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Explaining state support for rebel groups in the Syrian Civil War: A comparative analysis of third-state support for the Free Syrian Army
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Explaining state support for rebel groups in the Syrian civil war

A comparative analysis of third-state support for the Free Syrian Army



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“I didn’t set a red line.

The world set a red line.” - Barack Obama, 2014

1. Introduction

May 2023 saw the latest of indications that the Syrian civil war is drawing to a close, as Syria under the leadership of Bashar al-Assad rejoined the Arab League (The Economist, 2023). This rehabilitation of Syria in the regional political structure arguably signals the imminent victory of the Assad regime against the armed opposition, which has been fighting for the liberation of the Syrian people for the last 12 years. However, it perhaps more importantly signals a shift to a more realpolitik-based policy by regional actors in Middle East towards Syria, after all past efforts to overthrow the Assad regime have utterly failed. Most foreign actors have engaged in the Syrian civil war indirectly through the support for rebel groups. Consequently, in order to understand how the foreign anti-Assad state states have failed in achieving their main goal of overthrowing the Assad regime, an analysis of state support for rebel groups is of absolute necessity.

First of all, some background to the Syrian civil war must be provided. The Syrian civil war has been one of the most complex, politically impactful and internationalized civil wars in the post-Cold War era. The Syrian civil war started in 2011 after anti-regime protests erupted in Da’ara, a rural city in the south of Syria (Sorenson, 2016, p. 2). Unrest quickly spread across the country, eventually resulting in the rise of a complex web of armed rebel groups fighting against the government forces.

The nature of the popular unrest lies in deeply rooted societal cleavages that the Ba’ath government, since 2000 under leadership of Bashar al-Assad, has created and exacerbated with its policies (Daoudy, 2020, pp. 205-212; Sorenson, 2016, p. 22-31;). The government’s policies have been primarily designed to benefit the ‘Alawi elite. Furthermore, in order to ensure popular support, al-Assad developed an extensive patronage network (Sorenson, 2016, p. 21).

The humanitarian impact of the highly destructive Syrian civil war has received the most part of the international attention over the last decade. Particularly the mass external displacement of Syrian people has sparked international attention, as this was the main driver for the European refugee crisis in 2015 (Fargues & Fandrich, 2012; Saatçioğlu, 2021). As of March 2023, around 13.3 million people had been displaced, of which half were internally-displaced and half were refugees (SNHR, 2023, p. 23). Furthermore, approximately 15.3 million Syrian people still find themselves in need of humanitarian assistance (SNHR, 2023, p. 27). The human cost of the conflict has been enormous, as at least 230 000 civilians have been killed since the onset of the war (SNHR, 2023, p. 7).

Relatively quickly after the onset of the Syrian civil war, it developed into a highly internationalized conflict in which foreign powers played a decisive role (Phillips, 2016, pp. 125-146). Among the states that have interfered in the conflict are the United States, Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Qatar, Lebanon, Jordan, the UAD and Israel (Sorenson, 2016, pp. 86-112). These states have all intervened in one way or another, although these interventions have differed in their type, scope, goals and timing. Among these states, several have supported rebel groups that have been fighting the Assad regime. However, this presents a puzzle, as state-centric paradigms of international relations theory would dictate that there is little incentive for a foreign state to support an armed rebel group (San-Akca, 2016, p. 7). State-centric paradigms would namely suggest that sovereign states counter their adversaries through alliances with other sovereign states (San-Akca, 2016, p. 7; Kirchner, 2016, pp. 35-54). However, state support for non-state actors, such as rebel groups, is an apparent phenomenon in the contemporary international system. Therefore, this thesis will revolve around the following research question:

RQ: *What explains state support for rebel groups in the Syrian civil war?*

An answer to this question is crucial in order to fully understand the nature and dynamics of the Syrian civil war. Especially in the highly internationalized context of the Syrian civil war, it is essential to understand what factors have driven international actors in intervening in the conflict. This might provide some useful insights into why the Syrian civil war has developed into such a highly complex, internationalized and protracted war. Although the existing literature does address the motives of some states that have interfered in Syria (Cockburn, 2014; Hale, 2019; Legrand, 2016; Ma'oz, 2014; Yetim & Kasikci, 2021; Yüksel, 2019), it fails to provide an exhaustive and detailed analysis of all the factors that have contributed to the phenomenon of states supporting rebel groups in the Syrian civil war. Furthermore, the broader literature on state support for rebel groups often focuses on a specific dimension of the explanation, but only scarcely provides an analysis of how strategic interests, ideational affinity and domestic incentives interact when determining state support for rebel groups.

In order to provide such an analysis, the main purpose of this thesis will be to apply the States' Selection Model (SSM) as proposed by San-Akca (2016, pp. 67-105) to the Syrian civil war. Thereby, this thesis will aim to identify which factors are most important in explaining state support for rebel groups in the Syrian civil war. More specifically, it will identify the strategic, ideational and domestic factors that have influenced the support of the US, Turkey and Saudi Arabia respectively to the Free Syrian Army (FSA). These three states differ substantially from each other in their strategic interests in supporting a Syrian rebel group, ideational affinity to the FSA and domestic political context, but still have all supported the FSA. Therefore, these states are well-suited for a comparative study based on the Most Different Systems Design. The hypothesis is that state support for rebel groups is the result of a selection process by states in which they weigh their strategic interests, ideational affinity and domestic incentives and thereby choose to support a certain rebel group.

