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## **The Terrorization of Syria: A Case Study of Indiscriminate Violence in the Syrian Civil War**

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**The Terrorization of Syria**  
A Case Study of Indiscriminate Violence in the Syrian Civil War

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## **Introduction**

At the beginning of the 1980s, Hafez al-Assad started a counterinsurgency campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood. His tactics were successful, such as employing military units, assembling pro-regime militias, and using force to fight the insurgents. More than three decades later, his son, Bashar, tried to reapply his father's strategies (the Institute for the Study of War, 2013). However, instead of saving the country from insurgency, the tactics of Bashar al-Assad's regime caused the escalation of the conflict into a civil war. Never before has there been a war that displaced, victimised, and cost so many lives as the Syrian Civil War. This conflict, which started during the Arab Spring protests in 2011, continues to be fought today.

At the beginning of 2012, Connie Agius published an interview with a resident of Idlib, a city in Northwest Syria. When asked to describe what was happening in the city of Idlib, the source answered the following: "They used to be aggressive with the people who were really active [in the resistance] before, but now any sort of trouble means death to any person or his relatives" (Agius, 2012).

The hostility from the Syrian government against innocent civilians is also apparent in the story about Maryam and Taha. Maryam, who graduated as a midwife, met her husband Taha during her studies (Firth, 2021). Taha was studying to become an anaesthetist. On the 10th of July 2021, Maryam, and her fiancé Taha, got married. A short week later, the Syrian government fired an artillery shell. The family home of Maryam and Taha was hit (Firth, 2021). Taha was severely wounded and brought to a hospital across the Turkish border. He survived. Unfortunately, Maryam did not. She died as a result of the attack (Firth, 2021).

To learn more about the atrocities that happened over the past decade in Syria, a deeper look into the violence that is being used is needed.

In his article Kalyvas (2004) addresses the paradox of terrorism. Through the evidence given in many empirical studies, he proves that the use of indiscriminate violence will result in the opposite of the desired outcome under certain circumstances. When indiscriminate violence has been proven counterproductive, Kalyvas (2004) argues, the tactics should change to a selective form of violence. In reality, indiscriminate violence is still being used due to its cheaper nature (Kalyvas, 2004). This then creates a paradox.

We do not witness a change from indiscriminate violence to selective violence in the Syrian civil war. And as there has been little research done on the topic of violence within the Syrian civil war, it is interesting to dive deeper into the mechanisms preventing the change from indiscriminate to selective violence. By the hand of Kalyvas' (2004) theory, this thesis sets out to answer the question, "For what reasons does the Syrian government still use indiscriminate violence against its civilians?".

This research will focus on the Syrian civil war and the methods used by the government to clear its country from insurgents. The first part will consist of a literature review on the research that has been previously done on the different types of violence and the civil war in Syria. Secondly, an explanation of Kalyvas's (2004) theory that will be used to research the use of violence by the Syrian regime will follow. Then, the methodology of this research will be explained. This methodological section will detail the process tracing nature of this thesis and which sources have been used in the analysis, which makes up the third part of this article. Finally, I will conclude that the Syrian government is still using indiscriminate violence as it does not have the resources to install an infrastructure of information needed to implement selective violence against rebels.

## **Literature Review**

This section reviews the most important literature on civil war and the types of violence used within it. As this research will focus on civil war, this will be the first subject of debate. Next up will be the types of violence that can be identified within conflict. After having looked into the effects of indiscriminate violence, the focus will shift towards the use of indiscriminate violence by the incumbents in civil war cases and Syria in specific.

### **Civil war**

In part two of their book 'Resort to Arms', Small, Singer, and Bennett (1982) try to establish an operational definition for the concept of civil war. They define a civil war as "any armed conflict that involves (a) military action internal to the metropole, (b) the active participation of the national government, and (c) effective resistance by both sides" (Small et al., 1982). The difference between war and any other internal conflict is the number of deaths caused by the battle at hand. Small et al. (1982) claim that taking human lives is the dominant and primary characteristic of war. The threshold put forward by Small et al. (1982) for an internal conflict to be defined as a civil war is a minimum death count of 1,000.

According to Sambanis (2004), the definition of Small et al. (1982) makes for a great foundation. However, Sambanis argues that it does not answer fundamental questions about coding civil wars, such as data reliability when focussing on numerical thresholds. Since civil wars are often fluctuating in the amount of violence committed, Sambanis (2004) also asks how to know when an old war has ended, and a new one has begun.

Sambanis (2004) creates a new operational definition of civil war to answer these difficult questions. He argues that an internal conflict should be coded as a civil war if the war takes place in

an internationally recognised territory that exceeds a population of 500,000. The involved parties should be militarily and politically organised, and their political objectives should be publically stated. One of the principal combatants should be the government. The starting date of the war should be in the year in which the amount of deaths lies between 500 and 1,000. If a war does not count at least 500 casualties in the first year, the war can only be said to have started in that year if, in the next three years, the amount of deaths exceeds 1,000. There should be no three-year periods where the conflict causes less than 500 deaths. If this does occur, the war will be coded as ended.

Throughout the war, the insurgents' side should be able to be effective in their resistance. This means that the weaker party should cause at least 100 deaths within the stronger party. Once the violence becomes one-sided, the war should be coded as ended. A peace treaty that lasts for at least six months or the victory of the insurgents should be coded as the end of the war. When the parties stop fighting, or if a truce or ceasefire is reached, this should also mark the war's end if this results in at least two years of peace. If a new battle begins between the same parties but over new ideologies, this should be coded as a new war. Suppose the same parties start fighting again over the same issues. In that case, this should be coded as a continuation of the old war unless the previously discussed reasons to code the war as having ended are applicable (Sambanis, 2004).

