INFIGHTING AMONG THE SYRIAN OPPOSITION

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ALSHARQ FORUM

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Contents

Abstract: This paper aims to understand the infighting dynamics within rebel factions during the Syrian conflict, to underline their inherent causes, and to identify patterns in these dynamics. This paper relies on empirical data from 40 infighting incidents between 2012–2017 to explain the phenomenon. It assumes that faction leaders are rational actors motivated by their perception of opportunities and threats, and that their assessment of costs and benefits dictate when, how, and where they will attack their rivals.

This paper identifies three types of infighting: bids for hegemony, expulsions of future threats, and dealing with existential threats. The paper measures the impact of time, available resources, and the level of external threats on the motives behind initiating an attack against a direct rival as well as the successes of mediating efforts. Empirical data confirms the rational behavior of faction leaders in their decision-making processes behind initiating an attack, and demonstrates how conflicts of interests trump other differences in motivating attacks.

The Syrian conflict is not a unique case of rebel infighting. In Iraq for instance, the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan collaborated with their common enemies, Saddam Hussein and Iran, in their quest to eliminate one another.[1] Similarly, Tamil and Kashmiri rebels fought each other in Sri Lanka and in India.[2] Indeed, a common feature of modern popular insurgencies and revolutions is rebels' tendency to factionalize, cooperating at times, but more often competing against one another.[3] In Syria, six years after the start of the popular uprising, the last two years have been heavily marked by rebel infighting despite considerable and strategic losses to the Syrian regime. This paper attempts to better understand competition dynamics in civil wars, to underline their inherent causes, and to identify patterns in these dynamics. This paper relies on empirical data from 40 infighting incidents within the Syrian war between 2012–2017 to explain infighting phenomena in the Syrian conflict.

In Syria, six years after the start of the popular uprising, the last two years have been heavily marked by rebel infighting despite considerable and strategic losses to the Syrian regime

Decrypting rebel infighting dynamics is important for two main reasons. First, in order to develop and adopt efficient and appropriate policies for encouraging closer cooperation between all the parties concerned, and second, to obstruct probable collaboration between armed opposition groups and their common enemies, as some studies[4] show that continuous and intensifying infighting could encourage rebel groups to join forces with common enemies against local rebel competitors.

It is important to acknowledge that rebel infighting is a complex phenomenon triggered by circumstantial causes, and is a side effect of structural differences between the disputing parties.[5] Unfortunately, most meditation efforts focus on resolving apparent but marginal causes rather than treating root causes of infighting that are more difficult to deal with. Hence, it is not surprising that we often witness the failure of these attempts in the mid- to long-term, and it is equally safe to expect difficult challenges while struggling with the deep-rooted causes of conflicts.

It is important to acknowledge that rebel infighting is a complex phenomenon triggered by circumstantial causes, and is a side effect of structural differences between the disputing parties

A number of experts claim that social and ethnic dynamics are the primary sources of rebel conflicts,[6] and even though it is undeniable that such factors play a major role in fueling existing tensions, such a rationale fails to explain disputes between factions which have adopted the same faith, ideology or political disposition, who operate in the same region, and whose members are from the same families and local communities. Thus, the question remains: "What is the primary source of motivation for infighting between homogeneous groups?"

Factions of the same ethnicity, political inclination, and ideology are competing for the same sources of popular legitimacy and local financial resources. Faction leaders are fully aware of this reality, and it is further reflected in their underlying consciousness of opportunities to monopolize shared sources of power, and their perception of future and existential threats.[7] Military factions tend to seize opportunities when they are aware of their relative strength in comparison to groups competing for the same resources (popular support, funding, or local income) at times when the Syrian regime threat is at

its lowest level.[8] These circumstances provide strong motives for seizing a competitor's resources. On the other hand, their sense of vulnerability increases when their competitors grow in strength and hostility. These circumstances awaken the attacker's survival instincts, and induce groups to take high risks in fear of disappearance.[9]

This paper seeks to familiarize readers and mediators with infighting dynamics, and to help them develop appropriate and efficient solutions to this phenomenon. The first section investigates the infighting phenomenon, while the second explains how dynamics result from factionalism. The third section presents the outcomes of a study of 40 infighting incidents during the Syrian conflict between 2012 and 2017.

1. The Social Phenomenon Of Infighting

The known ramifications of infighting in terms of human, military, and financial costs are known by host communities, and hence the fraternal infighting phenomenon is largely a mystery for them. Moreover, this phenomenon contradicts the widely-expected framework of cooperation during wars and revolutions. Hence, internal conflicts are rarely tolerated by the social bases that support the groups. In general, there are three beliefs that predispose hosting communities to supporting cooperation rather than competition:

a- The Enemy Of My Enemy Is My Friend: The predominant approach adopted by experts suggests that small and weaker rebel groups engaged in an armed conflict would cooperate against a stronger oppressive regime or occupying forces.[10] Such a logic privileges the rationale of mobilizing small and divided powers despite existing disagreements to defeat a common powerful enemy.

b- Infighting Emerges After Victory Not Before: The Afghan experience has had a major effect in forming popular beliefs around fraternal conflicts, adopting the balance of power logic which presupposes the rationale of postponing existing disagreements until the stronger mutual enemy has been defeated.[11]

c- Negative Publicity: Infighting has a negative impact on a cause's image among both its local and international supporters. Recent experiences show an increase in the Syrian regime's popularity and perceived legitimacy when fights among armed opposition groups intensify.[12]

Syrian analysts adopt a traditional approach in their attempts to explain the roots of conflict between armed opposition groups. The former emphasizes the impact of factors such as regionalism, ideological differences, social class, and foreign interference. Undeniably, most of the infighting incidents that have occurred during the Syrian conflict are linked to these factors in one way or another. Nevertheless, the various and diverse ways in which these differences have been employed have led us to consider them as mobilizing tools rather than as real causes for infighting. Indeed, many conflicts can be attributed to regionalism, but not the majority. Similarly, mainstream armed opposition groups share the same ideological and societal traits, yet it has not prevented them for clashing with each other. For instance, the Islamic Front brigades, who all adhere to the Salafist movement, nonetheless competed and fought with each other.

