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## МИРОВЫЕ И РЕГИОНАЛЬНЫЕ ДЕРЖАВЫ НА БЛИЖНЕМ ВОСТОКЕ

### **SYRIAN UPRISING: UNDERESTIMATED EXTERNAL FACTORS. CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF AN AMERICAN APPROACH TO THE ONSET OF INSURGENCY AND CIVIL WARS**

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The article is devoted to the critical analysis of the Fearon and Laitin's approach to the onset of insurgencies and civil wars, using the case of the Syrian Uprising. It examines the role of external factors which is underestimated by the American scholars.

**Key words:** Syria, Syrian uprising, civil war, external factors, Syrian regime, Syrian opposition, rebels, revolution, Middle East, Arab Spring, the military, coercive apparatus, Russia, regional actors, major powers.

The uprising in Syria started in late March of 2011, and has been transformed to the full-scale civil war which threatens security of the whole region and carries far-reaching implications for the entire international system. Syria, being a state with quite stable, slowly-growing economy, with a majority of population supportive to the regime, is experiencing now bloody civil war with a huge influx of radical Islamist fighters from all over the world. It makes the reasons and factors contributed to the country's slide into the civil war highly discussed. A lot of work already has been done describing internal factors which led to the phenomenon of so-called Arab Spring, including socio-economic, political, ideological factors.

This paper aims to critique the approach of James Fearon and David Laitin [1] to the factors that contribute to the onset of insurgency and civil war using the case of Syria. The article claims that they chose wrong indicators which favor civil war. It also intends to explain importance of external factors that contribute to robustness of the regime and opposition and, therefore, to the civil war. In this paper I am not discarding internal factors per se. They played a certain role as well, however, without involvement of external factors events of March 2011 would not become the Syrian Uprising and later the Syrian civil war.

In Fearon and Laitin's article *Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War* [2. P.75—90], published in February 2003 in *The American Political Science Review*, authors argue that there are certain conditions that favor insurgency and make the civil war more likely. They suggest that these include **poverty** — which marks **financially organizationally and bureaucratically weak states and favors rebel recruitment, and rough terrain, political instability, and large populations which all aid insurgents.**

Basically the Fearon and Laitin's approach fails to explain insurgency and civil war in Syria, because none of these factors were at place in Syria. Authors are considering wrong indicators which according to their analysis contribute to the onset of the civil war.

**Economics.** Taking into account poverty, which marks financially, organizationally, and bureaucratically weak states, the analysis shows that it does not explain the onset of civil war in Syria. Indicators such as income per capita, annual GDP growth, unemployment (also among youth) in Syria in the wake of the uprising were quite good, especially if we compare them with other countries of the region, like Egypt, which experienced uprisings but did not fall into the civil war. In the wake of uprising Syria had higher GDP per capita, higher annual GDP growth than Egypt, lower unemployment rate (both total and among youth), and lower inflation [3]. Moreover, Syrian literacy rate is of the highest in the region (Syria — 84.1%, Tunisia — 79%, Egypt — 73.9%) [4] which also contributes to a country's better economic stance. This is not to say that Syria was among the most economically developed countries in the region and did not have socio-economic problems, but this is to indicate that on the regional level Syria was doing quite well and those indicators cannot solely explain the onset of the Syrian uprising and the civil war. They are present in many other places around the world which do not experience anything like Syria. Considering the above mentioned factors it is also important to indicate that organization and state bureaucracy in Syria are quite strong, especially taking into account the fact that in 2014 in most areas under regime control basic goods are available and the government's institutions have shown remarkable resilience [5].

Moving further, Fearon & Laitin's argument that rough terrain, political instability, and large populations contribute to the insurgency and civil war also can hardly explain the Syrian case.

**Population.** Syrian population (22 mln) is relatively small if to compare with Iraq (32.5 mln), Egypt (80 mln) or Saudi Arabia (28.2 mln), which according to Fearon & Laitin should decrease the risk of civil war in the country. It is clear that despite relatively small population Syria is in the civil war. However what is important about population here is its distribution. According to the last Syrian census of 2004, 53% of population was urban, while 43% of total population lived in Damascus and Aleppo [6; 7]. Therefore, we can assume that this numbers were even higher in 2011, also taking into account annual growth of urban population of about 2.9% [8]. It is important due to the number of reasons. Damascus and Aleppo are the military strongholds of the regime with much bigger presence of coercive apparatus (police, mukhabarat [9], military personnel) than in other cities due to strategic, administrative, and economic importance of these two cities. It allows the regime to have tighter control over the cities. Damascus and Aleppo are also the most attractive cities in the country from economic perspective and infrastructure which explains their high population numbers. Thus, high concentration of population in the main cities with bigger police/military presence contributes to their stability and reduces risk of insurgency there. One of the facts that matters for insurgency, according to Fearon & Laitin, is whether economic opportunities are so poor that the life of a rebel is attractive to 500 to 2,000 young men. Given a high percentage

