Applying the new wars debate:

Exploring new paths forward for conflict resolution in Syria

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Introduction:

The Syrian civil war encapsulates many elements that characterise a new war; multiple actors in the conflict, their goals, methods of waging war and financing (Kaldor, 2013). This research paper will explore the Syrian civil war through the defining criteria of the new wars debate. In applying the new wars framework to aspects of the Syrian conflict, major challenges and strategies for international intervention and conflict resolution may be approached in new ways.

Theoretical frameworks:

Clausewitz described war as occurring between two state actors, each state battling with the aim of having the other submit to their will by force. The state's primary task is to defend the state's integrity (Maccarone p.11) and as such total warfare is geared to use the country's resources to subdue their enemy efficiently and rapidly. Cajiic (2016) describes the Clausewitzian trinity of social relations as retaining its relevance today, by reasserting the importance of maintaining the moral endorsement of the civilian population in support of the war being fought. The trinity of people, armed forces and government has long informed the study of classical warfare. Taken together, the Clausewitzian model presumes that state leadership constitutes a legitimate authority, and that the populace supports the leadership and its goals by sending soldiers to fight to achieve these ends. Total warfare is territorial or ideological and throughout history wars have defined borders and empires.

Each war fought has a unique set of circumstances due to the close relationship of war and politics. "Clausewitz always argues that – whenever a conflict breaks out – one has to find the origins of war by looking at the political context in which it occurs" (Maccarone, p.10). The context in which the Syrian conflict is unfolding is a complicated weave of divergent politics and understanding requires a framework that can unravel the multitude of actors and goals. Kaldor's new wars theory is sometimes described as a post Clausewitzian model and views war as a social construct involving multiple groups (Kaldor, 2013). "Such groups are networks of state and non-state actors, who are both global and local" (Kaldor, 2020, p.2). Maccarone (2018) argues that with so many actors, the territorial losses on various fronts, a decentralization of Syrian governmental power and the outsourcing of violence to private militias, the conflict in Syria is a good example of the new wars thesis. Without a monopoly on sanctioned use of violence, the state can no longer be seen as a source of legitimate authority. These various groups use political means, through forced displacement, ethnic cleansing, the destruction of cultural symbols or systemic sexual violence, to establish territorial control (Kaldor, 2020). Under a new wars framework, violence against the civilian population is used as a weapon of political dominance.

Feminist perspectives are also consistent with the new wars approach, and Abbington (2019) broadens the discussion by including gender dynamics and violence in war. "The fundamental assertion of the new war thesis is that conflict is multidimensional, therefore rather than undermining, it is bolstered by the indication that conflict motivations are multifaceted. The new war is fought by multiple actors, the feminist perspective indicated it is also fought for multiple motivations" (Abington, 2019, p. 3). Understanding Syria as a multifaceted conflict allows the international community more complex approaches to conflict resolution.

Historical context

Modern Syria is the result of colonial partitioning between France and Britain after WW1 resulted in the breakup of the Ottoman Empire. France was assigned a zone of influence of Syria, Lebanon, northern Iraq and southeastern Turkey, claiming to protect Christian communities in the Levant. France invested infrastructure and economic investment in the region, counterbalancing the British mandate controlling Palestine, Trans-Jordan and Southern Iraq. Aspirations for a modern Syrian state begin in 1920 and became fully independent in 1946. Political instability reigned for the next twenty years, often emphasizing "pan-Arabism (an ideology that combined aspects of nationalism and socialism)" (Maccarone, 2018, p. 68), forming and breaking alliances with Egypt.

After a coup in 1966, Hafiz al-Asad, an Alawite Syrian, was elected as president in 1971. His government put into place a new constitution defining Syria as a secular state, sparking protests and demonstrations by the Sunni majority within Syria calling for an Islamic State. Al-Asad's regime was authoritarian and concentrated power in the hands of the president. Al-Asad focused on land redistribution and a patronage network that led to inefficiency and corruption, controlling opposition, and maintaining allegiance (Maccarone, 2018).

