

The Impact of External Actors Activities in Affecting Civil War Duration in Syria

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Abstract

This research aims to further explore the civil war that is taking place in Syria. This paper questions fundamentally, why did the civil war in Syria become a prolonged armed conflict? Or are there other factors that strengthen the strength of their resistance? This research offers a novelty of research on the situation of this conflict, is that the prolonged civil war in Syria is not only caused by internal conditions, but also the involvement of external actors. As with the approach of David E. Cunningham (2010) that the involvement of external actors in civil war produces two possibilities, namely; become a negotiating facilitator and help one party win. This research reveals that the involvement of external actors interventions - regional, international and transnational – actually prolongs the conflict. This is because the involvement of external actors causes the addition of combatants in the conflict, so the preference in the conflict increases.

Keywords: Civil War, Assad Regime, Regional Actor, International Actor, and Transnational Actor.



A. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary period, civil war has become one of the various conflicts that have an important influence on the dynamics of international security. The reason is that civil war is not merely classified as a conflict of interest between domestic actors within a country, but has a tendency to be intervened by external interests (Gleditsch, 2007). This can be seen systematically about the conflict that took place in Syria, where domestic conflict is an important issue for various countries that have direct and indirect relations and interests.

Basically the armed conflict in Syria is motivated by years of community disappointment in responding to the Assad regime. This resistance originated from the duality of the group namely Sunni Islam with Alawite groups and other minorities (Christians, Druze, Jews, etc.). The conflict peaked in February 1982, and is known as the Massacre Hama, in which Syrian troops, under the orders of Hafiz al Assad, surrounded and controlled the city of Hama in order to reduce the resistance of the Muslim Brotherhood. This group is here to fight for Islam as the political foundation of the Syrian Republic.

According to news reports, the mitigation of the conflict caused more than 2,000 civilian (Barmin) deaths. The form of damping was carried out by the government of

Hafez al Assad through hard-power measures in the form of arrest, exile and also torture. This action was taken to maintain domestic stability and maintain the status quo, so that groups who tried to suppress it would get such heinous actions. This regime also formed a special body called Mukhabarat which strictly supervised all forms of movement within Syrian society (The Guardian). This kind of political practice continued until the reign of Bashar al-Assad, but the resistance of the group under pressure continued and continued the resistance.

The wave of demonstrations in 2011 culminated with the presence of armed conflict. In March 2011 pro-democracy protests erupted in the southern city of Dara'a after incidents of arrest and torture of young men who wrote opposing slogans on their school walls (Rodgers, Gritten, Offer, & Asare). This triggered various national protests demanding that President Bashar al-Assad resign. In April 2011 the government took a pretty hard step to overcome the wave of protests across the country by deploying soldiers, armored weapons, and also special police in charge of arresting activists in the wave of demonstrations. The various waves of protest that followed were also accompanied by the large number of Syrian soldiers who defected and sided with pro-democracy groups, and several thousand of them formed the Free Syrian Army (Lister, 2016).

Instantly the conflict turned into an armed conflict which claimed many lives and severe infrastructure damage. Approximately 250,000 people lost their lives and more than 11 million were forced to flee, as a result of conflicts between the government, the opposition, and the jihadist groups also followed, in an effort to get their respective interests (Aljazeera, 2015). The conflict, which began in 2011 and continues today, has not yet indicated the potential for an end.

From the simple historical basis of the conflict above, at least we can underline that the continuation of the civil war is a phenomenon of political upheaval that is so complex because it continued during the two Syrian terms. The escalation of conflict continues to increase even though the government's counter-action has not been able to completely reduce the resistance of groups opposed to the status quo. For this reason, this paper specifically seeks the essential question as follows, why did the civil war in Syria become a prolonged armed conflict? Are there other factors that strengthen the strength of their resistance? To answer the question above, this article is organized into two parts. The first part, describes the development of civil war studies or armed conflict. The second part, outlines the involvement and interests of external actors.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of civil war or domestic armed conflict in certain countries is one of the important issues in international security studies. This issue raises the attention of

international studies on the issue of conflict and peace. The problem of internal conflict raises a tendency in efforts to find the cause of internal conflict and how and how to resolve conflicts.

Writings on the state of political dynamics that are the cause of internal conflict and the efforts of third parties to support the creation of peace over the conflict; dominate the study of this problem. However, there is a vacuum in two main concerns on this issue. This is due to the reality of internal conflict in several countries which turned out to be prolonged and escalating in the midst of intervention and the involvement of third parties or other countries in the dynamics of internal conflict. Therefore, civil war can not only be seen as a matter of domestic politics.

