



## Going on the Run: What Drives Military Desertion in Civil War?

Holger Albrecht & Kevin Koehler

To cite this article: Holger Albrecht & Kevin Koehler (2017): Going on the Run: What Drives Military Desertion in Civil War?, *Security Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/09636412.2017.1386931](https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2017.1386931)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2017.1386931>



Published online: 30 Oct 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 98



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



## Going on the Run: What Drives Military Desertion in Civil War?

Holger Albrecht and Kevin Koehler

### ABSTRACT

Under which circumstances do soldiers and officers desert in a violent domestic conflict? This article studies individual military insubordination in the Syrian civil war, drawing on interviews with deserters from the Syrian army now based in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. A plausibility probe of existing explanations reveals that desertion opportunities originating in conflict events and the presence of safe-havens fail to explain individual deserters' decision making. Accounting for socio-psychological factors—moral grievances and fear—generates more promising results for an inquiry into the conditions under which military personnel desert. While moral concerns with continued military service contribute to accumulating grievances among military members engaged in the civil war, fear—that is, soldiers' concerns for their own safety—is a more effective triggering cause of desertion. The article presents a theory-generating case study on the causes of military insubordination and disintegration during violent conflict.

The disintegration of national armies is a recurring phenomenon in violent domestic conflict. Mutinies, coups, factionalism, and mass desertions can trigger civil wars or emerge as the consequence of violent domestic conflict in cases where the army's organizational cohesion is compromised. Among the various conflict trajectories of the Arab Spring, for instance, Yemen and Libya witnessed the descent of peaceful mass uprisings into civil war through mutinies within the respective national armies. More generally, scholarship on army factions switching sides has become increasingly influential in the study of civil war.<sup>1</sup>

---

Holger Albrecht is an associate professor of Political Science at the University of Alabama. He is the author of *Raging Against the Machine: Political Opposition under Authoritarianism in Egypt* (2013) and the co-editor of *Armies and Insurgencies in the Arab Spring* (2016).

Kevin Koehler is a research adviser at the NATO Defense College in Rome. His work has appeared in journals such as *Comparative Political Studies*, *Comparative Politics*, and *International Political Science Review*, among others.

---

Color versions of one or more of the figures in the article can be found online at [www.tandfonline.com/FSST](http://www.tandfonline.com/FSST).

<sup>1</sup> See Lee J. M. Seymour, "Why Factions Switch Sides in Civil Wars: Rivalry, Patronage and Realignment in Sudan," *International Security* 39, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 92–131; Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014); Jesse Driscoll, *Warlords and Coalition Politics in Post-Soviet States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Theodore McLauchlin, "Desertion and Collective Action in Civil Wars," *International Studies Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (December 2015): 669–79; Romain Malejacq, "Warlords, Intervention, and State Consolidation: A Typology of Political Orders in Weak and Failed States," *Security Studies* 25, no. 1 (February 2016): 85–110; Sean M. Zeigler, "Competitive Alliances and Civil War Recurrence," *International Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (March 2016): 24–37.

In line with these expectations, the civil war in Syria witnessed military insubordination as well. The Syrian military saw a large number of desertions, the bulk of which occurred among soldiers and low-ranking officers. Estimates put their overall number at somewhere between fifty thousand and one hundred thousand; that is, up to one-third of pre-war active military personnel deserted.<sup>2</sup> While the exact number remains uncertain, President Assad acknowledged the problem in an unprecedented speech in July 2015, speaking of manpower shortages in the Syrian army and announcing an amnesty for draft-dodgers in an apparent attempt to bolster recruitment efforts and military effectiveness.<sup>3</sup>

It is not surprising that the civil war raging in Syria since early 2012 has tested the loyalty of regime soldiers. Yet we witness a very specific form of military disintegration in Syria: while military insubordination has turned into a mass phenomenon, it comes in the form of atomized individual desertions of soldiers and officers, rather than collective action through mutinies, military rebellions, and coups d'état. Collective forms of military insubordination are common in armies with compromised hierarchical orders and dysfunctional chains-of-command. Conversely, the maintenance of control mechanisms within the military hierarchy renders military insubordination extremely risky, since a failed mutiny or attempt to simply walk away from a unit while on duty will likely result in serious consequences for the individual involved.

The Syrian civil war therefore presents us with a paradox: individual mass desertions from a military institution that nevertheless has remained capable of sustaining its organizational order and fighting capacities.<sup>4</sup> Based on our structured qualitative interviews with Syrian army deserters—conducted in the refugee communities of Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey—we are interested in individual *socio-psychological dispositions* as push factors vs. inter-subjective *opportunities* as pull factors in collective or individual action.

While extant research on civil war in general—and military insubordination in particular—has widely emphasized opportunities in explanations of high-risk action, existing opportunity structures originating in conflict dynamics have not led individual soldiers and officers in Syria to walk away from their units. We therefore depart from such standard explanations and introduce an analytical narrative based on socio-psychological dispositions as push factors in desertion decisions. From our interviews, we know that fear, indignation, and moral concerns exist: deserters have discussed these factors at length in their post-hoc justifications, and it seems unlikely that they would

<sup>2</sup>Florence Gaub, "Syria's Military: Last Man Standing?," *Judy Dempsey's Strategic Europe*, 21 July 2014 (Carnegie Europe), <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=56274>; Charles Lister, *Dynamic Stalemate: Surveying Syria's Military Landscape*, Brookings Doha Center Publications, 19 May 2014, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/dynamic-stalemate-surveying-syrias-military-landscape/>.

<sup>3</sup>See Maher Samaan and Anne Barnard, "Assad, in Rare Admission, Says Syria's Army Lacks Manpower," *New York Times*, 26 July 2015.

<sup>4</sup>Kheder Khaddour, "Strength in Weakness: The Syrian Army's Accidental Resilience," 14 March 2016 (Carnegie Middle East Center), <http://carnegie-mec.org/2016/03/14/strength-in-weakness-syrian-army-s-accidental-resilience-pub-62968>.

even fathom the risky move of desertion had they not developed strong grievances against the regime—or at least against their complicity in the regime’s counter-insurgency. But we do not know which socio-psychological dispositions matter more as effective desertion triggers than others.

Distinguishing between socio-psychological dispositions—namely moral grievances and fear—as well as individual economic incentives, we find that fear (concerns about personal risk associated with continued military service) comes as an effective trigger of individual desertion. Accumulated moral grievances figure prominently in soldiers’ post-hoc reasoning and almost certainly contribute to their disposition to insubordination. But moral grievances do not constitute effective triggering causes of desertion, and economic considerations remain insignificant in the decision making process.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows: in the next section, we develop a theory of individual mass desertion in violent conflicts. We then reflect on our empirical research on the Syrian civil war and the data upon which our findings are based. A third part investigates how opportunity structures may have triggered military desertion in Syria and concludes that there is a lack of evidence for this assumption. Part four establishes testable hypotheses on various socio-psychological dispositions that may have made deserters go on the run. The fifth section presents some preliminary findings based on our empirical data and suggests that fear—that is, personal risk perception—is the most effective trigger of insubordination. Section six discusses the paradox of soldiers who deserted out of concern for their personal safety, only to expose themselves to a new level of violence in taking up arms against the regime. Finally, the article concludes with a brief discussion of our argument’s empirical, theoretical, and methodological implications.

### Personal Disposition Versus Opportunity in High-Risk Individual Action

In the absence of a larger body of literature on individual military desertions, drawing on civil war scholarship more broadly serves as a valuable point of departure for the establishment of guiding assumptions. Scholars have discussed the impact of grievances, greed, and opportunities in studies explaining why individuals join rebel groups and which factors render the outbreak of civil war more likely than others.<sup>5</sup> From this broad perspective, scholars distinguish analytically between an *opportunity* structure for collective action and the *personal disposition* of individuals to support rebel groups, take up arms against their government, execute terrorist acts, or defy authoritarian repression and control. While the focus on personal dispositions leads the researcher to study properties of individual agents—including emotions, identity, sense of belonging, greed, hatred, and fear—the focus on opportunities redirects attention to factors beyond individual agency, such as the

---

<sup>5</sup> James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War,” *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (February 2003): 75–90.

degree of repression exercised by governments, events on the battleground, and social and geographic factors present in the conflict zone.

Scholars of violent conflict are primarily interested in the breakup of militaries and the militia-ization of armed forces, hence group behavior rather than individual action.<sup>6</sup> Only a small number of works have focused on factors explaining individual behavior of deserters. Theodore McLauchlin's groundbreaking scholarship stands out in that it most forcefully employs an opportunity perspective, utilizing arguments that emphasize the geography of violent conflicts. McLauchlin argues that the geographical characteristics of soldiers' hometowns influenced desertion patterns in the Spanish Civil War, with soldiers hailing from inaccessible mountainous areas being more likely to desert.<sup>7</sup> We employ McLauchlin's work, grounded in the broader body of literature on civil war, as a useful starting point for the development of opportunity-based hypotheses. According to this approach, the emergence of safe-havens—possibly aided by the presence of mountainous terrain—should be seen as a trigger for individual military desertions.

