Grievances in Civil War Participation: Micro-Level Evidence from Syria

Vera Mironova

Harvard University

Sam Whitt

High Point University

Loubna Mrie

Independent Researcher

Abstract

Recent macro-level studies have revived interest in grievance-based explanations of civil war participation. Using original survey data from the ongoing conflict in Syria, we try to understand at the micro-level whether fighters, civilians, and refugees can be distinguished based on intensity of personal, social sectarian, and regime-based grievances. Using a well-balanced sample of over 300 active rebel fighters, civilians from within the conflict zone, and externally displaced refugees, we observe that insurgents tend to have strongest regime-based grievances. In contrast, refugees and civilians are less revenge-seeking and more willing to support negotiations for peace and reconcile with regime supporters. Our results speak to the role of grievances in sustaining violence in civil war and to the challenges of securing peace. At the micro-level, grievances appear relevant to understanding not only mobilization for violence, but also conflict duration, the likelihood of negotiated settlements, and prospects for reconciliation.

Introduction

How important are grievances to understanding human behavior in civil war? For much of the past decade, a great deal of research has tended to discount grievance-based explanations for the onset, duration, and outcome of civil war, focusing instead on conditions favoring the formation of insurgency, (Fearon and Laitin 2003, Collier and Hoeffler 2004), state capacity and structural conditions of the economy (Karl and Sobek 2004; Collier et al. 2004), technologies of rebellion (Kalyvas and Balcells 2010), or the number of actors in the bargaining process (D. Cunningham 2006, K. Cunningham 2013). Recent research, however, has revitalized attention to grievances using more refined measures of political exclusion and ethnic inequality at the group-level (Wucherpfennig et. al. 2012; Cederman et. al. 2011, 2013; Buhaug et. al. 2014; Denny and Walter 2014). Out study looks for micro-level validation of grievances in civil war. Using survey evidence from inside the civil war in Syria, we seek to understand the role that grievances might play in differentiating among combatants, non-combatants, and refugees in a conflict and how grievances could impact civil war duration and outcome.

The remainder of our study is outlined as follows. First, we provide an overview of the literature on civil war, highlighting work on grievances. Next, we offer hypotheses on individual-level grievances in civil war. We then discuss the appropriateness of our case selection, outline our research design and empirical strategy, summarize our data collection efforts, and present

results. We conclude with discussion of how our micro-level findings inform the existing literature on civil war participation.

Grievances and Civil War Participation

To what extent do grievances help distinguish combatants from non-combatant civilians and refugees in civil war? Little is known about whether refugees and civilians share common grievances with combatants in civil war. Most work on refugees in conflict highlight exposure to and threat of violence and economic means and opportunity as important predictors of refugee flight (Davenport, Moore, and Poe 2003; Moore and Shellman 2004, 2006, 2007; Adhikari 2013). However, some research suggests that war-related grievances may travel with refugee movement either internally or abroad, such that refugees can encourage the diffusion and expansion of conflict (Salehyan and Gleditsch 2006). For civilians who remain in conflict zones, little is known for why some decide to take up arms while others do not, and what role grievances play in the process. Some micro-level studies suggests that combatants and non-combatants can be distinguished by intensity of grievances. Based on retrospective surveys of rebel factions in Sierra Leone's civil war, Humphreys and Weinstein (2008) find that people with strong grievances are more vulnerable to political manipulation and more likely to engage in violence. Examining non-traditional fighters, including Hezbollah fighters and suicide bombers, Krueger and Maleckova (2003) also find that the decision to fight is a function of long-standing grievances and frustrations. Arjona and Kalyvas (2008) also observe that both political grievances and economic deprivation drove mobilization for violence in Colombia.

Other studies, however, emphasize the blurring of lines between civilians and combatants. In particular, Kalyvas (2006) underscores the challenges of identifying combatant from non-combatant in civil conflict. Wood (2003) has also posited complex in-group ties between rebels and civilians in conflict that breaks down the usual combatant/civilian dichotomy. For example, Parkinson (2013) has shown how women played an important support role for rebel fighters during the civil war in Lebanon, challenging conventional notions of what it means to be a combatant during wartime. Combatants often rely on active civilian affiliates to make what they do on the frontlines possible. If grievances are shared by a broader fighting community (fighters, civilians, and even refugees), they may be less helpful for understanding role differentiation in civil war.

We also ask how important are grievances to understanding micro-level preferences regarding duration and outcome. A well-established literature points to the challenges of ending civil war through negotiated settlements (Licklider 1995; Walter 1997). Recent macro-level research underscores how a priori grievances bolster in-group solidarity and out-group aversion in conflict, undermining group willingness to bargain for peace (Wucherpfennig et. al. 2012). Other research shows how the accumulation of grievances through extreme levels of victimization during conflict further undermines prospects for good faith bargaining (Wood and Kathman 2014). However, there has been little effort to address sources of grievance at the micro-level as conflict is still ongoing and prospects for peace are uncertain.

In this study, we focus on grievances as a possible sorting mechanism for civil war participation.[1] Our study offers evidence for whether grievances impact individuals' willingness to join combatant groups and pursue military strategies for victory over bargaining for peace and reconciling with adversaries. To unpack grievance motivations, we will draw distinctions between personal, collective-social, and political-regime based components.

Hypotheses

Personal grievances could provide a powerful rationale for joining rebel groups, increase one's willingness to incur costs of fighting, and forgo bargaining for peace. Of course, personal grievances in civil war can take many forms and may be directed at any number of different targets (Kalyvas 2006).[2] We consider how grievances based on victimization could drive people to join insurgencies. On one hand, the loss of individual family members, close friends, the destruction of one's home and property, and personal injury at the hands of a brutal regime could be a powerful source of grievance. However, victimization could also place undue burdens on individuals preventing them from fighting and possibly compelling them to flee to a safer environment. We believe it may be useful to distinguish between direct forms of personal

---

[1] By participation, we mean a willingness to join combatant groups and otherwise support combatant efforts.