As there are many types of civil wars to be distinguished, Kalyvas (2006) outlines the definition of irregular as opposed to conventional warfare. He says that whereas in conventional wars, the territory is divided into two spaces (that of the government and that of the opposition), this is not the case in irregular warfare. Irregular war, as Kalyvas (2006) argues, fragments space. The country is divided into territories that are either controlled by the incumbent or by the insurgent. Between those territories are regions that are often referred to as twilight zones. These zones of contested control are deemed the most critical arena in which the war takes place (Kalyvas, 2006). During irregular warfare, the boundaries between the incumbent, insurgent, and contested controlled areas

are often blurry as those who are essential actors (combatants, agents, and spies) within the war are hiding among innocent civilians. It is hard to distinguish combatants from civilians; this feature is often referred to as the identification problem (Kalyvas, 2006).

### **Types of violence**

There are various forms of violence to be identified and distinguished in warfare.

Like Laia Balcells (2011), some scholars differentiate between direct and indirect violence. According to her, direct violence is any form of violence committed with light weaponry such as guns and knives during face-to-face interaction. For direct violence to work, armed groups need the collaboration of civilians to be able to identify and locate any potential targets.

On the other hand, indirect violence is committed with heavy weaponry such as tanks and fighter planes (Balcells, 2011). In contrast to direct violence, indirect violence does not require a face-to-face interaction between the perpetrator and the victim. This form of violence, Balcells (2011) argues, does not need the collaboration of civilians. Indirect violence can be used within a territory not under the armed group's control (using airstrikes, for example).

Direct violence is somewhat counterintuitive, as it would be inefficient to target individuals in a territory that the armed group fully controls. Indirect violence, on the other hand, is less puzzling. As it is often targeting enemy-controlled regions, it is most likely aiming to destroy the military strength of the opponent.

While Balcells (2011) differentiates between direct and indirect violence, Kalyvas (2006) categorises violence as indiscriminate or selective. In his book 'The Logic of Violence in Civil War', Kalyvas (2006) explains the phenomenon of selective violence as a process in which violence becomes more personalised and targets only those who are part of the opposition.



Indiscriminate violence, the counterpart of selective violence, is used when the “guilty” cannot be identified and sanctioned due to the identification problem (Kalyvas, 2006). By using indiscriminate violence, innocent civilians, who might be associated with insurgents, are targeted. The underlying assumption, Kalyvas (2006) says, is that those who are innocent will convince those who are guilty to change their behaviour or that those guilty will alter their plans of action to save those innocent people they care about, or maybe even both.

### **Indiscriminate violence and its effect**

According to Kalyvas (2004), indiscriminate violence in civil wars is counterproductive. As indiscriminate violence targets not only those who committed rebellious acts but also innocent civilians that happen to share characteristics or membership in a group similar to the opposition, there is no way in which the targets can prevent being targeted. Kalyvas (2004) then argues that defection towards the insurgents is the more rational choice when safety from the government's terror cannot be guaranteed. This then creates a paradox. Whereas the government used indiscriminate violence to deter civilians from revolting, the opposite will be reached as many civilians will try to find safety in the arms of the rebels. Selective violence would then be the better alternative. However, the resources necessary to enable governments to identify “those who are guilty” from “those who are innocent” are not always within reach. Due to the cheaper nature of indiscriminate violence and institutional distortion within the political structures of the incumbent, we still encounter its use today (Kalyvas, 2004).

Kalyvas (2004) uses many examples of past wars to build his argument. However, he does not apply his eventual theory to a specific case.

An article that does look into a specific war case and the use of indiscriminate violence is written by Jason Lyall (2009). In his article Lyall (2009) studies the relation between indiscriminate violence

and insurgent attacks by analysing the use of Russian artillery strikes in Chechnya between 2000 to 2005. As he finds that villages targeted by indiscriminate violence do not show a more significant amount of insurgent attacks than not targeted villages, Lyall (2009) concludes that indiscriminate violence does not incite insurgent attacks. A conclusion that would contrast with Kalyvas's (2004) theory. However, Kalyvas' approach does not say that indiscriminate violence would provoke insurgent attacks. He merely argues that due to indiscriminate violence, more civilians will be inclined to desert the incumbent, searching for safety that only the insurgent can now offer.

Lyall (2009) is not the only author that tries to prove that indiscriminate violence can be productive. In his article, Alexander Downes (2007) argues that indiscriminate violence can be a successful method of counterinsurgency under certain circumstances. This can be found in his case study of the Second Anglo-Boer war from 1899 to 1902. When the support for the rebels is relatively tiny, the rebel territory is restricted, and external help and supplies are not within reach, the government can cut off the stream of information and supplies from the population towards the rebels. As a result, they will be unable to continue the war (Downes, 2007).

### **The use of indiscriminate violence within the Syrian Civil War**

While the Syrian Civil War is one of the most prominent contemporary civil wars, very little research has been done on the violence used in this conflict. The only accessible article on indiscriminate violence in the Syrian Civil War was written by Evan Tyner (2016). In this article, Tyner (2016) investigates the relationship between territorial losses and the use of indiscriminate violence from incumbents within Aleppo. By comparing incumbent territory in three different periods and looking at the differences in civilian and child deaths at these specific moments, it can be concluded that in those periods in which the incumbents lost the most considerable amount of territory, the highest number of civilians and child deaths were reported. Therefore, Tyner (2016)

argues that territorial loss leads to an increase in the use of indiscriminate violence. This conclusion can be linked to the argument made by Kalyvas (2006), who argues that indiscriminate violence occurs when the incumbents run into an identification problem that is often caused when they cannot gather information within a particular territory. The loss of territory will generate this identification problem and, therefore, increase the use of indiscriminate violence.

Throughout this literature review, it has become clear that while civil wars are an often studied subject, authors have not yet been able to find a consensus on the use of indiscriminate violence and its effectiveness.

