ECON494 – Term Project

Project Report

Project Title: Battles of Syria

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Introduction

The Syrian conflict has become widely recognized for its extensive mapping coverage, making it one of the most extensively mapped conflicts in recent history. This report aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the battles that have taken place in Syria, focusing on various aspects such as the nature of data, main actors involved, fatalities, the involvement of Turkey over the years and news transparency by investigating the news sources reporting on the Syrian battles.

Nature of Data:

The dataset for the report was collected from Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), therefore, presents the rationale: the movements of troops, the presence of armed groups, the activities of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the distribution of public resources, and most importantly, territorial control.

The period of time that was observed is from 2016/2017 till 2023.

Categorization of Events:

In the Syrian Civil War, a significant portion of the fighting and battles have taken place outside of major cities. Although there have been instances of sieges and urban warfare in places like Aleppo, Homs, and Damascus, a sizable majority of the battle has been waged in rural areas, particularly in the countryside and along the borders.

The countryside has been a strategic and logistical focus for different factions due to factors such as control over key supply routes, agricultural resources, and border crossings. With the objective to retake power and hold onto strategic territories, the Syrian government has also carried out military operations in rural areas with the support of its allies.

Share of Disorder Types
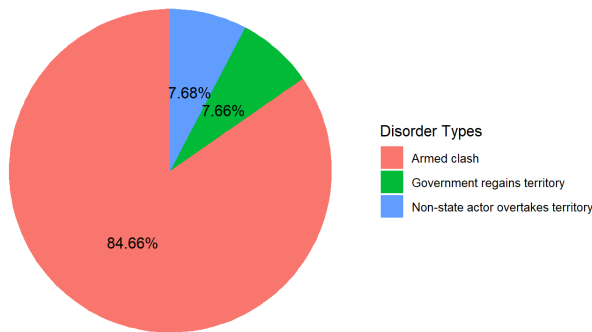
The pie chart above shows the share of disorder types in the ACLED dataset we have worked on. It shows that 85 percent of the battle activity were armed clashes while the others were territorial overtaking from each other, either of Government, or of a non-state actor.

Top Actors and Fatality Perpetrators in Battles:
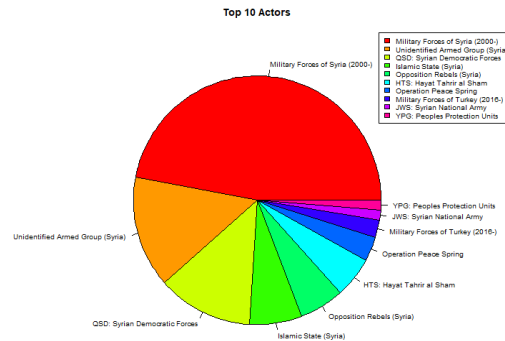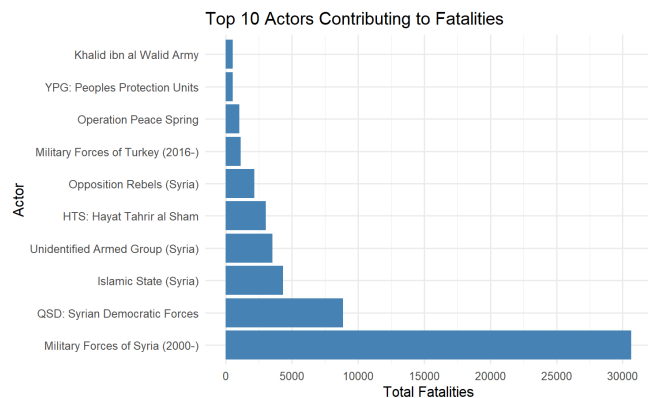
The Syrian Civil War is a complex action with multiple actors and shifting alliances. The influence and control groups have changed in different regions of the country because of the involvement of various forces' evolve over time.

