From Disaffection to Desertion

How Networks Facilitate Military Insubordination in Civil Conflict

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Soldiers contemplating desertion from the military amid a civil conflict are confronted with a dilemma: although they might harbor strong grievances against continued military service, they face incentives to falsify their preferences and stay in the army. This dilemma arises due to the extreme risks associated with the process of desertion on the one hand and the fact that relations between deserters and rebels are dominated by mistrust, on the other hand. The first problem renders the potential costs of desertion extraordinarily high because soldiers face a credible threat of punishment. The second renders the potential payoffs of desertion uncertain because deserters have reasons to believe that rebels will treat them with suspicion or even hostility.

Given these extreme decision-making conditions, why would soldiers desert at all? We argue that soldiers assume the extreme risk of desertion when their social networks persuade them of the value and feasibility of desertion. Family, friends, and close hometown connections are crucial in turning disaffection into desertion by activating norms of trust that help convince soldiers that desertion is an acceptable behavior. Such connections also facilitate coordination with rebel networks, which allows soldiers to escape their positions.

We draw on extensive fieldwork on the contemporary conflict in Syria to support this argument. Insights from more than ninety interviews with former service members of the Syrian military who are now based in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey allow us to address the meso-dynamics of desertion. Our results show that trust transmitted through strong network ties is a crucial factor in moving soldiers from passive disaffection with military service and the regime to active insubordination.

Our argument speaks to several debates in conflict studies and political science more generally. In order to answer the question of why individuals would take extremely high risks in return for uncertain benefits, we draw on the literatures on rebellion and insurgency,[1] as well as on ideas from network theory and social movement studies.[2] Conventional accounts have difficulty explaining the behavior of deserters, which can

neither be grasped as collective, nor individual action. We use the Syrian conflict as a theory-generating case to claim that network-based coordinated action is crucial to moving a disgruntled soldier from silently harboring his desertion preferences to taking the extreme risk entailed by leaving the military.

Second, our argument speaks to the question of cohesion in military sociology. We show that soldiers' social ties are as consequential in explaining cohesion as the military-centric factors emphasized in standard explanations in this research tradition.[3] Finally, our argument furthers our understanding of civil conflict trajectories and the Syrian crisis in particular by highlighting the context of military desertion. We focus on the crucial period in which the originally peaceful uprising developed into an armed insurrection and finally a full-fledged civil war. Military desertion played a crucial role in this process since it contributed to both the militarization of the opposition and the conversion of what was a national army into an armed faction in a civil war.

The Syrian Crisis: A Case Study of Military Desertion and Social Networks

The Syrian crisis started with largely peaceful protests against the regime of Bashar al-Assad in March 2011. In the face of massive repression by the security forces, the uprising first turned into a series of largely unconnected, localized insurgencies and finally into a full-fledged civil war. While at first only elite military and police units were deployed against the protests, the increasing militarization of the regime's containment strategies meant that more and more military personnel became directly involved in dealing with the unrest. Indeed, by early 2012 the regime had adopted a purely military strategy, using heavy artillery and air attacks against the insurgency.

The regime's uncompromising stance and heavy-handed strategy not only drove the further escalation of the conflict, but also led to growing unease within the military rank and file. Many soldiers and low-ranking officers increasingly saw the conflict as one that pitted ordinary Syrians against a repressive ruling elite. The regime, moreover, began to rely on paramilitary forces alongside the regular army. Given the harsh and worsening conditions, many Syrian soldiers began to contemplate insubordination. Mounting grievances, however, did not automatically translate into desertion, conceptualized as "absence without leave" (AWOL) for an indefinite period.[4] Rather, disaffected soldiers would disobey orders, such as refusing to shoot at protestors, as a form of insubordination falling short of desertion.[5] Desertions remained isolated incidents in 2011 until early 2012, when individual desertions grew into a mass phenomenon.[6]

We draw on interviews with Syrian deserters to study the mechanisms by which widespread disaffection turned into desertion. Our insights come from extensive fieldwork conducted in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey between 2014 and 2015, consisting of sixty structured and more than thirty in-depth interviews.[7] To locate interviewees, we employed a non-probability sampling method, given the constraints imposed by an ongoing conflict. Our sampling strategy increased variance within our pool of respondents. We used respondent-driven chain referral (snowballing)

to identify potential respondents and varied our entry points in order to minimize the danger of network bias.

Nearly two-thirds of our respondents deserted between spring 2012 and spring 2013, a trend that parallels independent information published on desertion numbers.[8] Geographically we have information on deserters who served in eleven of Syria's fourteen provinces (including Damascus) and who originally came from nine different provinces. On the individual level, we collected information on respondents' social background (income, level of education, type of employment before military service, etc.), military status (conscript or volunteer, military rank), perception of the military organization (such as the nature of ties to other soldiers and officers), participation in the conflict (nature and timing of deployment), and desertion details.

