

# OIL OR BLOOD? THE DETERMINANTS OF INSURGENCY OUTCOMES IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

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*The study of insurgency outcomes in oil-producing states, in the Middle East, has been slightly explored by past scholars. Nowadays it is becoming increasingly important to understand why different groups can be more successful than others and what are the determinants that shape insurgency outcomes.*

*For this analysis I have selected four case studies: ISIS (in Iraq and Syria), Free Syrian Army (FSA), Iraqi Kurdistan Region (KRG - PUK) and Syrian Kurds (Rojava region, PYD and YPG), in the period from 2012 to 2018. This four groups have been compared because they offer a complete vision of all possible models of insurgent groups, that are present in middle eastern oil-producing states.*

*Four common key factors have been found: 1) management of natural resources, 2) management of territory under control, 3) military capacity and 4) incrementation of group's demography, and the sum of each factor determines if the group was successful and when. The highest will be the group's capacity in each of the four factors, the highest will be the level of success.*

*The peculiarity of this study, based on the calculation of the level of success, offer a new model that can be applied to review past conflicts, develop future insurgency/anti-insurgency campaigns and forecast future conflicts in oil-producing states.*

*Keywords: insurgent groups, oil, level of success, Middle East, calculation-model*

**What is the level of success? Methodology for the empirical research is provided. Few attempts have been made to explore the insurgent group perspective and different outcomes in a conflict in oil-producing countries. Similarly, studies on the relationship between oil and conflict [12], ethnic minorities and insurgent movements [13], supply chain management and oil lootability [12], have also been largely overlooked this area. On the contrary, this is a significant research context as insurgent groups in oil-producing states are becoming increasingly important.**

In this article I discover and analyze the main factors that determine insurgency outcomes of groups which are fighting in oil producing states. Each insurgent group has a goal and after a careful research, I have been able to find four key factors common to each group (for each factor scores from 0 to 5 have been applied). These are: 1) management of natural resources, 2) management of territory under control, 3) military capacity and 4) incrementation of group's demography.

The calculation of the four factors can be compared to the Measures of Effectiveness (MOEs)<sup>1</sup> used in war to determine the progress of operations toward achieving objectives by the army. In this case the sum of each factor determines if the group was successful and when. Calculating the level of success is important because it allows to explain what makes the difference for insurgency's outcomes. This model will help both parties (insurgent groups and

governments) to realize that the level of success is not just about winning battles but achieving the highest capacity in each of the four factors. This brings an insurgent group to influence the stability and unity of the country and to get closer to its goal. Moreover, this 'success model' is useful for reviewing past conflicts, for developing future insurgency/anti-insurgency campaigns and for forecasting future conflicts in oil-producing states.

The case studies are: ISIS (in Iraq and Syria), Free Syrian Army (FSA), Iraqi Kurdistan Region (KRG - PUK) and Syrian Kurds (Rojava region, PYD and YPG), in the period from 2012 to 2018. Their comparison offers a complete vision of all the possible models of insurgent groups present in the Middle East, groups with different matrix (ethnic and non-ethnic) and with different natural resource capacities.

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<sup>1</sup> Measures of Effectiveness (MOEs) to measure effects and determine the progress of operations toward achieving objectives.

### **1. 'Management of natural resources':**

0 = no resource present in the territory under control or no goal in gaining control over natural resources; 1 = goal in gaining control over natural resources and attempt with small success; 2 = goal in gaining control over natural resources and possible success in getting the control over a very small area with natural resources; 3 = success in the fight for controlling the natural resources and establishment of group's management in the fields with a beginning in lootability; 4 = control over natural resources and management of the revenues from the resources almost at all its levels of lootability; 5 = maximum control over the resources and management in all its lootable steps.

