

Research Article

REBEL MOVEMENTS AND REGIME CHANGE IN SYRIA: IMPLICATIONS ON INTERNATIONAL PEACE AND SECURITY

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the overbearing influence of rebel movements on regime change in Syria, and its implication on international peace and security. The primary objective of anti-government rebel movements was to challenge Assad's monopoly on force to effects regime change. The research aimed at assessing the role of rebel movements in the Syrian conflict and the broader implications of their actions on international peace and security. The theoretical framework adopted for the study was State Fragility theory which emphasizes that when a state loses the ability to perform its core functions like monopoly on violence, rule of law, delivery of services, and political legitimacy, **alternative centers of power emerge**. The **Assad regime's authoritarian repression**, particularly its brutal response to the 2011 uprisings, undermined its legitimacy both domestically and internationally and the **failure to deliver basic services**, protect civilians in war-torn areas created a vacuum which was filled by rebel factions like **Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)** and the **Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)**. The study adopted documentary method of data collection from secondary sources and qualitative descriptive method of content analysis. The study revealed among others that the Syrian conflict had multifaceted and far-reaching implications for international peace and security, and also underscores the fact that rebel movements played a central role in catalyzing regime change in Syria through a combination of armed insurgency, territorial control, which

undermines the legitimacy of Assad government. The study recommended that Regional bodies such as Arab League, European Union and African Union should invest in robust early warning systems to identify and respond to emerging civil conflicts before its escalate. It also recommended the United Nations Security Council to reconsider the veto power system, especially in cases involving mass atrocities or humanitarian crises.

Keywords: State Fragility, Rebel Movements, Regime Change and Middle East Geopolitics

Background to the Study

The Syrian conflict, which began in 2011, stands as one of the most tragic and complex crises of the 21st century, dramatically reshaping the Middle East and challenging the international system's ability to maintain peace and security. Triggered by the wider wave of political unrest known as the Arab Spring, Syrians initially took to the streets to demand democratic reforms, an end to political repression, and greater economic opportunities. However, what began as peaceful protests quickly escalated into a full-scale civil war following the Syrian government's harsh crackdown on demonstrators (Lesch, 2012). At the heart of the Syrian crisis lies the question of regime survival versus regime change. President Bashar al-Assad's determination to hold onto power in the face of domestic and international pressure set the stage for an enduring conflict. The rebellion against Assad soon fractured into numerous factions, giving rise to a multiplicity of rebel movements with diverse, and often conflicting, ideologies, objectives, and strategies. These groups ranged from secular opposition forces seeking democratic reform to Islamist militias aiming to establish religious governance (Lister, 2015). The internal fragmentation of the Syrian opposition significantly weakened the prospect of a coherent regime change and allowed extremist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra (al-Qaeda's affiliate) and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to gain a foothold. Their rise not only shifted the nature of the conflict from a political struggle to a broader battle against terrorism but also further complicated international efforts to mediate peace. As a result, Syria became the epicenter of global jihadist recruitment and activity, contributing to the spread of terrorism far beyond its borders.

International involvement further deepened the conflict's complexity. While Western powers such as the United States, France, and the United Kingdom expressed support for moderate rebel groups, regional actors like Iran and Hezbollah militarily backed the Assad regime. Russia's direct military intervention in 2015 on behalf of Assad fundamentally altered the balance of power, ensuring the regime's survival and complicating Western strategies (Phillips, 2016). Simultaneously, Turkey's involvement, primarily aimed at countering Kurdish groups along its border, introduced another layer of geopolitical rivalry. The consequence of the Syrian conflict on humanitarian grounds is very dismal. According to the numbers revealed by the United Nations High Commissioner for refugees (UNHCR, 2023), more than 6.8 million Syrians are now estimated to have fled their country and even more are outwardly displaced. Most notably, key cities like Aleppo and Homs have turned into ruins

and many of these civilians have been exposed to chemical attacks, widespread bombardment and siege warfare, much of it contrary to international humanitarian law.

The Syrian war has been extremely challenging to international peace and security in and out of its borders. It has occasioned huge movement of refugees and destabilized their neighbors including Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey as well as giving rise to nationalist/xenophobia in Europe. Besides, the inability of the United Nations Security Council to approve a resolution against Syria has revealed the weakness of the global modes of governance in addressing imminent global crisis because of the veto powers, mostly due to Russia and China. The case of the Syrian war demonstrates how conflicts within nations, in the cases of which they are internationalized and remain unrestrained, are capable of destabilizing the frameworks of global security, strengthening and empowering non-state armed groups, and causing humanitarian disasters to persist. It emphasizes the inseparable nature between local insurgencies and global political stability which begs to ask significant questions into the issue of sovereignty, intervention and the efficacy of international law. Therefore, it would be important to study more about the role of the rebel movements in the bid to overthrow the Syrian regime and see the wider impacts that the act has had in the global arena.

