Global Civil Society in Wartime:

Evidence from Syrian Facebook Pages

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Abstract

When and how do local, refugee, and diaspora civil society actors mobilize during conflict? Drawing on an original dataset of 8 million posts from 1300 Syrian public Facebook pages, we develop temporally granular behavioral measures of online mobilization by local, refugee, and diaspora civil society actors between 2011 and 2020. Our preliminary findings suggest that 1) refugee voices became increasingly prominent over the course of the conflict and played an active role in the production of revolutionary content; 2) extremist and sectarian content originated on diaspora and refugee pages but became more common among locals over time; and 3) diaspora actors actively sought to reach international audiences, producing the vast majority of their content in English. Our descriptive analyses help adjudicate between competing theories of diaspora and refugee politics, contributing to the transnational activism, wartime processes, and refugee studies literatures, as well as a growing body of research exploring conflict dynamics in the digital age. Additionally, we elevate the voices and production of Syrians themselves to provide new insight into the largest forced displacement, and one of the most brutal conflicts, in recent history.

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Introduction

A common refrain among Syrians, regardless of their political orientations, is that the ongoing conflict that has decimated their country for most of a decade is not a civil war. Instead, they argue, external actors have driven the political, social, and military battles fought on Syrian territory (Haddad 2016). In line with these claims, conflict scholars recognize that civil wars often have transnational dimensions (Salehyan and Gleditsch 2006; Salehyan 2009; Bakke 2013). Additionally, scholars of diaspora[1] and refugee[2] politics agree that conflicts do not stop at state borders (Adamson 2013; Muggah and Mogire 2006).

The rise of digital media technologies has afforded refugee and diaspora communities new opportunities to mobilize from afar, shaping and amplifying narratives targeting diverse audiences both within conflict zones and globally (Kendzior 2012; Michaelsen 2018). This has been well documented in the Syrian conflict, which has been dubbed the most "socially mediated" conflict in history (Lynch, Freelon and Aday 2014). Prior to 2011, Syrian activists were dispersed into exile, repressed, or engaged in the most rudimentary of activity in a civil society that was largely a "wasteland" (Pace and Landis 2009). But the uprising opened the door to remarkable growth in their organizational activity, and they turned to Facebook above any other social media application to coordinate, broadcast, and document it (TNS 2015; Toumani 2016).

In this paper we explore how local, refugee and diaspora civil society actors[3] mobilize online during conflict. Specifically, we ask whose voices contribute to conflict discourse, when, and what do they say? Building on scholarship on transnationalism, forced displacement,

[1]Diaspora politics are undertaken by migrants with a shared notion of kinship and whose political practices pertain to their home state (Østergaard Nielsen 2006; Betts and Jones 2016). For an account of primordialist, essentialist, and constructivist definitions of diasporas, see Betts and Jones (2016). As an empirical strategy, we operationalize diasporas as those in states around the world that are not refugee host states in an ongoing or immediate conflict. Despite our empirical strategy, we acknowledge that "diasporas" often share in common with refugees involuntary migration and grievances vis-a-vis the home state. We sometimes use diaspora interchangeably with exiles.

[2]Refugee politics are the political practices of refugees. A refugee is someone who has fled from political violence (FitzGerald and Arar 2018; Zolberg, Surke and Aguayo 1989). For analysis of legal, institutional, scholarly, and colloquial definitions of refugees, see FitzGerald and Arar (2018)). As an empirical strategy, we operationalize refugees as those in states that primarily host people displaced during and by conflict. In the case of Syria, refugees are primarily hosted in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Germany, and Iraq. Despite our empirical strategy, we acknowledge that the willingness of states to host them is an unsound and unethical legal basis for recognizing refugees. We also note that refugee and diaspora are not, in actuality, mutually exclusive categories.

[3]Civil society actors are nonviolent, nongovernmental organizations that act to effect goods or interests. For analysis of the evolution, controversies, and complications in defining civil society, see Alagappa (2004). Later in the paper we define organizations and explain why we include political and governance organizations in our dataset of Syrian civil groups. We use civil society interchangeably with activists, who seek to effect change in the lives of others (Bayat 2002) as well as interchangeably with groups undertaking civil action.

and civil war, we develop theoretical expectations related to the timing, volume, and content of diaspora, refugee, and local discourse over the course of the conflict.

We document these relationships descriptively using an original dataset of posts from public Facebook pages representing formal and informal Syrian groups that are located in Syria, in refugee host states, and around the world in non-refugee host countries. This dataset enables us to develop temporally granular behavioral measures of online mobilization by local, refugee, and diaspora civil society actors between 2011 and 2020. We examine both the volume and content of posts over time, across all three groups—including prevalence of discourse about the uprising, conflict events, and extremist and sectarian narratives—to better understand the transnational mobilization of wartime civil society.

In line with our expectations, our preliminary results suggest that refugee voices are prominent, ultimately surpassing locals in producing content overall and revolutionary content in particular. This finding is a clear demonstration of refugees' agency despite their common absence from studies of civil war and transnationalism. We also find that extremist and sectarian content originates on diaspora pages, as well as on refugee pages, but that this language became more common among locals over the course of the conflict. Finally, we find that English-language content is most prevalent on diasporic pages, but also fairly common among locals who, through information technology, now enjoy the means to communicate directly with international audiences. In our conclusion, we consider paths forward to build from these preliminary findings.

We contribute to the conflict, refugee, and diaspora politics literatures in several ways. First, developing real-time measures of local, refugee, and diaspora behavior enables us to adjudicate between and better understand the directionality and mechanisms associated with theories of diaspora politics, including their role in exacerbating or mollifying home state conflicts. Second, we draw attention to refugees' unique agency, against expectations of their violence and victimhood, and against their envelopment in the concept of diasporas from whom they differ in substantive ways. Third, we contribute to the growing literature on civilian roles in conflict processes. Fourth, we explore refugee and diaspora behavior in the Global South, which is often neglected in existing literature. Finally, our analysis of online behavior contributes to a burgeoning body of literature exploring refugee and diaspora behavior in the digital age.[4]

In the sections that follow we first situate our study within the literature on diaspora, refugee, and local mobilization in conflict and motivate our theoretical expectations. Next we provide background on the Syrian case. We then describe our data and measurement

[4]See, for example, Siegel, Wolffe and Weinstein (2021); Esberg and Siegel (2021); Nugent and Siegel (2021).

approach, present our preliminary results, and offer initial conclusions and steps forward.

Diaspora, Refugee, and Local Mobilization in Conflict

Scholarship on transnationalism and diaspora mobilization has made significant strides in the last two decades in the realm of conflict studies. Expectations of normatively positive outcomes of transnationalism (Portes 1999)[5] gave way to warnings of the negative effects of diaspora networks on violent conflicts in sending states (Byman et al. 2001; Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Lyons 2007), which in tern lead to more nuanced formulations of diasporas' mixed effects on conflict outcomes (Smith and Stares 2007; Orjuela 2008; Koinova 2013). But the relationships between diaspora, refugee, and local populations that are in direct proximity to and living through conflicts remains understudied. We explore the connections between these three groups to address competing theories in the existing literature and offer a more comprehensive understanding of the transnational nature of conflicts and civil societies.

First, although scholars often consider refugees in analyses of diaspora politics, and even include them in their conceptualizations of diaspora movements (Østergaard Nielsen 2003; Lyons and Mandaville 2010; Moss 2020), few studies actually analyze refugee communities (Al-Ali, Black and Koser 2001; Wahlbeck 2002; Bakker, Engbersen and Dagevos 2014), and even fewer consider refugees hosted in the Global South where the vast majority of forcibly displaced people reside (Brees 2010; Betts and Jones 2016). Besides their geographic distance, diaspora movements in Global North states are often also temporally distant from the sending state, and socioeconomically better off, than recently displaced refugees (Van Hear and Cohen 2017). These differences matter for posited mechanisms in the literature, such as the attribution of diaspora networks' extremism to their enjoyment of greater political freedom (Wayland 2004). Analyses that consider refugee and diaspora communities as one group are likely to miss significant distinctions between the two populations.