This thesis will make a meaningful contribution to the existing paradigm in several ways. Firstly, this thesis will validate or invalidate the theoretical framework proposed by San-Akca (2016), as it determines the practical applicability of the States' Selection Model. San-Akca (2016) tested her theoretical model using a large-N analysis of state support for rebel groups. Applying this theoretical framework to a specific case will reveal if the framework and its mechanisms actually are useful tools for explaining conflict dynamics in a new case. Secondly, this thesis will have significant implications for a potential peace process in the Syrian civil war. Although latest rehabilitation of Syria in the Arab League suggests a reluctant acceptance of the status quo by the international community, there are still calls for a political solution to ensure peace and alleviate massive suffering. In order for such a peace process to have meaningful impact in such an internationalized context, one must have an understanding of what has driven international actors to become involved in the armed opposition. The insights generated in this thesis will contribute to this understanding. Thirdly, this thesis will generate insights into the contemporary foreign policy interests of the United States, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, which will perhaps prove useful for research on the policies of these states in other geopolitical arenas. Lastly, the ultimate goal is to identify what factors possibly explain the inability of foreign actors in bringing about meaningful change in the Syrian civil war. Thereby, the generated insights might prove useful for the international community in preventing such mass suffering ever again.

This thesis will be structured as follows. Firstly, it will provide a review of the literature that already exists on state support for rebel groups, in general but also specified to the Syrian civil war. This literature review determines that there exists a conceptual gap on the explanation of state support for rebel groups in the Syrian civil war. Secondly, the methodology section will deal with the research design. The research design will be a comparative case study based on the Most Different Systems Design. Thirdly, the analysis section will present the comparative

case study and thereby identify what has driven support for the FSA by the US, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Lastly, it will end with some concluding remarks on what has driven state support for rebel groups in the Syrian civil war and what are the implications of these findings.

2. Literature review

In order to make a meaningful contribution to the literature on state support for rebel groups in civil war, it is important to first assess what the existing literature already explains and more importantly what it does not explain.

As civil wars have become increasingly internationalized, of which the Syrian case is an exemplary case, a growing number of scholarly works has been devoted to the transnational dimensions of civil wars, each with different foci and perspectives (Kalyvas, 2001). However, there exists consensus on the claim that civil war in the modern era cannot be examined without taking into account transnational and international factors (Gleditsch, 2007, p. 293; Salehyan, 2009, p. 165).

One perspective in this regard is that transnational linkages often function as a cause for the onset of civil wars. As Gleditsch (2007, p. 293) claims, civil wars are significantly more likely to occur if transnational factors and linkages between states exist, especially ethnic linkages. The reason for this is that transnational ethnic linkages make certain insurgent groups more willing to engage in violent conflict, as they are relatively assured that their ethnic kin living across the border will intervene in favour of them (Gleditsch, 2007, p. 297; Salehyan, 2009). Furthermore, the chances of a civil war occurring increase if a lot of regional states are weak states, as these states often function as safe havens for rebel groups (Salehyan, 2009, p. 45).

These transnational linkages not only explain the likelihood of a civil war occurring, but also explain why certain foreign states engage in the subsequent war. Firstly, trade

interdependence will incentivize foreign states to intervene in order to protect their vital economic interests in the target state (Kathman, 2011, 851). Secondly, regional states will be incentivized to intervene in order to prevent spillover effects into the region (Kathman, 2011, p. 847). However, these explanations for intervention remain relatively limited in scope.

There also exists a considerable body of literature on the effects of state intervention on the process and outcome of civil wars. The general notion is that international intervention in civil wars rarely ends the violence (Regan, 2000). Balch-Lindsay et al. (2008, p. 360) provides a more nuanced view and argues that state intervention on the side of rebel groups increases the chances of a military victory for this rebel group, while state intervention on the side of the government increases the chances of a negotiated settlement occurring. Furthermore, if state intervention occurs on both sides of the civil war, the chances of a negotiated settlement occurring decreases significantly (Balch-Lindsay, et al., 2008, p. 360). These consequences of foreign intervention may provide strategic incentives or disincentives for foreign states to pursue a such an interventionist policy.

With regards to state intervention in civil wars, one distinction is of crucial importance: the distinction between state support for the government and state support for rebel groups. State support for governments can easily be explained through classic IR theory, appealing to concepts such as balance of power and alliance forming. However, state support for rebel groups is rather puzzling, as it infringes upon state sovereignty and occurs within the illegitimate sphere of international politics (San-Akca, 2016, p. 7). Therefore, there appears to be little rational incentive for state to pursue such a foreign policy. Several scholars have written on the subject of state support for rebel groups, all with different foci and perspectives.

Some scholars focus mainly on the strategic dimensions of state support for rebel groups. In this regard, a number of scholars have focused on state support for terrorism. Terrorist groups refer to groups that construct a system of fear, which is based on the threat and

use of violence and is used to achieve political goals (Kirchner, 2016, p. 23). Kirchner (2016, p.19) takes a neorealist approach to explaining state support for terrorist rebel groups, claiming that states decide to support terrorist groups due to security dilemmas on the domestic and international level. Supporting terrorist groups is therefore largely a strategically driven policy. However, this only account for active support for rebel groups: some states also passively support rebel groups, by allowing terrorist groups to operate within their territory (Byman, 2005, p. 17). This is often not a deliberate choice, but more the result of the inability of a state to police its borders.

Another strategic driver for state support for rebel groups might be the delegation of foreign policies in order to limit the cost of conflict (Salehyan, 2010, p. 510). However, classic principal-agent problems make it difficult for states to maintain full control over the rebel groups (Salehyan, 2010, p. 510). Although this analysis provides some useful insights into how states use support for rebel groups as a foreign policy tool, it does neglect how ideational affinities and domestic factors feed into the decision of states to support rebel groups.