Statement of the Problem

The Syrian conflict started as a call of democratic change and soon degenerated into a complex civil war whose major characteristics were proliferation of rebel groups, foreign interventions and rampant humanitarian crisis. Failure of the domestic forces and the international community to provide regime change and achieve a sustainable peace settlement also has had disastrous results not only in Syria but also the international peace and security. Despite all of the diplomatic efforts, ceasefire negotiations, and foreign involvement, the war continues after over a decade which speaks of the serious flaws in the system of global conflict prevention and resolution. The fact that there have been many rebel groups with separate designs and the establishment of extremist groups like ISIS has also made the situation more difficult and frustrates clear opposition of the Assad regime. This divided opposition, instead of a democratic transition, has resulted in some years of instability and sectarian violence and militarization of the conflict.

In global terms, the Syrian conflict has caused the gigantic displacement of refugees, the destabilization of immediate countries, and the growth of the threat of terrorists and enhanced geopolitical tensions among the key world powers. This gridlock at the international institutions, particularly the United Nations Security Council has highlighted the weaknesses of collective security systems in cases where the national interests are contradictory. Besides, the war has undermined the integrity of international humanitarian law as war crimes allegation is a recurring theme and the use of banned weapons without any significant accountability is small consolation. With these consequences in mind there is a need to evaluate the way the actions of rebel groups and pursuit of regime change has shaped the course of the civil war and the international peace and security in general. This paper, therefore, presents an analysis of the nature of the roles played by the Syrian rebel groups and

the obstacles they faced in their pursuit to create a change in regime and the consequences of these events as regards international security and peace.

Objectives of the Study

- i. To ascertain the contribution of the rebel movements to regime change in Syria.
- ii. To investigate the implications of the Syrian conflict and the involvement of rebel groups for international peace and security.

Research Questions

To guide the study, the following research questions are posed:

- i. How has rebel movements contributed to regime change in Syria?
- ii. What are the major implications of the Syrian conflict and the involvement of rebel groups for international peace and security?

Significance of the Study

The study is of great significance to academic research and policy making. To begin with, it contributes significantly to the scholarly understanding of rebel phenomenon and its consequences on civil wars, particularly, in reference to the Syrian case. Warring against an authoritarian regime by using a disintegrated opposition forces is a challenging task; the research provides valuable information about the same by exploring the process through which divided rebel organizations found their existence and grew and interacted with the indigenous forces as well as foreign stakeholders. Those discoveries supplement and augment the current body of knowledge of civil wars, insurgency movements and conflict-resolution strategies.

Second, the paper throws light on the international aspects of Syrian war and highlights the fact that the war has massive dimensions when it comes to global peace and security. It indicates how local conflicts can escalate into international crises in situations where powerful actors promote contradictory strategic agendas that threaten to disturb the regional law-security apparatus and international security systems. This kind of a view is unavoidable to scholars and practitioners of international relations who would like to better understand the intricacies of modern wars. Lastly, the study is fortuitous and relevant since the events of the ongoing consequences of the Syrian war; the continued threat posed by terrorism; the refugee crisis and the general weakening of international rules against aggression and war crimes were unfolding. A proper understanding of the Syrian experience can guide the international community to come up with more resistant systems to preempt such conflicts in other regions.

Rebel Movements

Rebel movements form one of the most prominent aspects of many internal wars in the world, and in many cases, the foundations of the conflicts discussed can be considered those where the regimes are considered as illegitimate, oppressive or incapable of fulfilling any of the needs of the population. In Political science and conflict studies, such movements are

viewed as organized groups in which armed resistance is used to challenge current state power, to seek political reform, or to seek autonomy or independence. A mature understanding of their characteristics, their causes, and their aims is essential to studying civil wars and insurgencies, and regime change attempts-just as is occurring in Syria. According to Weinstein (2007), rebel groups can have diverse goals which could be overthrowing the government, secession, political reforms or transformation of ideas. Rebel movements normally justify their actions by political, ethnic, religious or social grievance, unlike the criminal organizations whose main motive is material gain.

Characteristics of Rebel Movements

Rebel movements also have a number of characteristics that can be distinguished among other non-state actors.

- i. **Political Goals:** In most cases, the rebels have defined political aims such as overthrowing a government pursuant to gaining autonomy or gaining more political freedom.
- ii. **Planned Organization:** successful rebel movements often use a hierarchical or networked organization that can coordinate terrorist-military and political actions.
- iii. **Territorial Control:** Most of the rebel groups want to take control over territories in order to have their base to operate and govern because this has been the case with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and ISIS at the peak of their powers in Syria.
- iv. **Armed Force:** Violence forms the principal tool used by rebel movements to intimidate, compel and pose a challenge to the state monopoly on the use of force.
- v. **Popular Support or Coercion:** Certain groups of rebels have popular backing or the worldwide, regional allies who make them grow stronger, but others are based on coercion measures perpetuating the influence.