Our empirical material imposes methodological limitations. Operating with a nonrandom sample, we cannot generalize our findings to a population of all military deserters. Moreover, we were forced to sample on the dependent variable—studying military deserters alone. These limitations have consequences for the study of the causes of military insubordination. Thick narratives, however, enable us to paint a clear picture of the mechanisms of desertion and provide evidence for the environment to which an individual soldier is exposed. While we do not propose a causal explanation of desertion, we concur with David Waldner that "knowledge of causation requires knowledge of the underlying mechanisms."[9] The mechanisms we study are a central building block of such a causal interpretation.

Our empirical approach of tracing the process of desertion is an exercise in theory building. Not only does this offer a way of assessing the validity of existing accounts, but it also advances scholarship through the creation of hypotheses, especially in thematic areas where theory building has been limited and primary empirical material is rare or unavailable.[10] Through a thick narrative, we aim at overcoming limitations in the few existing studies of individual military desertion. Providing a better understanding of how soldiers interact with civilians to desert the military advances our theoretical understanding in that it enables us to refocus on the conditions under which military desertion takes place.

The Deserter's Dilemma: Decision-Making under Extreme Risk

The uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa have refocused attention on the coercive apparatus's king-making role in domestic politics. Scholars have framed the question as whether "the" military will support embattled autocrats,[11] with initial accounts focusing on the predictive power of the military's degree of institutionalization,[12] response to a particular protest strategy,[13] or officers' collective grievances and identity.[14] This focus on a corporate military apparatus is problematic, however, given that militaries have not always acted as cohesive institutions.[15] Amid the Arab Spring, the Yemeni military fragmented along division lines; the Syrian military saw significant desertions among the lower ranks; and the Libyan armed forces disintegrated.

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Despite the empirical reality of within-military variation in loyalty and insubordination, little has been written on the reasons and triggers of individual desertion in violent conflicts since the sociological studies by Shils and Janowitz and Rose on desertion in World War II and Bearman's study on the American Civil War, and the RAND interviews of Viet Cong deserters in the 1960s.[16] Perhaps with the exception of McLauchlin's and Bou Nassif's recent works,[17] scholars in political science have all but ignored the topic, focusing instead on collective military insubordination, mainly coups d'état. This gap in the literature is even more surprising as the prospect of military desertion and fragmentation has been regarded as a decisive factor for our understanding of civil war as well as democratization triggered by mass mobilization.[18]

Military desertion is a form of insubordination and therefore carries extreme risks for the potential deserter. In times of peace, insubordination—such as shirking orders, deserting a post, or defecting to another militarized group—would be legally prosecuted by democratic states. The likely result would be dismissal from service or time in prison. When unrest takes place under an authoritarian regime, the punishment for soldiers is even more extreme. Soldiers encounter torture or death if they refuse to implement commanders' orders.

Autocrats' threats of punishment are not only frightening, but also credible. This is significant because the likelihood of prosecution rather than the stringency of punishment has the larger deterrent effect on behavior.[19] Following a cascade of coups d'état in the 1950s and 1960s, authoritarian regimes in the Middle East began building overlapping security and military apparatuses.[20] These military apparatuses have developed substantial internal monitoring and punishment hierarchies. As a result, soldiers feel there is a high probability that any sign of insubordination will be detected and punished. Whenever the military apparatus is deployed—to wage war or repress domestic insurgencies—an authoritarian regime will bolster its efforts to sustain the military hierarchy. Monitoring the actions of military personnel is decisive to prevent coordination among potential deserters and the outbreak of mutinies.

When serving in a military amid unrest, soldiers face difficulties coordinating for collective desertions. Owing to the regime's monitoring capacity, they assume that both the likelihood of detection and the stringency of punishment for desertion are high. Hence, refusing orders, fleeing the country, or joining the opposition is an extreme-risk behavior. In addition, even if desertion from the military succeeds, deserters face a second problem. Members of the armed opposition will meet deserters with suspicion. Not only is it difficult to ascertain whether a recent deserter is sincere, but rebels might even hold an individual soldier personally responsible for military operations in which he was involved. Consequently, potential deserters should assume rebels' mistrust and therefore need to solicit the cooperation of opposition networks prior to their desertion—a task rendering the act itself yet more challenging.

Given this situation, strong grievances against military service will not automatically lead to action. Potential deserters have incentives to falsify their preferences and stay in the military.[21] In parallel to Lichbach's "Rebel's Dilemma,"[22] the deserter's dilemma implies that potential deserters might not walk away from their units even though they harbor strong grievances against military service.

What Converts Disaffection to Desertion?

