Fighting Beyond Borders: Unravelling the Complex Drivers of Syrian Fighters in Foreign Conflicts

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Abstract

While research on the involvement of private military or mercenary companies in armed conflicts focuses primarily on their role as an alternative model for international security or on how they accentuate exploitation for pursuit of certain national interests, little research has approached this phenomenon by empirically singling out individuals' motivations to join foreign conflicts. This article investigates the motivations behind Syrian fighters' participation in conflicts beyond their national borders, specifically focusing on their involvement in Libya and Niger. It delves into the personal accounts of 15 Syrian fighters from opposition factions in northern Syria, supported by Turkey, to understand the complex reasons propelling them into foreign battlefields. I ground this study in a theoretical discussion of the reciprocal simultaneity of perceived 'gain' and 'despair.' Drawing from theories by Collier, Hoeffler, and Gurr, I argue

that exploring the intersection of personal motivation and broader socio-political influences expands scholarly understanding of variations among those who are recruited to join foreign conflicts.

Keywords:

Gain, despair, Syrian fighters, foreign conflicts.

[Ana sho mali bLibya…ana rayeh samad Misrat.. qirshayn li awladi]

'What do I have to do with Libya…I am going there to save money…a few pennies for my children.' (F5)[i]

[Al-ya'as…al-ya'as wasalna la hun…iqtital dakhili…w hukoomat w duwal la'abat feena…ma 'ad tafriq kteer ma'na…al-hala btia's]

'Despair…Despair has brought us here…Internal conflict…Governments and nations have toyed with us…It doesn't really matter to us anymore…The situation is desperate.' (F7)

Introduction

In the summer of 2020, headlines resounded with the exploits of a group of Syrian fighters hailing from opposition factions of the Syrian National Army (SNA) in northern Syria, embroiled in conflicts beyond the borders of their war-torn homeland, notably in Libya and across Africa. While the broader conflict has been examined within a geopolitical framework (Phillips and Valbjørn 2018), identifying it as a proxy battleground involving numerous global and regional stakeholders—deepening its complexity—the saga of these Syrians fighting in foreign lands has often been relegated to mere sensationalist headlines and local emotive narratives among Syrians. Depicted as mercenaries, these fighters have long captured the public's imagination and reflected heightened debate among Syrians on social media platforms (BBC 2020; Sky news 2022). These factions were the Sultan Suleiman Shah Division (Al-Amshat), the Hamza Division (Al-Hamzaat), and the Sultan Murad Division, affiliated with 2nd

Corps in SNA, who were also involved in recruiting their fighters into north and west Africa. These factions are primarily active in the Afrin and Peace Spring operation areas, with significant allegations of human rights abuses. Without a doubt, life under the control of and within armed groups is shaped by immense experiences of violations and cruelty; in particular the 2nd Corps' violations, which include the forced displacement of indigenous residents (Kurds), extortion through arbitrary detention and ransom demands, and economic exploitation, such as seizing olive crops and imposing hefty levies on remaining residents.

Following the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024, SNA factions were formally merged into the Ministry of Defense (MOD) as part of a broader military restructuring. However, despite this official integration, many groups within the 2nd Corps continue to function under Turkey's influence rather than being fully absorbed into Syria's national military framework (Aldoughli New Lines Magazine 2025; The World Today 2025). Turkey retains operational control over these factions, shaping their decision-making and deployments, including their continued presence in foreign conflicts. Fighters who were recruited for combat in Libya remain stationed there, with no indication of an immediate return, underscoring how external actors still leverage these groups for geopolitical purposes despite the formal military restructuring within Syria.

Research on armed groups has largely centered on their involvement in violations, looting, and acts of violence, often portraying them through narratives of brutality and cruelty (Ritholtz 2022, 2). However, reducing their role solely to violence risks oversimplifying the broader dynamics that shape their actions and influence within conflict settings (Lederach 2023,

17). My research over the past few years on Syrian armed groups indicates that amidst all the violence and suffering (2024a), personal narratives of fighters reflect despair and uncertainty: 'yes there is element of personal motivations to go to Libya…there is gain, but there is also sense of feelings of despair' (F1). This article focuses on these perceived elements of gain and despair, and how they are entwined with and sit alongside experiences of grievance and political marginalisation.

While these simultaneities of gain and despair constitute a key aspect of this analysis, I do not negate, downplay, ignore, or trivialise the detrimental impact of violence within these rebel groups in general, and the 2nd Corps in particular, nor do I romanticise and idealise despair as a justification for joining foreign conflicts or to affiliate with armed groups. Rather, I acknowledge the complex entanglements of material benefits and perceptions of grievance that characterise these contexts and relationships. I situate this article within ongoing conversations and communities of thought about the diversities and complexities of lived realities in times of conflict (Sylvestre 2013; see also Saramifar 2024), seeking to offer alternative perspectives about fighters' experiences beyond their nations' borders. As such, this article delves into the personal journeys of 15 Syrian fighters who have crossed their nation's borders to join battles elsewhere.

Rebel groups in Syria have received some attention within peace and conflict studies, but these inquiries sought to unravel the role of ideology in the process of mobilisation (McCauley and Moskalenko 2011, 219-222; Lister 2016). Beyond the role of ideology in instigating violent behaviour, Jeron Drevon examines the tension between the ideological commitments of Salafi Jihadi groups and their strategic interests, particularly in the context of foreign support during the Syrian insurgency post-2011. Drevon argues that while ideology is a defining characteristic

of these groups, their strategic interests can, at times, override ideological considerations, especially when external support is involved. This dynamic has significant implications for understanding the behavior and alliances of Jihadi groups in conflict zones (2024). One strand of literature within conflict studies has focused on political economy as a mobilising factor for the emergence of armed conflict. These theories of civil conflict are sometimes divided into the categories of 'greed' and 'grievance'. Collier and Hoeffler are the most influential theorists of the greed perspective, arguing that in major twentieth-century civil conflicts, the warring factions and participants acted in pursuit of self-interested material gains (2000; 2002, 13-28). Their analysis was robust and included copious empirical data about conflict financing, recruitment, and natural resources, while largely dismissing issues of personal motives. Such outlooks, and the overall views of political economy with which they are associated, help to address the perception that war is irrational. From the greed perspective, the rationality of conflict may be bounded or myopic in nature, but it is always based on actors' intents to improve their personal material positions.

At the same time, Collier and Hoeffler emphasised both identity-based grievances (Collier and Hoeffler 2004, 563-566) and the economic motivations of rebels as driving factors for conflict (Humphreys and Weinstein 2006). Collier and Hoeffler argued that poverty is a key factor motivating individuals to engage in combat (2000: 570), while Kalyvas and Kocher contended that individuals are driven by a sense of group protection, a sense of 'collectivism' (2007). Despite the value of this analysis, other scholars have raised important concerns about Collier and Hoeffler's methods and sample choices, suggesting that they overlooked or oversimplified many conflict participants' motivations (Bensted 2011: 84-90). The greed framework has since been revisited and reconceptualised by Collier and Hoeffler (2009). In their

new analysis of the motivational factor, they demonstrated the relativity of the financial benefits in framing rebels' political agendas and strategies (4). In their measurement of the effect of lower income on the outbreak of civil wars, and given the socio-political factors, the reductionist interpretation of being prone to civil war become subject to the recruitment factors of rebel groups (12). In turn this calculative correlation between the level of per capita income and being prone to civil war eliminates analysis of how perceptions of grievances determine the cycle of civil war and shape contours of organised violence perpetrated by external actors involved in the Syrian civil war. By taking this reconceptualisation of the economic-based analysis, I focus on fighters' perceptions of martial opportunities and grievances as a basis for determining the process of recruitment of Syrian fighters in foreign conflicts, thus providing a nuanced understanding of the strategic manipulation of external actors in expanding their martial activities by reinforcing entrenched contentious relations between rebel groups and their subjects (Tokdemir, Sedashov, Akcinaroglu 2020).

