

Chapter 1

Labor Supply

In modern civil war, armed groups are competing for the most valuable asset: human resources. Therefore, first it is important to understand the labor market for regular rebel fighters (those not on the leadership level)—when and why individual fighters decide to take up arms (enter the market), and when and why they quit and leave (exit the market). And second, with the highly fragmented insurgencies often present in contemporary warfare, it is even more important to know how matching between groups and individual fighters happens. Whether to join an armed rebellion is not the only decision a prospective fighter has to make. He also has to decide which particular group to join; with many groups to choose from, this decision could be even harder than the first one. In the previous generation's single-rebellion-group civil wars, if a fighter was not satisfied with the group he was fighting with, his only choice was to leave the group and return to civilian life. In contemporary insurgencies, if a fighter is not satisfied with his group, he can simply switch groups. This option still leaves the fighter “in the market”, but he is faced with the tough problem of evaluating different groups and choosing which group to switch to. This is a problem that rebels in previous generation civil wars did not face. Such a set-up makes the current rebel industry much more dynamic and harder to understand and control.

Contrary to a commonly-held perception, the labor market for fighters in civil wars has similarities to that of civilian industry in the match-ups between “employees” and “firms.” In traditional industries, the market is represented by firms with specific purposes and missions, which hire employees in order to achieve those goals. In order to be the most competitive and successful in its industry, a firm needs to have the best people, in the right places, at the right time. It

continually works hard to attract the best possible employees in a very competitive job market; to make these employees the most useful and highly skilled; and to prevent them from leaving to work for direct competitors. Individuals — potential employees — first self-select into a particular industry and later match with a specific firm.

Take the engineering industry, for example. First, a person decides to become an engineer, and then he/she goes to school and chooses a type of engineering major. After graduation he/she applies for jobs with engineering companies and decides what company to work for, evaluating offers based on which company will help them reach their goals and provides better working environment (competitive salary and benefits including health insurance, a good team, effective leadership, etc.). At any time he/she could decide that this is not the right job anymore and exit the market by switching to another industry¹. The civil war labor market for fighters follows the same principles.

When a civil war starts, an individual decides what he is going to do: leave as a refugee, stay as a civilian, or become a fighter. He becomes a fighter if he has a goal that can be fulfilled only by fighting. He then needs to find a group to fight with. Although individual will is crucial, it alone is not enough; a person should have the ability to realize his goal and to carry out his mission. A single fighter could not take control of an enemy checkpoint; he will be stopped in the very first seconds of the “operation.”² Each individual fighter needs funding and a team of people with similar goals that he can rely on. This is something that an institution, in this case an armed group, helps him with. And then if he thinks that he does not want to fight anymore he demobilizes.

Each step in this individual fighters’ decision-making process should be studied separately. In this chapter I study different decisions that civilians and fighters face in civil war environment step by step in the same order as they face them. In

¹ If the person still enjoys working in the area, but there is simply no company that matches their goals or provides the desired working environment, they could start a new business.

² Of course a person could decide to conduct lone-wolf attacks but in that case it is not a civil war and cannot reach same goals as a full-scale insurgency.

particular I look at relative importance of previously identified factors like selective incentives, social sanctioning, social identity, risk tolerance, social networks and grievance in individual decision on each of those steps.

First, trying to understand the pool of potential fighters in the conflict zone, I look at why some people leave the war zone as refugees while others chose to stay. Previous large-N studies (Davenport, Moore, and Poe 2003; Edwards 2009; Melander and Oberg 2006, 2007; Moore and Shellman 2004, 2006, 2007) looked on why some conflicts experience major refugee outflows while others do not, and show that violence, economic opportunities and personal networks play role in people's reasons to leave, however little is known about decision to flee versus to stay on an individual level. Although Adhikari (2013) shed the first light on the importance of violence and threat, economic wealth, and opportunity for flight for the individual decision to leave, the opposite - who chooses to stay - is still not clear.

Next, I examine why some people among those who stayed take up weapons and become fighters, while others prefer to remain civilians and not take an active part in combat. The growing body of literature on rebel recruitment shows that rebellions have three principal ways to recruit soldiers: forced recruitment (Beber and Blattman, n.d.; Humphreys and Weinstein, 2008a); offering material incentives immediately or promising such benefits in the future (Olson, 1965); or appealing to the fighters' sense of grievance (Humphreys and Weinstein 2008). It has also been shown that relative deprivation (Gurr 1970), in-group ties and bonds (Horowitz 2000), and out-group aversions (Peterson 2001, 2002), the desire for improved ones social status (Abrahms 2008), the relative danger of remaining a civilian (Kalyvas and Kocher 2007), social networks (Peterson 2001; Staniland 2014), and even simple boredom (Young 1997; Nussio and Ugarriza 2013) drive people to mobilize for violence. Here I offer a test of those hypotheses close to the time of individual decision-making, to try to uncover the motives that could have been understudied in previous retrospective research.

In the new era of increasingly fragmented rebellions, the decision-making of prospective fighter is more complicated than just mobilizing for violence. The reasons for taking up arms are not the same as the ones for joining a particular group, and the decision to participate in a conflict should also be divided into two separate decisions: 1. to continue fighting or leave, then, 2. if to continue fighting, to stay with a particular group or not. Thus, after looking at mobilization I analyze the next decision a fighter is faced with – choosing a particular group to fight with and if (and when) to switch between groups.

Scholars of previous generation wars (conflicts with a monopoly on rebellion) looked at how fighters were choosing a side to fight with (Arjona and Kalyvas 2011, Ugarriza and Craig 2013) and why some fighters were switching sides - defecting to the (formally) opposing group (Kalyvas and Kocher 2007, Kaldor 1999; Collier et al. 2003; Mueller 2000, Oppenheim et al 2005). In the current highly-fractionalized conflicts the situation is different - choosing a group to fight with is separate from choosing sides, and changing groups does not mean defecting to the enemy. Because such a competitive market for armed groups is a relatively new phenomenon in civil wars, there is little literature in political science on how individuals choose particular groups in the same rebel block to fight with, so I base my theory on the general economic literature of labor market in civilian industries.

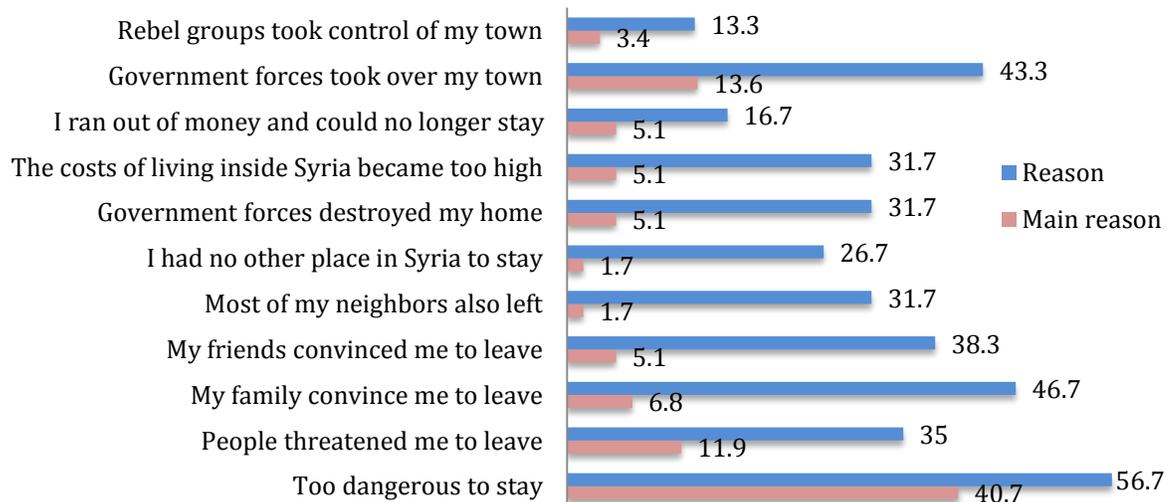
Finally I look at people who quit - the rebel fighters' labor market, analyzing when and why fighters decide to stop an armed struggle and return to civilian life. The majority of previous literature on this topic is looking at demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants (Humphreys and Weinstein 2007, Gilligan et al 2010) and is mostly concentrated on how demobilized ex-fighters integrate back into civilian society, while little research has been done on their self selection - why some fighters demobilized while others did not. Oppenheim et al (2015) shed some light on this topic, showing the difference in motivation for quitting between ideological fighters and people who joined for economic reasons. I extend this research looking at all possible motives that play a role in individuals' decision to quit and that could potentially bring an ex-fighter back to the armed struggle.