### **2. 'Management of the territory under control':**

0 = no control over the territory; 1 = control of small not so relevant areas; 2 = control of few areas of the country which can be of low strategic importance and/or without important economic and military sites; 3 = control over non strategic areas and beginning in the expansion over the areas more economically and military strategic; 4 = control over non strategic areas, almost full control over economically and military strategic areas; 5 = fully control over economically and military strategic areas. For using this factor I have been looking at different database which were tracked the conflict and consequent acquisition of territory from one of the group, I used ACLED (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project) database, GDT (Global Terrorism Database) and the Failex State Index. Regarding the case of KRG, the borders of this region were already shaped and also those of the contested regions around it, this is why once the Peshmerga forces of the KRG entered in one of the contested region and gained control over it, it was easier to understand the vastness.

### **3. 'Military capacity':**

0 = no military capacity; 1 = small military capacity which can be quantified in with small groups less dangerous than bandits; 2 = initiation in forming a military capacity with promotion inside the population in joining the group; 3 = first phase of initiation of a military group (people start to gather and to be trained for being able to support a fight); 4 = there is a physical trained and prepared military group which can face battles and can compete with the official army; 5 = powerful group, well trained and equipped which is stronger than the official army. For this factor two out of the four cases were easier to calculate, I'm talking about the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (PYD & YPG) and the Kurdistan Regional Government (PUK & KDP). Both these insurgent groups have specific military

forces which were known from all the external and internal actors in the fights. Regarding the first, we have the YPG which is the military factions of the government, with male and female fighters trained by Kurdish officials and also helped by foreign military bodies. For the second (KRG), the Peshmerga forces is a worldwide well know military group, which can be described as the army of the Iraqi Kurdish Region. For these two cases it was much more easier to have an idea of the amount of fighters, and when and why these number increased or decreased. For the other two groups that I take into consideration in this research, FSA and ISIS, the calculation of fighters who joined the group was a little bit more difficult. For ISIS I have used The Soufan Group (<http://www.soufangroup.com>), that contemplated the demography of foreign fighters that joined ISIS.

### **4. 'Demographical incrementation':**

0 = no supporters and participants, 1 = small number of supporters - usually the founders of the group, 2 = few supporters and participants, 3 = medium supporters and participants which are influenced by the founders in joining the group, 4 = high level of supporters which lead to an incrementation in the number of participants and those can influence other people in joining the group under an already formed leadership and hierarchy, 5 = high level of supporters and people which are joining the group - if this is an ethnic group high level of returnees from diaspora - which has a well structured hierarchy)<sup>2</sup>.

### **Kurdistan Regional Government (KDP-PUK)**

Iraqi Kurdistan is located in the northern part of the country and is widely considered as the gateway for doing business in Iraq [7]. The period analyzed, 2012-2018, shows that the years 2013 and 2014 were the most flourishing. In fact in those years the four factors which shape the level of success were at their highest level. This was given mainly thanks to an economic boom and a large number of returnees, which played a very important role. They brought new knowledge (many of them have western university education) and improved the economic sector. The more KRI had an independent and self-managed source of income, especially from the natural resource but not only from them, the more it allowed to establish a better defined autonomy and independence from Baghdad.

A moment of deep crises started at the end of 2014-2015: the worsening of the relations with the central government (the KRG was accused of acting unconstitutionally) together with the appearance of the ISIS compromised the security situation. Moreover focusing wrongly only on the economic sector linked to natural resources, neglecting other

<sup>2</sup> For researching the Iraqi Kurdistan level of demography and number of returnees, have been analyzed data from IOM (International Organization for Migration) - <http://www.iom.int>

**Tab 1:** Region of Iraqi Kurdistan (KRG-KDP-PUK) table of results of the influential level of success factors from 2012 to 2018

Region of Iraqi Kurdistan (KRG-KDP-PUK)	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
1) Management of natural resources	3	5	4	4	3	4	4
2) Management of the territory under control	3	5	4	3	3	3	3
3) Military capacity	2	4	4	5	5	3	3
4) Demographical incrementation	4	5	5	4	3	2	2
Total score of success	12	19	17	16	14	12	12