Why do individuals make decisions associated with potentially high risks and personal costs? Scholars in social movement theory and rational choice have focused on collective action and on how individuals overcome barriers to organizing for a common goal. They point to the power of leaders' charisma and efficient organizations; altruism, that is, individuals' belief in a common cause, more valuable than individual interests; and the showroom effect of early risers leading to cascades of individual actions. Yet, some empirical phenomena remain underexplored in this literature. How do we explain individual action when personal risk and potential costs are extremely high, organizations are weak, and a common cause is absent?

This puzzle emerges when studying soldiers' insubordination in civil wars. As mentioned above, soldiers' and officers' desertions are associated with extreme personal risk owing to a credible threat of heavy punishment. Moreover, agents and organizations facilitating desertions are weak and operate underground because they are themselves threatened with severe repressive counter-measures. Third, there is no common cause surrounding military insubordination: while some deserters might join rebel groups to fight the authoritarian regime, others just as well desert to hide, take refuge, and exit the conflict. Indeed, our interviews revealed that only about half of Syrian deserters left their army units to fight against the Assad regime, whereas the other half did not fight.

According to Kuran,[23] individuals will engage in high-risk behavior when they receive new information and see that many people have falsified their preferences as well. The result is a cascading dynamic in which early movers' actions signal that risk might not be as prohibitive as previously assumed, thus changing the decision-making calculus of late-movers. A few scholars have built on this logic to explain military desertion, primarily by emphasizing similarity in the social backgrounds among military deserters. Bearman, for instance, in his study of the American Civil War finds that soldiers are more likely to desert when their units are socially homogeneous, that is, when soldiers come from similar localities.[24] McLauchlin finds that lack of trust among comrades increased the likelihood of military desertion in the Spanish Civil War and, in his earlier work on Syria, develops an argument on social in-group versus out-group patterns within military organizations.[25] Similar to Kuran's logic, he argues that initial desertions will pierce the preference falsification bubble and show soldiers that the majority may harbor regime grievances as well. According to McLauchlin, soldiers perceive ethnicity as a marker of regime loyalty and assume that an ethnic in-group connected to the regime will sustain collective loyalty. On the other hand, as found by Bou Nassif in his account of Sunni officers in the Syrian army, a strengthened out-group identity among populations in the army may amplify their members' grievances in the course of a conflict, and hence lead to desertion.[26]

There is great analytical value in these accounts that have helped develop causal explanations of military desertion cascades. Yet, one shortcoming is that most works have ignored variance in the dependent variable. In-group and out-group dynamics are clearly present in the Syrian conflict, and our data provide substantial support for

such an argument: all of our respondents except one Druze deserter were Sunni Muslims, and all except one Kurdish respondent described themselves as ethnically Arab. Yet, many Sunni service members did not desert. Moreover, deserters left their posts individually and rarely coordinated with fellow soldiers. We see neither complete Sunni loyalty, nor mutinies of Sunni soldiers against Alawi officers, suggesting that although sectarian identities may be major drivers of disaffection, they are not a sufficient reason for desertion.

Accounts such as the contributions by Bearman, McLauchlin, and Bou Nassif essentially present us with probabilistic explanations for the identity of military deserters—and therefore suggest who will be more likely to desert. In the Syrian case, one could explain why Sunni service members were more likely to become disaffected; but, one would fail to explain why some ultimately deserted and others did not. To better understand this unexplained variance, we ask: what prompts individuals to act despite extreme risk? We draw on prior works on the role of networks in social movement studies, as well as on arguments from the literature on rebellion and insurgency. Our core argument is that communication with strong network ties—family and friends—is crucial in determining whether disaffected soldiers will take the extreme risk to desert.

Strong Ties, Persuasion, and Coordinated Action

Students of social mobilization have long recognized the significance of networks in overcoming collective action problems.[27] McAdam, for example, has maintained that social networks were particularly effective pull factors for collective behavior in the American Civil Rights movement; similarly, Gould has argued that social networks were drivers of recruitment into the National Guard during the 1871 Paris Commune.[28] Clarke emphasizes the role of networks in the Egyptian uprising of January 2011 as well.[29] More generally, sociological research has established that networks can change individuals' perceptions, including their emotions, as well as individual judgments of fairness and moral values.[30]

Students of insurgency and rebellion have also come to emphasize the importance of network factors. Weinstein, for instance, has studied how rebel leaders use networks to vet potential recruits, and how recruits themselves often depend on members of their social networks to vouch for their trustworthiness.[31] In a similar vein, Parkinson has argued that network structures "allow for trust between otherwise isolated cliques of individuals" and are thus instrumental in establishing underground support networks.[32] Petersen, in turn, has examined the effect of different community structures on participation in resistance movements against Nazi and Soviet occupation in Eastern Europe,[33] and research on Libya shows that insurgent groups themselves might establish family-like social bonds.[34] On a more general level, Lichbach has described how networks facilitate solutions to dilemmas of collective action.[35]

It is intuitive that networks help form groups and organizations, that is, collective action. However, it remains unclear how such networks influence individual

decision-making such as that associated with extreme personal risk. When studying military desertion during civil war, the decision to desert cannot be fully grasped analytically as collective, nor is it individual action. What is under investigation here is coordinated action among few individuals, including potential deserters, their social networks, and eventually clandestine groups facilitating desertion. For this reason, our theory has to move past scholarship focusing on collective action problems.

