

Armies of Women: The Syria Crisis and the New War Thesis

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TIMOTHY ABINGTON, MAR 27 2019

The Syrian conflict is multifaceted, decentralised and difficult to depict in a statist model (Lynch, 2016). It has recorded thousands of fatalities; millions have been displaced, creating one of the most significant humanitarian crises of the decade (Specia, 2018). Though originating in a democratic uprising, it became embroiled in regional and international confrontations and is unlikely to be resolved in the immediate future (Phillips, 2016). This paper is to prove that the Syrian conflict constitutes a new war from the feminist perspective by contextualising the discussion through a literature review of the new war debate, then proceeding through a gendered analysis of the actors, goals, methods, and financing of the Syrian conflict. Collectively this analysis will prove that Syrian constitutes a new war.

Conceptualising Conflict: A Literature Review

Of the numerous attempts to conceptualise contemporary conflict, it is the new war thesis that proves particularly prominent (Chinkin and Kaldor, 2013; Gray et al, 1997; Hoffman, 2007). New war is a form of conflict that has emerged as a consequence of globalisation depriving the state of the monopoly of violence (Kaldor, 2013:1). Jung argues convincingly that “the age of globalization is characterized by a gradual erosion of state authority” (Jung, 2003:2 in Newman, 2004). Strange (1996) seconds that “state authority has declined,” foremost in security where “the obsolescence of major interstate war is implicit in state policies”. Though contested, the argument is convincing given the increasing privatisation of conflict (Taylor, 2018).

Having defined war as “organised political violence”, Kaldor asserts that it remains prominent despite the reduction of interstate conflict (2013). Kaldor (2003:7) contends that globalisation has altered the attributes of conflict, insofar that “the new wars can be contrasted with earlier wars in terms of their goals, the methods of warfare and how they are financed.” Together this includes “identity politics” as a motive for conflict rather than strategic and ideological objectives; the avoidance of battlefield confrontation in favour of terroristic “political control of the population”; financing conflict through the decentralised international economy, whereby taxation has declined in favour of revenue acquired through international networks and markets (Kaldor, 2013). This “globalised war economy” creates persistency, as conflict produces commercial opportunities that create incentives to continue fighting (Berdal, 2003; Newman, 2004).

This paper acknowledges that the new war thesis is contested, largely because “generalisations of wars will always be fraught with difficulty” (Berdal, 2003). The foremost critique of the new war thesis is that it allegedly establishes a distinction between contemporary and historical conflict (Henderson and Singer, 2002; Newman, 2004). In short “new wars are not new” (Kaldor, 2013). This debate is grounded in the concept of perceptions, whereby the tendency to differentiate between conflict is based on the adoption of misguided characteristics derived from ideological assumptions and historical experience (Kalyvas, 2001). Newman (2004) supports this assertion, insofar that “the problem [with the new war thesis] is not in its analysis of contemporary conflict but rather its [the new war] suggestion it is distinct from the past.” Kaldor (2013) convincingly responded to the critique. Rather than implying an empirical distinction from historical conflict, the “new” in new wars is to distinguish from an “old” war perception that organised violence is between states and devoid of violence towards civilians. Collectively, new war is a normative theory challenging the old war perceptions amongst academics and policymakers to reflect the nuances of conflict

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(Kaldor, 2003; 2013).

Prior to proceeding through the analysis of the Syrian conflict, it is first necessary to outline and justify the epistemological approach of this paper. This paper is to adopt a feminist perspective that identifies gendered relations and structures overlooked by traditional International Relations theories (Stearns, 2005). "Gender is a socially imposed and internalized lens through which individuals perceive and respond to the world," therefore traditional male-dominated scholarship has predominantly analysed the deployment of predominantly male soldiers and distribution of weaponry (Peterson, 1992: 194; Wibben, 2011).

Given the gender-biased perceptions, conflict is perceived as male activity (Wibben, 2011; Elshtain, 1987). This has overlooked the gendered facets of conflict: the female clerics sustaining the bureaucracy integral to the arming and deployment of combatants; the female prostitutes "serving the social and sexual needs" of the military (Enloe, 2014: 86); the male engineers integral to the aerial bombardments. It is necessary to refute the notion that conflict is between hierarchical, and masculine, state combatants. This unidimensional perspective ignores gendered dynamics upon which the conflict is sustained. Given its appreciation of the nuances of conflict, and the breakdown in the combatant and civilian distinction, the new war thesis presents a convincing opportunity for the application of a feminist perspective.

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Having justified the feminist approach, this paper is to proceed through a gendered analysis of the Syrian conflict to prove it reflects new war, beginning with the assertion that contemporary conflict is distinguished by the involvement of "varying combinations of networks of state and nonstate actors" (Kaldor, 2003). Syrian state actors include the Syrian Arab Army, in addition to the reservist National Defense Forces alongside foreign combatants including the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and Russian Air Force (Phillips, 2016). The unified international presence of the opposition Syrian National Council hardly reflects the reality of a divided organisation composed of combatants of multiple and conflicting objectives (Lynch, 2017). Collectively these combatants operate according to the realities of the conflict: a contested and a confused region. Female contingents have been deployed throughout the conflict in state and nonstate groups, Kurdish and state-sponsored female battalions for example (Chinkin and Kaldor 2013). Granted it has been asserted that female combatants have been exploited for propaganda rather than military operations. However, this supports the gendered perspective of conflict, insofar that women have been weaponized for propaganda; actors that contrast with the old war suggestion of conflict involving only battlefield confrontation.

