

Layers of War: Logics of violence in the Syrian conflict

Global Conversation with Marina Calculli



On the 8th of May, we were very fortunate to have the attendance of Marina Calculli to discuss the logics of violence in the Syrian conflict.

Marina Calculli is a scholar of International Relations of the Middle East. She got her PhD in Politics and Social Sciences at Catholic University of Milan. She currently is Senior Common Room Research Fellow at Saint Anthony's College, University of Oxford, focusing on logics of political violence and dynamics of competition and cooperation between state and non-state armed groups, especially in Syria and Lebanon.

Ms. Calculli centered her presentation around the question: "Why are the logistics of this conflict important?" Since 2011, Syria transitioned from internal revolution to international conflict. Over 407 thousand people died in the violent encounters between rebel groups and the Assad regime. The migrant crisis of 2015/2016 was a result of refugees arriving in Europe in unexpectedly large numbers. Over 13 million people of the Syrian population have been displaced, which amounts to half of the country's population.

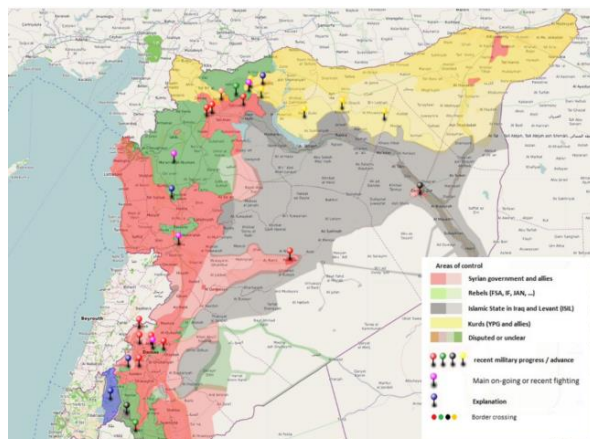
It is difficult to determine when the Syria conflict started. President Baschar Al-Assad turned the country into a surveillance state to single out and prosecute regime critics. Economic reforms introduced since 2000 turned out to only benefit the rich population, including Assad's cousin Rami Makhlouf, one of the most influential businessmen of Syria. People demanded better quality of life. Uncontrolled urbanization led to increased poverty in the cities where citizens came together to protest the long-standing oppression by the Assad regime. On March 15th, 2011, the revolution began. For the next 5 months, the peaceful protests were met with violence by government. Assad attempted to calm down the enraged population by declaring amnesty and releasing regime critics from prison. Instead of freeing members of the liberal and left opposition, who, in Ms. Calculli's opinion, would have probably been the best political alternative for Syria, Jihadists, members of extreme conservative Islamic believe, were released. This contributed to the current situation, with ISIS, also a Jihadist group, controlling parts of the country.

Other actors in the initial protests were the Muslim Brotherhood, who were forced into opposition in 70s/80s, when Baschar Al-Assad's father, Hafez Al-Assad became President. They tried unsuccessfully to engage in politics over the years and decided to use the protests to claim a new position in Syria. The Liberal and Left opposition organized and phrased demands related to Human Rights and socio-economic reforms, but were targeted most by the regime and quickly eliminated. Through international influence the revolution transformed into a trans-border conflict, changing entirely in its nature.

During the first months of the revolution international powers were reluctant to intervene, despite the major humanitarian crisis developing. Since Syria is geographically at the center of the Middle East, the fear that the internal instability would affect the entire region started to increase. In June 2011 Turkey asked Assad to step down while the US called for reforms to meet the populations demands. When in July 2011 war broke out, Turkey helped officers from Syrian Army to join the opposition and form the "Free Syrian Army" in hope of victory. Assad responded by calling on his allies. Since then, Turkey has supported some Jihadi groups in attempt to undermine the regime. Iran joined the fight as a strong ally of Assad, to increase its influence in the region. Saudi-Arabia, being in personal conflict with Iran (Shias vs Sunnis) wanted to overthrow Assad to weaken the Iranian position. They started giving financial support to rebel groups with the Jihadists being one of the main beneficiaries. Israel opposed the Assad regime, wanting a government more in favor of own interests and hoped Syria as a weak neighbor. The Hezbollah a Shia Islamist political party from Lebanon, have been defending Assad since 2013 to secure their weapon deliveries from Iran to Lebanon and simultaneously their position in Lebanon. The confusion created through the numerous actors was seen as an international opportunity to gain control in the region.

Today Syria is divided into different territories controlled by rebel groups and the Syrian government.

- yellow; the Kurds: Were given the Syrian nationality by Assad during conflict.
- red; Assad Regime: Controls the most important, population dense areas in the country.
- grey; ISIS: Controls the border to Iraq and deserted territory (part of Jihadist group). Corlini stresses that they are a product of war.



- green; Other rebel groups

The war is accompanied by negotiations between the Assad regime and rebel groups to guarantee safe passage for fighters in exchange for the liberation of people from occupied areas.

The US and Russian intervention contributed to the changing nature of the conflict. On the one hand, Russia had strategic interests: having a naval base in the Mediterranean Sea, they wanted to regain power in the region, controlled by the US after the Cold War and fight against the expansion of radical Islam. On the other the hand, the US had an unclear position towards the Syrian conflict. After the unsuccessful Iraq and Afghan war, they were reluctant to intervene and were not interested in regime change. The US created strong alliance with Kurds, restricting the expansion of Russia. The US intervention followed the use of chemical weapons by the Assad Regime in 2017.

Student Question: Is the US intervention after the use of chemical weapons an isolated event or can they be considered as a general contributor?

Answer: The US hasn't previously intervened because the costs of a possible intervention were too high. Obama in 2013 said if chemical weapons were used they were going to intervene, but after the attack in Damascus in August of the same year he rethought his decision. Donald Trump wants to show dominance and distinguish himself from Obama. So, we cannot be sure if this is an isolated event.

To return to the question of logistics of the Syrian war, we now understand the importance to distinguish between the internal revolution and ongoing international conflict. The goal for a regime change behind the peaceful protests in 2013 was abandoned for the war against terrorism, resulting in the migrant crisis. We left this Global Conversation with a new perspective on the narratives of the Syria conflict.

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