*Sources:* ACLED - Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (<https://www.acleddata.com>); Eurostat (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>); Fragile State Index (<http://fundforpeace.org/fsi/>); GDT - Global Terrorism Database (<http://www.start.umd.edu/data-tools/global-terrorism-database-gtd>); IEA - International Energy Agency (<https://www.iea.org>); IOM - International Organization for Migration (<https://www.iom.int>); Kurdistan Development Corporation ([https://web.archive.org/web/20071012180933/http://kurdistan-corporation.com/Oil\\_and\\_gas.htm](https://web.archive.org/web/20071012180933/http://kurdistan-corporation.com/Oil_and_gas.htm)); Stanford University - Mapping Militant Organization (<http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/>); The Soufan Group (<http://www.soufangroup.com>); Western Zagros (<http://www.westernzagros.com>); World Bank (<https://www.worldbank.org>) and author's tabulation.

business investments that had begun to develop, brought to an arrest of the general economic growth.

In February 2016, Kurdish president Barzani stated that «Now the time is ripe for the people of Kurdistan to decide their future through a referendum» [14], supporting an independence referendum, which in fact was held the 25th of September 2017. More than the 90% of the population voted 'yes' and after this, Baghdad sent its troops to regain the disputed territories which were at that moment under the Kurdish forces.

In that moment of complete fracture with the government of Baghdad, the population of KRI started to suffer. Many public workers didn't receive their salaries for months putting them and their family in a very difficult situation, and the KRG didn't have the funds for paying them. After months of street protests the two governments agreed and citizens started to receive parts of their salaries back. Crisis was also due to the decrease of oil price; this also shaped the bad economic reality and destabilized the KRG.

In the *table 1* it is outlined how the four main factors influenced the KRI level of success.

It is evident how the level of success increased in 2013 and then decrease, but what makes it interesting, is that it stabilized on a quasi-state condition and it kept an ongoing situation of conflict with the central government in the last two years.

### 3.2.3 Non-ethnic insurgent group in Iraq and Syria: ISIS

When the civil Syrian war exploded, several insurgent non-ethnic groups appeared; one and the most well known is ISIS. In June 2014 the Islamic State proclaimed itself a caliphate, claiming exclusive

political and theological authority over the world's Muslims [11]. ISIS occupied a vast territory between Syria and Iraq, and in the first its power reached higher level compared to what happened in the second. The access to oil resources was the main financial method of the group. The Islamist militants not only looted Syrian and Iraqi oil where they could, but also succeeded in gaining control over large oil fields, refineries, pipelines, and transportation hubs. Syrian civil war created a permissive environment for Islamist militants to assert their dominance over the region's oil infrastructure, and at the beginning of this war, the Syrian regime became its major trading partner [15].

Oil rents contributed significantly to ISIS's economy. It initially used the profits for startup funds as it "built up its self-styled caliphate, buying weapons and paying salaries" [5]. After expanding the territory under its control, ISIS began to sell most of its oil within its own region. The group exported approximately 30,000 barrels of surplus oil per day and earned large profits from smuggling operations into Iraq, Turkey and the Syrian government [5]. The Syrian government brokered a deal with ISIS to purchase oil since the militants possessed about 60 percent of Syria's total oil production in 2014 [3]. Looking at the conditions in Syria the Western trade sanctions prevented fuel imports to the regime forces [15]. ISIS's success in looting oil in Syria owes to the geography of oil extraction over which the group established territorial control [12].

ISIS started to withdraw and to lose ground in Syria when Russian backed Assad troops and the

**Tab 2:** ISIS (Syria and Iraq) table of results of the influential level of success factors from 2012 to 2018

ISIS (Iraq and Syria)	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
1) Management of natural resources	0	1	3	5	2	0	0
2) Management of the territory under control	1	1	3	5	2	1	1
3) Military capacity	1	3	4	5	2	1	1
4) Demographical incrementation*	2	3	4	5	0	0	0
Total score of success	4	8	14	20	6	2	2

\* Demographical incrementation<sup>3</sup>.

Sources: See Tab 1.

Kurds troops initiated the fight for regaining control over Syrian territory. Starting from this moment the terroristic group lost some of the major cities and then the major oil field, and in 2018 most of its of territory.