In the context of economic analyses of fighters' motivation to engage in warfare beyond borders, this article challenges the notion of objectivity and resists reductive views that use one theoretical framework to explain fighters' relational choices to fight in foreign conflicts. On the one hand, I question the impact of economic conditions on fighters' choice to fight in north and west Africa, incorporating greater attention to how, during war, economy is experienced as a community and how it meets needs such as physical and psychological safety. On the other hand, I examine the grievance aspect. Gurr (1970) was an influential proponent of this perspective, drawing attention to identity-based discrimination and animosity as an instigator of violent conflict. Several decades later, Stewart (2010) has developed the concept of 'horizontal inequality,' defined as a situation where people of similar abilities experience divergent

outcomes due to cultural discrimination, characterising such social conditions as the source of deep-seated grievances and resulting civil conflicts.

As such, in this article, I examine the Syrian war as a novel case study and dissect the simultaneity of gain and despair for clarifying fighters' motivations. In doing so, this article starts with the methodology section outlining the research design, data collection methods, and analytical framework utilised to gather and interpret fighters' narratives. The article then provides a background on the historical use of mercenaries in civil wars, examining the contentious nature of this term. Next, I provide an overview of the Syrian civil war and its involved actors. More particularly, in this section I focus on armed groups involved in recruiting fighters, with a particular focus on Turkey's role in contracting these fighters for engagements abroad. This section addresses the operational dynamics between Turkey and its Syrian armed group allies, the reasons behind Turkey's preference for these groups, and the detailed recruitment mechanisms and financial incentives driving this process. This will be followed by a section that conceptually delves into the greed and grievance framework, setting the stage for a nuanced analysis of the fighters' narratives.

Methodology

For my analysis, I draw on extensive three-year research with Syrian armed groups in northern Syria and southern Turkey. My overarching research objectives were aimed at understanding Syrian fighters' motivations to join and to continue fighting within Syrian armed groups. I focused primarily on the roles of emotions, grievances, combat experience, group cohesion, and perceived kinship in sustaining fighters' decisions to continue fighting (see Aldoughli 2024). I held focus group discussions and interviewed key informants, central commanders, experts, and

politicians. This article derives specifically from empirical research conducted between October 2022 and February 2024, involving 33 in-depth interviews with central military commanders, general commanders, experts, and fighters, including 15 fighters who participated in foreign conflicts.[ii] These engagements with individuals directly involved in the SNA were complemented by five in-depth interviews with key general commanders from the first, second, and third corps within the SNA factions, providing additional knowledge on mechanisms of recruitment, the position of Turkey, and the objectives of these commanders in recruiting fighters from their armed groups. Establishing trust and rapport with the participants was a time-intensive process. The sample selection strategy involved engaging with a key intermediary, or 'gatekeeper'. For this limited-group case study, participants were identified and recruited through a snowball sampling approach.

The fighters' interviews were conducted online and in Arabic. My interlocutors spent varying periods of time within the 2nd Corps, from shorter episodes of four months to extended periods of up to four years. The limitation of this research is that the fighters were all affiliated with the 2nd Corps. Another limitation is that this article focuses only on Syrian fighters affiliated with opposition groups, excluding Syrians deployed by Russia from regime-controlled areas.

Each interview began with asking the participants about their personal backgrounds, familial ties, and upbringing. The interviews then progressed to more detailed questions about various aspects of socialisation, including recollections about the onset of protests in Syria, political inclinations and activities, interactions with peers and media, initial involvement in protests, the pivotal moment they committed to military action, socio-economic conditions during the past decade, and their personal stories regarding participating in foreign conflicts. To

gain a comprehensive understanding of these experiences and perspectives, I occasionally checked the data with other individuals who were interviewed in-depth. These included first-, second-, third-, and fourth-line commanders; central commanders; military administrators; media and political representatives; and specialised experts on the various factions within the SNA.

In line with my research focus, my methodological approach was also modelled after a relational and care-based approach to research (Fujii 2017, 3–6). For Lee Ann Fujii, the ethos of relational research is humanistic, where 'its main ingredient is reflexivity. Its guiding principle is the ethical treatment of all participants' (Fujii 2017, 1). This approach moves beyond merely gaining access to interlocutors or building rapport and instead consciously centres around relationships, 'negotiated between the interviewer and interviewee and shaped by the interests, values, backgrounds, and beliefs that each brings to the exchange' (Fujii 2017, 3). In practice, I conducted research primarily with interlocutors and participants with whom I have pre-existing and often long-term relationships, characterised by years-long mutual engagement, trust, participation, and reciprocity. For the new relations and encounters that were forged through this research, I relied on sustained engagement and multiple conversations prior to and after conducting the interviews, in the interest of fostering relations and conversations with my interlocutors beyond the exercise of mere data collection.

I must acknowledge that my Syrian origin and unveiled appearance, and being perceived by interviewees as a British academic, introduced complexities to the insider-outsider duality. In my previous research, I explored how the positionality of researchers and their gender identity can contribute to conceptual limitations in their analytical frameworks. In my encounters with the fighters (Aldoughli 2023), my gender identity simultaneously posed challenges, yet also facilitated open, empathetic conversations. These discussions often revolved around fighters'

perceptions of traditional male roles to provide, protect, and defend. However, my academic positionality was sometimes perceived as lacking the emotional depth necessary to fully comprehend the fighters' personal narratives and their initial motivations for joining armed groups.

Mercenaries?

The post-Cold War era has seen a surge in scholarly debate regarding the use of mercenaries in civil wars, although mercenarism itself is as ancient as warfare. Roger Manning's exploration of the British army from 1585 to 1702 notes British aristocrats' preference, during the British and Irish civil wars, for recruiting and commanding soldiers based on social status rather than military competence. This recruitment strategy was effective primarily in Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and northern England, where loyalty superseded financial transactions as the bond between lords and smallholders (…). This point marked a decline of the strong prejudice against hiring ‘soldiers of fortune’. Subsequent research has expanded the understanding of mercenary involvement in civil wars with studies such as David J. Francis’s examination of security privatisation in Sierra Leone during the post-Cold War era. Francis shows how private military companies (PMCs) have significantly impacted internal conflicts, often under the pretext of providing national security while fostering international exploitation, especially in strategic mineral pursuits. Another strand of literature focuses on the role of PMCs in facilitating the peace process (Shearer 1998; Singer 2003), and others have investigated the dynamics of the market for mercenary activities in civil wars by identifying determinants of mercenary participation in foreign conflicts.

The term ‘mercenary’ often carries a negative connotation, and its definition remains a contentious issue in both legal and political discourse (Burmester, 1978: 37-40). The 1977

Additional Protocol I of the Geneva Conventions defines a mercenary as someone who is specially recruited to fight in an armed conflict, is motivated primarily by financial gain, is not a member of the armed forces of a party to the conflict, and does not have the nationality of a state involved in the hostilities. However, this definition is problematic for several reasons. First, it fails to account for cases where fighters have multiple, overlapping motivations—including ideological, political, and sectarian commitments—making it difficult to determine whether financial gain is their primary incentive. Second, the reliance on foreign nationality as a criterion has been widely critiqued, particularly by Percy (2007), as it excludes many fighters who operate within transnational networks where nationality is fluid, contested, or secondary to other forms of identity. This is especially relevant in conflicts like Syria, where fighters are embedded in cross-border kinship and ideological networks. For example, many leaders of the 2nd Corps hold dual nationality, and nearly half of the fighters interviewed also possess Turkish citizenship, complicating the classification of their status under traditional legal definitions.

This article challenges three misconceptions about Syrian fighters participating in foreign conflict. The first is that fighters' participation in conflicts is largely involuntary, driven by coercion or external pressures. This view simplifies the complex motivations behind individuals' decisions to fight; for instance, while some might have been coerced into fighting in foreign conflicts, others might have seen it as a strategic choice influenced by loyalty, ideological commitment, or financial incentives. The second misconception arises from the application of outdated analytical frameworks that fail to capture the nuances of post-Cold War conflicts. These frameworks often overlook the evolution of conflicts from state-centric to more fragmented, non-state actor-driven engagements. The Syrian conflict exhibits a mosaic of motivations: Fighters

navigate between roles imposed by authoritarian regimes and the murkiness of much infighting among Syrian armed factions (Gade, Hafez, Gabbay 2019: 325). Mainstream security studies sometimes miss these nuanced dynamics, leading to an oversimplified understanding of fighters' motivations (Ungor 2020). Lastly, the choices of individual fighters cannot be fully understood in isolation from the structural and political conditions that shape them. While fighters are often portrayed through the ideological lens of their factions, this research reveals the complexity and variability of their motivations. Not all fighters within the same group adhere to identical ideological or material goals; rather, their decisions—such as resisting recruitment, defecting, or navigating internal hierarchies—are shaped by intersecting factors including economic hardship, political despair, ethnic marginalisation, and gendered expectations. Understanding these choices through the lens of embedded positionality, rather than abstract notions of individual agency, offers a more nuanced analysis of how fighters navigate conflict.