It is important to note, however, that a pure opportunity perspective cannot offer a conceptually convincing explanation for individual desertion. Military insubordination is not solely caused by pull-factors—soldiers do not desert merely because the opportunity presents itself. Rather, arguments about opportunities as triggers of desertion presuppose the presence of individual grievances. In other words, opportunity arguments depart from the conceptual assumption that grievances are necessary conditions for desertion.<sup>8</sup>

We agree with this position to treat grievances as necessary conditions. But grievances as an explanatory factor cannot be held constant across time and cases. Given the scarcity of survey data and individual-level information on civil conflict,<sup>9</sup> available studies often employ proxy variables to draw inferences on the socio-psychological dispositions of agents in a conflict environment. In the civil war literature, for example, poverty and social inequality are held in support of the assumption that individual *greed* and feelings of relative *deprivation* render people more receptive to taking up arms against their governments.<sup>10</sup> Since these variables are measured at the national level, however, they treat grievances as constant across individuals. As a

<sup>6</sup>See Seymour, "Why Factions Switch Sides"; Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion*; Driscoll, *Warlords*; Zeigler, "Competitive Alliances."

<sup>7</sup>Theodore McLauchlin, "Desertion, Terrain, and Control of the Home Front in Civil Wars," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 58, no. 8 (December 2014): 1419–44; McLauchlin, "Desertion and Collective Action." See also Holger Albrecht and Dorothy Ohl, "Exit, Resistance, Loyalty: Military Behavior during Unrest in Authoritarian Regimes," *Perspectives on Politics* 14, no. 1 (April 2016): 38–52.

<sup>8</sup>See for example, McLauchlin, "Desertion, Terrain," 3–4.

<sup>9</sup>Exceptions include Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy M. Weinstein, "Who Fights? The Determinants of Participation in Civil War," *American Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 2 (April 2008): 436–55; Rune Henriksen, "Warriors in Combat—What Makes People Actively Fight in Combat?" *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30, no. 2 (April 2007): 187–223.

<sup>10</sup>Ted R. Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971); Indra De Soysa, "Paradise is a Bazaar? Greed, Creed, and Governance in Civil War, 1989–99," *Journal of Peace Research* 39, no. 4 (July 2002): 395–416; Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, "Greed and Grievance in Civil War," *Oxford Economic Papers* 56, no. 4 (October 2004): 563–95.

consequence, differences in individual socio-psychological dispositions are excluded as explanations for military insubordination by design, rather than as the result of systematic tests.

This article provides a micro-level contribution to the literature of military cohesion, and civil war more broadly, in that it uses data from the Syrian conflict as a plausibility probe of different explanations of individual insubordination, including opportunity-structure approaches and those emphasizing distinct socio-psychological push factors. Evidence from interviews with deserters supports our intuition that there are different individual-level drivers of desertion. One interviewee, for example, maintained that there were different kinds of deserters. After emphasizing the role of revolutionary principles in convincing soldiers to desert, he went on to argue that “[b]y now, of course, I won’t convince anybody to desert because of the revolution. I can only convince people because they don’t want to die. What would they be dying for? The regime? Bashar al-Assad? The revolution? No, just survive.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, there is evidence to support the notion that there are different individual-level push factors and that these factors might change over time. What we do not know is which of these push factors matter more.

In order to shed light on this question, we differentiate between different types of individual grievances and observe their development over time. We do so against the background of risk perceptions that have remained high across individuals and over time, suggesting that opportunity factors have not acted as effective triggers of desertion, particularly in low-information environments present during ongoing civil war.<sup>12</sup> As a theoretical starting point, we suggest that both moral grievances and fear contribute to an individual’s decision making process, but in very different ways. Moral grievances have an ambivalent effect: while they do contribute to an individual’s disposition to desert, they do not constitute a triggering cause.

Research on civil war onset found that moral grievances are a strong motivating factor for sustained rebel activism in the context of indiscriminate state repression and destructive violence.<sup>13</sup> Emotions have also been instrumental in sustaining rebel movements.<sup>14</sup> Moral grievances and emotions certainly increase regime soldiers’ disposition to desert, in great part because the soldiers are ultimately complicit in the repression and human rights violations exercised through a regime’s counterinsurgency measures. The logic is straightforward: increasing numbers of opposition casualties could convince soldiers that the regime is using disproportionate force against civilians and that continued military service cannot be morally justified. Desertion would then be the consequence of a process similar to what Sebastian Schutte called “reactive mobilization” in response to indiscriminate

<sup>11</sup> Former member of the Syrian military, interviewed by Kevin Koehler, Hatay, Turkey, 15 December 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Also see Kevin Koehler, Dorothy Ohl, and Holger Albrecht, “From Disaffection to Desertion: How Networks Facilitate Military Insubordination in Civil Conflict,” *Comparative Politics* 48, no. 4 (July 2016): 439–57.

<sup>13</sup> Sebastian Schutte, “Geography, Outcome, and Casualties: A Unified Model of Insurgency,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 6 (September 2015): 1101–28.

<sup>14</sup> Irena L. Sargsyan and Andrew Bennett, “Discursive Emotional Appeals in Sustaining Violent Social Movements in Iraq, 2003–11,” *Security Studies* 25, no. 4 (September 2016): 608–645.

state violence.<sup>15</sup> Yet the personal risk associated with a desertion attempt prevents individuals from turning disposition into action. Hence moral grievances cause individual preference falsification, rather than desertion.<sup>16</sup>

In turn, protracted civil war increases the degree of personal risk associated with remaining a loyal member of the regime military. Soldiers shoot at rebels, but they are also the targets of violent insurgencies. Increasing conflict intensity therefore leads military personnel to reevaluate their personal risk perception, taking into account both the dangers of a desertion attempt and the risk of military service itself. In fact, fear has been found to be a strong factor where individuals experience civil war violence<sup>17</sup> or pressure to join rebel forces,<sup>18</sup> as well as where powerless group members are confronted with a strong threat from outside of their group, such as from opponents in civil wars.<sup>19</sup>

These broad expectations find initial evidence in explaining individual desertion decisions: a series of interviews conducted among former Viet Cong fighters during the Vietnam War revealed that “personal hardship” and “fear of being killed” were the two most widely cited reasons for their desertions.<sup>20</sup> Interviews with US service members during World War II showed that deserters have been “frightened” or “worried” at a significantly higher degree than non-deserters.<sup>21</sup> We build on these arguments and expect that fear for one’s own life emerges as the most robust predictor of desertion on the individual level. While moral grievances lead to the disposition to desert, fear serves as the most effective triggering factor for individual military desertion.

## Doing Research on Military Desertion in the Syrian Civil War

Our interests and intuition regarding military behavior are situated on the individual level and thus have to be assessed using fine-grained empirical information. Our research with deserters from the Syrian military allows us to tackle these issues. First, the Syrian conflict has turned, since early 2012, into one of the most violent domestic conflicts of our time, and any decisions that individuals take are almost certainly associated with extreme risks for their personal well-being.<sup>22</sup> Second, the flight of large parts of the Syrian population to neighboring countries in the first few years of the conflict

<sup>15</sup>Schutte, “Geography.”

<sup>16</sup>Timur Kuran, *Private Truths, Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

<sup>17</sup>Wendy Pearlman, “Narratives of Fear in Syria,” *Perspectives on Politics* 14, no. 1 (April 2016): 21–37.

<sup>18</sup>Kristine Eck, “Coercion in Rebel Recruitment,” *Security Studies* 23, no. 2 (May 2014): 364–98.

<sup>19</sup>Elanor Kamans, Sabine Otten, and Ernestine H. Gordijn, “Power and Threat in Intergroup Conflict: How Emotional and Behavioral Responses Depend on Amount and Content of Threat,” *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 14, no. 3 (2010): 293–310.

<sup>20</sup>Leon Goure, “Inducements and Deterrents to Defection: An Analysis of the Motives of 125 Defectors,” *Rand Report* no. RM-5522-1-ISA/ARPA (1968): xi.

<sup>21</sup>See Arnold M. Rose, “The Social Psychology of Desertion from Combat,” *American Sociological Review* 16, no. 5 (October 1951): 623.