Past studies have examined linkages between diaspora networks and conflict actors such as rebels and elites, revealing processes such as lobbying and brokerage that occur between them—advancing, exacerbating, or undermining, conflict and peace processes (Adamson 2013). However the timing and nature of mobilization by these local and diaspora actors, as well as that of refugees, demand more attention. For example, if diaspora movements amplify narratives to international audiences (Moss 2020), whose voices are originating and shaping those narratives—those at a distance from the conflict, those in proximity, or those within it?

Attention to temporality and content help us to understand the direction and dynamics

[5]For critique of the optimistic view, see Waldinger and Fitzgerald (2004).

of processes like militarization and radicalization, among other issues. The real-time and networked structure of social media data provide an ideal way to measure these dynamic relationships. Moreover, information communication technologies have themselves transformed how local, refugee, and diaspora populations interact. Interconnectivity—especially through technology—has been heralded as a facilitator of transnational practices (Demmers 2007). Østergaard Nielsen (2006) forewarned that the notion of "digital diasporas" should be explored rather than assumed. Recent studies that deploy text analysis of social media data help reveal the role that external actors can play in influencing politics in their home states (Esberg and Siegel 2021; Nugent and Siegel 2021). Exploring the words and voices of diaspora communities, refugees, and locals offers a granular look at conflict processes and relations.

We propose to analyze the dynamics of diaspora, refugee, and local discourse through a conflict trajectory. As Bercovich (2007, p. 24-25) has noted, "conflicts are dynamic social processes with their own life cycle. . . . Each phase of a conflict denotes different types of behavior, different potential for conflict management, and different possibilities for intervention by a diasporic community." Extending this insight to refugee and local populations, we expect dynamics related to timing, volume, and content of these three groups' posts to vary in ways incompletely captured in existing understandings of transnational conflict dynamics.

Our first set of expectations relate to the volume of posts produced by local, refugee, and diaspora actors over time:

1. We expect locals to consistently create content throughout the conflict.

A growing body of literature seeks to explain a range of civilian responses to rebel control (Kasfir 2015; Kalyvas 2006; Parkinson 2013; Arjona 2016, 2017; Finkel 2017; Kaplan 2017; Avant et al. 2019) and civil action in violent contexts (Pearlman 2019; Zech 2019). More recent work demonstrates that civilian mobilization can persist and even grow over the course of conflict. This activism ranges from human rights advocacy to psychosocial support for displaced children (Khoury 2021*a*). We expect, therefore, that local civil society actors within Syria will continue to mobilize over the course of the conflict, even in the face of militarization and violence.

2. We expect refugee voices to become increasingly prominent over time.

While scholarship has associated refugees with the spread of conflict and violence (Lischer 2005; Gerdes 2006; Salehyan 2008), the study of refugee political behavior increasingly recognizes the potential for their nonviolent engagement in everything from protest to the provision of emergency relief (Holzer 2012; Murshid 2014; Brankamp 2016; Pincock, Betts and Easton-Calabria 2020). Recent work on Syrian refugees in particular demonstrates that

displaced activists can engage in transnational practices in coordination with traditional diaspora networks (Hamdan 2020); in nonviolent demonstrations within camps (Clarke 2018); and in sectors ranging from transitional justice to media and journalism (Clarke and Güran 2016; Stokke and Wiebelhaus-Brahm 2019; Badran 2020). Khoury (2017, 2021*a*) shows that refugees' activism can be facilitated by host states with favorable strategic stances and in the presence of international infrastructure (e.g., for humanitarian response). Furthermore, conditions common among refugees (though associated with diasporas further afield), including the "involuntary" nature of their migration and their geographic concentration, can make them more likely to mobilize (Kopchick et al. 2021). As displacement patterns take shape, we expect to see increased refugee mobilization.

3. We expect the diaspora to produce less content over the course of the conflict.

Studies of diaspora politics have recognized that the mobilization, and indeed very emergence, of diaspora movements is a process rather than a given (Sökefeld 2006; Kopchick et al. 2021). Although existing research is primarily concerned with understanding the drivers and mechanisms of diaspora mobilization, (Adamson 2013; Koinova 2013; Moss 2016), recent work explicitly theorizes demobilization as well. Betts and Jones (2016) posit that diaspora politics follows a "life cycle" which includes an eventual "death." In addition to their attention to the role played by "animators," who allocate resources to diaspora interests, existing explanations suggest a number of mechanisms that may be related to declining diasporic engagement including disillusionment (Koinova 2013); social and political incorporation in host states (Waldinger 2008); and military victory of the "other side" (Van Hear and Cohen 2017). At present we remain ambivalent regarding which of these mechanisms drive decreasing diaspora content over time, but note that any of these mechanisms would be enabled by a distance from the conflict that is not enjoyed by locals nor refugees.

Our second set of expectations relates to the *content* of online mobilization: beyond when these populations use their voices, what are they using them to say? We expect differences in the discourse around the conflict to result from distinct lived experiences of the three populations under study, despite their shared connections to the home state's conflict.

4. We expect all groups to use less revolutionary language over time.

In early phases of mobilization, participants in contentious politics frame their grievances. This framing process often results in collective or "master" frames used to articulate claims and demands (Snow et al. 1987). Because protest often follows cyclical patterns, which start with heightened contention (Tarrow 1993; Jung 2010; della Porta 2013), we expect revolutionary frames to be pervasive in the early phases of a conflict—especially among people on

the ground, i.e. locals, because participation is a core element of nonviolent collective action (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011). However, we expect all groups to use less revolutionary discourse as the conflict unfolds. There are several potential explanations for this decline, including that prewar preferences can be trumped by violent processes (Kalyvas 2006), fragmentation of radicals and moderates can lead the latter to institutionalize (Tarrow 1993), and international humanitarian organizations' practices can compel neutral language among contracted local organizations (Khoury 2021*a*). We remain ambivalent on the mechanism for now, not least because there are likely to be heterogeneous causes across the groups.

5. We expect the diaspora to produce more extremist and sectarian content than locals or refugees.

There is evidence that diaspora networks can contribute to conflict resolution (Koser 2007). Yet it remains the case that mobilized diasporas are often associated with the exacerbation of conflict. This relationship can potentially or partially be explained by identity preservation efforts (Shain 2007). Diaspora networks are, almost by definition, mobilized by a sense of shared identity (Adamson 2002; Sökefeld 2006). Thus, we can expect identity-related, i.e., ethnic or sectarian, messages from diaspora groups or leaders that seek to mobilize support (Adamson 2013). Diaspora movements are also thought to be more likely to take radical or extremist stances as part of outbidding processes (ibid.), in reaction to violence in the home state (Koinova 2013), because they are themselves sustained by traumatic memories (Lyons 2007), or because resolution of conflict can threaten a core motivation for their mobilization (Demmers 2007).

Diaspora politics are heterogeneous (Østergaard Nielsen 2006) and unlikely to create only or even primarily militarizing content. Yet establishing the contribution of diaspora voices to extremist and sectarian discourse is important for understanding whose content goes into the framing of conflicts and when. For example, it is often argued that diasporas broadcast allies' claims to wider audiences. Yet, whether their claims actually match those of allies on the ground, or if they precede them, or are more extremist, are empirical questions. By disaggregating these three populations, we expect to have a better view on diaspora content that may include extremist and sectarian language.