By addressing these misconceptions, this article moves beyond reductionist explanations and offers a more nuanced approach to understanding the motivations of Syrian fighters. Rather than viewing them as static actors, I argue that their agency is dynamic and relational, shaped by personal experiences, emotional bonds, and the structural realities of war. My extensive fieldwork and direct interviews with Syrian fighters revealed that they strongly reject the term *mercenary* (*murtazaqa*), as it implies a purely transactional motivation and erases their personal, ideological, and political grievances. Many of them see their participation in foreign conflicts as part of a broader struggle rather than a mere pursuit of financial compensation. While financial incentives played a role, many of the fighters I interviewed framed their decisions within a narrative of resistance, dignity, and addressing injustices they had endured in Syria.

As part of my broader research on armed groups in Syria, I specifically asked my interlocutors how they preferred to be identified—whether as *rebel* (*mutamarrid*) or *fighter* (*mukātil*). The overwhelming response was a preference for *fighter*, as they felt it best encapsulated their experiences without being tied to a singular political or ideological framework. To better reflect their perspectives, I have chosen to refer to them as *Syrian fighters* (*mukātilūn Sūriyyūn*), a term that acknowledges their agency without imposing an externally constructed label.

This distinction is important in understanding how these fighters perceive themselves and the causes they align with. I have now clarified this in the manuscript to ensure that their self-identifications and the complexities of their motivations are properly represented.

A War by Proxy: Allies and Foes in the Syrian Civil War

The Syrian conflict, which began in 2011 as a series of peaceful protests against the authoritarian rule of Bashar al-Assad, quickly evolved into a protracted civil war marked by regional and international interventions (Phillips 2016). The conflict saw the rise of various armed groups, ranging from moderate opposition factions to Islamist and jihadist movements, each backed by different external actors pursuing their geopolitical interests. Over the years, Syria became an arena of competing international agendas, with Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah bolstering the Assad

regime, while Turkey, the United States, and Gulf states provided varying levels of support to opposition factions (Hinnebusch and Imady 2018).

By 2020, the war had entered a new phase with increased direct confrontations between regional powers, particularly Russia and Turkey. The delicate balance of cooperation and rivalry between these two states was severely tested following a major escalation in Idlib, where Syrian government forces—backed by Russian airpower—killed 34 Turkish soldiers in February 2020. This marked one of the deadliest incidents involving Turkish forces in Syria and brought Ankara and Moscow to the brink of open conflict (Stein 2020). In retaliation, Turkey launched Operation Spring Shield, targeting Syrian government positions and leveraging its military presence in northern Syria to pressure both Damascus and its Russian allies (Öztürk and Gökalp 2021).

To prevent further escalation, high-level diplomatic negotiations between Turkey and Russia resulted in a ceasefire agreement in March 2020, temporarily stabilizing the situation in northwest Syria. However, this period also saw an intensification of external recruitment efforts, with Turkey deploying fighters from the Syrian National Army (SNA) to conflicts beyond Syria, particularly in Libya and later in Nagorno-Karabakh (Al-Tamimi 2021). The recruitment of Syrian fighters for foreign conflicts thus became an increasingly complex phenomenon, intertwined with regional power struggles and broader geopolitical calculations.

Despite the ceasefire agreement of March 2020, however, the ongoing recruitment and deployment of Syrian fighters into foreign conflicts (such as Libya, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Mali, and Niger) by both Russia and Turkey reflects a broader aspect of the war that encompasses not only geopolitical and strategic considerations but also the personal, economic, and social factors

influencing individual fighters' decisions to engage in combat abroad. Russia is currently sending fighters to Ukraine; each fighter receives a payment of US$1,000, a visa, and a Russian passport (CC1). They are then transported to Hmeimim base and onwards to Ukraine (E). There are casualties among these fighters, and some have families who remain uninformed of their status (CC2). The mechanism of recruiting includes civilian intermediaries or private security companies like the Al-Sayyad Company and the Special Missions Protection and Security Company, a Syrian firm working for the Russians (CC3). The Syrian regime has recently facilitated these companies' activities by enacting new legislation to manage the recruitment process.

Turkey pursued a similar strategy in its sphere of influence in north-western Syria, utilising its connections with Syrian factions to recruit fighters for deployment in regions where it sought to extend its geopolitical influence, including Libya and Azerbaijan. However, unlike the Russians, Turkey has been recruiting Syrians through certain factions based on loyalty or ethnic ties, under the supervision of the intelligence service Millî İstihbarat Teşkilati (MİT). It is believed that Turkey turned to recruiting Syrians to avoid domestic backlash against the ruling party due to the casualties it suffered in Syria (CC1; CC2; CC3). These manoeuvres were intended not only to assert military power; they also involved strategic efforts to avoid internal political fallout from military casualties, as seen with the Idlib incident.

The early emergence of armed groups in northern Syria, particularly after 2011, created a region fraught with conflict and shifting alliances. Among these warring factions was the SNA, comprised of three corps, backed by Turkey. More particularly, the 2nd Corps, formed in October 2019 as part of the broader SNA initiative, was a significant development, showcasing

Turkey's pivotal role in reorganising the Syrian opposition forces. This alignment was not merely strategic but also indicative of Turkey's influence over the Syrian military landscape, especially in areas such as the Aleppo countryside. Turkey's involvement went beyond mere organisation; it actively supported operations such as Peace Spring, Olive Branch and Euphrates Shield, shaping the power dynamics in the region (CC3; Grinstead, 2018). For instance, the objection of the Levant Front (affiliated with the 3rd Corps) to sending its base to fight abroad reinforced the fighters' loyalty to the 3rd Corps, yet put them under pressure from Turkey, which cut financial aid in order to weaken the Corps' ability to maintain control over its areas (Q1; Q2). This has caused much infighting and conflict within SNA factions (CC3; CC2; CC1).

The 2nd Corps, with a robust strength of 22,000 fighters distributed across 13 factions, emerged as a central player in this Turkish-backed military endeavour. Noteworthy factions like the Sultan Murad Division, Al-Amshat, and the Al-Hamzaat underscore the depth of Turkey's investment, both militarily and politically, in crafting a formidable ally in the region. In the volatile landscape of northern Syria, these three factions of the 2nd Corps have emerged as favoured proxies of Turkey, mostly due to their active roles in curtailing the Syrian Democratic Forces' (SDF) influence, which Ankara perceives as a direct security threat. Thus, Turkey's favouritism towards these factions is not merely strategic because these groups led operations in the Afrin and Peace Spring zones, demonstrating their utility for Turkey's broader regional objectives. This favouritism is also ethnically motivated, since most leadership roles within these factions are held by individuals of Turkmani ethnicity, closely aligned with Turkish interests (CC1).

This favouritism has a darker facet, however, manifested in numerous violations committed by these groups in the territories they control. Reports have shed light on severe

infractions, including home lootings in Afrin, displacements of indigenous people, arbitrary arrests, and demanding ransoms, all under the banner of military operations backed by Turkey. The Hamzat and Al-Amshat factions, in particular, have been implicated in heinous acts such as rape, forced displacements, and property seizures, actions that blatantly contravene international human rights standards. Economic exploitation further characterises their modus operandi, as evidenced by the imposition of arbitrary levies on remaining Kurdish residents and manipulative control over the local economy, notably the olive trade.

The egregious nature of these violations prompted the United States to impose sanctions in August 2023, targeting these factions and their leaders. This external pressure was a clear signal to Ankara to reconsider its policy and approach in northern Syria, as evidenced by subsequent Turkish efforts to restructure the SNA and to appoint coordinators in northern Syrian regions to alleviate administrative chaos. The material gains from such actions, facilitated and often overlooked due to the strategic benefits to Turkey, have further incentivised these factions. Incentives extended beyond local operations, because Turkey utilised these groups for broader regional conflicts, notably in Libya and Azerbaijan, offering substantial financial rewards and even citizenship prospects in exchange for martial service.