We argue that soldiers' strong network ties are crucial in persuading soldiers that deserting from the military is the right thing to do. At the same time, they are central in establishing trust between deserters and rebels on the ground. Hence, two mechanisms will determine whether an individual soldier will be able to break the spell of preference falsification and translate disaffection into desertion: persuasion and coordination.

Mechanisms of persuasion have figured into existing accounts of military responses to domestic unrest. Drawing on cases from the post-Soviet space, Binnendijk and Marovic have argued that civilian protestors actively organized themselves to persuade security force members to support their cause.[36] More recently, Ketchley has argued that fraternization between Egyptian military personnel and protestors changed soldiers' impressions of Arab Spring demonstrations over time and made them less willing to use force against civilians.[37] Such accounts show the power of persuasion when soldiers are deployed against their own populations. Yet, existing arguments focus on a particular persuasion equation: that flowing from demonstrator to soldier. Such accounts stop short of explaining why soldiers not only refrain from using violence against demonstrators but also take the more costly step of deserting.

Rather than the very presence of network ties, it is the content of such ties that explains the connection between disaffection and desertion. A deserter will not make a move merely based on an increasing quantity of information transmitted through network ties (information on conflict episodes, well-being or grievances of family members, or opportunities to go on the run), but rather based on his trust in the source of the information, which will guide him to re-interpret his situation. The strength of network ties is key in explaining puzzling patterns in individual military desertion. Strength of ties in a social network is a function of "the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie."[38] Thus, a soldier's strong ties are the individuals with whom he has dense and long-lasting personal connections. This includes primarily family members, but may also include close friends, particularly from one's hometown.

Strong network ties are crucial because they transmit trust. The extreme risk of punishment for insubordinate thinking and action leads soldiers to falsify their true preferences and "live a lie" in public.[39] Given their fear of being discovered, soldiers will only communicate more freely with people they trust based on experiences of repeated interaction—that is, people with whom they have established relationships characterized by "strategic trust."[40] While falsifying their preferences, soldiers are more likely to privately reveal their true thoughts to strong network ties than to fellow military personnel. Since relations within the military are closely monitored, opening up to fellow soldiers risks sharing desertion plans with state agents.

Once a soldier opens up about his developing true preferences for or against remaining in the military during the conflict, a strong tie becomes influential in translating disaffection into desertion. First, family and close friends' reactions can sway the soldier's behavior—persuading him that staying or deserting is the better choice. Soldiers' decisions are no longer about their individual course of action alone, but about how this decision relates to their immediate social ties. Staying in the military for fear of detection and punishment appears a less respectable decision if family and friends are taking risks themselves, a phenomenon studied in rebellion.[41] Conversely, however, desertion from the armed forces due to individual grievances appears irresponsible if it further endangers family members and friends. The mechanisms of persuasion described here essentially render the decision of an individual soldier a case of coordinated action.

Second, after a soldier is persuaded that desertion is an acceptable choice, he needs to know that he will be aided in overcoming the gap of mistrust separating him from the rebels. If family and friends cannot provide practical help in overcoming the high levels of mistrust between soldiers and rebel networks, the risks deserters face after leaving their barracks might still dissuade them from trying. While desertion remains risky in the presence of such coordination, soldiers are more willing to accept such risks because they have reasons to trust opposition activists on the ground. This trust is not only useful for soldiers aiming to join a rebel group, but also for those seeking to pass through rebel-held territory or navigate regime strongholds when leaving the country.

Disaffection and Preference Falsification in Syria

The significance of social networks is widely recognized among scholars of the Syrian civil war. Leenders and Heydemann, for instance, have argued that tribal networks in the country's southern city of Deraa were crucial in sustaining a peaceful uprising despite severe state repression. Droz-Vincent has pointed to the importance of kinship networks in sustaining the loyalty of elite military units.[42] In the following sections, we draw on more than ninety field interviews to show that social networks were also important factors in triggering and facilitating desertions of Sunni soldiers in the Syrian crisis. We start by outlining the difficult situation under which soldiers were forced to make loyalty decisions in Syria. We then discuss evidence highlighting the two network effects, persuasion and coordination, that have facilitated desertions.

