

Opinion

# Civil War in Syria and the ‘New Wars’ Debate

Artur Malantowicz\*

The last two decades saw a plethora of contributions to the academic debate on the shifting character of contemporary warfare. Some scholars praised the notion of unique features in the nature of contemporary violent conflicts and thereby coined new terms and approaches, such as ‘new wars’, ‘postmodern wars’, ‘wars of the third kind’, ‘peoples’ wars’, ‘privatized wars’ or ‘hybrid wars’; some, on the contrary, questioned the rationality of such distinctions, believing that these not-so-unique characteristics were long-present in the history of humankind. The most prominent – and hence the most commonly addressed by fellow scholars – among the aforementioned ideas was the one put forward by Mary Kaldor in her profound book “New & Old Wars. Organized Violence in a Global Era”. This is why it will become the framework of the following reflection, which is not meant to take sides in the debate but only to offer a brief attempt to review the main arguments of the dispute<sup>1</sup> and look into its applicability in the context of the unfolding civil war in Syria.

## I. The ‘New Wars’ Debate

As traditionally believed, particularly by the Clausewitzian school of thought, war is “an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfil our will”<sup>2</sup>, financed by states and fought between states in order to achieve state interests with the use of regular national armed forces with a clear vertical structure and hierarchy. Historically, wars were predominantly fought due to geopolitical and ideological reasoning and their ultimate goal was to defeat an enemy in the battlefield, gain its territory and thereby strengthen the state’s power. Since the mid-1990s, however, a number of analysts have argued that the world is witnessing changes in the nature of warfare, making it inevitable to reconceptualise conflict studies. This is when the ‘New Wars’ theory came into being, with its prime notion of the globalisation process influencing contemporary politics and economy, including conflicts. The latter – so-called ‘new wars’ – are of civil or intrastate character and tend to erupt within states with authoritarian regimes, weakened by their exposure to the globalising world. They are largely based on identity politics – strengthened by new communication technologies – and are stimulated by personal or group interests and greed. Internal gratuitous violence invoked by irregular paramilitary troops and expulsion of the population rather than traditional field battles between armies are the elements that characterise the new wars.<sup>3</sup>

---

\*Artur Malantowicz ([artur.malantowicz@gmail.com](mailto:artur.malantowicz@gmail.com)) is a PhD Candidate at the Faculty of Journalism and Political Science, University of Warsaw. He also serves as a Director of Asian Programme and Middle East Analyst at the Centre for International Initiatives (<http://centruminicjatyw.org>).

<sup>1</sup> An interesting evaluation of the ‘New Wars’ discourse was undertaken by Patrick Mello in his article ‘In Search of New Wars: The Debate about a Transformation of War’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 2010-XX(X), pp. 1-13. From a broader literature on new wars Mello derives five hypotheses concerning features of such conflicts: (1) erosion of the state’s monopoly on the use of force, (2) the political economy of ‘new wars’, (3) asymmetric character of the ‘new wars’, (4) ‘new wars’ as identity-based wars, (5) terrorism within the framework of ‘new wars’.

<sup>2</sup> C. Clausewitz, *On War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> M. Kaldor, *New & Old Wars. Organized Violence in a Global Era*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2005, pp. 6-7. See also: M. Kaldor, ‘In Defence of New Wars’, *Stability* 2013-2(1), pp. 2-3.

Considered in more detail, the ‘New Wars’ theories suggest that modern conflicts no longer have geopolitical or ideological backgrounds. Kaldor states that forward-looking ideas such as democracy, state-building or socialism are anachronistic<sup>4</sup>; that contemporary wars are based on identity politics, on “movements which mobilize around ethnic, racial or religious identity for the purpose of claiming state power”<sup>5</sup>, but which in fact are fragmentative, exclusive and backward-looking. It is why new wars are associated with state-dismantling processes.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, political leaders apply identity politics to justify authoritarian policies and to mobilise political support by increasing fear and insecurity or simply to find scapegoats. “The greater the sense of insecurity, the greater the polarization of society, the less is the space for alternative integrative political values.”<sup>7</sup> It is not without reason that Duffield uses the term ‘new barbarism’ to describe the tendency of “the anarchic and destructive power of traditional feelings and antagonisms [...] usually unleashed in times of change when overarching political or economic systems are either weakened or collapse.”<sup>8</sup>