Moreover, there are a few case studies about the use of different types of violence in civil war overall. But especially in the case of the Syrian Civil War, there is a very limited amount of research done, despite the vast scope of this specific conflict. This thesis aims to fill this gap in the literature by looking into the use of indiscriminate violence within the Syrian Civil War and why the tactics of the incumbents have not changed over the past decade.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This section will explain the theoretical framework on which this thesis focuses. This theory is derived from the works of Stathis N. Kalyvas called 'The Paradox of Terrorism in Civil War' (2004) and 'The Logic of Violence in Civil War' (2006).

In his work, Kalyvas (2004) argues that the use of indiscriminate violence has often been counterproductive. However, there are still numerous instances in which indiscriminate violence is used as the primary tactic. In his paper, he tries to find an answer as to why we still witness the use of indiscriminate violence as a strategy, even when proven to be counterproductive (Kalyvas, 2004).

Kalyvas (2004) defines indiscriminate violence as violence that targets individuals merely on their membership in a specific community perceived to have ties with the opposition. This type of violence is not focused on the individual actions of those civilians that it targets. According to Kalyvas (2004), indiscriminate violence results from an inability or unwillingness to discriminate. This inability is most often caused by the identification problem, which is known to emerge during irregular warfare (Kalyvas, 2006).

On the other hand, selective violence targets individuals based on personalised information about their behaviour (Kalyvas, 2004). When individuals are targeted based on their actions, avoiding such activities will guarantee their safety. When violence is indiscriminate, this safety cannot be guaranteed.

Under conditions in which the territory is divided into multiple sovereignties, the possibility to defect is present. And as security cannot be guaranteed by compliance, defecting to the opposition might be the only way to increase one's safety (Kalyvas, 2004).

Kalyvas (2004) points out four reasons why we might witness more indiscriminate violence than its selective counterpart, even though the data suggests that indiscriminate violence is less if not counter-productive.

The first reason he points to is truncated data. This phenomenon refers to the fact that indiscriminate violence is often more publically visible than selective violence. Moreover, there is a tendency to assume all violence to be indiscriminate, due to which selective violence often gets miscoded (Kalyvas, 204). Due to this miscoding, it seems as if indiscriminate violence is more frequently used than selective violence, but in reality, this is not the case.

Secondly, indiscriminate violence is more often used than selective violence due to cost. To personalise violence requires a vast amount of information which can only be gathered with a costly infrastructure. This cost is not needed for indiscriminate violence and therefore becomes a cheaper alternative than selective violence.

A third reason for the prevalence of indiscriminate violence is ignorance. Even though many political actors are aware of the destructive effects of indiscriminate violence, they still use it. This is why Kalyvas (2004) argues that ignorance plays a significant role in why indiscriminate violence is still being used.

Kalyvas (2004) brings forth a fourth and final reason: institutional distortion. This distortion which can be found in the political structure of the incumbent, can cause indiscriminate violence. Such as the temporary employment and high circulation of military personnel, due to which the learning process is obstructed.

Kalyvas (2004) argues that the incumbents can effectively use indiscriminate violence as long as the insurgents cannot protect civilians. However, when insurgents are strong enough to offer and guarantee safety to civilians, the usage of indiscriminate violence by the incumbents will most

likely result in defection from civilians towards the insurgents. In this situation, indiscriminate violence becomes counterproductive and unsustainable for the incumbents as the support for the insurgents will grow. Kalyvas (2004) concludes that, if this reasoning is correct, the incumbents will switch from indiscriminate violence to selective violence over time unless the incumbent does not possess the resources needed to personalise violence.

In this thesis, Kalyvas's (2004) theory, called 'The Paradox of Terrorism in Civil War', will be applied to the Syrian Civil War. The expected outcome of this case study is that the incumbent of the Syrian civil war (the government) did not change its tactics from indiscriminate violence to selective violence due to insufficient resources, which led to the inability to personalise violence through information.

## **Methodology**

A qualitative process tracing method will be conducted to answer the research question: “For what reasons does the Syrian government still use indiscriminate violence against its civilians?”. This section will state the fundamental principles of the process-tracing method and its advantages and possible pitfalls. Secondly, the concepts and how they have been operationalised will be outlined.

### **Process tracing**

Process tracing is a small-n or single case study method. With this method, the researcher determines whether or not the causal mechanisms described in theory will hold in a specific case (Halperin & Heath, 2017).

This study aims to identify the causal mechanisms that prevented a shift from indiscriminate violence to selective violence by using a process-tracing approach. In other words, this study tries to identify the mechanisms described by Kalyvas (2004) that resulted in the continuous use of indiscriminate violence in the Syrian conflict. By using the method of process-tracing on a single case, the findings of this study can hardly be generalised. However, process-tracing does enable the production of in-depth information on a topic that has previously been neglected in the academic arena. The findings of this study can still be used as a guideline on how to look at other civil war cases and the persisting use of indiscriminate violence within them.

### **Conceptualization & operationalization**

In this study, the two concepts of indiscriminate violence and selective violence play a prominent role, and the four reasons given by Kalyvas for the continued usage of indiscriminate violence, namely truncated data, cost, ignorance, and institutional distortion. Therefore it is essential to define these concepts. As most concepts are somewhat abstract and not directly observable in the real

world, it is crucial to describe how they can be detected in the sources used for this study (Lowndes et al., 2018). The definitions of indiscriminate and selective violence and the four reasons behind the usage of indiscriminate violence are deducted from the literature review and theoretical framework described in the previous sections. After summarising the definition of the concept, it will be explained how it can be found in the evidence.