Factors that Contribute to the Emergence of Rebel Movements

Different causes of emergence of rebel movements have been singled out:

- i. **Political Oppression:** Armed resistance is often triggered through authoritarian, repressive political regimes where the response to political dissent ruthlessly takes place
- ii. **Economic Marginalization:** Large inequalities, poverty and economic marginalization lead to bitterness, and this may result to violent outburst.
- iii. **Ethnic and Sectarian Divisions:** Tensions based on identity are usually great mobilizing conditions as demonstrated in multi-ethnic states like Syria..
- iv. **External Support:** The funding, also weapons as well as political support may be provided by foreign governments, diasporas or networks across the nation, and hence contribute to determine the intensity and durability of the rebel groups
- v. **State Weakness:** Weak institutions that are characterized by fragile or failing states find them more prone to internal armed challenges.

Typologies of Rebel Movements

The classification of anti-government mobilizations based on the models they use and the groups they follow:

- i. Secessionist Movements: Those groups of people who are trying to establish a functioning sovereign entity (e.g. the South Sudanese rebels);
- ii. Reformist Movements: Those movements which aim at changing the current political system without proposing breakaway (e.g. the Syrian opposition);
- iii. Ideological Movements: They are movements that are organized based on some political or religious vision (e.g. the popularization of radical Islam caliphate with help of ISIS);
- iv. Criminalized Rebel Groups: Gangs whose activities are becoming more and more dependent on crime, especially the drug trade to fund their activities, blurring the distinction between political and criminal motives.

Rebel movements in Syria: An overview

In Syria, the peaceful outpouring of demonstrations first marked the beginning of a peaceful movement that called to change to political reform. However the ever escalating violent reaction by the government increased tension causing some part of the opposition to embrace the use of armed. This situation resulted in a very polarized model of rebellion, including the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the Islamist factions such as the Ahrar al-Sham, the Kurds such as the YPG, and the extremists such as the Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, each of which possesses its more or less divergent and not always compatible interests (Lister, 2015). With multiple belligerents, third party benefactors and incompatible aims, there was no collective front against the regime. Rather, the division of rebel forces hindered its persistence of a regime change, prolonged the war, and led to its internationalization. At the center of this war is a group of forces against President Bashar al-Assad, including secular nationalists and Islamist militants; all are differentiated by ideologies, tactical focus, and foreign backing.

As the uprising started, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), mostly former Syrian military personnel, managed to become the major actor of the conflict, posing as a more moderate and otherwise secular movement consisting of people dedicated to the idea of democratic changes (Lister, 2016). It however had its weight against intrastate division and unstable external backing. Thus, Islamist groups extended their influence. Of those, Jabhat al-Nusra, later renamed Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), rose to prominence in northwestern Syria and also opposed the regime as they battled other rebel groups as well. At the same time, in 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) proclaimed its own form of the caliphate, which covered some areas of Syria and Iraq. Despite having initially opposed the Assad regime, the radical ideology and violent mode of operations increased over time and in turn, caused ISIS to lose the support of other competing rebels, and as such, an international coalition was formed to seek out the extremist group (Lister, 2016).

In northern Syria, Kurdish groups, especially the People defense units (YPG) and, later, the Syrian democratic forces (SDF) had created semi-autonomous rule. These forces took up leading military roles against ISIS and absorbed and controlled large swathes of land

although they were not formally associated with the Arab rebel movement (Gunter, 2014). The fact that the conflict was complicated with foreign intervention added to this difficulty in its evolution. Many of these armed oppositional groups had received the sponsorship of Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, and Assad regime was actively sponsored by Russia and Iran. This kind of cross-border allegiances in the rebel leadership split apart rebel groups, further increasing the term of the rule. Most of the opposition to the Assad rule was a Sunni Arabs that constitutes majority to Alawites who has been in power for decades. Even though they were united by the desire to change the regime, these factions differs on the type of governance that should dominate a post-Assad Syria.

Although regional and local sentiments had a strong influence on the conflict in Syria, the clash in how religion can be realized in the Syrian society became one of the key arenas (Van Dam, 2016). Salafists were the embodiment of this division: certain Salafist movements attempted to turn Islam into the only source of law as much as into the only source of cultural identity. Within the ranks, the salafis had diverging views on how to achieve this. The most popular are Nusra Front of al-Qaeda that demanded the immediate establishment of Islamic emirate with the help of military conflict and any democratic order. On the other hand, Ahrar al-Sham advocated an Islamic state to be achieved by embracing electoral political processes that would be available to all the Syrians. In efforts to expand their influence, Ahrar al-Sham would form several alliances with other like-minded organizations and together would form the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF), a Salafi rebranding of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). On the Salafi spectrum were non-Salafi moderating through less strictly modeled Islamist groups, who all aspire towards having Islam as the law of the land and hence a dominant culture without following a strictly enforced ideology and canon of Islamic thought. This tendency illustrated by the Faruq Brigades of Homs was consolidated by the Front to Liberate Syria (FLS), through union with similar groups, like the Suqur al-Sham in Idlib. Similar to the Syrian Islamic Front, the FLS rejected the subordination to the Free Syrian Army and purported to number approximately 40,000 fighters or around a half of the then estimated anti-Assad combatant force.

