Syria

Civilian interaction with armed groups in the Syrian conflict

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Conflict has ravaged Syria since 2011, when President Bashar al-Assad's regime responded severely to nationwide pro-democracy demonstrations. Some protestors began to take up arms to defend themselves and, as fighting escalated, the country descended into civil war. The peaceful protest movement was overwhelmed by violent encounters between the Syrian regime and its loyal militias, and forces opposed to Assad's rule. Civilians and civil society groups have since struggled to represent their views and interests in the face of multiple armed factions.

The armed rebellion has evolved significantly since late 2011. Initially, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), a loose coalition of armed anti-regime groups, played a prominent role in military operations. Today, a proliferation of independent armed groups with distinct modes of organisation and stated goals are fighting in Syria, estimated at up to 1,000, including local remnants of the FSA, umbrella groups such as the Islamic Front and the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front, "jihadist" groups including Islamic State (IS) and Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), as well as Kurdish military factions. All share the goal of removing Assad, but also represent a diversity of other objectives and motivations.

The conflict has further acquired sectarian dimensions between Muslim Sunni and Shia/Alawite sects. Sunni jihadist groups, IS in particular, have proved formidable in their ability to mobilise resources and control huge swathes of territory, albeit through the use of brutal tactics. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights has estimated that over 200,000 people have died in the war as of December 2014, with more then three million refugees flooding the region and over seven million people internally displaced.

One of the most significant developments of the conflict has been the emergence of areas that lie outside regime control – often referred to as liberated areas. In the absence of the state, different actors, armed and unarmed, live in the same space; they cooperate, coexist or compete to fill the vacuum.

This article looks at how civilians interact with armed groups, including through informal channels and more organised civil society groups, and the factors that affect this interaction. It focuses on areas where the absence of the regime has allowed particular armed groups to emerge as the sole military power. It excludes areas controlled by Kurdish military factions, which are beyond the limits of this article. Nor does the article cover regime-held areas, where the state, although weakened and challenged by autonomous local defence groups, is still able to control civilian life to a large extent using police forces and militias funded by and loyal to the regime.

The case study includes information from interviews with activists in Syria – in the cities of Daraa and Homs, and the Damascus districts of Yarmouk camp and Barzeh – and researchers outside Syria, as well as the authors' own experience of working on humanitarian and peacebuilding responses to the Syria conflict.