As described by Kalyvas (2004), Indiscriminate violence is the form of violence that targets civilians solely on their membership in a particular group or community. Their individual behaviour is not taken into account. There is no way to prevent being targeted by indiscriminate violence, as the characteristics on which the targets are selected cannot be altered. To identify indiscriminate violence in the sources that will be analysed, the focus will be on the victims of the violence. It can be concluded that indiscriminate violence has been used when many civilian deaths are reported due to the violence.

According to Kalyvas (2004), selective violence targets individuals based on their actions and behaviour. By refraining from actions deemed to be rebellious by the incumbents, civilians can ensure their safety. Selective violence can be identified within the sources when the only victims are also 'guilty' of being an insurgent.

The first reason Kalyvas' (2004) gives that might explain why it seems as if the Syrian government did not change its tactics from indiscriminate to selective violence is truncated data. As described earlier, this term refers to the tendency to see every form of violence as indiscriminate and therefore miscoding instances of selective violence. Moreover, indiscriminate violence attracts more attention due to its more extensive scale and can consequently overshadow instances of selective violence. By looking at the numbers of civilian deaths in general instead of coding individual events, the



problem of truncated data might be overcome. Suppose selective violence is the main tactic used in conflict. In that case, the number of civilian deaths should be very low or non-existent, as selective violence is supposed to only target those actively involved in the conflict.

Secondly, Kalyvas (2004) argues that warfare, in general, is an expensive matter. To use selective violence, the regime needs an extensive infrastructure of information to identify and attack the insurgents. This is very expensive to establish. Indiscriminate violence does not need this amount of information and is, therefore, a much cheaper alternative.

To find whether or not the cost of selective violence is too high for the Syrian regime, an analysis of the Syrian national economy is needed. However, after eleven years of warfare and the fleeing of most of the Syrian population, this economy might be rather hard to study. Moreover, very little data is available to international databases due to the ongoing conflict. Institutions such as the International Monetary Fund have left out information on Syria's economy from 2011 onwards due to a lack of data. As a result of this information gap, the analysis will consist of articles that describe the Syrian economy at the beginning of the conflict and the current state of the economy. Based on this data, an assumption will be made about the resources of the Syrian government and its ability to switch from indiscriminate to selective violence. The conclusions drawn from this small amount of data are not irrefutable. At this time, it is the best that can be done based on the available information. However, in the future, when more data about the Syrian economy during the conflict becomes available, these assumptions should be reevaluated, and the newly retrieved data should be used to achieve a more credible conclusion.

The cost of selective violence can be deemed out of reach if the expenditure of the Syrian government shows an overall deficit throughout the duration of the conflict. Or when, for instance, the spending on security and military in relation to other posts is too high.

A third argument given by Kalyvas (2004) is that indiscriminate violence can remain the dominant tactic of the government out of ignorance. Evidence of this ignorance can be found in interviews that give a clear insight into an individual's thinking. In this case, interviews with Bashar al-Assad will be used to analyse if he was aware of the innocent victims his regime caused by using indiscriminate violence and remained to use it instead of changing tactics. Transcriptions of the excerpts that have been used in the analysis can be found in the appendix.

Moreover, suppose it turns out that the government does possess the resources needed to shift from indiscriminate violence to selective violence, but they are still unwilling to do so. In that case, there can also be concluded that the regime is ignorant.

The fourth and final reason that Kalyvas (2006) explains is institutional distortion. These distortions are most often found within the incumbent's political structure. Examples of institutional distortion given by Kalyvas (2006) are the temporary employment of military personnel, which prevents the learning process, or the inability to avoid institutional proclivities. Moreover, Kalyvas (2006) refers to a case in which some administrators desired a long war.

With the currently available data, it is hard to assess the underlying ideas and motives for the war and the use of indiscriminate violence within it. In particular, the political structure and the military section will be analysed to find whether or not institutional distortion is at play in the case of the Syrian civil war. This analysis will identify any inherent problems in the political structure, such as the fast circulation of military personnel described above. This might cause an inability to change to selective violence.

## **Data**

The data used in the analysis of this study are predominantly articles and books about the Syrian civil war. Moreover, the monthly statistical reports of the Violations Documentation Centre (hereafter referred to as VDC) have been used. Oversight of the numbers given by the VDC can be found in the appendix. Other sources used are the interviews given by Assad to identify any form of ignorance within the regime.

## **Analysis**

After discussing previous research and establishing a theoretical and methodological foundation for this study, this section will consist of the results found in the analysis of the various sources. The first part of this chapter will argue that there has not been a change from the use of indiscriminate violence to selective violence. The next part of the analysis has been divided into the four primary reasons Kalyvas (2004) gives for using indiscriminate violence: truncated data, cost, ignorance, and institutional distortion.

### **The absence of change**

This research assumes that there has not been a change in war tactics from indiscriminate violence to selective violence by the Syrian Government. It is crucial to verify whether or not this initial assumption is correct. The evidence for the absence of a shift to selective violence can be seen in the civilian death numbers that the VDC has verified. This organisation was established in 2011 when the first violence of the Syrian civil war was reported. One of the VDC's goals is to carefully and independently document the number of deaths and whether or not the victims were civilians or combatants (also referred to as non-civilians).

The oldest monthly statistical report that can still be found on the VDC's website is from June 2014. The latest report dates back to November 2020. In the appendix of this paper, oversight of the amount of civilian and non-civilian deaths per month has been added. Unfortunately, not all the reports between June 2014 and November 2020 are still accessible through the VDC website. However, out of the 78 months between June 2014 and November 2020, there is data on 58 of them. Out of these 58 months, there are only ten in which non-civilian deaths exceed the number of civilian deaths. However, there is no single month in which there were no civilian casualties. From the numbers given by the VDC, it can be concluded that between June 2014 and November 2020,

the number of civilian fatalities was too high in relation to the number of combatant deaths. If a selective form of violence was used, the number of innocent victims should be far lower, as selective violence only targets those actively involved in the war. Therefore, it can be concluded that the dominant form of violence used during this period was indiscriminate.