Globally, research studying collaboration and competition dynamics in civil wars falls under three main categories:

a- Conflicts Among Heterogeneous Groups: Rivalry between distinct social, ethnic, or religious groups could extend into armed

conflict. This is especially the case when higher authorities fail to govern or to implement an abiding social contract.[13] Consequently, conflicts are more likely to happen when the level of conflict of interests increases.[14] Examples: The civil war between the Christians and Muslims in Syria and Lebanon, the Ugandan civil war, and the Lebanese civil war.

b- Alliances Between Homogeneous Groups: Groups of common ethnic, religious, and social affiliation have a natural tendency to form loosely binding coalitions capable of overcoming a mutual enemy. These coalitions are, however, vulnerable, and are subject to dissolution when the first opportunity to form a smaller but stronger coalition emerges.[15] Examples: The Islamic Front, the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front, and militants in Afghanistan.

c- Conflicts Among Homogeneous Groups: Conflicts break out between similar components of an ethnic group due to the almost total symmetry in sources of legitimacy and power. This hence forces opposing leaders to seek hegemony rather than adhering to a fragile and temporary coalition.[16] Examples: Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani in Iraq.

This paper will concentrate on the latter, and will attempt to shed light on conflict among mainstream opposition groups, so this would exclude the Kurdish-dominated Democratic Union Party (PYD), since it has very distinct ethnic attributes, as well as ISIS, since it has a very distinct set of resources.

2. Perceptions Of Opportunities And Threats

Syrian faction leaders are well aware of their inability to defeat the regime on their own, yet all their attempts to form coalitions or to unify have ultimately failed. More alarmingly, their strained relationships are leading to

increasing amounts of conflict. Three main sources of conflicts can be identified in the case of the Syrian uprising:

1- Chaos: The absence of centralized authorities and a lack of mutual trust encourage competing factions to depend on their respective military power to protect themselves, rather than relying on a defense pact or a cooperative framework.

2- Different Organizational Objectives: Although mainstream opposition groups adhere to common objectives, mainly overthrowing Assad and establishing a new government in Syria, they still have very different organizational goals (i.e. how, when, and who should govern what and where in Syria).

3- Scarce Common Resources: Competition over available resources (human and financial) automatically turns into a conflict of interests, which in its turn escalates into armed conflict with the increasing scarcity of these resources.

A fraternal conflict occurs when a group faces "windows of opportunity" or "windows of vulnerability." A window of opportunity appears when a group is in a position of military superiority over another group and their common enemy does not pose an immediate and serious threat. Whereas a window of vulnerability appears when a group faces the clear prospect of dissolution

Costantino Pischedda, a civil war dynamics expert at the University of Miami,[17] argues that a fraternal conflict occurs when a group faces "windows of opportunity" or "windows of vulnerability." A window of opportunity appears when a group is in a position of military superiority over another group and their common enemy does not pose an immediate and serious threat. Whereas

a window of vulnerability appears when a group faces the clear prospect of dissolution.

Accordingly, a faction's decision to initiate an attack against a direct rival depends on:
1- Its own assessment of the outcome of the conflict
2- Its own assessment of the cost of the conflict
The following table shows the motives of the initiator:

		Benefit		
		Seizing resources	Eliminating threats	NULL
Cost	High	No conflict	Betting	No conflict
	Low	Hegemony	Hegemony	No conflict

The following sections delve further into the costs and benefits of infighting as perceived by the initiators, it is however important to note the difficulty of assessing motives such as fear or greed, and therefore the paper adopts the following terminology and definitions throughout the rest of the study:

■ A conflict / infighting incident: an incident in which military actions took place over an extended period.

■ Hegemony: a military action with the objective of seizing the opponent's resources.

■ Future threat: a threat resulting from the growing power of an opponent and the increasing probability of clashes in the future.

■ Existential threat: a threat resulting from the increased hostility of an opponent at a specific time that may destroy or severely weaken the entire faction.

"Safety First" Logic
In addition to expected benefits, the identification of an opportunity or an imminent threat is not a strong enough motive on its own to initiate an attack against a competitor. It is rather the initiator's assessment of the conflict cost that plays

a decisive factor in the decision-making process. A faction may initiate an attack even if it lacks the best conditions just to avoid higher costs at a later stage.

A faction will continue to suspect a competitor's bad intentions even in the case of a longstanding collaboration agreement. This is mainly due to the anarchy that rules the liberated areas. Ultimately, local factions do not believe in the ability of their established Sharia courts to resolve inter-factional disputes, and their neutrality and independence is constantly in question.

The absence of effective, independent, and reliable accountability leads to a "safety first" logic. Precautions are more reliable than fragile, unguaranteed, tactical, and temporary cooperation. Indeed, eliminating a manageable threat is a proactive action that can avert other potential attacks in future.

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Easy Employment
Syrian armed opposition groups enjoy the support of an identical social base, and share influence over the same geographical territory; hence they compete over: 1. the hearts of the same people, and 2. the exploitation of local resources. Similarly, this overlap also reduces the cost of acquiring of a competitor's sources of legitimacy and wealth. On a human resources level, for example, incidents[18] have revealed a tendency within defeated fighters to join victorious parties.

This competition over resources does not necessarily presuppose a clash to seize them, but like the fear of a future threat, it is induced

by the nature of the governing relationship between the armed opposition groups. There are two specific dynamics that feed a factional perception of an organizational threat[19]:

1- The easy infiltration of a competitor, as factions recruit from a common human resource pool.
2- The difficulty of managing militants' personal disputes and preventing them from escalating into an organizational clash.

The first dynamic is hard to acclimatize to, and it is mainly the result of factionalism within homogeneous ethnic groups. Reducing the impact of the second dynamic is on the other hand possible if effective administrative regulations are implemented.

Factionalism and Identity

It is futile to try to study the Syrian uprising and its political dimension while ignoring the social angle. The violent nature and long duration of the war has helped in the formation of subsidiary identities that in their turn further fuel the conflict. Indeed, local identities are predominant in Syria, and an individual first belongs to his kin, then to his town or city, or his ethnic or religious group, and finally to his country. Factionalism in its turn has added a supplementary identity. It is important to note that identity and group affiliations are not strong enough motives for the initiation of a fight among different groups alone, but are on the other hand, often used in mobilization and hence justification, acquiring local legitimacy.

All Islamic ideologies encourage unity, but they differ in their interpretation and legitimate means of achieving it. While Al-Qaeda-affiliated factions adopt the domination principle "Taghalob تغلب", other factions have adopted principles of consultation, altruism, and participation. Consequently, factions that are ideologically close to Al-Qaeda have a stronger appetite for

infighting in comparison with their Islamic counterparts.