The Syrian government controls a significant portion of the country. The major armed group that supports the government is the Syrian Arab Army (SAA). Other pro-government paramilitary organizations, like the National Defense Forces (NDF), as well as foreign partners like Russia and Iran, back it. It is the biggest actor and highest fatality perpetrator since it's main purpose is to maintain the control and stability of the Syrian state therefore it has conflict with many groups.

The QSD is an alliance of Kurdish, Arab, and other ethnic groups that emerged to combat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) form the backbone of the SDF. They have received support from the United States and other Western allies. QSD is a united and supported force, not as much as Military Force of Syria, therefore the action count and fatality prepatration is lower then it.

During the conflict, ISIS, sometimes referred to as the Islamic State or Daesh became an important power. ISIS once had complete authority over significant portions of Syria and Iraq. However, as a result of military operations by numerous groups, including the QSD, Syrian government forces, and multinational coalitions, it has since lost a sizable amount of land.

Alongside the major military forces and factions involved in the Syrian Civil War, there are also numerous smaller and lesser-known armed groups that operate in different parts of the country. These organizations frequently have specialized goals, allegiances, or philosophies, and their functions and goals can change. Since these forces are seperate and cannot take significant actions, their fatality prepatration is very low despite their action count.

Fatalities Throughout the Timeline:
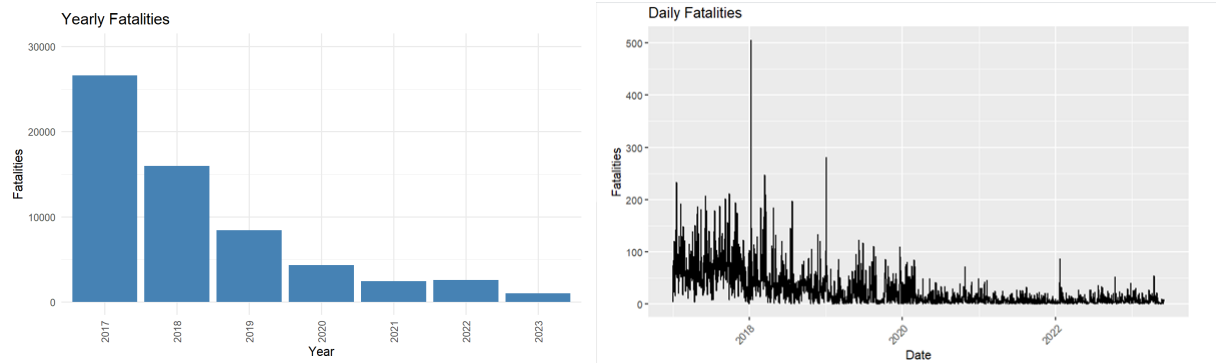
The fluctuation in casualties in Syria from 2017 until today can be attributed to various factors. The conflict's changing dynamics and territorial control are important factors. The intensity and scope of fights may change when different factions gain or lose control over particular regions, causing changes in the number of casualties. The makeup, power, and behavior of conflict players, such as government troops, opposition groups, and extremist organizations, can also have an impact on the number of casualties. These groups' alliances and strategies may change, which could have an effect on the amount of violence and number of casualties.

The involvement of international actors, diplomatic efforts, and peace initiatives is another factor that can affect casualty rates. As peaceful resolution zones are established or conversations between warring parties take place, international interventions and diplomatic dialogues may result in temporary decreases in violence. These approaches may help reduce casualty rates at particular times. Also crucial are humanitarian initiatives and expanded access to healthcare.

In conclusion, the casualty rates in Syria have witnessed fluctuations from 2017 until today due to various factors. These include shifting territorial control, changes in conflict actors and strategies, international interventions and peace efforts, humanitarian initiatives, access to medical care, as well as population displacement and demographic shifts. It is difficult to offer a definite explanation for the differences in casualty estimates due to the conflict's complexity and ongoing nature. It is crucial to rely on trustworthy sources and current data from international

organizations and research institutions that specialize in conflict studies in order to gain appropriate assessments.