In new wars, legitimate violence is not the state’s monopoly any longer. As analysts suggest, new wars are characterised by a multiplicity of types of fighting units, both public and private, state and non-state. Next to regular armed forces without “clear military objectives that can be translated into coherent strategies and tactics”<sup>9</sup>, there also appear different autonomous paramilitary groups, party militias, bandits, warlords, insurgents, private military companies and foreign mercenaries, all lacking military order and discipline, all committing severe atrocities and being more likely to use light weapons (e.g. machetes), rather than heavy artillery. Consequently, this kind of revolutionary warfare alters the objectives of violent struggle, that now aims to gain the support of the local population instead of capturing territory from enemy forces. Finally, in new wars there is also space for regular foreign troops operating under the auspices of international organisations and self-defence units composed mainly of volunteers trying to defend their localities, although without adequate resources to provide for their sustainability in the long term.<sup>10</sup>

The shifted strategy of new wars implies that the authorities no longer seek popular support; instead they pursue deliberate targeting and forced displacement of civilians. It leads to situations in which “the effects of these new conflicts are even more devastating than in the case of traditional cross-border wars. They strike at the very heart of a nation’s social fabric [...] threatening its political and economic development”.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the authorities create an unfavourable environment for those they cannot control. It is done either through ethnic cleansing – population expulsion through the use of force or by ‘systematic murder of those with different labels’, different opinions and identities, for instance political, religious or ethnic. Another technique available is ‘rendering an area uninhabitable’, which can be done physically (attacking civilian targets – hospitals, homes, water sources, markets), economically (forced famine and sieges) and psychologically, through systematic rape and

---

<sup>4</sup> Kaldor 2005, supra note 3, pp. 77-78.

<sup>5</sup> Idem, p. 76.

<sup>6</sup> Kaldor 2013, supra note 3, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Kaldor 2005, supra note 3, p. 84.

<sup>8</sup> M. Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security*, London; New York: Zed Books 2005, p. 110.

<sup>9</sup> D. Snow, *Uncivil wars: international security and the new internal conflicts*, Boulder; London: Lynne Rienner 1996, p. 109.

<sup>10</sup> Kaldor 2005, supra note 3, pp. 93-6; Snow, supra note 9, pp. 109-12; M. Kaldor, ‘New wars. Counter-insurgency or human security’, *The Broker Online* 2009, p. 2, at: <http://www.thebrokeronline.eu/Special-Reports/Special-report-Who-is-the-enemy/New-wars> (accessed on 18 June 2013).

<sup>11</sup> NGO International Alert 1999, p. 74. Quoted in: Duffield, supra note 8, p. 124.

sexual abuse or by 'other public and very visible acts of brutality'.<sup>12</sup> In addition, "the new type of warfare is a predatory social condition."<sup>13</sup> Violence spreads very easily, especially across borders into neighbouring countries, which are the most immediately affected by new wars. It thus has several economic and political effects for the region, such as lost trade, spread of illegal circuits of trade, spill-over of identity politics and the burden of refugees.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, in the new wars environment, when the states are disintegrated, markets are shut down as a result of fighting or blockades imposed by outside powers, production is physically destroyed or economically collapsed, both governments and military groups have to find another sources of funding their activity. They have several options, the most common of which is loot, robbery and extortion, but also levying of taxation and tribute.<sup>15</sup> However, war efforts cannot be sustained without external assistance in the form of remittances from abroad to individuals, direct support from the diaspora living abroad, assistance from foreign governments and humanitarian aid.<sup>16</sup> In other words, the economy of new wars is decentralised and highly dependent on foreign resources, support of which is not based on geopolitics anymore, but on ideology and/or ethnic and religious identity.<sup>17</sup>