<sup>22</sup>For the initial stage of the Syrian conflict, see Elizabeth O’Bagy, *Syria’s Political Opposition*, Middle East Security Report 4 (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2012); Reinoud Leenders and Steven Heydemann, “Popular Mobilization in Syria: Opportunity and Threat, and the Social Networks of the Early Risers,” *Mediterranean Politics* 17, no. 2 (July 2012): 139–59.



has provided unique opportunities for empirical research compared to other conflict settings; our insights come from extensive fieldwork conducted in the Syrian refugee communities in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey between mid-2014 and January 2015.<sup>23</sup> To locate interview partners, we employed a non-probability sampling method, given the constraints imposed by the ongoing conflict and our inability to identify all potential members of the target population. To increase variance within our pool of respondents both across and within countries, we used respondent-driven chain referral (snowballing) to identify potential respondents and we varied our entry points in order to minimize the danger of network bias. We were thus able to tap into different networks of deserters geographically based in different parts of each host country.

As is shown on the map in [Figure 1](#) below, our interlocutors come from different places across the country, including the urban centers of Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs; the areas around Damascus and Idlib Governorate; and the Mediterranean coast and rural areas in the south and east. We have subjects who served in eleven of Syria's fourteen governorates (including Damascus), originally coming from nine different provinces, and were based in three different host countries (Jordan, Lebanon, or Turkey) at the time of the interview.

This variation in geographic origin of deserters, location of military service, and post-desertion destination allows us to explore the potential relationship between desertion decisions and larger conflict dynamics, such as conflict intensity, regime and opposition strength, specific military tactics, the existence of opposition-held areas in close geographical proximity, and similar factors. On the individual level, we collected information on respondents' social background (income, level of education, type of employment before military service, etc.), military status (conscript or volunteer, military rank), perception of various aspects of military organization (such as the nature of ties to other soldiers and officers), perception of risks and difficulties associated with desertion, participation in the conflict (nature and timing of deployment), and other desertion details.<sup>24</sup> We anonymized our records to protect the identities of our respondents and purposefully did not ask them about their potential activities as part of the armed opposition, since revealing such information might have endangered them.

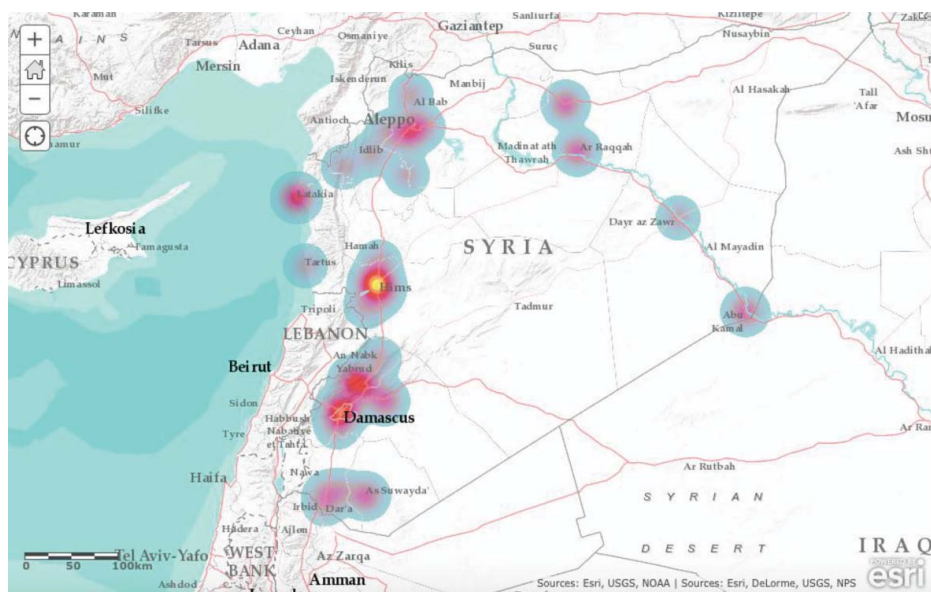
In addition to our own empirical research, we draw on a variety of additional sources to bolster our insights. First, we consider casualty data collected by the Violations Documentation Center (VDC) in Syria,<sup>25</sup> a network of Syrian activists who collect and

<sup>23</sup> Face-to-face and Skype interviews for this project were conducted in Kilis refugee camp and Hatay (Turkey); Amman and Irbid (Jordan); and Beirut, Tripoli, Aley, and Aarsal (Lebanon). We have not conducted interviews with Syrian refugees in Europe or other countries in Syria's wider neighborhood for both practical and substantive reasons. Empirical research on the Kurdish refugee community in Northern Iraq was barred by the researchers' security concerns amid the advances of the Islamic State in the area in June 2014. During the interview phase of this project in 2014 and early 2015, Europe had not yet become a major destination for Syrian refugees. According to the European Union, less than eighty thousand Syrians made it to Europe in 2014, most of whom were dispersed across the continent rather than staying in Italian or Greek refugee camps; see Frontex Risk Analysis Unit, *Annual Risk Analysis 2015* (Warsaw: Frontex, 2015), p. 57.

<sup>24</sup> For the organizational infrastructure of the Syrian military, see Joseph Holliday, *The Syrian Army: Doctrinal Order of Battle* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2013).

<sup>25</sup> See the Violations Documentation Center in Syria website: <https://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en> (last accessed 6 June 2016).





**Figure 1.** Geographic origin of Syrian military deserters

triangulate information on casualties from both the opposition and the regime. The VDC collects this information through a network of informants within the country and then verifies the identity of each victim, recording the status (civilian/non-civilian), gender, rank (for army personnel), geographical location, and type of death (for example shooting, shelling, or aerial bombardment). The data enable us to draw a geographically and temporally detailed picture of conflict dynamics in Syria. In addition, we rely on evidence available in the form of YouTube desertion videos and press reports, as well as publications from think tanks, human rights organizations, and similar sources. These additional sources allow us to check the reliability of our interview material and triangulate factual information.

Our empirical material imposes some methodological limitations. Since we are operating with a non-random sample, we cannot generalize our findings to a population of all military deserters. Moreover, we were forced to sample on the dependent variable—studying military deserters alone. These limitations, however, do not mean that there is no empirical variation to be exploited. We are still able to assess the plausibility of rivaling hypotheses, and we can exploit temporal variation to approach the question of which factors trigger desertion. In so doing, we use the material for two purposes: first, to introduce empirically rich data on desertion episodes for a better understanding of the mechanisms of desertion. Our second aim is to exercise a plausibility probe of existing explanations. The results of our inquiry therefore constitute a theory-generating case study. While our claim is modest, insights from our inquiry have the potential to serve as an important building block in conceptual innovation through the generation of hypotheses that have so far been largely unexamined in scholarly treatments of the subject field.

## Meet Syria's Military Deserters

A striking observation in our data is that all but one of our respondents identified themselves as Sunni Arabs. This resonates with the conventional wisdom portraying the Syrian civil war as driven by sectarian differences. One of the forms such arguments have taken in academic debates is the suggestion that loyalty is the effect of a shared sectarian identity.<sup>26</sup> Loyalty in the Syrian army can hence be explained as the effect of an ethnicity-inspired solidarity group.<sup>27</sup> Our empirical observations provide evidence for the claim that ethnicity comes as a necessary—but insufficient—condition for desertion. As applied to the Syrian army, the argument is relevant only to a relatively small group of military elites and high-ranking officers.<sup>28</sup> The majority of the rank-and-file was not drawn from minority groups before the outbreak of the conflict, and many Sunni soldiers and officers continue to serve in the regime camp.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, sectarian identities are constant, and explanations based on identity features fail to explain specific desertion dynamics, both temporal and in magnitude. In sum, there is convincing evidence that sectarian differences make Syria a “most likely case” of military insubordination during domestic conflict,<sup>30</sup> but this does not provide a sufficient explanation for the specific patterns and dynamics of desertion.

We also find evidence that contradicts narratives of a conflict largely defined by sectarian identities. While soldiers almost universally pointed to identity issues to justify desertion, their post-desertion activities varied considerably, implying that factors beyond sectarian identity may be at work. For example, our respondents are split sixty to forty as to whether they joined the armed insurgency or peaceful anti-Assad opposition on the one hand or retreated to civilian life on the other. Early desertion videos invariably link the condemnation of what rebels perceive as the criminal regime army with a pledge of allegiance to the national Free Syrian Army.<sup>31</sup> Outrage over the military's actions is thus immediately linked to a desire to protect civilians from such atrocities.

Given the propagandistic function of desertion videos, it is not surprising to find that most deserters who recorded them did so as part of the process of joining the

<sup>26</sup>Oded Haklai, “A Minority Rule over a Hostile Majority: The Case of Syria,” *Nationalism & Ethnic Politics* 6, no. 3 (August 2000): 19–50; McLauchlin, “Loyalty Strategies”; Kristen Harkness, “The Ethnic Army and the State: Explaining Coup Traps and the Difficulties of Democratization in Africa,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 60, no. 4 (June 2016): 587–616.

<sup>27</sup>James M. Jasper, “A Strategic Approach to Collective Action,” *Mobilization* 9, no. 1 (February 2004): 1–6.

<sup>28</sup>Bou Nassif, “‘Second Class.’”