Syria's foreign policy was focused on recapturing territory lost to Israel in the 1967 war, intervening in the Lebanese civil war in 1976 which resulted in indecisive military occupation of Lebanese territory. In 1980, al-Asad supported the Iranian regime against Iraq, effectively severing Syria's ties with much of the Arab world. In 1990, Syria joined the US led coalition against Iraq to restore Kuwait's national sovereignty. These foreign policy choices brought about increasing discontent from the conservative Sunni class looking for a more religious traditional Muslim Arab political system. Anti-regime forces launched campaigns in the late 1970s, resulting in a forceful response against rebel held areas and a reputation for al-Asad as a dictator willing to use force to stay in power (Maccarone, 2018).

Bashar al-Asad, Hafiz al-Asad's son, was elected unopposed in 2000 after his father's death. He portrayed himself as a progressive modern leader; establishing privately owned newspapers, releasing political prisoners and opened Civil society to new political debate. There was criticism of rapid change and worry over the risk to the stability of the government through reform movements allowing criticism against the regime. While more open, the new regime did not constitute open democracy. "Strategic occasional amnesties were used as a panacea to the oppressive and totalitarian practices of the regime" (Maccarone, 2018, p.75), oscillating between policies of conciliation and repression. The government continued and grew practices of nepotism and corruption, rewarding those loyal to the regime with wealth and opportunity.

The Arab Spring

In late 2010 and early 2011, many countries in the Middle East began to see popular protests emerging calling for democratic elections, freedom of association and the end of corruption. Initially begun as peaceful protests, armed rebellions became a wave over Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria (Turkmani, 2015). In Syria, the movement called for the removal of Al-Asad and was met with extreme violence and repression by the Syrian regime. Ten years later, Syria is still caught in a cycle of war, a country destroyed, and international interventions tried and failed. Looking at conflict resolution from a new wars perspective may provide international humanitarian and peace keeping efforts with new ways to focus strategy moving forward.

Differentiating old from new wars

Actors:

New wars are fought by a multitude of state and non-state actors, including regular armies, paramilitaries, and private militias, mercenaries, guerillas, jihadists, warlords, etc… As the failed state lost its monopoly on legitimate violence, various camps emerged with an interwoven mix of complementary and conflicting agendas. Syria is now comprised of four territories, controlled by the Syrian Government, Kurds, Opposition forces and Turkish forces. Hundreds of armed groups and militias are presently operating throughout and across these territories (Kaldor 2020).

The Assad Regime controls a regular army, the Syrian Armed Forces, and is allied with the National Defence force, a pro-government militia led by members of the extended Assad family, as well as Lebanese Hezbollah and Iranian Revolutionary Guards. The main forces of the pro-Assad movement have pushed a sectarian agenda to rally Shi'a Muslims into supporting the Assad regime as identity politic. "Once Iranians, Shi'a Iraquis and Hezbollah joined the government's side and, similarly, once fighters from fellow Sunni countries backed the rebels, the hitherto internal struggle of the Syrians transformed into yet another front of Sunni-Shi'a war" (Malantowicz, 2013, p. 56).

The Kurdish area of Syria is controlled by YPG (People's Protection Units), a nationalist democratic socialist organization that operates using guerilla tactics. Fighting alongside the Free Syrian Army against ISIS, the Kurds are a stateless nation, a minority population in Syria, Iraq, Iran and Turkey. Kurds have been backed by the US in their fight against ISIS (Hinnebush, 2019).

Turkish forces have seen an evolution of their strategic goals in Syria. Initially there was motivation to topple the Assad regime in order to counter the growing Iranian influence in the region. The fighting soon turned to engage with Kurdish forces to prevent YPG from establishing a corridor in Northern Syria to attack inside Turkey (Kostem, 2020). YPG is considered a terrorist organization in Turkey, and Turkish forces are most interested in diminishing the power of both ISIS and YPG in establishing strongholds on the Syrian Turkey border. Turkey is viewed as having leverage over some of the opposition fighters in the Syrian conflict, and as such has been coordinating militarily with Russia as their motivations have been aligned in this capacity (Kostem, 2020). In the pursuit of these goals, Turkey became an entryway for foreign fighters to join the Islamic State, creating a "jihadi highway" into Syria as their motivations were aligned to bring down Al-Asad. (Maccarone, 2018).