However, domestic incentives are of critical importance in explaining the decision of a state to support a rebel group. Political leaders that face both domestic and international threats to his or her security, will be more likely to support rebel groups (Kirchner, 2016, p. 238; San-Akca, 2016, p. 74). In this light, supporting rebel groups is a political strategy to divert attention away from domestic turmoil and settle external disputes (San-Akca, 2016, p. 78). However, it might also be a strategy aimed at limiting the risk for political leaders, as was the case with the foreign policy of the United States on Syria (Schulhofer-Wohl, 2021). As Schulhofer-Wohl (2021) argues, the decision of the US to support the Syrian armed opposition force, among which the Free Syrian Army, had been the result of domestic pressures that forced the Obama administration to act, although they were actually quite reluctant to intervene. Support for the

FSA was perceived to be the option with the lowest political risk for Obama (Schulhofer-Wohl, 2021, pp. 542 - 544).

Another part of the literature on state support for rebel groups is on the ideological dimensions of rebel groups that incentivize states to intervene. In this regard, Byman et al. (2001, pp. 103-107) argues that civil wars are often internationalized by the support of transnational ethnic groups to insurgent rebel groups. External ethnic groups support rebel groups that they share ethnic ties with and thereby sustain the insurgency abroad (Byman, 2001, pp. 8-10). Moreover, ethnic groups that live near the borders of the target state are more likely to rebel, as they are perceived to have a high chance of attaining international support due to transnational ethnic ties (Salehyan, 2009, pp. 41-47). However, this does not account for states that choose to support rebel groups, even when there are no shared ethnic ties.

These bodies of literature each focus on a specific dimension of the explanation of state support for rebel groups, being strategic, ideational and domestic factors. While this has provided useful insights into what actually constitutes state support for rebel groups, the reality is much more complex and includes a complicated web in which strategic, ideational and domestic factors interact and jointly produce state support for rebel groups. However, the current literature lacks an exhaustive overview of the factors that influence state support for rebel groups and how these factors relate to each other. This is where San-Akca (2016) comes in. San-Akca (2016) provides a highly useful framework based on strategic, ideational and domestic factors; a framework which can be used to analyse state support for rebel groups in the Syrian civil war.

3. Theoretical framework: the States' Selection Model (SSM)

The theoretical framework that will be used in this thesis is the States' Selection Model (SSM) as proposed by San-Akca (2016). This framework provides a relatively exhaustive analysis of

the factors that feed into the decision of a state to support rebel groups. This framework will be used as an analytical lens to look at state support for rebel groups in Syria.

The States' Selection Model (SSM) claims that state support for rebel groups is constituted by three factors: strategic interests, ideational affinity and domestic incentives (p. 14). Firstly, strategic interests refer to the presence of foreign policy advantages if a state decides to support a rebel group, meaning that it increases the relative capabilities of a state vis-à-vis its adversaries (p. 14). This often manifests itself in states supporting a rebel group that targets one of its adversaries (p. 14). Secondly, ideational affinity refers to ideational linkages between the rebel group and the supporter state or ideational antithesis of the target state and the supporter state (p. 15). These ideational linkages can be in terms of ethnic or national identity, religion or ideology (p. 15). State support for a rebel group will be more likely if the supporter state and the rebel group share certain ideological ties and if the target state and supporter state are ideologically opposed (p. 15). Thirdly, domestic incentives refer to political instability in the domestic political arena, which incentivize leaders to engage in conflict externally (p. 15). The aim of this engagement is either to divert attention away from the domestic political turmoil or to seek political gains by exploiting the provided political opportunity (p. 15).

The underlying assumption of this model is that state support for rebel groups is caused by a selection process of states that weigh their strategic interest, ideational affinity and domestic incentives and thereby choose to support a certain rebel group (p. 17). More specifically, states are more likely to support a rebel group if they experience international and domestic threats and share ideational ties with the rebel group or are ideationally opposed to the target of the rebel group. The SSM will be applied to cases of state support for rebel groups in the Syrian civil war, thereby analysing whether still proves useful in case studies.

Figure 1 displays a visual representation of the SSM.