In the context of the Syrian crisis, for a member of the armed forces to reveal his anti-regime preferences was tantamount to insubordination, a course of action with potentially extreme costs. Interviewees described clearly and passionately the psychological pressure they were under during the uprising and the ubiquity of monitoring and punishment. As one of our interviewees related:

> During my time in the military, I saw very clearly that the Syrian regime forces were attacking people and their homes in rural Damascus. They were attacking civilian houses and towns with tanks and mortars. As long as you are within the military, you cannot show any reaction to this. From the inside, however, you are burning.[43]

Many interviewees assumed that all Alawi soldiers—whether of higher or lower rank—were monitoring their Sunni comrades. As one man said, it felt as if for every fifteen Sunni soldiers there would be one Alawi soldier; hence, there would be no chance for Sunnis to talk openly.[44] Soldiers often described scenes in which they had to falsify their preferences and openly sympathize with another soldier's or officer's pronouncements about the demonstrators. For instance, one interviewee reported to have been watching television one day in the presence of his supervising officer. The scene on TV was of the soldier's hometown, Baniyas, and the officer knew the soldier was from this area. The officer reportedly asked him if he knew these people, and the soldier felt he had to conform, exclaiming: "Yes! This person is a terrorist! He's a criminal!"[45] Soldiers felt that every move was under surveillance and any step out of line would lead to arrest.[46] As one soldier put it, one could be arrested if one did not show indignation towards the rebels when watching TV reports.[47] Another interviewee explained that the price of a desertion attempt could be prison, torture, or death, and he went on to explain the many ways in which he heard of the regime torturing deserters.[48]

Indeed, military personnel also reported evidence of the regime's ability to track suspected dissenters. With the escalation of the crisis, the security services intensified their monitoring of the army. One officer from Deir El-Zour recounted that provincial-level security councils were formed that reported directly to the presidential palace in Damascus, bypassing the military chain of command.[49] Others maintained that, beginning in September 2011, a system was implemented by which the names of those wanted by the security services would be instantly communicated to checkpoints across the country, making it more difficult for deserters to move within Syria.[50] Those suspected of insubordination or caught during desertion attempts were killed or handed over to the intelligence services (*mukhabarat*).[51] Many interviewees had spent time in prison or were threatened with imprisonment.[52] As one soldier put it, he felt he was living among government terrorists, comrades who were boasting of how many opposition members they killed. Insubordination and evading these fervent soldiers was an almost unfathomable task.[53]

Fear of security service surveillance was exacerbated by a lack of trust in the military hierarchy. While close to three quarters of our interviewees thought of their fellow soldiers as close personal friends, an even larger proportion reported mistrusting their immediate superiors. Moreover, our interviews revealed that deserters trusted even their immediate fellow soldiers only very selectively and were hesitant to discuss political issues.[54] Interviewees often referred to sectarian differences to explain why they were unable to coordinate among themselves. One soldier, who had been stationed in Yafour, close to the Lebanese border, argued that soldiers could not coordinate among themselves since there were "too many Alawis in the army" and hence not enough trust among soldiers.[55]

If fears for personal safety prompted soldiers to falsify anti-regime preferences, this feeling was only underscored by deep concerns for their families. All deserters stated that worry for their families superseded concern for their own personal risks in desertion and recounted how families of deserters were threatened or punished by the regime.[56] In sum, Syrian military personnel have been operating in an environment of extreme preference falsification, fearing that they or their families were in grave danger should they desert.

This situation presented potential deserters with two problems. First, soldiers strug-gled to come to terms with competing narratives about the events they experienced. The state media as well as official discourse within the army conveyed the narrative of a Syrian state threatened by foreign-sponsored terrorist groups.[57] Many of our inter-viewees recounted having been skeptical about this version of events due to their own experience of deployment,[58] or because they had access to alternative media such as *Al-Jazeera*.[59] Some even maintained that it was in fact the *mukhabarat* staging attacks against the military to convince soldiers of an armed enemy's presence.[60] Nevertheless, the immediate reaction to such experiences, more often than not, was preference falsification rather than desertion. Although many soldiers shared disaffection with their service and the regime, only some took the risks associated with desertion.

Secondly, direct coordination among soldiers—or between soldiers, rebels, or civil-ians in the area—was almost impossible. Soldiers who were falsifying their own prefer-ences about military service for the regime had no way of knowing whether their comrades were doing the same or were genuinely supportive of the regime. Sectarian identity served as a marker of assumed attitudes toward the regime. Alawi soldiers and officers were generally perceived to be loyal to the regime,[61] but the lack of trust extended beyond this group to include all but a small circle of close friends. Our interviewees assumed that this lack of trust among soldiers went far in explaining why collective desertions or mutinies were exceedingly rare in Syria. Our respondents rarely reported to have deserted with fellow soldiers. Instead, insubordination remained an individual action.

In many cases, these problems were compounded by the fact that soldiers were serv-ing in a socially unknown environment. This was at least partially the result of a policy by which soldiers, and especially conscripts, would be stationed outside of their home prov-inces. Almost all of the conscripts we interviewed were serving in areas away from their home regions. This rule seems to have been less strict for professional soldiers and espe-cially commissioned officers, with about every third commissioned officer serving in his region of origin. The absence of strong social ties in their locality meant that soldiers could not be sure if people in the area would support them should they decide to desert.

