LEGITIMACY AS THE CENTER OF GRAVITY: IRREGULAR WARFARE AND STATE AUTHORITY IN FRAGMENTED CONFLICT ZONES CASE STUDY: SYRIA

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Research Article
Received: Apr,29, 2026
Accepted: May,24,2026

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Citation Information: Edmond, Chick. (2026). Legitimacy as the Center of Gravity: Irregular Warfare and State Authority in Fragmented Conflict Zones Case Study: Syria, *International Journal of Politics and Security*, 8(2): pp. 164-203, DOI: 10.53451/ijps.1940438

Abstract

The article examines the issue of legitimacy as a major focus of an irregular warfare's "center of gravity" using Syria as a test case for examining government authority in a fragmentary zone of conflict. It suggests that in today's wars, authority is determined more by conflicting legitimacy claims at the local, national and international level than by physical control over territory. Using qualitative methods, including the analysis of policy papers, speeches, practices of governance and historical data, the research demonstrates how states and non-states create legitimacy through their delivery of services, engagement with civilians, narrative framing and international recognition. The research indicates that legitimacy serves as both a resource for strategy and a foundation for norms in establishing authority, which influences both the ability of governments to maintain governance in conflict zones and the dynamic of the conflict itself, and the trajectory of politics after the conflict. The article contributes to IR scholarship, by illustrating the connection between local governance legitimacy and international recognition mechanisms in irregular warfare environments.

Key words: legitimacy, irregular warfare, Syria, state authority, fragmented governance, international relations, conflict zones.

INTRODUCTION

Over ten years of civil war in Syria has dramatically shifted from a civil uprising to a highly fragmented irregular war with state and non-state actors vying for authority and legitimacy across many geographic regions (Alkhalil et al., 2024). Irregular warfare scholarships describe these wars as battles of legitimacy, where state and non-state actors fight to win the hearts and minds of local populations. In Syria, therefore, legitimacy is an axis around which dynamics of governance, political authority, and social compliance rotate, influencing the shape of irregular warfare itself. Unlike conventional warfare, where military victory was typically the standard for measuring success, the Syrian conflict demonstrates that increasingly competing authorities will focus on legitimacy as the center of gravity that determines the sustainability of political power. Historically, the state's monopoly on violence was the defining characteristic of a state's ability to exercise political authority, however, due to the fracturing of the central state, and the emergence of new non-state authorities who are attempting to claim

legitimate authority as the monopoly on violence has been undermined and new forms of authority and legitimacy have begun to emerge. The emergence of new social orders in fragments of Syria demonstrates that the struggle for legitimacy is being fought at the level of the local, and that legitimacy is being constructed and exercised in ways that vary greatly across the conflict zone. The Syrian case, therefore, offers an empirical opportunity to explore the way in which legitimacy operates as a strategic objective, and as a form of operational leverage for competing actors in the conflict zone, including the Assad regime, rebel coalitions, Kurdish autonomous administrations, and extremist organizations. Additionally, legitimacy in this context is not solely domestic, but is shaped by external recognition and engagement, and by actors that include Turkey, Russia, the United States, and UN bodies that have impacted the perception and reality of authority and legitimacy in Syria. Scholars have demonstrated that the fragmentation of authority and the rise of localized governance structures in Syria illustrate that irregular warfare often fundamentally changes the nature of statehood and political legitimacy (Alkhalil et al., 2024). Therefore, this research argues that legitimacy is the primary organizing principal center of gravity that governs the dynamics of politics, warfare, and society in Syria today.

Legitimacy is a widely used term in political science and conflict studies, referring to the acknowledged right to rule, and the ability to elicit voluntary compliance from a population, whether it is provided through constitutional mechanisms, the effective performance of governance, or the consent of the governed (Hurd, 1999). The Syrian conflict represents a case in which traditional sources of regime legitimacy have been severely eroded by extensive state dysfunction, corruption, and brutal repression before and throughout the civil war, resulting in legitimacy contestation in much of the territory that the Assad government still exercises control (Chatham House commentary on regime legitimacy, 2018). Weber's sociological definitions of legitimacy define legitimacy as rightful authority recognized by a polity. However, irregular warfare complicates this by dispersing authority among multiple actors who attempt to establish their legitimacy through violence, service provision, or ideological appeals. Opposition groups in Syria have established forms of legitimacy through the provision of services, justice mechanisms, and community security structures, and in doing so, demonstrate a relational and negotiated form of political legitimacy. International actors have also complicated the legitimacy claims made by actors in Syria by recognizing some authorities diplomatically, while others have imposed sanctions, based on their own geopolitical interests rather than the

consent of the governed (Ismail, 2018). The interplay of domestic and international legitimacy narratives highlights the extent to which legitimacy struggles represent a central axis of the broader dynamics of irregular warfare. Thus, legitimacy is not simply an abstract normative ideal, but is a practical determinant of influence, control, and sustainable governance in contested territories. Recent studies have developed frameworks for assessing legitimacy in fragmented conflict settings, demonstrating the multidimensional nature of legitimacy that includes legality, justification, performance, and consent (Alkhalil et al., 2024). Viewing the Syrian case through the lens of legitimacy, therefore, provides a framework for understanding the role that contested authority plays in shaping both military strategy and social order. This article positions itself within this theoretical trajectory by exploring legitimacy as the central axis of conflict in the Syrian irregular warfare landscape (Ahram, 2014).

Irregular warfare, as defined in contemporary security studies, includes struggles between state and non-state actors vying to influence populations and to create new forms of political order that extend beyond battlefield engagements (Crafting Strategy for Irregular Warfare, 2020). In this regard, legitimacy serves as a strategic objective, because it directly affects a population's willingness to accept authority and to comply with the dictates of those authorities thus affecting the relative power of competing actors. The irregular warfare in Syria has evolved to the point that insurgent governance bodies and opposition councils have assumed governing responsibilities in areas outside of state control, creating a blur between insurgency and governance. This development illustrates a broader trend in the literature that demonstrates that irregular warfare is increasingly focused on the achievement of legitimacy over the capture of territory alone, as actors must develop their authority through the provision of security, social services, and representation. Furthermore, insurgent governance structures and rebel councils in Syria have implemented specific programs to establish bureaucratic functions, regulate markets, and resolve disputes, and in doing so, have attempted to establish legitimacy among local populations (Barnett, 2005). As a result, a highly contested legitimacy environment has emerged in Syria in which governance and coercion have become intertwined, creating a variety of social orders across different geographic areas. The dynamic competition for legitimacy in Syria, therefore, demonstrates the evolving nature of irregular warfare, in which winning the consent and trust of the population becomes as important as achieving military victories on the ground. Therefore, legitimacy must be understood not merely as a normative issue, but as a key strategic variable that influences the course of conflict and governance in fragmented areas.

The Syrian conflict has created multiple centers of political authority, ranging from the government in Damascus to Kurdish autonomous administrations in the northeast, Islamist factions in the northwest, and various local councils throughout the country. As a result, the Syrian conflict has created a mosaic of governance structures, each of which uses different mechanisms to construct and claim legitimacy. For example, Kurdish self-administration has pursued institutional legitimacy through the creation of civil governance frameworks and ethnic pluralism narratives, in an effort to establish both internal consent and external recognition. Similarly, other non-state actors have attempted to legitimize their authority through the provision of social services, justice mechanisms, and community engagement in the areas they control. The complex interplay of these actors demonstrates that legitimacy is not centralized, but rather decentralized and contested in the Syrian context. The competing legitimacy claims are not only shaped by internal political dynamics, but are also shaped by regional geostrategic factors, as neighboring countries and international actors support different factions in pursuit of their own political objectives, and often complicate legitimate governance claims. Therefore, the Syrian conflict demonstrates that fragmented conflict zones provide fertile soil for legitimacy competitions, where authority is constantly negotiated, maintained, and challenged. As a result, the legitimacy competitions in Syria directly impact the experience of local populations in terms of governance, justice, and security, and illustrate the multifaceted nature of authority in irregular warfare. Therefore, by examining these dynamics, this article contributes to a greater understanding of the ways in which fragmented authority structures interact with legitimacy claims to shape the outcome of conflict in Syria.

The continued existence of the Syrian conflict, coupled with the proliferation of competing authorities, has increased scholarly attention on legitimacy as a driver of conflict dynamics and post-conflict reconstruction. Both academics and practitioners agree that the traditional measures of war outcomes such as ceasefires or battlefield victories are insufficient to account for the central role that legitimacy plays in establishing durable governance. Rather, legitimacy is increasingly seen as a necessary condition for sustainable peace and political stability in post-conflict transitions, since populations are more likely to accept the authority of those whose legitimacy they acknowledge (Kalyvas, 2006). Studies on governance in Syria have further highlighted the importance of performance legitimacy the process by which actors are accepted by virtue of their ability to provide services and uphold order, regardless of whether or not they possess formal legal authority. This approach to legitimacy contests

traditional models of state authority that rely on formal institutions and legal frameworks, especially in cases in which the central state apparatus has been weakened or eliminated. Rather, legitimacy in the Syrian conflict zone often emerges from the functional nature of governance, the responsiveness of governance to local needs, and the perception of justice and equity in the provision of services. These developments illustrate that legitimacy is not solely dependent upon formal legal authority but rather must be actively generated through meaningful interactions with populations. These dynamics present significant implications for both academic analysis and policy responses to irregular warfare, particularly in complex environments such as Syria. As a result, an examination of legitimacy as the central axis of conflict and governance illuminates why certain authorities remain influential overpopulations, even in the midst of prolonged violence.