Involvement of Turkey

One of the reasons why the participants wanted to select the Battles of Syria was having the objective to investigate why Turkey joined the Syrian Civil War. The results we have obtained from our analysis and visualizations have a great explanatory power to explain the historical series of events.

To understand the reasons behind Turkey's intervention, we should first talk about the historical background of operations of the military forces of Turkey before 2016. Global Conflict tracker (CFR) reports such important insights from it (2023). It says that PKK, a terrorist organization that was established in the 1980's in the southeast of Turkey, is having a guerilla war against Turkey to form a Kurdish based government and since then Turkish army tries to eliminate the terrorist organizations in and across the border. In the civil war, PKK is in alliance with other Kurdish groups in Syria such as YPG and QSD (in other words SDF). These groups altogether were having attacks on the Turkish authorities at the Syrian border in 2016.

SDF and YPG were mostly clashing against the Islamic state before 2016 and established a semi-autonomous region in Northern Syria. Turkey had a concern of these terrorist activities and whether an independent Kurdish state is going to be established or not and started offenses against these groups and conducted such operations like Operation Peace Spring and Operation Olive Branch (CFR, 2023).
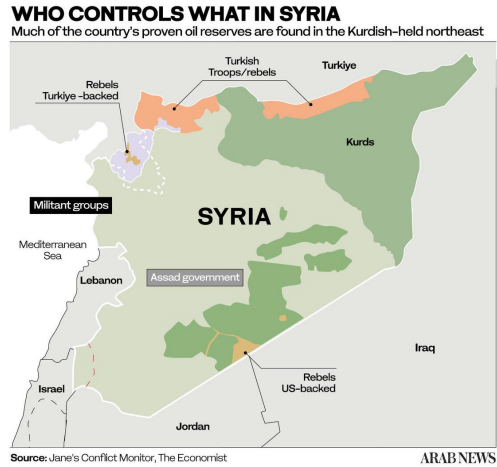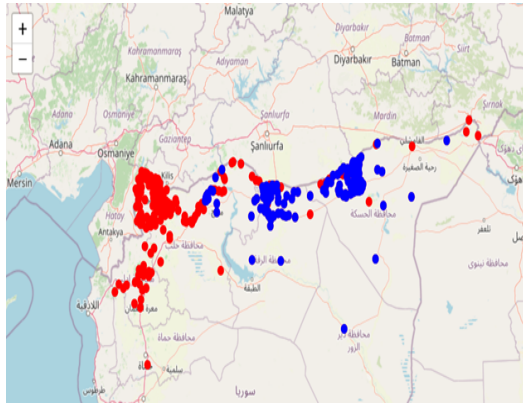
Top Actors Against 'Military Forces of Turkey (2016-)
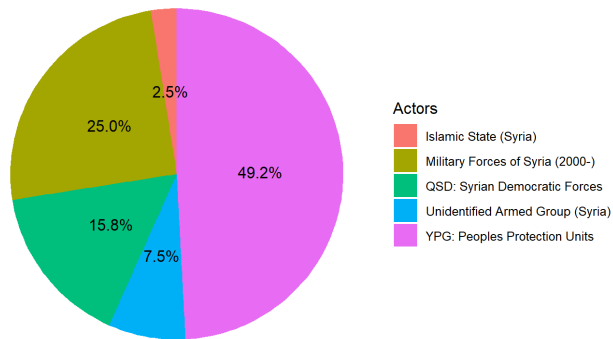
The pie chart above indicates the top actors that were "Military Forces of Turkey" mostly clashed. As it can be seen from the chart, the Turkish army mostly fought with the organizations that tried to establish an independent Kurdish state, such as YPG and QSD.
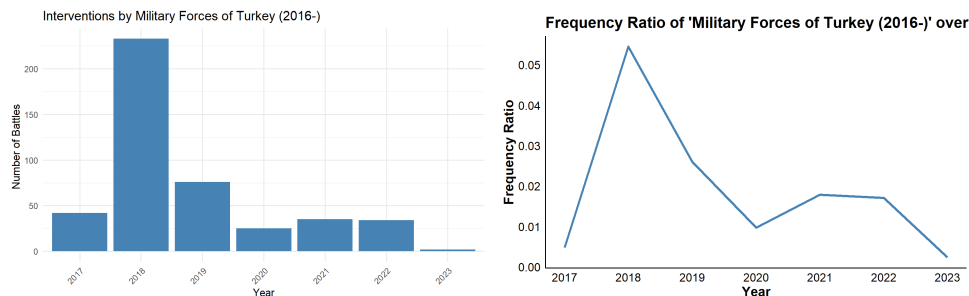
The charts above give the number of interventions of the Turkish military and the frequency ratio of the battles by the total battles in the dataset. First barplot shows that 2018 and 2019 were the years that were mostly involved in a battle. Second line graph also points out that Turkey was so highly in combat against his enemies such that the Turkish army was involved in every one battle out of twenty in Syria. This analysis collaborates with the analysis of CFR, that says the Turkish army and the Turkish-army backed forces had quite an enormous number of offenses against YPG and QSD to get Afrin from them (2023)