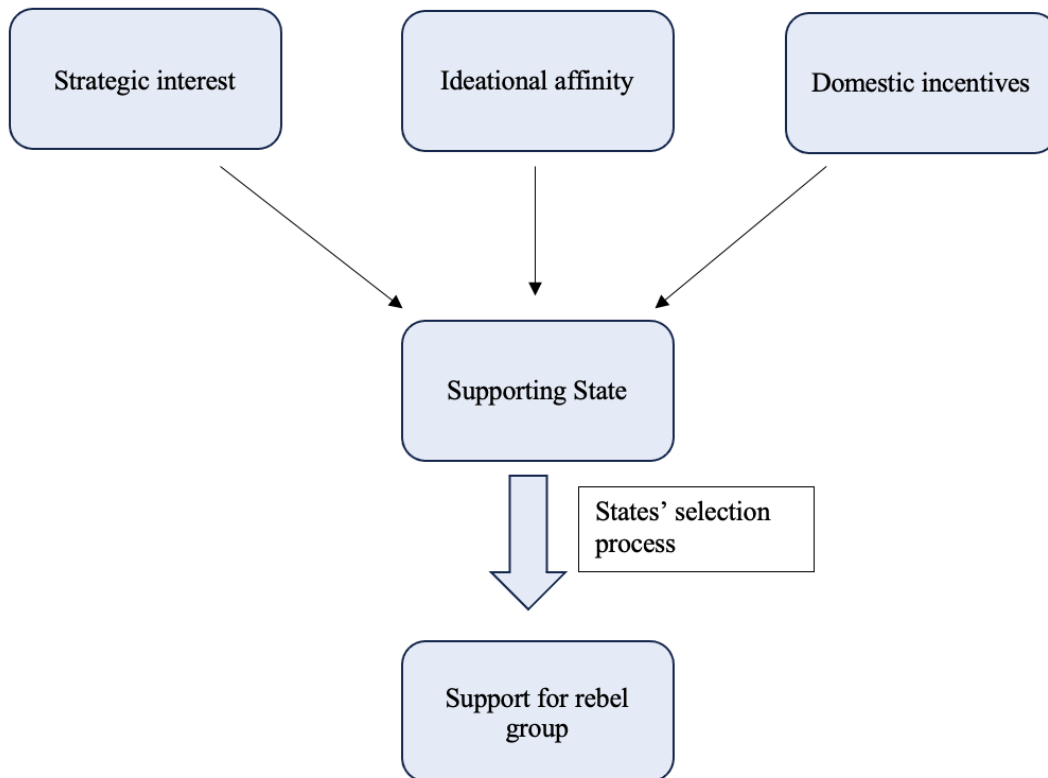


Figure 1: visual representation of the SSM

4. Methodology

The goal of this research is to test the assumption made by San-Akca (2016) that state support is the result of a selection process by states that weigh their strategic interests, ideational affinity and domestic incentives against each other. More specifically, this research is aimed at testing the assumption that states support a rebel group when they face simultaneous threats internationally and domestically, and also share ideational ties with the rebel group or are ideationally opposed to the target of the rebel group (San-Akca, 2016, p. 142). Thus, the combination of these factors shapes state support for rebel groups, rather than these factors in itself.

4.1 Explanation of variables

The main question this research attempts to answer is *what explains state support for rebel groups*. Thus, the dependent variable is state support for rebel groups. Support refers to any direct or indirect contribution to the violent conduct of rebel groups (San-Akca, 2016, p. 9). Not only the presence of state support is of importance for this research, but also the type and degree of this provided support, as this is also heavily dependent on the strategic interests, ideational affinity and domestic incentives that each state experiences. The independent variables will be strategic interests, ideational affinity and domestic incentives. Firstly, strategic interests refer to a state supporting a rebel group in pursuit of their foreign policy objectives, such as countering an adversary (San-Akca, 2016, p. 14). Secondly, ideational affinity refers to a state sharing religious, ideological or ethnic ties with the rebel group, which could incentivize support (San-Akca, 2016, p. 14). Thirdly, domestic incentives refer to domestic political instability, which pressures state leadership to support a rebel group as a diversionary or opportunistic strategy (San-Akca, 2016, p. 14).

4.2 Research design: the Most Different Systems Design

In order to do this, it will use the Most Different Systems Design (MDSD). The reason for this is that the aim of the research is to test the assumption that unidimensional explanations of state support for rebel groups, focused solely on strategic, ideational or domestic factors, are insufficient. Therefore, it is essential to find cases that differ on these explanatory variables, but have still score the same on the dependent variable, being state support for a rebel group. The goal would then be to find an alternative variable that explains why these cases score the same on the dependent variable.

The MDSD as a research design is well-suited for such a research project. The MDSD is a comparative research design that is based on the selection of cases that differ from each

other on the variables that according to existing theory generally explain the outcome (Halperin and Heath, 2020, p. 242). The goal is to find a “crucial similarity” that consequently explains why the cases score the same on the dependent variable (Halperin and Heath, 2020, p. 242). Thus, in this research, cases will be selected on the basis that the states differ in their strategic interests, ideational affinity to the FSA and domestic incentives to support a rebel group in the Syrian civil war. However, the cases must still have scored the same on the dependent variable, meaning that the states must have supported the same rebel group, despite their differences. The next section will explain why the cases of the US, Turkey and Saudi Arabia fit this description and explain why unidimensional explanations of state support for rebel groups are insufficient. The sources that will be used for this analysis are government reports, policy briefs, media reports and academic literature, as such a variety in sources provides the most complete analysis.

5. Analysis of support for FSA by the US, Turkey and Saudi Arabia

5.1 The insufficiency of unidimensional explanations

This section will first of all serve as a justification of the case selection. Furthermore, it will provide some insights in the specific strategic, ideational and domestic factors that have shaped the support of these states for the FSA.

However, some background to the FSA must be provided first, as ideational affinity between the states in question and the FSA will otherwise be difficult to determine. The FSA was created in 2011 by defecting Syrian Army Officers and has ever since functioned as the main coalition of armed opposition forces in Syria (O’Bagy, 2013, pp. 6-7). Furthermore, it is considered the military arm of the NCSROF, which is seen as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people (Yetim and Kasinkci, 2021, p. 203). The FSA function as an umbrella

organization for a wide variety of armed opposition groups with divergent ideologies, but the overarching goal “to end the dictatorship of the Assad” (Legrand, 2016, p. 1; O’Bagy, 2013, p. 6). Although it is governed by the Supreme Military Command, a lack of unity has made the FSA notoriously difficult to coordinate (Legrand, 2016, p. 1; O’Bagy, 2013, p. 6). Furthermore, over the course of the war the power of the FSA has been marginalized, as they increasingly function as agents in the proxies of foreign supporters (Legrand, 2016, p. 8; Yetim and Kasinkci, 2021, p. 201).