Alongside the sectarian oriented Islamist militias, secular rebel movements existed in rebel controlled areas with most being Free Syrian Army (FSA) flag flyers. Like their Islamist counterparts, they rejected the Baathist ideology and conceived a secular democratic policy with the main dissimilarity in the preservation of the Sunni-dominant outlook. People could well hold non-sectarian values, but the perception of fighting an Alawite-based regime promoted hostility against the minority groups in Syria, especially the Alawites (Sinjab, 2022). Distributed across rebel controlled areas, these secular movements had similar structural weakness to the opposition on a broader level: a dearth of consolidation in vision and strategy, undermining down a concerted effort to challenge the authority of President Assad.

The role of Rebel Movements in the Regime Change in Syria: An overview

On 21 December 2024, rebel forces crowned their efforts with a decisive blow to the regime of now former President Bashar al-Assad. With the eruption of the Syrian civil war in the year

2011, the country had succumbed into being dominated by rebel warlords and anti-regime generals. By 7 December 2024, when the government of Assad collapsed, three groups claimed positions of special influence: the Syrian National Army (SNA), a coalition of non-Kurdish rebel groups with Turkish support based on the Free Syrian Army, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a predominantly Kurdish organization with US support, and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) a Sunni Islamist so-called jihadist organization, which split with Al Qaeda. These entities often conflicted with each other even though each one had power over a specific region of Syria thus challenging the rule of the regime. In Idlib, the Syrian Salvation Government was formed by HTS, which has educational, housing, and utilities provision in its territory. Before the ousting of the Assad regime, rebel groups had almost been controlling half of Syria since the rebels dominated the North and Northeast of the country with the regime having most parts of Southeast Syria although with less resources. Constant diplomatic and military assistance by Turkey and the United States, which manifested itself in training and weapon supplies, only strengthened the rebels.

These factors, a combination of regime weaknesses, a massive exodus of the military and an escalating power of the rebels, combined to seize Assad's territorial hold of power, which quickly sent him into a tailspin. A blow to legitimacy was dealt internationally when the UN and several other states admitted the Syrian National Council (SNC) as the recognized government of Syria. As a critical step in the diplomatic power play, U.S. President Barack Obama declared the National Coalition to be the legitimate representative of the Syrian people, and the official gesture was characterized as a big step (Malas & Solomon, 2012). The SNC, a representative political body that was operating in exile, sought to represent the Syrian opposition, in general, and the establishment of the foundational blocks of a new post-Assad administration.

A closer look at the three most influential rebel groups reveals their distinct roles in Assad's downfall:

i. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS): An extreme Salafist militant group which became involved in the Syrian war in 2011, HTS was founded as an affiliate of al-Qaeda within Syria. The group was formed by merging Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS, formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) and other militias on January 28, 2017, with Abu Muhammad al-Golani, the founder of the Al-Nusra Front renamed to associate the group with al-Qaeda and out of which it formally dissociated itself the following year, serving as its leader (Cafarella, 2014). The HTS positioning is that of protection of Muslim oppressed in Syria, in which it operates with fighting against the regime and administration in its lands. HTS recruited members and received funding through international Salafi networks, which helped it bring the Assad government down.

ii. Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF): Formed on 10 October 2015, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) currently comprises a Kurdish led force made up of ethnically based fighting forces backed by the United States and rebel groups. The SDF, with armed confrontations with Turkey regularly, is adhered to the creation of a secular, democratic, and federal state of Syria and is suspected by Turkey to be affiliated with the Kurdistan Worker Party (PKK) an

organization that is regarded as a terrorist group by the Ankara government. The SDF, backed by Washington as the foremost partner in the fight against ISIS, has established an autonomous rule in the north of Syria, working in turn with other rebel forces in the latter attacks on the regime of Bashar al-Assad.

iii. Syrian National Army (SNA): Established in 2017 in the north of Aleppo as part of the Syrian Interim Government, a confederation of opposition political groups, the Syrian National Army (SNA) is commonly referred to as the Turkish supported Free Syrian Army. Made up of defectors, warlords, and other fighters on the opposition side, the SNA was instrumental in the military effort that forced the regime of president Bashar al-Assad to abandon powers.

Although all three Islamist groups worked to prepare Assad to fall, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which was headed by Mohammad al-Golani was the most organized and armed. It is HTS that led the takeover of territory that was strategically important to the nation such as Damascus, a move that forced Assad to run to Russia.

The last stage of the regime began on 27 November 2024 where the opposition conducted a spontaneous and synchronized move. Taking advantage of the government forces in the weakened states and depreciated authority, the HTS gained access to large chunks of the territory in Aleppo and Idlib Governorates (Desk, 2024). Without a plausible counter-attack by the Syrian military, which was weakened by divisions and resource shortages, opponent units penetrated into Aleppo (the largest Syrian metropolis and strong base of Assad) on 29 November 2024, the first time they controlled this city since 2016. Such a swift development highlighted the fall of the regime and virtually determined the future of Assad (Arora & Ganguly, 2025).