6. We expect locals and refugees to discuss violence and conflict events at higher rates than the diaspora.

Although to the outsider civil wars often appear to be conflicts fought over master cleavages (e.g., democratization, ethnicity, secession), to people on the ground violence is driven by dynamics of territorial control, local cleavages, and personal conflicts (Kalyvas 2003). Moreover, political preferences and other prewar attitudes may subside over the course of

the conflict because of the increased relevance of local dynamics of violence (Kalyvas 2006). As a result, we should expect those groups living in or in proximity to the conflict, and directly experiencing its human rights and humanitarian impacts, to discuss violence and conflict dynamics more, and more consistently than those, like diasporas, that are further afield.

7. We expect that the diaspora will be most likely to produce English language content targeting international audiences.

New media technologies have enabled diaspora populations to play a key role in making conflict events and anti-regime protests relevant to foreign media, governments, and non-governmental organizations (Brinkerhoff et al. 2009; Kalathil 2002). In the Syrian context, the diaspora population can be understood as brokers or intermediaries that develop bridges between local activists and international publics, as well as between new and traditional media (Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti 2013). As (Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti 2013) describe, "As members of two worlds, they are able to both coordinate the information flow between otherwise disconnected groups and frame messages that speak to target audiences." Similarly, Moss (2020) highlights how media attention gives activists opportunities to serve as representatives and brokers. In line with existing literature, we therefore expect diaspora actors to produce the most English language content.

Local actors also have incentives to produce content in multiple languages targeting diverse audiences. Poell and Darmoni (2012) found that the most active Tunisian social media users during the uprising would post in multiple languages, tailoring their content for different audiences and acting to connect groups of users commenting on the uprising in Arabic, English, and French. Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira (2012) find similar dynamics in the Egyptian context. This is also reflected in the offline behavior of local actors throughout the Arab Spring protests, who frequently designed protest signs in both English and Arabic to attract attention from international news outlets (Kasanga 2014).

The Syrian Case

We assess these expectations by analyzing the Facebook posts of Syrian civil society organizations between 2011 and 2020. The Syrian war represents an ideal case for exploring these dynamics because of its history of exile and diasporic mobilization, and extensive civic organizational growth during the conflict—including among what became the largest refugee population in the world today.

The Syrian state was run by president Hafiz al-Asad from 1970 until his death in 2000,

when he was succeeded by his son, Bashar, who remains in power at the time of writing. Early in his rule, Hafiz al-Asad molded the regime into a "populist authoritarian" one that incorporated working class unions and professional associations (Hinnebusch 2001) but excluded traditional bourgeois merchants and political Islamists who, by the late 1970s, partook in urban uprisings against the regime. Syria's Muslim Brothers association (MB) engaged in outbidding with a militant break-off group that escalated into armed insurgency in 1982. The revolt ended with al-Asad's forces killing (perhaps tens of) thousands. From then, membership in the MB carried the death penalty and the organization dispersed into exile (Lefèvre 2013).

Later that decade, facing an economic crisis, Hafiz al-Asad cut back on populist policies and compensated by loosening restrictions on faith-based charitable associations. But "political restrictions have maintained Islamic associations in a somewhat 'primitive' state, most of them remaining simple administrative structures involving few human resources" (Pierret and Selvik 2009, p.597). Later, Bashar Al-Asad persisted in selective privatization efforts and continued the "outsourcing" of welfare to faith-based charities, "as long as they did not actively pursue a political agenda" (Ruiz de Elvira and Zintl 2014). With his wife Asma, he also ushered in a new development: a handful of apparently modern, development-oriented government-organized NGOs, or GONGOs.

Meanwhile, in the 2000s, two movements led by intellectuals and human rights activists in the country and abroad sought to effect political reform. Both movements were repressed and delegitimized for being distant from the ground and close to Western politicians (Pace and Landis 2009). The events of that decade pushed even more opposition figures into exile. The "internationalization" of the regime's opponents, who in exile lobbied their host governments, had become enough of a problem that Syria's leadership took efforts to prevent dissidents from leaving the country (Pace and Landis 2009).

In sum, in the first decade of the 21st century, Syrian civil society was characterized by governmentally incorporated organizations, rudimentary charitable associations, and a repressed and diasporic political opposition. Then, in December 2010, the Arab Uprisings began to spread across the Middle East.

Though they mobilized "from scratch" (Pearlman 2020), Syrians inside the country engaged in nonviolent collective action. These included protests, which peaked that summer, and a range of other engagements (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2016). For instance, activists documented events and disseminated media (Issa 2016). They conducted civil resistance campaigns such as strikes and sit-ins (Khoja 2016). Divisions of uprising labor occurred through "local coordination committees" that would later become the basis of local governance councils in rebel-held territory (Munif 2013). Relief and medical efforts emerged

from the grassroots to address the fallouts of repression (Abdelwahid 2013). Additional undertakings ranged from violations documentation to radio broadcasting (Khoury 2017).

These various efforts coalesced into more or less formal organizational forms over the course of the conflict despite deepening militarization. Besides Syrians' adaptability and resilience, nonviolent mobilization against the odds was made possible, Khoury (2021*a*) argues, by international resources and infrastructure in countries neighboring Syria. For example, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs counts the number of "partner organizations" for cross-border operations from Turkey each month. These increased from 49 in April 2014 to more than 400 in December 2017. That remarkable growth represented just Syrian humanitarian organizations in northwest Syria. Hundreds more emerged there and elsewhere, focused variously on civil society and governance, and development and stabilization (Khoury 2021*b*).

Meanwhile, Syrians were fleeing some of the worst violence of the twenty-first century, especially to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Germany, and, to a lesser extent, Iraq. They came to constitute the largest refugee population in the world. Yet activists continued to participate, or began to, from refuge (Khoury 2020). It is hard to know exactly how many Syrian organizations were eventually established in Turkey, for instance, a particularly receptive host state for Syrians' nonviolent organizing. One NGO counted forty-seven Syrian initiatives in the border town of Reyhanli alone, home to just 60,000 people (Clarke and Güran 2016). Estimates in Gaziantep, a larger border city, run into the hundreds (Citizens for Syria 2017). Even in host states less strategically inclined to facilitate Syrians' activism, like Lebanon and Jordan, Syrians developed organizations and mobilized (Khoury 2017; Ruiz de Elvira 2019).

These historical and contemporary developments have meant that Syrian organizations constitute a transnational civil society that includes locals inside the country, refugees, and diaspora networks across the globe. Remarkably, Syrians pushed against decades of repression to organize independently, and took to Facebook to give public representation to their nascent groups and organizations. In so doing, they have offered observers a view into their priorities, concerns, and engagements—a chance to listen to their voices.

Data and Methods

Pages Database

Syria has been one of the most "socially mediated" conflicts in history (Lynch, Freelon and Aday 2014). Facebook as a platform is particularly significant: 97 percent of Syrian

social media users turn to Facebook, above any other app (TNS 2015). In addition to organizing collective action, Facebook pages were a "vital" means for groups to project their messages and activities to Syrians and to the outside world (Toumani 2016). Survey research also suggests that social media platforms have been a particularly important source of information for Syrian refugees along their journeys and upon arrival in host countries (Dekker et al. 2018).