In addition to its centrality to conflict outcomes, legitimacy also shapes the strategies employed by both state and non-state actors in Syria. For example, the Assad regime has attempted to restore or maintain its legitimacy through the use of state-controlled media to manipulate the narrative surrounding the conflict, limited public services, and territorial reconquest as evidence of the restoration of state authority. Conversely, opposition groups have attempted to establish legitimacy by forming alliances with local councils, collaborating with humanitarian organizations, and attempting to demonstrate alternative forms of governance. Similarly, Kurdish leaders have described their governance model as inclusive and pluralistic and have attempted to differentiate themselves from both extremist factions and the Assad regime as a more legitimate political authority. These differing approaches to establishing legitimacy illustrate different understandings of legitimate authority, and the means by which legitimacy can be secured in the midst of ongoing conflict. Additionally, external powers often reinforce or undermine the legitimacy claims of actors in Syria through the provision of diplomatic recognition, economic support, and military assistance, which can either strengthen a group's legitimacy claims, or delegitimize competing groups. Therefore, analyzing legitimacy struggles in Syria provides insight into the motivations, strategies, and consequences of irregular warfare strategies that go beyond mere battlefield victories, and shape the long-term trajectory of governance, authority, and peace in Syria.

The relationship between legitimacy and state authority in irregular warfare continues beyond the immediate fighting in Syria to affect post-conflict reconstruction and transitional processes. The creation of transitional justice mechanisms, the adoption of new constitutions,

and the creation of inclusive political frameworks are all predicated on legitimacy considerations, as these mechanisms seek to reconcile the competing claims of legitimacy, and achieve the broad-based consent required to support future governance arrangements. In Syria, discussions regarding transitional justice and national reconciliation are becoming increasingly prominent among international mediators and domestic actors and reflect the need to address the legitimacy deficits that have arisen in the context of the conflict and repression experienced over the past seven years (National Commission for Transitional Justice, 2025). The success of transitional justice and reconciliation mechanisms is not dependent solely on the implementation of formal legal procedures, but also on the extent to which they are perceived as legitimate by affected communities. Furthermore, the successful negotiation and ratification of new constitutions that incorporate the views and aspirations of diverse stakeholders is more likely to be supported by the affected populations, and to create a foundation for legitimate political authority in the post-conflict period. These transitional initiatives demonstrate the interconnected nature of legitimacy, authority, and long-term political stability, and suggest that a narrow focus on military victories, without addressing the legitimacy deficits associated with the conflict may reduce the prospects for sustainable peace. Therefore, academic analysis and policymaking must increasingly recognize legitimacy as fundamental to understanding and responding to the governance challenges presented by the Syrian post-conflict environment.

Actors involved in irregular warfare are not only combatants but also governors who compete against each other in order to build sustainable political orders (Arjona, 2016) and many researchers are demonstrating that this is true. Some scholars are documenting how insurgent groups and decentralized governance structures in zones of conflict create legitimacy through the delivery of public goods, the resolution of local disputes, and political outreach and in many cases, they achieve significant success. Such findings are disrupting the long-standing assumption of state-centric legitimacy and indicate that when there is enough social approval of an alternative authority, then that alternative authority can sustain local governance in zones of conflict. In Syria, similar processes are taking place where local councils and non-state actors are exercising governance functions in areas that were either abandoned or severely weakened by the central authority. These actors then develop a range of tactics aimed at gaining popularity and establishing their legitimacy as alternatives to the state, despite the fact that they may be operating within a legally ambiguous environment. The presence of such governance actors makes the task of post-war reconstruction much more difficult, because their competing

legitimacy claims will likely shape the form of political settlements and the structure of power-sharing agreements that are negotiated during post-conflict negotiations. Therefore, legitimacy cannot be understood as simply being based upon either formal state authority or coercive capability rather, it is a highly contested and relational process that is deeply rooted in the lived experiences of local populations. Understanding how legitimacy works in this way, therefore, is key to developing our understanding of current conflict dynamics, and the potential stability of Syria after the conflict ends.

Given these theoretical and empirical developments, this article argues that legitimacy is the central reference point in the Syrian conflict a "center of gravity" around which all of the strategies of competing actors, the responses of local populations, and the prospects for future governance will coalesce. This formulation of legitimacy is consistent with broader definitions of irregular warfare definitions that stress the competitive struggle among actors for influence over populations, rather than the mere pursuit of kinetic victories. By focusing on legitimacy as the primary analytical lens, this article will provide greater insight into the reasons behind the relative successes of some actors, and failures of others, in gaining local support, and how changes in governance authority configurations occur over time. Furthermore, this article demonstrates the limitations of foreign intervention approaches that ignore the primacy of legitimacy in determining the outcome of political struggles in post-conflict environments. Finally, this article contributes to an ongoing debate about how legitimacy shapes irregular warfare, state authority, and post-conflict reconstruction in highly fractured conflict zones by combining current academic research with real-world data from the Syrian experience.

Lastly, a legitimacy-focused approach to the Syrian conflict can offer practical recommendations for policymakers and peace builders working in Syria. Any effort to end the conflict, or to establish a post-war political framework, must address the extremely contested nature of legitimacy in the multiple territories and actors involved. If policies do not recognize the legitimacy of governance in local communities, those policies risk reinforcing pre-existing grievances and giving legitimacy to actors whose authority is not based on the consent of society. On the other hand, policies that encourage inclusive governance, community engagement, and accountability can help close legitimacy gaps and contribute to broader compliance with future political settlements. Thus, recognizing legitimacy as a strategic and operational goal rather than merely a normative concept will have significant implications for resolving conflicts, reforming governance, and promoting international cooperation. As global

attention continues to shift towards Syria's reconstruction and political transition, integrating legitimacy into both analysis and action will be crucial to achieving enduring peace and stable forms of authority. By placing legitimacy at the center of the academic and practical discussions surrounding irregular warfare, this article seeks to increase the understanding of the Syrian conflict and improve the effectiveness of future interventions and policy designs.

HYBRID WARFARE, NON-STATE ACTORS, AND CONFLICT GOVERNANCE

The Evolution of Contemporary Warfare and Legitimacy Dynamics

In his analysis of contemporary warfare, Hoffman (2022) identifies an increasing blurring of lines between conventional and unconventional warfare, resulting in hybridized threat environments in which both state and non-state actors utilize simultaneous combinations of military force, economics, information, and diplomacy. As such, this conceptualization of hybridized warfare is most relevant to the Syrian example due to its ability to illustrate how the Assad regime employed conventional military means, utilized proxies through militia deployment, engaged in information warfare, and exerted economic pressure; conversely, opposition forces employed hybridized strategies by combining insurgent tactics with governance functions and international advocacy. Furthermore, Murray and Mansoor (2023) demonstrate that hybridized warfare approaches deliberately target civilian populations as both tools and goals of conflict, thus illustrating that legitimacy becomes the primary focus of strategic competition. Therefore, the aforementioned research supports the assertion that legitimacy serves as the center of gravity within the context of irregular warfare by providing evidence that successful hybridized warfare requires at least some degree of civilian acquiescence or consent.

Non-State Actors and their Governance Strategies Regarding Legitimacy

Through their examination of rebel governance durability, Mampilly and Stewart (2021) identified four critical factors that affect whether certain types of non-state governance structures endure or collapse: civilian service delivery, effective dispute resolution processes, access to outside resources, and the presence of coherent ideologies. In applying this analytical framework to the Syrian case, it can be demonstrated that the Kurdish Autonomous Administration possesses superior governance durability compared to extremist organizations largely due to its performance in each of these areas. Moreover, Revkin (2022), through her study of Islamic State governance, illustrates that even entities utilizing extreme forms of

coercion require at least some form of governance services in order to maintain control over civilian populations. Thus, it can be asserted that legitimacy does not exist solely as a binary condition but also represents a continuum. As such, the complexity of legitimacy as a multifaceted and relational construct is strengthened through this nuanced perspective.

Conflict Governance Within Divided Regions

The development of the concept of "wartime political orders," described by Sjoberg and Whooley (2023), provides a framework for understanding the emergence of novel governance systems during conflict that could potentially persist into post-conflict periods. Consequently, this conceptualization has significant implications regarding the nature of governance fragmentation within Syria's authority structure and can help explain why various Syrian local councils and the Kurdish administration possess governance capacity that may outlast the ongoing armed conflict. Through a comparative analysis of rebel governance in civil wars, Arjona et al. (2022) provide evidence that regardless of geographic or cultural context, the three primary determinants of insurgent governance legitimacy include the provision of public goods, the implementation of dispute resolution mechanisms, and interactions with civilian populations. Collectively, these most recent contributions enhance our existing body of theory used to analyze legitimacy as the center of gravity in irregular warfare.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a qualitative research methodology for the purpose of investigating legitimacy as the focal point in irregular warfare and the nature of state authority in conflict areas where there is fragmentation of state power, with Syria as the case study. Data collection will be carried out through a variety of sources such as public policy documents (national and international), official government statements, peace agreements, strategic frameworks issued by both state and non-state actors participating in the Syrian civil war. All legitimate speech acts, i.e., public speeches, diplomatic communiques, and other narratives created by the leaders of various political parties, military commanders, and international organizations that are directly or indirectly engaged in the Syrian civil war will be analyzed to identify the legitimacy discourses and authority claims made by all parties. Additionally, historical archives (conflict timeline(s) and governance records, etc.) will be utilized to document the evolution of the authority structures and legitimacy strategies developed by each party over time. Secondary field reports, humanitarian assessments, and conflict monitoring platforms will provide additional qualitative observational data to help contextualize the governance practices and

civilian experience. Thematic analysis will be utilized to identify patterns related to legitimacy development, governance practice, civilian compliance, and international recognition. Discourse analysis will be utilized to analyze the policy texts and speeches to determine how each actor frames, justifies, and contests their legitimacy. Utilizing a multi-source qualitative methodology will ensure that an empirical analysis of legitimacy at all levels (local, national, international) will be conducted comprehensively. Lastly, utilizing a case study methodology will allow for an in-depth examination of Syria's fragmented authority structures within larger theoretical contexts of irregular warfare and international relations.