In Iraq, after a rapid expansion through in 2014, ISIS has been chased away by Kurdish forces, Iraqi forces and local populations, along with U.S.-led air strikes. Its militants have failed to advance on Baghdad or the Kurdish capital, Erbil, and after 2015 they started to withdraw and to lose territory.

The case of ISIS shows that it is possible for insurgents to establish control over oil fields [12], and its peculiarity was the ability to hold and maintain control over a territory with natural resources. Its lengthy occupation of oil fields and refineries in Eastern Syria and Northwestern Iraq enabled ISIS to produce, refine, and sell oil at a cheaper price than the one proposed on the market [12]. ISIS territorial control over such a strategic region has made oil trade possible, despite the fact that most governments will not openly associate as buyers of the group [3].

The fragility of Iraq and Syria's central state institutions following the departure of American troops enabled ISIS to become the most successful jihadi group in modern history [12]. Yet this vast and ambitious project has been drastically dismantled in a very short time. Shortages of qualified engineering staff and variable electricity supply posed difficulties in sustaining its productivity [12] and the leadership was reduced to nothing in few months, even though the leader al-Baghdadi survived. By the mid of 2017 there weren't any training camps and after the fall of Mosul the ISIS distribution of governance-related media dropped by two-thirds [2].

ISIS defeat was more achievable for three reasons: first, it needed continual conquest to succeed, victory was a clear sign that the group was doing 'God's work'. Expansion also meant new recruits to replace combat casualties, arms and ammunitions to acquire, and new oil wells and refineries to exploit [12]. Second, the violent intolerance of dissent and ISIS brutality towards the communities under its authority sapped support [2]. Third, without controlling anymore oil and gas fields ISIS lost a huge amount of finances, which brought to decrease its power and reduce the support [2].

The *table 2* shows how each factor shaped the level of success of the group.

In this case the non-ethnic insurgent group brought to an explosion of the conflict at the beginning, but later the group almost disappeared and dispersed.

### SYRIAN KURDS (ROJAVA-PYD-YPG)

In 2012 the first demonstrations against Assad's government emerged and started a separation between government and anti-government forces. In the Kurdish area, the political dimension moved gradually from local protests to a more defined reality, which brought the idea of building a Kurdish region.

One of the political parties that was most noted for its more realistic platform was the PYD (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat) [18], which, from time to time, has been harshly criticized because being a member of the Union of Kurdistan Communities (KCK), the umbrella body of groups supportive of PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê) ideology and goals.

Also the YPG (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel) was one player among Syrian Kurdish politics [6] and after a

<sup>3</sup> Due to the difficulty of listing a precise number of fighters, data from The Soufan Group (<http://www.soufangroup.com>) regarding foreign fighters that joined ISIS have been taken into consideration for creating an objective vision of the demography of the group.

<sup>4</sup> Information taken from the interview with a UN diplomats which was working in Syria and Iraq during 2011-2017. The person preferred to keep the anonymity.

**Tab 3:** Syrian Kurds (Republic of Rojava - PYD - YPG) table of results of the influential level of success factors from 2012 to 2018

Syrian Kurds (Republic of Rojava - PYD - YPG)	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
1) Management of natural resources	0	1	4	3	1	1	2
2) Management of the territory under control	1	3	5	4	1	2	4
3) Military capacity	1	3	4	5	4	2	2
4) Demographical incrementation	1	3	4	3	1	2	2
Total score of success	3	10	17	15	7	7	10

*Sources:* See Tab 1.

moment of misunderstanding the two parties joined together and started to recruit people (at the beginning they contacted those individual which were closed family member of PKK).

In 2012 the fight between the FSA (Free Syrian Army), the central government started, PYD and ISIS officially started, bringing to the establishment of de facto autonomy in Syria's Kurdish majority areas, called Rojava [10].

