Middle East. Therefore, this hypothesis is more likely to be proved by the way ISIL behaves in the lands of the Syria because it seems like ISIL is stronger than others. 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. According to many reports, ISIL/ISIS has a considerable success in Syria in terms of destruction. In March 2013, it is reported that ISIS took city of Raqqa in Syria and In January 2014, they expanded it to Fallujah, Iraq city (BBC News). After all this victory for ISIS, they understand that they are more powerful than other defense groups in Syria. Therefore, 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 different example for it is “Aleppo Burning”. On May 4, 2016, Syrian army supporting Assad regime attacked to Aleppo with bombs (Dadouch). Although ISIS seems like most powerful one, with the help of Russia, Syrian army become more powerful than ISIS in some areas like Aleppo. It is reported that dozens of people were killed during fight between rebellions and government forces in Aleppo (BBC News). ISIS states that establishment of “trans-state caliphate”, While Syrian Kurds supports autonomy of PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan (Gunter). ISIS, jihadists, try to seek lost fame of a resplendent Islam. It is said that they convince member of ISIS with drugs in order to commit suicide bombs by saying delights of paradise (Gunter). It is also interesting that some Christians also join ISIS with the will of adventure and revenge from United State because of its strategic games in Middle East (Gunter). For instance, ISIS’S Mosul victory in June 2014 influence the world. They attack Mosul and capture some U.S military equipment (Gunter). This is so interesting because U.S face with very huge failure with this event, it proves that ISIS has a very huge military power in that area that have a courage to inter rebel conflict. Another example for this theory is Also Kobani event. While ISIS attack there and destroy everything, it is hard to help Kobani for external and other powers because ISIS are very powerful (Vick, Why Kobani Matters, 2014, pg.32). These are the signs, which show militaristic power matters in inter-rebel conflicts. Otherwise, ISIS is not be talked right now.

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 importance of natural resources should not be underestimated because natural resources refer to power. It means that it provides more authority to dominate and control others. 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 which is so remarkable power. By trading or using the natural resources, the group can be earning money, which can be used to power up their weaponries. It should be remembered that Syria region has full with oil. It is known that oil is one of the most valuable resources in the world. Gaining control of oil by any rebellion groups enable it to control and dominate that region. It can be said that the power of money can be concluded with victory of a rebellion group. Thus, it explains the why these rebellion groups in Syria are following the way of oil. There is a sentence by Abu Nizar who is opposition to government, also explain this theory well that “Syria is an oil country and has resources, but in the past they were all stolen by the regime,” and

“Now they are being stolen by those who are profiting from the revolution.”(Hubbard). It explains that with the oil and gas, people or groups want to earn money so as to gain more power in the region. Also, 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 (Hubbard). It is the proof that rebellion groups want to economic power in the area to empower and strenghten themselves. 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. It can be also related to interest relationship .As an example, 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). It clarifies the effect of natural sources on opposition groups. It is like a mutual trade regardless of groups‘ different beliefs and ideoligies. 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. It can be considered that the power of oil can reverse the tension between opposition groups into a relationship based on self-interest. The best example for it is that In January 2014, the control of the main natural gas sources was in the hands of ISIL in Syria. 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. In this way, they make a deal based on self-interest like. Shortly, it is seen that natural gas and oil fields are one of the main reasons of the fight over the resources. Obtaining the natural resources has a potential to change the dynamics and situation in the change because one of the rebellion groups completely attain oil and gas sources, it may result in the victory of that groups that has an able to dominate others. In addition, Battle of Kobani can be given as example for this theory. The oil create such a political game in Kobani. In Battle of Kobani, both ISIS,PYD and later U.S forces have fought. U.S officials says about this situation that things done in Syria primarily shape situations in Iraq (Vick, 2014). All these examples support the idea mentioned above that natural resources can be reason of the inter-revel wars.

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 Kurds, 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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