The 2nd Corps, composed of factions such as Sultan Murad, Hamzat, and Al-Amshat, exemplifies a complex interplay of strategic alignment, ethnic identity, and material interests. These groups have been favoured under Turkey's tutelage, serving as instruments of Ankara's regional ambitions in northern Syria. However, this relationship—rooted in ethnic affinity (particularly Turkmen ties), military utility, and economic dependency—has also resulted in patterns of impunity, enabling violations that have drawn both local resentment and international condemnation. According to interviews conducted with central commanders from

the Hamzat Division and Sultan Murad Division, this alliance is perceived not merely as a tactical necessity but as a condition of survival within a volatile and competitive military landscape. The intricate nature of this relationship is crucial to understanding how foreign patronage both empowers and distorts armed group behaviour. It reveals a broader dynamic of geopolitical manipulation and transactional loyalty that has reshaped the Syrian conflict's landscape, reinforcing fragmentation while projecting external influence through local proxies (see al-Jabassini and E. Badi 2023, 7–9).[iii]

The narrative of favoured allies in this landscape is compelling. Factions within the 2nd Corps often received preferential treatment in terms of resource allocation, strategic positioning, and involvement in key operations. This favouritism was apparent in the allocation of resources from Turkey, indicating a reward mechanism for compliance and performance. This system inherently created disparities, and factions like the Sultan Murad, Sulieman Shah, and Al-Hamza divisions were positioned advantageously, both in terms of operational roles and material gain. This advantage was manifested in the recruitment mechanism within the 2nd Corps, which was complex and multifaceted. Building numbers was not the only goal; Turkey aimed to ensure loyalty and alignment with its strategic interests in the region (Q3). This process often intertwined with the broader socio-political narratives of the Syrian conflict, where material gains provided by Turkey became a significant motivation for fighters.

This favouritism is evidenced in the discrepancy of fighter's monthly salary in the three corps (CC1). Fighters in the 3rd Corps receive around US$20, less than fighters in the 2nd Corps (US$100). The prospect of steady income, better resources, and a prominent role in the military hierarchy made the 2nd Corps an attractive option. The aspect of material gain is therefore

crucial in understanding the motivations behind joining the 2nd Corps. The financial incentives provided by Turkey played a significant role in sustaining loyalty and operational readiness. The promise of regular pay and bonuses for specific missions, and the provision of logistical support, were pivotal in maintaining a robust and loyal fighting force. This economic dependency underscored the relationships within the SNA's structure, where factions that contributed significantly to Turkish-backed operations were financially rewarded, and those that hesitated faced repercussions. Abdo al-Jabassini and Emadeddin Badi deepen the discussion on the role of international and regional actors in shaping the Syrian conflict by presenting a comprehensive geopolitical analysis of Turkish and Russian involvement in both the Syrian and the Libyan conflicts. Their work explores the formal, informal, and semi-formal patterns of wartime security assistance, highlighting how Turkey and Russia have utilised the ongoing conflicts to expand their influence in the Mediterranean region.

However, as I contend in this article, this reshaping of regional involvement and military dynamics has profound implications for individual fighters. My interviews confirm the quasi-formal mechanism, characterised by its structured yet flexible approach, which includes official appointments and a sequence of well-defined procedural steps. The first stage of the recruitment process is marked by the presence of a ‘File Manager’, an officer appointed by the Turkish army, who determines the recruitment quotas from each Syrian faction for deployment to Libya. This stage is characterised by an organised, hierarchical communication flow: An MİT official initiates contact with a coordinator within each Syrian faction, who subsequently liaises with the faction leader to orchestrate preparations for transferring members to Libya. The involvement of official military and intelligence personnel at this stage underscores the structured aspect of the recruitment process.

The second stage commences with the SNA factions that are approved by Turkey initiating the registration of fighters. Brigade and battalion leaders within these factions are responsible for recruiting the requisite number of fighters through nominated brokers. They receive specific monetary compensation for each fighter recruited—a practice that reveals the hybrid nature of the process, combining elements of formal military operations with the incentivisation typical of private contracting. After the fighters are registered, their names are forwarded to Turkey for security clearance, after which the selected individuals are briefed and integrated into the military camp of the faction they are associated with. They are then told to prepare themselves and join the camp of the faction they registered with, within 72 hours. Fighters are then transferred to Hawar Kilis, where they sign one copy of the contract, retained by the military faction (CC1; CC2; CC3).[iv] In Hawar Kilis, the mechanism for receiving financial entitlements for each fighter is determined.[v] They are then transported by land to Gaziantep Airport in Turkey, flown from there to Istanbul Airport, and then flown to the combat zones, without undergoing training. This stage, with its focus on contracts and regulated payments, shows the quasi-formal nature of the process.

The conditions for accepting fighters varied. In the missions to Libya and Azerbaijan, aside from the Turkish security checks, there were no strict conditions, unlike for the Niger mission, which imposed specific conditions regarding age (20–35 years old), prior combat experience, and acceptable physical attributes in terms of organ health, weight, and height, with rejections based on obesity or height.[vi] With the operationalisation of transfers to Niger, the Sultan Murad Brigade, under the leadership of ‘Fahim Issa’ exemplifies the quasi-formal recruitment model. This Brigade undertakes direct communication and contract management with Turkey, indicating a level of quasi-formality. The term precisely captures the recruitment's

operational essence, where formalities like contracts and structured communication coexist with flexible, sometimes opaque, recruitment channels and practices. These activities unfold within a framework that, while lacking the full transparency and standardisation of formal military systems, still operates with a semblance of official sanction and order. This quasi-formal recruitment mechanism means that these fighters are not bound by the institutional norms and regulations that typically govern the actions and motivations of those working under the aegis of PMCs. This distinct lack of formal regulation has significant implications for the personal narratives and motivations of these fighters.

Taking into account the role of Turkey as an involved external actor in the process of delegating the 2nd Corps to recruit fighters for foreign conflicts, the situation markedly diverges from the post-Cold War era in Africa, where PMCs orchestrated the institutional contracting of soldiers. Previous research has extensively probed the role of such companies in providing military services and their consequential impact on global security dynamics. Badi and Jabassini describe the Turkish recruitment process as operating through a ‘semi-formal modality’ of security assistance, in contrast to the formal and informal processes they outline in their typology. This semi-formal approach involves the use of PMCs and a mix of formal and informal components and is characterised by a degree of plausible deniability and a lack of full institutional regulation. According to them, the recruitment for Libya was devolved to the SNA factions, closely monitored by SADAT, a Turkish private security company, operating within the headquarters of the SNA constituent groups (pp. 3-5, 15).

The variability of fighters' salaries across missions and time frames indicates a flexible compensation strategy, which is tailored according to mission-specific dynamics. In addition to

salaries, comprehensive compensation packages—including substantial payouts for fatalities and injuries—are indicative of an attempt to systematise and institutionalise the quasi-formal practice of recruiting fighters for foreign conflicts. For example, in Libya, the first batches of fighters were paid a salary of US$2,000,[vii] which gradually decreased until at the beginning of the current year it reached 5,000 Turkish Lira plus $100 for food and expenses at the military base in Libya. In Azerbaijan, fighters were paid an average salary of US$1,500 monthly during 57 days of fighting.[viii] In Niger, fighters received their first payment at the end of last March 2023, amounting to US$4,500 for three months.[ix] Fighters' salaries in Niger are, so far, unified because they all belong to one military faction, the Sultan Murad Brigade. Contracts also include compensation of US$60,000 for each fatality, in addition to compensation for war injuries, which varies according to the severity and damage of the injury.[x]

Conceptual Dilemmas: The Simultaneity of Gain and Despair in the Syrian Context

Although scholars have devised a host of theories to explain the violent conflict in Syria, there remain surprising conceptual limitations in many of these analyses (Balanche 2018; Hinnebusch 2019; Wedeen 2019). In particular, examinations focused on political economy tend to overlook the micro-level motivators of violent behaviour. There is a notable gulf between scholarship that focuses on how sectarianism and material violence have contributed to the war in Syria[2] and work that focuses on identity formation processes and the role of authoritarianism in shaping

cultural identities (Hinnebusch 2020). Patricia M. Thornton, for example, has discussed how the 'depolarization and reintertwining of identities' can contribute to conflict resolution (2007: 7), a perspective that is often missing from broader political analyses. To a large extent, the limitations in the literature on the Syrian war derive from an over-reliance on the frameworks of rational choice theory [3] and political economy (Eriksson 2011), while giving inadequate consideration to the interaction between perceived material gain and issues of identity, sect and ethnic construction, and interpersonal dynamics at the micro level.