Whereas a shift in contemporary warfare seems to be undisputed, the idea of a fundamental change of the war itself is not always perceived as such. As some scholars indicate, the description 'new wars' is in fact only a new name for different types (both domestic and international) of hitherto 'old' wars, including low-intensity conflicts. In 1992 Galvin wrote: "in the immediate future we will see the same causes of low-intensity conflict we have found in the past, including weak national administrations, lack of political infrastructure, economic stagnation, historic problems of disfranchisement for large parts of the citizenry, corruption and mismanagement, and difficult military–civil relationships".<sup>18</sup> I am certain that Kaldor would fully support the above statement, since its far-reaching similarities to the 'New Wars' theory are easily noticeable. However, Newman does not see any particular 'newness' about the new wars features (objectives, actors, human impact, war economy, social structure etc.) since they "have been present, to varying degrees, throughout last 100 years".<sup>19</sup> Rather it is our social reality and our perspective which have changed and hence we – academics, politicians, analysts – focus on these factors more than ever before. Nonetheless, Newman does recognise the input of the 'new wars' concept into our understanding of civil war. It is particularly valuable for drawing attention to the complex notion of security with its political, social, economic and human dimensions.<sup>20</sup>

Exploring the criticism further, Berdal emphasises the lack of a proper historical perspective in conflicts described as 'new' ones and draws attention to the tendency of simplifying as well as exaggerating the importance of the global economy in sustaining civil wars.<sup>21</sup> For Kalyvas,

<sup>12</sup> Kaldor 2005, supra note 3, pp. 97-100; C. Allen, 'Warfare, Endemic Violence and State Collapse in Africa', *Review of African Political Economy* 1999-26:81, p. 369; E. Newman, 'The 'New Wars' Debate: A Historical Perspective Is Needed', *Security Dialogue* 2004-37, p. 178.

<sup>13</sup> Kaldor 2005, supra note 3, p. 107.

<sup>14</sup> Idem, pp. 107-9.

<sup>15</sup> Idem, pp. 101-2; Allen 1999, supra note 12, p. 371.

<sup>16</sup> Kaldor 2005, supra note 4, pp. 103-14.

<sup>17</sup> B. Balcerowicz, 'Czym jest współcześnie wojna?', p. 11, at: <http://www.pl.ism.uw.edu.pl/images/stories/Publikacje/ebiblioteka/balcerowiczwspolczesnawoja.doc> (accessed on 18 June 2013).

<sup>18</sup> J. Galvin, 'Conflict in the Post-Cold War Era' in E. Corr & S. Sloan (ed.), *Low Intensity Conflict*, 1992, p. 60. Quoted in: E. Henderson & D. Singer, 'New Wars and Rumors of New Wars', *International Interactions* 2002-28:2, p. 172.

<sup>19</sup> Newman 2004, supra note 12, p. 179.

<sup>20</sup> Idem, pp. 179, 185-6.

<sup>21</sup> M. Berdal, 'How new are New Wars?', *Global Governance*, 2003-9, p. 490.

on the other hand, the key points of contention are the presumed lack of ideology or popular support in new wars and the contrast between 'limited, disciplined, understandable' violence in old wars and 'senseless, gratuitous and uncontrolled' violence in new conflicts. He finds these assumptions unsupported by evidence, in particular indicating several cases of African wars. Here ideological agendas were simply not clearly visible for outside observers even if the rebel movements themselves had 'sophisticated political understanding of their own participation'.<sup>22</sup>

Leaving the critics aside, I strongly recommend looking into Kaldor's idea of 'new wars' as an analytical category more than a comprehensive theory capable of explaining every single case of conflict in the contemporary world. As such it is able to contribute to our understanding of the contexts in which nowadays wars unfold and hence, possibly, to deliver some policy recommendations. Applications of the 'New Wars' paradigm have already taken place in the scholarly literature, for instance by Kaldor herself (Bosnia & Herzegovina), by Krige (Sierra Leone)<sup>23</sup> or in my own early experience with the 'New Wars' discourse (Rwanda, Darfur).<sup>24</sup> It is why I found it useful to examine features of the Syrian civil war and verify whether 'New Wars' theory can be at all helpful in explaining them.

## II. Civil War in Syria

Since March 2011 Syria has been entangled in a civil war where Assad's regime is fighting opposition forces that, inspired by uprisings elsewhere in the region, voiced their discontent about the regime's domestic policies. Up to date over 100,000 people have died in the conflict and a few million were forced to flee their homes. Heavy fighting continues to take place on ground whereas the international community remains stalled in its response. What are the features of the Syrian civil war? Is it a case of old war or rather a new type of conflict, or maybe something in between? In order to provide answers to these questions, I will try to address a few aspects of the analysis stemming from the 'New Wars' debate: goals, actors, methods, war economy and impact on the region.