Collectively "every military base depends for its operations on women" (Enloe, 2014:175), and without gendered relations, the deployment of state and nonstate combatants in the Syrian conflict would be impossible (Enloe, 2014). Russians deployed from the Khmeimim airbase are predominantly male; reflecting a characteristic of the foreign combatants throughout the conflict. Though a masculine air force, it is dependent on wives and partners in the caregiver capacity to sustain the domestic sphere whilst the husband is deployed in foreign territory (Enloe, 2014:175). Motherhood is co-opted to legitimise conscription and deployment of troops through weaponizing maternal relations as propaganda (De Volo, 1998).

Prostitution is integral to military operations. The Islamic State established an industry of female enslavement to sustain its troops, whereby women were distributed amongst its male combatants as enslaved sexual partners, to satisfy the male sexual desires (Semple, 2014; Gerges, 2017). Collectively the women became objects of reproduction and labour. Though considering the enslaved Yazidi to be heretics, and deserved of death, the group executed merely the men and enslaved the women (Semple, 2014). This was a gendered distinction that demonstrates the willingness of the Islamic State to disregard ideology to satisfy the sexual desires of its combatants. The Syrian conflict is sustained through armies of women that do not conform to the combatant and civilian distinction of old war. The feminist perspective, therefore, proves that the Syrian conflict reflects the new war thesis.

Weaponizing Gender

The new war thesis asserts that "old wars were fought for geopolitical interests or for ideology ... new wars are fought

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in the name of identity” (Kaldor, 2013). Conflict is motivated by a “claim to power on the basis of a particular identity, be it national, clan, religious or linguistic” (Kaldor, 2003: 8; Kaldor, 2013). The Syrian conflict initially reflects this logic, given that gendered identity serves as a significant motivation for combatants. Female suicide bombers are motivated by the “shame of rape and sexual enslavement” associated with capture (Alsaba and Kapilashrami, 2016). This is derived from a female identity associated with feminine vulnerabilities of sexual violence and illustrates the extent to which sexual identity has been exploited for purposes of conflict. In addition, the Dara’an demonstrations credited with instigating the revolution were mobilized through identity. The arrest and torture of teenagers accused of dissident graffiti and the attacks against those protesting it exploited tribal identities, insofar that tribes sought retribution for the affront to members. In turn, the Syrian regime has mobilized support through identity, framing the conflict as sectarian and establishing the perception of a Shi’a and Sunni conflict (Malantowicz, 2014). The construction of a sectarian narrative legitimised sectarian massacres and the deployment of tribal and religious militias (Phillips, 2015; Malanowicz, 2014).

Though identity is a partial motivation for conflict, ideology and strategic interests are also influential in Syria, reflecting the multifaceted dynamics of conflict. The uprisings occurred within the Arab Spring, suggesting opposition is ideologically motivated, indeed the initial graffiti slogan “?????? ?????? ??????? ?????????” [the people want the fall of the regime] reflected an ideological ambition for the removal of the authoritarian. Collectively this was “a protest movement driven precisely by the same motivations and aspirations” of the regional demonstrations: regime change (Phillips, 2016; Lynch, 2016).

Elsewhere the weaponization of gender has served ideological purposes to legitimise the Assad regime. The sectarian narrative of the regime retains gendered foundations, insofar that “the significance of the community’s women being raped ... is that the honour of the community’s men has been assaulted” (Enloe, 2014: 62). The Assad regime derives its legitimacy and motivation from the portrayal of the security provider, however, this depiction is a gendered depiction, reliant on the conceptualisation of the vulnerable female requiring of a masculinized regime protection (Loveluck, 2016; Enloe, 2014).

Given the strategic relationship between Damascus and Tehran, opposition to the Syrian regime strategically weakened the Iranian position in the regional order (Lynch, 2016). Hence Saudi Arabia and Qatar exploited the conflict through proxies, to achieve a strategic regional advantage at the expense of Iran, whilst Tehran sought to sustain its strategic partner to prevent a hostile encirclement (Hughes, 2014). Collectively the Syrian crisis altered from an internal uprising to an international conflict that reflected regional confrontations and strategic interests.

This feminist perspective of conflict motivation has demonstrated the qualifications of the new war thesis, insofar that though Kaldor (2013) asserts that conflict is fought for identity, ideology and strategy are other influential motivations. However, rather critically undermining the thesis, this qualification presents an opportunity to develop the theory so that it reflects the nuanced conflict. The fundamental assertion of the new war thesis is that conflict is multidimensional, therefore rather than undermining, it is bolstered by the indication that conflict motivations are multifaceted. The new war is fought by multiple actors, the feminist perspective indicates it is also fought for multiple motivations.