While a rational analysis of costs and benefits has merit, it is not in itself sufficient to explain individual motivations. This is an important endeavour, since in recent decades armed intra-state conflict and mercenaries are emerging globally as the primary form of organised violence, surpassing conflicts between states, which have steadily declined in prominence and impact since the end of the Second World War (Kaldor, 1999). I concur that terms like 'gain' and 'despair' can inadvertently underwrite the centrality of political framing, which often fails to capture the enduring presence and impact of violence that persists even after the overt incidents have ceased (Das et al. 2001, 14).

However, dissecting the simultaneity of gain and despair presents a related challenge. Inspired by Krysalli and Schulz' approach in grounding their theoretical conceptualisation of studying love and care in armed conflicts, as informed by the experience of their interlocutors (2022, 12), I deliberately do not provide a singular definition of 'gain' and 'despair' in order not to constrain these constructs within strict ontological or epistemological boundaries (2022, 12). My work is informed by the scholarly efforts that have elaborated on the theoretical and hermeneutic frameworks surrounding economic motivations and the interpersonal dimensions of

experiencing grievances. However, exploring gain and despair as motivation raises questions regarding linkages and simultaneity: How do material gain and expressions of despair interact? I reflect on the conceptualisations of gain and despair that shape how I have interpreted my interlocutors' narratives.

Gain/Greed

Critics have accused the greed perspective of ignoring the role of more complex sociological factors. The quantitative analysis used in Collier and Hoeffler's statistical approach involves transforming complex social concepts such as ethnicity into numerical values (2000), which can result in crude and reductive indicators (Cunningham et al 2013: 520). Collier and Hoeffler did not differentiate the intensity, scope, or duration of the wars they evaluated, and they did not consider many aspects of the wars' context, including fighters' stated motivations (2002), differential motivations among different conflict participants, speed of local social change, or historical trajectories and norms of the countries' politics (Nathan, 2003). In a similar fashion, high levels of overall economic inequality in a society cannot be based on quantitative analysis but must also be based on perceptions of inequality and deprivation (p. 442). This latter point was certainly the case for Syrian fighters who decided to join foreign conflicts.

The material motivation for conflict—greed—is sometimes disaggregated into financing and recruitment. Financing is often linked to the availability of lucrative natural resources that can be seized during conflict, and there is strong evidence linking the outbreak and longetivity of civil wars to the potential for plunder—especially of extractive or geographically constrained resources such as diamonds, petroleum, timber, or plant-based drugs (Collier and Hoeffler, 2000, 2002). The presence of such resources can allow insurgents to obtain an immediate and ongoing

source of financing (Piazza, 2012; Gberie, 2012; Jonsson et al., 2016). Some or all of the financing for civil conflict might derive from other sources, including deploying fighters from civil wars to join foreign conflicts, serving multinational corporations with vested interests. Another component, recruitment, is defined by the local availability of impoverished individuals who see an opportunity, most often young, unemployed or under-employed men facing absolute poverty.

For my interlocutors, gain has various meanings, but broadly refers to survival, which comes as a result of failure in peace negotiations, infighting among opposition armed groups, and lack of resources in northern Syria. According to a fighter who joined the 2nd Corps in 2020, 'gain refers to when I feel that I have no asset and dim prospects for my future…this gain is linked to my feelings of despair' (F14). This statement reflects scholarship on civil wars, an informal cost-benefit analysis in line with rational choice theory, in which individuals attempt to maximise their personal utility. At the heart of this argument is the contention that, 'economic motivations and opportunities are more highly correlated with the onset of conflict than ethnic, socio-economic, or political grievances', or, as De Soya (2002: 398) said, 'there are fewer martyrs than opportunists.' While for my interlocutors, joining foreign conflicts may have been perceived as an opportunity to enhance their financial situation or to flip the script on an economic status quo that had left them increasingly impoverished, this sense of material benefit is clearly overlapped with experiences of grievances—'my feelings of despair' (F15).

In the Syrian context, economic and material motivations were sustained by these armed groups up to 2017, when they were still able to maintain control over significant border crossings. For example, the 2nd Corps' financial strength stemmed from its initial control of the Bab al-Salama border crossing with the Turkish state of Kilis and the internal Hamran crossing

with areas held by the SDF. These key border crossings provided substantial economic and financial leverage to 'recruit more fighters and provide local services such as rebuilding houses and hospitals' (CC5). Moreover, military leaders of these factions enhanced profits with personal investments in Turkey and other regions to augment the group's financial resources (Hassan Hamadeh; MC1; MC2). But these investments primarily served the group's collective interests at a macro level, without substantially benefiting individual fighters. One fighter expressed disillusionment with his direct group commander's disproportionate gains from informal investments, as opposed to his meagre monthly salary (F2). However, personal motivations also played a role: Another fighter cited his direct leader's decision to relocate to Libya as an inspiring factor. Despite acknowledging the military benefits, the fighter's decision to follow his leader's path was driven by 'pragmatic thinking and trust [*thikka*] and faith in my commander's judgement' (F3).

These accounts underscore the complex interplay between economic motivations, leadership dynamics, and personal beliefs among fighters, and such insights highlight the intricate nexus of economic incentives and interpersonal relationships shaping armed conflict dynamics. One fighter said, 'I was working at the Hamran crossing before it was handed to the interim government. I lost all the benefits and extra resources I was getting of every shipment between areas' (F1).

Following the handover of Hamran crossing to the interim government, factions' loss of material gains did not affect their capabilities to maintain dominance over their geographic areas because they were able to effectively utilise a portion of their financial resources and invest in various economic sectors within the areas under their control (CC1; CC2). Interviews with military leaders indicated that in order to ameliorate this economic loss, leaders personally

engaged in foreign investments both in Turkey and in other regions (Hassan Hamadeh; MC1; MC2). However, personal investments benefited the group and not did affect fighters at the micro level. Fighters thus felt that the actions of individual military unit leaders directly affected their motivations to engage in foreign conflicts: 'when I see that my direct group commander is getting all the benefits of these informal investments happening in my area and I was left with only my monthly salary that is less than $100 a month…what can I do?' (F2). However, another fighter, despite emphasising the financial benefits (US$600 monthly), reported that 'since 2013 I moved among many different armed groups following my leader, when he decided to go to Libya, I thought of how much it will benefit me to save my monthly salary, but it was also belief and trust in the decisions of my commander' (F3). Other soldiers echoed these sentiments in other contexts: combat situations create solidarity and emotional bonds among officers and enlisted men.

Fighters also recounted the early phase of fighting under the leadership of the Military Operations Command (MOC) and the Military Operations Room (MOM), a leadership based on cronyism and favouritism. The countries that supported these military operations rooms were inclined to provide direct funding, beyond coordination with other parties, even after the adoption of operations rooms as a unified framework for coordinating support. This allowed military leaders to engage in informal and illicit economies, recruiting fighters to facilitate these activities (F4). One fighter recounted how the end of these operations lessened material rewards, even if they were not directly resourced by these external actors: 'during the MOC and MOM operations, I was able to save money from my leader's economic activities. We were also rewarded from each battle' (F4). Another fighter stated that during the operation for 'freeing

Aleppo from the regime in 2016', he and his comrades 'seized booty and valuable spoils' (F5; F6).