Some analysts, mostly western-based, would like to portray the Syrian war as a conflict that is purely forming along sectarian fault-lines; a conflict between the ruling minority (Alawite sect) and the Sunni majority with other minorities caught in the middle.<sup>25</sup> In spite of such claims, as Raphaël Lefèvre argues, the very onset of the protests was related to local issues in Dar'a: "It all started when a group of twenty children painted the slogan 'we want freedom' on the wall of a street before they were caught by police officers who sent them directly to jail where they received bad treatment".<sup>26</sup> Only after the harsh reaction of the regime to peaceful demonstrations in Dar'a did the conflict turn into a popular revolution, when opposition forces raised their demands related to the socio-political and economic situation of the country, e.g. lifting the emergency law that was in place, ensuring broader political

---

<sup>22</sup> S. Kalyvas, "New" and "Old" Civil Wars. A Valid Distinction?, *World Politics*, 2001-54, pp. 103-4, 109-10, 116.

<sup>23</sup> G. Kriege, *Perspectives on 'New Wars' in Africa: the case of Sierra Leone*, MPhil Thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 2008, at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10019.1/2601> (accessed on 18 June 2013).

<sup>24</sup> A. Malantowicz, 'Do 'New Wars' Theories Contribute to Our Understanding of the African Conflicts? Cases of Rwanda and Darfur', *Africana Bulletin*, 2010-58, pp. 159-72.

<sup>25</sup> See for instance: F. C. Hof & A. Simon, *Sectarian Violence in Syria's Civil War: Causes, Consequences, and Recommendations for Mitigation*, A Paper Commissioned by The Center for the Prevention of Genocide, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2013, at: <http://www.ushmm.org/genocide/pdf/syria-report.pdf> (accessed on 9 August 2013).

<sup>26</sup> Moti' al-Batin, cleric from Dar'a. Quoted in: R. Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria*, London: Hurst & Company 2013, p. 183

participation and introducing freer media.<sup>27</sup> Hence from the beginning there was an ideological and political agenda attached to the conflict, nothing related to greed or identity politics, as ‘New Wars’ supporters would like to see it. In the past two years several coalitions of opposition forces were formed to gain international support, the aim of every single one being political transition from the authoritarian Assad regime to a democratic state. The most recent and the most inclusive organisation thus far is the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, supported by the Syrian National Council, the Local Co-ordination Committees and the Free Syrian Army. Nonetheless, several parties remain outside the Coalition, particularly the National Co-ordination Committee (which rejects violence and wants to negotiate with the government) and some Islamist militant groups, including Jabhat al-Nusra. The National Coalition seeks to build a “democratic, civil, pluralistic, strong and stable state” with “preservation of the unity of the Syrian people”.<sup>28</sup>

It does not mean, however, that identity politics was not applied throughout the course of the war. The situation changed as soon as the regime responded with violence and tagged its opponents as ‘terrorists’ or ‘foreign elements’ threatening the Syrian nation. Since Syria is traditionally a heterogeneous country with many ethnic and religious minorities (Sunni, Shi’a, Christians, Alawites, Druzes, Ismailis, Palestinians, Kurds, Circassians etc.),<sup>29</sup> the regime also quickly turned to sectarianism in mobilising political support, particularly by calling itself a protector of the Syrian minorities against the Sunni majority. Such propaganda quickly bore fruit with some of the groups backing Assad,<sup>30</sup> some disputing his ‘protectorate’<sup>31</sup> and some opting to stay outside of the conflict.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, relatively early in the course of events, several Alawite (Assad himself being member of this Shi’a sect) militias were deployed by the government, particularly to crush rebellion in majority Sunni areas. It intensified the feeling that the Alawites were indiscriminately supporting the regime, even if this was not always the case, just as not all Sunni contest the regime. Consequently, once Iranians, Shi’a Iraqis and Hezbollah joined the government’s side and, similarly, once fighters from fellow Sunni countries backed the rebels, the hitherto internal struggle of the Syrians transformed into yet another front of Sunni-Shi’a war.<sup>33</sup>

As Vicken Cheterian remarks, “the overuse of the sectarian aspect in this conflict as the main underlying cause will impede us, not only at the level of understanding the general picture of Syrian politics, but also in asking the right questions to comprehend the Syrian crisis”.<sup>34</sup> As

<sup>27</sup> International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect (ICRP), ‘Crisis in Syria’, at: <http://www.responsibilitytoprotect.org/index.php/crises/crisis-in-syria> (accessed on 19 June 2013).