<sup>29</sup>See for example, Thanassis Cambanis, “Assad's Sunni Foot Soldiers,” *Foreign Policy*, 5 November 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/11/05/assads-sunni-foot-soldiers-syria/>.

<sup>30</sup>Aaron Rapport, “Hard Thinking about Hard and Easy Cases in Security Studies,” *Security Studies* 24, no. 3 (September 2015): 431–65.

<sup>31</sup>Over the course of the conflict, desertion statements on YouTube became increasingly common, especially among senior officers whose announcements have been instrumental in propagating recruitment into the Free Syrian Army. These short videos usually show a deserter announcing his desertion while specifying his rank and unit. Deserters often also announce their allegiance to a rebel group and justify their action with references to human rights violations and direct criticism of the Assad regime; see, for instance, the announcements (in Arabic, all websites last accessed on 22 September 2016) of General Manaf Tlass, a prominent former regime figure and personal friend of Bashar al-Assad ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=RIEDWc0C65k](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RIEDWc0C65k)), Brigadier General Tayyar Mohammed Yahya Bitar ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=PRWtrstUf8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PRWtrstUf8)), and Colonel Zubaida al-Meeqi, the first female Alawite officer to break ranks with the Assad regime ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kf8uW3golal#t=10](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kf8uW3golal#t=10)).

armed opposition. Our evidence, however, paints a more nuanced picture: almost 30% of our respondents state that they did not want to fight against the regime and only about 45% eventually joined the armed opposition. An impressive 95%, by contrast, agree that they found it problematic that their position forced them to fight against fellow Syrians. This evidence suggests a certain pride in military service even among deserters and despite cleavages along sectarian lines. While dissatisfaction with military service during the violent conflict might have been universal, the drivers of such dissatisfaction were more diverse than the emphasis on sectarian differences implies.

In order to understand desertion dynamics, we also need to take into account differences between volunteers and conscripts, as well as differences between ranks. Long-serving Syrian officers have been bound to the military through a comprehensive system of incentives. Officers used to live in special neighborhoods with their own systems of services and social relations. This meant that officers have effectively been socialized in a parallel world, disrupting relations with civilian society.<sup>32</sup> Qualitative interviews produced a wealth of evidence on this system. Not only have officers profited from material benefits such as cars or houses, they have also used access to military goods (especially fuel) for personal gain and generally enjoyed an elevated social status.<sup>33</sup> Kheder Khaddour illustrates the effects of this system by quoting an Alawite resident of a military neighborhood explaining that the “Alawite officer is closer to the Sunni officer than he is to an Alawite from Esh al-Warwar [an adjacent lower-class Alawite neighborhood] because they say the Alawites of Esh al-Warwar are lower than them.”<sup>34</sup> Socialization dynamics “fostered a sense of solidarity among officers from different sects” and to some extent disrupted solidarity within sectarian groups.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, our interviews reveal intriguing temporal patterns of desertion incidents. As is shown in [Figure 2](#), the desertion events we study cluster in a period of little more than one year, between fall 2011 and late 2012. Nearly two-thirds of our respondents deserted in this period, a trend that parallels independent information published on desertion rates.<sup>36</sup> In fact, our empirical observations from the Syrian conflict are corroborated by very similar temporal patterns of desertion episodes in the US army during World War II: most deserters quit fighting in a period between two and five months after their initial exposure to combat.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Kheder Khaddour, “Assad’s Officer Ghetto: Why the Syrian Army Remains Loyal,” *Carnegie Middle East Center Regional Insight*, 4 November 2015, <http://carnegie-mec.org/2015/11/04/assad-s-officer-ghetto-why-syrian-army-remains-loyal-pub-61449>.

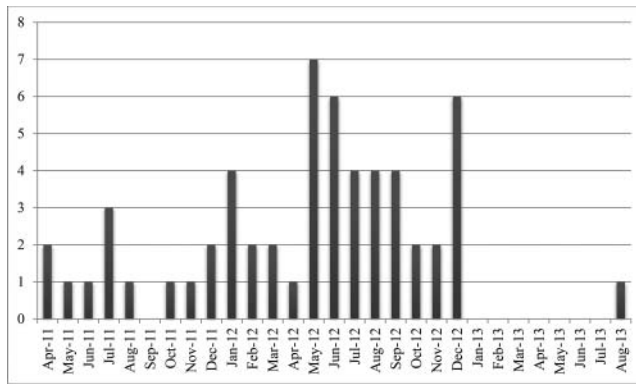
<sup>33</sup> Dorothy Ohl, Holger Albrecht, and Kevin Koehler, “For Money or Liberty? The Political Economy of Military Desertion and Rebel Recruitment in the Syrian Civil War,” *Carnegie Middle East Center* (24 November 2015), 6–7.

<sup>34</sup> Cited in Khaddour, “Assad’s Officer Ghetto,” 6.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>36</sup> See Aljazeera’s “Defection Tracker” at: [www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/syriadefections](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/syriadefections) (last accessed 6 June 2016); see also International Crisis Group (ICG), *Syria’s Mutating Conflict* (ICG: Middle East Report No. 128, 1 August 2012), 1; Lucas Winter, “A Modern History of the Free Syrian Army in Deraa,” Fort Leavenworth, Foreign Military Studies Office (2013).

<sup>37</sup> See Rose, “Social Psychology,” 626.



**Figure 2.** Desertions by month.

Another interesting observation in this temporal pattern is that desertions ceased abruptly by the end of 2012, which allows for various interpretations of their effects on the military organization. It is intuitively compelling to assume endogeneity effects in desertion patterns, with early incidents resulting—when turning into a mass phenomenon—in a snowballing dynamic. Yet rather than a J-curve type temporal pattern, which would see an exponential increase in observed desertions and finally the break-down of the Syrian army, we witness the military’s consolidation and the end of the desertion wave. Individual desertions of early risers did not seem to have a sufficiently prominent showroom effect on those that occurred subsequently. This prompts us to focus on desertion as a collection of individual decision making processes.

This temporal variation in desertion dynamics leads us to consider various analytical points of departure for our inquiry into triggering causes, invoking either opportunity-based or grievance-based explanations. In an opportunity-based perspective, one would look at the temporal correlation of desertion hikes with events on the battle ground and other factors believed to facilitate military insubordination: geographic safe-havens, signals of rebel strength and regime weakness, and possibly others. Conversely, temporal correlation of desertions with specific conflict dynamics—best accounted for through casualty data as proxy variables—offers leverage on socio-psychological explanations emphasizing moral grievances and fear.

### Perceptions of Opportunities

We begin our empirical plausibility probe from a perspective that takes opportunity-based explanations—that is, pull-factors of desertion—seriously. As indicated above, the extant literature on civil conflict has emphasized the importance of geographical features, focusing in particular on the existence of safe-havens as sanctuaries for rebel groups. McLauchlin has applied a similar argument to the Spanish Civil War, explaining desertion decisions in this setting with the geographical

characteristics of soldiers' home regions.<sup>38</sup> Consequently, there are good reasons to assume that such factors might matter in the Syrian context as well.

We do find initial evidence for the safe-haven hypothesis. The emergence of rebel-held territories in northern Syria coincided with the onset of the desertion wave in spring 2012. Such rebel strongholds, moreover, tended to be located on rough terrain or close to the Turkish border, suggesting that geographic characteristics played a role in sustaining local insurgencies. In brief, arguments based on geographically determined opportunities seem to explain a great deal about the behavior of these military deserters.

But we caution against overinterpreting this observation. On the individual level, we do not find evidence that objective improvements in opportunities for desertion were perceived as such by potential deserters. To the contrary, the context in which our respondents were embedded led them to believe that opportunities for desertion were, if anything, actually diminishing. We believe this dynamic is an instance of a more general phenomenon: opportunity-based arguments, when relying on correlations between objective developments on the ground and the number of desertions, fail to take into account the fact that opportunities need to be perceived as such by the actors in order to become effective. The low-information and high-uncertainty context of conflict situations renders this translation problematic.

Our interview data show that observable changes on the battlefield that seemed to favor the opposition—notably the emergence of rebel-controlled areas—were not perceived as opportunities for desertion by soldiers. Rather, desertions occurred despite an acute perception of the risks involved, and countermeasures by the regime prevented a widespread loss of control. The following section addresses this argument in empirical detail.

### **Opposition Safe-Havens**

Opposition control over specific areas appears to be a significant factor affecting the path of desertion. Idlib Governorate—which shares a long border with Turkey, some of which is marked by mountainous terrain—illustrates these dynamics. The province is home to Jisr al-Shughour, a town of forty thousand inhabitants to the west of the provincial capital Idlib, in which the first armed clashes between regime and opposition broke out in June 2011.<sup>39</sup> Following the suppression of the rebellion in Jisr al-Shughour, a sustained insurgency emerged in Jebel al-Zawiya, a mountain range south of Idlib city that remained effectively outside the reach of the regime army. Jebel al-Zawiya thus developed into a center of armed resistance in the north and the heart of a rebel-controlled area that at times stretched as far south as Hama province.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> McLauchlin, "Desertion, Terrain."