[2] Kalyvas (2006) shows how inter-personal grievances can be masked by loftier, idealistic intentions for fighting, which could explain the often observed phenomenon of neighbor-against-neighbor violence in civil war. People take opportunities during violence to settle scores.

victimization (such as severe injury or the destruction of one's home) and more indirect victimization through the death and injury of family and friends. Direct forms of victimization could prevent individuals from acting out their grievances through fighting, because they are not physically able to do so due to severe injury or, in the event their home is destroyed, they must focus on providing for now-displaced families. Given assumptions of both shortages in access to health care and housing in conflict zones, we predict that direct victimization is more likely to induce refugee flight than mobilization for violence. In contrast, indirect victimization, through the death and injury of family and friends, provides a strong grievance-based rationale for fighting and fewer constraints. We hypothesize the following:

H1 (*Direct Victimization*) Severe injury/property destruction decreases the likelihood of civil war participation.

H2 (*Indirect Victimization*) The loss of family/friends increases the likelihood of civil war participation.

In the absence of identifiable personal grievances, we also consider how individuals may mobilize for violence in response to collective grievances held by in-groups against rival out-groups. Petersen (2002), in particular, has emphasized how shared in-group/out-group fears, hatreds, and resentments can be an important precipitant of violence. To the extent that a civil war can be accurately characterized by ethnic, sectarian or other meaningful in-group out-group cleavages, we anticipate that parochial individuals would be driven to join insurgencies, continue fighting, and refuse to bargain for peace, while those with less in-group ties and out-group aversions would be more likely to flee from an ethnic or sectarian war that they neither support nor identify with. We test the following hypotheses:

H3 (*In-group Ties*) In-group solidarity increases the likelihood of civil war participation.

H4 (*Out-group Aversion*) Out-group aversion increases the likelihood of civil war participation.

Finally, we contemplate the role of grievances against a governing regime. We ask whether there are political-regime based grievances that are distinct from personal grievances or collective in-group/out-group divisions. We consider three dimensions to regime-based grievances – intense vilification of a political regime, a strong preference to vanquish the regime through military victory rather than negotiate for peace, and a desire to seek vengeance against regime loyalists for perceived crimes of the past.

On vilification, we ask whether rebel fighters naturally hold the most intense aversions to the regime they are fighting against. Humphreys and Weinstein (2008) among others reason that people who harbor political grievances against a regime would be most willing to join rebel insurgencies. Refugees, in contrast, may be fleeing civil war for lack of motivation to fight against a regime they do not necessarily oppose or for rebel causes they do not support. However, if civilians and rebel fighters are functioning as one large fighting community, then differences in regime opposition could be negligible between them (Wood 2003). We test the following hypothesis:

H5 (*Vilification of the Regime*) Aversion to a governing regime and its supporters increases the likelihood of civil war participation.

Next, we consider how grievances may affect civil war duration and outcome. First, we examine intensity of support for regime change. To what extent are people willing to endure the costs of fighting to remove the regime from power, or are they amenable to bargaining with regime supporters for peace? Humphreys and Weinstein (2008) suggest that rebel fighters would

be less favorable to negotiating with the regime than their civilian or refugee counterparts, preferring to fight until military victory, no matter the costs. Furthermore, if refugees are fleeing conflict for a lack of regime-based grievances, then they may be the most open to negotiating settlements to bring the war to an end. Again, Wood (2003) and Kalyvas (2006) provide a rationale for negligible differences due to the transformation of civilians and combatants into a broader fighting community. We hypothesize the following:

H6 (*Fight until Victory*): Civil war participation increases willingness to incur costs to achieve military victory.

H7 (*Bargain for Peace*): Civil war participation decreases support for negotiated settlements for peace.

As a final dimension to regime-based grievances, we inquire whether civil war participants are ultimately revenge-seeking or whether they are willing to reconcile with former adversaries in the interests of peace. As a proxy for revenge motives, we ask individuals whether they would be willing to grant amnesty to members of an opposing regime – i.e. forgo justice in the interests of peace. On one hand, if fighters are revenge-seeking, they should be opposed to any amnesty for regime loyalists. If refugees merely want the war to end so they may return to their homes, they could be the most willing to support amnesty as part of a negotiated settlement. On the other, revenge-seeking preferences could be shared by all groups, especially when the regime is indifferent to fighter-civilian distinctions on the battlefield and everyone is effectively treated as an enemy target. We test the following hypothesis about revenge-seeking.

H8 (*Hold Accountable*): Civil war participation decreases willingness to grant amnesty to opposing forces for war-related violence, crimes, and atrocities.

In summary, we seek to understand how decision-making during conflict is affected by different sources of grievance, using novel data from an important case of violence at a critical moment when war is still ongoing, people are still actively deciding what to do, and outcomes are uncertain. Our hypotheses address not only grievance motives for joining insurgencies, but also illustrate how grievances may affect conflict duration and outcome.

Grievances and the Syrian Civil War

To test hypotheses about grievances in civil war, we conduct our research in war-torn Syria. In March 2011, in the wake of the Arab Spring, violence in Syria broke out in response to a revolutionary movement to oust President Bashar al-Assad from power.[3] When the Assad regime responded to protesters with a brutal military crackdown, opposition groups organized an armed insurgency, and the Syrian civil war was underway. For much of the first two years of the war, rebel groups, loosely organized under the umbrella of "the Free Syrian Army", fought against forces loyal to the Assad regime for control of key towns and supply routes. However, neither side was able to achieve a decisive military victory on the battlefield. In desperation, the Assad regime turned to increasingly brutal methods to route insurgents, including indiscriminate bombing of rebel-controlled towns and villages and the use of chemical weapons. While the United States threatened military intervention, it opted instead to provide economic aid and military training to rebel groups, while Assad pledged to dismantle his chemical weapons

---

[3] The opposition was often characterized as peaceful, secular, and democratic at the beginning of the revolution but this depiction is now more contested.

arsenals and take part in a series of peace talks with rebels. Despite these commitments, the war raged on. It was in this environment that our study began in August 2013.