Should I stay or should I go?

The first question to answer in an attempt to understand the labor market of rebel fighters is what is the pool of potential recruits and supporters groups could draw from? Furthermore, because people who join are most likely ones who stay in the conflict zone and did not flee as refugees in the first place, the questions could be rephrased into who chooses to stay on the front line after the outbreak of violence, and why?

In Syria, people were confronted by the dilemma to leave as refugees or to stay as civilians or to join an armed rebellion in spring of 2011, after the first clashes between peaceful protesters and regime forces. This is when people first started leaving the country as refugees.³

Self-Reported Reasons for Leaving Syria Q: Why did you decide to leave Syria?



Similar to what was observed in other conflicts (Adhikari 2013), refugees were applying cost-benefit analysis and either did not have a desire to fight for any non-material goal such as democracy or, even if they had such a desire, it was low enough that their safety, family, and possible employment opportunities outside

³ In the first year of the war alone as many as 200,000 Syrians left the country.
<http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012/09/04/uk-syria-europe-refugees-idUKBRE8820NP20120904>

outweighed it. Almost a quarter of surveyed refugees said that they do not agree with the goals of the fighters. A majority of surveyed refugees who left Syria for Turkey say they left either because it was simply too dangerous to stay (41 percent) or because their towns/homes fell under enemy control (18 percent). Social pressure also appears to have played a role in their decision. Some say they were threatened/warned by others to leave (12 percent of civilians), or that their friends and family pressured them to leave (12 percent of refugees). As one refugee explained: “Although my sons were fighting, and I supported the goals of the revolution, I had to leave for the sake of my daughters. Schools were closed, but I did not want them to stop their education. Because I am a schoolteacher myself, very soon we ran out of money, so we had to leave Syria. There was no option for a normal life inside Syria anymore—staying on the regime's side was dangerous because the government was questioning me about my sons, and moving to the FSA territory was even more dangerous because of constant shelling from the government.” This supports previous the observations in the literature that economic reasoning, risk aversion and social pressure play a major role in individuals’ decision to flee in conflict situations.

This decision to leave the active war zone seems absolutely understandable, and many people would do the same, so it is more puzzling why, if it was so dangerous, did some people stay on the frontline? By making this decision they not only exposed themselves, but also their family and children, to the risk of a serious injury and death.

In the survey of civilians who preferred to stay in Syria despite the increasing danger, many say they are there to assist rebel forces in the fight (63 percent), but the majority also claimed to have no other options (66 percent). For example, they did not have family and friends (48 percent) or money (42 percent) to travel to a safer location. Some (35 percent) also thought that traveling may be more dangerous than staying in place. About half also claimed they were staying to protect their homes (59 percent) and other family members (51 percent).

Reasons Given for Staying in Syria (Civilians in Syria only)

<i>To what extent do you agree with the following statements?</i>	% agree	N
I have no other option but to stay here	66.3	80
I would go somewhere safer if I had family, friends to help me	47.6	84
I would go somewhere safer if I had money to do so	42.2	83
I would go somewhere safer if travel were less dangerous	34.9	76
I am staying to protect my family	51.3	80
I am staying to protect my home/property	59.0	83
I am staying to fight	56.5	85
I am staying to help those who are fighting	62.4	85

These insights show that, in addition to the absence of opportunity to leave (economic limitations, lack of necessary social networks and danger associated with such travel), ideology and non-material goals played an important role in people's decision to stay despite deteriorating security and humanitarian situation. Such initial self-selection benefits future mobilization efforts and makes armed group recruitment easier because a choice to stay already signals individuals' non-indifference towards goals of the war.

Mobilization

Soon after Assad army started targeting peaceful protesters, the first militarized units, which later became the FSA, started to organize. When the creation of FSA was formally announced in Syria in July 2011, FSA consisted of defectors from the regime's army—rank-and-file soldiers and mid-ranking officers who deserted the army after refusing to take part in the crackdown on anti-government protests—and local militias. After the Syrian regime's army was sent to Daraa province to quell ongoing protests, some units refused to fire on protesters, split from the army, and defected.

In addition, mobilization on the micro level was increasing among civilians. A growing number of people who had previously participated in peaceful protests, usually also in the areas of regime army attacks and violent suppression of such protests, were mobilizing for armed resistance. Activists who met each other and built trust during peaceful demonstrations also started recruiting for the FSA among people who remained in Syria. In neighborhoods that were still under regime

control (with no freedom of movement), people who wanted to join were contacting activists and coordinating activities online. In areas with no regime presence, activists were recruiting openly in the streets, shouting with megaphones slogans like, “You should come and protect your city from the government, because they will come and kill your children. Join the fight!”⁴ and singing the main revolution song “Ya Heif,” with the following lyrics: “Young people heard that freedom was at the gates, they went to call out for it. They saw the guns; they said these are their brothers, they wouldn’t shoot. But they did shoot...with real bullets. We are dead... On our brothers’ hands and in the name of national security.”

Thousands of similar small brigades were formed, mostly consisting of people who knew each other, with the main goals of protecting their neighborhoods and keeping non-violent protesters safe. Groups were mostly organized by neighborhoods, or in areas that were attacked by government forces. In DeirEzzor, for example, a brigade named “Mohamed” was first organized in the Al Jubely neighborhood, through which all protests were passing; this neighborhood was therefore crucially important for the regime and urgently needed protection. Initially that protection came in the form of a group of 5–15 people armed with pistols. They were tight-knit: they had grown up in the same neighborhood and had participated in peaceful demonstrations together. Soon, other neighborhoods, especially those located on the route where protesters passed, started organizing their own similar small units. They set up checkpoints and did not allow the regime’s military vehicles to enter the town in order to conduct arrests and killings. The brigades coordinated their actions with other groups by phone.⁵ The last group of brigades (mostly in villages) finished mobilizing after the fighting had already started and the regime began committing large-scale crimes. The Shohadaa Al-

⁴Example of a slogan from Hama

⁵ In order to avoid government surveillance they used documents of killed regime fighters to buy phone sim cards.

Jourah (Al-Jourah’s martyrs) brigade, for example, was formed as a response to the massacre committed by the regime in the Al-Jourah neighborhood.⁶

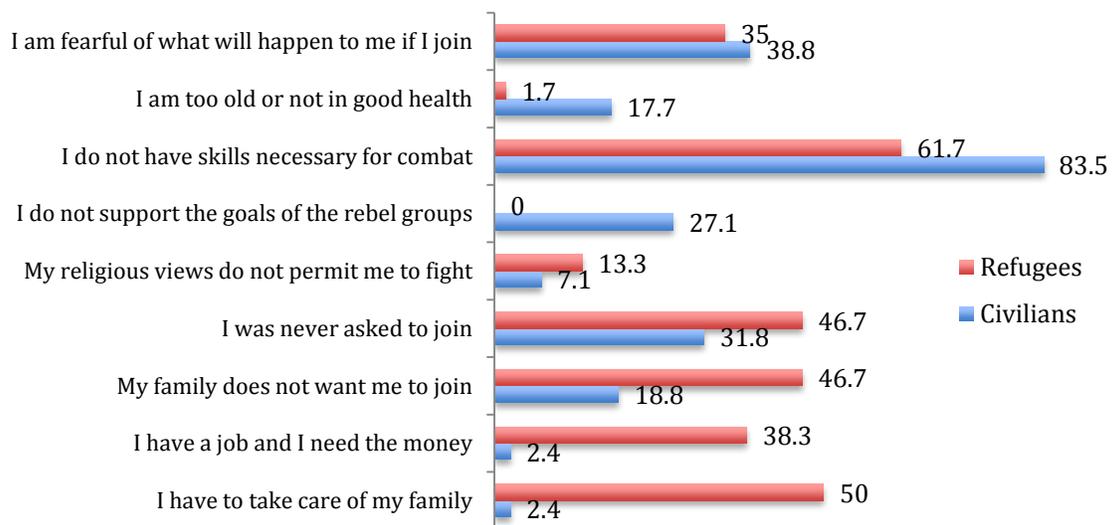
Whom did activists successfully recruit, and whom were they not able to mobilize despite their best efforts?