The most recurrent complaint among all these fighters is their inadequate monthly salary. Despite the recent increase in salaries for members of the SNA supported by Turkey, salaries still remained below the necessary threshold to improve the standard of living of this military faction, especially amidst the deterioration of the economic and living conditions in the region as a whole. Many of them have been forced to find extra work in other professions such as plumbing, selling used phones, carpeting, and building in order to meet the needs of their families: 'it is not in our hands but it is the difficult cirumstances…anything comes along to support us…I take it' (F7). Most fighters with low monthly salaries do this (F8-10).

F8, who is married and has five children, now receives a monthly salary of 1600 Turkish liras (US$40), up from the previous 800 Turkish liras, which he collects from the group leader. He pointed out that 'the salaries of my leaders are double of what me and all my fellows receive'. This perception of financial need follows the end of large funds sent by state sponsors to MOM and MOC to fight ISIS: 'we were getting lots of money from selling weapons after we finished fighting Daesh…with the end of the grants [*minah*] from these countries…we needed to look for secondary jobs in addition to our military work in the ranks of the 2nd Corps' (F8). Another stated that ' I tried to work in several professions so as not to rely on anyone. I tried working in construction and agriculture to get help with my monthly expenses. I have four children and responsible for my brother's kids after his death. I need $300 monthly at least' (F9).

This calculative approach was echoed among these fighters because their 'cause,' to fight the Assad regime, has weakened given the current stalemate: 'at a time when extensive battles in Syria had ceased, our decision to go to Libya does not harm the current situation, and had there

been battles in Syria, we would not have left to fight abroad regardless of the financial incentives' (F12). Another fighter added that 'fighting alongside the Turks in Libya is against the same parties we face in Syria, as in Azerbaijan and Libya, Russia stands against Turkey, and against us generally because of its position with the regime that the people have risen against.' (F13). Two other fighters underscored the importance of the bonds between them and their group leaders using the expression 'comrades of the path and weapon' (F14;15).

While the need for money is the primary and most common reason for Syrians to fight abroad, it is important to differentiate between two types of fighters. As one fighter said, 'The first type is the top or second and third-tier leaders, who saw foreign combat operations as an opportunity to build medium to large financial wealth as they deduct from recruited fighters from their group more than 30% of their salaries. Another way is to benefit from illegal activities like drug smuggling to Libya, exploiting price differences between Syria and Libya, and looting operations' (F15). According to this fighter: 'for example, two military leaders of the Sultan Murad Division carried out a massive search operation of a camp called the Yarmouk Camp in Libya, where they stole most of its contents, including electricity cables, which they emoved and sold' (F15).[xi]

However, the second type, the ordinary fighters, wanted to earn money to achieve various goals, mostly of a humanitarian nature. According to a series of interviews, fighters mentioned several goals they wanted to achieve with this money, including marriage: 'I proposed to my beloved girl and her brother is a fighter too but there is tension between our faction and his group so he asked for big dowry that I cannot afford. I am here in Libya to save money to marry her' (F8). Others listed various reasons such as 'supporting their family after displacement' (F9),

‘covering medical expenses for my sick father’ (F12), or ‘securing capital to start a small independent project and leave the National Army’ (F13).

Despair/Grievance

The statistical approaches adopted by Collier and Hoeffler and other greed theorists seek to establish correlations and probabilities, but they have little to say about human experiences of conflict or about organisational processes for de-escalating it. Delving into the personal narratives of these fighters has re-ignited discussions surrounding their perceived grievances and injustices, and the profound losses they endured not only during the decade of war but also over the course of five decades under the Baathist regimes. Their accounts vividly express despair and uncertainty, shedding light on the motivations behind their decision to join foreign conflicts. Indeed, this despair and the erosion of certainty regarding the initial 'revolutionary cause' of fighting solely against Assad emerged as significant motivational factors for their involvement.

Grievance theorists have argued that regardless of whatever other factors may be correlated with civil conflict, the formation of identity groups, the relative openness or rigidity of those groups, and the relative equity among such groups holds the key to influencing peace and conflict outcomes (Gurr, 1970; Huddy, 2003; Klandermans and van Stekelenburg, 2019: 309; Stewart, 2000, 2005). Specifically, fighters reflected on conflict dynamics and recounted how they were manipulated into engaging in conflict with other opposition groups within the SNA factions, often to assert control and dominance for the benefit of their own armed group. Recurrent statements among fighters echo that the ‘infighting among armed groups within SNA is because of the manipulation of Turkey and its favouritism of certain factions against others’ (F8; 10;

13;14). This internal strife led to profound reflections on their sense of autonomy and decision-making: ‘If I was made to fight the Levant Front in October 2022 where many got killed…it got me thinking why I was forced to fight against my fellow Syrians…I lost faith in the cause…I was manipulated…now at least I chose this foreign battleground’ (F1). Fighter 1 (F1) is a displaced Syrian from rural Aleppo who joined armed groups in 2014 and has since navigated through multiple factions across different battlefields. His trajectory reflects the evolving nature of the Syrian conflict, where shifting alliances and external influence shaped fighters’ decisions and mobility. Initially, F1 fought in Syria’s internal battles, engaging in intra-opposition conflicts as groups vied for dominance under the pressure of Turkish control. Over time, however, disillusionment set in as he was forced to fight against fellow Syrians, leading to a profound reckoning with his role in the war.

As he described, "If I was made to fight the Levant Front in October 2022 where many got killed… it got me thinking why I was forced to fight against my fellow Syrians… I lost faith in the cause… I was manipulated… now at least I chose this foreign battleground" (F1). This quote underscores a shift in agency—where F1 perceives foreign conflicts as a space where he exerts more control over his participation, rather than being caught in factional rivalries beyond his decision-making. F1’s journey from fighting in Syria to taking part in foreign conflicts in Libya and Africa reflects the broader dynamics of war economies, external recruitment strategies, and the fluid nature of militarized identities. His experience demonstrates how fighters navigate between ideological, economic, and coercive pressures, often seeking what they perceive as greater autonomy by engaging in external conflicts rather than remaining in fragmented, manipulated internal struggles. Thus, the broader dynamics of the conflict and its

impact on Syrian society have fueled intergroup tensions, violence, and polarization, contributing to the perpetuation of war both within and beyond Syria's borders.

While keeping in mind what Sinisa Malesvic (2018: 11–13) called the 'slippery nature' of violence, which often emerges from a complex stew of economic, ethnic, sectarian, and interpersonal factors, Anastasia Shesterinina argues that civil wars are 'social processes' that intricately connected with complex identity-related trajectories. According to Shesterinina, these conflicts cannot be understood without considering the power dynamics that existed from pre-war to post-war phases. They encompass negotiated interactions among various actors, including non-state, civil, and external actors (Shesterinina 2022: 540). The trajectories of civil wars, shaped by both external and internal dynamics become deeply entwined with the identity formations that emerge as a result of the war. Central to this inquiry is the overarching question, What motivates Syrian fighters to engage in foreign conflicts?

For grievance theorists, rivalry and perceptions of injustice between various social identity groups are regarded as a central factor in the onset and especially the continuation of violent conflict. Keen wrote in extensive detail about how a protracted conflict can allow faction leaders to consolidate profits through extorting 'protection' money, controlling or monopolising trade, exploiting labour, stealing aid supplies, and justifying martial privilege (Keen 2012); however, to maintain a protracted conflict, however, he also argued that leaders need to enflame grievances that will continue to motivate fighters even when material benefits at the individual level fail to materialise. Keen focused on the example of Slobodan Milošević in Serbia, who plunged the country into more than a decade of ethnic cleansing wars, and he suggested that the

resulting international sanctions that devastated the country's overall economy only served to increase Milošević's control of resources.

The Syrian conflict has often been described as a clash of identities between minority Alwaites and majority Sunnis (Balanche, 2018: xi; Lesch, 2012: 101). Today there is a significant trend in policy reports and academic scholarship toward describing Syrians through the lens of these sectarian and ethnic categories. The emphasis on identity conflicts is strengthened by the fact that throughout the many decades of Baathist rule, Syrians have been prohibited from any public claim to sectarian political identities (Aldoughli 2022). The outbreak of the war fragmented this tenuous national identity, and many Syrians have been cast adrift when it comes to forging new perceptions of who they are as individuals, or in seeking to explore long-submerged identity affiliations. This reconstruction of identity during times of displacement failed in creating a sense of solidarity: 'I don't feel I belong to anywhere…I lost faith in my armed group…My family does not approve of my armed group's violations against civilians…I promised them that after my service in Libya…I will save money to have better future' (F8). Another fighter stated: 'we have uncertain future unlike when the revolution started in 2011…we were full of hope and determined to topple the regime..now, all countries are against us and don't care about us…and we are left with no resources to save our future and provide for our families' (F).