Not only did they sometimes lack information on the balance of power in a specific region, potential deserters also found it difficult to convince rebels in their area of their trustworthiness.[62] Those of our interviewees who cooperated with the opposition while still in military service did so on the basis of personal or tribal connections.[63] For the majority of respondents who lacked such ties, however, the potentially hostile social environment presented an additional disincentive against desertion. Lacking reliable ways of convincing rebels that they were on their side, potential deserters had reason to be appre-hensive about what would happen to them even if they managed to leave their barracks.

This problem was exacerbated as the regime applied increasingly brutal repression on the population. Deserters, in the eyes of rebels, likely contributed to this repression. As Jenkins has recognized, "the government's deliberately brutal tactics may, paradoxi-cally, also discourage further defections. Defection is always risky, but Syrian soldiers contemplating defection now fear that they will be promptly killed if they show up in the rebel camp."[64] Hence, with the regime unleashing full military force against the

insurgency since spring 2012, deserters had every reason to not only fear retribution from Assad loyalists, but also the rebels' repulse.

In the following section, we explain how networks addressed these two desertion obstacles by linking potential deserters to their strong network ties. The content of communication with strong network ties was important because, first, it could tip the scale in favor of either a loyalty or desertion decision and, second, because social networks could be used to generate trust between potential deserters and rebels on the ground.

Strong Ties Persuade

In Syria, networks were instrumental in providing soldiers with alternative perspectives on the uprising and persuading them that desertion was the right choice. Many of our interviewees mentioned the illegal use of their cell phones in the barracks and hence gaining perspective through conversations with family members.[65] Such communication was important because potential deserters learned about what was going on in the country. It also helped soldiers understand how the people they cared about viewed their position in the army as well as the possible consequences of desertion. As many of our interviewees related, the fear for their families was always greater than the fear for their own safety.[66] From the beginning of the conflict, deserters' families were in danger of facing regime retribution. Each soldier seemed to have learned of episodes of a deserter's family members being arrested and sometimes dying in prison.[67] Learning that one's family was exposed to fighting or regime harassment did not change soldiers' assessment of the risk of desertion, but rather increased their willingness to take such risks. Conversely, if family and friends counseled against desertion, disaffection with military service remained, but incentives for preference falsification increased. In brief, strong network ties could decisively affect potential deserters' decision-making calculus.

One interviewee recounted a conversation he had with his sister by phone. She reportedly told the soldier that insurgents were on their way to a military position in Tadmur (Palmyra). While on the phone with her, he recalled hearing people at the mosque in the background screaming "Allah Akbar!" When asked about the incident, the soldier's sister reported on the conflict in Palmyra and his deceased friends. The soldier resolved to leave the military right after that phone conversation.[68] In other cases, learning of a family's endangerment seems to have provided soldiers with information about the scope of the regime's activities. One officer's family was living in Deraa while he was stationed in Damascus. He came to find out that the security forces made a sweep through his neighborhood and came to his family's door. A neighbor told the security forces that this was the household of a high army officer. Yet, as his family told him later, the security forces did not care. They used a battering ram to open the locked door, barging into his home.[69] The officer emphasized that he was horrified that the security forces did this to the household of an army officer.

By talking to their family and friends on the phone—often on cell phones illegally used in the barracks—potential deserters learned about regime attacks in their

hometowns[70] or of regime atrocities more generally.[71] Our interviews revealed how soldiers relied on such sources of information to form opinions about what was happening in the country and to decode other sources of information considered unreliable, notably state TV. As one deserter recalled, such direct information made many soldiers question the official regime discourse of a struggle against armed terrorist groups. After having received news from other parts of the country via trusted channels, he explained, they "understood that when they [state TV] say 'terrorist groups,' these are not actually terrorists, but Syrian brothers."[72] One officer recounted that, among themselves, officers were "always referring to the protestors as 'traitors.' Whole cities were called 'traitors.'" Having witnessed military deployment against demonstrations in his hometown, including the shooting of innocent bystanders, however, he did not believe this version of events: "I knew them [the protestors]; they were people from my village. They just wanted their freedom. This made me angry."[73]

By the same logic, although close contact with one's network can provide information that encourages desertion, it may as well spur loyalty. One deserter recalled how his first attempt at desertion had met resistance from his family. While on home leave in June 2011, he initially refused to return to his unit. His mother and brothers, however, pressured him to do so. He was eventually arrested upon his return and managed to desert later.[74] Another eventual deserter described his decision-making process. He contemplated desertion very early in the conflict. Although he did not tell his family explicitly, his father knew he was thinking about leaving the military. Yet, his father was against taking the risk of desertion and instead insisted that his son was not to kill anyone while on duty. The eventual deserter explained that it was thus initially difficult for him to decide to desert, especially with his family living in a regime-controlled area, as he was worried about the regime's possible retribution against them.[75]