Implications of Syrian Regime Change on International Peace and Security

The Syrian conflict, which began in 2011, has had profound implications for international peace and security, particularly regarding the risks associated with potential regime change. While the initial aspiration of the Syrian opposition and their international backers was to remove President Bashar al-Assad and install a democratic government, the protracted nature of the conflict, the rise of extremist groups, and the involvement of multiple external actors transformed Syria into a complex battleground with global repercussions as discussed below.

i. Regional Instability: One of the most immediate implications of the push for regime change in Syria has been the destabilization of the Middle East. The collapse or weakening of central authority created power vacuums exploited by various actors, including jihadist groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda affiliates (Lister, 2015). Neighboring countries, particularly Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Turkey, have faced the spillover effects of the conflict in the form of sectarian violence, border insecurity, and political polarization (Phillips, 2016). Moreover, the fragmentation of Syria fueled the broader Sunni-Shia rivalry, with Iran and Hezbollah backing the Assad regime, while Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey supported various rebel factions (Lund, 2012). This exacerbated regional tensions and turned Syria into a proxy battlefield for competing regional powers, thereby undermining regional peace efforts.

ii. Rise of Extremism and Global Terrorism: The absence of a unified, moderate opposition allowed extremist groups to flourish in Syria. The Islamic State (ISIS), in particular, used the chaos to capture vast territories across Syria and Iraq, declaring a caliphate in 2014 (Cockburn, 2015). The internationalization of these extremist movements, including the recruitment of foreign fighters and the export of terrorism to Europe, Asia, and Africa, significantly heightened global security threats. The Syrian conflict demonstrated how regime change efforts, if not carefully managed, can lead to the empowerment of radical actors who pose a far greater threat to international peace than the original regime (Byman, 2016).

iii. Humanitarian Crises and Refugee Flows: The conflict has produced one of the worst humanitarian crises since World War II. According to UNHCR (2021), over 6.8 million Syrians have fled the country, while millions more are internally displaced. The refugee influx into neighboring states and Europe has strained resources, fueled political tensions, and contributed to the rise of nationalist and anti-immigrant movements in many Western countries (Betts & Collier, 2017). The mass displacement has also led to prolonged instability in host countries, creating conditions ripe for further radicalization and undermining global efforts to maintain peace and security.

iv. Strained International Institutions and Norms: The Syrian conflict revealed and exacerbated the weaknesses of international institutions such as the United Nations. Despite overwhelming evidence of atrocities, the UN Security Council remained paralyzed due to the vetoes of Russia and China, highlighting the limits of international mechanisms meant to uphold peace and human rights (Hehir, 2013). Furthermore, the failure to achieve a cohesive international response undermined the credibility of norms such as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), setting a dangerous precedent for future conflicts.

iv. Great Power Rivalries and the New Cold War Dynamics: The conflict deepened the divide between Western powers and Russia. While the United States and its allies supported regime change and various opposition groups, Russia intervened militarily in 2015 to support Assad, framing its actions as a fight against terrorism but also aiming to preserve its strategic interests in Syria (Trenin, 2016). The antagonism between the United States and Soviet Union did not only extend the World War II but continued to extend the confrontational patterns which underpinned the cold war and increased the risk of direct military conflict between the major powers thus complicating international relationships in issues like management of climate change and an arms control process.

Empirical Review

Phillips, C. (2016) examined how external interventions by the U.S. Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and others shaped the outcome of the Syrian civil war and complicated the prospects for peace. The study employed qualitative research design, where data were gathered through Focus Group Discussion. In order to analyze the data, qualitative-descriptive method was used. It has been revealed that efforts to overthrow the Syrian regime ended up entangled in broader geopolitical politics, especially between the United States and Russia, as well as Sunni and Shia fighting, thus endangering international

peace and security. The writer has therefore suggested that the United Nations should review its charter that is, the veto clause that would minimize the interest of the great powers and hence stem broader geopolitical competition.

In a different study, Gade, Hafez, and Gabbay (2019) examined the nature and reasons of intramural conflict between Syrian rebel groups in terms of effectiveness and patterns. Employing a qualitative research design, whereby the data were gathered with the help of a semi-structured interview scheme, the researchers found that the extent of ideological differences significantly increased the likelihood of confrontations between groups, despite the fact that specific armed forces were sponsored by the same state. It is on this ground that they held the view that the subtle understanding of rebels and rebel fragmentation is irreplaceable in assessing the challenges to the change of regime as well as the success of long-term peace in Syria.

Mironova, Alhamad, and Whitt (2020) studied why the former Syrian rebel fighters choose to again engage in the fight or abstain. In the research, the researchers have used descriptive research design where information was mainly acquired through secondary sources like documents. Thematic analysis on the resultant corpus thematically identified that the refusal to give up the inspiration of regime change or the establishment of an Islamic state often motivates some former combatants to join again, which feeds back into later remobilization to fight. The study recommended amongst others the importance of post-conflict reintegration programs to avert the risk of relapse into violence, which are critical for international peace and security.