of urban population which does not experience desperately poor economic opportunities and has a high level of literacy rate it is hardly possible that the life of a rebel is attractive to the Syrians living in the urban areas which are highly controlled by the regime's coercive apparatus.

***Rough terrain and political instability.*** Neither of these two factors was present in Syria. Syrian geography does not have much of a rough terrain which is primarily semiarid and desert plateau with narrow coastal plain [10]. However it is important to notice that Syrian borders with Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel are mountainous. This fact is very important because Syrian mountainous borders contribute to cross-border rebel activity. Major battles between rebel forces and Syrian Army are happening in cities and towns or places close to the mountainous areas (Deraa, Jisr ash-Shoghour, Homs, Idleb, Al Qusayr and later Aleppo), because otherwise the rebels would have no chances to fight Syrian army on the open space. Rough terrain along the borders allows rebels to cross them freely, to attack, and to go back. Therefore, Fearon & Laitin's argument about a country's mountainous terrain cannot fully explain the insurgency.

Syria was politically stable prior to the uprising. Mass protests and provocations (with casualties from both sides, demonstrators and police forces) started from late March 2011 in bordering cities with Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey which seems to be at least suspicious. The city of Jisr ash-Shoghour is about 20 km from the Turkish border; Deraa is right on the border with Jordan; Homs is 30 km from the Lebanese border and Hama is about 80 km; Deir az-Zour is about 100 km from the Iraqi border. One can argue that almost all major Syrian cities are close to borders: Damascus is about 50 km from the Lebanese border, Aleppo is about 50 km from the Turkish border, Tartus is about 50 km from the Lebanese border, Latakia is about 60 km from the Turkish border — which is certainly true. However the cities like Damascus and Aleppo did not experience mass demonstrations and insurgencies for about a year since the uprising started, and cities like Tartus and Latakia remained almost intact. Then reasonable question rises why some cities did experience massive insurgency while others did not. Here other factors come into play. Tartus and Latakia are two major cities located in the Mediterranean coast which historically was Alawi. The Assad clan belongs to the Alawi sect of Shia Islam and hence cities of Latakia and Tartus are considered to be loyal to the Syrian regime. That is why, predominantly Alawi populated Mediterranean cities of Latakia and Tartus remained almost intact. Also following the onset of the insurgency and the civil war in Syria a lot of internally displaced people (predominantly Sunnis) from Aleppo, Homs, Hama, and elsewhere found the refuge in the coastal cities of Tartus and Latakia. By some estimates the number of Sunnis in those areas now nearly equals the number of Alawites along the coast [11]. This is to say that it did not spur the conflict in those areas and it undermines initial sectarian narrative of the conflict.

Another two major cities, Aleppo and Damascus, are military strongholds of the regime. A lot of police and mukhabarat agents are stationed there; a lot of military bases and headquarters of the army are situated either within the cities or in their suburbs, so it allows the regime to have tighter control over the cities which are strategic from the administrative and economic point. This contributes to the argument of Theda Skocpol about the importance of state's coercive apparatus in securing the regime from the fall. She poses that *if state's coercive apparatus remains coherent and effective, and the*

*state's capacity to maintain a monopoly on the means of coercion is strong, revolution is unlikely to be successful* [12. P. 34; 13]. Also Damascus and Aleppo are two major commercial centers where Syrian business elite, mostly Sunni (loyal to the regime), resides. Since 1970s, the regime has worked on building networks of capital that tie business elite with state officials. It resulted in the long-term state-business partnership which made urban Sunni economic elite loyal to Assad regime and provided it with powerful economic leverage [14]. That helps to understand why Aleppo remained majorly unharmed for the first year of uprising and Damascus is still under the regime's control.

Thus, it can be concluded that Fearon & Laitin cannot explain the onset of insurgency and civil war in Syria using economic indicators, arguments for rough terrain, large population, and political instability. As Fearon and Laitin do not pay much attention to the external factors that favors insurgency and civil war, further I will continue exploring them. I argue that external factors contribute to robustness of both, the regime and the opposition, and, therefore, to the civil war in Syria.