### **Truncated data**

From the numbers that the VDC reported, it can also be concluded that there has been no form of truncated data. This phenomenon of truncated data is the idea that every form of violence is seen as indiscriminate, therefore miscoding selective violence as indiscriminate. Moreover, due to the more large-scale nature of indiscriminate violence, it might overshadow instances of selective violence as they are more precise and less public. However, the data from VDC between June 2014 and November 2020 shows an enormous amount of monthly victims due to the Syrian Regime and its army. More than two-thirds of the total amount of victims were innocent civilians. When using selective violence, the number of innocent casualties should not be this high. Therefore, it can be concluded that the main tactic used was indiscriminate violence and that this data is not truncated or miscoded.

### **Cost**

As previously explained, there is very little data available about the government's expenditure during the civil war. Due to the conflict's chaos, it is unclear whether this data is reliable. Therefore, large organisations such as the International Monetary Fund are unwilling to publish any data on the economy of Syria from the years 2011 onwards. This section entails the analysis of data retrieved from articles that explain Syria's current economy and how it used to be before the start of the conflict. Based on this data, an assumption will be made about the ability of the Syrian government

to allocate resources in such a way that would enable the regime to switch from indiscriminate to selective violence.

War waging is a costly matter. This is illustrated by the GDP of Syria, which can be found in the database of the World Bank. While the GDP was 252.52 billion in 2010, this collapsed enormously with the beginning of the revolution in March 2011 to 62.32 billion by the end of that year (World Bank Group, 2022). In the following years, the GDP dropped even further to 42.81 billion in 2012 and 20.35 billion in 2013 (World Bank Group, 2022).

Furthermore, while extreme poverty was almost non-existing in Syria before the beginning of the war in 2011, it currently affects over 50% of the Syrian citizens (World Bank Group, 2022).

In 2013, the news platform Al Arabiya published an article that compared the pre-revolution Syrian national economy to the economy in 2013, 2 years after the start of the conflict. In 2009 the expenditure of the Syrian government showed a deficit estimated at 122 billion lira (Mahamid, 2013). To cover this, the government mostly used the local market. However, when the conflict started at the beginning of 2011, the stock markets ran out of monetary resources. When people began fleeing the country, they took their money with them, which led to a decrease in bank deposits (Mahamid, 2013). This forced the Syrian government into using the Syrian Central Bank reserve. At the start of the unrest in 2011, the reserve, which amounted to 18 billion dollars, was reduced by half, and by the end of 2012, only \$2 billion was left (Mahamid, 2013).

At the end of 2019, the Syrian government agreed on the budget for 2020, which had a total deficit of \$3,2 billion. According to the Syrian Minister of Finance, Mamoun Hamdan, this deficit is estimated. However, due to the increase in salary and pension, which the government announced, and the rising import cost, this deficit will only increase (Advani, 2020). Another interesting aspect

of this 2020 budget is that the security and military expenses have been left out. As Syria remains in conflict, it is self-evident that a significant amount of resources will be allocated to the military (Advani, 2020). This, in the end, will result in an even more substantial deficit in the budget.

The Syrian expenditure already showed a deficit before the beginning of the conflict in 2011, and in 2020 it remained to have insufficient funds to make its budget balanced. Due to the chaos within the country and the destruction due to the fighting, it can be assumed that between 2011 and 2020, there has not been a year in which the incomes were higher than the expenses. Therefore, it can be concluded that the Syrian government does not have the resources that would enable them to shift from indiscriminate violence to selective violence.

### **Ignorance**

To identify whether or not the Syrian regime is ignorant of the innocent lives it has taken by using indiscriminate violence, it is essential to look at how the government justifies the high numbers of civilian deaths.

Greg Palkot and Dennis Kucinich interviewed Bashar Al-Assad for Fox News on September 17th, 2013. Reports by the United Nations and other humanitarian organisations suggest that the Syrian Army is bombing villages. Thus causing the deaths of many civilians. When asked about the killing of innocents by the Syrian forces, Assad replied that “no wise government would kill its own people” (al-Assad, 2013). Moreover, Assad (2013) claimed that most of the casualties were caused by rebels, whom he called terrorists. Palkot then argued that Assad could not deny that the Syrian forces had launched these attacks and that those attacks led to the death of innocents. Assad (2013) then admitted that they did bomb villages and suburbs, but only when terrorists had invaded those territories. The deaths of the innocents living in these areas, according to Assad, are a part of the

war. “You can not have a clean war. You don’t have a soft war. You don’t have a good war” - Assad (2013).

This interview is not the only instance in which Assad refers to the innocent deaths as merely a part of the war. In an interview with BBC News in February 2015, Bashar Al-Assad sat down with journalist Jeremy Bowen to talk about the Syrian civil war and the events that happened up until then. When Bowen asked about the innocent lives lost at the hands of Syrian armed forces, Assad (2015) again replied that casualties are a part of the war. Later on in the interview, Bowen asked Assad about the use of indiscriminate weapons such as barrel bombs. Assad (2015) denied the use of this type of bomb and argued that “when you shoot, you aim. And you aim at the terrorists” (al-Assad, 2015). However, through the data of the Violations Documentation Centre (2015), it can be argued that up until February 2015, 112.676 people had been killed by the hands of the regime, of whom an estimated two-thirds was civilian. This indicates that the number of casualties is far higher than the number of terrorists killed at the hands of the Syrian forces. It can be concluded that even though the regime claims to be aiming at terrorists, they shoot significantly more civilians than non-civilians. This proves once more that the Syrian government is using indiscriminate violence through which they indeed take down some terrorists but are killing many innocents in the process.