<sup>39</sup> Joseph Holliday, *Syria's Armed Opposition*, Middle East Security Report 3 (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2012), 17.

<sup>40</sup> Asher Berman, *Rebel Groups of Jebel al-Zawiyah* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2012), <https://www.slideshare.net/ISWPress/rebel-groups-in-jebel-alzawiyah>; Joseph Holliday, *Syria's Maturing Insurgency*, Middle East Security Report 5 (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2012).

The regime regained control of Idlib itself through an offensive in late February and March 2012, but this had the unintended effect of pushing rebel forces into the surrounding countryside, which effectively “remained beyond the government’s reach.”<sup>41</sup> An opposition safe-zone thus stretched from the Turkish border north of Jisr al-Shughour through Jebel al-Zawiya down into Hama governorate in spring 2012. Our data include evidence that this particular area attracted deserters; the emergence of this safe-haven coincides with a spike in desertions in spring 2012. Interestingly, among our interviewees, soldiers who deserted to Idlib Governorate had been stationed as far away as Deraa or Deir El-Zour, both about 400 km away from Idlib. In addition, similar to McLauchlin’s findings in the case of the Spanish Civil War,<sup>42</sup> most of the soldiers deserting to Idlib were born in this province, suggesting that the availability of social support paired with rough and inaccessible terrain was what attracted deserters.

### ***Opportunities Do Not Trigger Desertions***

Although the creation of rebel-controlled areas coincided with an increase in desertions, a more detailed analysis of the trajectories of deserters to Idlib suggests that they were instrumental in establishing rebel control, rather than being attracted by it. To begin with, half of the desertions occurred before spring 2012, indicating that deserters played a role in establishing the safe-haven. Indeed, as Berman notes, deserter-led rebel groups emerged in Jebel al-Zawiya as early as December 2011 and played an important role in rebel activity in the area.<sup>43</sup> This interpretation is further sustained by the fact that the majority of our interviewees who deserted to Idlib subsequently joined rebel forces there.

More generally, we do not find evidence for the safe-haven hypothesis on the individual level. Rather, there are indications that some soldiers actually deserted to places that were subject to strong fighting, rather than to safe-havens. When we analyze areas to which deserters fled, we find that these regions witnessed an increase in opposition casualties at that time when compared to preceding months, suggesting that such areas were subject to above-average degrees of regime violence at the time the desertions occurred.<sup>44</sup> The impression is further corroborated by a synchronic comparison. The proportion of deserters fleeing to places with above and below average numbers of opposition casualties are very similar, further weakening the plausibility of the safe-haven hypothesis.<sup>45</sup> These findings suggest that

---

<sup>41</sup> Holliday, *Syria’s Maturing Insurgency*, 13.

<sup>42</sup> McLauchlin, “Desertion, Terrain.”

<sup>43</sup> Berman, *Rebel Groups of Jebel al-Zawiyah*, 6–7.

<sup>44</sup> The diachronic comparison calculates the percentage of deserters who deserted to provinces with above (below) average opposition casualties in the month of desertion compared to all previous months in the same province. 66% of all deserters fled to provinces witnessing above average opposition casualties compared to previous months, during which casualties had been significantly lower in those very same provinces; only 2% fled to areas with province-months with below average casualties.

<sup>45</sup> The synchronic comparison calculates the percentage of deserters who deserted to provinces with above (below) average opposition casualties compared to all other provinces in the month of desertion. 30% fled to places with above average opposition casualties, 32% to places with below average opposition casualties.



deserters' arrival in specific areas contributed to an increase in violence. For two-thirds of our subjects, opposition casualties in the provinces to which they fled were significantly higher than the average number of victims in the months preceding their desertion; for one-third, opposition casualties exceeded the average number in other provinces during the same month. In brief, many deserters could have fled to safer places, but they did not.

Finally, if a causal link existed between the emergence of safe-havens and desertion decisions, we would expect deserters to recognize such opportunities. We included a number of questions in our interviews to assess respondents' risk perception. If safe-havens played a role in triggering desertions, we would assume that soldiers who deserted to them considered their personal risk lower than those who did not. Comparing those who deserted to the safe-haven in Idlib to all other deserters, however, does not yield significant differences. Idlib-deserters had a very similar assessment of the high risk associated with desertion, suggesting that the presence of a rebel-controlled area was not perceived as a factor facilitating desertion.

Taken together, the safe-haven hypothesis is not supported by interview data. Rather, the example of the rebel-controlled area in Jebel al-Zawiya suggests that deserters were instrumental in creating safe-havens, rather than deserting because of their existence. Many deserters moved to areas that were subject to more, rather than less, intense fighting, and on the individual level, we do not find evidence that soldiers perceived the existence of rebel-controlled areas as factors facilitating desertion. Thus we are left with a counterintuitive observation: the number of desertions increases in parallel with the emergence of opportunity structures that could plausibly be thought to favor them, but there is no evidence on the individual level to connect the supposed cause and effect.

## Individual Motivations in Desertion Decisions

Our inability to find empirical evidence for the opportunity hypothesis prompts us to consider an alternative explanation, invoking a range of different individual-level motivations. We start from the premise that a range of different dimensions interact to bind members of the Syrian military to their institution. While sectarian identity might be one of these,<sup>46</sup> other factors include processes of socialization<sup>47</sup> and material incentives,<sup>48</sup> as well as control and coercion.<sup>49</sup> Given the complexity of these processes, we would expect dynamics that trigger desertion to be no less

---

<sup>46</sup> McLauchlin, "Loyalty Strategies"; Bou Nassif, "'Second Class'."

<sup>47</sup> Khaddour, "Assad's Officer Ghetto."

<sup>48</sup> Frank O. Mora and Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Economic Reform and the Military: China, Cuba, and Syria in Comparative Perspective," *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 44, no. 2 (April 2003): 87–128; Philippe Droz-Vincent, "From Political to Economic Actors: The Changing Role of Middle Eastern Armies," in *Debating Arab Authoritarianism*, ed. Oliver Schlumberger (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 195–211.

<sup>49</sup> Eyal Zisser, "The Syrian Army: Between the Domestic and External Fronts," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 5, no. 1 (March 2001): 1–12.



diverse. In our exploratory analysis, we differentiate between three broad categories of factors: moral grievances, risk, and material considerations.

We use two different types of data to probe the plausibility of these factors. We rely extensively on casualty figures collected by the VDC through a network of informants on the ground. The figures are broken down by province and differentiated between opposition and regime losses. Opposition losses include both rebel fighters and civilians, while regime losses account only for regime fighters (irrespective of whether they are soldiers or irregular combatants). While the VDC internally validates reports of casualties and strives to include only victims who can be identified by name (through local sources, identification documents, or other evidence),<sup>50</sup> there is no way to independently cross-check the reliability of their data. We mitigate this limitation by aggregating the data into monthly casualty totals on the province level, rather than relying on the daily data differentiated by type of death provided by the VDC. However, we maintain the VDC's differentiation between opposition and regime casualties.

Using these variables, we assess the importance of different desertion triggers based on three fundamental expectations. First, if moral grievances drove desertions, we would expect to find a relationship between opposition casualties and the risk of desertion. In fact, deserters often justified their actions by referring to the military's deployment against civilians, framing it as the "Assad army" (*jaysh al-Assad*), often in conjunction with an adjective such as "criminal" (*mujrim*) or "barbaric" (*barbari*), and pointing to its killing of civilians. These sentiments are juxtaposed with the military's mission to protect the homeland and its people and with the "national" (*watani*) Free Syrian Army (*jaysh al-hurr*).<sup>51</sup> Such evidence suggests that desertions can be explained by the breakdown of regime discourses of legitimation, centered on a struggle against armed terrorist elements, which led to the emergence of moral objections against the role of the army among soldiers.

Our qualitative interviews yield a wealth of evidence for such processes: soldiers often explained their decision to desert with reference to information they received through communication with their friends and families about regime atrocities in their hometowns; others recounted having directly witnessed the indiscriminate use of violence while in military service. Such experiences were used as explanations for why military service became morally irresponsible. Moral outrage as a potential desertion trigger can best be captured through the association between individual desertion and opposition casualties.<sup>52</sup> This leads us to consider the following hypothesis:

<sup>50</sup>VDC informant for Deir Ezzor city, discussion with Kevin Koehler, Hatay, Turkey, December 2014, and VDC coordinator based in Istanbul, phone conversation with Kevin Koehler, December 2014.