These narratives correlate with grievance theory: regardless of whatever other factors may be correlated with civil conflict, the formation of identity groups, the relative openness or rigidity of those groups, and the relative equity among such groups holds the key to influencing peace and conflict (Gurr 1970; Huddy 2013). Sanín and Wood have pointed out that without the felt affiliation and organising principle of group identity, the collective action necessary for

factions to undertake a war would not be feasible. In an empirical sense, it is incontrovertible that military factions participating in conflicts—whether state-led or insurrectionist—rely heavily on identity concepts and in-group formations to maintain participants' motivation and loyalty. Measuring identity-based grievance demonstrates its links to violent behaviour, where concepts such as identity, tradition, ethnicity, belief, and discrimination are difficult to quantify or measure (Dyrstad and Hillesund 2020; Regan and Norton 2005). Murshed and Tadjoeddin further divided grievances into the components of relative deprivation, horizontal inequality, discussed in this article, and polarization (Murshed and Tadjoeddin 2011: 91).

The above components of grievance reflect group belief structures and psychology as much as material conditions. The identities around which a sense of relative deprivation consolidates can vary greatly, including differences between ethnic communities, regional geographic communities, language communities, social caste, profession-based communities, and religious communities. Regan and Norton (2005) found that feelings of relative deprivation emerged as much from perceived social discrimination as from material conditions, and that they were heightened when state authorities were seen as disregarding or disparaging the group's identity.

Gurr emerges as a seminal figure advocating for the grievance perspective, emphasising identity-based discrimination and animosity as catalysts for violent conflict (1970). Stewart's concept of 'horizontal inequality' further elucidates the underlying dynamics, showing how people of similar abilities experience divergent outcomes due to cultural discrimination, thus fuelling deep-seated grievances and civil conflicts (Stewart 2010). Importantly, any comprehensive analysis of the Syrian conflict must acknowledge the enduring legacy of five

decades of entrenched Baathist authoritarianism, which inflicted both material and psychological violence upon Syrians long before the outbreak of armed conflict. Expressions of injustice were reflected in fighters' narratives. One fighter recounted how 'during the battles against the regime in 2016' he had to move to Izaz, where he joined another armed group that was controlling the new area: 'I lost my house, and more than 20 members of my family were killed in air raids…I felt angry…I joined the 2nd Corps because it was known for its commitment to paying monthly salaries' (F4). This testimony highlights how grievances alone do not account for mobilization; rather, they intersect with structural and material conditions. The psychological impact of loss and displacement generates an emotional pull toward continued fighting, but financial security and factional affiliation play an equally critical role in determining pathways of mobilization.

The case of F4 suggests that fighters navigate multiple layers of decision-making, where past trauma, economic survival, and shifting battlefield dynamics inform their choices. While grievance-driven narratives may sustain an initial motivation, long-term engagement often requires material incentives and institutional structures that provide fighters with stability and purpose. This complexity underscores the need to move beyond a binary reading of motivations as either grievance- or greed-based and instead recognize how these factors coalesce in shaping armed group participation.

This sentiment of anger and despair was also recounted regarding the current division of Syria into four controlled areas. One fighter stated that 'fighting against ISIS, SDF and the regime came with no good outcome for what I wished for in 2011…what is the difference between fighting a lost cause like the one we had in Syria and the one we don't relate to in Libya…it is all the same for me now' (F6). This example marks a shift from grievance to a kind

of resigned pragmatism that could be interpreted as greed—not necessarily as acquisitive greed but as a survival strategy. The fighter acknowledges the fruitlessness of past conflicts and the lack of difference in fighting for causes in Syria versus Libya, suggesting a motivation that is more transactional than ideological. This pragmatic turn to fighting for monetary gain or security in the form of regular income—F6 is interested in the 2nd Corps' commitment to paying monthly salaries'—reflects how individuals can transition from being motivated by grievances to making strategic choices based on self-interest when the initial ideological or emotional impetus of the conflict wanes. Thus, the fighters' narratives illuminate the nuanced spectrum between grievance and greed: While grievance might spark initial engagement in conflict, as the struggle drags on and ideological goals become blurred or unreachable, the mundane necessities of life and the allure of financial stability can become more pronounced. Motivations are thus not static and can evolve in response to changing circumstances within a conflict zone, further suggesting that greed and grievance are deeply interlinked, that their proportions may vary among different actors, and that civil conflict cannot be fully understood without considering both factors.

The sense of despair and uncertainty is, however, further complicated by perceptions of class rivalry and social marginalisation among various social identity groups. The war in Syria has fundamentally altered class structures, effectively eliminating much of the middle class and transforming socio-economic hierarchies across different regions. For instance, **F7**, originally an Arab from Al-Rai—a town with a mixed population of Arabs and Turkmen—experienced this transformation firsthand. Prior to the war, his family owned significant commercial assets, granting them a stable economic status. However, following years of displacement and conflict, his family lost both its wealth and social standing.

This sense of loss was compounded by the rise of new elites, particularly Turkmen fighters who, with Turkey's backing, rose to prominent leadership positions within the Syrian National Army's (SNA) Second Corps. While Turkmen communities in pre-war Syria had limited political influence, their close ties with Turkey after 2016 enabled them to secure privileged positions within the opposition's military hierarchy. F7, who had never previously experienced discrimination based on his Arab identity, now found himself in an altered landscape where ethnic favoritism shaped access to power, promotions, and salaries. As he explained:

> My family used to own half of the markets in central Homs… after our displacement, we lost everything… It feels anguishing to see new warlords and many others gaining benefits… while my family and I have lost everything. Yes, we were fighting to end oppression, but with the current loss of hope for any political change… at least perhaps going to Africa might reverse this current situation of material loss. We suffered because we fought the regime, were displaced, and suffered from losing everything (F7).

In this context, relative deprivation manifests as the discrepancy between what a group of people believe they deserve within society and the conditions they actually experience (Gurr 1970). This was particularly relevant for fighters in the Second Corps, who compared their meager salaries with those of their central commanders. While economic deprivation often correlates with real financial hardship, relative deprivation is also shaped by group psychology and shifting power structures—individuals may feel excluded even when their objective conditions have not worsened (Regan and Norton 2005).

F12, a fighter who had served in multiple factions before joining the Second Corps, echoed similar grievances. Coming from a Turkmen background, he initially benefitted from Turkey's favoritism, but over time, he began to see how promotions and salaries were distributed based on personal connections rather than merit. As he explained:

> Why do some fighters get promoted? Because they are close to the central leader and come from his region. And sometimes, because they are Turkmen. They get higher salaries… Fighting in Libya has given me status after all (F12).

This observation reinforces how ethnic dynamics shaped the Second Corps' internal power struggles, favoring certain groups over others. F12's experience suggests that fighters sought alternative battlefields not only for financial incentives but also to reclaim lost status and agency in a rapidly shifting military landscape.

In the interviews, feelings of relative deprivation emerged as much from perceived social discrimination as from material conditions, and they were heightened when cronyism and favouritism were paramount. Three fighters confirmed that their groups' military leaders favoured those from the same geographical area or even ethnicity: 'yes, there is favouritism to those who are Turkmani because the central commander is Turkmani' (F8), 'or if the leader from rural Aleppo, the leader then favours those who are from his region'(F9), and 'I was not promoted because I am not from the same area as my group leader' (F10).