<sup>28</sup> ‘Guide to the Syrian opposition’, *BBC News*, at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15798218> (accessed on 19 June 2013). Full political agenda of the National Coalition can be found at its website: <http://www.etilaf.org/en/>.

<sup>29</sup> For a good introduction into sectarianism in Syria see: Lefèvre 2013, supra note 26, pp. 63-77.

<sup>30</sup> ‘Fearing Change, Many Christians in Syria Back Assad’, *The New York Times*, 27 September 2011, at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/28/world/middleeast/fearing-change-syria-christians-back-bashar-al-assad.html?pagewanted> (accessed on 19 June 2013).

<sup>31</sup> D. Khoury, ‘Is it Winter or Spring for Christians in Syria?’, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, at: [http://www.lb.boell.org/downloads/Perspectives\\_03-09\\_Is\\_it\\_Winter\\_or\\_Spring\\_for\\_Christians\\_in\\_Syria.pdf](http://www.lb.boell.org/downloads/Perspectives_03-09_Is_it_Winter_or_Spring_for_Christians_in_Syria.pdf) (accessed on 19 June 2013).

<sup>32</sup> A. Glioti, ‘Syriac Christians, Kurds Boost Cooperation in Syria’, *Al-Monitor*, 20 June 2013, at: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/06/syria-syriacs-assyrians-kurds-pyd.html> (accessed on 20 June 2013).

<sup>33</sup> J. Pawlak & S. Nebehay, ‘U.N. warns of foreign influx into sectarian Syria war’, *Reuters*, 20 December 2012, at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/12/20/us-syria-crisis-un-idUSBRE8BJOLI20121220> (accessed on 20 June 2013).

<sup>34</sup> V. Cheterian, ‘Syrian War Is Not Only Sectarian’, *Al-Monitor*, 27 May 2013, at: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2013/05/syrian-conflict-failed-sectarian-analysis.html> (accessed on 9 August 2013).

seen from this perspective, the civil war in Syria is not merely based on identity politics and does not lack an ideological agenda. In fact, it was there from the very beginning and is still present now, even though recent developments on the ground may suggest otherwise. In addition, in line with my general reflection about the ‘New Wars’ discourse,<sup>35</sup> while not lessening the role of ethnic and religious mobilisation in the Syrian war, the sectarian element should not be perceived as the very cause of the conflict or its underlying goal, but rather a symptom or a tool to intensify the scale of the atrocities. It is why, in my opinion, the ‘New Wars’ theory does not score a point for the ‘goals’ reasoning.

Undoubtedly, an enormous variety of actors is involved in the war in Syria and truly, as ‘New Wars’ advocates claim, the state’s monopoly on legitimate violence has been taken away. On one side of the barricade there are: the Syrian Armed Forces, a regular army under the command of President Assad, the National Defence Force, a special unit comprised almost exclusively of Alawites, a pro-government militia Shabiha led by members of the extended Assad family, Lebanese Hezbollah and Iranian Revolutionary Guards<sup>36</sup>; and these are only the main forces. The list of Assad’s opponents is even longer, a part of which presents Fig. 1.