Suechika, K. (2023) investigate public opinion in Syria to assess the extent of state-diffusion, or the fragmentation of state authority and legitimacy. The study employed qualitative research design where data was gathered through semi-structured interview. Thematic analysis was used to evaluate the data. It was revealed that regions previously under opposition control exhibit higher levels of rejection toward the Assad regime, which triggers the rise of rebel movements that culminated into regime change. The study recommended that internally mobilized state building devoid of external interference should be adopted.

Theoretical Framework

To underpin this study with a scientific base, the researcher adopted State Fragility Theory as a theoretical framework that could provide the conceptual foundation for understanding, analyzing and interpreting the relationships among key variables in the study. The Theory gained institutional prominence through the **World Bank (2002)** and **Fund for Peace's Fragile States Index**, which quantify state stability based on governance, conflict, demographic pressures, and external intervention.

The Theory was particularly developed by **Rotberg (2003)**, who argued that a fragile state is one that has lost its monopoly over the legitimate use of force, lacks the capacity to provide public services, and suffers a crisis of legitimacy. The theory evolved in tandem with post-Cold War interventions in failed or failing states such as Somalia, Liberia, and later Iraq and Syria. The theory posits that the **inability of the state to deliver core governance**

functions such as security, political participation, justice, and economic development leads to the rise of non-state actors, including rebel movements (Ghani & Lockhart, 2008). The absences created by the fact that the state has been unable to perform its crucial roles are exploited by some actors who often end up causing civil wars, revolts or a collapse of the regime depending on the situations. In the conflict that was witnessed in Syria, the State Fragility Theory plays a vital role in explaining why rebel movements became powerful opponents to the power of states. It is the contention of the theory that when the government is unable to exercise a monopoly of violence, uphold the rule of law, or a supply of basic needs to people or even to the legitimacy of governing, parallel centers of power will, necessarily, arise. This protracted authoritarianism, especially its brutal crackdowns after a wave of popular rebellions in 2011, was demolishing the legitimacy of the Assad regime, both locally and internationally. At the same time, the failure of the state to even deliver bare necessities or protect civilians in conflict zones left a gap that was well utilized by rebel groups like Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) as well as Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Fragmentation of the Syrian military expressed in mass defection and high desertion rates weakened further the power held by Damascus to control the national territory.

Another account that could be attempted by reasonably predicting the toppling of Bashar al-Assad regime in 2024 can also be explained using the theoretical framework of state fragility. Institutional weakness was incessant and it was accompanied by regime disintegration. Syrian state was no longer able to control or squash domestic protest, but became heavily dependent on external powers such as Russia and Iran to provide military support and was not able to construct powerful sense of nationhood amidst strong divisions on sectarian lines. This gradual wear and tear of systems meant regime was increasingly at risk of organized attacks by military groups of rebels, especially those that took advantage of low morale in the armed forces, shrinking foreign donor base as Russian and Iran priorities changes in addition to strategic occupation of key urban centers like Homs and Damascus. All these interdependent clauses led the regime to collapse in 2024 and highlight the dangers of unconstrained state fragility to global security.

Even though State Fragility Theory provides a rigorous heuristic that is applicable in the inspection of the weakening of the Assad regime and the rise of rebel formations, it experiences a number of restrictions. First of all, the framework often reduced rebel organizations to a product of state weakness instead of independent political actors with coherent ideologies and unambiguous goals and alliances with international partners. Secondly, the theory gives undue emphasis to the role of foreign intervention and does not fully consider the role played by the Great-Power rivalries, e.g., U.S. and Russia relations and the Iran-Israel rivalry, upon the propensity of fragile states. Third, the conceptual apparatus is likely to reproduce accidentally a western-centric definition of statehood and government hence suggesting that deviations are in themselves weak or dying.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the State Fragility Theory goes well as an analytical tool in examining the current case analysis since, in a keen sense, observes the institutional disintegration of Syrian national structures, the simultaneous replacement of the rebels in the

exercise of executive power, and the consequential internationalization of the conflict. It also provides a clear theoretical window to view the connection between state vulnerability and regime change, and the insecurities that follow thereafter both regionally and outside the region.

Methodology

This paper adopted qualitative descriptive research design and documentary research method to gather information. The approach is appropriate to the study of such complex political phenomena as rebel movements and foreign interventions, and regime change in Syria. It allows for in-depth analysis of historical events, policy decisions, and international reactions using secondary data sources. The qualitative design is also instrumental in interpreting patterns, understanding motivations behind foreign sponsorship, and assessing implications for international peace and security. **Content analysis** was used to systematically review, categorize, and interpret the collected data.

Analysis of Research Question 1: How does rebel movements contributed to the efforts for regime change in Syria?