The composition of the article distinguishes four areas of relationship between armed groups and communities. These help to identify general observable trends based on available data, although in reality of course they inter-connect and overlap. The article looks first at how structured civilian organisation, including administrative councils in liberated areas, have in some instances developed relations with armed groups. Second, it explores contexts in which civilian
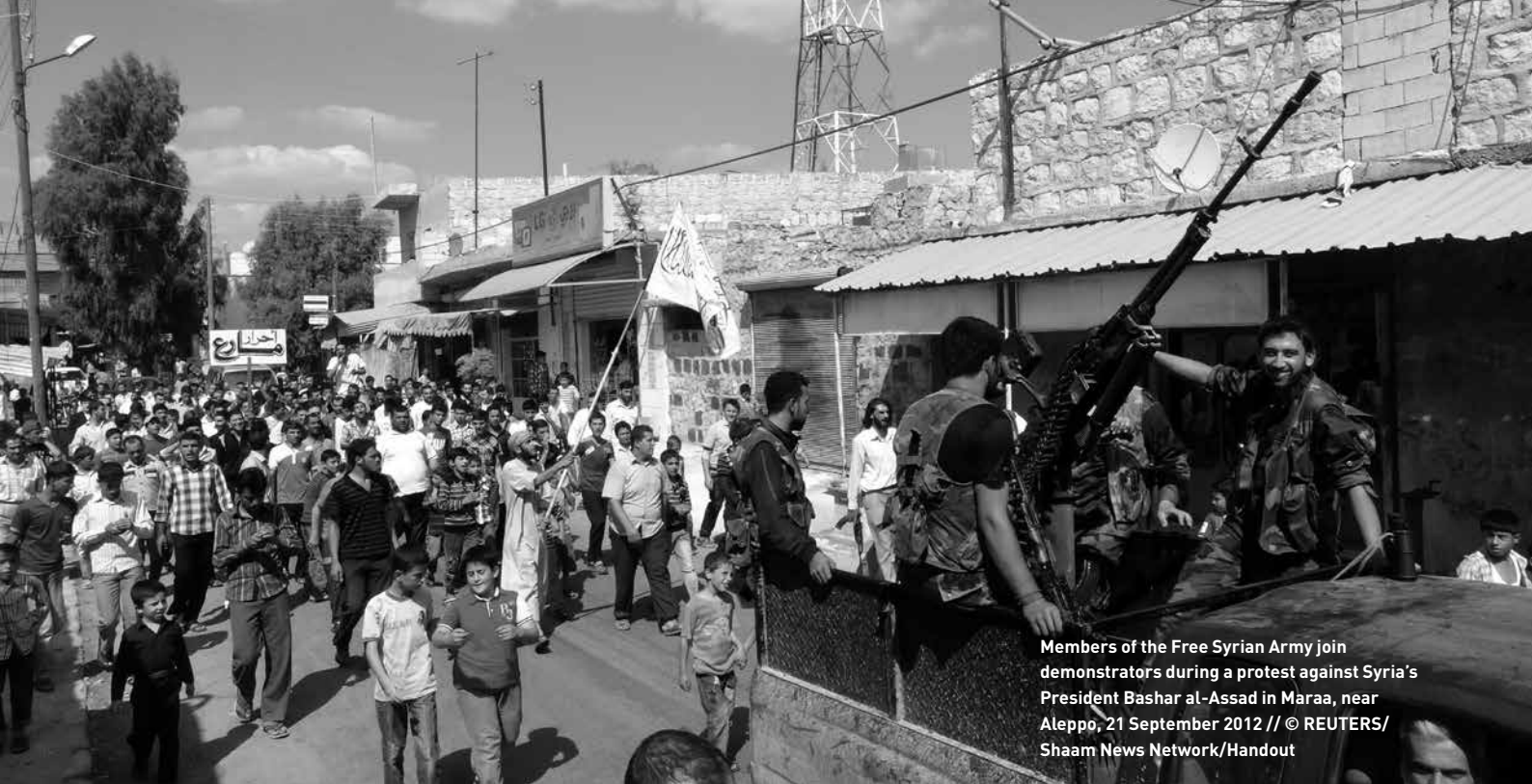
Members of the Free Syrian Army join demonstrators during a protest against Syria's President Bashar al-Assad in Maraa, near Aleppo, 21 September 2012 // © REUTERS/ Shaam News Network/Handout

organisation has been less established, yet modes of informal organisation have developed to pressure armed groups. Third, it identifies some specific factors that influence interaction between civilians and armed groups, such as personal links. Fourth, it reflects on the impact of the changing nature of the conflict and shifts in the typology of the armed groups.

Armed groups, civilian organisation and local legitimacy

After decades of oppression, civil activism emerged in the public space in Syria in 2011. At the start of the uprising, activist groups developed into Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) as platforms for mobilising and coordinating protests and campaigning. As areas were liberated from regime control the subsequent governance vacuum was filled by a multitude of actors, both armed and civilian. Armed groups continued to fight the regime and hold territory, and provide security and protection to the population. Civilian actors, including LCCs where present, took on responsibility for delivering services, and providing aid and administration.

The intensification of the armed conflict saw many civilian structures dismantled; some were restructured and only a few survived. Syrian civil society has been through many changes and faced many constraints, as Rana Khalaf documented in 2014. And as Doreen Khoury (Accord 25, 2014) has mapped out, new civil society groups emerged in non-regime controlled areas, most notably Local Administrative Councils (LACs) that provided governance functions in rural regions.