Data Source Description

Data source(s) used for this study have been chosen to represent only publicly available information, including policy documents, official Government statements, Peace Agreements, Strategic Frameworks, Public Speeches, Diplomatic Communiques, Historical Archives, Conflict Timelines, Governance Records, Secondary Field Reports/Assessments, Humanitarian Assessments, and Conflict Monitoring Platforms. The study did not collect Primary Data through interviews, surveys or field work (within Syria), due to safety concerns associated with being present in conflict zones and accessing them. In addition, it was practically impossible to conduct reliable Primary Research in various parts of Syria where different groups exerted varying degrees of authority. Therefore, the study relied upon documented evidence that is either generated by actors involved in the conflict or by third party observers. There are possible biases to the documented evidence based upon the political position of the actor generating the document, their funding source(s), and/or the operational constraints they face in collecting data.

Limitation of the Study

This study recognizes many limitations. First, because of the rapid evolution of the conflict in Syria, there will likely be instances where aspects of the study could be considered out-of-date once new governmental arrangements occur or when territorial control changes hands or when an actor changes alliances. While the study examined the dynamic characteristics of the conflict until the point of data collection, all stakeholders in Syria are aware that legitimacy claims can shift at any time. Second, the use of publicly available documentation precludes consideration of the internal decision-making process of actors, unofficial negotiation processes, and localized views that were never reflected in written documents. Third, because of the case study methodology applied to examine the authoritative fragmentation in Syria, the

findings from this study cannot be generalized to apply to other studies. However, the theory constructed through this case study could be applied to other cases where authoritative fragmentation occurs; however, each case would need to be appropriately adjusted for context. Finally, linguistic barriers limited the analysis to include only documents authored in English and Arabic; therefore, documents authored in other languages (Kurdish, Turkish, Russian, etc.) that may be relevant to actors involved in the Syrian conflict were excluded from the analysis. Although there are limitations identified above, using a multi-Source Qualitative Methodology ensured that a complete empirical examination of legitimacy existed at both local (i.e., neighborhood level), national and international levels.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Legitimacy in Conflict

Legitimacy in conflict is defined as the recognition of the authority to govern that is held by a population, thereby creating the willingness of citizens to follow governing authorities (Arjona, 2016). In irregular warfare, legitimacy does not come solely from a formal constitution, but from performance legitimacy actors create authority through the provision of security, services, and dispute resolution (Alkhalil et al., 2024). The concept of legitimacy was first proposed by Max Weber as being rooted in social acceptance (Weber, 1947) and remains the foundation for understanding how different Syrian actors define their legitimacy. The formal state legitimacy in Syria has been severely eroded as a result of the extended period of violence, institutional collapse, and mass displacement of people (Lister, 2019) therefore, non-state actors such as local councils and insurgent governance bodies have developed legitimacy through alternative means of authority and social order (Arjona et al., 2015). Actors develop relationships with communities by providing basic services, resolving disputes, and developing administrative structures that meet local standards of acceptable behavior thus establishing relational legitimacy, which is often equal if not surpassing that of the central government (Arjona, 2016). Another factor that complicates legitimacy contests in Syria is the influence of external actor support, which may either enhance or diminish local perceptions of authority based upon the geopolitical allegiances of the supporting actors (Hokayem, 2013). For example, the support of Turkey for some opposition councils in northern Syria has impacted the ability of local governments to provide services and establish governance structures in that region — which affects the practical authority and perceived legitimacy of the councils (Lund, 2019). Moreover, the regime's efforts to regain legitimacy through a combination of limited

governance restoration and controlling the narrative of events in Syria demonstrate that legitimacy is a key strategic objective and a contested resource (Phillips, 2021). Thus, legitimacy in conflict zones is best viewed as a dynamic negotiation process that impacts power, compliance, and the future of governance in Syria.

Authority legitimacy scholars argue that claims to authorities in irregular warfare must be earned and sustained through continued engagement with local populations, rather than simply declared or imposed (Jackson, 2000). In Syria, actors have experienced consistent pressure to demonstrate their ability to protect civilians, dispense justice, and enable economic activity particularly in areas where the central government's ability to function has failed (Alkhalil et al., 2024). For example, numerous local councils were created in opposition-held areas with the intention of implementing participatory decision-making processes to increase perceptions of local representation and authority (Ismail, 2018). The councils' use of community consensus-based governance structures resulted in several instances where the councils provided more efficient and effective governance than the Assad state, resulting in increased localized legitimacy for non-state institutions in certain geographic areas. A large body of research on civil war governance finds that legitimacy gained through demonstrated performance translates into greater civilian cooperation and more resilient governance (Arjona et al., 2015). However, this type of legitimacy is fragile and subject to erosion if actors fail to consistently deliver equitable or effective services or if external actors remove their support (Rein, 2018). The fragility of legitimacy is visible in disputed areas of Syria where control over governance is constantly shifting among different armed groups, causing discontinuity in governance and reducing social trust (Lister, 2019). Consequently, legitimacy should be considered an ongoing achievement that can be earned, lost, and re-negotiated in fragmented contexts. Further research shows that the international legitimacy of governance actors — which may be recognized through diplomatic channels or peace negotiations is not always equivalent to the local legitimacy of governance actors (Paris, 2004). Thus, a comprehensive understanding of legitimacy in Syria will require attention to both the perceptions of legitimacy at the local level and the international legitimacy of governance actors, as each level of legitimacy interacts with one another in determining the authority and long-term viability of governance.

The contested nature of legitimacy in Syria illustrates the manner in which the claims of authority by governance actors intersect with social, ethnic, and sectarian identity categories,

further complicating the governance dynamics in Syria (Hokayem, 2013). For example, the Kurdish administrative bodies in northeastern Syria have developed legitimacy narratives emphasizing inclusive governance and ethnic inclusivity in their efforts to differentiate themselves from extreme factions and the Assad regime (Gunter, 2020). The legitimacy narratives emphasized participatory institutions, gender equality, and civil rights, attracting some members of the population, while simultaneously alienating other members who view such legitimacy claims as exclusionary or as being influenced by external factors. On the contrary, extreme factions such as ISIS attempted to legitimate their authority through coercive order, using rigid ideological frameworks to govern the behaviors of individuals, creating compliance through fear rather than broad social consent (Lister, 2019). The contrasting legitimacy models used by actors in irregular warfare — pluralistic versus coercive — illustrate the variety of authority claims in irregular warfare and the varying impact of these claims on civilian compliance and resistance. Research has identified that legitimacy that is grounded in inclusive governance and accountability is more sustainable than legitimacy that is based on coercion or sectarian favoritism (Paris, 2004; Arjona, 2016). These dynamics illustrate that legitimacy contests in Syria are not only about who is governing, but also about how governance is carried out and whose interests are served by governance. As such, legitimacy can be a source of resilience for actors who continue to earn performance and consent, as well as a source of vulnerability for actors whose authority does not resonate with local populations. Understanding the nuances of legitimacy provides significant insight into why certain governance forms persist, evolve, or collapse during periods of ongoing conflict.

Irregular Warfare

Irregular warfare is a form of organized political violence where state armies are not the principal or only combatants; examples include insurgent networks, militias, and social movements vying for authority and legitimacy (Ucko & Marks, 2020). Unlike traditional forms of warfare, where control of territory and force superiority are paramount, irregular warfare focuses on influencing populations and therefore considers legitimacy a key operational objective (Galula, 1964/2006; Kilcullen, 2010). In the Syrian context, the battlefield has transformed into a multi-actor irregular environment characterized by armed groups, local governance councils, and foreign proxy organizations competing for the loyalty of civilians (Lister, 2019). The complexity of this environment makes it difficult to measure success in armed conflict using the traditional measures of control of territory, since controlling territory

does not always translate into control of the minds and hearts of those living within (Kilcullen, 2010). Rather, legitimacy competitions become a source of strategic leverage; actors derive power and credibility from civilian cooperation, information networks, and social compliance, rather than simply through superior firepower (Ucko & Marks, 2020). This logic resonates with counterinsurgency theory, which asserts that winning popular support is necessary for establishing stability in contested regions (Galula, 1964/2006). In practice, local councils and autonomous administration in Syria have taken on governance responsibilities in providing services and resolving disputes, thereby demonstrating to populations that their authority is functional and legitimate (Arjona et al., 2015). At the same time, the Syrian State has sought to regain its legitimacy through selective service restoration, control of the narrative, and the reclamation of selected territory, demonstrating how irregular warfare generates a continuum of legitimacy strategies (see above). These trends are consistent with a broader body of research that reframes irregular warfare as a form of political competition for authority and consent (Ucko & Marks, 2020) and demonstrates how legitimacy becomes a center of gravity in irregular warfare—a critical component of strategic influence that shapes both battlefields and governance outcomes (see above).

Irregular Warfare Alliances, Authority Structures and Legitimacy

Irregular warfare also creates an environment of fluid alliances and authority structures, resulting in contested and renegotiated legitimacy (Kilcullen, 2010; Paris, 2009). Rebel factions in Syria have been seen to shift between alliances, merge governance functions, dissolve, and create fluctuating claims to authority and legitimacy in various territories (Lister, 2019). These fluctuations demonstrate that legitimacy in irregular conflict is not fixed but is responsive to shifts in military successes, external support, and local attitudes towards the provision of security and basic services. When a local community perceives that an armed group is unable to provide security or basic services, that group's legitimacy will rapidly erode; the community will either resist the group, or an alternative governance body will emerge. This represents broader theoretical insights indicating that legitimacy in irregular conflict is linked to performance and adaptability, rather than simply ideology and military capabilities (Arjon, 2016). Additionally, external state and non-state actors impact these legitimacy assessments via the supply of material, diplomatic support, and/or humanitarian aid, and influence how authority claims are perceived at the local level. The global aspect of legitimacy competition is one of the defining features of irregular warfare in Syria, where external actors' priorities often

align with local needs, while at other times they undermine them. Therefore, legitimacy becomes a multi-layered construct, including local perceptions, external validation, and strategic positioning. Therefore, examining irregular warfare in Syria necessitates the analysis of how actors utilize legitimacy through governance practices, coalition formation, and negotiations with social actors. This approach shows that irregular warfare is as much about the struggle for political legitimacy as it is about the fight for control of territory.