Firstly, it should be mentioned that there are two main groups taking direct part in the Syrian civil war: the Syrian government and opposition each with outside patrons. The first one is very cohesive and united and the second is highly fragmented, which lacks unity of purpose, unity of command, and unified international support. The opposition can be divided into internal and external, where the former is divided into moderate and radical, and armed and peaceful. Different goals and composition of opposition, as well as methods that opposition groups use, made it extremely fragmented and overall weak. As Joshua Landis marked in the spring of 2012, *'the political leadership of the Syrian opposition remains divided, the Syrian National Council claims to speak for the entire opposition but has been struggling to contain divisions within its own ranks as well as to unite with competing opposition parties.* [15]' With the time, fragmentation has been worsened, especially with the increasing involvement of radical Islamic groups (Jabhat an-Nusra, Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL)) and influx of foreign jihadi fighters from more than 70 countries [16]. It only worsens rebels' performance as those radical groups started to fight against other anti-Assad forces [17] weakening the opposition. Another factor which contributes to the absence of the united opposition which represents significant part of the Syrian population is a big amount of external supporters of the armed opposition. Due to its crucial geopolitical position Syria is attractive to many different forces and everyone pursues its own interests: Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, USA, Britain, France, etc. It leads to the situation when a lot of external actors support different opposition groups. This means that they receive funding from different sources which makes them be dependent on their masters. And, while there is no united approach/position among opposition supporters — there will be no solid and cohesive opposition in Syria. Moreover, the absence of united and balanced position among the international community on the Syrian crisis weakens opposition groups even further.

So far neither the regime forces, nor the opposition were able to claim strategic superiority in the Syrian civil war. However, the regime has proved its robustness over the last three years and keeps control over major cities of the country and the majority of its territories, although rebels control significant regions in the north and east of Syria and clash with the Syrian army in suburbs of Damascus and Aleppo.

One of the main reasons for the Syrian regime robustness is its ability to deliver basic public services, supply basic commodities, provide relative security in the government-controlled areas and maintain functional coercive apparatus. A key thing needed for that is functional economy which can provide delivery of the above mentioned services. Despite the disastrous effect of the civil war on the country's economy, the Syrian government managed to avoid total economic collapse and to keep its economy afloat. In most areas under the regime control basic goods are available and the government's institutions have shown remarkable resilience [18]. The government maintained public salaries (even in many areas outside of the government control). This is crucially important because the state sector in Syria remains one of two key pillars of the economy and underpins the regime's social control [19]. No doubt that the Syrian government could not manage it alone. It became possible with significant external assistance which is primarily coming from Iran in the form of financial and technical assistance, and from Russia, mostly in the form of providing diplomatic support in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Thus, the Syrian regime has managed the economic crisis skillfully which allowed it to keep state sector loyal.

Scholars like Skocpol [20], Bellin [21; 22], Russel [23], Andreski [24], Weede and Muller [25] acknowledged importance of the strength of a state and especially its army and coercive apparatus in affecting the outcome of a civil war. In case of Syria loyalty of coercive apparatus to the regime keeps the Syrian government from collapse and loss to the opposition. So, why the Syrian coercive apparatus is coherent and effective? As Eva Bellin (2004, 2012) argues, maintenance of fiscal health of coercive apparatus and maintenance of international support networks are of the main contributors to its robustness. The Syrian government made everything possible to provide its army and security apparatus with necessary financial benefits... "*When the military can no longer pay the salaries of its recruits and the security forces cannot guarantee supplies of arms and ammunition, the coercive apparatus disintegrates from within*" [26]. This important factor is missing in the analysis of Fearon & Laitin as well.

***Syrian opposition.*** Analyzing the reasons of why the Syrian coercive apparatus is loyal, coherent and effective, we should necessarily consider the question, why rebels did not give up their fight after three years of exhausting confrontation with the robust regime of Bashar al-Assad. It is important to indicate that the opposition in Syria is still fighting and do not think to surrender. This is to say that it would be impossible for the opposition to survive and keep their struggle against the regime (and now against terrorist groups) on their own. The rebels in Syria would not have fought for three years without financial benefits, especially when there is no foreseeable victory and your opponent is not going to give up. Thus, Bellin's argument about factors which contribute to the state's coercive apparatus robustness is applicable to the opposition armed groups as well. The question should be asked: what are the reasons of the opposition robustness in Syria? The answer is at the same place: *fiscal health of opposition* (means having money to operate and provide basic needs for people in controlled territories) and *international support networks* (sponsors that constantly provide opposition with necessary supplies and provide international support). External actors which support the Syrian opposition provide it with significant aid which includes not only arms, equipment, training, food,

