

Third Party Intervention and Ongoing Civil Wars in Syria

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According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), there have been over 200 civil wars since 1946, roughly half of these counting as major conflicts in which more than 1,000 deaths have occurred (e.g., recent conflicts in Mali, Syria, Yemen). Of the major conflicts, nearly 20% involved another country – a third party - intervening in the civil war to fight on behalf of either the government or rebels. Third parties complicate the dynamics of the conflict, as they help fan grievances, shift capacity, and alter demands at the bargaining table. Two types of countries tend to intervene into ongoing civil wars. First, nearby countries that are directly affected by the conflict may intervene as a way to help control the externalities they face from the war. Concern for ethnic kin, refugee inflows, decreased trade, and limited access to natural resources are all common reasons neighboring countries intervene. For instance, in Africa's Great Lakes region, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda have all intervened in each other's conflicts for a mix of these reasons. Second, major or regional powers, such as the United States or Russia, may intervene to solidify their interests in the dispute. For example, during the Cold War, the Soviet Union intervened to support the communist regime in Afghanistan, while the United States joined the conflict in Vietnam to support the anti-communist government. More recently, France intervened in Mali to support its former colony, while Saudi Arabia has joined the Yemen conflict to pursue its regional interests.

Despite interest in the outcome of a conflict, though, third parties rarely enter an ongoing war. Recall that a minority of civil wars experience intervention. Part of the reason for this hesitation is that third parties find it extremely difficult to achieve their desired outcome in the conflict. Some research reveals that this is especially true for pro-government interveners. The reason for this pattern is that pro-government third parties tend to intervene “when it counts”—that is, when the government is facing a strong rebel group, is failing, and needs significant help to maintain power. In these situations, both the incumbent regime and its third party ally find defeating a strong and resolved opposition force quite difficult. The U.S.'s inability to push back the Viet Cong in Vietnam and the Soviet failure in propping up the fledgling communist regime in Afghanistan are two oft cited examples of such struggles.

However, two ongoing civil wars in Syria appear to defy this trend. The first is the coalition war against the Islamic State (IS)—also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). IS started as an al Qaeda splinter group (al Qaeda in Iraq) in 2004. Relying on oil sales, extortion, ransom, smuggling and taxation, it captured and controlled more than 34,000 square miles in Syria and Iraq by 2014—including major cities like Falluja, Mosul, Raqqa, and Tikrit—making the caliphate larger than several countries, such as Austria, the Czech Republic, and Ireland. Inside these borders, the Islamic State held over 3,500 slaves, engaged in mass executions, and committed genocidal acts against minority groups, such as the Yazidi. Humanitarian concern, mixed with fears for the stability of the region and volatile oil prices led to significant international efforts against IS, including the participation of dozens of countries in varying capacities. By the end of 2018, IS retained only 1% of its captured territory and had been fully removed from Iraq. With the United States now

preparing to withdraw its troops from the fight, Syria has okayed Iraqi forces to attack the final IS strongholds inside the Syrian border.

The second conflict is the ongoing war between the Syrian government and several insurgent groups, such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), formed in 2011 as part of the Arab Spring. Alongside the FSA, several smaller insurgent groups formed to overthrow the Assad regime and pursue their own agendas. By 2014, the Syrian rebels controlled major cities like Aleppo in the north and Daraa in the south, and had strongholds outside the capital, Damascus. Throughout the conflict, though, the rebels remained unable to connect their strongholds throughout the country, despite U.S. backing. In 2015, Russia intervened in the conflict to support the government. Soon, the tide of the conflict changed, as Russian-backed Assad was able to retake the south of the country in 2017 and force the rebels from Damascus in 2018. Russia's presence helped Assad push the opposition groups into the province of Idlib. Since then, Russia has worked with Turkey (who backs some of the rebels) to establish a ceasefire and a demilitarized zone in the province in hopes of evacuating the 3 million civilians in the area and disarming the remaining 70,000 rebels. However, prospects of avoiding a final battle remain dim, as many jihadist groups in the area have rejected the notion of any deal that would appear to be a surrender. If such a battle occurs, though, the chances that the remaining rebels will be able to outgun the government appear low.

These conflicts, while not fully resolved, raise questions about our understanding of third party intervention and government success during civil war. Why do these cases defy the trend? It does not seem to be about the third parties involved, as the United States and Russia have both failed in counterinsurgency operations before. It also does not appear to be a Middle East trend, as the Saudi-backed Yemen regime continues to struggle against the Houthi rebels nearby. One possibility is that we are beginning to realize a trend started with the end of the Cold War. When the Cold War ended, many opposition groups lost funding from their foreign backers. Without foreign arms, support, and sanctuary, these groups are unlikely to be strong enough to defeat a government or gain serious concessions from the regime. However, few past rebel groups were able to amass the strength IS possessed at its peak. Furthermore, such an explanation largely focuses on weaker rebels, which are the ones third parties are least likely to intervene against. Another explanation might center on the unusual bedfellows who united to oust the Islamic State and who are now negotiating around Idlib. For example, local tribes, Kurdish militias, and the Iraqi government each worked together to defeat a common enemy. It is important to note, though, that these ties are tenuous and are already beginning to crack, as the Kurds and Iraq battled over Kirkuk, and Turkey has already begun to refocus its attention on driving the Kurds out of territory they captured during the civil wars in Syria. How strong these ties remain, especially as the United States begins to withdraw from Syria, will be of great importance to how peaceful a post-conflict Syria can be.

Overall, third party intervention is fraught with difficulty and often fails. These recent cases defy this trend. Are these simply blips on the trend or something more? How these conflicts resolve may provide important lessons for observers on how and when intervention may be successful.