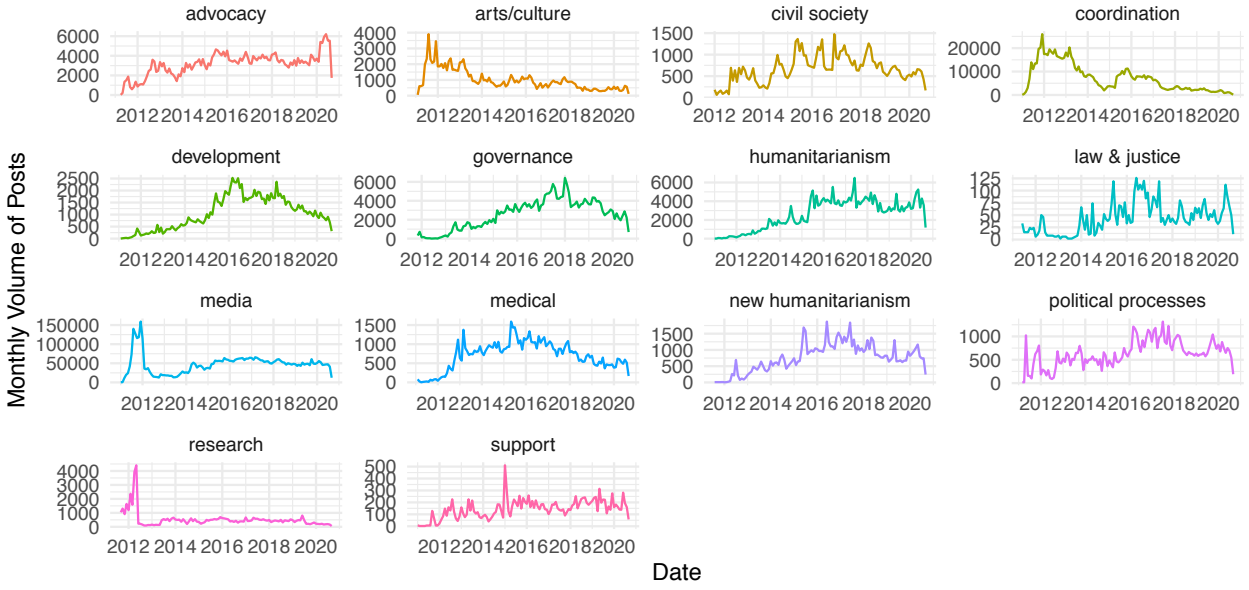
In 2018, we conducted an audit of public Facebook pages associated with nonviolent Syrian groups. Pages were audited using pre-existing lists of Syrian non-state media and civil society organizations (Issa 2016; Citizens for Syria 2017), keyword searches, and snowball sampling of "related pages." The 1,362 pages included are outward-facing representations of formal organizations and informal groups of Syrians in the country, refuge, and diaspora. They include community-based, faith-based, and non-governmental organizations, as well as coordination committees, opposition governance bodies, media outlets, art collectives, and human rights advocates.[6]

We consider these pages an appropriate level of analysis—organizational—for our analyses of local, refugee and diaspora discourse during war. Theorizing on transnationalism takes place at varying levels of analysis, from network to individual. Yet the organizational level of analysis is typical for empirical studies and we follow in this tradition. We define organizations as social units with a purpose and constituted by people who play roles within it (Fowler 1997, p.20). We do not define them by their formality nor their legal status (ibid.).

The types of organizations represented by public Facebook pages are concerned with or engaged in a wide variety of activities. We manually coded their specialties based on page self-descriptions, photographs, and recent posts. Figure 1 displays volume of posts associated with each over time, demonstrating that media pages (formal news sites, radio, periodicals, and informal local information dissemination) contributed the largest volume of posts, especially but not only in the early stages of the conflict when it was evolving into a full-blown and brutal civil war. Some specialties, especially humanitarianism, became prolific posters over time, as the crisis of needs worsened and the formal international humanitarian response took shape.

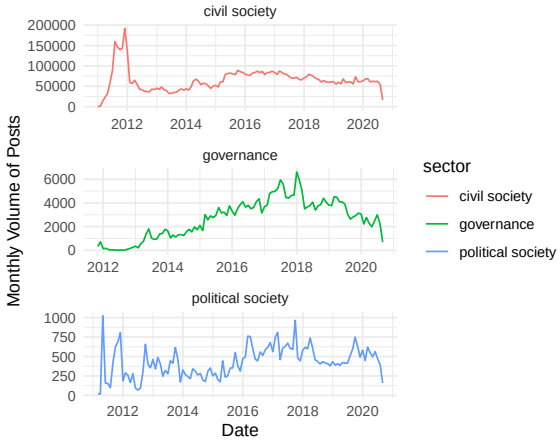
[6]We eliminated pages that represented business entities, conveyed violent or individual (rather than group) engagements, and had fewer than 500 likes. The last of these exclusion criteria aimed at limiting activities that were more aspirational than actual, though we accept that activism sometimes exists solely online. Our research assistant, a Syrian refugee in Turkey, was particularly immersed in the field of Syrian activists—as an emergency responder who partook in the 2011 protest movement. As we conducted the audit, we were often familiar with the groups associated with the pages, or else could discern their fit based on our acquired knowledge.

Figure 1: Posts by Page Specialty Over Time



Based on their specialties, we manually grouped these pages into three broad sectors: civil society, governance, and political society. All of the groups and organizations we study are non-governmental organizations in the sense that they are independent of the Syrian government. However, there are nonetheless civilians engaged in the governance of territories held by rebels, who we consider to be part of the "governance" sector, including local and governorate councils and ministries of the opposition Syrian Interim Government. Additionally, we consider parties and other formal political organizations to be part of the "political society" sector. Figure 2 displays the volume of posts by page sector over time, showing the dominance of civil society pages.

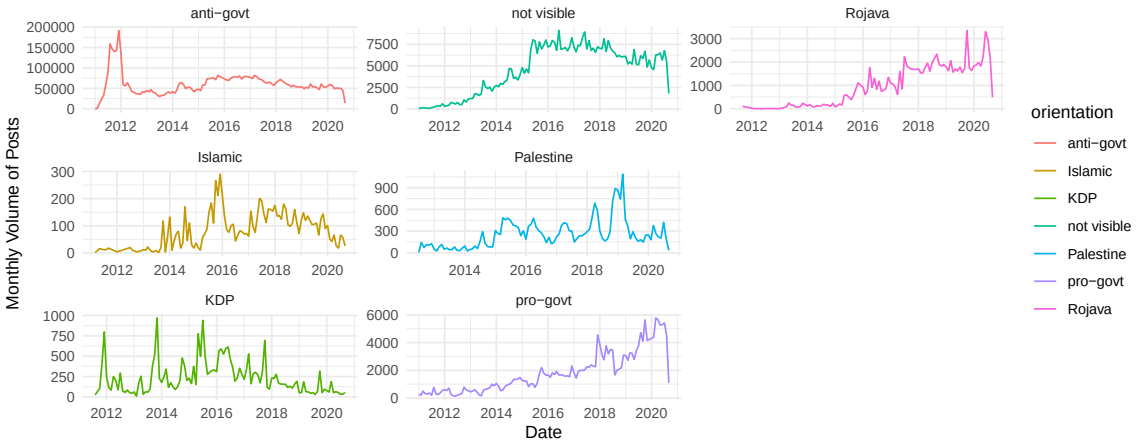
Figure 2: Posts by Page Sector Over Time



We also coded pages in the Facebook dataset according to their "political orientation" based on observable markers on groups' public Facebook pages in their cover photos, profile pictures, the content of recent posts, their group names, and descriptions on their "about" pages and linked websites. Anti government pages constitute a majority of all pages (64%), and the volume of their posts also predominates.[7] We examined multiple markers of political orientation before deciding on this designation. Other labels included Islamist, pro-government, Palestine, and Kurdish groups, each of which accounted for less than 3 percent of page totals.[8]

After anti-government groups, the next largest subset of pages were coded as "not visible," meaning their political orientation was not discernible from qualitative examination of their pages. These are pages that were clearly engaged in social or civic activism but doing so without betraying obvious political claims or positions. Humanitarian groups were especially likely to be "not visible" in their politics. Figure 3 plots the monthly volume of posts by orientation.