Even though some surveyed civilians wanted to help the fight for the revolution’s goals, they were not willing to take the risk of becoming active combatants, and instead chose to stay as civilians and not carry a weapon.

Reasons for Not Joining Rebel Groups (Civilians, Refugees Only)

Explaining Decision NOT to join rebel groups (Civilians inside Syria vs. Refugees Abroad)

Q: If you have never fought with any group, why you did not join ?



Most civilians explain that they did not join because they did not have the skills necessary for combat (83.5 percent). This answer is not “an answer of convenience”; some people rationally decide that by continuing to do the civilian job they did before the war, they will be more helpful to the cause. A baker, for example, may assume that instead of taking up weapons and becoming an inexperienced soldier,

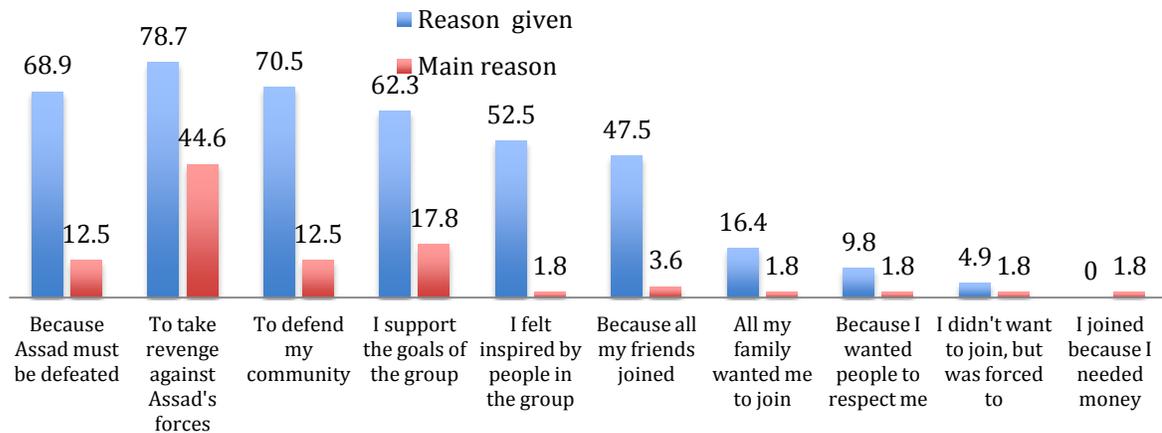
⁶ Also, in addition to the geographic brigades, there were a small number of narrow specialized brigades like Almohajereen Ila Allah brigade that started as a group of assassins working in the regime controlled areas, but those brigades were minor and occupied a small niche.

he could be more useful by continuing to bake bread for fighters because someone would have to do that job anyway. Some civilians indicated that they did not join for age- and health-related reasons (18 percent). Other civilians say they simply were never asked by any group to join (32 percent). A sizable minority fears what will happen to them if they join (39 percent), and some face family pressure not to join (19 percent). Only a minority of civilians refuse to join because they do not support the goals of the rebel groups (27 percent).

This is in comparison to refugees, most of whom do not join the fighting because of pure rational-choice calculations. They reasoned that the danger they would be exposing themselves to is not worth the reward they would receive for it. Civilians did not apply this type of logic, but instead were just looking for other ways to help the fighting. Compared to 22 percent of refugees who said that their main reason for not joining was because they needed to take care of the family, and 10 percent who could not join because they had jobs, 0 percent of civilians named those reasons. Apart from not having the necessary skills to fight, 19 percent of civilians said that they did not join because they did not support the goals of the group (compared to 0 percent of refugees), and 12 percent said that they were simply afraid of what would happen.

On the other hand, despite the obvious risks and absence of prior civil war experience of majority of the Syrian population, people started picking up weapons and joining armed resistance in increasing numbers. So what differentiated combatants from non-combatants in the beginning of the Syrian civil war?

Reasons Given for Joining Rebel Groups (FSA)
Q: If you are currently fighting or have fought with the FSA, why did you join? (select all that apply, % selecting each option)



Although in general surveyed FSA fighters offered a range of reasons for joining, their main reason was emotional in nature, based on grievance. They joined to take revenge against the Assad regime (78.7 percent), “because Assad must be defeated” (68.9 percent), and to defend the community (70.5 percent). Other reasons, such as community and peer pressure (“because all my friends joined” or “my family wanted me to join”) were only minor. And although, in general, 52.5 percent of fighters mentioned that one of the reasons for their decision to join was that “they felt inspired by the people in the group,” this is far from being their main reason for joining; only 1.8 percent mentioned it as such. When asked about the main reason for joining, “to take revenge against Assad’s forces” was almost two times more important than the second most popular reason. Even if fighters thought about other reasons when joining, they were clearly taking up weapons to fight for a very abstract goal of revenge and were less concerned about everything else.

Even members of Islamist groups joined the war for similar reasons: to take revenge against the Assad regime (79.6 percent), “because Assad must be defeated” (90 percent), and to defend the community (90 percent). Although they also claimed to want to build an Islamic State (71 percent), to gain combat training and experience (71 percent), and to have joined in response to a religious instruction or

fatwa (63 percent), it is not clear whether these were honest responses or these fighters were just saying what was expected from people with similar affiliations. Due to concern that members of those groups might feel pressure to misrepresent their intentions, in the survey they were also asked to consider the motives of others in their groups for joining. When asked about these “abstract” others, many fighters agreed that the most popular reasons for joining were far from religiously motivated and were same as those of the moderate fighters: to defeat the Assad regime (99 percent), to take revenge against Assad’s forces (90 percent), and to defend their communities (98 percent).

In addition, to clarify this important question even further and to understand how those fighters’ goals correlated with those of their openly Islamist brigades, they were asked to clarify the main goal of the group they were fighting with. Again, the most popular answer was not religious. Members of one Islamist groups said that the main goals of their group were “to defeat Assad and every group that is supporting him,” to “protect Muslims from criminals from Iran and Hezbollah,” to “liberate Syria,” to “stop killings, rapes, and free people from Assad’s jails,” and “to protect civilians.” One of the members of an Islamist group even went into a more detailed explanation, saying, “If we are talking about now, the main and only goal of everyone is to defeat Assad. But after that we will have to decide what we want our country to be.” Essentially, therefore, on the question of why they took up arms, both members of Islamist and moderate groups had the same opinion: they joined and were fighting to defeat Assad and to take revenge against him.⁷

These answers show the importance of grievance in fighters’ initial decision to mobilize for violence. It is an important insight, but without understanding the sources of such grievance, it will be just part of the picture.

⁷ To further confirm the motivations of fighters to take up arms, the people who were closest to the fighters—civilians who stayed on the front lines—were asked about their opinions on the reasons that both moderate and Islamist fighters joined brigades. The civilians generally confirmed the fighters’ own responses: 88 percent of civilians in Aleppo and Idlib said that fighters joined the FSA because they wanted revenge on Assad. Civilians also noted that fighters supported the revolutionary goals of the group in general (76 percent) and also felt inspired by other people who were joining (58 percent). Civilians strongly disagreed that fighters joined for money (2 percent), respect (4 percent), or were forced to join (0 percent).

Why did fighters want to revenge Assad personally? Among the fighters, 87 percent strongly agree that Assad is personally guilty for the war, while only 47 percent think that Alawites, a religious group that Assad and regime elites and army belong to, is to blame for it. Although the majority of fighters, both moderates and Islamists, indicated that they wanted revenge on Assad for crimes against both “them and their family” and “Syrian people in general” (47 percent), an almost equal number of people said that they wanted revenge only for “crimes against Syrian people” (46 percent), and only a small minority (10 percent) said that they wanted revenge only for “crimes against them and their family.” So it was primarily the collective desire to defeat Assad, not personal grievance that drove people to pick up weapons and join the rebellion.