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WHO CONTROLS WHAT IN SYRIA
Much of the country's proven oil reserves are found in the Kurdish-held northeast

(Iddon, 2023)

The first map above shows the involvement of the Turkish army in Syrian soils from our analysis. Red dots indicate the actor of "Military Forces of Turkey" while blue dots indicate the special operations that the army conducted, such as "Operation Peace Spring" and "Operation Olive Branch" in the period of 2018-2019. As it can be seen from the map, Turkey's involvement in Syria was mostly based on border security since most of the dots were pointed in the border cities of Syria. At the right, the Syrian Map with the rulers of it can be seen. As it can be extracted from both of the maps that Turkey's main enemies were Kurdish groups in Syria. From Iddon's map, the analysis we have provided seems to be accurate, claiming that the reason for Turkey's involvement is because of protecting its borders and eliminating the possibility of establishment of a Kurdish state.

News sources of the battles

The Syrian conflict has been a protracted and multifaceted crisis, characterized by ongoing battles and ever-evolving events on the ground. To gain a deeper understanding of these conflicts, data analysis is conducted using sources of Syrian Observatory Human Rights (SOHR), Liveuamap, Shaam News Network (SHAAM), Facebook, and the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR). However, it is crucial to recognize the potential biases that may arise as well due to the ownership of these platforms by Western authorities whose activities prevail within the territory. It is important to explore the intelligence intervention facilitated by these news providers and highlight the impact of bias on the analysis of battles in Syria.
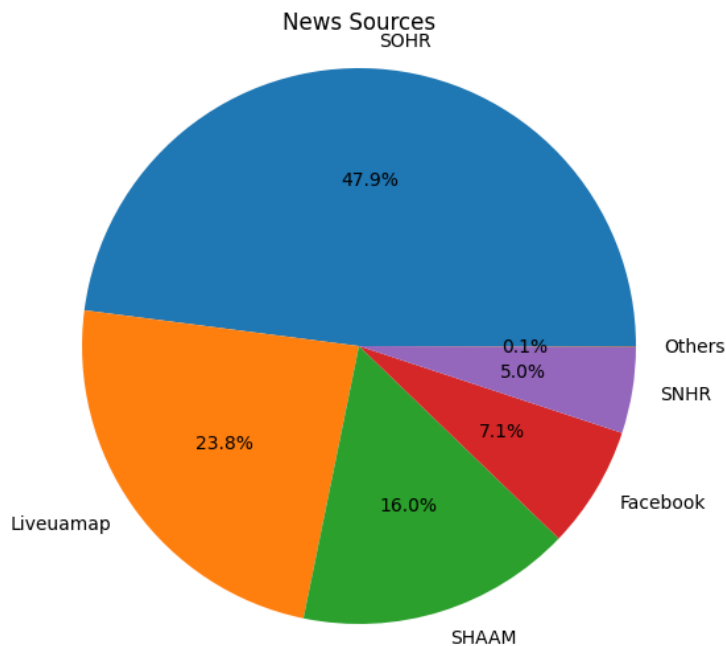
Analyzing Intelligence Intervention: The utilization of these news providers indirectly contributes to intelligence gathering efforts through their data analysis and reporting. By aggregating information from diverse sources and employing analytical techniques, intelligence agencies can derive insights into the dynamics of the Syrian conflict. These insights can aid in monitoring the situation on the ground, assessing the impact of military operations, identifying key actors, and potentially informing decision-making processes.