3. Statistical Study

This study investigates the most significant infighting incidents that have occurred within Syrian armed opposition groups. The groups we have examined are the Free Syrian Army brigades, Islamist factions, Jaysh Al Islam, and Ahrar al-Sham. These factions share a common territory and thus compete for the same local and human resources. ISIS (after 2014[1]), and the Democratic Union Party (PYD) have been excluded from this analysis, the former for its transnational nature as well as its distinct area of control and influence, and the latter for its distinct social base. It is important to notice that even though Al Nusra Front (Fateh Al Sham Front) is not part of the mainstream opposition, it has been included in this study for its capacity to recruit from the same human resources pool as the opposition. Likewise, secret ISIS affiliates have also been included in the study as they operate in the same region in which the mainstream opposition fights. In this statistical study, data has been collected on clashes that have mobilized either one or more of these parties between January 2012 and January 2017. However, limited or individual disputes have not been taken into consideration.

1-The mainstream opposition have openly and collectively recognized ISIS as an alien force, ending prior tolerated coexistence

Study Terms

Term	Definition
The time range of the study	From 1 January 2012 to 1 January 2017
Sample size	40 infighting incidents
Resources	Factional resources including human resources, checkpoints, military bases, materiel, tunnels, farms, and border crossings.
Cost	The repercussions of fighting on the initiator, quantifiable (troops and munition), and reputation-wise (negative impacts on popularity, relations with other factions and regional and international powers).
Benefit	The initiator's expected benefits to ending the fighting in the initiator's favor.
Disappearance	The end of the military presence of a faction.
Collapse	A military faction retreating before the opponent.
Fusion	A faction joining another faction for protection or surrender.
Advance	A military faction advancing on the opponent.
Free Syrian Army	A group of military factions that have agreed to receive support from the MOC and MOM operations rooms.
Islamic military factions	Islamic-armed opposition factions, including the Islamic Front or the Islamic Liberation Front. Jaysh al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham were classified within a separate category due to their large relative size, their cohesion, their organizational structures, and their adopted policies.
ISIS affiliates	A group of factions whose leaders have pledged allegiance to ISIS without organizationally joining it.
Initiator	The faction that initiates the fighting.
Defender	The faction that is attacked.
Intervention	Mediation or external intervention to resolve a conflict.
Mediation	The process of resolving a conflict between the factions involved.
Mediator	A body or a faction that is not involved in the conflict and which intervenes to resolve the conflict.
Liberated areas	The areas under control of the opposition.
Calm front	A joint front with a mutual external opponent where no widespread clashes have recently taken place.
Active front	A joint front with a mutual external opponent at which clashes take place.
Siege	A siege laid by a mutual opponent within a geographically defined area, not necessarily one with clashes already taking place.
Truce	A ceasefire agreement with a mutual opponent in a geographically defined area.

Incidents of Fighting Studied

The following table demonstrates 34 documented incidents of infighting, the areas of infighting, the initiator, and the defender.

Date	Initiator	Defender	Governorate
July 11, 2013	ISIS	Alez Bin Abdulsalam Brigade	Latakia
August 14, 2013	ISIS	Ahfad Arrasoul Brigade	Raqqa
September 13, 2013	ISIS	Farouq Brigade	Raqqa
November 9, 2013	Alhijra Ilallah Brigade	ISIS	Latakia
March 23, 2014	Al Nusra Front	FSA west and center fronts command ship	Latakia
April 1, 2014	Jaysh Al-Islam	Ajnad al-Sham Islamic Union	Damascus Countryside
August 14, 2014	Al Nusra Front	Syrian Revolutionaries Front	Idlib
September 20, 2014	Jaysh Al-Islam	Jaysh Al Umma	Damascus Countryside
October 27, 2014	Syrian Revolutionaries Front	Al Nusra Front	Idlib
November 29, 2014	Al Nusra Front	Khalid Ibn Al Walid Brigade	Homs
December 15, 2014	Al Nusra Front	Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade	Daraa
December 30, 2014	Sham al-Rasul Brigade	Al Nusra Front	Damascus Countryside
January 27, 2015	Ansar al-Sahel Battalion	Ahfad Saladin Battalion	Latakia
January 29, 2015	Al Nusra Front	Hazzm Movement	Aleppo
April 4, 2015	Al Nusra Front	Southern Front / Soqur al-Janub Alliance	Daraa
May 1, 2015	Al Nusra Front	Jaysh al-Jihad	Quneitra
August 2, 2015	Al Nusra Front	Division 30	Aleppo
November 3, 2015	Al Nusra Front	Al Bayada Martyrs	Homs
December 1, 2015	Jaysh al-Islam	Jaysh Tahrir al-Sham	Damascus Countryside
January 1, 2016	Jaysh Ahrar al-Ashayer - Jaysh al-Yarmouk	Islamic Muthanna Movement	Daraa
January 11, 2016	Al Nusra Front	Syrian Revolutionaries Front	Quneitra
March 11, 2016	Al Nusra Front	Division 13	Idlib
April 28, 2016	Al Rahman Legion	Al Rahman Legion	Damascus Countryside
May 19, 2016	Al Nusra Front	Islamic Muthanna Movement	Quneitra
June 7, 2016	Jaysh Tahrir al-Sham	Al Qadisiya Brigade	Damascus Countryside
June 25, 2016	Jaysh al-Yarmouk	Tawheed al-Janub Brigade	Daraa
June 30, 2016	Inkhil Military Council	Ahl al-Sunnah Battalion	Daraa
July 3, 2016	Al Nusra Front	Jaysh Tahrir al-Sham	Idlib
July 9, 2016	Jaysh al-Yarmouk	Shabab al-Sunnah Division	Daraa
October 6, 2016	Jund al-Aqsa	Ahrar al-Sham	Idlib
November 2, 2016	Al Nusra Front - Abu Amara Battallions – Al Zenki Movement	Fastaqim Kama Umirt Union	Aleppo
November 14, 2016	Ahrar al-Sham	Levant Front	Aleppo
December 3, 2016	Al Nusra Front	Jaysh al-Islam - Sham Legion	Aleppo
December 28, 2016	Al Nusra Front	First Brigade	Damascus

Methodology

■ The data were collected from analyzing statements and press communiques issued by the conflicting entities as well as those of mediators, in addition to interviewing the leaders and members of the groups involved.

■ Groups with Islamic characteristics were classified under "Islamic military factions" due to their common approach in forming alliances and with regards to their relations with other national factions.

■ Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam were categorized separately due to their large size, special status within armed opposition groups, and the distinctive international community approach in dealing with them and their leaders.