In late 2013 YPG took Yarubia a border crossing region; they managed to broke a major deals with the local Arab tribes for controlling oil fields [8]. They agreed in keeping those previous political figures and employees, but the problem which arose was the lack of good infrastructures, in fact the extraction was just at the first level of oil lootability, and it didn't allowed them to get a high profit from its sales<sup>4</sup>.

2014 and 2015 have been signed by months of constant internal battles and by the isolation of the Kurdish region; in 2016 Turkey accused Syrian Kurds of being PKK allies and it perpetrated repeated attacks towards the Kurds.

In 2017 external assaults almost stopped and the PYD and YPG found themselves controlling a wide territory. Without a clear support from any actor involved in Syrian war, they decided to move towards a possible agreement with Assad's government. A presumable benefit could be the protection against possible Turkish attacks and the construction of working institutions.

In July 2018, the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) agreed to work with the Syrian government towards a "democratic, decentralised Syria". The SDF's political wing, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), issued a short statement on the 28th of July 2018 saying they would form committees to develop negotiations and chart a

roadmap to a democratic, decentralised Syria (Democratic Union Party, PYD<sup>5</sup>).

Without a sustainable and effective economy and good infrastructures the Kurds will probably take the path of negotiations. In their case oil is/was a presence which can't be used effectively for gaining autonomy, because of the lack of three main points: a) working and developed infrastructures, b) companies investing in their fields, c) experience in self-ruled territory (as the Iraqi Kurdistan has). What allowed them to keep control over the territories and to have an effective military capacity was its ethnic matrix of the group.

The *table 3* shows how much each factor shaped the level of success of the group.

### FREE SYRIAN ARMY (FSA)

Free Syrian Army (FSA) is the most questioned insurgent group in Syrian civil war. Its formal identity was presented in 2011 and was promoted as the opposition to the official Syrian government, its structure gradually dissipated by late 2012, and the it has been used arbitrarily by various fighting groups. We can say that different opposition groups which took part in the fight against the regime went under the same umbrella and kept calling themselves FSA [9].

FSA aimed to be «the military wing of the Syrian people's opposition to the regime», and it aimed to bring down the government by armed operations, encouraging army defections and by carrying out armed action (FSA Platform<sup>6</sup>).

In May 2013, Salim Idris, the FSA leader, said that «the insurgents» were badly fragmented and lacked the military skill needed to topple the government of President Bashar al-Assad. Idris said he was working on a countrywide command structure, but that a lack of material support was

<sup>5</sup> <http://pydrojava.net/english/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://fsaplatform.org/fsa>

**Tab 4:** Free Syrian Army (FSA) table of results of the influential level of success factors from 2012 to 2018

Free Syrian Army (FSA)	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
1) Management of natural resources	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2) Management of the territory under control	3	3	1	1	2	3	2
3) Military capacity	5	0	2	4	5	3	2
4) Demographical incrementation	5	1	0	1	3	3	2
Total score of success	13	4	3	6	10	9	6

Sources: See Tab 1.

hurting that effort [4]. In February 2014, Colonel Qassem Saadeddine of the FSA announced that Chief of Staff Idris had been replaced with Brigadier General Abdul-Ilah al-Bashir, due to «the paralysis within the military command in the past months» [9]. From October 2015 onwards, several groups that identify as part of the FSA joined the newly founded, and U.S.-supported, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) militia [15].

After the Turkish military intervention in 2016, with the so called ‘Operation Euphrates Shield’, an informal group of Turkish-backed Arabs and Turkmen was established under the name “Free Syrian Army”, with on-ground support of an organised military backed Turkish and British airpower [16]. The year 2017 saw the FSA further divided and insurgent factions operating under the banner of the Syrian Interim Government emerged with some fighters trained and equipped by Turkey [1].

The territories controlled by the FSA varied but mainly they were always limited to the same areas of the state where they were in the beginning of the war. Even in their proclamation of Principle, the territory expansion wasn’t listed<sup>7</sup>. In neighbourhoods opposed to the government, the FSA has acted as a defense force, guarding streets while protests took place and attacking the government militias. In all these years just a new area, named “Tanf” (February 2018), came under FSA control due to the fact they were fighting gained its control once defeated ISIS.