This research is focused on three of these foreign supporters of the FSA, being the US, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. The justification for this case selection is that these cases differ significantly on the independent variables that are generally considered to explain state support for rebel groups. Concretely, this means that the US, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have experienced highly divergent strategic interests and domestic incentives to support a rebel group in Syria and display a highly divergent ideational character, but still have all supported the FSA. Therefore, these cases are well-suited for a MDSD.

5.1.1 Strategic interests

Firstly, the US, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have all experienced different strategic interests for engaging in the Syrian civil war. The US has supported the Syrian opposition partly to counter Russian influence, which has been its traditional adversary since the beginning of the Cold War (Sorenson, 2016, p. 95; Phillips, 2022, p. 373; San-Akca, 2016, p. 142). Turkey, on the other hand, engaged in Syria partly in order to compete with Iran, Saudi Arabia and Egypt in the geopolitical rivalry for regional leadership (Phillips, 2022, p. 365; Yetim and Kasikci, 2021, p. 200). Furthermore, the main strategic incentive for Turkey to engage in the Syrian civil war was to avert the threat the Kurdish-led YPG posed to its national security (Legrand, 2016, p. 6; Yüksel, 2019, p. 3). Lastly, a strategic incentive for Saudi Arabia to engage in Syria was to

counter Iranian influence, but also to provide regional stability (Blanga, 2017, p. 56). This goes to show how these states each had their own strategic interests in engaging in the Syrian civil war.

These strategic interests do not directly explain why these states have all supported the FSA specifically, as the direct adversary of the FSA is the Syrian regime and not Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia or the YPG (Legrand, 2016, p. 1; O'Bagy, 2013, p. 10). Although these states were also directly opposed to the Syrian regime, their ulterior strategic motives must not be excluded from the analysis of what determines state support for rebel groups. Furthermore, these strategic incentives do not explain why the states in question did provide support to the FSA specifically, and not to another rebel faction that countered the Syrian regime, such as Jihadist or Salafist coalitions (Phillips, 2016, p. 126). Consequently, strategic interests as a variable on its own does not explain why the US, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have all supported the FSA.

5.1.2 Ideational affinity

Secondly, the US, Turkey and Saudi Arabia differ greatly in their ideational affinity to the FSA. In this regard, the FSA shares clear religious and ethnic ties to Turkey, as it consists largely of Sunni Arab and to some extent also ethnic Turkmen soldiers (Yüksel, 2019, p. 3). The ideational affinity of Saudi Arabia to the FSA is very strong, as the FSA consist largely of Sunni Arabs that are fighting against their oppression and Saudi Arabia perceives itself to be the global protector of Sunni Islam (Rasheed, 2010, p. 11; Blanga, 2017, p. 56; Gause, 2020, p. 194). However, there seems to be little ideational affinity between the US and the FSA, apart from the ideological opposition against the terrorism, oppression and radicalism (Sorenson, 2016, p. 50). Another possible ideational incentive was that the FSA had presented itself as the most

moderate alternative, appealing to principles of freedom, justice and liberty, which is in line with the US' liberal values (Lister, 2016, p. 3; Sorenson, 2016, p. 99).

However, the US had relatively little ideational affinity with the FSA compared to Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Therefore, these ideational affinities were much less decisive in determining their support for the FSA than was the case with Turkey and Saudi Arabia, which will also be illustrated in the next section. Therefore, ideational affinity as a variable on its own does also not explain why the US, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have all supported the FSA.

5.1.3 Domestic incentives

Thirdly, the US, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have experienced different incentives domestically to support the FSA. Part of the reason for this has arguably got to do with the different political systems that these states have, in which public opinion has a varying impact. Whereas the US is a full-fledged federal constitutional republic that adheres to liberal norms and values, Saudi Arabia is on the other side of the spectrum, as its political system is an authoritarian monarchy in which political parties are prohibited, public debate is tightly controlled and every part of social life is heavily controlled by strict norms of Islam and the narratives that the state imposes on its population (Aarts, 2011, p. 38; Al-Rasheed, 2010, p. 182). Although Turkey is in theory a parliamentary republic based on democratic values, it has experienced significant democratic backsliding over the last decade (Karpat, 2015, p. 458; San and Akca, 2020, p. 34). This is apparent in the increased restriction on media freedom, the violation of human rights and the centralization of power within the office of the president (San and Akca, 2020, p. 39).

Consequently, these systems have created different domestic incentives to support the FSA. Firstly, the support for the FSA by the US has been heavily influenced by domestic factors. Most importantly, the Obama administration had a policy of non-intervention in the Middle East, with a focus on diplomatic rapprochement, which was the result of the lessons

learned from Iraq and little public support for involvement in the Syrian civil war (Phillips, 2016, p. 169; Phillips, 2022, p. 363; Schulhofer-Wohl, 2021, p. 530; Sorenson, 2016, p. 84, 97). US involvement in Syria has primarily been shaped by these domestic considerations, on which will be focused more in the next section. In the case of Turkey, the main domestic incentive that shaped support for the FSA was the opportunist attitude of the Turkish leadership; by supporting the FSA, Erdogan would boost its nationalist credentials by indirectly countering the YPG and addressing the issue of Syrian refugees (Hale, 2019, p. 35; Yetim and Kasikci, 2021, p. 200). Although public debate and party politics are practically non-existent in Saudi Arabia, it still experienced a domestic incentive for supporting the FSA, being that they aimed to prevent radicalization of returning soldiers at home, which threatens its highly prioritized domestic stability (Blanga, 2017, p. 58; Gause, 2020, p. 193; Phillips, 2016, p. 139). However, this domestic incentive was way less decisive in determining state support for the FSA than in the case of the US. This illustrates how domestic incentives as a variable on its down does not explain why the US, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have all supported the FSA.