Throughout both interviews, Assad denies attacking civilians. However, he does say that as the army targets terrorists, innocents can be killed. Assad labels these losses of civilians as casualties. And according to Assad, casualties are an intrinsic part of the war. As Assad is aware of the high number of casualties caused by his tactics, one would expect that he would change these tactics. However, this is not the case. Therefore it can be concluded that, to a certain extent, Assad is indifferent about the innocent lives that are lost as he still uses indiscriminate violence and does not show any intention to change his tactics.



## **Institutional distortion**

At the start of 1963, the Ba'ath party established political control through a successful military coup (van Dam, 2017). In 1971 Hafiz al-Assad became the first Alawi president of Syria. From that moment onwards, Alawites, a minority sect within Syria, made up the largest part of the people in political institutions, the army, and the security services. This dominance of a minority community, which was often discriminated against by the Sunni majority as an infidel sect, created tension amongst the Sunnis and gave rise to the extremist side of the Muslim Brotherhood (van Dam, 2017). In 1976 the first bullet of the Jihad was fired. After this, the oppression began to focus its forces against Muslims in general and Sunnis in specific by destroying mosques, for example (van Dam, 2017). This conflict came to a climax in 1982 with the bloody events of the Battle of Hama. After the regime was able to abolish the Muslim Brotherhood, the conflict ended. It would take thirty years before the tensions between the civilians and the government would again erupt into the civil war that started in 2011 with Bashar al-Assad at the head of the regime.

In 2011 the percentage of Alawite officers stood at 86%, while the Sunnis only made up 14% (van Dam, 2017). At the beginning of the civil conflict, many Sunnis defected from the army. This resulted from their alienation from the regime and because they refused to slaughter fellow civilians who were primarily Sunni, as Sunnis still made up the large majority of the Syrian population (van Dam, 2017). By this time, defection was made a hazardous action, as the regime would severely punish it. Several prominent members of the government even died under suspicious circumstances (van Dam, 2017). In July 2015, Assad publically stated that there was a shortage of soldiers. A need that was resolved by the large-scale help of the Russian and Iranian military forces. To further increase the number of soldiers employed by the army, militia-like committees and other irregular units were used (van Dam, 2017). Whereas these units were first helping the army, they soon started to disregard the instructions from the central military command. And as wages became lower and

lower, many conscripts began to find other ways to earn money, resulting in a decrease in the dependency of the conscripts on the regime (van Dam, 2017).

From this short analysis of the political and military structure of the Syrian regime, it can be concluded that there are indeed institutional distortions at play. A minority group, which the majority has discriminated against for a long time, is in power. As a result of this unbalanced representation, many tensions have arisen. The resentment from the Alawite community towards the Sunni majority might lead to the use of indiscriminate violence, as they do not care whether or not the Sunnis that it victimises are actively involved in the war. Moreover, selective violence can only be employed with the help of civilians who can find and identify the targets. Due to the tensions between the Alawite minority, which makes up the largest part of the regime, and the Sunni majority, it can be argued that little help will come from the Sunni population.

After the first four years of war, it became clear that the army forces were suffering a shortage of soldiers. This can be attributed to the infliction of fear upon the regime soldiers to prevent them from defecting. The alienation from the regime and the unwillingness to kill civilians still result in the defection of many Sunni soldiers and deterring others from joining. The shortage of personnel might cause an inability to use selective violence, as this tactic needs many soldiers to collect data and execute targets.

### **International Intervention**

There are numerous theories about the intentions of the Syrian “allies”. Samuel Charap (2013) argues, for instance, that the intervention of Russia in Syria has nothing to do with its allegiance to Assad. Instead, the Russian regime is fighting the Syrian Sunni population that is revolting to deter its Russian Sunni community from doing the same (Charap, 2013). Due to the scope of this thesis, this factor cannot be further investigated. It might be an excellent opportunity for future research.

## **Conclusion**

This paragraph will summarise the conclusions drawn from the analysis section. Moreover, the final answer to the research question will be given, and recommendations for future research will be provided.

To determine whether or not the Syrian government forces switched their tactics from indiscriminate to selective violence, numerous monthly statistical reports of the Violations Documentation Centre have been analysed. Over the 58 months included in the analysis, there are only ten months in which the number of combatant deaths exceeds the number of civilian lives lost. However, in these months, there were still civilian deaths caused by the hands of the Syrian regime. If selective violence were employed, the number of civilian casualties would be significantly lower, if not non-existing. Therefore, it can be concluded that there has been no shift from indiscriminate to selective violence by the Syrian army.

The reports of the VDC also answered the question of truncated data. Due to the high amount of civilian deaths, which make up over two-thirds of the total amount of victims caused by the hands of the Syrian Army, it can be concluded that the most prominent tactic employed by the Syrian regime is indiscriminate violence. By not coding individual events as either indiscriminate or selective, but by looking at the number of deaths overall, the problem of possible miscoding is overcome.

To assess if the Syrian regime had the resources necessary to switch to selective violence, data about the government expenditure in Syria has been analysed. Due to the presence of a deficit in the budget at the beginning of the conflict in 2011 and the budget of 2020, it has been concluded that the Syrian government does not possess enough resources to pay for the costly infrastructure of

information needed for the implementation of selective violence. Here it needs to be mentioned that due to the lack of information about the Syrian budget during the conflict, this conclusion is an assumption made based on the currently available data. If more information becomes available in the future, the conclusion made here should be reassessed.

Interviews with the President of Syria have been analysed to determine if he might have an ignorant attitude towards the high number of innocent lives lost at the hands of the Syrian forces. From the analysis, it can be concluded that Assad is aware of the high amount of innocent deaths due to the indiscriminate tactics used by the regime. However, Assad seems rather confident about how he is fighting the terrorists and is not about to change his tactics to limit the number of civilian deaths. Therefore, it can be concluded that the attitude of Assad toward civilian casualties is rather indifferent. However, it should be noted that even if the regime wanted to change its tactics, this would be very hard to achieve with the deficits in the governmental budget.