What is relevant is that in the list of groups that were fighting with the FSA there was a particular one: the Nusra Front. Nusra and FSA-affiliated brigades functioned as a coalition in the fight against the Syrian government from 2012, with FSA commanders often referring to fighters from Nusra as

their. In many cases, FSA offensives against Syrian government military bases began with suicide or truck bombings carried out by Nusra militants. Nusra and FSA-affiliated brigades have established joint committees to divide weapons captured from the Syrian army in insurgent offensives [16].

The FSA itself became very dependent on Nusra [16] and it became an important branch of the FSA. Eliot Higgins, of the crowdsourcing journalism website *Bellingcat*, noted that FSA brigades and Nusra jointly assaulted a Syrian government military base outside of Al Sahweh in December 2012. Higgins also noted that the FSA and Nusra jointly attacked the Syrian army outpost, Hajez Barad, in Busr al-Harir, Daraa, in March 2013 [16].

The Nusra Front, captured different oil fields from Syrian government [17] and we don’t know whether or not the revenues from oil income were used by the FSA too. The fact is that the Nusra group fought with and for the FSA in its most flourishing time frames (2012 and 2016), bringing the Nusra’s ideal<sup>8</sup> inside the group and making itself a central branch of this big umbrella called Free Syrian Army.

This is the reason why it is not possible to shape a direct link between FSA and oil lootability, but we can’t avoid to take it into consideration as possible factor for incrementing its efficiency.

The *table 4* shows how much each factor shaped the level of success of the group.

What is interesting is how due to its matrix, the group has an inconsistent level of success that rises and falls based on which unit is added to its militants.

## COMPARISON OF THE CASES AND CONCLUSION

In this article we found how the four key factors (management of natural resources, management of

<sup>7</sup> <http://fsaplatform.org/fsa-principles>

<sup>8</sup> <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/493>; Nusra’s goals are to overthrow Bashar al Assad’s government in Syria and to create an Islamic emirate under sharia law, with an emphasis from an early stage on focusing on the «near enemy» of the Syrian regime rather than on global jihad justice and peace.

territory under control, military capacity and incrementation of group's demography) determined the insurgency outcomes of ISIS, Free Syrian Army (FSA), Iraqi Kurdistan Region (KRG - PUK) and Syrian Kurds (Rojava region, PYD and YPG).

Syrian Kurds suffered a difficult moment in the end of 2016/beginning of 2017; after they have been left to themselves till July 2018, when they decided to enter into a negotiation process with Assad's government. Finally, they succeeded, somehow, not to lose completely what gained during these years of fights.

Free Syrian Army was officially without natural resources and with no goals of territorial expansion, but with a more complicated situation due to its fragile matrix. FSA entered into a confusing motive regarding which group is called FSA and when, bringing them into a sort of implosion and/or absorption inside the state.

ISIS at the beginning created a big chaos in both Syria and Iraq, taking as advantage the weak political situation of these states. The main targets were not just the most important cities, but the biggest and richest oil fields. At its venue a great number of

followers joined this movement, but this 'ideological bomb' switched off in a very short time.

The case which can be described as the most successful is the one of the Kurdish Region of Iraq. Due to different aspects they have been able to keep an ongoing conflict and a quasi-state condition even during the hardest period. Iraqi Kurds have been able to establish a well functioning region under the social, political and economic point of view.

Looking at these cases it is possible to understand how the matrix of the insurgent groups plays a fundamental role in marking the management of territory under control, military capacity and incrementation of group's demography. The case of Syrian and Iraqi Kurds proofed how an insurgent group with ethnic matrix, even if its revenues from oil lootability decrease, can last longer and move closer to its goal than a group with non-ethnic matrix. If one of these two factors, access to oil lootability and ethnic matrix, is not present, the insurgent group will hardly last.

This new model can be used for further researches which focus in reviewing past conflicts, develop future insurgency/anti-insurgency campaigns and for forecast future conflicts in oil-producing states.

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