Figure 3: Posts by Page Political Orientation Over Time



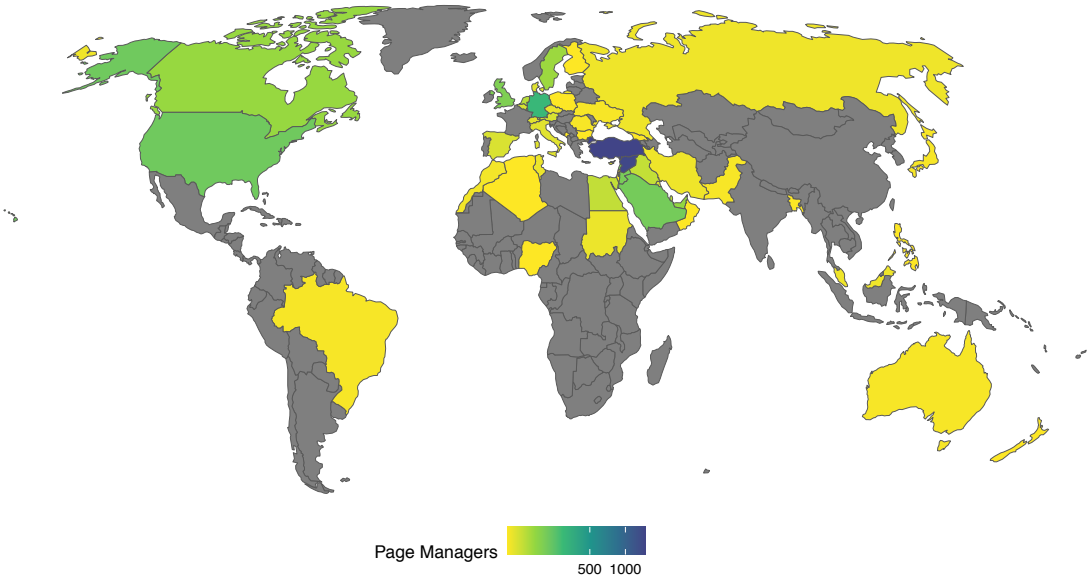
Finally, we attended carefully to the location of pages in order to designate them as representing local, refugee, or diaspora organizations. To this end, we combined two indicators. The first, "page managers" is automated by Facebook based on user data; Facebook began

[7]These were coded based on contextual knowledge such as images of the "Free Syria" flag and language referencing the thawra (revolution), government repression, political detainees, torture, and regime violence including sieges, use of barrel bombs and chemical weapons, and so forth.

[8]The iterative coding process meant that we took the decision to separate Kurdish groups into two distinct political categories that map to the cleavage between the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria) and Rojava (the political project associated with the Democratic Union Party and its armed wing the People's Protection Unit), although it is worth noting that a number of apparently Kurdish groups (i.e. those that use Kurdish language in their pages) fell under other categories too. Islamist was used only when a political view was explicitly in favor of Islamist governance, and not on the basis of cultural markers.

sharing this information in 2018 as part of "page transparency" efforts. Page manager data was available for just over half the database, or 771 pages. Managing a Facebook page is often a collective task, so the number of managers associated with the pages, 4,209, is much higher. They operated across 56 countries, with by far the largest numbers based in Syria itself (1,309) and in neighboring Turkey (1,359). Figure 4 shows the distribution of page managers around the world, illustrating the transnational nature of Syrians' mobilization.

Figure 4: Page Managers by Location

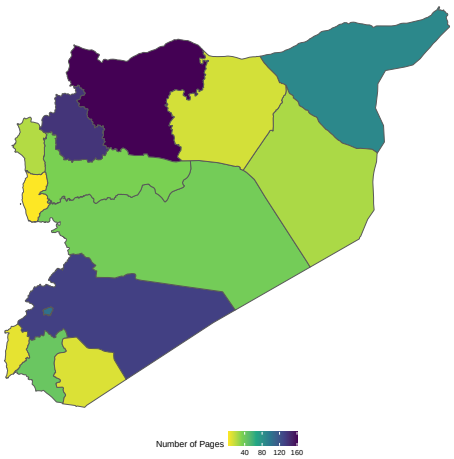


Page manager data is granular and captures information within pages; a single page can be managed by individuals in multiple countries across several regions. Because it is automated, it is not subject to biases of self-reporting. Although individual users can opt to "hide" manager information, only 55 of the more than 4,000 managers did so; the missing manager information is attributable, rather, to Facebook's own limitations on collecting and displaying the information.

However, the page manager location information is also subject to a significant limitation. Manager information began to appear on pages in late 2018 as part of transparency initiatives undertaken by Facebook in the wake of revelations around a data scandal that spring. Indeed, the information was not yet available when the database was created in fall 2018; we added it in 2019. Thus, page manager information likely reflects manager locations after the largest population movements and forced displacements associated with the conflict had already occurred: the registered refugee population stood at 300,000 at the beginning of 2013 and plateaued around 5.5 million beginning in 2018.

Our second location indicator provides additional information. We inferred information about the location of organizations and/or their primary activities based on the content of their pages including their self-reported locations, self-descriptions, names (e.g. a radio station named after a Syrian town), photographs, or other page content. This researcher-inferred indicator has important advantages. First, it is uniquely granular at the subnational level within Syria, where information was gathered on the activity of 838 groups at the governorate level (equivalent to U.S. states), as per Figure 5.[9] The largest proportions of pages that are associated with activity inside Syria are in the northwestern governorates of Aleppo and Idlib–across the border from Turkey. For the sake of our transnational analysis, these pages are taken to be in Syria.

Figure 5: Subnational Page Locations within Syria



Research-inferred location data was traceable to countries other than Syria for about 400 pages, the largest number of which is associated with Turkey (242) (as was the case for page managers). These two pieces of information contained in the research-inferred location indicator (internal Syria and external country) are not mutually exclusive. It is common for an organization with relief operations inside Syria, for example, to be managed from another country.

In the analysis that follows, we aggregate these two indicators into one location variable applying a restrictive selection rule. Only those pages that have researcher inferred information that matches the location of at least one page manager are included. For example,

[9]Groups whose locations of operations appeared to be outside of Syria, or whose locale was not discernible, are excluded from Figure 5. Some groups appear to operate in several governorates; we code these according to the most prominent. For those with apparently commensurate operations across northwestern Syria, we have included half under Idlib and half under Aleppo for the sake of visualization.

if a page associated with a group is inferred to be based in Turkey, and it also has a page manager in Turkey, we categorize that page's location as "Refugee Host State." If a page inferred by the researchers to be associated with a group inside Syria, but there are no page managers in Syria, we drop that page from the analysis. In a future analysis, we will relax the restriction on the location variable and code based on the presence of one or the other indicator.

Post Data

After compiling a list of 1362 pages representing formal organizations and informal groups of Syrians in the country, refuge, and diaspora, we used the Crowdtangle API to download all posts and engagement data (including likes, reactions, and comments) from these pages in September 2020. CrowdTangle is a social media analytics platform owned by Facebook that tracks public posts on Facebook made by public accounts or groups as well as public interactions (likes, reactions, comments, shares, upvotes) to these posts. Crowdtangle tracks 99% of public posts from pages with over 100,000 likes, as well as a large number of pages with smaller followings. Researchers can also add public pages to Crowdtangle that do not already exist in its database. We added all pages that were not already in the Crowdtangle database in order to collect as much data as possible.[10] We were able to collect data for 1215 of the 1362 pages we identified, or 89%. Missing pages had either been deleted or made private between the time we initially identified them and the time of data collection. We collected all posts still available across our pages as of September 2020, going back to the first post on each page. This yielded a dataset of almost 8 million posts from across the 1215 pages for which we were able to collect data.