Another aspect of grievance stems from horizontal inequality, which refers to measurable discrepancies between identity groups. This is evidenced in the perceived inequality and relative

deprivation felt among the fighters. Four fighters that are ethnically Arab pointed out that the leadership of the 2nd Corps belongs to the Turkmani ethnicity, whereas only 10% of the fighters are Turkmanis. Yet 'Turkmanis are favoured and get higher salaries and material benefits from the informal investments with the central commanders…isn't enough what we experienced from the regime's sectarian strategy…we are witnessing the same thing now…' (F6; echoed by F2; F3; and F5). Expressions of identity and belonging were highlighted among these fighters, who emphasised that the Arab-Turkmani rivalry has surged after Turkey's involvement in strengthening the Turkmani leadership. A Syrian military expert stated that 'the strategy of Turkish government is to favour Turkmans because they are closer ethnically to them as the Arab-Turkish rivalry goes back to the Arab revolt of Sharif Hussein against the Ottoman Empire' (E2). This concept, derived from Gurr's work on relative deprivation, is useful for distinguishing the objective factors of horizontal inequality from the psychological or ideological phenomenon of relative deprivation (1970; Murshed and Tadjoeddin 2009).

Horizontal inequalities also occur over numerous dimensions, including economic (income, land ownership, employment), social (access to healthcare, education, influence in institutions), and cultural (freedom of religious practice, language, dress) (Steward 2013). These varying dimensions of horizontal inequality can reinforce each other; for example, economic inequalities can create inequalities in access to social institutions, which in turn perpetuate the economic stratification. Fighters observed that high positions in civil institutions such as in the al-Rai area were reserved for ethnic Turkmans: 'there are many economic investments happening now in al-Rai because they want to empower Turkmans as it is their area' (F3).

Researchers have found a weak relationship between civil war and the overall (or 'vertical') level of financial inequality (Tydas et al 2011; Fearin and Laitin 2003), but robust

studies show that horizontal inequality between identity groups is strongly associated with violent behaviour (Stewart 2008). This situation is reflected in fighters' narratives, where inequality in general led to anger and frustration. Such conditions are much more likely to progress into violent conflict when marginalised individuals are consolidated under a group identity that also experiences social and cultural discrimination.

Conclusion

This article has sought to move beyond reductionist interpretations of Syrian fighters' participation in foreign conflicts by situating their agency within the broader political, social, and economic transformations resulting from the Syrian war. Rather than viewing these fighters solely as passive subjects of coercion or financial opportunism, the findings illustrate how their decisions are embedded in a landscape of shifting alliances, personal grievances, and strategic calculations shaped by years of displacement and conflict.

One of the central contributions of this study lies in its engagement with the voices of Syrian fighters themselves, highlighting how their perceptions of loss, injustice, and shifting power structures influenced their trajectories. The war's dismantling of previous class hierarchies and the restructuring of power within the Syrian National Army (SNA) factions, particularly under Turkish patronage, played a significant role in shaping recruitment patterns. Fighters like F7, who once belonged to the merchant elite, experienced profound status loss that drove their engagement in armed action—not merely as an economic necessity but as a response to changing social orders. Similarly, F12's narrative underscores how ethnic favoritism within the 2nd Corps

reinforced perceptions of exclusion and relative deprivation, further motivating participation in foreign conflicts.

By foregrounding these narratives, this article moves away from rigid classifications that tie agency exclusively to financial precarity or ideological indoctrination. Instead, it underscores the relational and intersectional nature of fighters' decision-making, where emotions, identity transformations, and political calculations are deeply interwoven. While economic incentives remain a factor, they cannot be disentangled from the broader security dilemmas, grievances, and strategic choices that Syrian fighters navigate.

This study also contributes to discussions on the role of agency in armed mobilization, cautioning against overly deterministic frameworks that equate agency with violence. As fighters negotiate their place within a fragmented and externally influenced military landscape, their choices reflect a spectrum of motivations beyond simple survival or economic gain. Recognizing this complexity is crucial for moving beyond security-driven narratives that overlook the deeply personal and structural factors shaping combatant mobilization.

Future research should continue to explore the evolving dynamics of the post-Assad military order and the long-term implications of fighters' involvement in transnational conflicts. As Syria transitions into a new political reality, understanding how these fighters reintegrate—or continue to engage in military networks—will be essential for assessing the region's stability and the legacy of foreign fighter mobilization. This study thus calls for a more nuanced and empirically grounded approach to understanding contemporary armed mobilization, one that prioritizes the perspectives of those directly involved rather than imposing externally constructed frameworks onto their experiences.

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2. Author interview with Security Commander (anonymized Q2) affiliated with 2 Corp, 6 February 2023, Gaziantep, Turkey.
3. Author interview with Security Commander (anonymized Q3) affiliated with 2 Corp, 9 February 2023, Gaziantep, Turkey.

4. Author interview with Central Military Commander (anonymized CC1) in SNA, 29 March, Gaziantep, Turkey.
5. Author interview with Central Military Commander (anonymized CC2) affiliated with Third Corp, 25 March, Gaziantep, Turkey.

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7. Author interview with Hasan Hamadeh, Minister of Defense affiliated with Syrian Interim Government, 2 September 2023, Gaziantep, Turkey.
8. Online interview with fighter affiliated with Sulieman Shah in Libya (anonymized as F1), 18 March 2024.
9. Online interview with fighter affiliated with Sulieman Shah in Libya (anonymized as F2), 19 March 2024.
10. Online interview with fighter affiliated with Sulieman Shah in Libya (anonymized as F3), 18 March 2024.
11. Online interview with fighter affiliated with Sulieman Shah in Libya (anonymized as F4), 26 March 2024.
12. Online interview with fighter affiliated with Sulieman Shah in Libya (anonymized as F5), 29 March 2024.
13. Online interview with fighter affiliated with Hamzah Division in Libya (anonymized as F6), 1 April 2024.
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16. Online interview with fighter affiliated with Hamzah Division in Libya (anonymized as F9), 8 April 2024.

17. Online interview with fighter affiliated with Sultan Murad in Niger (anonymized as F10), 9 April 2024.
18. Online interview with fighter affiliated with Sultan Murad in Niger (anonymized as F11), 9 April 2024.
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20. Online interview with fighter affiliated with Sultan Murad in Niger (anonymized as F13), 12 April 2024.
21. Online interview with fighter affiliated with Sultan Murad in Niger (anonymized as F14), 5 April 2024.
22. Online interview with fighter affiliated with Sultan Murad in Niger (anonymized as F15), 9 April 2024.
23. Author interview with a broker linked to the Sultan Murad Division, dated 3/4/2024.
24. Interview with a broker linked to the Sulieman Shah, 4 April 2024.
25. Interview with a fighter's financial representative in Niger, 1 April 2024.
26. Seven interviews with Commanders in Chief affiliated with the 2 Corp. Syria/Turkey borders.

[i] The transliteration of these quotes preserved the actual dialect of the fighter. The transliteration stands for a Syrian dialect from north-west Syria.

[ii] Regarding fighters' entry into armed conflict, six of them joined in 2012, three in 2014, and the rest in 2017. As for their social background, two fighters from rural Damascus, six from rural Aleppo, one from rural Hama, and six from Idlib.
[iii] Author interviews with Abu Bakr and Fahim Issa in August 2023. Both are Turkmani central commander and the later has been appointed as the deputy minister of defense in May 2025.
[iv] Contracts are signed first between the fighter and an interim representative from the armed group who then facilitates the process in accordance with the central commander of the group and the Turkish intellegince.
[v]The financial dues are either delivered to the agent of the fighter in Syria, who is authorized through a recorded video in which the fighter provides full details of the person being authorized. The financial amount is then transferred to them via one of the money transfer offices located in the areas controlled by the opposition. Alternatively, the fighter can receive their dues personally as was done in Libya through Libyan money transfer offices authorized by the factions and the Libyan delegate in the camp, where representatives from these offices come to the camp gate and deliver the dues to the fighters.
[vi] Interview with a broker linked to the Sultan Murad Division, dated 3/4/2024.

[vii] Al-Majd Corps is the only faction that delivers the fighters' full financial dues without any deduction, while the rest of the factions deduct a portion of the dues for the benefit of the faction's leadership and the commanders of the brigades and battalions, with the deducted amount varying from one faction to another.
[viii] Interview with broker from Sulieman Shah faction.
[ix] Interview with a fighter's financial representative in Niger.
[x] Interview with a broker from Sultan Murad faction.

[xi] According to the testimony of one of the fighters, the leaders of the Sultan Murad Division carried out a large-scale looting operation at a camp called Yarmouk Camp in Libya, where they stole most of its contents including electrical cables, which they removed and sold.