Since our field work in Syria was completed, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) has become increasingly fragmented, and new groups with stronger Islamist orientations have emerged to challenge both the FSA and the Assad regime for control of Syria. At present, there are now multiple insurgent groups, including the Al Qaeda backed Al-Nusra Front, the Iraqi-led Islamic State, moderate Syrian Islamist groups like Ahrar al-Sham, and the degraded FSA, which are fighting both against the Assad regime and one another. In the meantime, nearly 200,000 people have been killed in the conflict and millions more have been displaced internally and abroad since the war began three years ago.

We argue that Syria is an appropriate case to test grievance-based theories of violence. Given the purported goals of the initial Syrian revolution – removing the Assad regime from power – the origins of the subsequent armed insurgency clearly speaks to grievance-based motivations. In addition, the Syrian case enables us to test collective social-sectarian grievances. In our research, we examine individual grievances in communities of well-defined in-groups (Syrian Sunni Muslims) inside rebel controlled territory and refugee camps abroad who fled those same communities. Sectarian divisions are often presumed to exist between Sunni Muslims and the Alawite minority, with Sunni Muslims supporting the insurgency and Alawites supporting Assad. If deep-seated sectarian grievances are fueling the conflict, then the Assad regime merely represents a proxy for underlying grievances against Alawites.[4] By testing

---

[4] Some scholars, however, contend that this is an oversimplification of complex divisions in Syrian society and dispute that the current conflict is sectarian in nature. See Seale (1986) and

hypotheses of regime-based grievances against collective social-sectarian grievances, we can tease out whether regime opposition or sectarian hatreds are driving people to fight.

Finally, with the war now in its third year, we can assess the toll of victimization. Importantly, the perpetrators of violence against subjects in our study are external to the local community. Victimization was a result of aerial bombardment, shelling, and sniper attacks by forces loyal to the Assad regime. At the time of our study, subjects in our sample did not face the immediate problems of neighbor-against-neighbor or otherwise intra-group violence described by Kalyvas (2006). Since our data collection was finalized, however, Sunni-on-Sunni violence has increased as various rebel factions battle one another in formerly uncontested areas. Our study was conducted in a unique window where rebel groups were still aligned against the Assad regime, and victimization of Sunni Muslims was almost exclusively regime-based. In addition, victimization in our sample is so widespread that we can capture meaningful between-group differences even with small samples. In an environment of near indiscriminate violence, everyone in rebel controlled territory, whether they supported the insurgency or not, was a potential target for attack by the Assad regime, making Syria an appropriate case for evaluating victimization-based grievances.

Rationale for Fieldwork

Heydemann (1999) for historical background and Pierret (2013); Hashemi and Postel (2013) for analysis of the conflict.

11

Examining individual preferences and motivations in the midst of conflict is a novel approach. Most evidence about insurgency violence is post-hoc, relying on retrospective interviews and surveys to understand determinants of participation in civil war or refugee flight. On one hand, retrospective studies conducted over an extended period of time could allow for greater clarity of motivations, especially if people feel pressure not to reveal their true intentions either during or in the immediate aftermath of conflict (Kalyvas 2006). Time removed from violence could potentially lessen constraints and prohibitions on speaking openly and honestly. However, research on the psychology of memory also suggests that retrospective studies may be prone to "moral rationalizations" where conflict outcomes alter one's perceptions of prior motives and beliefs (Tsang 2002). Numerous studies have shown, for example, that information and experiences after an event can influence how people recall the event and color emotional memories (Bartlett, 1932; Loftus 1992; Levine 1997; Safer et. al. 2002).[5] Collective memory, i.e. ''the representation of the past embodied in both historical evidence and commemorative symbolism'' (Schwartz 2000, p.8) could also bias the recall of critical decisions and events (Harris et. al. 2008). The timing and location of our study helps us understand how people make decisions and interpret those decisions when outcomes are still unknown.

In addition, when retrospective studies are conducted in the aftermath of an especially protracted, brutal civil war, there is obvious selection bias on survivors, and we do not know how people who survive differ from those who do not. If fighters and civilians in combat zones are disproportionately killed, then many critical actors in the conflict would be non-randomly

---

[5] Safer et. al. (2001) and Levin et. al. (2001) show that recalled emotions about a tragic event are better correlated with current feelings of grief that with an actual grief reported at the time of event. Safer et. al. (2002) show that recalled emotions are biased by information acquired later.

selected out of those studies. We attempt to overcome the retrospective selection bias problem by surveying people as conflict is still ongoing and survival is still highly uncertain.

To survey combatants, civilians, and refugees under conditions of high intensity violence is extremely challenging.[6] It is difficult to gain access to sub-populations of interest due to dangerous and uncertain conditions in the field. While previous studies (ex. Humphreys and Weinstein 2008) have conducted retrospective surveys and interviews with both ex-combatants and noncombatants, we attempt to capture a broader range of subgroups to active and former rebel fighters, fighters from different groups, civilians in combat zones and refugees in camps. Our multi-group approach allows us to compare marginal differences between civilians, combatants, refugees at a time when they are still determining their respective roles in the conflict.[7]

Research Design

[6] In addition, our study takes place in the absence of any coordinated international peacekeeping intervention in the field. Conducting research under the security umbrella of peacekeeping forces would be much safer than what we have attempted to do, but then we are no longer studying decision-making under active conflict, but rather under third-party enforcement and monitoring, which is known to significantly alter individual and group level decision-making and behavior in the field (Doyle and Sambanis 2000; Fortna 2004).

[7] To better distinguish between initial motives as opposed to post hoc rationalizations, we can compare individuals, for example, who have only recently joined rebel groups to those who have been fighting for an extended period and refugees who are just arriving in camps to those who have been displaced for extended periods of time.

Our research employs a multi-method approach consisting of survey, experiments, and in-depth interviews. For ecological validity, we conduct our study in multiple locations and among various sub-populations of interest to include civilians, rebel fighters, and refugees. We focus here on results from our survey.