Through an analysis of the political and military structure of the regime, it can be concluded that there are indeed some institutional distortions that might influence the use of indiscriminate violence. For instance, this war has been taking a sectarian form. As the regime predominantly consists of Alawite officers, whom the Sunni majority has discriminated against for a long time, there is an unbalanced representation. This results in tensions from both sides. The resentment of the Alawites towards the Sunnis might be a reason for the consistent use of indiscriminate violence. Moreover, to use selective violence, the help of civilians is often needed to identify and find the potential targets. As most of the Syrian population is Sunni and due to the tensions created by the political structure, it is hard to imagine that many civilians would help the regime.

Moreover, the regime has suffered from a shortage of soldiers. As selective violence would need much personnel to gather information and eventually take down targets, the lack of such personnel could be another reason why indiscriminate violence remains the dominant tactic.

To conclude, a change in tactics from indiscriminate to selective violence did not occur in the Syrian civil war. The Syrian Government is still using indiscriminate violence against its civilians because of insufficient resources and a relatively ignorant attitude toward losing innocent lives. Moreover, the political and military structure of the regime might generate other incentives for the continuous use of indiscriminate violence. These findings agree with the theory proposed by Kalyvas.

Since the Syrian civil war has not ended, some information was not yet available at the time of this study. Therefore, it might be interesting for future research to look into newly published data. Especially new insights into the governmental expenditure could lead to new conclusions and a different outcome for this study.

As the scope of this study is limited, it is not possible to analyse all the alternative explanations. However, other factors might cause the prevalent use of indiscriminate violence. An example of this would be the international intervention apparent in the Syrian Civil War. For future research, it will be interesting to dive deeper into the influence of international intervention on the use of indiscriminate violence.

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## Appendix

### Number of Deaths according to the Violations Documentation Centre

		Amount of Deaths VDC								2020	Total
		2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020			
Civilian Deaths (CD) January			760		524	450	82	317			
CD February			794		853	1262	169	325			
CD March			905		811	1479	170	179			
CD April			1068		745	693	224	139			
CD May			1126		375	221	98	91			
CD June	1476				356	316	220	102			
CD July					431	604	384				
CD August	1348			1137	431	205	214	119			
CD September	1357				617	44	117	89			
CD October	1017				521	93	264				
CD November	986			1056	439	134	330	125			
CD December	875			700	506	77	280				
Non Civilian Deaths (NCD) January			300		178	237	56	378			
NCD February			424		445	189	26	846			
NCD March			435		345	332	54	399			
NCD April			489		420	111	36	125			
NCD May			453		286	51	88	161			
NCD June	731				301	77	115	148			
NCD July					198	43	111				
NCD August	514			564	198	7	221	114			
NCD September	867				161	22	76	151			
NCD October	646				152	45	356				
NCD November	422			318	166	60	395	140			
NCD December	506			196	157	42	352				
<b>Total CD</b>	<b>7059</b>	<b>4653</b>	<b>2893</b>	<b>609</b>	<b>5578</b>	<b>2552</b>	<b>1486</b>	<b>23771</b>			
<b>Total NCD</b>	<b>3686</b>	<b>2101</b>	<b>1078</b>	<b>3007</b>	<b>1216</b>	<b>1886</b>	<b>2462</b>	<b>11750</b>			
<b>Total Deaths</b>	<b>10745</b>	<b>6754</b>	<b>3971</b>	<b>9616</b>	<b>6794</b>	<b>4438</b>	<b>3948</b>	<b>35521</b>			

## **Transcript Fox News interview with Assad excerpts**

Minutes 27:01 till 31:01

**Q: You mentioned before that some figures that are given are an exaggeration. Can you tell us now how many Syrian have actually died in this conflict?**

A: We have tens of thousands of Syrians that have died mainly because of the terrorist attacks, assassinations and suicide bombers... the majority.

**Q: And how many of your government soldiers?**

A: More than 15 thousand

**Q: And how many are insurgents?**

A: We don't have numbers cause we cannot count them.

**Q: But there are innocent people being killed in this. And the reports are that your government has bombed villages in which innocent people are killed, and what about them? What about the innocent people that are killed by the Syrian forces?**

A: The majority of innocent people have been killed by the terrorists, not by the government. There is not a government, wise government, that would kill its own people. How can you withstand when you kill your own people for two years and a half. While the West is against you, the regional countries, many of them are against you. And your people are also against you while you kill them. Is that possible?

**Q: You are saying that you are not killing your own people, but your forces have launched attacks on villages where your own people have been killed.**

A: No, actually what you are talking about is when the terrorists are invading residential areas, invading villages, then sometimes in the suburbs or the cities and within large cities, the army has to go there to get rid of those terrorists. It is the army who defends civilians, not the opposite. You can not leave them free, killing the people, assassinating the people and behating the people. If you go there to see and defend your people, they will say you are killing your people; you don't. But in every war, you have casualties; this is war. You don't have a clean war. You don't have a soft war. You don't have a good war.

**Q: The international community reports that the Syrian rebel forces opposed to you are equally if not more worried now about jihadi fighters than they were previously about your government. Now in this new development, is there an opening for you to achieve a rapprochement with your Syrian opponent?**

A: Here, we have to differentiate between what you call opposition and the terrorists. Opposition is a political meaning, a political term. You oppose somebody, and like in every other country in the world, you have your own program, your own vision, you have your own grassroots. And you go propose whatever you want regarding the political system or anything else. And you change that system if you oppose the other party. Opposition does not mean to carry weapons and kill people, kill innocents and to, destroy schools, destroy infrastructure, and to behate. What is the relation between opposition and behating?