Some academic literature discusses the problem of the main causes of a civil war or internal political conflict. Regan and Norton argued in their research that civil war tends to occur in the condition of a country that has an uneven distribution of economic welfare, repressive governments responding to protests from its citizens, and there is access to opportunities for resources that can be exploited in a country (Regan & Norton, 2005).

There is also Collier and Hoeffler in one of his writings trying to provide an explanation of the determining variables for the occurrence of civil war. They argue that the conditions of a particular country can be a major cause of civil war compared to the motivations of warring groups (Collier, Hoeffler, & Rohner, 2009). Motivation based on dissatisfaction or greed for political power from the actors in conflict is not a major variable in the occurrence of civil war in a country. Failed state conditions, high economic inequality, and the presence of gray areas within a country are the main triggers of civil war.

These writings have a main focus on the domestic characteristics of a country in influencing the occurrence of a civil war. Indeed an effort to prevent and resolve a domestic conflict requires an understanding of the causes of the conflict. However, conflict resolution efforts are in fact difficult to produce results just by looking at it, because domestic conflicts can be even longer and increase in escalation due to causes or reasons that are different from the causes of the conflict itself. Domestic conflict can develop into a conflict of interests of foreign actors, both state and non-state. The combination of the political interests of domestic and foreign actors, can be an important factor in the prolongation of civil war in a country and its efforts to resolve it.

The involvement or intervention of external actors in a domestic conflict in a particular country has a significant influence in influencing the dynamics of the conflict. This dynamic can mean the effect on the character of conflict and the effect on the potential for conflict resolution which in this case can be; settlement by military victory or negotiation. Rafizadeh Majid in his writings argued that the civil war conflict in Syria

in particular has a different dimension. According to him the character and dynamics of the conflict that occurred in Syria was formed by four types of grouping and political competition, both domestic and regional and even international (Rafizadeh). Interaction in the four layers of competing interests that occur, forms the increasingly prolonged and increasingly devastating civil war in Syria.

There is also David E. Cunningham who more clearly discusses how external state intervention in civil war tends to produce two possibilities, namely; become a negotiating facilitator and help one party win (Cunningham, 2010). The main argument is that external state intervention in civil war tends to prolong the conflict. This is because the external state has an independent agenda compared to the agendas held by parties to the conflict in domestic conflict or civil war (Cunningham, 2010, p. 116).

External countries in general have less incentive to negotiate compared to internal actors, because they only bear a small fee and they tend to anticipate the possibility of slight benefits from negotiations compared to domestic insurjen groups. The external state tends to be not merely to help one of the parties to the conflict or help to resolve the conflict. This makes the involvement of the external state be considered as the addition of parties or parties to the domestic conflict itself. Conflict will be more prolonged when more and more combatants because they have different war outcome preferences. The duration of civil war in general is determined by two important conditions, namely; conditions where military victory will be easier / harder to obtain; and conditions where negotiations will be easier / harder to achieve.

There are several reasons why intervention by external actors who have their own agendas has the potential to prolong conflict. First; the existence of combatants who have different and separate preferences, raises issues in the negotiation effort. Second; in the condition of 'fractionalized' conflicts, combatants will find it difficult to use the outcome of warfare to be a measure of their confidence in winning their interests. Third; the more parties involved, the more incentives are needed by these parties and this makes agreement more difficult because more parties will need to approve it. Finally; negotiations tend to fail because of a shift in alliance between the parties involved when different issues are raised. This is also due to the possibility of combatants being able to create different coalitions in different issue areas (Cunningham, 2010, pp. 117-118).

This paper will use Cunningham's argument in understanding the intervention of external actors in civil war. Specifically, this tulian makes the case of civil war in Syria as one example that is able to illustrate the impact and influence of external actor-actor interventions on the character and dynamics of the conflict. The fact that a prolonged civil war in Syria has become an arena of conflicts of interest for other countries; both regional and international; a means to provide evidence that the involvement of outside actors who have an interest in domestic conflicts will tend to increase escalation and prolong

conflict. In the next section; this paper will explain the external actors involved and their interests in this conflict.

C. METHODOLOGY

This research is a type of descriptive research that uses literature to get data, and then analyzed based on the theoretical basis used to frame the analyzed data. The theoretical foundation used is The Impact of External actor in affecting civil war duration in Syria.

D. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Involvement and Interests of External Actors

Civil war in Syria is increasingly complicated and difficult to stop. This is influenced by various factors of domestic demographic and political conditions in Syria. However, strategic political and geographical conditions, making the conflict in Syria invite the involvement of external parties with a variety of strategic interests. This conflict also proved to be able to illustrate how competing interests and forces exist at regional and international levels. Domestic conflict in Syria can no longer be seen as a conflict of interest between the government and rebels alone. This conflict has strategic value for external actors, both regional and international. The influence of these actors will determine the character of the conflict that has occurred until now. The involvement of these actors, namely:

Regional Actor

The civil war in Syria has a fairly broad dimension of conflict with the involvement of countries in the region in supporting certain domestic groups involved in the conflict. Geographical location and socio-political conditions in Syria since years (controlled by the Assad regime), has a strategic value for the countries around its territory. The power competition in Syria provides the possibility for a shift in the map of power and influence in the Middle East. The rivalry of political influence between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Arab countries has influenced and shaped the character of the conflict in Syria.

One of the countries in the Middle East region that has important interests and influence in the civil war in Syria is Iran. Iran became one of the strong supporters of the Assad regime in Syria during the domestic conflict. In fact, many have stated that, without the assistance and support of Iran, the government of Bashar al-Assad would not have survived. Behind the similarities in religious background, the closeness between Iran and the Assad government is more for geopolitical reasons. The Iran-Iraq War became the main intersection between Iran and the Assad government, where Syria became a country in the Middle East region that supported Iran. However, the main thing that has become a strategic value for Iran in its support of the Assad government in the

current conflict is the possibility of the fall of Assad and the birth of a pro-Sunni government in Syria (Barfi, 2016).

This is a concern for Iran if that happens, logistics and weapons shipments to Hezbollah in Lebanon will be hampered. Therefore, Iran continues to make efforts to maintain the current Syrian government, including providing intelligence and military training by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. In addition, Iran also provides weapons supply to Syrian government troops from the air. Hezbollah was also significantly involved in the conflict and provided additional personnel strength in the field (Fulton, Holliday, & Wyer, 2013).

Other regional actors who also have interests and influence in the conflict in Syria are a group of Gulf Arab countries (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, United Arab Emirates). The domestic conflict in Syria provides the possibility of changing the political character in Syria which has been pro-Iran, and this is an opportunity for Saudi Arabia and Gulf Arab countries to change the regional political map in the Middle East region. Saudi Arabia and Qatar provide financial assistance for salaries of Syrian rebel forces who are trying to overthrow the Assad government (Alsharif, 2012). Saudi Arabia also provided some weapons assistance to the rebels, including anti-tank missile weapons (TOW missiles) made in the United States (Bassam & Perry, 2015). In addition, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab countries also continue to encourage international intervention and encourage Bashar al-Assad to step down, having lost credibility and legitimacy as Syrian leaders. The reason is the main value that always lies behind Saudi Arabia's support for the rebels (Basma & Strohecker, 2015).

There are also countries that can be affected by conditions that occur in Syria, and have the possibility to contribute indirectly because these countries have direct borders with Syria, including Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq. The main factor that is likely to get these countries involved to influence the conflict in Syria is the flow of refugees who came as a result of the conflict. Approximately 4.5 million Syrian refugees in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt. As many as 2.5 million people are in Turkey; 1.1 million are in Lebanon; 635,324 people are in Jordan; 245,022 people are in Iraq, and 117,658 people are in Egypt (Amnesty International, 2016). The wave of refugees is a big responsibility and can be a security threat to these countries. These things eventually pushed some of these countries to take sides in the domestic conflict in Syria.

International actor

In addition to having strategic value for countries in the Middle East region; Syria also has strategic value for global power countries such as Russia and the United States. This caused the civil war in Syria to also become a space of clashes between these

countries and made the dimension of conflict in Syria expand to the international dimension. This also causes the civil war in Syria to be a trigger for conflict between global actors with their various political and strategic interests.

The major global powers that have enough interest and influence in the Syrian conflict include Russia. Syria is Russia's ally in the Middle East region since the Soviet Union era. Since 1971, the Syrian government has given the Tartus port to Russia as a port that provides fuel supplies and repairs to Russian warships in Mediterranean waters. Even though it was closed in 1991, the possibility of the fall of the Assad regime will make Russia's opportunity to get service from the port again closed (Bagdonas, 2012). In addition, Russian military involvement in Syria will increase Russia's credibility as a strong and large country in the international system, and this is important because after the Cold War the credibility of Russia as a big country continues to be questioned (Pakhomov, 2015). Russia militarily, provides direct assistance with its air power, provides support for government forces on land (Valenta & Valenta, 2016).

Other international actors who also have strategic interests and influence in the conflict in Syria are the United States and its allies. The possibility of political change in Syria will provide strategic and geopolitical advantages for the US in the Middle East region, seeing how Syria's government has been Russia's ally in the Middle East. In addition, Russia's real intervention in the Syrian conflict, becomes a challenge for the US which during this post Cold War is a major force that can provide security through its military capability to deploy power in various regions of the world (Issa, 2016). Syria is also an opportunity for the US to be able to resist the influence and power of Iran and disrupt the political chain between Hezbollah-Syria-Iran (Cafiero & Wagner, 2015). President Barack Obama gave the Pentagon authority to provide weapons to the opposition against Assad's government (Cassidy, 2015). US efforts in the conflict in Syria have focused on providing weapons assistance to rebels, although the US also sought to provide military training to rebel groups (Stewart & Holton, 2015).