<sup>51</sup>See, for instance, "Inshiqāq al-'amid Fāyaz 'Amr mudir al-madrassat al-faniyat al-juwiya," [The Desertion of Fāyez Amro, Director of the Special Air Force Academy], YouTube video, 1:05, posted by Omama Ameer, 16 February 2012, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LgLLwZcN\\_5g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LgLLwZcN_5g); and "Inshiqāq al-'aqid Mustafa 'Abd al-Karīm," [The Desertion of Colonel Mustafa Abd al-Karīm], YouTube video, 0:50, posted by Syrian Media Services, 18 February 2012, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SrhBuZ8LQ\\_k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SrhBuZ8LQ_k).

<sup>52</sup>We use opposition casualties (rather than civilian casualties) since it is unclear how VDC exactly differentiates between combatants and non-combatants (civilians) among opposition casualties.

*Hypothesis 1 (H1).* If moral grievances drove military desertions, we would expect a positive relationship between opposition casualties and desertion.

The casualty data also allow us to assess the importance of fear as a consequence of personal risk. Fear certainly has been widespread in Syrians' perceptions of politics and violence—both during the ongoing civil war and as subjects of particularly repressive authoritarian rule under the Assad regime.<sup>53</sup> If fear was a major driver of desertions, we would expect a positive relationship between regime casualties in the area where soldiers are stationed (base province) and the likelihood of desertion. Regime casualties in the base province serve as an indicator of the degree of threat created by regime opponents and felt by individuals serving in the regime army and are a direct reminder that military service is associated with high risks for soldiers' physical safety. If casualty levels increase, the risks of continued military service might well exceed the threshold of what an individual soldier is willing and able to bear. In fact, there is initial evidence that the desertion cascade during 2012 coincides with increased numbers of regime casualties, as well as events on the battlefield that put the regime on the defensive until it reorganized its coercive capacities and made significant gains beginning in early fall 2013.<sup>54</sup> This leads us to consider Hypothesis 2:

*Hypothesis 2 (H2).* If risk-based grievances drove military desertion, we would expect a positive relationship between regime casualties and desertion.

In addition to the casualty data, we also draw on information collected through our questionnaires that allows us to address questions related to respondents' attitudes and individual characteristics, such as socio-economic background or military rank. The *rank* variable captures military ranks on an ordinal scale. The clear modal category is that of sergeant (including the ranks of *raqib*, *raqib thani*, and *raqib awwal*) with 40%, followed by lieutenants (including both *mulazim* and *mulazim awwal*) with 18%. *Income* measures self-reported income on an ordinal scale using income brackets. We use these variables to probe factors related to material incentives. If material factors were important to guaranteeing military loyalty—as is suggested by the regime's repeated efforts to boost salaries and pensions—we would expect to find that the duration in service increases with increasing rank.<sup>55</sup> Low-ranking military personnel are typically not part of the military spoils system, which was established to serve mainly the higher officer corps.<sup>56</sup> Such individuals therefore have less to lose from desertion. Access to spoils, in turn, should increase with increasing rank. Higher-ranking officers would therefore think twice about sacrificing their privileges by desertion. For the same

<sup>53</sup> Pearlman, "Narratives of Fear."

<sup>54</sup> Holliday, *Syrian Army*; Lister, *Dynamic Stalemate*.

<sup>55</sup> Ohl, Albrecht, and Koehler, "Money or Liberty?"

<sup>56</sup> Mora and Wiktorowicz, "Economic Reform"; Khaddour, "Assad's Officer Ghetto."

reason, we would assume income to be negatively related to the duration in service. This leads us to consider our final hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 3 (H3).* If material concerns drove desertions, we would expect negative effects of the rank and income variables.

## Fear Triggers Military Desertion

Our data impose certain limitations in terms of applicable analytical strategies. Because we were unable to collect data on both deserters and non-deserters, we cannot explain the difference between desertion and loyalty, but we can nevertheless investigate the relative importance of desertion triggers. While all respondents ultimately deserted, they did so at very different points in time. We observe the first desertions in April 2011—mere weeks into the uprising—while our last observation occurs in August 2013, with an average of just over one year between the onset of the conflict and desertion. Our approach exploits this temporal variation, capitalizing on the fact that these soldiers are loyal up until the moment they desert. Also, the relatively limited number of cases restricts the number of variables we can consider simultaneously; we administered our questionnaire to sixty-one individuals in total, but missing values on a number of variables reduce the number of cases to fifty-six in most applications.

Given these challenges, we start with a series of plausibility probes based on the logic of comparative, rather than statistical, control.<sup>57</sup> We first assess the fit of Hypotheses 1 and 2 with a straightforward test based on the logic of necessary and sufficient conditions respectively.<sup>58</sup> We calculate the percentage of desertion cases that display the hypothesized trigger: the higher this percentage, the closer a specific factor comes to being a necessary condition for desertion. We then calculate the percentage of non-desertions that display the hypothesized trigger: the smaller this number, the closer it comes to being a sufficient condition. In the most extreme case, a factor that is both necessary and sufficient would be present in 100% of desertions and 0% of non-desertions.

For the purpose of this test we operationalize high opposition or regime casualties as values that are significantly above the average.<sup>59</sup> We employ different reference groups. In the diachronic version we compare the value of opposition or regime casualties in the month and province in which a desertion occurred to the average of all prior months in the same province. In the synchronic version we compare the same number to the average of all other provinces in the same month.

<sup>57</sup> Arend Lijphart, "Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method," *American Political Science Review* 65, no. 3 (September 1971): 682–93.

<sup>58</sup> Bear F. Braumoeller and Gary Goertz, "The Methodology of Necessary Conditions," *American Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 4 (October 2000): 844–58; Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

<sup>59</sup> Based on passing the 90% confidence threshold in a one-tailed t-test.

**Table 1.** Moral grievance and risk.

	Moral Grievance		Risk	
	Diachronic	Synchronic	Diachronic	Synchronic
Desertion	74%	34%	66%	36%
Non-Desertion	22%	21%	29%	33%

Based on a first perusal of our data, we find support for both the moral grievance and risk perspectives. The first row in [Table 1](#) shows the percentage of desertion-months that saw above-average values on the respective variable in diachronic or synchronic comparisons. The second row shows the same information for non-desertion months. The information can be interpreted as summarizing the extent to which moral grievances and risk approach the status of a necessary (Row 1) or sufficient (Row 2) condition for desertion. [Table 1](#) lends initial support to Hypotheses 1 and 2 in the diachronic variant: 74% of all deserters left their units in the context of above-average opposition casualties in their vicinity, while the same value is 66% for regime casualties. Moreover, only 22% and 29% of province-months that did not see desertions show such above-average values. In substantive terms, experiencing high levels of opposition and regime casualties is thus a condition that a great number of deserters have in common. At the same time, it differentiates province-months with desertions and province-months without desertions from each other. The synchronic version of the comparison, on the other hand, does not show strong patterns.

A major concern with this type of analysis is that the findings might be driven by an increase of conflict intensity over time. Since both casualty figures and the likelihood of desertion might well increase over the course of a conflict, the association between high casualties and desertion might be spurious. Indeed, on the aggregate level, the correlation between conflict duration and opposition casualties is .60 ( $p < 0.001$ ). The situation for the risk hypothesis is more encouraging. Compared to opposition casualties, regime casualties have varied much less over the thirty months studied in this article.

What is more, as [Figure 3](#) demonstrates, there is a clear upward trend of the growth rate of opposition casualties over time, while the rate for regime casualties actually diminishes and eventually turns negative. This observation suggests that the effect of opposition casualties on the likelihood of desertion might be driven to an extent by a temporal trend, while this is much less likely to be the case for regime casualties. We are thus confident that the effect of increasing risk is robust to a time control, while the effect of moral grievance might be largely due to a temporal trend.

In fact, individual-level evidence in our data weakens the aggregate association between opposition casualties and desertions. If deserters were motivated by moral considerations, we would expect not only an association on the aggregate level, but also evidence for such a link on the individual level. In particular, we would expect that soldiers' attitudes towards the regime were affected by high levels of opposition casualties. But contrary to this expectation, those of our

respondents who justified their decision to desert with a wish to fight the regime left the military in the context of significantly fewer opposition casualties compared to those respondents who did not offer this justification (173 versus 103 monthly deaths, respectively).

Figure 4 below more profoundly illustrates the association between desertions and regime and opposition casualties. Individual-level data here corroborate our intuition that the association between fear and desertion is more plausible as a triggering cause than moral concerns. Indeed, cases of desertion in the context of high opposition casualties (positive cases) cluster in the later months of the conflict. Even more striking, almost all cases of desertion in the absence of high opposition casualties (negative cases) occurred in the first fifteen months (see the left panel of Figure 4). This is not true for desertions associated with regime casualties. As the right panel in Figure 4 shows, there are cases of desertion in the context of high regime casualties throughout the conflict, as well as desertions absent high regime casualties at the beginning of the conflict and towards the end of the period analyzed in this study. More formally, a t-test reveals a significant difference in average conflict duration between desertions with high opposition casualties and cases of low opposition deaths (fifteen versus nine months, significant at  $p < 0.000$ ). No such difference exists in the case of regime casualties. In fact, average conflict duration is even slightly—though insignificantly—higher in cases of low regime casualties (fourteen versus thirteen months).