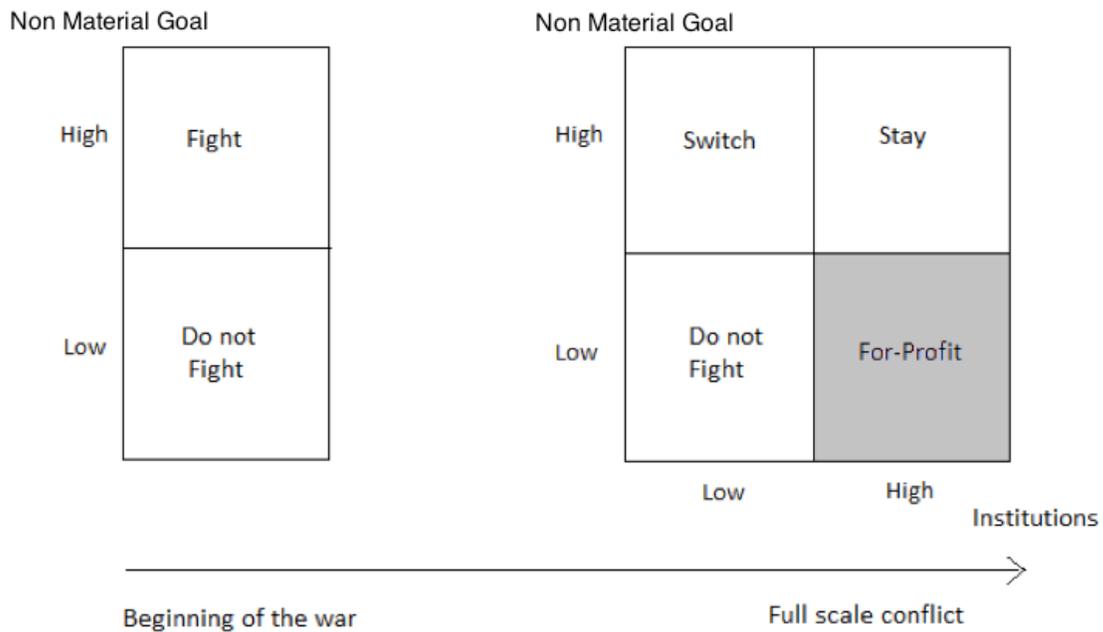
Such emotional reasons for mobilization also led to difference in emotions experience by different sub-groups during the conflict. For example fighters feel happier overall compared to civilians (19 percent of civilians said that they were quite a bit or even extremely happy, compared to 24 percent of fighters who said so.) That could be attributed to their ability to act on their grievance. They also feel stronger than non-fighters (38 percent of fighters feel extremely strong compared to 33 percent of civilians and 24 percent of refugees) and less afraid (13 percent of fighters said that they were afraid vs. 19 percent of civilians). On one side expectations of those emotions could also have contributed to a decision to become a member of an armed group instead of remaining a civilian in the first place, but on the other side those emotions also help fighters do their job better. As a downside of their decision, fighters feel angrier (34 percent of fighters vs. 25 percent of civilians), more sad (32 percent of fighters said that they felt sad compared to 19 percent of civilians) and more tired (27 percent of fighters vs. 21 percent of civilians). In terms of overall dedication to the goal both civilians and fighters feel equally determined (29 percent of civilians and 31 percent of fighters).

When individuals were making decisions about whether to discount risks of fighting and join an armed resistance, they evaluated whether or not the desire for revenge and the wish to defeat Assad were worth the sacrifices required. If the answer was “yes,” they joined. “Even if we will lose a lot of people, it will be worth

it,” explained one of the FSA fighters about the brigade’s emotions during the first days of the revolution. Following the same reasoning, even family members were not against their relatives’ joining. Abu Hassan, who joined the war in the very first days, remembers, “My mom lost her brother in Hama in 1982. Now, she thought that it is time to get revenge and was encouraging me to join the fight.”⁸

Consequently, at the beginning of the conflict in Syria, when almost everyone who wanted to join the fight was doing so, the only thing that mattered substantially in making that decision was the non-material goal of defeating Assad. If one wanted to contribute to this goal, he stayed to fight or support fighters; if he did not, he left.

Band of brothers or coworkers?



In the first year of the war, everyone was mobilized for the same goal; there were no organizational differences in groups, other than their geographical locations, and no resources available. Since at that time location was the only

⁸ Referring to the Hama massacre, when the Syrian Arab Army, under the orders of the country's then-dictator, Hafez al-Assad, besieged the town of Hama for 27 days in order to quell an uprising against the government.

information prospective fighters had about the brigades they were choosing from, they were joining neighborhood groups with people they knew. Although of course it was a very noisy signal about the quality of the group and its fighting capabilities, it was the only one available at the time, so fighters were choosing groups relying on it.

In addition, at that time the groups were self-sustainable. In Syria in 2011, weapons and ammunition were also not a problem. There were weapons available since the war in Iraq, government army defectors were usually bringing their own weapons, and traditionally, civilians had small arms, mostly pistols, at home; many also had just enough savings to buy light weapons—Kalashnikov rifles, BKC machine guns, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, and ammunition. Logistically, it was not difficult to get additional weapons if needed, since from the very beginning weapons dealers selling old weapons were everywhere and would sell them to anyone. While fighters manned their positions, their family members and other civilians took the role of “combat support units,” by, for example, providing food for the brigades. They cooked at home and children would bring prepared food to the frontlines, along with portable ovens for reheating meals and making fresh coffee.⁹ Fighters were also based in their own neighborhoods, so they were going home not only to sleep, but also for anything else they needed like resting, taking a shower, and surfing the Internet. Public services such as hospitals were functioning as well, and there were not many wounded so there was no need for private medical care. Therefore, the role of the brigade as an organization that is needed to facilitate logistics and provide weapons was very limited at that time.

While in previous generations of civil wars fighters usually needed the infrastructure and organization of a group to get the necessary essentials for a “civil war start-up” from the very onset of the war, this was not the case in Syria. Like the beginning of an Internet start-up boom, when the new “industry” appeared, everyone was using their own savings to buy necessities (hardware and office supplies) and was working from “their parents’ basement.”

⁹ During the battle of Aleppo, that started on Ramadan of 2012, in addition to food, civilians were even bringing fighters sweets for the iftar.

Two years into the war, the role of armed groups completely changed - their role as organizations facilitating fighting significantly increased.

As war gets more intense and the frontline becomes more active, combat operations become more sophisticated. Without professional leadership, armed groups could not function as organizations and be successful in combat; and without being able to rely on each other, fighters could not perform to their best abilities on the front line.

The first urgent issues that brigades faced with war progressing became logistics and organization of combat. With the regime operating at full capability, the insurgents had to provide an adequate response. Targets became more sophisticated. In the beginning, fighters had to only ensure safety in their own neighborhoods; as the war continued, they had to attack enemy checkpoints and even well-guarded military bases. Also, in order to defend against the regime's airplanes and tanks, expensive and hard-to-get anti-tank weapons systems were needed. In Hama, one interviewed fighter remembers that, "all of a sudden everything changed—we found ourselves fighting a real war with professional and well-equipped enemy and we were absolutely not prepared for it."

In addition, after pro-Assad forces started attacking the FSA and arresting its members, small "neighborhood" groups had to change their positions and relocate away from their "home" areas, losing the logistical advantages of being closer to home and the resources therein, which increased their everyday expenses even further. After moving to the countryside, away from regime-controlled territories, the groups needed cars to move around, so they also needed a constant supply of gas. Away from their communities, they could not always rely on civilians in other areas for basics such as food.

This situation led to the second urgent problem faced by the armed groups. The costs of fighting skyrocketed and at that point, a brigade began to need constant income to cover its everyday expenses. In addition, fighters had to be provided with a salary to be able to support themselves and their families. Brigades' resources became short for several related reasons: fighters were running out of their own savings; civilian jobs in the war-torn country started to disappear, so fighters could

not rely on the income of their family members anymore; and food became scarcer and as a result more expensive.¹⁰ Production of consumer goods declined during the war, so the majority of the goods had to be imported. High inflation made almost everything unaffordable to average people.¹¹ Meanwhile, the brigades' everyday expenses kept increasing—increasingly sophisticated and expensive weapons were needed to fight the enemy, fighters were getting wounded and required expensive medical treatment, and even ammunition was in short supply.¹² So the armed groups also had to urgently address the funding situation.