■ The type and reasons of the fighting were defined by identifying the initiator motives.

■ The motive of hegemony was identified when the following conditions were met:

1- Relatively high benefit to seizing the defender's resources (equipment, bases, tunnels, checkpoints, and border crossings)

2- The defender's relative weakness in comparison to the initiator and the relatively low cost of fighting to the initiator.

3- Prior media mobilization and justifications for attacking the defender.

■ The motive of eliminating an existential threat was identified when the following conditions were met:

1- The relative growing power of the defender and a high cost of confrontation.

2- The relative receding power of the initiator in comparison to the defender.

3- The existence of shared resources between the defender and the initiator accompanied with an imbalance of control in the defender's favor.

4- Increased indicators of hostilities initiated by the defender (hostile actions by members, raiding checkpoints, stopping the weapons or military convoys of the initiators).

5- Internal mobilization within the initiators' ranks and the justification of a probable attack on the defender as an advanced defense tactic.

6- The failure of previous mediation attempts over trivial disputes between the two factions.

■ The motive of eliminating a future threat was identified when the following conditions were met:

1- Defender predisposition to internally mobilize against the initiator especially at the ideological level.

2- Growing and regular international support reaching the defender.

3- The regression of the initiator's relations with the international community and states supporting the defender.

4- Rising competition between the two factions for popularity and legitimacy.

5- Prior media mobilization and a justification for attacking the defender on the basis of suspected collaboration with either the regime, ISIS, or the International Coalition.

6- The defender refraining from or evading cooperation with the initiator.

■ The type of fighting and justifications were defined according to indicators and direct results.

4. Results

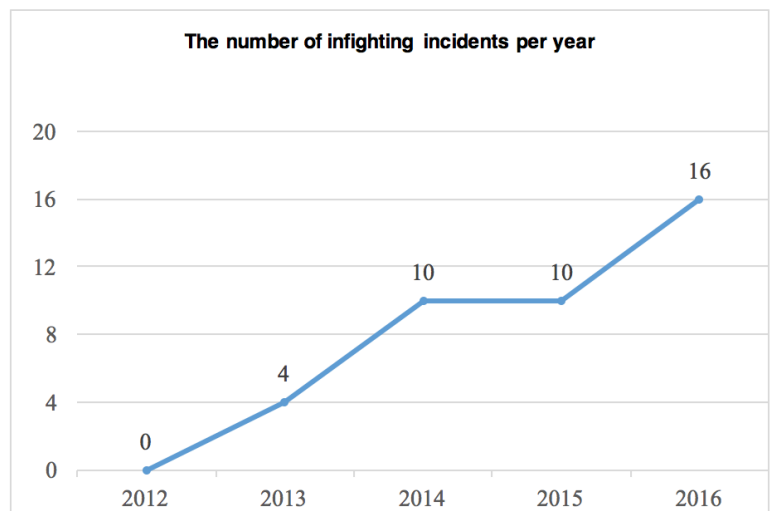#### *Timeline and geographic distribution*

Figure 1

Figure 1 shows a timeline indicating the number of infighting incidents per year: logically the number increases as the conflict endures and its complexity increases. This growth is attributed to the following reasons:

1- Thinning financial support,
2- Increased foreign intervention,
3- Popular discontent and pressure resulting from gains made by Syrian regime forces.

Finance-driven reasons are reflected in the results found in Figure 2, which show a significant increase in infighting incidents motivated by the initiator's attempts to seize the defender's resources.

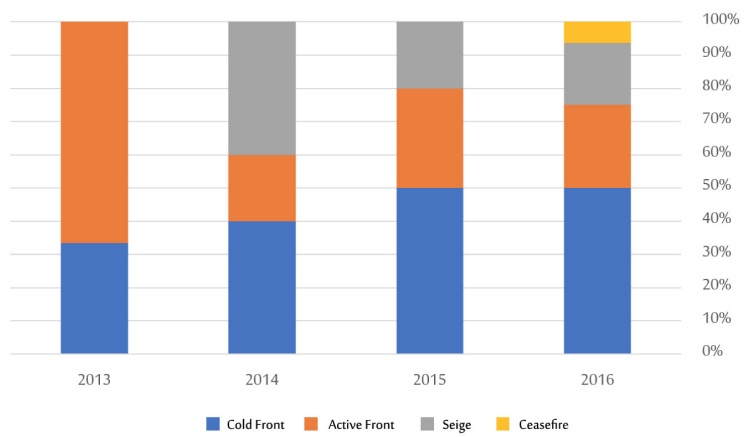### Level of external threat during fights per year

Figure 3

Figure 3, shows the impact of external threats on infighting. A bigger appetite for infighting has been observed when the threat of ISIS or the Syrian regime is on the retreat.

Initiator's Motives Per Year

Figure 2

Figure 2 shows the motives for initiating a fight with a competitor: the results demonstrate a net increase in fights motived by hegemony. An attacker seeks hegemony in order to gain control over his opponent's resources. Indeed, this increase is reflected within the escalation of intra-rebel violence for scarcer resources, as their finances are degraded by the prolonged struggle.
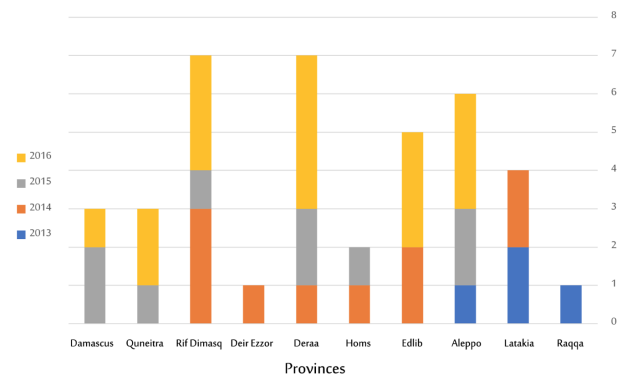
Fights per year and province

Figure 4

Figure 4 confirms the previous finding, showing where and when infighting incidents have occurred. Across the last five years, provinces spared by regime forces or ISIS have witnessed an increase in infighting among opposition groups. Deraa and Edlib validate this observation. In both cases, the number of infighting incidents peaked in 2016 during which opposition groups and the regime rarely fought.
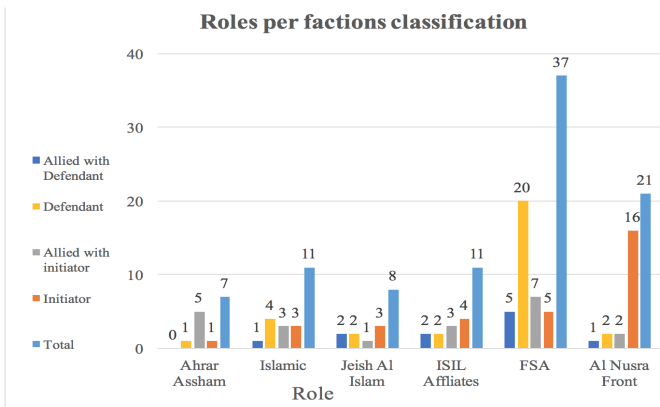
Who is the most aggressive?