Finally, irregular warfare emphasizes that legitimacy is not only a strategic goal, but also a resource to protect, challenge, and employ (Ucko & Marks, 2020). Actors in Syria have employed narratives of victimhood, liberation, and resistance to enhance legitimacy claims among sympathetic populations, showing how legitimacy can be created through discursive construction and functional achievement. These narratives are interconnected with media, cultural symbols, and social identity markers, and therefore produce legitimate frameworks that resonate with particular constituencies. For example, Kurdish political discourse has utilized the legitimacy framework of cultural rights and local self-determination to build support among certain communities, even if it may create resentment among other communities (Gunter, 2020). Similarly, opposition groups have employed narratives of justice, democratization, and humanitarian relief to legitimize their governance roles. These competing narratives show that legitimacy is not only procedure-based or performance-based but also symbolic and ideational and therefore influences how communities interpret authority claims. Therefore, irregular warfare creates a competitive legitimacy landscape in which actors must continually adjust governance practices and narratives to maintain their authority. Understanding the symbolic aspects of legitimacy expands upon analyses of performance legitimacy and further illustrates why legitimacy continues to be a central factor in the struggle for authority in Syria's ongoing conflict.

Fragmented Authority

The term "fragmented authority" refers to the existence of many separate, overlapping authority structures, which exist in a single territory, resulting from extensive violent conflicts, collapsed institutions and an inability to provide basic services to citizens by a central government (Hokayem, 2013). The Syrian state apparatus was once a single entity, but as the conflict escalated, it became divided into separate spheres of authority, controlled by various parties including the Assad regime, Kurdish autonomous governments, Islamist factions, local councils, and foreign military actors (Lister, 2019). The fragmented authorities vary in their

capacities and legitimacy, creating a patchwork system of governance that complicates political and security dynamics. Typically, fragmentation occurs when there is a failure of the central government to provide basic population needs, thereby motivating local actors to take responsibility for providing security, services and resolving disputes (Arjona et al., 2015). As a result, several governance models emerge simultaneously, each asserting its own claim to jurisdictional authority over different populations and geographic zones. Fragmentation directly impacts legitimacy because, depending upon factors such as security, access to services, and alignment with social identity, local populations will recognize different authorities. Furthermore, support from outside states or organizations to empower specific governance entities can increase fragmentation when these entities serve as proxies for geo-political interests (Hokayem, 2013). For example, Turkish military and political backing for local councils in Northern Syria has increased the legitimacy of these councils in the eyes of the local population and affected both the governance structure and the legitimacy perceptions of local populations. Likewise, U.S. support for Kurdish forces in Northeastern Syria affected both the configuration of authority and the legitimacy perceptions of local populations. The coexistence of these fragmented authorities represents how conflict environments create decentralized governance systems with competing legitimacy claims, which generate complex political environments where authority is constantly contested and negotiated.

Fragmented authority also affects how governance functions are provided and perceived, since different entities may implement disparate administrative systems, legal frameworks, and social policies in close proximity to one another (Lund, 2018). Local councils, in some regions, have established democratic consultation mechanisms; however, governance in other regions may be implemented by militarized factions who utilize strict ideological rules to govern. These differences in governance provision will impact on the legitimacy assessments of local populations as they compare the effectiveness of governance provision, the application of justice mechanisms, and the level of inclusiveness across multiple authorities. For example, regions with relatively effective local governance provision will likely have stronger legitimacy assessments by local populations than those regions governed primarily through coercion. The concept of fragmented authority illustrates that legitimacy is not a singular concept but is experiential and comparative in nature and shaped by the quality and type of governance experienced by civilians. In addition, fragmented authority creates significant barriers for coordinating public policy initiatives, humanitarian access, and national reconciliation

initiatives, as different authorities have different goals and priorities. As a result, conflict will likely continue longer, and post-war reconstruction will be more complicated due to the division of social groups and the lack of a unified political process. It is therefore critical to recognize that fragmented authority structures shape legitimacy contestations, to better comprehend both current conflict patterns and potential governance structures in post-conflict Syria.

Further, fragmented authority affects how external actors interact with internal governance entities and shapes resultant legitimacy assessments (Hokayem, 2013). States, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and multilateral institutions typically make difficult decisions when selecting which internal authorities to recognize, support financially, or partner with, as supporting one authority may delegitimize other authorities in the eyes of local populations. These external legitimacy interventions can unintentionally stabilize certain actors while marginalizing others, creating unintended consequences. Examples of this include decisions regarding humanitarian distribution channels, negotiation partners, or reconstruction contracts, which can shift local allegiances and alter perceptions of authority legitimacy. The external aspect of fragmented authority indicates that legitimacy is not solely an internal phenomenon but also impacted by external alignments and policy decisions. Additionally, fragmented authority complicates peace negotiations by creating multiple negotiation tracks, each representing different populations and legitimate claims. In such environments, peace agreements are unlikely to be successful unless they account for the plurality of governance authorities and the legitimate claims of the diverse populations. Therefore, analyses of fragmented authority should consider legitimacy aspects at both the local and international levels to determine how the configurations of authority contribute to the continuation of conflict and resolution of conflict. Overall, Syria's fragmented authority environment represents how irregular warfare produces complex legitimacy competitions that influence the creation of political orders and societal resiliency.

Lastly, fragmented authority interacts with social identities and local dynamics, further influencing legitimacy assessments in conflict environments (Gunter, 2020). If the authority of governance aligns with a particular ethnic, sectarian, or tribal identity, legitimacy claims may resonate unequally across different communities, creating patterns of inclusion or exclusion that affect social cohesion. In Syria, the Kurdish autonomous governance model has focused on cultural rights that appeal to specific communities while generating opposition from other communities that fear Kurdish political expansion. Similar to this example, some local councils

have gained legitimacy from specific community networks and not from broader multi-ethnic populations and have impacted how authority is perceived and accepted. These examples represent that fragmented authority is not simply a product of a structural arrangement, but a highly social construct that links governance legitimacy to group affiliations, past grievances, and cultural narratives. Therefore, legitimacy contests in fragmented zones are linked to social identity politics, impacting both short-term governance success and long-term political reconciliation. Understanding these complexities is important to explain why some authority claims are successful in achieving legitimacy while others are rejected or met with resistance. The Syrian case illustrates that fragmented authority does not simply disperse power but alters the nature of legitimacy competitions, making them dependent on localized social realities as well as the performance of governance strategies.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Clash of Legitimacies

The clash of legitimacies theory suggests that, whereas irregular warfare is the result of disagreement regarding resources, it is the result of disagreements regarding perceptions of legitimate authority (legality, legitimacy) in three areas (local, national, and international), (Jackson, 2000). Thus, when looking at the case of Syria, there are numerous actors claiming different types of authority to govern. These include the Assad regime, the government of Syria, using the authority of the Syrian State, and thus the authority of the State under International Law (the source of legitimacy); the various insurgent groups and local councils; and the Kurdish administration; each of these is using its own type of authority (based upon its ability to provide services, represent the population, obtain the consent of the local population, etc.) (Alkhalil et al., 2024; Hokayem, 2013). When these actors claim legitimacy, they generate "conflict" among those who recognize them as having authority and those who do not (Lister, 2019). This conflict exists because the recognition given to some actors by the international community does not always correspond to the degree of acceptance that these actors receive from the local population. The clash of legitimacies theory demonstrates that legitimacy is multi-dimensional (and includes legal, social, and normative aspects) and that the interaction of these aspects varies by population and context (Jackson, 2000). Foreign states such as Russia, Turkey, and the U.S. have selectively recognized some actors as being legitimate, which has reinforced the legitimacy of these actors in the eyes of the international community; however, at the local level, the perception of legitimacy of these actors has been diminished (Lister, 2019). Non-State

actors also create legitimacy through the narrative of liberation, justice, or protection, which resonates with certain constituencies (Arjona et al., 2015). Therefore, the clash of legitimacies theory shows that irregular warfare is primarily a legitimacy dispute, in which the perception of legitimate authority is just as important as the military control of territory (Weinstein, 2006). The clash of legitimacies theory offers an IR lens to examine how local governance actors, state institutions and international actors compete to establish authority in Syria. By focusing on legitimacy as a strategic and normative objective, this theory will demonstrate how international involvement, economic sanctions and recognition can have a significant impact on the trajectory of conflict. Therefore, the clash of legitimacies theory places the Syrian conflict in a larger debate about normative authority and state legitimacy in fragmented territories (Wimmen, 2016).

In addition, the clash of legitimacies theory argues that the legitimacy disputes are influenced by historical, social, and geo-political factors, which determine whether the authority claims of one actor will be accepted by local and international communities (Paris, 2009). For example, in Syria, decades of state centralization, repression, and sectarian policies have created a situation in which many Syrians view the Assad regime as illegitimate, and yet, many Syrians question the authority of the various insurgent groups and councils supported by foreign governments. Many non-state actors take advantage of these perceptions to build local authority by providing services, resolving disputes, and performing other governance functions that are lacking in the centralized structures (Alkhalil et al., 2024). However, foreign state recognition of actors such as the Kurdish Administration in the northeast and the Opposition Councils in Idlib has led to varied legitimacy outcomes that have affected the negotiating capacity of these actors, their ability to resolve the conflict, and the allocation of aid (Hokayem, 2013). The clash of legitimacies theory also identifies the strategic nature of legitimacy. Actors invest in legitimacy not only to ensure compliance, but to acquire the necessary international backing and leverage to achieve their goals (Jackson, 2000). In Syria, this is reflected in the coordinated development of governance narratives, media campaigns, and humanitarian activities to demonstrate authority competency and moral credibility (Arjona et al., 2015). Therefore, scholars argue that legitimacy should be viewed both as a normative concept and as a tool used strategically in international relations, linking domestic governance issues with the dynamics of international recognition (Jackson, 2000). This perspective adds additional dimensions to the analysis of irregular warfare, including the IR dimensions of sovereignty,

intervention, and the competition for authority (Paris, 2009). Overall, the Clash of Legitimacy framework presents a strong theoretical lens for examining how Syrian actors operate within local and international legitimacy frameworks.