In addition, these two problems exacerbated a third problem: the quality of the leadership became even more important. Between the end of 2013 and the beginning of 2014, some brigades were accused of unprofessional leadership because some leaders were reluctant to take action and others did not have the qualifications to be good managers. According to fighters, some FSA commanders were often abroad and only went to the front lines to increase their media visibility. Other brigades had a problem with teamwork; some groups for example, were known for not taking care of its injured fighters. In other brigades, leaders were unable or unwilling to enforce discipline. Corruption and nepotism were also widespread in some units. In a time of resource shortages, leadership had failed to ensure that whatever resources the brigades had were not mismanaged, and were used wisely and distributed fairly so as not to provoke distrust or internal divisions. Some leaders simply were not qualified to run such complicated enterprises. Despite their best intentions, they did not have enough experience and knowledge to build a well functioning institution from scratch in such a challenging environment in such a short time.

Gap between effective and ineffective brigades became visible. At the same time prospective fighters learn more about different armed groups fighting together. If in the beginning of the conflict the only information available, based on

¹⁰ If before the war one dollar was equivalent to 50 Syrian lira, three years after the war started, it was 250 lira.

¹¹ If before the war 1 egg was 7 lira and bottle of Coca-Cola 25 lira, 3 years after the beginning of the war it was 27 lira and 100 lira respectively.

¹² If before the war a bullet cost 25 lira, 3 years into the conflict it is 200 lira.

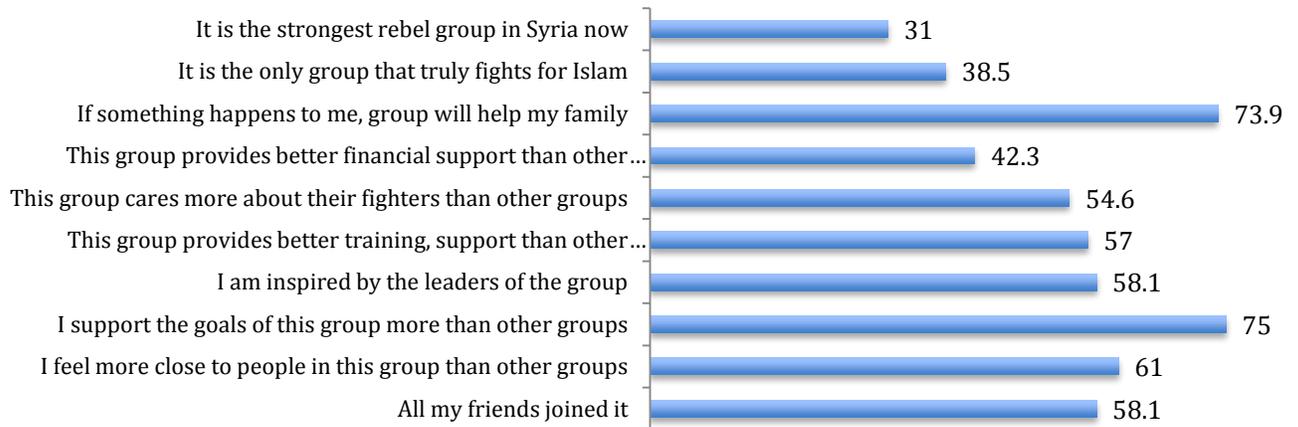
which fighters self-selected into particular groups, was their geographic location, with the war progressing more “signals” about the brigades’ qualities and fighting capabilities become available. And with experience, prospective fighters learn what signals and information about groups they need to look for.

This was the point when fighters started perceiving brigades as institutions and increasingly evaluating all the available information about a particular group before considering joining it. They began asking themselves: Which group will help me achieve my goals the most and will utilize my skills and sacrifice the best? And in what group will I feel more comfortable achieving my goal?

When evaluating a company to work for in civilian life, a prospective employee looks at things like adequate compensation alongside other material benefits, and they also value such non-material issues as a brigade’s brand, employee development (i.e. training), provision of medical care, and group cohesion, among others. Rebel groups are no different. When choosing a particular brigade to join, a prospective fighter also looks for those qualities. While for a civilian a poor choice will cost him the time and effort involved in changing jobs, a fighter’s poor choice could cost him his life. So for a fighter this choice is much more crucial, and the cost of a mistake is much higher.

When asked why they chose a particular group to fight with, the majority of fighters—both members of moderate and Islamist groups—answered that they based their decision on two things. First, they wanted to ensure that the goals of the group matched their own goals. The second part of the decision was based on the quality of the group as an organization: 74 percent of fighters mentioned that the most important reason for them to join a particular brigade was that if something happened to them the group would take care of their family; 61 percent said that they felt close to the people in their group; 59 percent said that their friends had joined it; and 58 percent said that they joined because of the particular group’s leadership. Even among members of Islamist groups, the reason that “it is the only group that truly fights for Islam” is second least important, while the least important one was the share of power that the groups currently held.

Reasons Given for not Joining Other Groups
Q: Why did you join this group as opposed or some other group? (select all that apply)



With the war continuing, the gaps between groups' quality levels widen, and because fighters not only discuss each other's units, but also often conduct joint operations, information about the organization, quality of leadership, and resources of different brigades very quickly becomes common knowledge on the front lines.¹³ That leads to not only to more deliberate choosing of the brigades by new fighters, but also to more switching between brigades by fighters who were already active. By 2015, four years into the conflict, it was not uncommon for fighters to have changed brigades three or four times since the beginning of the war.

This re-matching of fighters and brigades takes place in a complete information market and leads to "shopping for brigades" among fighters who are still determined to fight for the goal but were disappointed in the groups they were fighting with. These fighters would reevaluate their choice of brigades and possibly switch to another brigade that was fighting for the same goal but functioned better as an institution (with, for example, more resources, better leadership, better teamwork). Just like in any other industry when an individual is not satisfied with

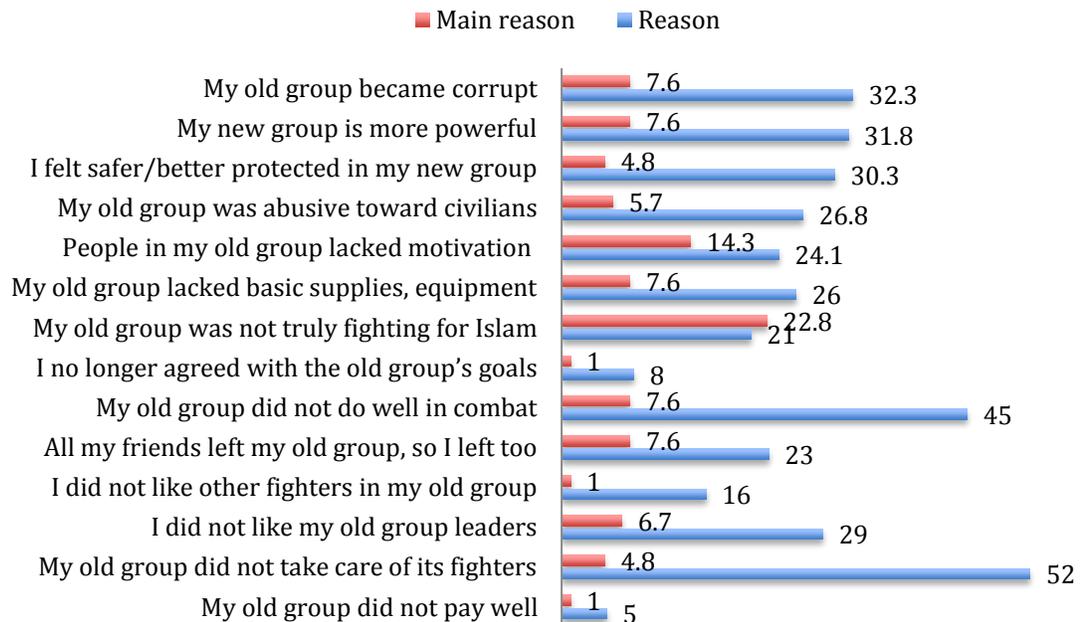
¹³ In Syria, because brigades are not large enough to conduct major operations alone or to control large territories if they win in combat, they coordinate with other brigades and go into combat together.

the salary and work environment, no matter how much he likes what he does, he will soon start looking for a better job (although most probably in the same field).