Figure 5

Figure 5 shows the number of conflicts between the different competing factions based on the role they played. FSA factions ranked first in 37 incidents, 20 of which as a direct defender and only five as an initiator. The Al Nusra Front, on the other hand, is the most violent, initiating 16 incidents. As for the least violent party, Ahrar al-Sham is the group which has initiated the least number of incidents, mostly only sending reinforcements to its local allies.
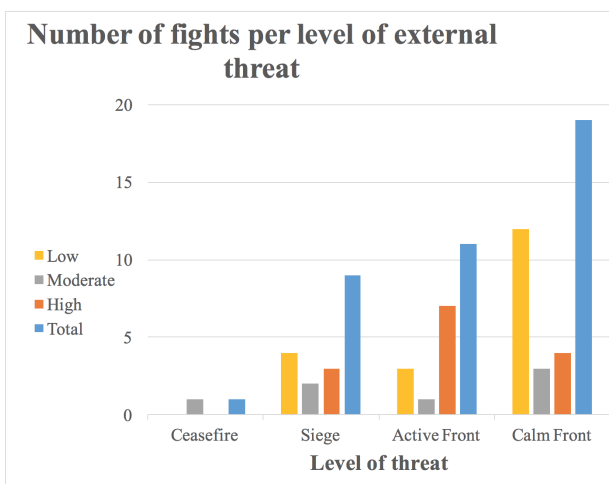
Dealing with external threats

Figure 6

Figure 6 presents the total number of conflicts in relation to the state of fronts with external common enemies (the regime

and ISIS). Results show that intra-rebel violence escalated near calmer fronts with lower threats. This confirms a tendency for a faction to initiate a fight with a competitor when the external threat level is low.

Data gathered on incidents near active fronts reveals a higher number of fights when the threat level is higher rather than lower, as in the case of fights near calmer fronts. In order to explain this differing behavior, Figure 7 investigates the motives behind fights in respect to the state of the fronts.
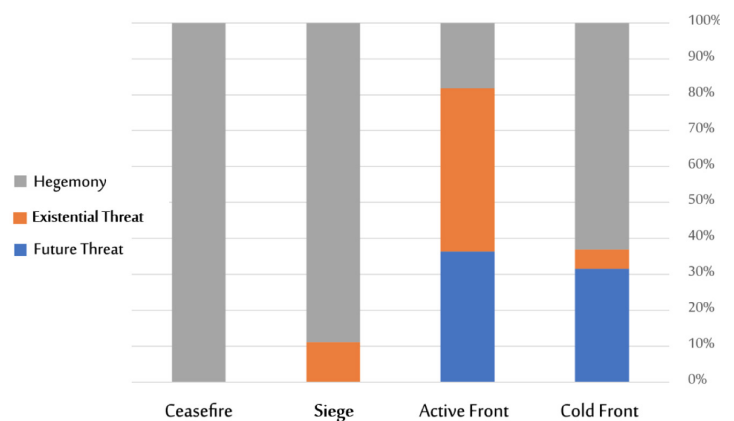

Figure 7

Figure 7 shows an increase in hegemony bids near calmer fronts, ceasefires and sieges. Sieges and ceasefires motivate faction leaders to seek hegemony, taking advantage of interruptions in fighting the regime to consolidate their control of common resources. This behavior is rational, demands planning and premeditation, and is most likely to appear in more stable environments.

Near active fronts, however, data shows that eliminating existential and future threats motivated 80 percent of incidents of infighting. Looming external threats trigger survival instincts in faction leaders, and if they suspect the defection of their competitors, they favor quick confrontation and protecting their backs rather than

relying on fragile and volatile cooperation. This observation explains the Al Nusra Front attack on the FSA brigades during the Battle of Aleppo.[20] The former acted to protect its interests in seizing its competitors' weapons to better preserve itself in the final days of the battle.

On the other hand, public figures and local imams' recurrent interventions reflect the local character of these disputes (over resources), but also clearly reveal the local dimension of the opposition factions, and hence their sensitivity to local social dynamics.
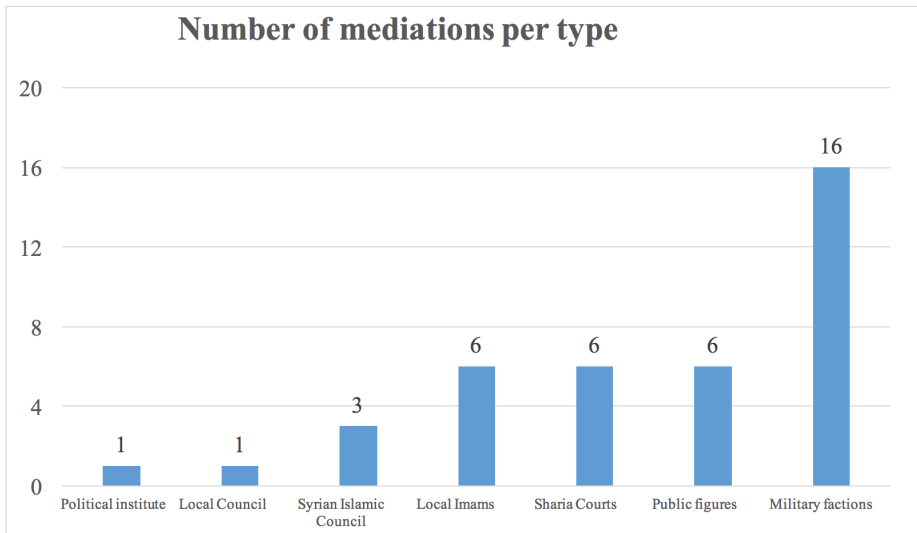
Mediations

Figure 8

Figure 8 shows the number of times mediators intervened; opposition factions ranked first, while civil organizations such as the Syrian National Coalition, local councils, and Islamic scholars' councils were the least involved.