Research by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue published in 2014 showed how most Syrian anti-regime armed factions acknowledge the need to maintain popular support for the uprising. They cooperate with local councils and encourage their creation, and also maintain vested interests in their structure, especially their welfare function. LACs were officially acknowledged by the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, a coalition of opposition groups created in November 2012. In 2014, the opposition government estimated there were over 750 LACs in liberated areas.

Many civil society groups use the legitimacy gained from their administrative, governance and service delivery function to engage armed groups. For example, activist groups in Yarmouk, Damascus, have since the arrival in their neighbourhood of armed groups in summer 2012 – the FSA and the Democratic Liberation Front of Palestine (DFLP) – used their activist heritage to become a reference point for civilians to contact local armed groups. Similarly, in Aleppo, some civil activists explain their good relationship with certain armed groups by the camaraderie that had brought them together prior to emergence of the armed rebellion, at the time when the regime was systematically repressing human rights activists.

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LACs have derived legitimacy from basic democratic tools such as public reasoning and elections as well as through consensus amongst influential community actors. Funding from foreign donors for LACs that deliver services and humanitarian aid in their local areas is often conditional on their independence from any armed groups. One of our interviewees describes how: "armed groups understand this; and they know that they will face opposition from the local population if they interfere in the work of LACs". Civil society groups that do not deliver services are more vulnerable to armed group interference.

In Barzeh, relationships that were channelled through the neighbourhood committee were more effective than direct interaction between civilians and local FSA brigades. This is because the neighbourhood committee was formed through an agreement between local armed groups and local civilians. It was headed by representatives of local *katibas*

(fighting units) and civilians (such as doctors and lawyers), and was consequently given executive powers that all parties committed to respect. As Turkmani et al (2014) describe, the Reconciliation Committee played an important role in representing local armed groups and activists in Barzeh in negotiating a ceasefire with the regime in early January 2014.

In Saraqeb, a predominantly Sunni populated city of 30,000 in Idlib Governorate, revolutionary activists and armed groups cooperated to form legislative and administrative bodies. An example is the Revolutionary Front, an alliance formed in December 2013 by FSA brigades and now one of the strongest local armed groups in Saraqeb, which has worked with activist groups and the LAC to set up an independent civil judiciary body. This was a shared effort to limit violations by security brigades operating in the area.

Informal civilian interaction with armed groups

In many instances, cooperation is not feasible and relations between civilians and armed groups are more confrontational. Since March 2014, the Islamic Council for the Administration of Liberated Areas, backed by JN and the Islamic Front, has endeavoured to establish local Islamic councils in order to challenge the role of independent LACs.

In areas under IS rule, civilian life (relief, education, justice, and behaviour in public spaces) is under strict control. Despite limited venues for expression, lack of protection and fear of retribution, civilians actively engage in campaigning and mobilisation to counter the control of armed groups and to voice their concerns. There are numerous examples of civilians and activists replicating the same non-violent techniques in non-regime-controlled areas that had previously been used against the regime, including protests, leaflets, graffiti or disobedience.

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In the besieged governorate of Rif Dimashq, communities have become frustrated with the conduct of Jaysh al-Islam, the dominant local armed group. The group, which is part of the Islamic Front and is made up of local fighters, emerged in 2011 and became an umbrella for a number of factions in the area. Communities, protesting against the stockpiling of food reserves while people starved, broke into food stores. In Maaret al-Numan (Idlib Governorate), civilians protested against JN interference in their daily lives, such as imposing dress codes for women and schoolgirls. JN responded by loosening restrictions. In another case in Aleppo, a high profile activist was arrested after refusing to wear *hijab* as requested by a local armed group. A network of activists reached out to political bodies and donors supporting and funding the group.

The activist was released after the group was warned it would lose its funding.

However, despite the abundance of cases of extreme violence against civilians by armed groups, and the efforts that civil activists invest in highlighting their cause, these stories rarely gain interest or support from international activists, international non-governmental organisations, donors or politicians. An exception is the case of Razan Zaytouneh, co-founder of the LCCs, which has generated wider attention. Razan and three other civil activists were abducted in Douma (an eastern suburb of Damascus) in December 2013 by members of a local Islamist militia, and remain in captivity.