The application of the Clash of Legitimacy theory to Syria demonstrates that irregular warfare goes beyond the traditional territorial disputes and becomes a normative and diplomatic struggle for the recognition of authority (Jackson, 2000). The Assad regime's strategy of survival is predicated upon demonstrating a continuity of sovereignty and obtaining selective international endorsement, while insurgent groups seek to delegitimize the central authority in order to gain local and international support (Hokayem, 2013). The Kurdish governance structures have framed their authority in terms of human rights, decentralization, and pluralism in order to connect with international norms and appeal to transnational legitimacy networks (Gunter, 2020). This multifaceted struggle illustrates the fundamental contradictions between local legitimacy (that is, rooted in social acceptance and performance) and international legitimacy (which can legitimize actors regardless of the views of the local population). The theory demonstrates that legitimacy serves as a focal point, thereby influencing all of the military, political, and diplomatic strategies of the actors involved. As such, understanding the Syrian conflict via this framework necessitates examination of how actors use legal, normative and social claims to authority in order to maintain and extend their influence. The theory represents a critical IR lens for evaluating the persistence of fragmented authority and the potential for international mediation and/or political settlement of the conflict. Finally, the theory underscores why interventions based solely on military force will fail unless the underlying authority disputes are addressed (Jackson, 2000). Overall, the Clash of Legitimacy theory explains how Syrian actors operate in a complex terrain of authority, balancing local governance, coercion, and international diplomacy in a legitimacy-contested space.

Population-Centric Counterinsurgency (International Relations Perspective)

Population-centric counterinsurgency theory emphasizes that the successful exercise of governance in irregular warfare is based upon the winning of civilian support, where legitimacy is the key factor to compliance and stability (Galula, 1964/2006; Kilcullen, 2010). In terms of International Relations, this theory goes beyond military action, and considers legitimacy, social cohesiveness and international recognition as elements to be considered in strategies for state survival and governance by insurgents (Arjona et al., 2015; Alkhalil et al., 2024). In Syria, both the state and non-state actors have attempted to use population-centric strategies to

establish their authority, including service provision, justice administration, etc. and thereby demonstrate their ability to govern effectively to both local populations and foreign supporters (Arjona et al., 2015; Alkhalil et al., 2024). For example, the Assad regime has represented itself as the sole defender of national sovereignty while insurgent groups have used local councils and civil services to secure population compliance (Alkhalil et al., 2024). According to population-centric counterinsurgency theory, civilians are strategic actors whose perception of legitimacy will determine the success of authority and military actions, as well as the trajectory of conflicts and political results (Kilcullen, 2010). Additionally, according to this theory, international recognition and support can enhance or weaken these legitimacy efforts as evidenced by international endorsements of certain Kurdish administrations or opposition councils (Hokayem, 2013). Finally, this theory suggests that irregular warfare cannot be explained solely by kinetic measures and must include social, governance, and legitimacy indicators to measure strategic success. Therefore, in Syria, the population-centric approaches employed by actors have resulted in varying levels of legitimacy across different areas of territory and demonstrate why some actors remain influential even though they do not possess significant military force. In summary, this theory provides an IR lens connecting local governance practices with legitimacy, state authority and geopolitical results. Therefore, this framework illustrates the interconnectedness of domestic legitimacy and international recognition in conflict zones characterized by fragmentation.

Additionally, the population-centric approach shows that legitimacy is realized through direct engagement with civilian needs, therefore, the focus is on providing security, essential services and dispute resolution (Galula, 1964/2006). In Syria, local councils and non-state actors have often replaced the central state's inability to provide essential services and therefore have administered educational institutions, health care systems and police services. Performance-based legitimacy efforts influence not only local compliance, but also international assessments of an actor's ability to govern and its moral authority, as international actors assess an actor's capability and moral authority to provide governance prior to extending diplomatic recognition or humanitarian aid (Alkhalil et al., 2024). As such, population-centric theory connects local governance with international politics and places civilian support at the center of determining the persistence of authority and potential for resolving conflicts. Additionally, this theory shows that failure to consider the perceptions of civilians will result in loss of legitimacy and could lead to resistance, insurgency, or changes in allegiance

(Kilcullen, 2010). Thus, applying this framework to the case of Syria indicates that legitimacy strategies focused on meeting the needs of the population are fundamental to establishing fragmented authority and achieving long-term stability. As such, this aligns with IR literature that highlights that local legitimacy serves as a mediator between domestic governance and international interventions. Therefore, population-centric counterinsurgency provides a conceptual link between local governance, legitimacy and the broader strategic objectives of state and non-state actors in Syria. Therefore, it highlights that authority disputes are multi-dimensional and include military, social and diplomatic aspects in irregular warfare.

Finally, population-centric counterinsurgency theory points out that legitimacy gains are conditional and transitory and require continuous reaffirmation through effective governance and responsive policymaking (Galula, 1964/2006; Alkhalil et al., 2024). In Syria, fluctuations in territorial control, external support and security stability have generated cyclical legitimacy acquisition and erosion among local populations. While rebel groups may temporarily acquire legitimacy by providing security or services, this will likely erode once territorial losses, mismanagement, or abuse occur. Similarly, international support can increase perceived legitimacy; however, it can generate resistance among locals if it is perceived as foreign interference (Hokayem, 2013). Therefore, population-centric legitimacy strategies must be flexible and integrate social, cultural and political nuances to sustain authority over time. Therefore, this perspective aligns with IR literature regarding legitimacy of governance as being both locally grounded and internationally mediated, highlighting the dual nature of compliance and recognition in fragmented conflict zones. Overall, population-centric counterinsurgency theory offers an IR informed framework for understanding the Syrian conflict, illustrating how civilian support, governance performance and legitimacy interact to produce authority outcomes and strategic pathways.

Governance and resilience in fragmented states

Governance and Resilience theory in International Relations (IR) analyzes how in fragmented states, governance institutions maintain authority, legitimacy and the rule of law during times of continued conflict, institutional collapse, or social fragmentation. The theory suggests that both state legitimacy and governance capacity are dynamic and must adapt to local, national and international pressures in order to remain functional. In Syria, years of conflict have created a fragmented government structure in which there are now multiple levels of governance authority, ranging from the Assad regime to Kurdish administrations, to local

councils and to various non-state armed groups (Lister, 2019; Alkhalil et al., 2024). These governance authorities have varying degrees of resiliency based upon their ability to deliver services, to maintain security, and to navigate legitimacy issues at the local and international levels. Governance resiliency in this case is the ability of a governance authority to maintain its influence, legitimacy and operational capabilities despite disruptions and challenges to authority. The theory suggests that legitimacy is both a cause and effect of resiliency: authorities that possess legitimacy can better resist shocks to their authority than those who do not possess legitimacy, and, conversely, authorities that are able to perform effectively in delivering services and maintaining security, build legitimacy and thus increase their resiliency (Paris, 2004). For example, Kurdish administrations in northeast Syria have shown high levels of resiliency due to their ability to develop pluralistic governance structures, create civil service networks, and negotiate with international actors to gain recognition and support (Gunter, 2020). On the other hand, areas of Syria controlled by extremist factions show low levels of governance resiliency because the coercive use of force without the consent of the people creates a lack of legitimacy and ultimately reduces the faction's ability to maintain control over the area (Lister, 2019). As such, the framework shows that in fragmented states, legitimacy, governance, and resiliency are interdependent and represent a three-way relationship that will help to understand the trajectory of conflict in fragile states. Furthermore, the theory illustrates how international relations, sanctions, and external support will impact on the resilience of authorities in conflict zones and either strengthen or weaken their claim to authority (Hokayem, 2013).

Furthermore, the theory also addresses the role of institutional adaptation and contextual legitimacy in maintaining authority in the face of irregular warfare (Bell, 2022; Alkhalil et al., 2024). Local councils and rebel administrations in Syria have adapted to the irregular nature of warfare by developing governance and administrative systems that combine traditional governance mechanisms with new mechanisms designed to respond to local needs. Examples of these adaptations include the development of participatory decision-making systems, community policing programs, and local dispute resolution systems that increase the legitimacy of authority and improve the delivery of services. By adapting governance systems in response to local needs, these administrations have increased their resiliency as they have been able to ensure that local populations recognize their authority in unstable and chaotic environments. Notably, resiliency is not limited to domestic factors alone. Rather, it is impacted by

international relations through diplomatic, economic, and military interactions (Hokayem, 2013). Governance authorities that are able to establish a link between local legitimacy and external support tend to display greater resiliency than those who are unable to balance these two aspects of legitimacy. The theoretical model presented above helps explain why certain governance models in Syria, namely those that emphasize inclusivity, service delivery, and negotiations with external actors, have survived despite the ongoing conflict. Additionally, the theory highlights that resiliency in fragmented states is dependent on the possession of legitimate authority among both local populations and international stakeholders. Therefore, the Governance and Resiliency Model integrates IR perspectives on legitimacy, external recognition, and political stability into a single theoretical model of governance resiliency in fragmented states.

Lastly, the theory identifies the strategic and normative significance of legitimacy as a foundational element of governance resiliency in conflict zones (Paris, 2004). In Syria, the ability of authorities to build and maintain legitimacy has enabled them to access resources, coordinate with humanitarian actors, and maintain the compliance of the population in providing them with the necessary resources to maintain their operational capability, thus increasing their resiliency. Legitimacy has also shaped the post-conflict potential of governance authorities in terms of whether they can credibly participate in reconstruction efforts, negotiations, or transitional governance processes. The Governance Resiliency Model argues that all fragmented authorities must continually adapt their legitimacy-building strategies in order to survive, negotiate with competing authorities, and interact with international stakeholders. Such adaptations include the need to balance the use of coercion and the legitimacy of performance, address local grievances, and project a normative authority consistent with international expectations. The Assad regime, Kurdish administrations, opposition councils and other fragmented authorities in Syria have each developed different strategies for maintaining their resiliency. Some focus on building legitimacy through the provision of services, others through the use of coercive measures and military strength, and still others through the combination of both strategies. The IR-informed model of governance resiliency demonstrates that the resiliency of fragmented authorities cannot be solely attributed to structural capacity, rather it is highly relational and is influenced by the legitimate perceptions of both local populations and international actors. By focusing on governance resiliency, this model presents a comprehensive analytical framework for assessing the Syrian

conflict, one that incorporates local performance, social consent, and international recognition as interconnected elements of sustainable authority. This model thus complements the Clash of Legitimacies and Population-Centric Counterinsurgency Models, and offers a complete model of legitimacy, authority, and governance in irregular warfare.