The dependence of military factions on their counterparts in resolving their disputes is logical, but the conflict of interests that may result raises doubts about the sustainability and efficiency of these mediations over the long term.

Sharia courts are in most cases established by Islamic armed opposition groups, who delegate loyal judges to these courts upon their creation.[21] The reliance on Islamic groups is hence normal, since these courts are naturally inclined to give judgments favorable to their patrons.
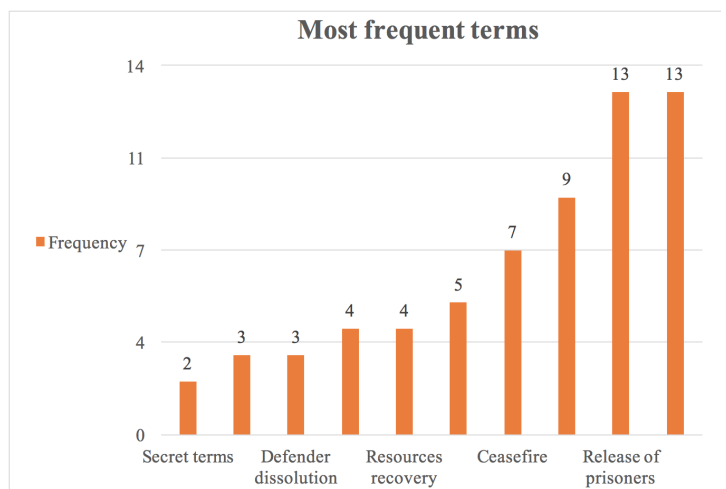

Figure 9

Figure 9 shows the most common negotiated terms in mediation agreements, whereas Figure 10 shows how they are classified. Hence, the following observations can be made:
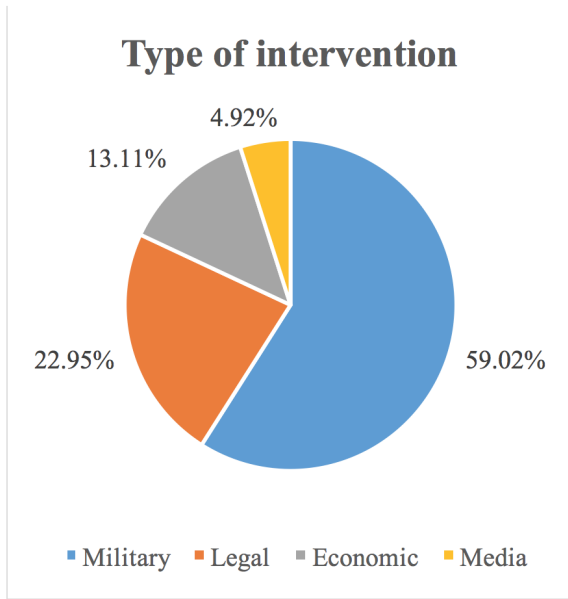
Type of intervention

- 59.02% Military
- 22.95% Legal
- 13.11% Economic
- 4.92% Media

■ Military ■ Legal ■ Economic ■ Media

Figure 10

Reasons

- 57% Hegemony
- 25% Future Threat
- 18% Existential Threat

■ Hegemony ■ Future Threat
■ Existential Threat

Figure 11

1- Terms of a military nature (redeployment, prisoner release, or the dissolution of one of the parties) are the most frequent terms.
2- Terms of an economic nature (the return of weapons/bases/checkpoints or neutralizing resources) are negotiated only once every six times.

Figure 11 shows the most probable motives for initiating a fight, and it reveals that hegemony bids with the objective of seizing resources are the most common motivation behind infighting incidents.
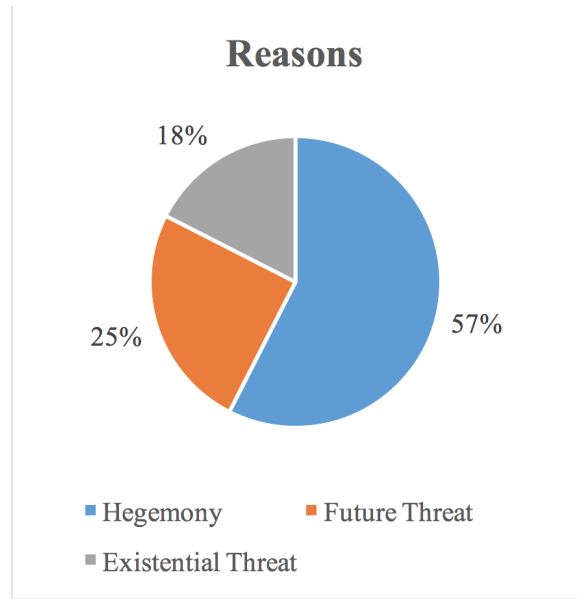
To determine the efficiency of these mediations, Figure 12 shows the types of mediation vs. the most probable motive. Logically, the military and legal dissolution interventions lead the list of conflict resolution actions motivated by military threats (future and existential threats). Nonetheless, economic interventions, which are expected to lead the list of conflicts resolution actions driven by hegemony bids, is ranked third, only occurring in 14 percent of cases. The failure to produce adequate solutions for the original motive (in the case of hegemony bids, resource sharing agreements) results in unreliable, temporary peace resolutions.
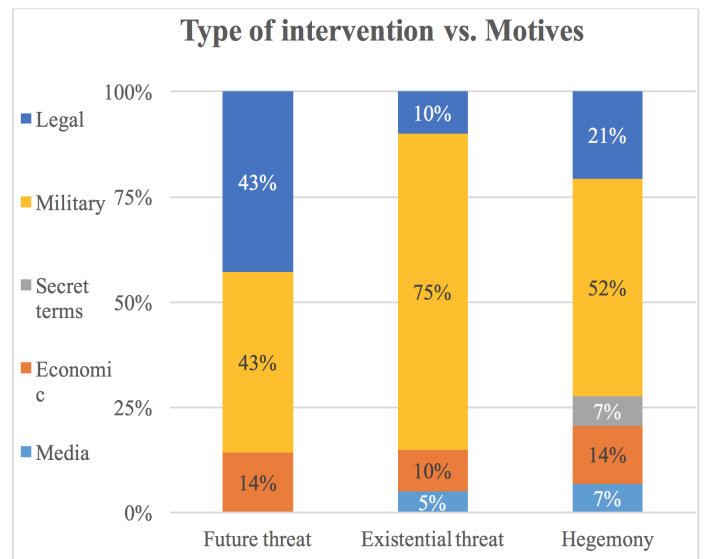
Type of intervention vs. Motives