Philips (2016, 2020), Suechika (2023), Desk (2024) and Dzulhishan (2024) agrees with the fact that rebel movements triggers regime change in Syria. The primary objective of anti-government rebel movements has been the overthrow of Bashar al Assad to effects regime change. Although various rebel movements had divergent ideological goals which delayed cohesive action, that did not prevent eventual territorial control as exemplified by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) capturing of Idlib, Aleppo, Hama and Damascus.

Rebel movements challenged the Assad regime's monopoly on force through sustained insurgencies. Groups like Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and Syrian Democratic Force (SDF) established de facto governance which eroded Assad's legitimacy and control. It was widely acknowledged that Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham led by Abu Mohammed al-Golani captured key territories including Damascus, which eventually unsettled President al-Assad. It is instructive to mention that while Syrian civil war was still going on, Russian-Ukraine war set in as well as escalating tension between Israel and Iran. These also shaped the Syrian conflicts, due to the fact that Kremlin and Tehran support for pro-Assad government forces begin to wane, and focus shifted to attack from Ukraine and Israel respectively. Therefore anti-Assad government rebel groups exploited the government waning control and fragile defense to capture Idlib and some part of Aleppo in November, 2024 (Desk, 2024).

They were gaining the upper hand, and, as a result, opposition groups moved in on the third largest city in Syria, Homs, which was a critical transportation hub between the capital Damascus and the Alawite dominated coastal provinces. Homs having a strategic location, it was also a symbolic and a logistical objective to conquer its capture would have interfered with the ability of the regime to organize the military activities between the capital city and the remaining strongholds. On 6 December rebel fighters had surrounded Homs and destroyed supply and communications. The shifting of military forces through siege tactics: group attacks, attacks on command centers, the creation of isolation zones and garrisons of the

government gradually led to a weakening of the ability of the Syrian army to oppose. On 7 December, with food running low and morale low, due to loss of ammunition, pro-government forces surrendered the city. By reducing the city of Homs, this was not just another battlefield loss but cut the remaining secure land link between Damascus and the Alawite heartland, and effectively divided the regime territorially.

Conditions worsened at a very high rate. On 7 December, reports surfaced that president Bashar al-Assad had escaped the country, the symbolic and practical acceptance of the end of the regime. On 8 December the next day, opposition forces were able to capture Damascus itself. Fighters of the rebellion quickly took over governmental buildings, control of strategic infrastructure and made a symbolic declaration of victory in Umayyad Mosque which was both a political gain and an embodiment of a historical continuity. In this moment, the reign of the Assad family in the Syrian politics was over after more than fifty years. Recent success of the opposition demonstrates that the systematic use of a military force is a means to promote political interests. The rebels have performed the feat of making successful territorial advances and, at the same time, causing an effective psychological impact on the regime, once they focused their actions on strategic parts of the city, rather than dramatic battles in rural areas. Due to the international recognition of the Syrian National Council shortly after these victories, the opposition was granted diplomatic credence, and further isolated the regime, accelerating its political downfall.

Assad's diminishing resources, desertions and declining moral in the Syrian military, couple with weakening Russian and Iranian military commitments late in the conflict underscores the Assad regime's weaknesses and momentum shift triggering regime collapse cum change. Therefore, it is evident that rebel movements were instrumental in the Syrian regime change through a combination of armed resistance, territorial control, external alliances, and emerging government structures. Their collective actions despite ideological fragmentation led to a gradual erosion of the Assad regime's authority, culminating in its collapse in December, 2024.

Analysis of Research Question 2: What are the major implications of the Syrian conflict for international peace and security?

As noted in Lister (2015) and Phillips (2016), the fragmentation of Syria destabilized neighboring countries like **Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Turkey**, exposing them to **border insecurity, militant infiltration, and refugee overflow**. Furthermore, Syria became a **proxy battleground** for regional powers: **Iran and Hezbollah** supported the Assad regime, while **Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar** backed various opposition factions. This alignment along **sectarian lines (Sunni vs. Shia)** amplified regional rivalries and inflamed other dormant conflicts, undermining broader peace efforts across the Middle East. Syria's transformation into a **theater for regional proxy wars** threatened collective regional security mechanisms, introduced long-term instability into fragile neighboring states, and fostered transnational networks of conflict.

The power vacuum in Syria enabled extremist groups, most notably **ISIS**, to flourish. Cockburn (2015) averred ISIS declared a caliphate in 2014 and leveraged chaos to capture territory across **Syria and Iraq**. These groups also recruited **foreign fighters** from across Europe, Asia, and Africa, and exported **terrorist activities abroad**. Byman (2016) emphasized that poorly planned regime change can inadvertently strengthen such radical entities, who present **greater international threats** than the authoritarian regimes they seek to replace. The civil war in Syria has turned to the source of international terrorism, as it can be seen that internal conflicts can both export violence and destabilize peace on a far larger scale than their area of origin.