Exploiting Femininity

This paper turns next to methods employed in conflict. Kaldor asserts that the old wars “consisted of capturing territory through military means” (2013). New wars differ because “battles are rare and territory is captured through political means, through control of the population” (2013). The new war thesis suggests that the method of contemporary warfare centres on the control of the population, rather than the control of territory, and that violence is increasingly directed towards civilians.

Syrian combatants have indiscriminately targeted civilian populations and civilian infrastructure with ariel and artillery bombardment. Ethnic cleansing and arbitrary execution are commonplace (Komireddi, 2012). Combatants have besieged settlements so that civilians “negotiate with the regime and accept being forcibly displaced in exchange for their lives” (Al-Jablawi, 2016). This strategy of deliberate population displacement and enforced demographic

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change is an attempt to establish control of the Syrian population, as outlined in the new war thesis.

The feminist perspective proves that civilians are deliberately targeted in the Syrian Conflict. Gender has been systemically weaponized as a means of control and coercion of the population (Human Rights Council, 2018). Women have been systematically raped, to blackmail their male husbands, fathers and sons. This system of humiliation exploited gendered notions of a masculine protector and feminine vulnerability to achieve control of the populace by preventing fighters from opposing the regime given the likelihood of sexual violence against female relations. This organised violence is explicitly targeted at female civilians, reflecting the new war assertions. In addition to enslavement, stoning and sexual violence were commonplace in the Islamic State as punishments explicitly targeted at women, intending to instil fear amongst the female population and ensure its compliance. Collectively it is evident that “control of the population” through gendered violence is explicit in the Syrian conflict, therefore this feminist perspective of the conflict methods supports the assertion that it constitutes a new war.

Gendered Financing

The new war thesis asserts that the financing of conflict has fundamentally changed because contemporary “global economic process” that is critical to the conflict (Berdal, 2003). Conflict prevents centralised revenue generation because of the disruption to the bureaucracy (Kaldor, 2003). Thus, revenue is acquired through international markets and networks, in addition to exploiting the conflict for commercial benefit; the feminist perspective proves this. Predatory finance prevails in conflict, and combatants resort to banditry; diaspora fundraising; trafficking and smuggling (Kaldor, 2013). The Syrian conflict demonstrates this tendency. Combatants have extorted revenue at border checkpoints and seized resources and revenue in territory it controls, in addition to implementing levies at border crossings, targeting refugees. This predatory finance disproportionately affects women, insofar that battalions of male soldiers are unlikely to be halted at checkpoints, whereas the disproportionately female refugees are subject to levies from the theatre of conflict to the refugee camp (Freedman et al, 2017).

The international economy has been exploited to finance the continued conflict, insofar that a system of finance has emerged in the Syrian Civil War to acquire revenue through “looting, kidnapping and smuggling” (Yazigi, 2014). The illicit resource smuggling and sale on international markets has proved a significant source of revenue for the conflict participants. Transnational fundraising networks have mobilized to finance combatants and sustain the conflict (Lynch, 2016). This in part reflected the regional confrontation between various states; insofar that Saudi Arabia and Qatar provided weaponry and finance to various combatants in opposition to the regime, itself receiving financial assistance from Russia and Iran. Private networks also proved influential, and fundraising initiatives sought to generate revenue through mosques and charities (Lynch, 2016). The trafficking of enslaved women to be distributed in international markets for domestic labour and sexual exploitation is commonplace as a means of revenue generation. Ransoms are a significant source of revenue, though this has gendered attributes, insofar that the feminine vulnerability of the female identity coupled with the threat of sexual violence is exploited to create incentives for ransom payments. Women are perceived as commodities, to be traded on international markets for profit. Collectively the feminist perspective has proved that Syrian conflict is financed through gendered relations and exploitation of international economic markets, in this regard it therefore constitutes a new war.

The Gendered Conflict: Conclusion

Summarising, the competing and multifaceted dynamics of the Syrian conflict are difficult to arrange in a cohesive model. However, adopting a feminist perspective has proven that the conflict does constitute a new war. This paper contextualised the discussion through a literature review of the new war debate, then proceed through a gendered analysis of the actors, goals, methods, and financing of the Syrian conflict. Though the feminist perspective demonstrated the relationship between the Syrian conflict and new war, it identified a qualification. Rather than the new war assumption of identity as the single objective, the Syrian conflict is a product of multiple motivations. However, rather than a crippling shortcoming, this paper concluded that this is an opportunity for development of the new war thesis to reflect further the complex dynamics of conflict. As the new war asserts, conflict is fought by multiple actors, the feminist perspective indicates that the new war should further assert that it is fought for multiple motivations. This again demonstrates the worth of adopting the feminist perspective, insofar that it proved that Syria

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constitutes a new war, whilst establishing opportunities for further research. Concluding, this paper employed a feminist perspective and proved that the Syrian conflict constitutes a new war.

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