The Syrian Observatory Human Rights (SOHR) is widely recognized as a prominent source of information on casualties and events in Syria. Founded and operated by a Syrian living in the United Kingdom, the organization relies on a network of contacts within Syria to gather data. While the SOHR strives to maintain accuracy in its reporting, the nature of its sources may introduce limitations and potential biases. It is important to critically evaluate the reliability and objectivity of the data provided by the SOHR when conducting data analysis.

Liveuamap, an interactive map platform, has gained popularity for its ability to aggregate news and social media reports from various sources. It offers real-time information about conflicts worldwide, including the Syrian conflict. While Liveuamap provides a comprehensive overview of events, caution must be exercised in assessing the credibility and accuracy of the sources cited within the platform. Verifying the information through independent channels is essential to ensure its reliability for intelligence purposes.

Shaam News Network (SHAAM) has been extensively involved in reporting on the Syrian conflict. However, it has faced criticism regarding its alleged association with opposition groups, which may introduce biases in its reporting. The potential for bias necessitates the need to cross-reference information from multiple sources to obtain a more comprehensive and objective understanding of the battles and events unfolding in Syria.

Although Facebook is primarily a social media platform rather than a dedicated news source, it plays a significant role in disseminating information during conflicts, including the Syrian conflict. However, the credibility of information shared on Facebook can vary widely, ranging from authentic and verified content to disinformation and propaganda. Rigorous verification and independent corroboration of the shared information are imperative to separate fact from fiction.

The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) is an independent, non-governmental organization that aims to create documentation and reports regarding to the human rights violations in Syria. It has been widely recognized for its efforts to meticulously document casualties and human rights abuses. However, it is important to acknowledge that any organization involved in conflict documentation can face challenges and biases, even when

striving for objectivity. Careful scrutiny of the SNHR's methodologies and transparency in data collection and reporting should be considered when utilizing their data.

Impact of Bias:

The ownership of these news providers by Western authorities introduces the potential for bias in the data they provide. While Western ownership does not necessarily imply intentional manipulation, inadvertent biases can arise due to the sources chosen, interpretation of events, or the framing of narratives. Western authorities may have their own geopolitical interests or perspectives that can unconsciously influence the data analysis and reporting process.

To mitigate the impact of bias, it is crucial to consult a range of independent sources with diverse perspectives. Incorporating local sources, including those affiliated with Syrian authorities, can provide a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of the conflict. Independent verification and cross-referencing of information become essential to ensure a nuanced and objective analysis of the battles in Syria.

Data analysis of Syrian battles using news providers such as the SOHR, Liveuamap, SHAAM, Facebook, and SNHR offers valuable insights into the complex dynamics of the conflict. These platforms indirectly contribute to intelligence gathering efforts, aiding in the monitoring, assessment, and decision-making processes related to the Syrian conflict. However, the ownership of these platforms by various authorities necessitates a cautious approach regarding potential biases in the data they provide. While biases may diminish due to the diversity of ownership, it is imperative to consult a range of independent sources to mitigate the impact of bias and ensure a more comprehensive and objective understanding of the Syrian conflict. Rigorous verification and cross-referencing of information are essential to establish the credibility and reliability of data used for intelligence purposes.

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