Personal relations

Personal links, such as those deriving from kinship, tribal affiliation and solidarity between friends and neighbours, play a key role in how communities reach out to armed groups. Whether armed groups and civilians are from the same locality is of particular – often paramount – importance in relation to their interaction, building on existing social capital and encouraging the development of networks for civilians and armed groups to trust each other and work together.

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This is especially the case in urban centres. The Barzeh district of Damascus, with a population of 50,000, has been under a regime blockade since spring 2013. The FSA unit controlling the area is made up of fighters from the neighbourhood and it has positive relations with local civilians that are more significant than blood ties; the FSA has been responsive to civilian influence and interests. Pressure from members of the Barzeh population who had been displaced to the rest of Damascus and wanted to return home was a key reason why FSA fighters struck a ceasefire deal with the Syrian army in January 2014. The influx of returnees made the ceasefire irreversible – any military action would cause large number of casualties and a new displacement crisis for Barzeh locals.

Solidarity from shared experiences during initial phases of the uprising further strengthens links based on locality. In Aleppo, civil activists explain that their good relations with armed groups developed from solidarity prior to the armed rebellion, when the regime had systematically repressed human rights activists.

Tribes, and large family networks in rural areas including rural Aleppo and Idlib, assert a hierarchical structure, which emphasise the importance of, and respect for, notables and social leaders. They also promote solidarity and cohesion as essential for their survival. Tribal connections extend to cities.

In Homs, one interviewee explained that in areas under FSA control civilians have tried to influence the extent of fighting in their locality, and in some cases have prevented family members from fighting in their areas.

For LACs, tribal and familial relations have been relevant where such relationships are highly valued and respected, such as rural and tribal communities. Membership of local leaders in the LAC plays an important role in affecting and, if needed, pressuring local armed groups. In rural Daraa, for example, the tribal affiliations of members of LACs and *Shura* (consultative) councils are used to influence local armed groups. This role is not limited to LACs, but to any civil body that includes community leaders, such as the Council of Wise Men in rural Idlib.

The negative side of such organic solidarity is that local communities pay a high price for supporting their local armed group. After two years of an intensive army siege of Homs, the city centre was completely destroyed and more than 2,200 citizens lost their lives. When defeated FSA fighters and Islamic brigades agreed to leave the Bab 'Amr district of Homs in June 2014, most civilians fled the city in fear of army reprisals.

Personal and competitive agendas can also emerge in conflict contexts, which can undermine social and cultural structures that support community cohesion. In Barzeh, an interviewee explained how illiterate fighters find in war an opportunity to gain influence and respect, as well as earn a living. The possession of arms provides them with power that might not be accessible to them otherwise. This weakens the influence of personal relationships and kinships. In Manbij, Aleppo Governorate, armed factions from outside the region accused the local council of supporting the regime, causing it to lose legitimacy, and afterwards took the opportunity to replace it with a submissive *Sharia* (Islamic laws) committee in November 2013.

The strategic conflict priorities of armed groups can also reduce the influence of personal relations. Where militants possess the upper hand militarily, personal links are superseded in favour of military necessity. In the long term, this damages the social bonds that previously allowed civilians to resist or support opposition groups. Several interviewees explained how during truce periods, civilian neighbourhood committees consisting of respected neighbourhood individuals have been able to influence militia decisions through traditional leadership or ad hoc elected authority. However, during periods of intense fighting war, armed group actions are determined by conflict priorities.

Civilian interaction and the changing nature of Syrian armed groups

The armed movement in Syria started with small, local and loosely organised groups that were largely composed of local fighters and dependent on the support of their communities. The intensification of fighting and the need of armed groups to increase their capabilities in order to sustain resistance to the regime and gain or maintain territory created demand for larger and more organised fighting formations. The availability of resources, access to funding and weapons, and clarity of organisation and chain of command, all played essential roles in creating the larger armed groups prevalent today.