money but also fighters, and political support in international organizations (Arab League, NATO, and the UN). International sponsors of the Syrian opposition provide it with all necessary means to be able to confront the regime and be able to exercise at least some basic functions of the state. The pool of external actors that supports Syrian rebels is quite big and includes the GCC states, Turkey, US, Britain, France [27]. For example, Qatar does not hide the fact that since the Arab Uprising began they have been directly supplying fighters and weapons to assist rebels who fight against their regimes (Libya, Syria) [28]; Saudi Arabia has been supplying rebels and radical Islamists in Syria with money and weapons [27] (until winter 2014 when they officially banned it by the royal decree); Turkey provides safe haven for jihadists who goes to Syria through the Turkish territory [29]; US provides financial support and training as well as Britain and France. By April 2013 it was up to 11,000 individuals from 74 nations who have become opposition fighters in Syria [30]. All of the above mentioned factors largely contribute to vitality and robustness of the Syrian opposition.

***Syrian regime.*** The above mentioned robustness of the Syrian regime would definitely be impossible without support and assistance it receives from Russia and primarily from Iran and its satellites (Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi Shia militia, although now Iraqis are busy in their own country). Basically Iran pays for the Syrian government to maintain its public sector, urban population and army loyal, and helps to keep country's economy from collapse. Iranian aid is crucially important for keeping Syrian economy afloat and making regime able to provide fiscal health to its state sector which remains the largest single employer in the country [31]. As an example, in 2013 Iran opened \$3.6 billion credit line for Syria; Iran ships crude oil which is refined in Syria [32] and which helps the regime to keep supply of fuel to army and people. As for Russia, Moscow provides Damascus with necessary diplomatic support in the UNSC and also economic, military, and humanitarian assistance.

Russia vetoed four U.N. Security Council resolutions against Syria blocking any punitive measure against Damascus, including military intervention which was widely discussed by the Western powers, and excluding any possible room for the Libyan scenario to be repeated in Syria. On the sidelines of G-20 Summit in September 2013, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that Russia will keep providing assistance to Syria if it's attacked [33]. Apart of that, Russia continues economic and humanitarian assistance to Syria, also delivering arms and weapons to the Syrian government fulfilling its obligations under the previously-signed agreements majorly of 2010 that were signed during the official visit of the Russian President Medvedev to Damascus. Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov repeatedly commented on repeating accusations of supplying Syrian regime with arms illegally: "We are not supplying anything prohibited to Syria and we are not supplying anything that could destabilize the situation in the region" [34]. The overall nature of the Russian military supplies is defensive. Firstly they aim to finalize the implementation of Russian commitments within existing contracts and, secondly, to counterbalance the illegal flow of the weapons to the armed opposition and extremists that receive it anyway. Moreover, as a result of the Russian delegation (headed by vice Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin) visit to Syria in May 2014, Syria will receive financial assistance (without compensation) worth of  $\text{R}240$  mln. It will be allocated to

the country's social sector [35]. All of these definitely contribute to economic and political survival of the Syrian regime and, thus, to its survival in general.

Therefore, it is clear that external actors play important role in providing their constituencies with necessary support which is crucial to their robustness and vitality. However in order to understand why those actors chose to back respective sites, it is important to explain their interests.

**External actors' interests.** As it is already mentioned above, the amount of external actors, involved into the Syrian civil war, is quite big. The US, Britain, and France are at odds with Russia and China over the character of the conflict and the future of Syria, while regional non-Arab powers Turkey and Iran similarly support opposite sites along with Saudi Arabia and Qatar who back anti-government forces in Syria [36]. As we can see, amount of external actors involved in the Syrian civil war is quite big and each of them has their own interests which simultaneously overlap and contradict with each other. I will briefly analyze interests of the actors that are directly involved into the Syrian civil war: Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran. Interests of Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, on one hand, and Iran, on the other, clash. Although interests of the US, France, the UK and Russia are very important and play crucial role I am not going to elaborate on them here as it is a separate topic for analysis. Just to say briefly that their interests and involvement keep the conflict ongoing and hardly contribute to its settlement. At the same time regional actors' involvement and interests are crucial for understanding regional dynamics and peculiarities as they were at place before the uprising, and the major powers just basically backed them to avoid direct participation in the conflict.