The fourth major territorial grouping is a coalition of rebel forces opposing the Assad regime. The main opposition consists of the Free Syrian Army, created in 2011 by soldiers who had defected from the Syrian Armed forces to support protesting civilians. The next largest opposition grouping is a range of secular and Islamist organizations. The main fronts of the opposition are the Supreme Military Command (SMC), the Syrian Islamic Front, and the Syrian Liberation Front. The SMC, led by a Syrian army defector, was set up in an effort to unite rebels backed by Western and Arb Gulf governments. The Syrian Islamic Front is a coalition of Syrian Islamists and includes a variety of salafist jihadist groups with nationalistic aims. While there is a religious focus within this group of rebels, it co-operates with the SMC when their agendas are aligned. The Syrian Liberation Front is also a coalition of Islamist groups but consists of both Syrian and foreign fighters and leadership. The sub-groups comprise a range of Islamist fighters, from moderate to devout, many of whom share a global vision of an Islamist state. These fighters have ties with al-Qaeda (Malantowitz, 2013, p. 57).

Proxy Wars:

Multiple actors have competed over international funding, alliances shifting based on an alignment of interests and political agendas, and motivations need a bit of unraveling, as there are global, regional and local levels of fighting in this conflict. Syria holds a strategic geo-political position, bordering Israel, Iraq and Turkey, making it a good candidate for politically motivated international intervention.

On a global scale, the US sought to fight terrorism and maintain the status quo as a superpower. "Western countries also became involved because large parts of the territory were taken over by ISIS" (Kaldor 2020, p.3), considered a major global terrorist threat by the US, they were set to unseat ISIS and al-Asad. Russia was motivated to re-emerge as a superpower with substantial control over the Middle East and position themselves opposed to US interests. As the tides of war have ebbed and flowed, Russia has shifted their strategy. The "gradual regionalization of Russia's approach to the conflicts in the Middle East, whereby Moscow developed a pragmatic approach that enabled it to engage with all the major actors of the Syrian conflict regardless of whether their aims converged with Russia's" (Kostem, 2020, p.8).

Regionally, Shi'a and Sunni sectarian positioning has played out, with Iran as a major supporter of Al-Asad and Shi'a groups, and Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar supporting Sunni groups. The Anti-Asad movement have been motivated by sectarian allegiances but have financed rebel forces without attention paid to the nature of their political or religious extremism, including rebel groups linked to al-Qaeda (Maccarone, 2018).

Russian and Iranian military interventions in support of the Syrian regime have allowed al-Asad not only to quell much of the rebellion, but also to portray himself as a protector of Syrian minority groups and a fighter of terrorism. Russia, Turkey and Iran have been involved in political cooperation, jointly signing the Moscow declaration in 2016 as a roadmap to the end of the Syrian crisis. In the Astana process, the three countries addressed major problems that the Geneva format did not: involving the major actors of the armed opposition, developing a lasting ceasefire, and taking into account the interests of the major actors. (Kosem 2020).

Goals:

Over a decade of Civil war, Syria has seen an evolution in the goals of the various actors over time. In 2011, the Arab Spring in Syria was based on an ideological agenda to end an authoritarian regime and transition to a democratic state, goals more classically attributed to old war goal setting. In the arrest and torture of teenagers accused of dissident graffiti, and the attacks on their supporters, the Assad regime sought to reframe the conflict from political dissent to tribal and religious identity (Abbington, 2019). In mobilizing political support for the state, the Syrian government strategically invoked identity politics to take on a more sectarian slant, pitting Sunnis and Shi'a Muslims against each other as a tool to escalate atrocities (Malantowicz,2019). Military goals of the actors now fit a new wars model as an exercise in the disintegration of the state, mobilizing instead around ethnic, religious, or racial identities to claim state power as a right.

Agendas of opposition fighters are conflicting or unclear and rebel forces typically lack coherence and military discipline (Malantowicz, 2019). Despite religious or political differences, significant funding opportunity lies with forming alliances with those powers able to pay for weapons and soldiers, with the goal of delegitimizing the government. "These are wars of state-unbuilding. They disassemble public authority and turn state power into an archipelago of armed fiefdoms. They deliberately weaken and undermine the rule of law" (Kaldor 2020, p.2). Without another potential government accepted as legitimate authority in Syria, it is the civilian population that bears the human cost of the conflict.