■ Legal
■ Military
■ Secret terms
■ Economic
■ Media

	Future threat	Existential threat	Hegemony
Legal	43%	10%	21%
Military	43%	75%	52%
Secret terms			7%
Economic	14%	10%	14%
Media		5%	7%

Figure 12

Defender reaction vs. initiator acceptance of mediation

■ Defender acceptance
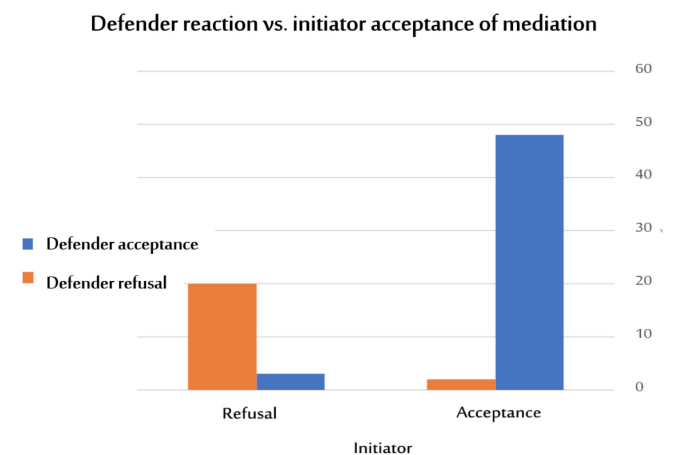■ Defender refusal

(Initiator — Refusal, Acceptance)

Figure 13

As for cooperation with mediation by the factions, Figures 13 and 14 reveal the following tendencies:

1- The initiator's reaction considerably dictates the defender's attitude.

2- A general tendency to accept the mediation across both parties.

3- A general tendency to accept the mediation while the initiator is advancing. This behavior can be attributed to the defender's interest in not losing more resources, along with the initiator's interest of keeping its gains.

4- A general tendency to refuse mediation while the initiator is losing. This can be explained by the initiator's desire to regain what it has lost.

5- A general tendency to accept mediation by the initiator when close to complete loss, while the acceptance rate of the defender does not exceed half.

Figure 15 shows publicly declared justifications against possible motives. Affiliation to ISIS leads the list of justifications. The modus operandum of ISIS and the secrecy that surrounds it makes difficult to refute such an accusation and allows the initiator to claim legitimacy in fighting the defender under the pretense of fighting terrorism. On the other hand, the accusation of "Allegiance to the West" was less frequently used as a justification, since the west is not socially perceived as a threat to the uprising. The following observations can be drawn:

1- Fighting corruption is frequently used to justify hegemony bids.

2- Acquisition of resources, i.e. confronting a faction that has earlier seized the resources of the attacker, is the most genuine expression of the initiator's objectives.
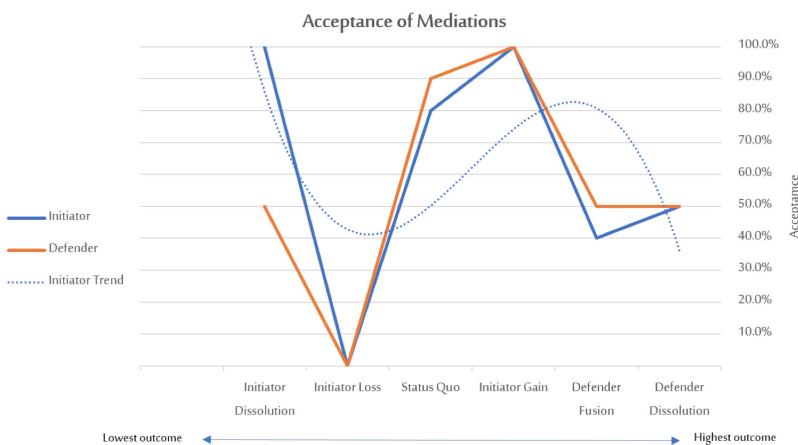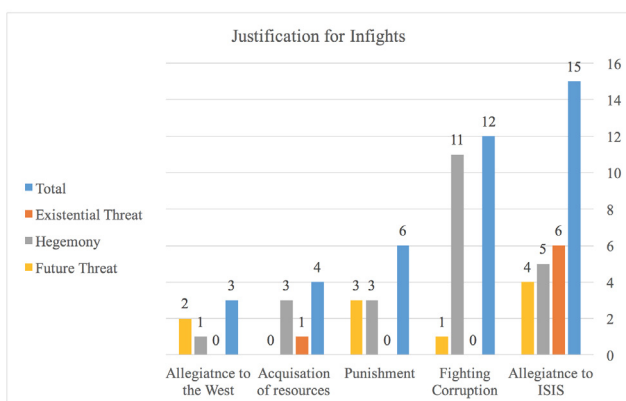

Figure 14

Justifying War

Figure 15

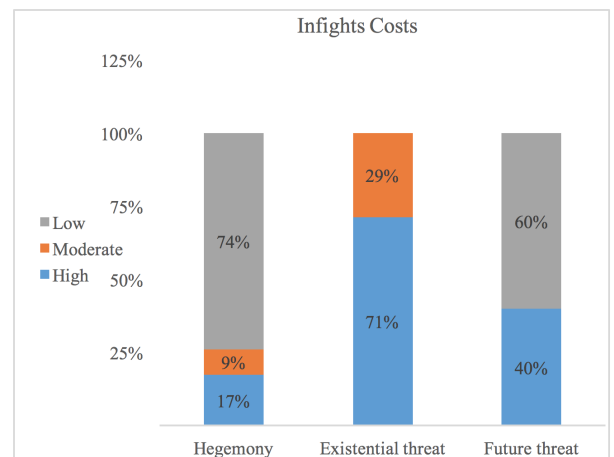### *Costs and Benefits*

Figure 16

Figure 16 shows the cost of infighting to an initiator, and here the following observations can be made:

1- The cost of initiating a fight is low in most of the hegemony bid cases, whereas it increases in the cases of an existential threat. This observation confirms the urgency behind an initiator's motivation to attack when its existence is challenged even if the defender is stronger.