**Q: Well, let me then, as a follow-up, ask you about diplomacy. What diplomatic moves are you prepared to make as confidence-building measures toward peace in your country.**

A: Any diplomatic move without having stability and getting rid of the terrorist is going to be illusional—just illusion. So any diplomatic move should start with stopping the flow of the

terrorists, the logistical support of those terrorists, the armament support and the money support.

Then you have a full plan for the Syrians who could sit at the table and discuss the future of Syria, the political system, the constitution, the institutions, everything.

**Q: Would that future include negotiations with the Syrian opposition.**

A: Exactly, that does not mean negotiation with the terrorists

## **Transcript BBC interview with Assad excerpts**

Minutes 00:00 till 1:15

**Q: Can we briefly go back to when all of this started in 2011? You have said that there were mistakes made in the handling of the early demonstrations. Did you make mistakes yourself?**

A: No, I never said we made mistakes in handling this. I said that anyone could make mistakes. But there is a difference between policy and practice. If you want to go back to policies, we took the decision to fight terrorism from the very beginning, and we took the decision to make dialogue at the national level, and I think both policies are correct. While if you wanted to talk about mistakes in practice, some mistakes were committed towards civilians that happened from time to time, and some people were punished for these mistakes.

**Q: But you didn't make mistakes personally in your handling of the crisis**

A: I said, every person makes mistakes every day; otherwise, if you deny those mistakes, you deny the human nature of the people

3:13 till 4:34

**Q: In 2012, I was in Duma, which is a suburb of Damascus, as you know, which has been held by armed rebel groups. And I spoke to a man there who has defected from the Syrian Army. He said, and this is the quote: "I have escaped cause I can't see my people, my Syrian family, being killed by our hands." He meant the hands of the Syrian armed forces. Do you think that some of the activities of the Syrian Army helped create the nightmare that Syria is in right now?**

A: If you are talking about the conflict taking the military shape, any war is a bad war. And in any war, you have civilian casualties; that's why every war is a bad war. So you cannot talk about war

without casualties. It could have happened, but it is not policy. When you talk about government, you talk about policy. What are the decisions that we make on a political level? As I said, fighting terrorism, defending the civilians and making dialogue. And if we were the ones who killed our people, how can we still withstand four years while the people are against us, supposedly. And the West and the regional countries. I spend four years in my position with the government, the army, and the institution without public support. That is impossible.

6:55 minutes until 11:35 minutes

**Q: I have spent time at the frontline with soldiers from the Syrian Army who insisted that they were patriotic patriots and they weren't cold-blooded killers. But I have also interviewed people, and so have many other journalists and human rights people and so on, who say they have suffered badly at the hands of Syrian soldiers. They can not all have been lying, surely.**

A: How? How surely? Why are you sure?

**Q: Well, by the weight of testimonies, human rights watch 30th of January this year had said that forces loyal to Bashar Al-Assad "have deliberately attacked civilians in opposition-held areas using indiscriminate weapons, notoriously barrel bombs.**

A: This is a childish story that is kept repeating in the West. If somebody who is against his people and the regional power and the great powers and the West survive, how? If you kill the Syrian people, they support you, or they become against you. As long as you have public support, it means you are defending the people. If you kill the people, they will be against you. That is common sense.

**Q: What about barrel bombs? You don't deny that your forces use them?**



A: I know about the army; they use bullets, missiles and bombs. I haven't heard of the army using barrels or maybe cooking pots.

**Q: Large barrels filled with explosives and projectiles that are dropped from helicopters and explode with devastating effects. There have been a lot of testimonies about these things.**

A: They are called bombs. We have bombs, missiles and bullets.

**Q: But you would not deny that included under the category of bombs are these barrel bombs, which are indiscriminate weapons.**

A: No. There are no indiscriminate weapons. When you shoot, you aim. And when you aim, you aim at the terrorist in order to protect civilians. Again if you talk about casualties, that is war. You can not have a war without casualties.

**Q: There are always casualties in war, and civilians die as well, but it is the responsibility under international humanitarian law for belligerents on both sides to do everything they can to protect civilians. And the accusation against the Syrian Army that by using barrel bombs, indiscriminate weapons and UN envoy has talked about the constant fear of barrel bombs means that you are not respecting humanitarian law by protecting your own people. What do you say about that?**

A: First of all, we have been attacked in Damascus and the .... by the rebels. Not vice versa. They have been attacking the Syrians with mortars. So you have to retaliate and defend your people. That is self-evident. Second, again you are talking about somebody or a government who is killing its people, but the people are supporting the government. This is a contradiction. There is no logic in it.

**Q: Of course, you have many supporters among part of the Syrian population. But in areas held by the rebels, the accusation is that your people have used indiscriminate weapons. They may well have attacked places where there are armed rebels, but there are civilians there as well; civilians have also died. And if you used less indiscriminate weapons, like barrel bombs, this kind of thing would not be happening.**

A: During the war, you can have any kind of allegations. Every part could blame the other one. But if you talk about this, you have to talk about the reality. The families of those fighters they came to the government in order to have refuge, not vice versa. You can go now and see where they live and who takes care of them. If we would kill civilians, they should flee to the other side, not come to us.

**Q: If you stopped barrel bombing. And it does happen. Would you not help your own case internationally? There are people now saying that you are a potential partner in the fight against the Islamic State. And that you could be part of the solution, not the problem. It would be quite an easy thing, wouldn't it? Simply to order your generals, you say, "look no more of these attacks," and that would be no doubt improve your international standing, would it not?**

A: The first part of your question is about asking us to stop fulfilling our duty and defending our people against the terrorists.

**Q: So that is legitimate use of force?**

A: Of course

**Q: Including the use of barrel bombs?**

A: There are no barrel bombs. We don't have barrels. Again it is like talking about cooking pots. We don't have cooking pots. We only have, like any regular army, bombs, missiles, bullets etc. You know, like every army has.