Forms of Finance:

Rather than seeking a clear and decisive victory to gain a throne or a country, new wars tend to involve "numerous armed groups who gain from the violence itself rather than from winning or losing" (Kaldor, 2020, p.2). Wars require significant funding, both in the procurement or production of arms, and paying the wages of soldiers. In perpetuating the cycle of violence, sources of funding, including both international proxy war efforts and international aid funds, are likely to continue. Public sponsorship by foreign nations or groups is tied to the political or ideological objectives of the supporting sponsor. In Syria, hundreds of armed groups and militias operating throughout and across these territories are financed by outside states and private donors, increasing sectarian polarization between Shia and Sunni communities (Kaldor, 2020). External funding by nations with their own political agendas creates a marketplace for combatants, jockeying for backing as political alliances evolve.

In the total wars of the last century, the financial structure of the war economy was aimed at maximizing both the force of the governmental army and it's efficiency in achieving their goal of defeating of the enemy. As the state's legitimate monopoly on violence is further eroded by the emergence of multiple actors, external funding for military activity becomes more typical. Markets and production are frequently shut down due to fighting, destruction, or blockades, the effect of which is to decentralise the economy of new wars, shifting money away from taxation or government investment and into the hands of warlords and opposition fighters.

Whereas in the total wars of the last century the most important goal of a war effort was to steer, as much as possible, the resources of a nation towards achieving the goal of defeating the enemy, the “new wars primary objective is to perpetuate the war through the exploitation of the resources stemmed from the progressive development of an underground, remunerative economy” (Maccarone, 2018, p.46). The creation of a parallel economy operates in a criminal sphere, where the state no longer has either military or civil authority. The funding method of asset transfer, where the existing resources of the population are redistributed to the fighting units, is a common method of self financing. Examples of self financing include smuggling, hostage taking, looting, drug trade, protection rackets, money laundering, and diversion of aid (Kaldor, 2020). Bank robbery or hostage taking has potentially large rewards, potentially providing the operational budget for a small guerilla faction for an extended period of time. Looting aid supplies can be politically motivated, furthering the destruction of the legitimacy of the state in protecting the population. The robbing of banks or the wealthy can also be used as “revolutionary fundraising tools”, to destroy the structures benefiting the elite members of society (Maccarrone, 2018, p. 49).

Forms of Recruitment:

The new war economy has added a significant impact on the emergence of ISIL and other jihadist groups as Syria functions as a marketplace for factions competing for international funding (Turkmani, 2015). Syria’s government losing their monopoly on legitimate violence has been an opportunity for private mercenaries and jihadi groups to fill a void through foreign recruitment. Attracting thousands of foreigners to fight for its cause is a defining characteristic of ISIL, where the movement's "most fundamental appeal is based on a profound sense of catharsis, empowerment and satisfaction derived from striking a blow at a hated, predatory oppressor" (World Watch, 2016, p.27). The message is spread through the Internet and social media where groups like ISIL can form a direct link with potential recruits. ISIL targets recruits looking for aggressive young men maladjusted to their community experience. The incentive for groups such as ISIL to recruit foreign fighters is the possibility of sending them back home to strike in the West (World Watch, 2016).

Where recruitment of jihadis can be ideological, the emergence of private mercenaries in Syria is a capitalist phenomenon. Well armed and well-trained fighters for hire who enable foreign governments to turn profit motive into war strategy. Rewards can include cash or oil and mining rights, their skills altering the course of conflicts. "Their employees are recruited from different countries and profitability is everything. Patriotism is unimportant and sometimes a liability" (McFate, 2019, p. 2).

Methods of war and military strategy for targeting civilian population:

There is often a blurring of the distinction between civilians and combatants under the new wars theory, where violence generally includes asymmetric levels of power and force (Odernatt, 2013). Syria remains an excellent example of this asymmetry, where often attacks on civilians, including ethnic cleansing, population displacement, expulsion, systematic rape and sexual violence perpetrated on civilian populations, create hostile environments for those critics of the Syrian regime, thereby initiating a significant humanitarian and refugee crisis (Malantowicz, 2019).