Who’s who in Syria’s battlefield		
Key rebel groups, their leaders and ideology		
Name	Leader	Aims
<b>Main fronts:</b>		
Supreme Military Command (SMC)	General Salim Idriss, a defector	Set up in December 2012 under the Syrian National Coalition in an effort to unite rebels backed by Western and Arab Gulf governments. Has limited control on the ground
Syrian Islamic Front	Collective leaders’ council; chair is Abu Abdullah al-Hamawi	Syrian Islamists. Includes Ahrar al-Sham and other Salafist groups. Co-operates with SMC
Syrian Liberation Front	Sheikh Ahmed Issa, head of Saqour al-Sham	Coalition of Islamist groups. Independent of mainstream fighters, but works closely with them. Some leaders sit on SMC
<b>Fighting groups:</b>		
Jabhat al-Nusra	Abu Muhammad al-Golani	Salafist jihadists with a global vision of an Islamist state. Mainly foreign leadership, Syrian soldiers. Linked to al-Qaeda
Ahrar al-Sham	Abu Abdel Rahman al-Suri, Abu Abdullah al-Hamawi, Abu Ayman (political leader)	Salafist jihadists with national aims. Co-operate with other groups. Strongest component of Syrian Islamic Front
Farouq Battalions	Osama Sayeh al-Jinidi	A mixed bunch, ranging from devout to mild Islamists. Started in Homs, now nationwide; includes Farouq al-Shamal in the north. Controls some border crossings
Liwa al-Tawhid	Abdulkader Saleh (Haj Marea)	Umbrella force in Aleppo, included in the Syrian Liberation Front. Its leader sits on the SMC
Saqour al-Sham	Sheikh Ahmed Issa	Most powerful fighting force in Idleb. Islamist. Its leader heads the Syrian Liberation Front
Ansar al-Islam	Abu Moaz al-Agha	Umbrella for Islamist factions around Damascus, including powerful Liwa al-Islam
Ahfad al-Rasul	Ziad Haj Obeid	Part of Ansar al-Islam in Damascus, where it has carried out assassinations; also has offshoot in Idleb
Ghurabaa	Omar Hilal	Islamist group with growing presence in Aleppo and Raqqa; works with all other groups
Democratic Union Party (PYD)	Salih Muslim	Syrian offshoot of Turkey’s Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). Neither with the regime nor with the rebels. Its militias control Kurdish areas in north-east Syria

Sources: Institute for the Understanding of War; *The Economist*

Fig. 1. Main rebel groups involved in civil war in Syria<sup>37</sup>

The main opposition army group is the Free Syrian Army (created at the end of July 2011 among army defectors who decided to support protesting civilians), followed by a range of secular and Islamic organisations, many with unclear agendas. Recently the most heard of is Jabhat al-Nusra, an off-shoot of Al-Qaeda in Syria which in December 2012 was listed by the

<sup>35</sup> Malantowicz 2010, supra note 24, pp. 170-1.

<sup>36</sup> L. Sly, ‘Assad forces gaining ground in Syria’, *The Washington Post*, 11 May 2013, at: [http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-05-11/world/39297570\\_1\\_urban-warfare-government-forces-rebels](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-05-11/world/39297570_1_urban-warfare-government-forces-rebels) (accessed on 20 June 2013).

<sup>37</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.economist.com> (accessed on 19 June 2013).

United States as a terrorist group.<sup>38</sup> In other words, both state and non-state actors, regular troops, militias, foreign mercenaries, jihadists and like groups are present on Syrian territory. Likewise, the majority of them has committed severe atrocities in the battlefield, an echo of which is reported by the media on an everyday basis.

I would not, however, deprive the fighting units – at least some of them – of having a coherent vision of military strategy. There seems to be a clear understanding among the major players of the importance of several strongholds on Syrian territory, such as the central region of Homs with the city of Qusayr, which links Damascus and the coastal region with ports in Tartus and Latakia (an important transit route for the regime) as well as Northern Lebanon and the rest of Syria (a major route used by the rebels to ship their weapons). Similarly, they adjust their tactics to the means available – since rebels were unable to meet the regime’s forces in the open field due to arms disparities, they turned to guerrilla tactics and urban warfare as their only chance to face the enemy. Consequently, it triggered a shift in the regime’s strategy and led to Hezbollah’s engagement in the Syrian war – which is well known for its mastery of guerrilla warfare. As retired Lebanese Army General Elias Hanna pointed out: “They [the regime] are fighting urban warfare with urban warfare instead of going at it asymmetrically”.<sup>39</sup> Nonetheless, the rebels experience several internal problems as indicated by the ‘New Wars’ theories – they lack coherence and military discipline. “The regime is a unitary actor politically and has a cohesive military command and control structure. The rebels remain badly fragmented. They face ongoing problems of internal cohesion, poor command and control, and repeated disruptions in the supply of arms and ammunition from their principal supporters in the Gulf. Above all, the rebels lack strategically savvy political leadership”.<sup>40</sup> Having said that, I have to grant Kaldor and her supporters a point for their (almost) correct assumptions in the field of ‘actors’.