We are thus confident that the effect of increasing risk is robust to a time control, while the effect of moral grievance might be largely due to a temporal trend. Our data allow us to treat fear as a triggering cause of desertion in the Syrian civil war, whereas

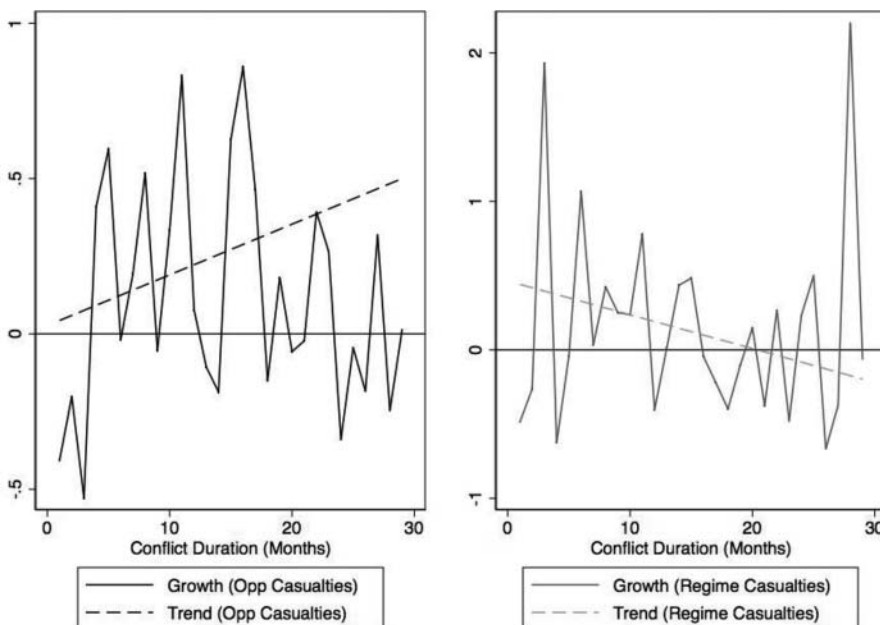
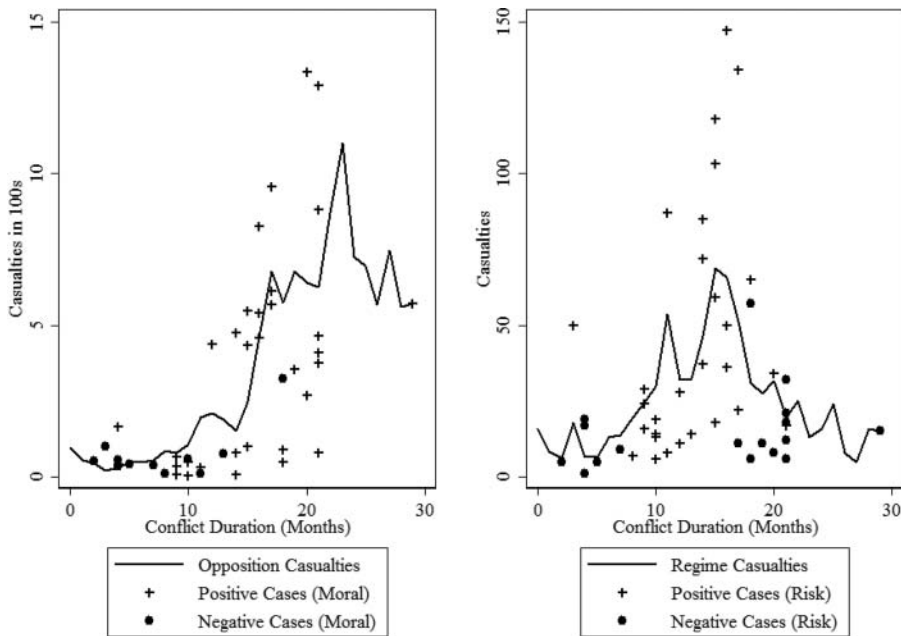


Figure 3. Trends in opposition and regime casualties, 2011–2013.



**Figure 4.** Casualties and conflict duration.

the relationship with moral concerns is uncertain. Accumulating moral concerns over time are most likely to have contributed to the decision making of deserters, but the impact on the act of desertion was not as direct as in those cases where deserters went on the run in reaction to increasing casualties among fellow soldiers.<sup>60</sup>

While we find limited support for H1 and relatively strong support for H2, our third hypothesis (H3)—based on material incentives—fares less well. We find in our empirical material that high-earning service members are just as likely to desert as low-earning soldiers. Average times in service are very similar for both higher and lower ranking officers (13.32 months below the rank of lieutenant versus 14.16 months from lieutenant upward) and for higher and lower income groups (above or below 20,000 SYR per month in March 2011 with 14.32 and 13.18 months before deserting, respectively). None of the differences is significant. These initial findings corroborate qualitative evidence that economic motives did not play a decisive role in triggering or preventing desertions in the initial stage of the Syrian conflict.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>60</sup>In order to test the validity of the two main variables, we estimate three linear probability models (see the [Appendix](#)). Given the limitations imposed by our data, we merely use these models to check the robustness of the relationships that emerged from the analysis conducted thus far. Most importantly, we assess the relative importance of moral grievances and risk while controlling for material factors and the passage of time. The results confirm the robustness of some of the findings we formulated above. In particular, regime casualties exert a significant positive effect on the probability of desertion, increasing our confidence that individual risk perception indeed triggered desertion among our respondents (H2). Moreover, our suspicion regarding the time-dependence of the opposition casualty variable is validated by the fact that this variable does not attain statistical significance once the time control is added.

<sup>61</sup>Ohl, Albrecht, and Koehler, "Money or Liberty?"

The notion that fear is an important trigger of desertion is consistent with the results of a study of Viet Cong deserters conducted in Vietnam by the Rand Corporation in the 1960s, which has largely gone unnoticed in scholarly accounts on military insubordination and rebel formation.<sup>62</sup> Our findings are somewhat counterintuitive given our qualitative interviews, in which most deserters recounted how experiences of regime violence persuaded them to attempt desertion. While mechanisms of persuasion and coordination were crucial in convincing soldiers to leave the military,<sup>63</sup> we maintain that the actual timing of desertion was driven by increasing individual risk. Moral outrage explains why individuals wanted to desert; fear explains why they actually went on the run.

### **A Paradox of Desertion and Rebel Recruitment**

The primary finding emerging from the analysis so far is that individual risk is an important trigger of desertion from the Syrian military. Regime casualties were above average in two-thirds of our desertion cases, while only 29% of province-months displayed above average regime casualties and no desertions. Moreover, the effect of regime casualties is likely to be robust to controlling for conflict duration.

This finding leaves us with a paradox: while our deserters left their positions under the impression of increasing personal risk, some then continued to take such risks by fleeing to parts of the country experiencing intense fighting. As mentioned above, many could have fled to safer places, but did not. What is more, about half of our respondents reported having joined the armed opposition after their desertion. Does the fact that they took up arms to fight the regime suggest that they did not flee out of concern for their personal safety? Might this apparent paradox be actually driven by endogeneity; that is, do desertions cause regime casualties by weakening the military, rather than desertions being caused by fear induced by increased personal risk? In this section, we explain that endogeneity concerns do not compromise our findings, and we suggest a different solution to the paradox.

There is a strong and a weak version of the endogeneity argument. Deserters could leave their units to join rebel groups in the area, thereby strengthening rebel capacities and helping to increase regime casualties. Alternatively, deserters could flee without joining local rebel groups in the area, which could still contribute to an increase in regime casualties by weakening the fighting capacity of regime units. In both cases, our interpretation that the relationship between regime casualties and desertion suggests fear as a trigger of insubordination would be mistaken.

Based on our data, we are confident that both versions of the endogeneity concern are unfounded. To begin with, there is no evidence that deserters were

---

<sup>62</sup>Goure, "Inducements and Deterrents."

<sup>63</sup>Koehler, Ohl and Albrecht, "Disaffection to Desertion."



directly involved in driving up regime casualties in the time and place of their desertion. About two-thirds of our respondents fled their base province after desertion and did not stay on to fight in the same area. Moreover, those who did join the armed opposition were no more likely to stay in their base province than those who did not. Perhaps most importantly, these findings are the same for those who did and did not desert in the context of above-average regime casualties. Taken together, our data suggest that deserter-turned-rebels were not responsible for increased regime casualties among their own units.