Measuring Changes in Content Over Time

In order to measure the degree to which diaspora, refugee, and local communities advance revolutionary discourse, discuss conflict dynamics, and put forth extremist or sectarian narratives, we begin with a pure dictionary-based approach as a proof of concept. Specifically, we measure the monthly proportion of posts that contain a set of Arabic-language keywords related to each concept.[11] This enables us to develop relative measures of the salience of these topics over time that will not simply be driven by differences in the volume of posts

[10] Crowdtangle does not include paid ads unless those ads began as organic, non-paid posts that were subsequently boosted using Facebook's advertising tools. CrowdTangle also does not track posts made visible only to specific groups of followers. See https://help.crowdtangle.com/en/articles/1140930-what-is-crowdtangle-tracking for an overview of what data is included through the API.

[11] See the Appendix for a list of keywords.

produced by each group in a given month. These categories are not mutually exclusive. For example, a post can both reference conflict dynamics and contain sectarian language.

Ultimately we plan to use word embeddings to expand these dictionaries and measure more nuanced concepts. Specifically we will train word embeddings using *word2vec* on our entire corpus of Facebook data to identify other words (including hashtags, dialect-specific terms, and other social-media specific words and phrases) that are semantically related to our seed words (our initial dictionary terms) in the data and relevant to each topic of interest. Semantic similarity here is based on these words appearing in similar contexts, and can be computed using cosine similarity on the word embedding space (Gurciullo and Mikhaylov 2017). We will validate these measures by training native Arabic speakers as human coders to manually classify random samples of posts, stratified by their automated classification. If our word2vec dictionary-based approach yields too many false positives, we will train supervised machine-learning classifiers to improve the precision of our measures.

Beyond tracking changes in the volume of content over time, we plan to use a state of the art deep learning sentiment classification algorithm created by Farha and Magdy (2019).[12] to measure not only when but also *how* local, refugee, and diaspora communities discuss each topic of interest. This will enable us to evaluate whether (and when) refugee populations discuss the revolution more negatively than diaspora populations and refugees, for example.

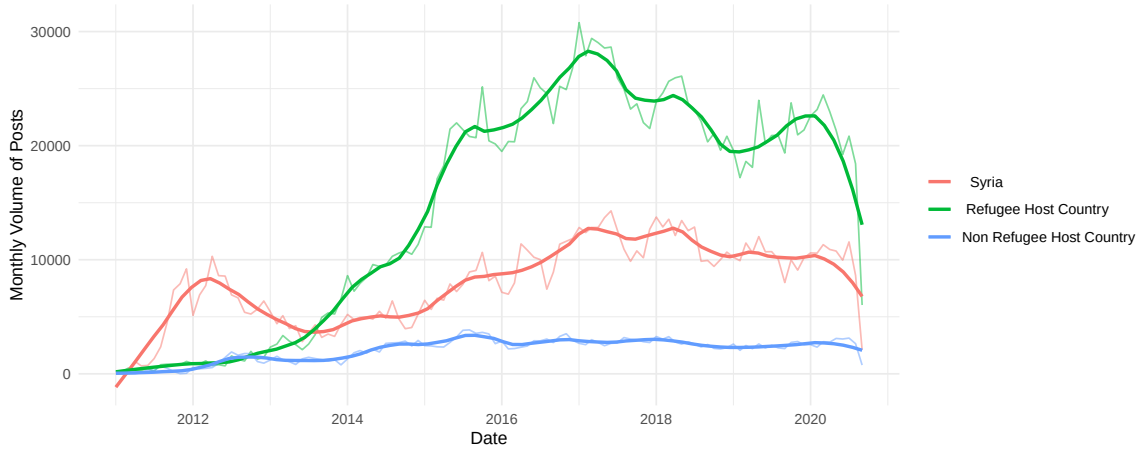
Preliminary Results

We begin by mapping the monthly volume of posts produced by local, refugee, and diaspora pages between 2011 and 2020. This allows us to measure whose voices are represented in online discussions of the Syria conflict, as well as how this varies over time. In line with our theoretically motivated expectations, Figure 6 suggests that pages located within Syria consistently created content throughout the conflict, initially peaking late 2011 through early 2012, and then rising again steadily from mid 2014 through 2018. Pages located in Syria dominated the production of posts through the first two years of the conflict from 2011 through 2013. As expected, refugee voices (measured as pages operated from refugee host countries) become increasingly prominent over time, surpassing content produced on pages within Syria in mid 2013 and then consistently producing 2-3 times as much content as pages within Syria for the remainder of the period under study. Diaspora pages (pages operated

[12]This algorithm classifies sections of text into three sentiment labels: "positive," "negative," and "neutral." The algorithm was developed using a large corpus of 250 million Arabic-language tweets, and relies on an embedding layer trained from the tweet corpus that is used as input to a convolutional neural network and (LSTM) recurrent neural network. The classifier achieves state-of-the-art performance across three separate benchmarks datasets.

from non-refugee host countries) produced less content than local or refugee pages throughout the entire period. The volume of posts grew steadily from 2011 through 2015, peaking in late 2015 around the height of the refugee crisis and then declining modestly through 2020.

Figure 6: Monthly Volume of Posts by Page Location



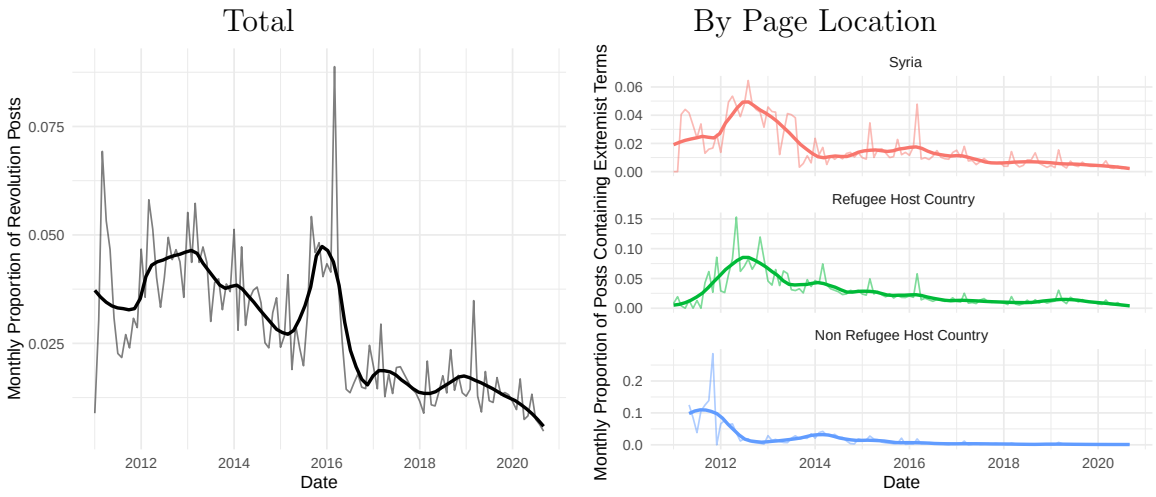
Next we look at differences in the content of posts produced by local, refugee, and diaspora pages. In particular, we examine the use of sectarian and extremist language, revolutionary discourse, discussions of conflict events, and the use of English (a proxy for communication with international audiences). While we will ultimately use word embeddings, supervised machine, and sentiment analysis[13] to develop more nuanced and comprehensive measures of these different types of discourse, this proof of concept analysis uses a simple dictionary based approach, in which we measure the monthly proportion of posts that contain Arabic-language terms related to each topic of interest.