Our survey instrument is wide-ranging, encompassing a number of themes. It begins with an emotional battery, followed by demographics, rebel group participation, refugee status, and then attitudinal questions about perceptions of safety and security, general outlook for the future, ethnicity, religiosity, social identity and inter-group relations. We then introduce questions specifically about the Syrian conflict including views of different combatant groups, the peace process, international interventions, and Syria's future to include preferences for democracy and post-war reconciliation. We conclude the survey with questions about victimization by violence, displacement, and property damage.

After the survey, additional data were collected on respondents' safety and comfort levels with the location of the interview and the questions asked by the interviewer. We also included similar items for the interviewer about safety and comfort levels while conducting each interview. As an incentive to participate, subjects were paid approximately $5 for their time, as the study generally took between 45 minutes to an hour to complete. All interviews were conducted by one of the authors, face-to-face, in Arabic, with assurances of privacy and confidentiality in what both the subject and interviewer deemed to be a safe location.

Sampling and Data Collection

Sampling and data collection were major challenges for this project due to potential risks posed to our interviewer as well as subjects inside Syria. Minimizing risk to our participants was the utmost priority. Because we are targeting difficult to reach subpopulations in a dangerous environment with unknown population parameters, we utilize cluster sampling methods to better target sub-populations of interest.[8] We identify two regions inside rebel contested areas of Syria for data collection. First, we sampled in and around Aleppo, Syria's second largest city, which has experienced intense, ongoing violence between rebel forces and the Assad regime. As a comparison point, we also sample in and around the city of Idlib, which was generally considered a safer area for rebel forces and civilians at the time of our research than Aleppo.

For recruitment of civilians, we avoid random route sampling due to inherent uncertainties and dangers of movement from street to street. We also refrain from door-to-door sampling to protect our interviewer. Instead, we identify areas of the city, locations where civilians are congregated in public. These clusters are our initial sampling point. Interviews are conducted with no more than five respondents per cluster and no more than two clusters for a

---

[8] Interviewing rebel fighters and civilians in a combat zone potentially exposes both the enumerator and subjects to risk. We devised a cluster sampling method, which would minimize potential risks to all our study participants relative to the risks they assume by remaining inside an active combat zone. Cluster sampling enabled us to include a random element to the sample selection process while taking into account the safety and security of our participants. Finally, consistent with ethnographic approaches to in-depth interviewing and field research methods, we believe that surveying active rebel fighters and civilians in combat requires the enumerator to gain trust and acceptance within the community before they are willing to grant permission/consent to be interviewed. This design received IRB approval.

given street or neighborhood. We limit our interviews to 1 person per household or extended family. If multiple family members are able and willing to participate, we select one family member at random. Each interview was conducted in an open, public location for safety concerns, but the interviewer kept a distance from crowds to ensure privacy, and did not permit others to listen in on the interview once in progress. We entrusted our enumerator to use discretion when deciding where to conduct interviews.

To access refugee flight motivations in civil war, we survey a sample of refugees from a UNHCR run refugee camp in Kilis, Turkey, which is just across the border from Syria and a primary destination for refugees fleeing the Aleppo and Idlib regions. Inside the camp, the interviewer followed a random route, interviewing no more than 1 per household and no more than five subjects on a given street or pathway.

For interviews with rebel fighters, we sample from two predominant groups – rebels fighting with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Islamists with various groups including the Islamic Front/Ahrar ash-Sham and Al-Nusra Front. We identify locations where rebel fighters are currently positioned based on local knowledge. Interviews of FSA rebels are conducted in both Aleppo and Idlib regions. Interviews with Islamists are only in the Idlib area.[9] Although we conducted extensive qualitative interviews with people on all levels of the chain of command, we limited our survey to only rank-and-file FSA and Islamist fighters, not officers or unit leaders. For a given unit or cluster of FSA or Islamist rebels, we interviewed no more than five soldiers per cluster or unit. We also interviewed former-FSA fighters who have since stopped fighting

---

[9] Permission to conduct surveys with FSA rebel fighters was granted by their superiors and by an informal "Islamic court" for interviews with Islamist fighters.

and now reside in Turkey to capture the behavior of those who join and, for various reasons, have exited the conflict.[10]

Because of safety and security concerns as well as practical challenges of conducting field research, we collected data incrementally from August 2013 till May 2014 in a series of month-long waves. Our response rate was over 80% in each location among those contacted for an interview, which we believe is due in part to financial incentives to participate in the study. Even rebel fighters had periods of rest during the conflict and were eager to express their views. In total 305 subjects took part in the study as indicated in Table 1 below. We note that our samples are remarkably well-balanced across gender, age, education, and whether the subject was employed before the war began (a proxy for pre-war income/savings). Nevertheless, we include extended controls for demographics in our subsequent analysis.[11]

Table 1 about here

Empirical Strategy

---

[10] We will highlight and discuss differences between active and former rebel fighters in more detail in a subsequent manuscript.

[11] We also used covariate matching techniques (propensity score matching, coarsened exact matching) for robustness checks for possible selection on observables in our data.

We begin by examining a range of grievance instruments in our survey data. We use regression models to examine revealed differences in grievances across groups in our sample. For example, if fighters claim to be joining rebel groups out of desire for revenge, to what extent do they exhibit out-group aversions that are markedly greater than civilians or refugees? Our reasoning is that indirect measures of preferences are less susceptible to social desirability biases or other contaminating effects. Indirect measures of preferences and motivations also provide an important robustness check on what people claim as their goals, motivations, and intentions.