According to the results of the survey, the main reasons for fighters to switch between brigades were related to the brigades as institutions. For example, the majority of fighters mentioned that they changed groups because their old group did not take care of its fighters (52 percent); 45 percent of fighters thought that their initial group did not do well in combat (and as a result was not utilizing fighters' skills properly); 32 percent mentioned that their old group became too corrupt; 32 percent thought that their new group was more powerful; and 31 percent felt that they were safer and better protected in the new group. Goal-related rather than institutional motivations were significantly less popular. Although 22 percent said that they changed groups mainly because only their new group "truly fights for Islam," even this number is probably too high since it is very likely that the respondents assumed that this was "the answer they should give, taking into account their affiliation with the Islamist groups." When the word "Islam" was not specifically mentioned and the answer was framed more generally as "I do not agree with my old group's goals," only 8 percent of fighters agreed with this statement.

Also, as an additional question to check the importance of religion, when asked more generally about "abstract" others currently fighting in Syria, fighters confirmed that the majority of people in Syria were still fighting for democracy (85 percent) and to defeat Assad (73 percent), not to impose Sharia law and build an Islamic state. That further supports the idea that even fighters who changed from moderate to Islamist brigades did not switch because of ideology *per se*. Furthermore, in interviews with people who began fighting with the FSA and then switched to groups considered to be Islamist, almost all of them mentioned reasons which were not expressly religious: "My friends left my old group and I left with them," "I didn't like the people in my old group," "My friend got injured, and they didn't support him," "I was with my old group (FSA) until I fought with Ahrar al Sham. I liked their way of treating fighters and I joined."

Reasons for changing brigades?



Thus, after a year of fighting, fighters seeking better situations started looking at brigades as organizations. They became more interested in what the group could provide them, in terms of both individual benefit (basics such as food and salary) and combat organization (support such as logistics and ammunition). And it is no secret for the groups themselves. Participants in the focus group recall “Some fighters wanted to join our battalion, but our conditions are harsh. The brigade does not offer much for new fighters. We only provided training on heavy weapons such as tanks.” (“Anonymous” group, DeirEzzor Country Side, 122 members); “We used to get fighters constantly until the beginning of 2014. After that no one wanted to join since the battalion does not offer anything to the fighter, other than salary, food and cigarettes.” (Abbas group, 80 fighters); “There is no outside support so there hasn’t been any new members.” (Sarayah Al-Naser , 26 fighters). When most fighters were not satisfied with their groups, they tried to switch to better organized groups in the same goal domain. Some fighters, however, quit fighting altogether.

Time to Go

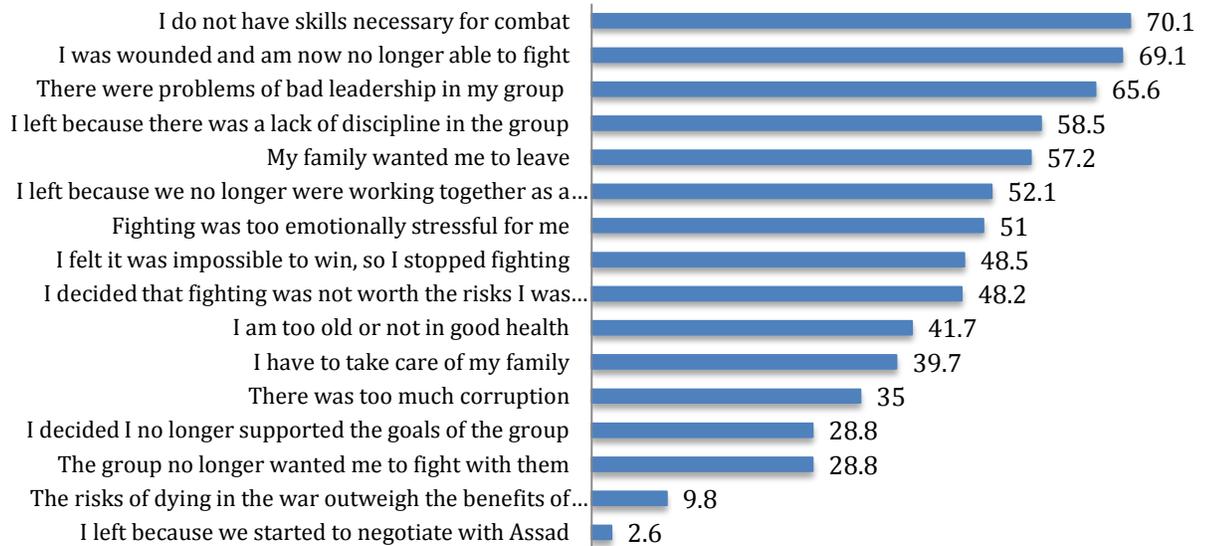
As in the civilian world, the labor market for rebels is a two-way street. While some people are entering the job market, others are exiting. During the course of the war in Syria, new people joined, but some left - either voluntarily or not.

Some were getting killed or wounded and could not continue fighting. Opinions and attitudes of those ex-fighters were not different from active fighters still fighting on the front lines. For example, wounded ex-fighters are only a little less likely to support “fighting until victory”, than are active fighters (88 percent of wounded fighters compared to 90 percent of active ones). Wounded ex-fighters also have a strong desire to go back, although for many it will not be possible due to the nature of the injury¹⁴.

Others decided to quit voluntarily. They made the decision to stop fighting for reasons similar to those of the people who did not join the fighting at the beginning of the conflict (such as refugees): lack of interest in the non-material goals of the war. People who became disappointed in the war and thought that it was not worth fighting for any more, or at least that they personally could not make a difference in the course of the conflict, tend to quit voluntarily.

¹⁴ Although 17% of surveyed wounded ex-fighters said that they would definitely return back to Syria to fight, it is not possible to make any generalizations. It is unclear how many of the surveyed could possibly go back to the front line due to the severity of their injuries.

Reasons Given for Quitting the Fight
Q: If you are no longer fighting with this or any other group, why are you no longer fighting? (check all the apply)



In the survey, ex-fighters who had previously been fighting with both moderate and Islamist groups were directly asked why they were no longer fighting. The main reasons for quitting were related to the general disappointment with the war and its goals. First, some fighters understood their own limitations: 70 percent of the respondents realized that they were not very good at fighting; 51 percent said that it was too emotionally stressful for them; and 49 percent decided that the risks associated with combat were just not worth it. A fighter from Ja'far alTayyar group in Deir ez-Zor, who had been fighting for four years but left in 2014, commented: "After my fourth injury, after I lost my brother and all my friends in the brigade, and there were no more Syrians left in my city it became very emotionally hard for me and I decided that nothing is holding me back now and it is time to leave." Another ex-fighter, who was fighting with an Islamist group "Fajr Allslam" (now part of Al Nusra) in Yabroud and left in 2014, recalls: "After the end of "Alsehel" battle with Shiaa militias, and after the regime took control of the villages around our positions, I was thinking- what remains to fight for? I lost my right hand to a sniper shot, and when I was bleeding no one could help, because we simply did not have enough people. We were always very close to the enemy, but we only had Klashinkovs

(AK47), while the enemy had tanks and planes. I felt that God's angels were helping us, but rationally I thought - what can a left handed man do, in front of those tanks! Nothing ... so I found a way to get out of the city, and ended up opening a small restaurant to sell falafel. Now the only thing I am fighting for is the food for my kids.”

Second, people become frustrated with the organization of their brigades: 65 percent of respondents reported bad leadership as an important reason for leaving; 59 percent pointed to the lack of discipline in the brigade; and 52 percent thought that they were not working as a team anymore. Generally, if people were dissatisfied with the organization of their brigade, they simply switched groups, so ex-fighters also appear to have given up on the cause for fighting: 48 percent of respondents felt that it was impossible to win and no longer worth the risk.