The bottom line of their rival is Sunni-Shia confrontation and struggle for the influence in the region. With the demise of three traditional power centers — Baghdad, Cairo, and Damascus — new powers have risen. Saudi Arabia and Qatar assumed leadership and try to capitalize on the current turbulence in Egypt, Iraq and Syria [36]. Their main goal is to confront Shia Iran whose influence also increased since the beginning of 2000s by virtue of the American invasion in Iraq, Iranian nuclear program and the policies of its regional clients — Syria, Hezbollah and friendly Shia regime in Iraq. From the perspective of the Gulf States, in particular Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the crisis in Syria offers an opportunity to roll back the influence of Teheran in the region and to strengthen their own position. Beyond this, a prospect of the Iranian defeat in the Levant would weaken Teheran sufficiently and force it to back down on other contentious issues, such as its nuclear program [37]. As for Turkey its main rival in the region is Iran, and Syria is its client-state; therefore, weakening of the Shia regime is in the Turkey's interests. Thus, the main goal of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey is to topple Alawi regime in Syria which is allied with Iran. Their rationale is that after fall of the Assad regime its successor would be predominantly Sunni, hence, indebted to them and no longer a client of Iran and Hezbollah. In their perspective, they would receive friendly Sunni regime in the strategically located country.

Altogether, the regime change in Syria would pose more credible military threat towards Iran and would decrease its influence in the region. As a result of the regional dynamics, approved and heavily supported by the Western powers, the opposition forces

with a strong presence of Islamists have mostly benefited from the conflict and financial and material support that they received from the regional actors (Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia), while those with a more secular orientation have seen little support. This has clearly strengthened the more radical elements in Syria's opposition [37], and only contributed to the further escalation of the conflict.

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Fearon and Laitin's explanation of factors that contribute to the onset of insurgency and civil war does not work in the case of Syria. Holding internal socio-economic, political, ethnic and religious factors that played a certain role in the onset of the Syrian uprising and civil war, it is clear that involvement of external factors which contribute to the robustness of the Syrian regime and opposition and, therefore, to the civil war, explains the onset of insurgency much better. In contrast, Bellin's argument about importance of state's coercive apparatus in defining the success of insurgency showed its credibility in explaining the onset of the Syrian civil war. Considering the Syrian army and the opposition armed groups as generally equal participants of the civil war, in terms of functioning and maintaining its robustness, Bellin's argument is applicable to opposition groups as well. As a result of the analysis, external support networks (represented by external actors) involved in Syrian conflict provide both sides with necessary assistance which contributes to the robustness of both sides. Having such support neither of the opponents are ready to succumb, hence, hoping that in the end of the day it can eliminate its rival completely.

Thus, it is fair to state that external assistance to opposing groups in the civil war (regime coercive apparatus and opposition armed groups) which aims to maintain ability of the sides to carry out their responsibilities and, thus, preserve control and loyalty of their constituencies, significantly increases the risk of onset of civil war and predicts its large scale run.

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## APPENDIX

GDP per capita, USD	2005	2010	2011
Syria	1 536	2 962	3 095
Egypt	1 273	2 645	2 801

Source: UNDP

GDP annual growth rate (%)	2006	2008	2010
Syria	6,2	5,7	6
Egypt	6,8	7	5
Tunisia	3,9	6,1	2,8
Algeria	5,7	3,2	2,4
Jordan	8	5,2	3,9

Source: Central banks of the states

Unemployment rate (%)	2000	2004	2006	2008	2010
Syria	9,5	9,8	8,2	10,9	8,4
Egypt	9	10,7	10,6	8,7	9
Tunisia	15,7	13,9	12,5	12,4	13
Algeria	29,8	20,3	12,3	11,3	10
Jordan	13,7	12,4	14	12,7	12,5

Source: World Bank Group

Unemployment youth (15—24) rate (%)	2000	2004	2006	2008	2010
Syria	18,8	19,2	18,4	21,9	19,3
Egypt	25,5	30,4	31,4	25,8	26,3
Tunisia	32,4	29,5	27	27,4	29,4
Algeria	52,5	40,8	23,9	23,9	22,2
Jordan	27,9	27,3	30,1	28,9	30,1

Source: World Bank Group

Inflation Rate	2006	2008	2010
Syria	5	5	3
Egypt	3,5	6,5	12,5
Tunisia	4	5	4
Algeria	1,8	3,8	3,5
Jordan	5	5	5

Source: <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/>