Table 2 presents a systematic overview of the strategic, ideational and domestic factors that have been decisive in bringing about state support for the FSA.

| Case | Strategic | Ideational | Domestic |
|----------------------|---|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| United States | Counter Russia | Moderate | Policy of non-intervention |
| Saudi Arabia | Counter Iran | Sunni Arab identity, anti-Shiism | Prevent radicalization |
| Turkey | Counter YPG, signal regional leadership | Sunni Arab identity, ethnic Turkmen | Exploit political opportunity |

Table 1: systematic overview of incentives to support the FSA

5.2 States' selection process of the US, Turkey and Saudi Arabia

Thus, as the previous section has illustrated, support of the US, Turkey and Saudi Arabia for the FSA cannot be explained by unidimensional explanations that focus solely on strategic, ideational or domestic incentives. Thus, there must be some other explanation for why these states have all supported the FSA. Therefore, this section will deal with how state support for the FSA has been the result of the US, Saudi Arabia and Turkey weighing their strategic interests, ideational affinity and domestic incentives against each other. The result of this process is that they all perceived support for the FSA to be the best option.

5.2.1 The United States

The US has supported the FSA particularly in the first phase of the war, as its attention eventually shifted more towards countering the rise of ISIS and Jabhar al-Nusra in 2014 by supporting the Syrian Democratic Forces (Hale, 2019, p. 29). First the US only provided political support to the FSA, for example by calling on Assad to respect human dignity and by recognizing the NCSROF as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people (Schulhofer-Wohl, 2021, p. 525; Sorenson, 2016, p. 97). As the conflict started to escalate, the US started to also covertly support the FSA by providing non-lethal assistance, meaning that they provided communications equipment, food and medicine (Ruys, 2014, p. 16; Schulhofer-Wohl, 2021, p. 525). From 2012 onwards, the US started to provide indirect military support to the armed opposition, meaning primarily that they facilitated arms transfers, established logistical infrastructure for support and helped with facilitating financial support (Schulhofer-Wohl, 2021, p. 525). Until mid-2013 over and direct arms transfers were out of the question, until Assad started using chemical weapons (Phillips, 2016, p. 144; Schulhofer-Wohl, 2021, p. 525). In 2017, Trump halted all US support for the FSA.

Thus, what has motivated the US to provide this support? In this regard, the domestic political context is of great importance. In the beginning of the Syrian civil war, public support in the US for military engagement in Syria was low, which was the aftermath of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the great recession (Sorenson, 2016, p. 525). Therefore, Obama's foreign policy was focused on the retrenchment of US military involvement in the Middle East, focusing instead on diplomatic rapprochement and providing peace and stability (Fayyaz, 2019, p. 36). This policy was meant partly to gain favour in the electorate for the elections in 2012, but also in large part to avoid a repetition of the US' failure in Iraq and Libya (Phillips, 2022, p. 363; Phillips, 2016, p. 169; Schulhofer-Wohl, 530). The result was that Obama was determined to avoid military engagement in Syria, as to avoid getting involved in a quagmire (Phillips, 2016, p. 146). The Syrian civil war thus posed a domestic political threat to the foreign policy goals of the Obama administration (Schulhofer-Wohl, 2021, p. 520)

However, as the conflict continued to escalate further, domestic political pressure in favor of support for moderate rebel groups increased and the US started to realize rhetorical support was insufficient (Schulhofer-Wohl, 2021, p. 525; Sorenson, 2016, p. 98). Furthermore, pressure started rising even more when reports started circulating that Assad had used chemical weapons in 2012, which incentivized Obama to state the use chemical weapons would be crossing a red line, resulting in a direct military intervention by the US (Hale, 2019, p. 26; Schulhofer-Wohl, 2021, p. 526).

In spite of that, Obama was still extremely reluctant to intervene when Assad actually used chemical weapons in 2013, and avoided direct military intervention (Schulhofer-Wohl, 2021, p. 526). Part of the reason for this has also got to do with the international constraints that the US experienced at the time. Namely, the failure in Iraq had gravely damaged the US hegemony in the Middle East and created a power vacuum in the region, which has been filled

by Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey (Phillips, 2022). Due to this increased regional geopolitical competition, the US leadership remained extremely reluctant to engage in Syria.

However, at the same time the US was also pressured to engage more by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which based their Syria policy on the expectation that the US would militarily intervene (Phillips, 2016, p. 171; Phillips, 2022, p. 369). The US was also pressured to engage more directly with the armed opposition by the increasing involvement of its traditional adversary, being Russia, which had already been vetoing UN resolutions proposed by the US since the start of the war (CFR¹, 2023; UN DPI¹, 2012a; 2012b).

Thus, while the US was pressured domestically and internationally to support the armed opposition in Syria, it was severely constrained by the domestic and international context. The result was to provide support for moderate rebel groups, meaning that they were in favor of a democratically elected government that respected principles of justice, freedom and liberty (Sorenson, 2016, p. 98). As the FSA had signaled these values, support for the FSA was politically the most acceptable and least risky foreign policy option for the US in Syria (Sorenson, 2016, p. 99). This illustrates how strategic, ideational and domestic factors all feed into the decision of a state to support a rebel group.