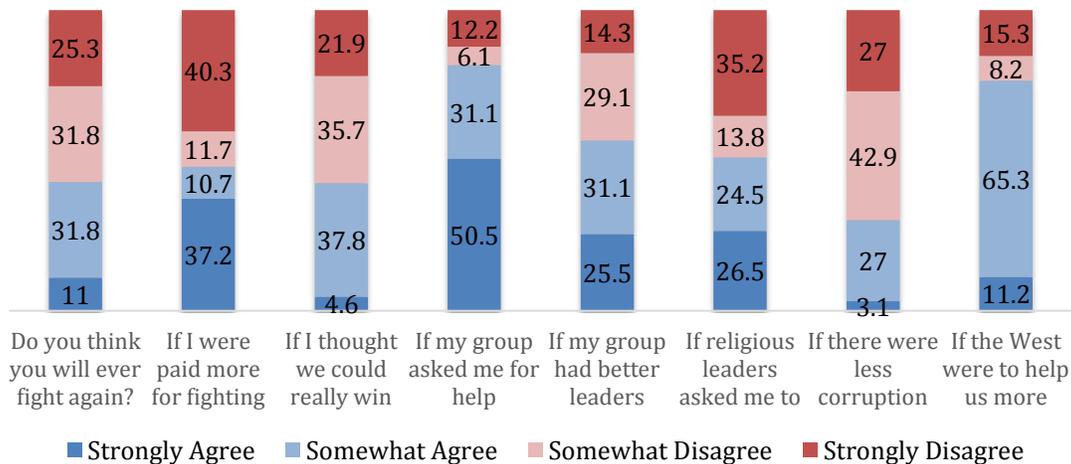
Another 10 percent of respondents mentioned other reasons as most important ones for them to leave the battlefield. Examples of such reasons include personal ones like the death of a mother, being upset with international community (“War won't end until the international governments take their responsibilities”); and a small minority (<3%) also mentioned to have fled because they were not able to fight the war against Assad that they initially mobilized for¹⁵.

Those separating from an armed group also paid a toll emotionally. In general ex-fighters feel significantly more ashamed compared to active members of a group (36 percent of quitters feel a bit or extremely ashamed vs. 18 percent of active fighters), more sad (38 percent of ex-fighters compared to 32 percent of active fighters), weaker (24 percent of ex-fighters mentioned that they feel strong vs. 38 percent of active fighters), more tired (34 percent of ex-fighters vs. 27 percent of active group members) and much more afraid (36 percent of ex-fighters vs. 13 percent of active fighters). On the other hand they feel happier (30 percent of ex-fighters said that they feel quite a bit or extremely happy compared to 24 percent among active fighters) but almost equally angry (34 percent of ex-fighters and active fighters).

¹⁵ Their reasons are related to the opened front with ISIS and include “ISIS took control of the area”, “I was arrested by ISIS”, “We were forced to join ISIS” and “We had to run away from ISIS”.

Ex-fighters who quit voluntarily were also asked if they would go back to fight if given the opportunity, and 42 percent agreed that they would under certain conditions. Their opinions about the possible scenarios of coming back to fight further confirmed that general disappointment in the goal and the fight were their main reasons for quitting. Prospects of victory (restoring belief in the goal) played an important role in determining whether they will return to the fight or stay on the sidelines: 43 percent said they would fight again if they thought they could really win. Many, for example, saw Western intervention in the conflict as a potential game changer, which would tip the balance in their favor. A strong majority (76 percent) claimed that they would fight again if the West were to intervene militarily. In addition, many ex-fighters were still concerned about the institutional quality of the brigades they would return to in Syria: 56 percent would consider going back if the group had better leaders, if they were paid more for fighting (48 percent), and if there were less corruption (30 percent). Although these are secondary considerations, they are still important aspects of the decision on whether or not to return to the fighting.

Reasons to Return to the Fight
Q: If given the opportunity, would you be willing to fight again? (% agree/disagree)



Fighting for money

The labor market for rebel fighters would operate in a relatively simple way with only goal-motivated fighters. Unfortunately there is another group of fighters who

are participating in the war for completely different reasons. They could not be ignored, but need to be examined separately. As pointed out in the book by Wienstein (2006) non-all members of armed groups are interested in anything other than immediate monetary benefits, and their war participation decisions are different. They enter the civil war labor market as for-profit fighters, and are fighting solely for the immediate monetary reward. Due to the nature of their interest in the conflict, they appeared only if and when money became part of the war (through foreign financing, looting or extraction of natural resources). Prior to that, the conflict is simply not of interest to such individuals because not only did it not bring any immediate material benefit, but also participation in the conflict required investment of the fighters' own savings.

When money and immediate profit became available in the conflict in Syria, for-profit fighters appeared. Because there is no non-material goal for these prospective fighters, they will choose a brigade based on the benefits offered. These mercenaries could be people who were not interested in the non-material goal of the war from the beginning, or fighters who became disappointed with the goal during the course of the conflict. In both cases, as for-profit fighters, they were not interested in the overall goals of the conflict. They are simply using the lawless situation in the country to their advantage.

In the first category are individuals who did not care about the revolution from the beginning and left the war zone, but since they were not able to find an occupation outside, returned to earn money by fighting as mercenaries when such an opportunity presented itself. As the war progressed, fewer and fewer jobs were available in the war zone, and more and more refugees were fleeing the country. As a result, employment prospects for refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) also grew slimmer, while international assistance was often not enough to cover even basic needs such as food and shelter. People had to start looking for other options; fighting for money was one of them. As an NGO worker in a refugee camp on the border with Syria described: "People come here, try to find a job for one to three months but if they are unable to do it, they go back to fighting since they need to provide for their families. And although it does not pay much, being a member of

a brigade they could easily cross checkpoints and get involved in smuggling.” Sometimes women are forcing their sons to leave the camps and go to fight since “if you are not making money here, at least you could make money there.”

The second category consists of fighters who took up arms “in good faith,” but later, while fighting, got disappointed in the goal of the war. Since they were already fighting when they realized they no longer share the goals of the revolution and want to quit, but they could not find any other opportunities that would pay a comparable amount, they could still stay with the group and continue fighting as mercenaries, for an immediate monetary benefit. Just as a civilian employee will stay at his job as long as he gets the best benefits and will change companies as soon as another one offers better compensation and a superior work environment, a fighter will also stay as long as fighting offers more benefits than any other option, and the risk that he is exposing himself to is tolerable.

In Syria, some for-profit fighters continued fighting while actively seeking opportunities to emigrate to Europe and waiting for word on their applications. After registering with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), a person can wait two to six years before receiving resettlement documents. While they are on the waiting list, they continue fighting to support themselves and their families. Another alternative, illegal immigration, is quite expensive, so fighters had to continue fighting until they (or their family members who had already become refugees in Europe) were able to collect enough money to pay for the boat to cross to Europe. As soon as they had enough money, they left their groups.

Fighters in this “for profit” category are the least preferable to the not-for-profit brigades, which are fighting for non-material goals of the war. First, those fighters are expensive, since, being only interested in money, they keep trying to maximize their intake; second, they are not willing to take risks, making them the least reliable in combat. Finally, because they would change brigades or even sides as soon as someone else offered more money, they are the least trustworthy. They would not only easily move between brigades, but they would also leave the war zone altogether as soon as they found a way to make a better profit outside of the

civil war market, or if risks increased (for example, as a result of a sudden increase in enemy military capabilities).

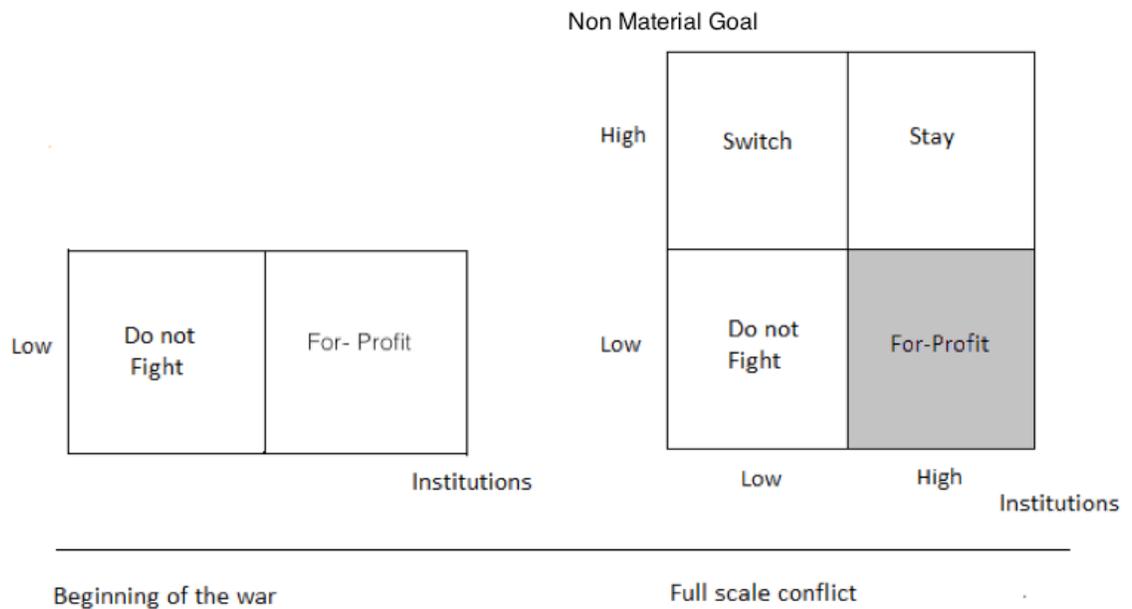
Because fighters are aware of the negative consequences of having mercenaries, if such a fighter does not end up leaving voluntarily, he will be forced to leave a brigade that actually fights for a non-material goal as soon as his true motives become known. One obvious and visible signal that reveals such fighters is stealing. Almost all interviewed fighters recall “the majority of people were kicked out because of stealing, both from the brigade and civilian communities.”