To test hypotheses on the role of grievances in determining how people select into different roles in civil wars (combatants, noncombatants, refugees), we turn to binary and multinomial logit models which predict the probability of choosing or being assigned to different roles based on observable characteristics of individuals in our sample. Our key outcome or dependent variables of interest is a discrete variable (Y_{ij}) denoting whether individual (*i*) is a member of group (*j*). In the binary logit versions of the model, our comparison groups consist of a simple "fighter" model (combatants vs. non-combatants) and then a "refugee" model (refugees vs. non-refugees). In the multinomial logit model, we expand the group outcomes to include the five broader subgroup categories (FSA fighters, Islamists, ex- FSA fighters, civilians, refugees). Our key explanatory variable (Γ_{ij}) consists of different attitudinal measures of grievances, while X_{ij} is a vector of controls for covariates such as gender, age, and education.

$$Y_{ij} = \beta_0 + \beta_1\Gamma_{ij} + \beta_2X_{ij} + \varepsilon_{ij}$$

Of course, all our primary variables of interest are observational in nature, so any causal claims about how and why individuals take on different roles in conflict are subject to identification problems due to endogeneity, selection, and sorting effects. We apply extended controls (X_{ij}) based on gender, age, education, and prior employment (a proxy for income) to help deal with potential sorting effects and selection on observables. We also employ locational/temporal fixed effects and covariate matching as robustness checks.[12]

Finally, because individuals are already in their respective roles at the time of our study (fighters, refugees, civilians), it is difficult to distinguish between a priori motivations from socialization effects after the fact. However, we can control for time in group. For example, we know how long individuals have been fighting with various rebel groups or how long they have been living as refugees abroad. By comparing seasoned fighters to new recruits, we can estimate the strength of socialization effects over time. This helps us assess whether, for example, rebels enter into a conflict with a long list of grievances or whether they simply acquire those grievances over time as a consequence of fighting.

<div align="center">Analysis</div>

Sources of Personal Grievance

We evaluate individual-level grievance motivations based on a range of victimization indicators (H1). In Table 2 below, we present the average marginal effects from logit models of

---

[12] There may also be potential unobservable differences. To deal with selection on unobservables, we can also follow Altonji et. al. (2005) by considering how strong an omitted variable would need to be to explain away the effects of our covariate of interest and observable controls.

self-reported victimization.[13] First, we begin with direct victimization in the form of personal injury and property destruction (H1). Over half our sample report experiencing personal injury and nearly one-third of our sample report some form of property destruction. In Table 2 we find that differences in personal injury experiences are not significant across groups. However, one possibility is that we are selecting on only people with minor injuries, as those with more serious injuries remain in hospitals or lack the capacity to conduct interviews. We find more support for H1 when assessing differences in property destruction. People inside the combat zone (FSA, Islamists, and civilians) are less likely to have suffered property damage and destruction than those who are displaced in Turkey (civilian refugees and ex-fighters). Rather than joining the fight, people who lose their homes and business are more likely to flee abroad.

Next, we examine the possible effects of victimization by loss of individual family members and close friends (H2). Over two-thirds of our sample report that family members and close friends have been injured, killed, or are missing since the war began. Islamists, in particular, are more likely to have experienced victimization of family and friends compared to others. Of course, people who remain in combat zones could experience more victimization, so it is an effect of the decision to remain in a combat zone rather than a cause. However, we do not find that time serving with rebel groups is a significant predictor of victimization.[14] With the possible exception of Islamists, individual grievances resulting from victimization does not help us distinguish between FSA rebels, civilians, and refugees, who experience comparable losses of family and friends. Hence, we find only partial support for H1 and H2.

---

[13] Full logit model specifications are available in an online supplementary appendix.

[14] Correlation coefficients on the effects of time are available in an online supplementary appendix.

Sources of Social Sectarian Grievance

We now turn to questions of collective grievances based on sectarianism. We hypothesized that individuals with stronger ties to their religious in-group (H3) and greater out-group aversions (H4) are more likely to stay and fight. In Table 2 below, we first consider in-group sectarian ties (H3). Using social distance as another proxy for sectarianism, we ask about how close people feel to other Sunni Muslims in Syria. Over half our sample indicate that they feel "very close" to Sunni Muslims, while less than 1% feel "not close at all". Examining subgroup variation, we find that Islamists have strong ties to other members of their religious in-group; 75% feel "very close" to other Sunni Muslims in Syria. However, differences among FSA rebels, ex-FSA, civilians and refugees are less clear. Therefore, we only find support for H3 with respect to Islamist fighters.

We then examine out-group aversions (H4), focusing on the Alawite minority, who are often characterized as supporters of the Assad regime. We ask subjects how close they feel to Alawites in Syria. In contrast to Sunni Muslims, less than 3% feel "very close" to Alawites in Syria, while over half (56%) feel "not close at all". Examining the models in Table 2, civilians feel closest to Alawites among the subgroups. Islamist fighters are more intensely sectarian than others; 94% feel "not close at all" to Alawites. FSA fighters, however, are not distinctively out-group averse, so H4 appears valid mainly for Islamist fighters.

Finally, in a supplementary appendix, we consider inter-correlation between personal and sectarian grievances, and find that personal injury, home destruction, and the death of friends and

family are not correlated with increased sectarian grievances. Only a weak correlation between the death of friends and in-group ties is observed. Also, there is no relationship between closeness to Sunni and Alawites, suggesting that in-group bonds and out-group aversion are capturing different aspects of collective grievances. Ties to Sunni do not predict distance toward Alawites. In-group ties and out-group grievances also do not increase with time in-group, suggesting that parochialism is not simply a consequence of socialization effects after joining rebel groups.

In summary, while there are clear sectarian divisions between how Sunni Muslims view and treat one another compared to Alawites, these distinctions are not sufficient to understand why everyone chooses to fight. Strongest support for H3 and H4 is found among the behavior of Islamists, suggesting that those with sectarian grievances differentiate between rebel groups. FSA fighters are no more parochial either in terms of in-group bonding or out-group aversion than non-combatant civilians and refugees.

Sources of Political Grievance

We now examine the extent to which different groups vilify the Assad regime and their supporters (H5). First, when we ask all combatants to indicate why they joined the insurgency, two main reasons given were "because Assad must be defeated" and "to take revenge against Assad's forces", suggesting that strong regime-based grievances are driving them to fight.[15]

---

[15] We discuss stated-rationales for joining rebel groups in further detail in the supplementary appendix.

Here, we assess whether such grievances are born out in comparison to non-combatants and whether stated political grievances might actually mask underlying sectarian and personal grievances at work.