5.2.2 Turkey

Turkey has arguably been the foreign actor most aligned with the Free Syrian Army. Notably, the FSA was founded and has its headquarters in Turkey (Yüksel, 2019, p. 6). Furthermore, over the years Turkey has provided communication assistance, facilitated training programs for FSA-affiliated forces and served as a diplomatic bridge between the FSA and Western powers (Yüksel, 2019, p. 6). Turkey also functioned as the main route for arms transfers and its intelligence service dealt with the logistics of distributing the arms that Qatar and Saudi Arabia

¹ United Nations Department for Public Information

had bought (Phillips, 2016, p. 137) In 2017, many secular FSA factions have been regrouped under the banner of the Syrian National Army, over which Turkey has established fully centralized control (Yüksel, 2019, p. 6). Turkey has used the SNA in their Operation Euphrates Shield, which was meant to counter ISIS and YPG forces in northern Syria (Yüksel, 2019, p. 3).

Much of the reasons for why Turkey supported the FSA has to do with the regional political context. Firstly, Syria has been a traditional adversary of Turkey, as they support the PKK (Hale, 2019, p. 27). Therefore, supporting the armed opposition was seen as a great way to counter an adversary regime. In this regard, the FSA was considered the best option, as it was seen as the legitimate representative of the people and would therefore legitimize Turkish involvement in Syria (Yetim and Kasikci, 2021, p. 203). Secondly, Syria functioned as a new geopolitical arena for Middle Eastern great power rivalries, specifically between Iran, Saudi Arabi, Egypt and Turkey, which all battle for regional leadership (Phillips, 2022; Yetim and Kasikci, 2021). Turkey saw the Syrian civil war as an opportunity for Turkey to increase Turkish influence in the region and signal their new ambitious plans for regional leadership (Yetim and Kasikci, 2021, p. 200). Thirdly, the factor that has arguably been most decisive in shaping Turkish support for the FSA has been the security threat of the Kurdish-led YPG, which it sees as an extension of the terrorist PKK (Hale, 2019, p. 2; Legrand, 2016, p. 6; Yüksel, 2019, p. 3). The YPG was considered a grave national security threat, partly because it could spark secessionist aspirations among the Turkish Kurds, but more importantly because the YPG was active in north-eastern Syria, meaning that violence could easily spread over the Turkish border (Hale, 2019, pp. 28-30; Legrand, 2016, p. 6). The FSA had been opposed to the YPG from the beginning of the war and was therefore a viable partner to Turkey (Phillips, 2016, p. 134). Therefore, from 2015 onwards, Turkey has used FSA forces in their proxy against the YPG,

but also in their offensive against ISIS (Hale, 2019, p. 29-30; Legrand, 2016, p. 5-9; Yüksel, 2019, pp. 6-9).

This use of the FSA to counter the YPG has also been the result of domestic incentives, as countering Kurdish forces would boost Erdogan's nationalist credentials, appealing to more right-wing voters in the upcoming elections (Hale, 2019, p. 35). Furthermore, using the FSA to counter the YPG would deal with the highly salient issue of Syrian refugees, as the goal of Turkey arguably was to sweep north-eastern Syria of Kurdish people, thereby making room for Syrian refugees to resettle (Hale, 2019, p. 35; Yetim and Kasikci, 2021, p. 200).

Finally, there was also a clear ideational dimension to the motivations of Turkey to support the FSA. Most importantly, the FSA consisted largely of Sunni Muslim Arabs, which also makes up most of the Turkish population (Yüksel, 2019, p. 1). There were also a considerable number of ethnic Turkmen among the ranks of the FSA factions in north-eastern Syria (Yüksel, 2019, p. 1). Furthermore, Turkey preferred rebel factions that were affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, of which the FSA contained plenty (Phillips, 2016, p. 140)

Thus, Turkey was internationally and domestically pressure to engage in the Syrian civil war and support for the FSA was the best option for several reasons. Firstly, the FSA legitimized Turkish actions in Syria. Secondly, the FSA could be used in the proxy against the YPG. Thirdly, support for the FSA provided a domestic political opportunity. Lastly, the FSA was the rebel group most ideationally aligned with Turkey. This again illustrates how state support for rebel groups is the result of the selection process of states based on strategic interests, ideational affinity and domestic incentives.

5.2.3 Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has been the most prominent Arab state supporter of the FSA. Relatively quickly after the onset of the war in 2011, Saudi Arabia was the first state to officially condemn the Syrian regime, thereby politically supporting the armed opposition (Blanga, 2017, p. 45).

Especially regarding financial support Saudi Arabia stands out, as they for example provided more than \$100 million dollars to subsidize the salaries of FSA soldiers, with the aim of incentivizing more defections from the Syrian army (Blanga, 2017, p. 52; Phillips, 2016, p. 138). Saudi Arabia also provided considerable non-lethal assistance, consisting of uniforms, medical supplies and communication equipment (Phillips, 2016, p. 138). Furthermore, Saudi Arabia helped in facilitating arms transfers to the FSA via its allies in Iraq and Lebanon (Phillips, 2016, p. 137). In the first phase of the war, Saudi Arabia remained committed to supporting only moderate rebel groups in order to incentivize the US to militarily intervene (Phillips, 2016, p. 185). However, after its disappointment by the inaction of the US after the Assad regime used chemical weapons in 2013, Saudi Arabia started to conduct a more militaristic and pragmatic approach, in which also more radical Islamist factions of the armed opposition were supported (Phillips, 2016, p. 185)

Saudi Arabia had several motivations to support the FSA. Firstly, one of the main foreign policy objectives is the ensure regional stability in order to retain their dominant position in the world's oil market (Gause, 2020, p. 193). In order to prevent spillover effects into neighboring countries such as Lebanon, which pose a danger to regional stability, Saudi Arabia was politically forced to intervene (Blanga, 2017, p. 57). However, Saudi engagement in the Syrian conflict must also be seen through the lens of the geopolitical rivalry with Turkey, Qatar and Iran to assert regional dominance (Blanga, 2017, p. 57; Yetim and Kasikci, 2021, p. 199).