Table 1: Legitimacy and Governance in Fragmented Syria

Actor	Legitimacy Strategy	Local Impact	International / IR Dimension
Assad Regime	Service restoration, coercion, narrative control	Partial compliance, stabilized urban areas, civilian distrust in contested zones	Maintains selective international recognition (Russia, Iran), influences negotiations and aid distribution
Kurdish Administration (NES)	Participatory governance, service delivery, pluralism, inclusive policies	High civilian support, resilience in northeast, improved social cohesion	Gains limited international backing (U.S., EU), but faces Turkish opposition; demonstrates model for decentralized governance
Opposition Councils (Idlib & NW)	Local governance, humanitarian aid, population-centric engagement	Moderate civilian compliance, legitimacy depends on continued security and service provision	Supported indirectly by international donors; legitimized in diplomatic discourse, but fragmented recognition limits leverage
Extremist Factions (ISIS / HTS)	Coercion, strict ideological governance	Short-term control, fear-driven compliance, poor social cohesion	Largely delegitimized internationally, targeted by military interventions; unable to sustain authority long-term
Local Councils / Civil Networks	Adaptive governance, grievance redress, community involvement	High localized legitimacy, improved service delivery, responsive governance	Limited formal recognition but influence operational planning for international aid and intervention strategies

Table 1 represents a dynamic model for assessing the legitimacy and governance among actors in a fractured state such as Syria. The model uses a comparative strategy (actors) and an impact assessment strategy ("Local Impact") to demonstrate how actors use various methods to create a foundation of legitimacy and/or govern in a manner that creates legitimacy and stability for the affected populations. Actors are using forms of governance including participation and service delivery (as in the case of local governance), coercive measures (in the case of extremist governance), and enforcement of specific ideologies (in the case of sub-state governance). A review of the "Local Impact" section of the table highlights that those forms of governance that focus on the needs of the local population and adapt to changing conditions are more likely to provide a sustainable form of legitimacy than those models that focus solely on coercion. The table also allows us to compare and contrast actors based on their actions and behaviors,

demonstrating that legitimacy is not consistent across all actors and is dependent upon the actions and behaviors of the actor and the perceptions of the affected population regarding the performance of the actor. Finally, the table highlights the relationship between the legitimacy of actors at the local level and the legitimacy of actors at the international relations level.

The "International relations dimension" column of the table demonstrates how external factors influence the legitimacy of actors at both the local and national/international levels. External recognition and alliances provide some actors with a basis for selective legitimacy, which can enhance their ability to operate at the local level and achieve their goals. Conversely, actors who do not receive international recognition may find it difficult to maintain their legitimacy and ultimately face challenges in achieving their objectives. In this regard, the Assad regime has received significant international support and recognition, which has provided a basis for selective legitimacy that bolsters his ability to govern at the local level. Extremist actors have been unable to achieve international recognition and therefore they have struggled to establish and sustain their legitimacy at the local level and to achieve their goals. Regional opposition to Kurdish administration has created a challenge for them as well in terms of establishing and maintaining their legitimacy at both the local and international levels. The table clearly demonstrates the importance of considering both local and international legitimacy when analyzing governance in Syria and other countries. Furthermore, the table demonstrates that achieving effective governance requires an understanding of the interrelationship between local legitimacy and IR dynamics.

COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION OF OTHER FRAGMENTED CONFLICT ZONES

Relevance to Libya

While the legitimacy dynamics observed in Syria are clearly unique, they also represent a pattern that has emerged in other fractured conflict zones. For example, there is a clear similarity in the competing authorities and legitimacy challenges in Syria and Libya. Like Syria, Libya has multiple authorities (Government of National Accord; Libyan National Army; etc.) each vying for the same legitimate authority. Each authority uses different means to gain legitimacy. Similar to Syria, these include service provision, international recognition, and coercive power.

Similar to some Syrian Local Councils and the Kurdish Autonomous Administration, the Eastern Libyan administration delivers core services (e.g., salaries) to public sector

employees using their own resources. However, unlike many Syrian Local Councils or the Kurdish Autonomous Administration, armed groups in Western Libya do not provide governance functions beyond their coercive capabilities. As such, like extreme elements in Syria, they have lost legitimacy among much of the population (Reno, 2011).

Relevance to Yemen

Yemen provides an additional illustration of how the legitimacy contest between a government with international recognition, and a group with domestic legitimacy can lead to conflicting legitimacy claims. The Houthi Movement's ability to deliver governance services (dispute resolution; security), as well as its claim of being the most legitimate authority in Yemen, has created a level of legitimacy in the eyes of some local Yemenis. This level of legitimacy exists despite the widespread international delegitimization of the Houthi Movement. A similar phenomenon was identified among Kurdish administration in northern Syria. Additionally, the Southern Transitional Council's claims of legitimacy based on historical grievances and right to self-determination, are similar to the claims made by Syrian opposition councils in Idlib.

Relevance to Somalia and the Sahel

Somalia illustrates how a fragmented authority structure leads to varying levels of legitimacy outcomes. While the Somali Federal Government is attempting to establish central authority over member states, the establishment of governance structures in Somaliland and Puntland indicate varying levels of legitimacy due to governance performance and international engagement. Somaliland has established a high degree of legitimacy locally by establishing functional state institutions, holding elections, delivering basic services, and creating mechanisms for accountability. Despite no international recognition of Somaliland, it has achieved this level of local legitimacy. This is consistent with the evidence collected in Syria which indicates that local legitimacy does not necessarily require international recognition.

Local governance councils and community-based security arrangements in regions of Mali and Burkina Faso are emerging as a result of state withdrawal from periphery regions. These developments have parallels to the experiences of local councils in Syria. External actors involved in supporting local authorities (French counter-terrorism forces; Russian private military contractors; United Nations Peacekeeping Forces) create legitimacy conflicts. Similar to what occurred in Syria, external support for local authorities can increase or decrease their

local legitimacy dependent upon the perspective of the civilian population toward that external support.

Generalizability and Potential Future Research

Overall, comparative analyses presented here suggest that legitimacy as a source of stability and/or instability is not specific to Syria, but rather a generalized factor present throughout all areas experiencing fragmentation during violent conflict. The theory derived from this Syrian case study examining: the critical nature of performance legitimacy; tensions between local and international recognition; importance of adaptative governance; and relationships between service delivery and civilian compliance may be applied to other fragmented conflict zones with consideration of regional/cultural/political differences. Systematic testing of these findings will be necessary to verify whether these conclusions are transferable across geographically/ culturally/politically diverse contexts. Nonetheless, the Syrian case provides a strong basis for developing theories about legitimacy dynamics that will likely contribute to our analytical frameworks of other fragmented conflict zones, as well as inform better designed international interventions.

MAIN FINDINGS

Legitimacy as the primary center of gravity in the Syrian conflict has been demonstrated as the primary driver of local compliance and international engagement. Actors that establish civilian recognition and support through service delivery, conflict resolution, and security are generally able to exert greater control than those reliant on coercion alone. An example of this includes Kurdish administrations in northeastern Syria that have established their legitimacy by engaging in participatory governance, supporting education, and enacting gender-inclusive policies, thereby securing local support although they do not possess territorial control. Conversely, extremist factions that were able to impose authority through coercion, including ISIS, secured short term compliance through the use of coercion, however, they ultimately failed to develop legitimate authority and lost territorial control. As such, international recognition provides legitimacy by facilitating diplomatic and economic support, although this does not necessarily equate to local recognition, as exemplified by the United States support for Kurdish forces in northern Syria, which led to Turkish resistance. Legitimacy is therefore a multifaceted commodity, serving as both a local performance metric and an international currency. Furthermore, the Assad regime has demonstrated that a partial restoration of state services and narrative framing can create legitimacy in specific regions, while at the same time,

preserving international alliances with Russia and Iran. In addition, fragmented authorities are continually competing over legitimacy through narrative, service delivery, and coercion, resulting in a constantly changing "authority landscape" throughout Syria. Therefore, this finding supports the notion that legitimacy is not a static entity, rather, it serves as a center of gravity for strategic planning from both IR and conflict governance perspectives. As such, legitimacy management is essential for actors seeking to develop durable influence in Syria's irregular warfare environment.

The Syrian conflict has produced multiple, overlapping authorities and thus a fragmented authority environment that presents a variety of governance options and legitimacy claims. Fragmented authority creates challenges for coordination, service delivery, and conflict resolution, as populations within different geographic locations are subject to different laws, administrative systems, and security structures. A clear illustration of this phenomenon is found in northern Syria, where three separate entities (Turkish aligned councils, Kurdish administrations, and Islamist factions) exist in close proximity and compete for legitimacy, as civilians provide varying levels of legitimacy to the different authorities based upon performance and ideology. Additionally, the complexity created by the existence of multiple authorities complicates international engagement, as foreign donors and international organizations face numerous challenges when determining what level of support to provide to the various authorities without risking the delegitimization of the other authorities. Adaptability in local governance serves as a resilience mechanism for actors, enabling them to remain influential in spite of fluctuations in territorial control and international intervention. This dynamic further supports the notion that legitimacy is contingent upon both the ability of actors to perform and the ability to navigate a complex, fragmented, and evolving political environment. Moreover, the fragmentation of governance has contributed to the creation of disparate experiences for the civilian population. Areas of Syria with active and effective local councils, have experienced relatively high levels of compliance and stability, whereas areas controlled by coercive actors have experienced population displacement, unrest, and governance collapse. This finding illustrates that the existence of fragmented authority is a significant determinant of legitimacy and conflict resilience. As such, understanding the multiple forms of authority that exist in Syria is essential for both IR scholars and practitioners attempting to establish and maintain stability in fragile conflict zones.