First, we inquire whether respondents draw distinctions between Alawites in general and the Assad regime using measures of social distance as proxies for vilification. We ask subjects how close they feel to supporters of the Assad regime compared to Alawites and find that while most (80%) do not feel close to Assad supporters, fewer (57%) feel the same about Alawites. We then compare views of Assad loyalists across groups in our sample (Table 2). We find that Islamists are most socially distant to supporters of the Assad regime, while other groups are not clearly distinguished from one another. In addition, vilification of the Assad regime does not intensify with time spent fighting inside a rebel group, suggesting that regime-based grievances are not simply a socialization effect. Hence, H5 is best supported by the attitudes of Islamist fighters, but all groups are more distant toward Assad loyalists than of Alawites in general, such that political-regime based grievances appear deeper than sectarian divides in Syria.

If grievances are primarily directed at the Assad regime, we also anticipate that rebel fighters will be far more committed to military victory and less willing to negotiate for peace with Assad's forces compared to civilians and refugees (H6). In Table 2 we find that rebel fighters are much more likely than civilians to agree that the Assad regime should be defeated no matter the costs. Conversely, civilians and refugees are more likely to support an immediate ceasefire to negotiate for peace. Overall, there is strong support for H6.

We also find that rebel fighters are also less willing to trade justice for peace (H7). We ask whether they think everyone in the Assad regime should be held accountable for war crimes or only the top leadership. In support of H7, rebel fighters are far more committed to holding

everyone linked to the Assad regime accountable for crimes committed during the war. Refugees and civilians are more willing to support a general amnesty in the interests of peace, undercutting the notion that they are as heavily aggrieved as rebel fighters. We find strong support for H7.

Finally, we consider inter-correlation between political and other grievances in the supplementary appendix. First, most items are not inter-correlated suggesting that political, sectarian, and personal variables are capturing different aspects of grievance. At the personal level, we note that those who are injured feel more distant toward Assad supporters and are less willing to support negotiations with the Assad regime. People whose family members have been killed are less willing to support amnesty. In contrast, people who have lost their homes to the conflict are more eager to bargain for peace, despite aversion to the regime. At the collective level, people who feel closer to Sunni are more supportive of prolonging the conflict until victory can be secured, while those who are less distance toward Alawites are more favorable of negotiations. Finally, people who feel closer to Assad supporters are also more supportive of peace negotiations and more willing to grant amnesty to members of the regime.

Our results here are generally robust to alternate specifications and models. Also, when we control for how long fighters have been actively fighting, how long refugees have been living in camps, and how long civilians have been living in their current locations, we find the effects of time are negligible or not significant for fighters and civilians. This helps reduce concerns that our observations of political grievances are primarily endogenous to socialization effects of fighting, staying, and leaving - mere rationalizations after the fact. Socialization effects may be more prevalent in refugees with increasing time spent in camps, such as increased feelings of group solidarity. See the supplementary appendix for further details.

Table 2 about here

In summary, political and regime grievances highlight salient differences between combatants and non-combatants, civilians and refugees. In the case of Syria, rebel fighters report that they join for the sake of regime change, while civilians and refugees are less inspired by these goals and do not join. Furthermore, civilians and refugees are willing to consider negotiated settlements for peace that may include amnesty and reconciliation with opposition groups, something that rebels are far less willing to do. Overall, we find evidence that political and regime grievances matter in distinguishing those who participate in civil war from those who does not.

Discussion and Conclusion

In conclusion, our research provides a unique glimpse into possible sorting mechanisms that are taking place between committed fighters, civilians and refugees in the midst of civil conflict. We observe mixed motivations and preferences in different subpopulations of civil war participants (rebel groups, civilians, refugees). People are fighting, leaving, and staying for myriad, complex reasons, but grievances play an important role in distinguishing combatants and non-combatants in our sample. Our research advances the theoretical literature on conflict participation by unpacking the concept of grievances into different composite forms (personal, collective, regime-based). Based on unprecedented access to empirical data from an intense,

ongoing conflict, we find that not all grievances are equivalent predictors of who joins rebel insurgencies.

First, political-regime based grievances matter. We find evidence of strong sorting on political, regime-based grievances between combatants/non-combatants in our sample. While rebel fighters, civilians, and refugees are united in their vilification of a brutal, authoritarian regime, rebel fighters are much less willing to negotiate for peace than civilians or refugees, wanting nothing less than victory and vengeance. Our results speak to work by Humphreys and Weinstein (2008), Lyall (2009); Lyall et. al (2013) regarding how regime-based violence can fuel insurgencies within a civilian population. In real time, our research shows how people respond to regime-driven violence by mobilizing for rebellion. In contrast, other forms of social sectarian and personalized forms of grievance are less predictive of role differentiation in civil war. Here, our results support work by Kalyvas (2006) and Wood (2003) on the blurring of lines between combatants and non-combatants.

We also develop insights by disaggregating victimization-based grievances. We find that the loss of family and friends is an especially powerful grievance motive for fighting. However, other forms of victimization, such as the destruction of housing, are more likely to induce people to take flight. By specifying how different forms of state repression may affect incentives for refugee flight, our findings help inform observations from research at the macro-level (ex. Davenport et. al. 2003; Moore and Shellman 2007).

Regarding collective grievances, we find strong sectarian divisions in our sample. Consistent with Petersen (2002), individuals exhibit hyper-polarized views of in-groups vs. out-groups. However, because sectarian divisions permeate the group, they are not clearly predictive of who fights and who does not. On one hand, this finding supports work by Fair et. al. (2010)

that intense religiosity and sectarianism are not exclusive to fighters. However, we also observe that Islamist fighters are significantly more sectarian than comparable FSA fighters, suggesting that collective grievances could be important for selection into rebel groups with different purported goals.