Consistent with his oscillating strategies for political reformation of his father's government, "Bashar al-Asad released interviews to state-controlled media saying that he would be ready to undertake political reforms and policy chances. Then he issued decrees and took political decisions aimed at addressing the discontent" (Maccarone (2018, p. 81). This strategy of obfuscation delayed international diplomatic efforts, as countries like the US were looking to avoid military intervention. The harsher the government tactics to control the actions of the opposition forces, the more political support of the population was lost.

While pre-1945 warfare sought to achieve popular support of government authority and military action, new wars' combatants mobilize the populations under their control along ethnic, social or religious lines. Ethnic cleansing and the perpetuation of fear and hatred of the other offers warring factions an opportunity to create an ideologically homogeneous area where their control is not questioned. The new wars thesis highlights a change in the targeted population. Before 1945 the goal of an army was to destroy the enemy. In the context of the new wars, the use of violence on the civilian population has fewer political consequences as "the shifted strategy implies that the authorities no longer seek popular support; instead they pursue deliberate targeting and forced displacement of civilians" (Malantowicz. 2019, p. 53). In clearing out the Sunni-dominated opposition groups and their families from the major cities, large scale displacements of refugees have resulted in ethnic cleansing, altering the sectarian geography of Syria to benefit the Al-Asad regime (Maccarone, 2018).

In normalizing violence against civilians, the "regime has employed artillery, air power, bulldozers, sectarian massacres, and even ballistic missiles to force Syrian populations out of insurgent held areas. This strategy ensures that even when the rebels won towns and neighbourhoods, they lost the population" (Holliday, 2013, p.19). On several occasions, chemical weapons were fired on civilian areas held by the opposition forces. While total wars had rules of engagements that were typically followed by state actors, the chaos of new wars has seen an increase in direct violence against civilians and an erosion of global societal norms designed to prevent the use of chemical or biological weapons by a government against its civilian population (Ilchmann & Revill, 2014).

While there are disparate objectives and belief systems held by rebel forces, many opposition groups share a vision of military strategy: there is agreement on strongholds of Syrian territory, where guerilla tactics are the only means to meet regimes forces. The Syrian government engaged Iran-funded and Lebanese-based Hezbollah fighters in guerilla warfare attacks as a response (Malantowicz. 2019). This escalation of violence was further exacerbated by extreme tactics by the Syrian government against their civilian population, such as using ballistic missiles and chemical weapons, which further delegitimised the moral authority of the Syrian state (World Watch, 2016).

Sexual violence as a method of war

A new wars perspective includes the gendered aspects of conflict. “The extremist ethnic and religious identities found in contemporary wars nearly always involve a contradictory and unstable version of masculinity in which new form of sexual order are established” (Kaldor, 2020, p.3). This sexual order is established in both traditional and non-traditional ways and occurs on many sides of the conflict. The ability for men, particularly foreign recruits, to engage with warfare is dependent on the ability for women to sustain the domestic realm, maintaining property and care of the children. These values enable conscription, even justifying the morality of the violent actions as men defending and protecting women and children (Abington, 2019).

Rape has long been used as a psychological weapon of war, with sexual violence perpetrated against the victim and against the community. Not only are women and sometimes men physically violated, but also “the honour of the community’s men has been assaulted” (Abington 2019, p.3). In Syria government and allied forces were implicated in thousands of rapes of men and women during the war, using sexual violence as a form of ethno-sectarian domination (Ahram, 2019).

Prostitution also supports military efforts. “The Islamic State established an industry of female enslavement to sustain its troops, whereby women were distributed amongst its male combatants as enslaved sexual partners” (Abington, 2019, p.2). Sexual slavery allows for the satisfaction of soldiers but also fuels the conflict through reproduction and labour. Arranged and forced marriages extends ISIS’s umbrella of protection, coercion maintaining the relationship, as the women no longer have other options to ensure their survival or that of their children (Ahram, 2019).