In line with our expectations, Figure 7 suggests that revolutionary discourse begins in Syria in early 2011, before it was discussed frequently on refugee or diaspora pages. Revolutionary language in Syria peaks in mid 2012, and then declines, plateauing in 2014 and remaining at similar levels for the rest of the period under study, with the exception of a large spike in 2016, which is also prevalent in our aggregate analysis of all posts regardless of page location, displayed in the left half of the figure. Interestingly, revolutionary language never comprises more than 7% of posts in Syria in any given month. Turning to refugee host pages, we see an uptick in revolutionary discourse beginning in late 2011 and peaking in early 2012 at 15% of total monthly posts. Beginning in 2014, revolutionary discourse in both Syrian and refugee pages follows a very similar pattern, plateauing and then declining, with the exception of a particularly large spike in early 2016. For diaspora pages, we see

[13]We describe this proposed analysis in more detail above.

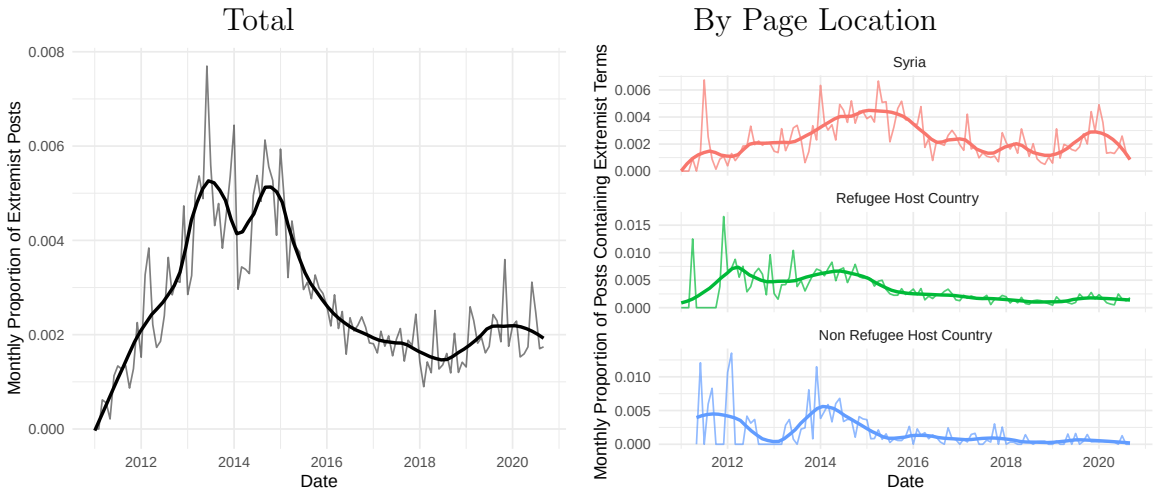
an initial spike in revolutionary discourse after the first spike in the Syria data, going all the way up to 30% of total posts, followed by a sharp decline and relatively low levels of revolutionary discourse for the remainder of the period under study.

Figure 7: Revolution Language Over Time



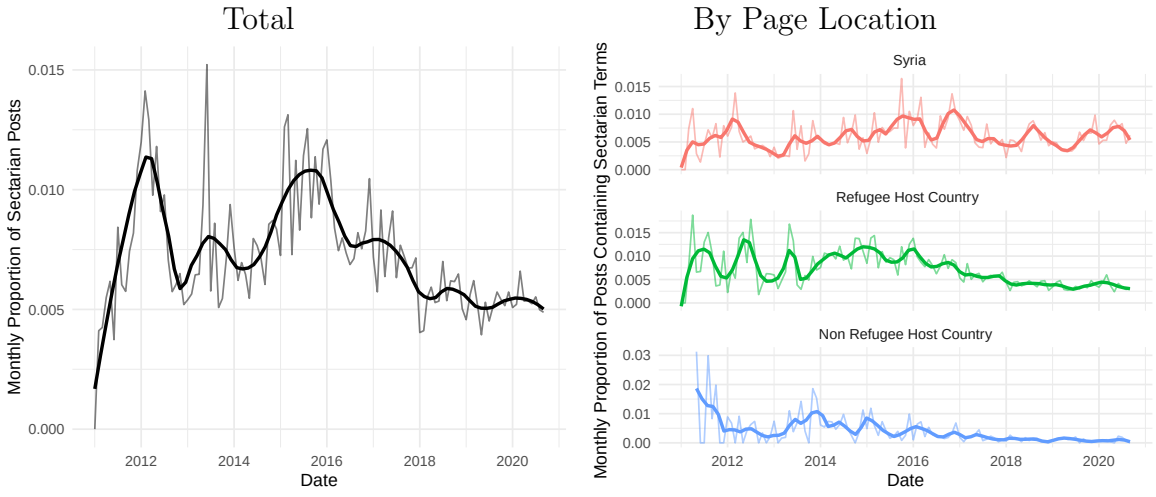
Examining the proportion of posts containing extremist language over time, in aggregate we see a steady increase in extremist language beginning in 2011 and peaking in 2013. Disaggregating our data by page location, we see initial spikes in extremist language in early 2011 in both refugee and diaspora pages, which persist into mid 2012 and then decline. These spikes precede the first large spikes in extremist language in our Syria pages. After these initial spikes, extremist language in Syria continues to rise steadily until 2016, perhaps coinciding with ISIS' increased territorial control. Extremist language declines post 2016 across all pages, particularly refugee and diaspora pages, where it tapers off dramatically. Notably, however, there are higher levels of extremist rhetoric in both diaspora and refugee pages, relative to those based in Syria across the entire period.

Figure 8: Extremist Language Over Time



Turning to sectarian language, we see initial spikes in sectarian language in early 2011 across all page types, with particularly large spikes in diaspora pages, at 3% of total posts relative to a little over 2% of total posts in the refugee data and around 1% of posts in the local data. Sectarian rhetoric on the Syria pages continued to rise through early 2012, then declining through 2013 and rising again until its peak in 2016. Sectarian rhetoric then remained relatively constant for the rest of the period under study. In contrast, we see a decline in sectarian language on both diaspora and refugee pages beginning in 2016 for refugee pages and 2014 for diaspora pages.

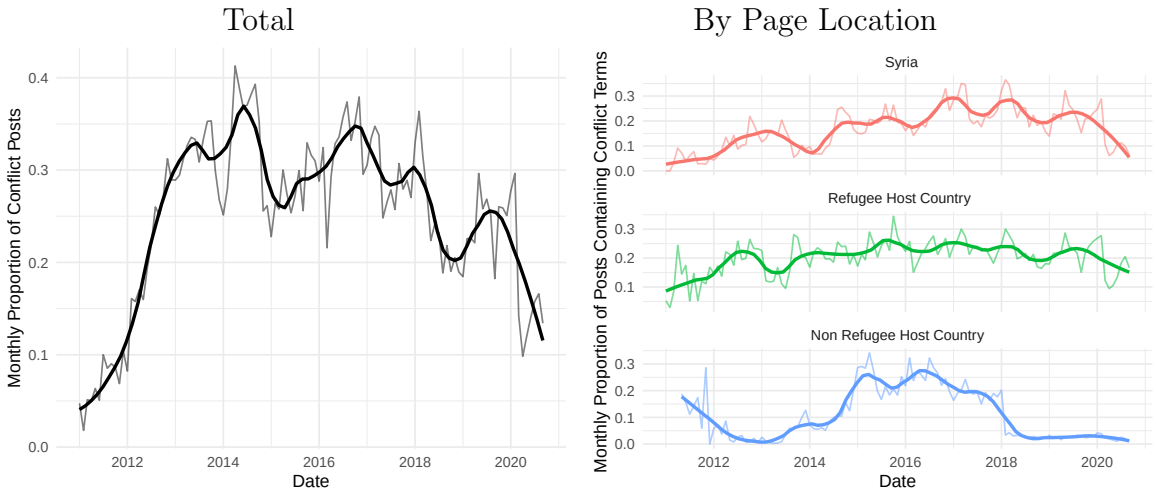
Figure 9: Sectarian Language Over Time



In order to track attention to battlefield developments and the day to day dynamics of the conflict on the ground, we analyze the proportion of posts that mention conflict events