Local compliance and international legitimacy in Syria are significantly influenced by population centered legitimacy. The importance of local compliance in irregular warfare is well documented, as local compliance is essential for establishing legitimacy and achieving durable authority. In Syria, actors that focus on delivering services to civilians, such as education, healthcare, and local policing, have developed legitimacy and are therefore better equipped to sustain authority than those that rely on coercion to achieve compliance. An example of this is the opposition councils in Idlib, that delivered governance and humanitarian services to the civilian population, thereby securing their compliance and reinforcing their authority, even in the midst of continuous military pressure. Population-centered legitimacy also informs IR strategies, as states and multilateral organizations assess which groups warrant diplomatic engagement, aid, or security partnership. Conversely, failure to address the perceptions of civilians can lead to a loss of legitimacy, an increase in insurgency, or local resistance, as evidenced in areas controlled by extremist factions or poorly performing local administrations. Therefore, this finding supports the idea that legitimacy is relational and performance-based, and that civilian endorsement serves as a significant strategic leverage point for actors operating in Syria. Furthermore, population support mediates the relationship between local governance and external actors, as the provision of support to certain authorities by external actors influences whether those authorities will obtain international recognition or receive foreign assistance. Experiences in Syria clearly illustrate that population-centered legitimacy is both a tool for governance and a factor that shapes broader IR outcomes. As such, successful legitimacy strategies are typically multi-layered and include elements of service delivery, narrative framing, and alignment with international norms. Therefore, this finding highlights the linkage between domestic compliance and international legitimacy in fragmented conflict zones.

The relationship between international recognition and legitimacy is complex in Syria and results in both stabilizing and destabilizing effects on local authority legitimacy. Support provided by foreign actors, including military aid, political endorsements, and humanitarian assistance, can strengthen perceived authority, and enable actors to solidify control and improve governance. However, external recognition can also undermine local legitimacy if the civilian population perceives the recognized authority as a proxy for a foreign power, as was evident in the case of the Kurdish administrations in Syria that received support from the United States, which resulted in Turkish military intervention and local resistance in the border region. Similar

to this example, Assad's relationships with Russia and Iran have increased his international legitimacy, while simultaneously reducing his legitimacy in regions that have been impacted by his repressive policies and military campaigns. Therefore, this finding illustrates that legitimacy is not solely domestically created, but is instead co-created through IR interactions, alliances, and perceptions of foreign involvement. In this regard, recognition can serve as either a resource or a liability for actors, as it can impact both their operational resilience and civilian compliance. Therefore, in fragmented conflict zones, actors must engage in a balancing act between developing domestic legitimacy strategies and engaging internationally to preserve their authority. Failure to manage this balance can lead to a decline in legitimacy, resistance from the local population, and/or territorial losses. Syria's conflict is illustrative of the double-edged nature of international legitimacy and serves as evidence that recognition must be contextualized and responsive to local realities in order to produce desirable outcomes. Therefore, managing legitimacy requires a strategic combination of local governance, narrative control, and international diplomacy.

The Syrian conflict demonstrates that legitimacy competitions directly affect the development of post-conflict governance and the possibilities for achieving political settlements. Actors that are able to establish legitimacy among local and international stakeholders are better positioned to participate in peace negotiations, reconstruction efforts, and transitional governance initiatives. Conversely, actors that lack credibility and/or support from the local population will be marginalized and are likely to have fewer opportunities to contribute to sustainable political solutions. Competitions over legitimacy have extended the duration of the conflict in Syria, as various actors have competed to determine who will govern, who will control the local population, and who will receive international recognition. Additionally, legitimacy has mediated the potential for social cohesion, reconciliation, and intergroup trust, all of which are essential for long-term stability. For example, the legitimacy of Kurdish governance structures may influence the type of political arrangement that develops in the northeast of Syria, contingent upon their continued legitimacy and alignment with international stakeholders. Similarly, Assad's continued alignment with international stakeholders preserves his strategic positionality, although he faces legitimacy challenges in many parts of Syria. Therefore, understanding the legitimacy competitions that take place in Syria and similar fragmented states is essential for forecasting the types of political arrangements that will emerge in the aftermath of conflict and for designing effective IR

strategies. Legitimacy serves as both a tactical resource during conflict and a structural determinant of post-conflict order. Therefore, addressing legitimacy competitions is essential for resolving conflicts, stabilizing conflict zones, and reconstructing societies in Syria and similar fragmented states.

Policy Implications

Legitimacy as a strategic goal for local authorities and international policymakers is emphasized throughout the literature. The Syrian case demonstrates that legitimacy supports resilience and compliance from local populations, especially when legitimized through service delivery, justice, and security and is reinforced by recognition and support from external actors, including states and international organizations. However, legitimacy recognized by external actors may not reflect local legitimacy and thus may lead to unintended consequences such as resistance, conflict escalation, and territorial contestation. Successful governance strategies must include mechanisms for building legitimacy, in addition to military or coercion-based measures, to provide for long-term stability. Furthermore, legitimacy will impact on the diplomatic leverage and negotiation capabilities of IR actors and will further determine the feasibility of implementing and sustaining intervention policies. Syrian non-state administration(s) illustrate that legitimacy based on performance and support from local populations can outweigh limited military and territorial capability; therefore, the strategy for engaging with local authorities should focus on performance and population support. This has implications for peacebuilding as well, since internationally backed actors need to balance their externally driven objectives with the locally derived consent needed for successful and sustainable peacebuilding. Ignoring legitimacy could undermine the effectiveness of intervention, further fragment conflict zones and prolong the conflict. Therefore, legitimacy should be both a practical and normative priority in IR and conflict governance contexts.

Syria's fragmented authority also illustrates that governance and legitimacy occur at multiple overlapping levels; therefore, IR actors must develop multi-layered policy approaches to address these complexities. If IR actors focus on one layer of governance, i.e. the central state or a specific actor, they will likely miss the reality of governance occurring at other layers, leading to service delivery, security, and legitimate gaps. To overcome this challenge, IR actors must develop coordinated recognition, aid, and diplomatic engagement strategies across all relevant authorities, while avoiding favoritism which could delegitimize other actors. Local authorities must similarly adapt governance models to sustain legitimacy within the context of

changing territorial and political realities. Finally, post-conflict reconstruction in fragmented areas presents challenges because multiple authorities assert jurisdiction and influence over populations. Consequently, IR actors must develop policy approaches that incorporate local governance capacity, community engagement, and legitimacy considerations to achieve effective outcomes. Fragmented areas also create opportunities for insurgent or extremist actors to capitalize upon governance gaps, highlighting the strategic nature of legitimacy-focused interventions. Failure to recognize the effects of fragmentation can result in continued cycles of violence, population displacement, and contested authority. Developing multi-level strategies that build resilience, reinforce legitimate authorities, and deter coercive, or predatory governance models will help to prevent these negative outcomes. This has significant implications for IR engagement, and suggests that legitimacy-sensitive, decentralized and adaptive strategies will be critical for the conflict stabilization process.

Governance that prioritizes the needs of local populations will enhance stability, legitimacy, and authority in irregular warfare. Authorities that prioritize civilian needs, i.e., security, services, dispute resolution—are more likely to receive high levels of compliance and social support from local populations, thereby increasing both local and international legitimacy. International engagement that aligns with population-centered governance approaches reinforces authority legitimacy and enables effective governance and intervention. Conversely, neglecting civilian perspectives or imposing external governance models will undermine legitimacy, reduce compliance, and may promote insurgency or social resistance. Syrian non-state councils and Kurdish administrations illustrate the benefits of participatory governance and how it can provide authorities with durable authority. IR policymakers can use this knowledge to design interventions that support local service delivery and legitimacy-building rather than imposing top-down solutions. Additionally, population-centered approaches to governance enhance social cohesion and decrease the potential for communal tensions or renewed violence. These approaches facilitate inclusive governance and bridge the gap between international objectives and local needs, creating an environment for longer term conflict resolution. Therefore, effective legitimacy strategies must integrate social consent, institutional capacity, and external alignment into governance planning. This approach emphasizes the centrality of civilians as both strategic actors and legitimate arbiters in fragmented conflict zones.

International recognition is a double-edged tool for legitimacy; it can either strengthen or undermine authority based upon local perceptions and alignment. Supporting actors who do not have local legitimacy will delegitimize those actors in the eyes of local civilian populations and potentially limit their ability to achieve operational effectiveness and stability. As a result, recognition strategies must consider social, ethnic, and sectarian dynamics in order to ensure that external engagement does not undermine but rather reinforce local legitimacy. Strategic coordination among international actors will mitigate the risks of conflicting legitimacy narratives and prevent exacerbating conflict fragmentation. Furthermore, recognition should be contingent upon performance and governance capacity, and reward authorities that continue to provide services and support to local populations. This approach aligns with IR theory that emphasizes both normative legitimacy and pragmatic statecraft. The Syrian case illustrates that legitimacy contests are often intertwined with foreign intervention; therefore, developing nuanced recognition strategies will be necessary to produce sustainable outcomes. IR actors must also continually monitor evolving legitimacy dynamics and adjust their engagement accordingly to prevent unintended consequences such as local resistance or proxy conflicts. Recognition policies should therefore be adaptive, flexible, and based upon the realities of governance in each area. Therefore, legitimacy-sensitive external engagement is critical for stabilizing fragmented conflict zones while achieving diplomatic and humanitarian goals.