Kaldor suggests that the main technique of ‘new wars’ warfare is population displacement. She could not be more right in the case of Syria as almost daily the world media deliver news about ethnic cleansing, targeted mass killings, rapes, executions, destroyed households and civilian infrastructure and so on. It is important to note, however, that both sides of the conflict commit such atrocities: in case of the regime it is a deliberate policy ‘from clear to cleanse’ where an “attempt to separate the insurgents from the population only accelerated population displacement along sectarian lines, which in turn entrenched broader civil conflict in Syria”<sup>41</sup>, in case of the rebels – mostly, but not exclusively, revenge actions occur. Since this point raises no doubt and there are numerous documents<sup>42</sup> reporting such atrocities I will not go into depth on the issue but rather quote one of the reports:

Bashar al-Assad’s forces have displaced populations in opposition strongholds, which has deepened Syria’s sectarian division. The regime has employed artillery, air power, bulldozers, sectarian massacres, and even ballistic missiles to force Syrian

<sup>38</sup> ‘US blacklists Syrian rebel group al-Nusra’, *Al Jazeera*, 11 December 2012, at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/2012121117048117723.html> (accessed on 20 June 2013).

<sup>39</sup> Sly 2013, supra note 25.

<sup>40</sup> Y. Sayigh, ‘Syria’s Strategic Balance at a Tipping Point’, 7 June 2012, at: [http://carneגיע-mec.org/2013/06/07/syria-s-strategic-balance-at-tipping-point/g95a](http://carneгие-mec.org/2013/06/07/syria-s-strategic-balance-at-tipping-point/g95a) (accessed on 20 June 2013).

<sup>41</sup> J. Holliday, ‘The Assad Regime. From Counterinsurgency to Civil War’, *Middle East Security Report 2013-8*, p. 19, at: <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/TheAssadRegime-web.pdf> (accessed on 20 June 2013).

<sup>42</sup> See for instance: Human Rights Watch, at: <http://www.hrw.org/middle-eastn-africa/syria>; Amnesty International, at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/syria>; N. Cumming-Bruce, ‘U.N. Panel Reports Increasing Brutality by Both Sides in Syria’, *The New York Times*, 4 June 2013, at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/05/world/middleeast/un-panel-reports-increasing-brutality-by-both-sides-in-syria.html> (accessed on 20 June 2013).

populations out of insurgent held areas. This strategy ensures that even when the rebels win towns and neighbourhoods, they lose the population. Chemical weapons are now the only unused element in Assad's arsenal, which could be used for large-scale population displacement to great effect.<sup>43</sup>

The regime's depopulation strategy has resulted in humanitarian crisis and an enormous number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees. As of June 20, 2013 there are over 4,250,000 IDPs scattered across Syria and almost 1,675,000 refugees residing in neighbouring countries, out of which the biggest number is in Lebanon (>550,000), followed by Jordan (>480,000), Turkey (<390,000), Iraq (<160,000) and Egypt (>80,000).<sup>44</sup> Even though these countries keep their borders open for Syrian refugees and provide them with humanitarian assistance, the crisis constitutes a severe burden for their economies. It is particularly noticeable in the cases of Lebanon (where refugees now equal 12% of the country's population) and Jordan (which has very scarce water and energy resources in addition to a financial crisis). Additionally, the unfolding situation threatens the very existence of both Lebanon and Jordan: the former became the scene of many sectarian clashes in the past months<sup>45</sup> while the latter has experienced border clashes with Syrian soldiers and received direct threats from the Syrian regime.<sup>46</sup> All neighbours of Syria alike are worried about the spill-over of the conflict which in fact is already taking place with Hezbollah's active participation. Therefore, in both aspects, 'methods' and 'impact on the region', the 'New Wars' theory is correct when applied to the case of Syria.