Communication with strong network ties not only provided information, but also, more importantly, a perspective on this information. A soldier from Deraa recounted how he had heard about the arrest of children there, the event that would spark the original protests. As he talked to his father, however, he was told that there was nothing wrong. On reflection and after talking to his father again, he realized that his father had lied to him at the start of the uprising out of fear of his reaction. Indeed, even after military intelligence took the soldier in for questioning in January 2012, he felt that his father remained unsupportive of his desertion. His father reportedly told him that the situation in Syria remained unclear and that there had not been many officer desertions. Only after another round of interrogations did his family support and facilitate his desertion.[76] As these episodes demonstrate, it is not a forgone conclusion that friends and family sympathetic to an uprising will support desertion. Rather, given that the families of deserters were likely to face retribution if they were within the reach of the security forces,[77] and that their loved ones risked their own death during desertion, families often discouraged insubordination.

As the conflict progressed, however, it became increasingly likely that deserters would find support in their social networks. Deserters' families and friends became increasingly vulnerable to regime violence and witnessed atrocities committed by the

security forces. In particular, the number of civilian casualties rose steadily over the course of the conflict. One interviewee, who had initially been hesitant to reveal his plans even to his family, explained that family members' own experience with regime repression swayed them to support his desertion.[78]

Moreover, in early 2012 the regime changed its strategy from a security-based to a military solution. This change of strategy triggered two further developments. First, the army increasingly used heavy weapons against densely populated areas. This change of strategy also meant that, during 2012, shelling replaced shooting as the most frequent cause of non-military deaths.[79] Given the indiscriminate effects of heavy weapons, such tactics were not compatible with the regime's narrative of fighting against terrorist groups. The increasing implication of the military in large-scale repression tarnished the image of this institution. The military had previously not been heavily involved, and "its purported professionalism, balanced sectarian makeup and relatively unscathed popular legitimacy led many to imagine it as the backbone of the state—a respected, effective institution that could finally take over from overly sectarian, incompetent security services."[80]

Given these changes in the perception of the regime in general and the army more particularly, families and social networks often turned from obstacles into facilitators of desertion. As one deserter recalled, he was afraid that something could happen to his family if he deserted, but his family pushed him to do so. In the event, his father was in fact arrested and disappeared because of his desertion.[81] Another deserter confirmed this, emphasizing that his family and the families of his friends in his unit were pressuring them to desert because "the regime was shooting people in demonstrations."[82]

In sum, by communicating through strong social ties, disaffected soldiers received more than just additional information. Many were disaffected already and did harbor grievances against the regime and military service. Communication with family and friends did little to change grievances as such; rather, disaffected soldiers gained perspective by revealing themselves to trusted networks. The content transmitted through strong network ties was trustworthy and could persuade disaffected soldiers to either disregard risk and attempt desertion, or to swallow their grievances and stay put.

Strong Ties Coordinate

Social networks were central in facilitating desertion once a soldier had decided to leave the armed forces. Trusted contacts within oppositional networks were crucial for many soldiers, who relied on friends or family relations within the Free Syrian Army (FSA) to overcome the problem of mistrust between deserters and rebels.[83] Soldiers turned to trusted connections to secure fake identification cards that would allow them to cross Syria's many checkpoints.[84] Coordinating with family was crucial for some deserters at this stage—borrowing a brother or cousin's identification had the added benefit that one resembled the person pictured in the identification photo.[85] On the route out of the country, interviewees stayed with friends[86] and extended family[87] who had encouraged a soldier to desert.[88] Nearly all interviewees agreed that the help of revolutionaries

or FSA members was absolutely necessary to desert and leave Syria, as these individuals had expertise in organizing provisions; they knew which roads to travel and how to get to the border.[89] Opposition networks were also instrumental in securing families[90] and in masking desertions by producing fake videos showing kidnappings and executions.[91] Rebels even at times kidnapped soldiers and brought them to the border in an act that one interviewee referred to as forced desertion.[92]

Again, however, such help was not automatically forthcoming. One deserter, interviewed in Reyhanlı, Turkey, described how he contacted his cousin in early 2012, hoping that his cousin's contacts with rebel groups would help to facilitate desertion. Yet, given the weakness of the opposition around Damascus at that time due to the regime offensive in the area, his cousin's contacts could not offer any help. When orders arrived, however, that parts of the unit were to be transferred to Deraa and others to Hama, the soldier contacted his cousin again and was instructed to try to be transferred to Hama where his cousin's rebel networks could better reach him. The soldier bribed his way to Hama and deserted from the military with the help of rebel networks six weeks after the transfer.[93]

As this soldier's experience suggests, the emergence of identifiable local opposition and rebel networks was an important factor enabling desertions. In this respect, too, the transition to a military solution in early 2012 had important effects. In particular, it had the unintended consequence of strengthening networks among opposition activists since it was no longer possible to locally contain confrontations and limit the flow of information. As a report by the International Crisis Group explained, "as the regime depopulated some areas, it exported their problems elsewhere. As repression grew exponentially, the opposition could rely on expanding solidarity networks that cut across formerly segregated compartments."[94] As a result, opposition networks and coordination structures consolidated, although a unified leadership never emerged. This arguably facilitated coordination on the ground and helps account for the increase in desertions in spring 2012.