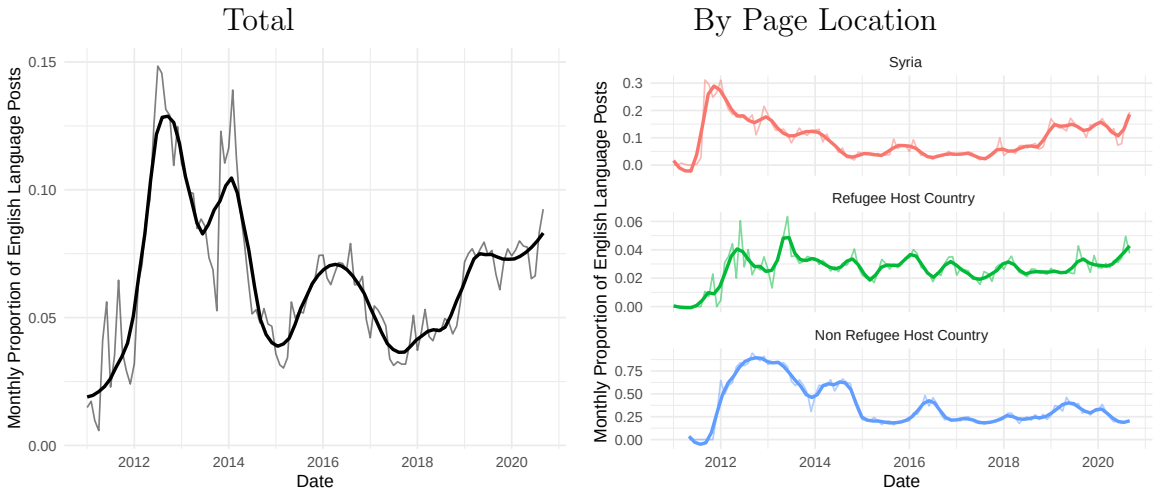
including discussions of clashes, bombings, air raids, and casualties. We find that in aggregate, discussion of conflict events grew steeply from 2011 through 2014, peaking throughout 2014 at almost 40% of total discourse and remaining between 25 and 35% of monthly posts through to 2018, after which discussion of conflict events declined. Disaggregating by page type, we see that in both Syria and refugee host pages, discussion of battlefield events generally increased between 2011 and 2017 before plateauing. By contrast, in the diaspora there were spikes in discussion of conflict events in late 2011, followed by a decline through 2013 and then a steady increase from 2014 to 2015, followed by a plateau. We also see a sharp and sustained decline in discussion of conflict events beginning in 2018. This is in line with expectations that actors within Syria will sustain attention to shifting dynamics on the ground, while the diaspora community may be more likely to lose interest as the conflict drags on.

Figure 10: Conflict Language Over Time



Finally, we examine the use of English language in Facebook posts over time as a proxy for communications targeting the international community. In aggregate we observe that the highest proportion of English language posts across all pages were produced between 2012 and 2014. Turning to page locations, we see first, that English language posts were by far the most common in diaspora pages, encompassing as much as 80% of all posts in 2012 and 2013. This is likely because these pages are located in English speaking countries and may have stronger ties to international networks. English posts were next most common on Syria pages, reaching up to 30% of all posts in this period. English posts were quite rare on refugee pages, however, never reaching more than 6% of the total across the entire period.

Figure 11: English Language Over Time



Conclusion and Steps Forward

Taken together, our preliminary analyses provide systematic empirical evidence in support of our theoretically motivated expectations. First, examining the volume of posts over time, we find that pages located within Syria produced content consistently throughout the entire period under study, while refugee voices become increasingly prominent over time, surpassing content produced on pages within Syria in mid 2013 and then consistently producing 2-3 times as much content as pages within Syria for the remainder of the period under study. We do not observe diaspora pages producing less content over time, however, as expected. Diaspora pages produced less content than local or refugee pages throughout the entire period under study, rising slightly until 2016 and then plateauing.

Regarding the content of posts, we see in line with our expectations that revolutionary language declined across local, refugee, and diaspora pages. This decline occurred the most quickly in diaspora pages, followed by refugee pages and local pages. Also supporting our expectations, we find that sectarian and extremist language originated on refugee and diaspora pages and then became less frequent on these pages, while beginning later and remaining more common on local pages throughout the entire period of study. Conflict language was used frequently across all pages, increasing across the entire period on refugee and local pages. On diaspora pages, we find declines in the salience of conflict language, particularly after 2017, perhaps indicating waning interest.

Finally, turning to post language, we that English language posts were by far the most common in diaspora pages, encompassing as much as 80% of all posts in 2012 and 2013. English posts were next most common on Syria pages, reaching up to 30% of all posts in the

first two years of the conflict. By contrast, English posts were very rare on refugee pages, never reaching more than 6% of the total across the entire period.

Beyond these preliminary findings, we have several additional analyses we plan to conduct moving forward. First, we will build upon our dictionary-based approach, using word embeddings to develop more nuanced and accurate measures of revolutionary, sectarian, extremist, and conflict language. We plan to validate these measures using native Arabic speaking coders. If our word2vec dictionary-based approach produces too many false positives, we will use supervised machine learning to improve the precision of our measures. We also plan to conduct sentiment analysis using a deep learning classifier to measure how local, refugee, and host populations discuss the revolution and conflict dynamics over time.

Second, we plan to replicate our analysis with different measures of location, to be able to capture location information for a broader subset of pages. Third, we plan to take advantage of engagement data—including likes, reactions, and comments—to better understand not only changes in volume and content but also changes in the popularity of different post types across local, refugee, and diaspora pages over time. Fourth, we plan to use social network analysis to examine interactions between local, refugee, and diaspora pages, as well as link sharing across the three page types. This will improve our understanding of the degree to which these groups are connected to one another and share similar (or dissimilar) content over time.

Our approach has several limitations. First, we were only able to collect content on public Facebook pages, and cannot observe content from private groups, which were also active in this time period. Second, we identified relevant Facebook pages in 2018 and collected data in 2020. We are therefore likely missing content—and even entire pages—that were deleted before this period. If content was systematically deleted from certain page types more than others, or in certain periods more than others, this could bias our results. Third, we currently only distinguish between local, refugee, and diaspora pages when we have information about page manager location and location information that is self-reported or inferred by the researchers. While we plan to replicate our analyses using multiple types of location data, there are certain pages that we will be unable to categorize.

Despite these limitations, by providing temporally granular measures of the behavior of local, refugee, and diaspora organizations on the same platform, we are able to begin to answer longstanding questions about how these diverse actors interact in real time to shape conflict narratives. Our work contributes to the transnational activism, wartime processes, and refugee studies literatures, while adding to a growing body of literature examining the digital dimensions of conflict.[14] We hope that future research will continue to draw on

[14]See Zeitzoff (2017); Gohdes (2018)for an overview as well as Gohdes and Threlkeld (2021).

similar data sources—across diverse platforms and global contexts—to continue to advance our understanding of the transnational dimensions of conflict in the digital age.

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