On the other side, since group leaders may or may not be interested in non-material goals from the beginning, and are not immune from getting disillusioned in the course of the conflict, they follow the same labor market cycle and could also become for-profit fighters. In that case, leaders will soon transform their brigade into a “for-profit” brigade, intentionally or not. They will start tolerating misbehavior, disobedience, and theft. Members of the Dhe Qar brigade mentioned that the main problem they had with their last leader was that “he was not a good person. He was tolerating bad behavior of the members.” When asked, “What do you think your brigade should have done, but did not do?” members of the Abbas brigades agreed that “they should have changed their commanders on time.” And leaders of the relatively rich brigade which controlled oil in the Deir Ezzor countryside, openly admit that their brigade should have kicked out “people, from the brigade leadership, who were stealing oil.”

After the information about the type of a brigade leader (mercenary or ideological) becomes common knowledge, self-selection occurs. Leaders who are not interested in the non-material goal anymore and are looking only for the immediate monetary benefits will lose fighters who still want to fight for the main goal of the war. They will attract mercenaries, who were in turn forced to leave brigades that are still fighting for the goal, or simply do not want to join non-profit groups because it is too dangerous and is not worth the benefits offered. As a result, separate “for profit” brigades will emerge, where both leaders and fighters are interested only in the immediate profit. Such for-profit groups are not that different in structure and behavior from gangs commonly seen in many developed countries.

Such a situation reportedly happened with one brigade in Idlib after its leader got a reputation as a rich man interested only in immediate profit, who would tolerate any behavior as long as he got a cut of the money. In addition to getting outside funding, they were making money from smuggling fuel, extracting cash at checkpoints, and looting museums. What had at first been a brigade with four hundred members swelled to the size of three thousand as for-profit fighters switched to his group. Among those fighters were people who not only switched from other brigades, but also came back from refugee camps in Turkey. They left Syria at the beginning of the conflict, registered as refugees in Turkey, but later returned when they learned about “for profit” brigades. Reportedly, according to an NGO worker, they were still driving every month from Syria to Turkey to collect refugee benefits provided by various NGOs.

The case above illustrates how a not-for-profit fighter turns to profit-seeking, but the opposite effect can also occur. In that case, while fighters initially joined for the immediate material benefit, through membership in the group and being in combat they began accumulating grievances and sharing the goals of the fight. While such fighters joined for material reasons such as salary or looting opportunities, during the conflict they witnessed a lot of destruction, torture, and death imposed by the enemy (including the deaths of fellow fighters or family members who stayed in the conflict zone). Based on these grievances, accumulated during the fighting itself, they sometimes decide that they need to revenge those deaths. So in the long run, these fighters switch to the not-for-profit level of the matrix, becoming no different from the fighters who joined as not-for-profit from the beginning and started following its labor market dynamics. They will then try to switch to a not-for-profit brigade, albeit one that is well-organized as an institution.



Conclusion

The majority of fighters join armed conflicts because they want to achieve a non-material goal, which can be achieved only through fighting. In the case of Syria, the main goal for the fighters was a desire for revenge against Assad for the crimes that he committed against Syrian people, and in some cases them personally.

Even the slightest deviation from the main goal by the brigade leads to problems between fighters and their leadership. Many fighters left their groups as soon as they suspected that their leadership changed affiliation or preferences, as happened in other civil wars (Oppenheim et al 2005). Members of the Abbas brigade remember that their main problem with their commander was “his relations with ISIS,” and members from another brigade from the DeirEzzor countryside said that the main disagreement they had was that their commander had “pledged allegiance to ISIS without the knowledge of the fighters.”¹⁶

¹⁶ Although both moderate groups and ISIS were fighting Assad, their main goals were different

Such strong non-material motivation of rebel fighters is known to the enemy, and was used strategically by the Assad regime. The goal and related emotions are so crucial for fighters that sometimes in pursuit of the goal they lose their capacity for rational decision-making. In their choice to fight, for example, sometimes it is not easy even for commanders to slow fighters down for strategic reasons. Members of the brigade Abu Ammarah remember that the biggest disagreement they had with their commander was because “the regime was advancing, and we all wanted to continue fighting, although we knew that we do not have enough ammunition. Our leaders had a hard time calming us down.”

While in this case the commander was thinking rationally and was able to stop his emotion-driven fighters, this is not always the case. In the DeirEzzor neighborhood of Al Djura in 2012, seven hundred people were killed and many more arrested in three days. Everyone who survived ran to the FSA headquarters and demanded weapons to go and fight Assad’s army. There were only around one hundred assault rifles (Kalashnikovs) available on the base, so one hundred people were armed and rushed to attack the government forces. The regime was counting on precisely this reaction, and sat fully armed waiting to ambush those fighters. According to local activists, they killed as many as 60 percent.

Personal benefits in the decision-making process of such not-for-profit fighters are secondary to the goal and become important only later in the war. Among the groups that are fighting for the goal, fighters evaluate brigades based on their qualities as institutions. A fighter is looking for the group that on one side makes it “the most comfortable” for him to fight for the chosen goal, but on the other side could also help him contribute most to the war. Salaries, for example, make a fighter more comfortable, but they are also making him more effective in fighting for the goal, because he is getting money from the group and does not need to spend time thinking how to provide for the family. Medical care that some groups provide to their members and money that they pay to the families of fallen also allow fighters to take more risks in combat and, as a result, be more deadly to the enemy.

Like civilian organizations, rebel groups are different in their internal organizational structures and financial health. With a developed market of armed

groups like the one in Syria, fighters have freedom in choosing groups and switching between them if they think that their group is not good enough, and there is another group that is fighting for the same goal, is better as an institution, and will be willing to admit them. If a fighter decides that he does not want to fight for the goal anymore, he quits and leaves. It happens not when he is disappointed in the group, but when he is disappointed in the whole cause. In that case just switching groups will not solve the problem because they are fighting for the same goal in the same rebel block, so the fighters decide to quit.

Also participating in the civil war labor market are for-profit groups and fighters who joined the war solely for the material benefits. They do not care what they are fighting for as long as they are getting more compensation than what they would be able to get in other occupations, including those that are less risky or are outside the conflict zone. In the course of the war, not-for-profit fighters could become for-profit and vice versa, which makes the whole system even more dynamic. If a fighter gets disappointed in the overall goal of the war, he could either leave and look for options in another, non-civil war industry, or, if there are no other options, he could look for the brigade that offers the best benefits in order to provide for the family. Conversely, a person who initially joined for money could accumulate grievances during the combat, and his reasoning for fighting could change from money to the non-material goal such as revenge.

Since the non-material goal is the most important thing for a not-for-profit fighter, he will only look at brigades that operate in this goal domain. Because the choice of an institution comes only after the initial decision of the importance of the goal, a prospective fighter who decided to fight to liberate the country from a foreign invader, for example, will not consider joining a brigade that is fighting to overthrow the government, even if it provides the best benefits; that brigade is not in his goal domain. As a result, brigades with different goals operate in separate labor markets, and not-for-profit fighters will not move between them only because of institutional benefits.

On the other side, the for-profit fighters see no distinction between different goal domains. Since they do not share any goals other than immediate enrichment,

they will join any brigade in any goal domain that offers the best salary and working environment and move freely between labor markets. That makes them much less reliable and even dangerous, since they could not only leave the brigade anytime for another one with a similar goal, but could also defect to the enemy if offered better benefits.