Finally, our research offers an important new baseline for evaluating the development of grievances during and after violence. In retrospective studies, it is unclear the extent to which people re-imagine their experiences through the lens of conflict outcomes in a reconciled post-war society. We also know that some of those who are intensely involved in conflict do not survive to recount their experiences. The effects of healing over time and selection on survivors may discount the raw intensity of grievances held by those who fight and die for salient political causes. In an ongoing civil war, we find that such grievances play an important role in the process of insurgency mobilization and refugee flight.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	SD	N
FSA fighters	0.20	0.40	305
Islamist fighters	0.16	0.37	305
Civilians inside Syria	0.28	0.45	305
Refugees in Turkey	0.20	0.40	305
Ex-FSA in Turkey	0.16	0.37	305
Aleppo	0.31	0.46	305
Idlib	0.33	0.47	305
Turkey	0.36	0.48	305
Female	0.12	0.33	305
Age	29.80	9.39	296
Education	2.47	0.72	296
Employed	0.84	0.37	297

Balance across sub-samples (Combined KS-statistics)

	Fighters vs. non-fighters	Refugees vs. non-Refugees	FSA vs. Islamists	Fighters vs ex-fighters	Fighters vs. civilians	Fighters vs. refugees	Refugees vs. Civilians
Female	0.05	0.06	0.09	0.09	0.08	0.08	0.03
Age	0.06	0.16	0.18	0.17	0.06	0.14	0.12
Education	0.08	0.03	0.07	0.25**	0.09	0.05	0.09
Employed	0.00	0.09	0.04	0.00	0.09	0.07	0.13

*** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$

Table 2. Grievances and Civil War Participation (Average Marginal Effects)

	Personal Grievances						
	(1)	(2)	(3)				
Model	Fighters	Refugees	FSA	Islamists	Ex-FSA	Civilians	N
Personally injured	0.01	-0.02	0.01	-0.00	0.08**	-0.07	284
(1.1)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.05)	
Home destroyed	-0.27***	0.18***	-0.10**	-0.17***	0.13***	-0.05	284
(1.2)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.05)	
Family killed	0.08	-0.19***	-0.05	0.12***	0.14***	-0.02	284
(2.1)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.05)	
Friends killed	0.38	-0.19***	-0.05	0.13***	0.12***	-0.01	284
(2.2)	(0.28)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.06)	
Collective Grievances							
Close to Sunni	0.12***	0.04	0.06	0.15**	0.04	-0.33***	278
Muslims (3)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.08)	
Close to Alawites	-0.09**	-0.10***	0.12	-0.27***	-0.13***	0.53***	278
(4)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.18)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.18)	
Political Grievances							
Close to Assad	-0.10	-0.08	0.03	-0.20***	-0.18***	0.49***	275
Supporters (5)	(0.07)	(0.05)	(0.13)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.16)	
Fight until	0.20***	-0.07***	0.21***	0.28***	-0.45***	-0.44***	282
Victory (6)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.14)	(0.13)	
Bargain for	-0.15***	0.06***	-0.18***	-0.29***	0.04	0.25***	279
Peace (7)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.06)	
Accountable	0.21***	-0.24***	0.04	0.18***	0.20***	-0.15*	282
for crimes (8)	(0.07)	(0.09)	(0.06)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.08)	

Average Marginal Effect with discrete variables treated as factorials. For Model 1 and 2, AME is for 1 unit increase in key IV. For Model 3, AME is for an increase from the lowest level to highest level (i.e. not close at all to very close, strongly disagree to strongly agree).

Appendix Table 2. Variable Description and Coding

Variable	Description	Mean	SD	N
Female	1 = female subject, 0 = male subject	0.12	0.33	305
Age	Subject age in years from 18 to 60	29.80	9.39	296
Education	Subject education from 1 = no formal education to 4 = post-secondary education	2.47	0.72	296
Employed	1 = working before the war, 0 = unemployed, not working	0.55	0.50	297
Personally injured	1 = injured as a result of violence during the war, 0 = not injured	0.55	0.50	305
Home destroyed	1 = home destroyed as a result of violence during war, 0 = not destroyed	0.32	0.47	305
Family killed	1 = family member killed as a result of war, 0 = no family member killed	0.61	0.49	305
Friends killed	1 = close friends killed as a result of war, 0 = no close friends killed	0.73	0.45	305
Close to Sunni Muslims	How close do you feel to the following? [Sunni Muslims in Syria] 1 = not close at all, 4 = very close	3.32	0.72	299
Close to Alawites	How close do you feel to the following? [Alawites in Syria] 1 = not close at all, 4 = very close	1.62	0.81	299
Close to Assad supporters	How close do you feel to the following? [Supporters of the Assad regime] 1 = not close at all, 4 = very close	1.22	0.48	296
Fight until victory	Tell me whether you support or oppose the following [Continue Fighting until the Assad regime is defeated, no negotiations with the Assad regime] 1 = strongly support, 4 = strongly oppose	3.10	1.23	302
Immediate ceasefire	Tell me whether you support or oppose the following [Immediate ceasefire to begin negotiations with Assad's forces] 1 = strongly support, 4 = strongly oppose	2.16	1.30	299
Hold accountable for crimes	Which of the following statements comes closer to your view: 1 = Only the top leadership should be held accountable for crimes committed during the war in Syria	1.86	0.35	303

2 = All those responsible for war crimes in Syria should be held accountable for what they have done	

References

Altonji, Joseph G., Todd E. Elder, and Christopher R. Taber. 2005. "Selection on Observed and Unobserved Variables: Assessing the Effectiveness of Catholic Schools." *Journal of Political Economy* 113(1): 151.

Arjona, Ana M., and Stathis N. Kalyvas. 2011. *Recruitment Into Armed Groups in Colombia: A Survey of Demobilized Fighters*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bartlett, Frederic Charles. 1932. *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Buhaug, Halvard, Lars-Erik Cederman, and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch. 2014. "Square Pegs in Round Holes: Inequalities, Grievances, and Civil War." *International Studies Quarterly* 58(2): 418-431.

Cederman, Lars-Erik, Nils B. Weidmann, and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch. 2011. "Horizontal Inequalities and Ethnonationalist Civil War: A Global Comparison." *American Political Science Review* 105(3): 478-495.

Cederman, Lars-Erik, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Halvard Buhaug. 2013. *Inequality, Grievances, and Civil War*. Cambridge University Press.

Collier, Paul, and Anke Hoeffler. 2004. "Greed and Grievance in Civil War." *Oxford Economic Papers* 56(4): 563-595.