Finally, legitimacy contests will significantly affect the prospects of post-conflict reconstruction, governance, and political settlements. Authorities that are able to establish and maintain both local and international legitimacy will be better situated to participate in negotiations, transitional governance, and reconstruction initiatives. On the contrary, fragmented authority and contested legitimacy will delay the conflict, complicate reconciliation and social cohesion, and ultimately affect the distribution of power after the conflict. Recognizing legitimacy as a strategic asset will allow both local and international actors to more effectively manage transitions and align governance capacity with population expectations. Civilian perceptions of authority legitimacy will influence whether communities will support peace initiatives, comply with governance institutions, and participate in elections or reconstruction efforts (Arjona et al., 2015). International engagement that considers local legitimacy will improve the long-term viability of settlements and diminish the risk of renewed conflict. Conversely, failure to recognize legitimacy in post-conflict reconstruction planning may empower actors without popular support and undermine long-term stability. Syrian non-

state and state actors that focus on performance legitimacy will be more resilient and capable of influencing post-conflict political outcomes. Legitimacy contests will have strategic, operational, and normative implications for IR actors engaged in conflict resolution; therefore, successful post-conflict planning will require incorporating legitimacy considerations into the planning process at each stage to achieve sustainable governance, reconciliation, and political stability.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Legitimacy as a priority of strategic governance

Syrian actors – both state and non-state – need to place the legitimacy of all governance, military, and diplomacy at the center of every strategic action they take. Syrian authorities will have to develop legitimate government by providing services, maintaining order, resolving disputes and creating a system of governance that earns the consent of civilians. Foreign actors need to link their recognition and support to the legitimacy of the governments they are supporting to make sure that the support they provide does not undermine the government. Legitimacy building programs need to be ongoing, adaptable to changing conflict circumstances and not limited to symbolic gestures. Every program, including training and capacity-building programs for local councils, needs to create an environment where participatory governance is emphasized, and transparent and equitable resource distribution takes place. The legitimacy of actors needs to be integrated into communications and narrative strategies to reinforce both domestic and international authority (Arjona, 2016). Contingency plans for potential loss of legitimacy due to external events, territorial changes, or changes in the sentiment of the people need to be included in strategic plans. Because donor and aid agencies compete for legitimacy, it is important for them to coordinate legitimacy sensitive initiatives to prevent undermining the legitimacy of other actors. By placing legitimacy first, actors can increase the ability of governments to resist collapse, gain compliance from their populations and increase the legitimacy of those governments internationally.

Multi-level governance in fragmented areas

Because of the fragmentation of authority in Syria, both local and international actors must begin to use multi-level governance strategies to address this problem. Strategies for multi-level governance will need to allow for the existence of many different authorities working together to deliver aid, services and security at the local, regional and national level. To support the development of legitimate governance, multi-level governance will need to

involve flexible recognition policies that do not delegitimize alternative local actors who are able to perform governance functions. International support must be tied to the performance of local authorities and their acceptance by the population to increase their legitimacy without increasing competition. Mechanisms for coordination and cooperation among actors can help eliminate duplication and gaps in services and conflict over resources. Multi-level governance will help to increase resilience in the face of territorial changes and operational disruptions because it allows authorities to continue to function in spite of disruptions. Local councils and non-state administrations should be empowered to make decisions autonomously about issues that are relevant to their territory, to support contextual relevance in governance. Training programs for actors should focus on improving their ability to work collaboratively with each other, share resources, mediate conflicts and resolve disputes. IR strategies need to include legitimacy assessments of actors across different levels of governance to ensure that external actors are supporting coherent and effective governance structures. Ultimately, multi-level governance increases the legitimacy of governments, stabilizes fragmented areas and enhances post-conflict reconstruction capacities.

Population-centric approaches to governance

Governments must develop population-centric governance strategies to strengthen the legitimacy of their actions, to increase the compliance of their populations, and to increase social cohesion in the country. Local authorities should provide the necessary basic services to the population, such as healthcare, education, sanitation, and security, to win the support of the population for their actions. Participatory governance mechanisms should be developed to enable citizens to participate in decision making processes and to influence the resolution of disputes and the allocation of resources. Foreign actors should link recognition and aid to the adoption of population-centric approaches by local authorities, to encourage local authorities to engage directly with their populations. Governments must establish grievance redress mechanisms to quickly address the concerns of the population, to reduce social tensions and to increase their legitimacy. In addition to these mechanisms, transparency, accountability, and clear communication with the population are essential for developing successful population-centric governance strategies. Monitoring systems should be used to measure the effectiveness of the provision of services to the population, as well as to measure public satisfaction with these services to enable governments to adjust their policies accordingly. Civil society organizations should be supported by local councils to increase the scope and inclusiveness of

governance. IR actors must understand that the support of the population for local authorities has an impact on both domestic compliance and international legitimacy, and therefore local governance has a direct relationship with broader political goals (Paris, 2004). Population-centric approaches will increase the legitimacy of governments, increase the resilience of governments, and increase the likelihood of long-term stability in fragmented conflict zones.

Coordinate international recognition with local legitimacy

Foreign actors must be cautious when providing recognition to local authorities, to ensure that the recognition provided reinforces the legitimacy of those authorities among the local population. Providing recognition to authorities that have no legitimacy locally could lead to resistance against those authorities, undermine the ability of those authorities to govern, and increase the instability of areas in conflict. Recognition should be performance-based and should be linked to the demonstration of the capacity of those authorities to govern and to the approval of those authorities by the population. It is also essential for foreign actors to coordinate with one another to avoid sending conflicting messages regarding the legitimacy of local authorities and to avoid increasing the fragmentation of local authorities. Foreign actors must also be aware of the attitudes of the local population, the degree of social cohesion in the area, and the effectiveness of the governance structure of local authorities when determining whether to provide recognition to those authorities. Recognition should also support the creation of inclusive governance structures, which allow for the representation of all segments of society, regardless of ethnicity, sect, etc. IR strategies must include legitimacy as a criterion for engagement, to ensure that foreign actors increase the legitimacy of governments and stability in the countries they operate in. When foreign actors link international recognition to local legitimacy, they can increase the ability of governments to survive, increase the likelihood of sustainable conflict resolution and increase the capacity of countries to reconstruct after conflict.

Establish systems for monitoring and adapting to legitimacy

Both local and foreign actors need to establish systems to continually monitor legitimacy in areas that are fragmented. The data collected through these systems should include the views of the population, the effectiveness of the provision of services to the population, the effectiveness of the security provisions, and the level of compliance of the population with the laws of the governing authority. These systems need to have adaptive governance mechanisms that will enable actors to rapidly respond to changes in legitimacy, changes in the needs of the

population, and changes in external events. Local councils must be given the authority to adjust their administrative structures and the delivery of services based on the feedback received from the population, to maintain relevance and responsiveness in governance (Arjona et al., 2015). Foreign actors should adjust their recognition, aid, and diplomatic engagement based on the information collected through the systems to maintain consistency with the changing legitimacy of the local authorities. Transparency and accountability mechanisms must be incorporated into governance structures to increase both the perceived and real legitimacy of the authority. Training programs for actors should focus on building the capacity of those actors to adapt their governance structures to meet changing legitimate requirements, to mediate conflicts and to engage with their populations. The monitoring of legitimacy should be connected to strategic decision-making, so that changes in the perceptions of the population will trigger policy responses. Institutions should work together at the local, regional and international level to avoid gaps in legitimacy and to develop coherent governance structures. The institutionalization of systems for monitoring legitimacy will increase the resilience of institutions, provide guidance for IR strategies, and increase the likelihood of long-term stability in areas affected by fragmented conflict.

CONCLUSION

The role of legitimacy in Irregular Warfare represents the central axis around which all other factors revolve, as it determines both local compliance and international engagement. The Syrian civil war exemplifies how authority is challenged in multiple forms (state institutions, non-state actors, and local governance). Actors able to establish and maintain their authority through performance, service delivery, and security will have greater levels of resilience and influence over time than actors using only coercive means. Authority's international recognition supports its legitimacy, however when international and local perceptions of authority do not align, the authority may experience resistance to its governance. When authority is fragmented, coordination, service delivery, and post-conflict reconstruction become increasingly complicated, requiring multi-layered and adaptable policy responses. As such, population-centered governance is an essential component to achieving strategic success by establishing a linkage between civilian support for authority and the sustainability of the authority itself. Syrian Kurdish administrations and opposition councils provide examples of how participatory and inclusive governance processes can create legitimate authority in contested areas. Non-State Actors and extremist groups without local consent may temporarily achieve control of

territory, however they will eventually be unable to sustain their authority. The struggle for legitimacy influences the distribution of power, resilience, and post-conflict political trajectory. Therefore, external recognition must be carefully matched with legitimacy based on local perceptions to prevent destabilization and ensure the long-term sustainability of legitimate governance. Implementing flexible governance systems and continuously monitoring legitimacy enables authorities to adapt to shifting social, territorial, and geopolitical environments. Legitimacy is therefore located at the nexus of local governance, military strategies, and International Relations dynamics, providing a link between local citizenry perceptions and international political actions and outcomes. All conflict resolutions, reconstruction, and negotiation efforts are dependent on the recognition and strengthening of legitimate authority (Cunningham, 2013). The legitimacy of authority is not fixed or permanent; it is rather situational, relational, and influenced by the performance of legitimate authorities within the domestic environment and the endorsement of those authorities from international actors. States experiencing fragmentation require coordinated and multi-level approaches to governance, legitimacy building, and intervention to break cycles of instability. Establishing relationships with local populations and implementing inclusive governance mechanisms is essential to creating enduring authority, increasing social cohesion, and ensuring compliance. International actors must match their assistance, recognition, and intervention activities to the legitimacy dynamics present in conflict zones to prevent exacerbating the conflict. Only by addressing the legitimacy issues arising out of conflict and allowing credible authorities to administer the conflict affected area effectively and inclusively can post-conflict reconstruction be successful. Finally, integrating legitimacy as a strategic, operational, and normative concern provides a bridge between local governance issues and International Relations. Overall, the Syrian case demonstrates that Irregular Warfare, fragmented authority, and legitimacy contests cannot be separated and require a holistic approach to governance, intervention, and conflict resolution in modern day conflict zones.

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