The war resulted in one of the most disastrous refugees since the World War II. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as of 2021, more than 6.8 million Syrians had already been driven abroad, not to mention the other millions that had already been displaced within Syria. The exertion of burden by the refugees on the partner nations created instability in the political landscape especially in Europe where it resonated with the populist, nationalist, and anti-immigration feelings. The extent of the resulting fallout involving humanitarianism caused polarization in the politics of host nations, established the boundaries of global humanitarian aid, and strengthened xenophobic and nationalist policy which further weakened international solidarity. The Syrian crisis revealed the insufficiency of the existing international mechanisms of conflict resolution when the major powers are opposed to each other and diluted the credibility of international mining centers of peace.

The conflict in Syria is therefore an eye opener on how local wars tend to develop into global security problems. It undermines regional security, sponsored terrorist organizations and networks, flooded humanitarian mechanisms, crippled the international regimes governing institutions and enhanced great powers feuds. With the help of the content analysis thematically, this paper affirmed that the Syrian conflict implications go far behind its boundaries in the sense that the conflict has posed long-term threatening harm on the international peace and security. **Discussion of Findings**

An overall overview suggests that the Syrian conflict not only had complex and far-reaching consequences on international peace and security, but the rebel groups were also prominent as actors in bringing about regime change in Syria through the twin explosives of an armed revolt, capture of territory and political delegitimization of the Assad regime. As Phillips (2016, 2020), Suechika (2023), Desk (2024), and Dzulhishan (2024) observe about the corresponding positions in the above-led movements, the ultimate goal therein was the ousting of Bashar al-Assad. Even with differences in ideological views between rebel groups, their military gains overall, especially Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) impact over the monopoly of violence and the government by the Syrian state. The fact that strategic centers like Idlib, Aleppo, Hama, and Damascus was captured, marked an achievement in military victory as well as symbolic obliteration of the Assad regime. The takeover of Homs which was a logistical and symbolic bastion was one of the turning points

in the opposition and this further showed the tactical organization and the political purpose of rebel groups.

The other significant conclusion is the impact of changing international conditions, including the Russian-Ukraine war and Israel-Iran conflict that infiltrated the key allies to the Assad regime, Russia and Iran, with the scenario creating declining military and financial assistance in support of the regime. Rebel groups strategically took advantage of this geopolitical change and launched more attacks during this time of a vulnerable regime. The latter parts of the conflict resulted in the evacuation of Assad out of Syria on 7 December 2024 and the capture of Damascus highlights the reward of prolonged rebel actions.

On the other hand, according to Lister (2015) and Phillips (2016), the conflict in Syria nationally divided the Syrian regime and exported instability to the neighboring countries namely Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, and Turkey. The regional adjustments of powers according to sectarian and ideological grounds has also created the country of Syria a proxy zone, which has further increased Sunni-Shia tensions and has produced the sub-regional polarities. Syria has become effectively the symbolic and strategic battlefield of the new U.S. Russia confrontation. The 2015 Russian military intervention marked a recalibration of the geopolitical aspects and injected the civil war with a cold war dynamic. The Syrian crisis shows how conflict that is localized can create global international ripple effects and destabilize not only Syria but the system of international governance and peace systems. It accentuates the necessity of uniform global policies to this process of conflict resolution and hazard of divisive or interest-based policies.

Conclusion

This paper examines the role of rebel movements in the Syrian regime change and the wider effects that conflict in Syria has on international peace and security. Through the analysis, it can be confirmed that rebel groups provided critical roles in destabilizing and indeed bringing down the Assad regime. Despite the conflicting squabbles and ideology differences, other forces such as Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS), Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and others came on the ground to wage an armed struggle in the long run and made alliances in order to weaken the regime. Besides, the Syrian crisis produced marked global effects. It instigated destabilization in the whole region, contributed to internationalization of terrorism, caused humanitarian disasters, weakened the institutions of the world and enhanced great-power tensions. The proxy character of the war and ideological clash in Syria illustrates that local conflicts and international system of security are very interdependent. As such, the Syrian conflict serves as a lesson, 'how badly conceived regime-change policies and foreign interventions may lead to sustained conflicts that have extensive international implications. The inability of international concerted efforts, and, more specifically, the inability of global institutions, including the United Nations to take any decision, poses a vivid example of the necessity of reforms of the system of international peacekeeping and conflict resolution mechanisms.

Recommendations

i. Strengthening Early Warning and Conflict Prevention Systems

Concerning early warning and conflict reduction, regional organizations, i. e. the Arab League, the European Union, the African Union, should invest in robust early-warning systems that can scout and forestall incipient internal conflict that could later mutate into regional or international menace. This move would have most probably prevented the civil war in Syria.

ii. Reform of International Governance Structures

Second, review of the global governance architecture is due. There should be a reconsideration of the use of the veto by United Nations Security Council when prevalent atrocity or humanitarian disaster exists. It would limit the use of the veto in cases where the occurrence of the recorded crime against humanity is even established prompting the swift and strong international action. The omission of such restraints would have most likely alleviated the unintentional backlash of foreign interventions and counterproductive regime-change policies, which threatened both the Western, as well as non-Western states.

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