Criticisms and controversies of the new wars paradigm:

Malesevic (2010) takes issue with the separation of identity and ideology, claiming that identity politics are also about ideas. The criticism is refuted by Kaldor (2013) in terms of motivations of power. “Identity politics is about the right to power in the name of a specific group; ideological politics is about winning power in order to carry out a particular ideological programme” (p.5). This distinction is particularly revealing in Syria, where different groups might share the same ideology, such as being against the al-Asad regime, but not share sectarian or ethnic ties, keeping Syrian rebel unity difficult, if not impossible to achieve.

There is a significant debate within the academic community as to whether the concept of "new wars" (really) designates anything new. Malesevic (2010) asserts that while intra-state warfare has been more prevalent than inter-state warfare in recent times, this distinction can easily become redefined during wars that create new states. Violence against civilians has occurred throughout the millennia, and there are significant historical examples of terrorist and guerilla tactics going back well into the last two centuries. Maccarrone (2018) argues that the Syrian conflict cannot be analysed through an old war lens. Rather than a comprehensive theory that can explain every case, Malantowitcz (2019) agrees that the new wars theory as a pragmatic analytical tool can be useful.

Kaldor (2013), in response to the accusation that new wars are not new, agrees that many features of new wars can be found in earlier wars. She argues that the term new allows for the exclusion of "old assumptions about the nature of war and to provide the basis for a novel research methodology" (p.3). Syria certainly meets the criteria to serve as an example of Kaldor's new wars theory, however the question remains as to whether the ability to define aspects of the conflict can lead to new approaches or solutions in war torn Syria.

Implications for public policy and intervention:

After a decade of civil war in Syria, with 75 countries intervening, the country has become ever more divided, and the violence has only escalated. With so many violent and radical actors, diplomatic negotiations initially fail when opposing combatant parties/groups have a vested interest in continuing the violence (Kaldor, 2020). With countless human rights violations reported and high rates of civilian casualties, the conflict in Syria is reported to be the deadliest conflict in the 21st century (Maccarone, 2018). The international community has not been successful in their interventions and war continues at great cost.

The application of new wars theory to describe the war in Syria is an attempt to redefine and reconceptualize the social condition of the conflict by linking concepts of human security, disarmament, and development. In an old wars framework, diplomatic negotiations have usually been premised on the assumption that states can agree to compromises. However, formal agreements can only be forged with governments that possess legitimate authority. Where violence against civilians has become normalized, the human rights of the population must be prioritized. Ignatieff (2002) believes this commitment to human security also requires a government with legitimate authority, capable of giving orders, enforcing them, and able to provide protection of the people within the structures of the basic institutions of a state.

Kaldor (2020) proposes a cosmopolitan strategy to conflict resolution, centering around the establishment of a legitimate political authority, in cooperation with civil society. These “bottom up” efforts would seek to stop the flow of funding and weapons to armed groups on all sides, instead putting pressure on their allies to stop killing civilians. The aim of these efforts legitimizing civil-society work over continued violence (Maccarone, 2018). While Maccarone (2018) believes that Kaldor’s strategy lacks realism, there is also an expression of hopefulness that human rights and legitimate political authority could be the focus of international efforts.

In a time of global pandemic, challenges remain in identifying and supporting civil society leaders, both in Syria and in the diaspora, as potential legitimate political authority. Covid 19 has impacted the military balance of power on the variety of military actors in Syria based on their available resources and manner of involvement, but the pandemic has not resulted in a pause in the conflict. Instead, it has proven to only be one more factor "affecting cooperation formats, military strength, power balance, and prospects for stabilisation" (Asseburg et al, 2020, p.7). It would be an interesting area of study to identify specific pandemic impacts on each actor and their goals, as well as the health implications in the territories of the various factions to analyze potential diplomatic strategies moving forward.

As both the pandemic and the Syrian conflict continues, the focus on policy is still relevant. The new wars theory gives us a potential roadmap to follow; seeking to identify and amplify moderate, legitimate political authority that makes the health of the population a priority, diplomatic relationship with and eventual removal of external actors, and a future reconciliation process. Any future stable Syrian government must be able to bring accountability and justice for past crimes so that the Syrian people may have a chance to rebuild.

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