Clarity of military goals, political vision, or "ideology", affect armed groups' coherence and organisation, their ability to mobilise and recruit like-minded individuals, and their legitimacy among populations in territories they mean to liberate from regime rule. Groups that did not adopt a political programme failed to attract foreign funding earmarked respectively for either "democratic" (pro-Western) or "Islamist" groups, and consequently lacked the resources to achieve military progress. The discourse of democracy, citizenship and the rule of law held by some armed groups linked to the FSA in the initial stages of the Syrian uprising was soon weakened by the paralysis of Western powers and interference from regional states with their own geo-political interests.

In 2015, "Islamist" ideology is the most prominent dogma amongst armed groups in Syria. The largest anti-regime armed groups and formations currently in Syria include JN, Jaysh al-Islam, al-Jabha al-Shamia, Jaysh al-Mujahideen and IS. These groups claim to be governed by specific variations of (Sunni) Islam. They often try to impose their convictions on communities around them, including by setting up religious courts and committees. Civilian reaction to this varies depending on the context, but communities that try to influence armed groups will make reference to the same religious corpus to counter or reject a ruling of a court or committee. For example, a community in rural Idlib, outraged by JN's stoning of a woman accused of committing adultery in late 2014, used religious sources to provide "evidence" that the stoning was "un-Islamic". One interviewee, who opposes JN's views, commented that, "we have to use the same language they [JN] use".

Many people believe it is not possible to defy ideologies outside of this framework. Groups like IS and JN impose a radical and exclusive implementation of *Sharia* in regions and cities they rule over, such as Ar-Raqqah and Deir ez-Zor Governorate. Even some human rights activists or secularists have resorted to arguments from the same ideology, although this can be problematic as it limits their capacity to contradict or condemn violations and impositions perpetrated by armed groups.

Inevitably, armed groups that have adopted an Islamist ideology are less accountable to the community. An activist from Yarmouk quoted a response he was offered from a local armed group: "Our role is to raise the word of God. This is more important than human life." The activist subsequently had to leave Yarmouk to evade persecution.

The majority of non-Sunni communities living in areas under the control of Islamist groups have faced severe treatment. For example, in January 2015, religious minority Druze communities from 14 villages around Idlib were forced by a JN Emir to demolish their shrines and renounce their faith. Civilians from these communities usually lack the capacity to engage with Islamist armed groups, which often leads to their displacement or physical harm. Similarly, activists that do not conform to the views of Islamist armed groups, such as those who are openly secularist, pro-freedom or pro-democracy, have also been forced to flee.

Conclusion

As the conflict map in Syria grows increasingly complex, it would be wrong to assume that civilians are always capable of engaging armed groups in dialogue or resisting their demands. In the face of extreme and sustained violence, Syrian populations have undoubtedly struggled to assert their peacebuilding agency to influence conflict dynamics and the behaviour of armed actors.

The most significant channels remain kinship, local and social relations. Civil society activists have also developed influential relationships with armed groups having previously organised and participated in anti-regime protests together. This helps them to mediate between civilians and armed groups. At the political level, activists have also been involved in several local ceasefire agreements concluded between anti-regime groups and regime forces.

The tactics of non-violent resistance used against the regime, including organising protests, campaigns, and general civil disobedience, have been adapted to engage with armed groups with varying success. Relationships between communities and Islamist armed groups are particularly complicated. In most cases, civilians do not have strong counter-arguments to *Sharia*-based rulings to negotiate their positions. It is also important to assist civilians' peace efforts by pressuring states and donors that support Syrian armed groups to in turn compel groups to stop encroaching on civilian space.

As the Syrian conflict enters its fifth year, it is important not to lose sight of the significant roles played by unarmed, non-state actors to develop structures for promoting local security and peace, and to adapt to the constantly changing demands of the conflict. Huge efforts have been invested in maintaining a civilian voice by activists and locals. They have shown courage and resilience and an incredible capacity to sustain their efforts and aspirations despite huge challenges and lack of support.