Collier, Paul, Anke Hoeffler, and Måns Söderbom. 2004. "On the Duration of Civil War." *Journal of Peace Research* 41(3): 253-273.

Cunningham, David E. 2006. "Veto Players and Civil War Duration." *American Journal of Political Science* 50(4): 875-892.

Cunningham, Kathleen Gallagher. 2013. "Actor Fragmentation and Civil War Bargaining: How Internal Divisions Generate Civil Conflict." *American Journal of Political Science* 57(3): 659-672.

Davenport, Christina, Will Moore, and Steven Poe. 2003. "Sometimes You Just Have to Leave: Domestic Threats and Forced Migration, 1964-1989." *International Interactions* 29 (1): 27-55

Denny, Elaine K., and Barbara F. Walter. 2014 "Ethnicity and Civil War." *Journal of Peace Research* 51(2): 199-212.

Doyle, Michael W., and Nicholas Sambanis. 2000. "International Peacebuilding: A Theoretical and Quantitative Analysis." *American Political Science Review* 94 (4): 779-801.

Fair, C. Christine, Neil Malhotra, and Jacob N. Shapiro. 2010. "Islam, militancy, and politics in Pakistan: Insights from a national sample." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22 (4): 495-521.

Fearon, James D., and David D. Laitin. 2003. "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War." *American Political Science Review* 97(1): 75-90.

Fortna, Virginia Page. 2004. "Does Peacekeeping Keep Peace? International Intervention and the Duration of Peace After Civil War." *International Studies Quarterly* 48 (2): 269-292.

Harris, Celia B., Helen M. Paterson, and Richard I. Kemp. 2008. "Collaborative Recall and Collective Memory: What Happens When We remember Together?" *Memory* 16 (3): 213-230.

Hashemi, Nader, and Danny Postel, eds. 2013. *The Syria Dilemma*. MIT Press.

Heydemann, Steven. 1999. *Authoritarianism in Syria: Institutions and social conflict, 1946-1970*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Humphreys, Macartan, and Jeremy M. Weinstein. 2008. "Who fights? The Determinants of Participation in Civil War." *American Journal of Political Science* 52 (2): 436-455.

Kalyvas, Stathis N. 2006. *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*. Cambridge University Press.

Kalyvas, Stathis N., and Laia Balcells. 2010 "International System and Technologies of Rebellion: How the End of the Cold War Shaped Internal Conflict." *American Political Science Review* 104(3): 415-429.

Karl, R., and David Sobek. 2004 "The Dynamics of Civil War Duration and Outcome." *Journal of Peace Research* 41(3): 303-320.

Krueger, Alan B., and Jitka Maleckova. 2003. "Education, Poverty and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection?" *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 17 (4): 119-144.

Levine, Linda J. (1997). "Reconstructing Memory for Emotions." *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 126 (2):165-177.

Levine, Linda J., Vincent Prohaska, Stewart L. Burgess, John A. Rice, and Tracy M. Laulhere. 2001. "Remembering Past Emotions: The Role of Current Appraisals." *Cognition & Emotion* 15 (4): 393-417.

Licklider, Roy. 1995. "The Consequences of Negotiated Settlements in Civil Wars, 1945–1993." *American Political Science Review* 89(3): 681-690.

Loftus, Elizabeth F.(1992)."When a Lie Becomes Memory's Truth: Memory Distortion After Exposure to Misinformation." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 1: 121-123.

Lyall, Jason. 2009. "Does Indiscriminate Violence Incite Insurgent Attacks? Evidence from Chechnya." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53(3): 331-362.

Lyall, Jason, Graeme Blair, and Kosuke Imai. 2013. "Explaining Support for Combatants During Wartime: A Survey Experiment in Afghanistan." *American Political Science Review* 107 (4): 679-705.

Moore, Will H., and Stephen M. Shellman. 2004. "Fear of Persecution Forced Migration, 1952-1995." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48 (5): 723-745.

Moore, Will H., and Stephen M. Shellman. 2006. "Refugee or Internally Displaced Person? To Where Should One Flee?" *Comparative Political Studies* 39 (5): 599-622.

Moore, Will H., and Stephen M. Shellman. 2007. "Whither Will They Go? A Global Study of Refugees' Destinations, 1965–1995." *International Studies Quarterly* 51(4): 811-834.

Parkinson, Sarah Elizabeth. 2013. "Organizing Rebellion: Rethinking High-Risk Mobilization and Social Networks in War." *American Political Science Review* 107 (3): 418-432.

Petersen, Roger D. 2002. *Understanding Ethnic Violence: Fear, Hatred, and Resentment in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pierret, Thomas. 2013. *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution*. Vol. 41. Cambridge University Press.

Safer, Martin A., George A. Bonanno, and Nigel P. Field. 2001. ""It Was Never That Bad": Biased Recall of Grief and Long-term Adjustment to the Death of a Spouse." *Memory* 9 (3): 195-203.

Safer, Martin A., Linda J. Levine, and Amy L. Drapalski. 2002. "Distortion in Memory for Emotions: The Contributions of Personality and Post-event Knowledge." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 28 (11): 1495-1507.

Salehyan, Idean, and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch. 2006. "Refugees and the Spread of Civil War." *International Organization* 60(2): 335-366.

Seale, Patrick. 1986. "The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-war Arab Politics, 1945–1958, new edition." *London: IB Tauris*.

Tsang, Jo-Ann. 2002. "Moral Rationalization and the Integration of Situational Factors and Processes in Immoral Behavior." Review of General Psychology 6(1):25-50.

Walter, Barbara F. 1997. "The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement." *International Organization* 51(3): 335-364.

Wood, Elisabeth Jean. 2003. *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*. Cambridge University Press.

Wood, Reed M., and Jacob D. Kathman. 2014. "Too Much of a Bad Thing? Civilian Victimization and Bargaining in Civil War." *British Journal of Political Science* 44(3): 685-706.

Wucherpfennig, Julian, Nils W. Metternich, Lars-Erik Cederman, and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch. 2012. "Ethnicity, the State, and the Duration of Civil War." *World Politics* 64(1): 79-115.