At last, 'newness' of the war in Syria would require a specific way of its financing, particularly in the form of seeking external assistance, but also through looting or robbery. The Syrian government seems not to need to resort to such means of acquiring funds so far, although it may be receiving some financial support from Russia or Iran,<sup>47</sup> who are already providing Assad with arms and technical assistance. For the opposition forces, however, their only option to acquire funds is foreign assistance, hence they are actively involved in securing foreign resources. They mobilise support from the Syrian diaspora, governments, religious communities, private donors and foreign citizens.<sup>48</sup> They are very creative and use different tools, including social media. I even have personal experience in that matter, since I was once approached on Facebook by an acquaintance of mine, a former student at the University of Damascus and currently a fighter in the Free Syrian Army, with a request to either donate or organise a fundraising for their cause (by which he meant 'buying some weaponry'). Additionally, Syrian rebels focus on gaining control over strategically important oil fields in

---

<sup>43</sup> Holliday 2013, *supra* note 36, p. 7. Clearly this report is already outdated.

<sup>44</sup> Data after UNHCR, at: <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/syria.php> (accessed on 21 June 2013).

<sup>45</sup> See for instance: S. Abedine & B. Brumfield, 'Rocket strike Beirut suburb as sectarian strife flares in Lebanon, Syria', *CNN*, 27 May 2013, <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/05/26/world/meast/lebanon-violence/> (accessed on 20 June 2013); D. Cave, 'Syrian War Plays Out Along a Street in Lebanon', *The New York Times*, 23 August 2012, at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/24/world/middleeast/syrian-war-plays-out-along-a-street-in-lebanon.html> (accessed on 20 June 2013).

<sup>46</sup> Assad warns 'fire' in Syria could reach Jordan, *Al Arabiya*, 18 April 2013, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/04/18/Assad-warns-fire-in-Syria-could-reach-Jordan.html> (accessed on 20 June 2013).

<sup>47</sup> M. Stott & S. Nakhoul, 'Syria expects more financial aid from Russia, Iran', *Reuters*, 24 April 2013, at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/24/us-syria-crisis-economy-idUSBRE93N0QA20130424> (accessed on 20 June 2013).

<sup>48</sup> Particularly generous support for the anti-Assad forces comes from the Gulf states as they share similar Sunni Arab background. See: J. Warrick, 'Private money pours into Syrian conflict as rich donors pick sides', *The Washington Post*, 16 June 2013, at: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/private-money-pours-into-syrian-conflict-as-rich-donors-pick-sides/2013/06/15/67841656-cf8a-11e2-8845-d970ccb04497\\_story\\_1.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/private-money-pours-into-syrian-conflict-as-rich-donors-pick-sides/2013/06/15/67841656-cf8a-11e2-8845-d970ccb04497_story_1.html) (accessed on 20 June 2013).



the north-eastern province of Hasaka<sup>49</sup> and selling looted artefacts<sup>50</sup>, both meant to obtain the necessary funds to keep their struggle alive. In other words, Kaldor was right in her description of the 'war economy'.

### III. Conclusion

As mentioned before, my aim was not to dispute whether 'new wars' are indeed new or whether the theory presented by Kaldor has sufficient historical perspective. The paper was merely an attempt to test the analytical category of 'new wars' and its applicability to the present conflict in Syria which, due to its significance to regional security, gained substantial international attention. The analysis, although limited in its scope, has proved the 'New Wars' discourse right in most of its basic assumptions about actors, methods applied, spread of violence and war economy typical for the new types of conflicts. The only point of disagreement was found in relation to the objectives of new wars since I argue, with Kalyvas on my side, that the Syrian conflict in particular and other contemporary wars in general still have a deep ideological and political background. Truly, these are frequently muffled by gratuitous violence leading to population displacement, but the importance of ideology should not be diminished notwithstanding. Altogether, as Newman rightly indicated, the 'New Wars' theories contribute to our understanding of civil wars by focusing our attention on the multidimensional concept of comprehensive security with its social, economic, political and human elements.

---

<sup>49</sup> B. Dehghanpishch & A. Ramadan, 'Syrian rebels take town, part of oil field, in north', *The Washington Post*, 14 February 2013, at: [http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-02-14/world/37094281\\_1\\_al-nusra-hama-province-syrian-rebels](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-02-14/world/37094281_1_al-nusra-hama-province-syrian-rebels) (accessed on 20 June 2013).

<sup>50</sup> T. Luck, 'Syrian rebels loot artifacts to raise money for fight against Assad', *The Washington Post*, 12 February 2013, at: [http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-02-12/world/37059413\\_1\\_syrian-rebels-aleppo-syrian-city](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-02-12/world/37059413_1_syrian-rebels-aleppo-syrian-city) (accessed on 20 June 2013).