Desertions might still have indirectly heightened the risk for regime soldiers by weakening the remaining units of the army. But conflict dynamics do not support such an interpretation. Our face-to-face interviews indicate that desertion did not usually occur in the heat of battle when the impact on the regime army's fighting capacity would have been most immediate. Rather, deserters most often fled while on home leave, from their barracks, or from hospitals.<sup>64</sup> This suggests that the immediate impact of desertions on ongoing fighting was limited.

We propose a different solution for the apparent paradox of combative cowards, one which rests on a conceptual distinction between the decision to desert and subsequent decisions about joining rebel forces. To address these issues, we take a closer look at the deserters who fled to Idlib Governorate. Altogether, eleven of our respondents deserted to Idlib: five before the establishment of the safe-haven and six after that date. Our overall argument holds with respect to those who went to Idlib before an area there was liberated in early 2012. This group exemplifies the paradox well: given that they deserted before the safe-haven emerged, they are likely to have contributed to the establishment of opposition control there. Indeed, of these five deserters, three reported having joined the armed opposition, one retired to civilian life within Syria, and another crossed the border into Turkey. At the same time, three of the five did actually leave their units in the context of above-average regime casualties in their base province, corroborating our notion of personal risk as a major driver of desertion decisions.

Preliminary empirical evidence allows us to assume discrete causes and rationales for the two processes: while clearly contingent upon one another, the question of where deserters turn after fleeing the army and a potential decision to join rebel movements are influenced by factors unrelated to the triggering cause of desertion. Our material suggests that deserters' post-desertion destinations, as well as their decisions of whether or not to join the rebellion, were primarily determined by the social environment in which they found themselves.

To begin with, there is some empirical evidence that, upon their decision to leave, Syrian army deserters have been primarily attracted by the motivation to see their families and concerns about their own safety, rather than the prospect of violent battle against the Assad army from which they had just deserted. Of the eleven Idlib deserters, eight were original residents of the area, suggesting that they simply

---

<sup>64</sup>Various deserters from the Syrian military who asked to remain anonymous, interviewed by Holger Albrecht and Kevin Koehler, Turkey, March 2013 and June 2015.

went home. More generally, almost two-thirds of deserters who stayed in Syria did flee to their home regions. Those who neither fled home nor abroad ended up in various locations from regime-controlled Damascus to the contested countryside around the capital and rebel-controlled parts of Idlib Governorate. Taken together, however, deserters' home region seems to be the most consistent predictor of their post-desertion destination, a finding consistent with fear as an important driver of desertion. In other words, many deserters left their units out of concern for their personal safety, returned to their hometowns, and were then caught up in fighting.

Possible explanations for this phenomenon are hampered by our lack of interview data and will be left to further studies of deserters as a specific population for rebel recruitment. Our intuition prompts us to invoke the literature on the social environment of civil war,<sup>65</sup> which offers a number of possible reasons why deserters may have taken up arms against the Assad army. Perhaps they experienced social pressure as a consequence of the assistance opposition groups provided them to facilitate their desertion in the first place. Similarly, some deserters may have felt they had little choice but to defend themselves and their communities in an ongoing conflict. Finally, dire economic realities on the ground may have pressured deserters into joining the Free Syrian Army, many units of which received financial support from outside Syria, creating a rebel economy throughout the country.<sup>66</sup> Consequently, the Free Syrian Army was able to provide substantial material incentives to those it needed most to establish its fighting capacities: former military personnel.

## Implications

In this article, we presented a rare account of military insubordination in violent domestic conflict using fine-grained individual interview data on deserters. The empirical results of our inquiry are noisy, owing not only to the limitations inherent in our data collection process, but also—as we believe—because it involves a complex decision-making environment that dismisses simplistic cause-and-effect explanations. Nevertheless, the results of our research have intriguing empirical and theoretical implications that merit further systematic and comparative research.

Empirically, our insights into military insubordination among the Syrian armed forces shed light on specific dynamics in the Syrian civil war. Most

<sup>65</sup> Roger Dale Petersen, *Resistance and Rebellion: Lessons from Eastern Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Elizabeth Jean Wood, "The Social Processes of Civil War: The Wartime Transformation of Social Networks," *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (June 2008): 539–61; Zachariah Mampilly, *Rebel Rulers: Insurgent Governance and Civilian Life during War* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2011); Sarah Elizabeth Parkinson, "Organizing Rebellion: Rethinking High-Risk Mobilization and Social Networks in War," *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 3 (August 2013): 418–32; Koehler, Ohl, and Albrecht, "Disaffection to Desertion."

<sup>66</sup> Tom Keatinge, "The Importance of Financing in Enabling and Sustaining the Conflict in Syria (and Beyond)," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, no. 4 (August 2014): 53–61; Ohl, Albrecht, and Koehler, "Money or Liberty?"

desertions of soldiers and officers cluster in a specific period between late 2011 and late 2012, which helps explain the formation and strengthening of rebel groups as well as the reconfiguration of the loyal forces backing Bashar al-Assad. The erosion of the Syrian armed forces at least in part explains why the Bashar regime was unable to put down a fragmented rebellion and impede the rapid advances on Syrian territory of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) since mid-2014.

Our findings also propose a theoretical contribution to the study of civil conflict more broadly, as well as to scholars' methodological points of departure for studying a phenomenon such as the one presented. Discussions on the dynamics of violent conflict have been dominated by accounts in which correlations between inter-subjectively present conflict features and events (on the one hand) and assumed triggers of individual behavior (on the other hand) do the heavy lifting in causal interpretations. This is at least in part due to the lack of interview and survey data: it is difficult—if not impossible—to generate fine-grained interview data in such conflict environments. Yet our research shows that it is worth seeking information from the individuals about whom we make assumptions in order to validate explanations of individual behavior in civil war research. While objective opportunities—such as geographic safe-havens—present themselves to potential military deserters, military personnel perceive insubordination as constantly uncertain and risky, which cautions us against overemphasizing opportunity-oriented accounts. Clearly, in our case of military insubordination in Syria, deserters' perceptions do not corroborate the researcher's intuition.

At the same time, our inquiry highlights the challenges inherent in qualitative interview data. Ex-post rationalization led our respondents to overwhelmingly cite moral grievances as reasons for their desertion decisions: their wish to protect their families and communities and indignation with human rights violations in which they feel complicit as members of security forces. Our findings suggest that such moral grievances have almost certainly contributed to Syrian soldiers' readiness to desert, and the fact that deserters' hometowns remain their most likely destination lends support to their claims that they cared primarily about their families and social groups. But moral grievances do not explain the timing of desertions and therefore are not likely a desertion trigger. Using correlational analysis, we probe the validity of such personal accounts and find evidence that personal fear constitutes a more effective trigger of military insubordination than those moral grievances emphasized by our interviewees.

Methodologically, this leaves us with a call to combine correlational analysis with qualitative, individual-level interview data for robust claims on individual behavior and collective action in civil conflict and other high-risk environments, such as political activism in authoritarian regimes. The main theoretical contribution in this article is to introduce "fear" as an important factor,

one that has largely remained unexamined in the study of civil war. The results of our inquiry may be easily applied to other subjects and puzzles in that literature. While greed, grievance, and opportunity have been routinely employed to explain rebel formation, it is perhaps the mere calculation of personal danger that goes the furthest in explaining high-risk action: individuals might join rebel forces—or remain regime loyalists—simply because they perceive it a greater chance to survive.

## Acknowledgments

Funding for this research project came from the American University in Cairo and the Project on Middle East Political Science. We wish to thank Dorothy Ohl for collaborating with us on the data collection. Previous versions of this article have been presented at conventions of the International Studies Association (ISA) and the Middle East Studies Association (MESA), as well as at Harvard University, the University of Alabama, Wake Forest University, and the Naval War College. We are grateful for insightful comments and critique from participants at these events and from the editor and reviewers of *Security Studies*. Any errors are our own.

## Appendix

Drivers of desertion (linear probability models).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Opposition casualties	0.0140 (0.0039) <sup>***</sup>	0.0047 (0.0048)	0.0085 (0.0056)
Regime casualties	0.0902 (0.0372) <sup>*</sup>	0.0655(0.0386) <sup>+</sup>	0.0962 (0.0473) <sup>*</sup>
Income		0.0005 (0.0056)	
Conflict duration		0.0081 (0.0022) <sup>***</sup>	0.0124 (0.0026) <sup>***</sup>
Constant	0.0266 (0.0266) <sup>*</sup>	−0.0051 (0.0286) <sup>***</sup>	−0.0442 (0.0167) <sup>**</sup>
Fixed effects?	No	No	Yes
Cases	55	53	53
N	714	671	671

*Note.* Standard errors in parentheses

<sup>+</sup>p < 0.1

<sup>\*</sup>p < 0.05

<sup>\*\*</sup>p < 0.01

<sup>\*\*\*</sup>p < 0.001