In this regard, the geopolitical rivalry with Iran is most important, as Saudi Arabia considers Iranian influence in the region to be the primary threat to its national security (Blanga, 2017, p. 56). This rivalry has a highly apparent ideological dimension, as it is part of the greater “intra-Islamic cold war” between the Shiite and Sunni coalitions in the region (Blanga, 2017,

p. 56). The Shiite coalition consists of the Gulf states, Jordan, Egypt and Turkey and the Sunni coalition consists of Iran, Syria and the Hezbollah (Blanga, 2017, p. 57).

Secondly, in this ideational context, support for the FSA may be seen as a way of Saudi Arabia to present itself as the global protector of Sunni Islam and to contribute to the struggle of the oppressed Syrian Sunni majority by a Shiite minority (Rasheed, 2010, p.11; Blanga, 2017, p. 56; Gause, 2020, p. 194). Furthermore, the FSA also appealed to Saudi Arabia due to its secular character, as it was concerned about the rise of jihadist groups (Phillips, 2016, p. 139). Therefore, they also did not support the FSA factions that were associated with the Muslim Brotherhood (Phillips, 2016, p. 139)

Thirdly, this fear of radicalization also led to domestic political pressure, as the Saudi leadership was concerned about the radicalization of returning Saudi soldiers (Blanga, 2017, p. 58). This would naturally threaten domestic stability, which is of utmost importance for an authoritarian regime such as Saudi Arabia (Gause, 2020, p. 193).

Thus, this analysis shows that Saudi Arabia supported the FSA for several reasons: firstly, to assert its dominance in regional geopolitical rivalries; secondly, to counter Iran and the Shia coalition; thirdly, to support the oppressed Sunni majority in Syria and lastly to avert the domestic threat of radicalization. This again illustrates how state support for rebel groups is caused by the combination of strategic incentives, ideational affinity and domestic incentives.

6. Conclusion

Thus, what conclusions can we draw from this analysis? Firstly, from the analysis we can conclude that state support for rebel groups is the result of the selection process of states, in which they weigh strategic interests, ideational affinity and domestic incentives against each other. Thereby, the analysis supports the assumption of San-Akca (2016) that state support for rebel groups must be explained by the combination of strategic, ideational and domestic factors rather than by unidimensional accounts that focus solely on one of these factors.

With regards to Syria, the analysis clearly shows that support for the FSA by the US, Turkey and Saudi Arabia has been influenced by different strategic, ideational and domestic factors. However, the interplay of these factors has created a context for each state in which support for the FSA was the best option. For the US, the combination of international and domestic political constraints has severely limited the US involvement in the region, making indirect military support for the moderate FSA the only politically acceptable policy to counter the Syrian regime. Turkey has supported the FSA because it legitimized their involvement in Syria, gave them an instrument to avert the security threat posed by the YPG, provided them a domestic political opportunity to exploit and because they share ethnic and religious ties with the FSA. Lastly, Saudi Arabia has supported the FSA to participate in the regional geopolitical rivalry, counter Iran and the Shia coalition, support the oppressed Sunni Syrian people and to prevent radicalization at home. These motivations to support the FSA are all clear examples of how the interaction between strategic, ideational and domestic factors produces state support for rebel groups.

Thereby it has successfully validated the States' Selection Model by San-Akca (2016) by illustrating its practical applicability on specific cases. Future research could possibly focus on the practical applicability of the Rebels' Selection Model. This model argues that state

support for rebel groups is not only the result of the selection process by the state, but also of a process by which the rebel group selects the state it will extract support from (San-Akca, 2016).

Secondly, this research provides important insights into why the armed opposition has failed in overthrowing the Assad regime. Most importantly, this analysis has shown that each state has had its own interests in supporting the FSA and that this support has been shaped according to those interests. For example, each state has provided support to different factions of the FSA and has also provided different types and degrees of support to these factions. Factions of the FSA have also been used to fight in the proxies of foreign supporters, which is apparent in the case of Turkey and the YPG (Legrand, 2016, p. 2). This lack of coordination on foreign support has only increased the cleavages that already existed between different FSA factions and made cooperation among the armed opposition incredibly difficult (O'Bagy, 2013, p. 6). This has contributed significantly to the failure of the armed opposition to overthrow the Assad regime.

However, it is not only the lack of capabilities of the armed opposition that explains why the war has been dragged on for so long, but also the Russian military intervention on the part of Assad from 2015 onwards (Phillips, 2022, p. 374). This is arguably the result of the relative inaction of the US and the West, which created space for Russia to tip the balance of power in favour of Assad (Hale, 2019, p. 26).

An important implication of these insights is that it pressures the US and the West to rethink its stance on intervention in the Middle East, and especially on state support for rebel groups in the Middle East. Especially the US finds itself in a paradoxical transitional period in which they aim for retrenchment of their military involvement in the region, while the regional powers that have filled the power vacuum still base their policies on the expectation of US military intervention. In order to smoothly guide this transition, the US needs to rethink its role in the region.

An important consideration in this regard is that war is essentially about people, and the failure of the international community to actually set a red line and live up to the expectations they set have already cost the lives of far too many innocent Syrian people. This has made the Syrian civil war one of the greatest human tragedies in modern history. Hopefully the insights provided in this research will contribute to the finding of a political solution in Syria and the prevention of such mass suffering in the future.

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