2- The cost of initiating a fight is low in most future threats cases. This observation confirms the rational behavior of faction leaders, and their awareness of existing competition with other factions. It also reveals the calculating nature of their attacks. Indeed, factions with a higher tendency to attack opponents and treat them as a probable future threat have a higher "life expectancy".
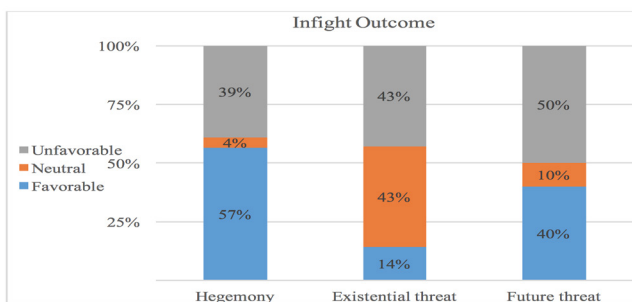

Figure 17

Figure 17 shows the outcome of infighting to an initiator, and the data reveals a favorable outcome for calculated attacks (40 percent for future threats, and 57 percent for hegemony bids) in comparison to urgent attacks (14 percent for existential threats). Unfavorable outcomes in cases of calculated attacks (50 percent for future threats, and 50 percent for hegemony bids) can be explained by poor assessment of the defender's strength.

4. Conclusion

The strength of a mutual enemy—the Syrian regime and its allies—should supposedly create a high level of cooperation between armed opposition groups, yet data confirms the presence the infighting phenomenon despite regime advances and massive opposition losses over the last two years. This study has adopted a theory identifying conflicts of interest among armed opposition groups as a source of fraternal infighting. It has revealed that regionalism, ideological and intellectual differences are all tools of mobilization that can be employed in reducing the cost of the conflict and increasing its benefit, but are not the primary sources of

conflict.

Faction leaders are rational actors motivated by their perceptions of opportunities and threats, and their assessment of costs and benefits dictate when, how, and where they will attack their rivals. As stated in the aforementioned argument,[22] a fraternal conflict occurs when a group faces either "windows of opportunity" or "windows of vulnerability." A window of opportunity appears when a group is in a position of military superiority over another group, and their common enemy does not pose an immediate and serious threat. A window of vulnerability arises when a group faces the clear prospect of dissolution.

This paper has identified three types of infighting: hegemony bids—military actions with the objective of seizing the opponent's resources; future threats—threats resulting from the growing power of an opponent and the increasing probability of clashes in the future; and existential threats—threats resulting from the increased hostility of an opponent at a specific time that may destroy or severely weaken the entire faction.

Regionalism, ideological and intellectual differences are all tools of mobilization that can be employed in reducing the cost of the conflict and increasing its benefit, but are not the primary sources of conflict

The rest of this paper has analyzed 40 cases of fraternal infighting from January 2012 to January 2017, measuring the impact of time, the available resources, and the level of external threats on the motives behind initiating conflict and the successes of mediating efforts.

Empirical data has confirmed the rational behavior of faction leaders in their decision-making processes for initiating attacks against

direct rivals. The paper has demonstrated how conflicts of interests trump other differences to motivate attacks as follows:

1- As the conflict has advanced, resources have become scarcer and the motivation for seizing rivals' weapons and sources of income has increased.

2- The number of fraternal infighting incidents increased when the threat levels from ISIS and the Syrian regime were at their lowest. Provinces spared by regime forces or ISIS witnessed an increase in infighting among opposition groups.

3- Ceasefires and long sieges witnessed the highest number of incidents, both motivated by seeking hegemony over an area, and out of survival instincts in extreme harsh conditions, meaning that factions under these conditions are more susceptible to fighting each other.

4- Factions with a higher level of internal cohesion and a better understanding of factional dynamics initiated a higher number of attacks. Al Nusra Front initiated 16 out 40 incidents, while the FSA was the defender in most incidents.

5- Third-party armed opposition groups are the actors that intervene the most in mediation between two fighting rivals. The conflict of interests that arises from their interventions cast a shadow of a doubt on their capacity to maintain peace.

6- Most mediation efforts in hegemony bids failed to address the problem of managing shared resources. This failure in its turn resulted in unmaintainable peace resolutions, since it failed to resolve the original cause of conflict.

7- The tendency to accept meditation is higher when the initiator accepts, and when neither

of the parties has succeeded in eliminating its rival.

8- "Affiliation to ISIS" has been used as a justification to attack a rival more often than "Allegiance to the West", thus revealing the broader opposition's sensitivity towards the demands of the international community.

9- The cost and outcome of initiating an attack is at its lowest levels when the attacked is calculated and the sense of urgency is low.

It is difficult to intervene in opportunity- and threat-formation dynamics; however, it is possible to intervene in minimizing the benefit of fighting and maximizing its cost. Such measures could include maintaining a power balance between factions; concentrating efforts against the Syrian regime and other common enemies; reinforcing the independence of courts in opposition-held areas or forming an independently-funded settlement court with binding force recognized by all factions

It is difficult to intervene in opportunity- and threat-formation dynamics; however, it is possible to intervene in minimizing the benefit of fighting and maximizing its cost. Such measures could include maintaining a power balance between factions; concentrating efforts against the Syrian regime and other common enemies; reinforcing the independence of courts in opposition-held areas or forming an independently-funded settlement court with binding force recognized by all factions.

Nevertheless, it is important to notice that such measures or others can only postpone eventual clashes that will erupt over resources and legitimacy sooner or later between competing factions. It is also crucially important to observe similar factionalism dynamics within regime loyalist forces. Even

though loyalists recognize the legitimacy of the regime for the time being, it is extremely important to monitor their behavior in a period of peace when their perception of fighting a common threat has decreased.

A successful disarmament, demobilization and reintegration campaign necessitates understanding the dynamics of factionalism to be able to identify probable sources of conflicts, their history, and their origins

Finally, a successful disarmament, demobilization and reintegration campaign necessitates understanding the dynamics of factionalism to be able to identify probable sources of conflicts, their history, and their origins. Such intimate knowledge will enable experts to better treat focal points of resistance and learn how to efficiently counter them.

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ABOUT ALSHARQ FORUM

The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. The Forum does this through promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue, social justice, and public-spirited research.

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Infighting Among The Syrian Opposition

This paper aims to understand the infighting dynamics within rebel factions during the Syrian conflict, to underline their inherent causes, and to identify patterns in these dynamics. This paper relies on empirical data from 40 infighting incidents between 2012–2017 to explain the phenomenon. It assumes that faction leaders are rational actors motivated by their perception of opportunities and threats, and that their assessment of costs and benefits dictate when, how, and where they will attack their rivals.

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