Based on Cunningham's argument that states, external state actors have a small risk of loss in their involvement in civil war. This will encourage countries to continue to prioritize their interests in the conflict because they are not directly affected by the devastation of the war. Therefore, the civil war in Syria will continue to potentially increase escalation and also be a prolonged conflict.

Transnational Actors: Jihadis Group Involvement

In reality, the civil war in Syria is not only a conflict between the authorities and their opposition. Islamic extremist groups or also often referred to as jihadis salafi groups, became the third group that played a role in shaping the character of the conflict in Syria. Although they have a common goal with opposition groups; namely to overthrow the

government of Bashar al-Assad, this jihadis salafi group has a vision and ideology of politics that is far different from the opposition groups. This makes it possible for the emergence of non-state global actors who have important interests and influences in the Syrian conflict, including Al Qaeda.

Although various media have excessively stated that Al Qaeda has a role in the Syrian conflict, it is not yet clear whether Al Qaeda is involved and has a direct influence in the Syrian conflict. However, what is certain is that groups that have affiliations with them in Syria are involved in this conflict. The groups according to Elizabeth O'bagy are the Abdullah Azzam Brigade, some elements from Iraqi Al Qaeda, Fatah al Sham, and jihadis salafi groups from Jordan (O'bagy, 2012).

In addition, Al Qaeda also sent several senior leaders and strategists to oversee the formation of a pioneer force in the midst of the Syrian revolutionary movement, after the start of the civil war in 2011. Some of those sent; which is often referred to as the khorasan group by the US; not only giving consideration and advice to jihadi groups such as Jabhat al Nusra, but also other rebel groups. Al Qaeda seeks to foster sympathy and support for the goals of the rebel groups (Cafarella, Heras, & Casagrande, 2016).

Jabhat al Nusra emerged as the most prominent salafi jihadist group and had the most influence among various rebel groups. The increase in power and influence of this group in the Syrian conflict makes the character of the civil war in Syria even more complicated. This group has an important connection to Al Qaeda and shows a higher level of effectiveness than other rebel groups (O'bagy, 2012, p. 31). This group also demonstrated its ability to attract the support of communities and armed groups from several Syrian population areas. This group can be a more effective group compared to resistance groups such as the Free Syrian Army which is supported by state actors in the regional and international regions. Al Qaeda, through the statement of its current leader; Ayman al Zawahiri; is an important external party that has so far clearly stated its support for this group (Lister, 2015).

The involvement of these jihadi groups gave a new dimension to the political interests that clashed in the civil war in Syria. Thus, the Jihadists' daily life has influenced the existing conflicts with the appearance of variations in interests that differ from other external actors. Not only the political interests of the rebels to overthrow the ruling government, or the political interests of the Assad regime to maintain its power; but also the interests of jihadis for their rule in Syria based on their personal political vision. This of course adds to the issue in the conflict. Sectarian issues will emerge and emerge in this civil war. Adding issues will result in difficulties in formulating agreement and understanding between the parties to the conflict.

E. CONCLUSION

From the various explanations in the previous sections, it can be concluded in this paper that the involvement of external actors in the civil war will tend to extend the duration of the conflict. The involvement of external actors is the cause of the prolonged conflict in Syria. This is because the involvement of external actors causes the addition of combatants in the conflict, so the preference in the conflict increases. The increasing number of different preferences between parties, it will be difficult to find common ground in a conflict to be negotiated. The more a fractional domestic conflict becomes, the more difficult it is for the parties to the conflict to calculate the final outcome of the conflict in order to fulfill their interests. External actors also ultimately prioritize personal interests over the interests of the warring domestic camps. This adds to the issue in the conflict and the addition of the issue will make it more difficult for the approval efforts in the negotiations.

There are several conditions that can be a factor supporting the conflict resolution efforts in Syria. Looking at the reality of the conflict in Syria and the conclusions of this paper, it can be said that the increasingly involved external actors will actually complicate the conflict resolution efforts. Therefore, conflict resolution will be more easily achieved if there are external actors who withdraw from political competition in Syria; either because of humanitarian considerations or rational considerations where the possibility to benefit from this conflict is getting smaller or no longer exists. Efforts to negotiate peace carried out before the occurrence of these conditions will have a very small possibility to succeed in having a significant impact in resolving this prolonged conflict in Syria.

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