While such networks created the material basis for coordination, potential deserters' strong network ties were needed to overcome the lack of trust between them and the rebels. Where deserters had family, friends, or tribal connections into rebel networks themselves,[95] or where their strong ties could act as mediators,[96] trust could be established between deserters and rebels. After having described how he was able to desert based on connections to rebel networks, for example, one deserter explained that such ties were indeed indispensable: "I could only desert because I had contacts with people in the village close to my checkpoint," he said. "Deserting alone is impossible because people would be killed by the FSA. Now there is a threat for them."[97]

Conclusion

Communication with strong network ties linked disaffection to desertion in the Syrian conflict. While many soldiers harbored grievances against the regime, security services, and the military, the extreme risks associated with desertion along with the lack of trust between deserters and rebels created strong incentives for preference falsification.

Grievances did not necessarily and immediately lead to action. Rather, many soldiers kept their disaffection to themselves.

Communication with strong network ties, with family and friends, addressed both of these issues. Although disaffected soldiers may have shared their private thoughts with trusted fellow soldiers in their immediate military environment, lack of trust prevented them from discussing, let alone coordinating, concrete desertion plans. Many soldiers shared grievances, especially among what scholars identified as identity-based in and out-groups. Yet, this was not a sufficient reason for desertion given the high risks of punishment for insubordinate soldiers. Strong network ties rested upon repeated interaction and mutual trust and thus allowed soldiers to reveal their preferences without having to fear that this information would reach the security services. This gave strong network ties exceptional influence over whether soldiers would translate their disaffection into desertion. Where strong ties encouraged such a step, soldiers often took the risk of deserting; wherever their strong ties discouraged desertion, they usually continued to falsify their preferences.

Secondly, strong network ties were instrumental in overcoming the lack of trust between deserters and rebels. Deserters needed to coordinate with opposition networks on the ground since they were often serving in places where they were social strangers. Not only did they lack information on rebel networks in the location of their military service, but they also had every reason to expect that rebels would greet them with suspicion or even outright hostility even if they managed to desert. Coordination via deserters' strong networks helped to establish trust between them and the rebels and thus facilitated desertion.

We have offered one of the first analyses of military desertion on the individual level since earlier works focusing on military cohesion in the American Civil War and World War II. While we are aware of the methodological limitations of our empirical material, the almost complete absence of systematic studies of individual military desertion is a research gap in the intrastate conflict and civil-military relations literatures that merits our contribution. We offered a thick narrative of military desertion in Syria as a theory-developing case study with the aim of initiating a debate on military desertion that moves beyond collective behavior to take seriously the extreme risks involved in military deserters' decision-making. This contributes to a deeper understanding of the environment and conditions under which soldiers make decisions to desert or stay loyal, which should be of interest for students of military cohesion, Syrian politics, and violent conflicts more broadly.

Our argument shares some resemblance with works on collective action problems in the literatures on social movements, rebellion, and insurgency. In particular, we share an interest in the determinants of high-risk activism with many contributions to these literatures and draw on Kuran's work on preference falsification in its application to questions of military desertion.[98] At the same time, however, we go beyond these contributions in a theoretically intriguing way.

Our thick narrative of military desertion in Syria leads us to identify challenges for rational choice theories of high-risk decision-making. Treatments of high-risk activism in social movement studies, or work on rebellion and rebel recruitment, have focused on either collective action or individual action. Our research reveals that neither provides

a sufficient conceptual tool-set for the study of soldier decision-making during civil conflict. In our case, it is not analytically useful to aggregate episodes of desertion and treat them as collective action, for they do not produce public goods or common goals shared among individuals.

Moreover, it is also not accurate to analyze desertion as solely an individual decision, because soldiers do not desert in a vacuum. Instead, we proposed that high-risk actions such as desertion might be best thought of as coordinated action between individual decision-makers and their strong network ties. Our findings emphasize that individuals hold preexisting opinions on whether high-risk action is worthwhile, but that the networks in which they are embedded persuade them to act on or reconsider their opinions and ultimately aid in coordinating action. It is therefore the content of strong network ties (rather than their mere existence) and the ability to interpret information (rather than the presence of information), which help us explain individual action under extreme risk.

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