

Women Combatants and the Politics of Gender-Based Repression in the Syrian Conflict*

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Abstract

Conventional wisdom holds that governments, when faced with challenges to their political authority in civil conflict, will target military-aged men at a higher rate than other civilians to reduce the supply of fresh rebel recruits. Yet research on the involvement of female combatants in fighting has fundamentally challenged the idea that women don't participate in the production of violence. In the ongoing Syrian conflict, the crucial involvement of women combatants in the Kurdish armed forces has gained much attention, while other armed groups involved in the conflict have few to no women participating in active combat. This paper explores how variation in the involvement of women combatants in fighting is linked to the active targeting of women civilians in the Syrian conflict, assuming that the presence of women fighters affects the threat perception the government has of civilian women. Drawing on a new database of more than 80,000 killings perpetrated by the Syrian Regime between July 2013 and December 2015, and newly collected data on armed group presence in Syria, the paper analyses whether the targeting of civilian women through Regime forces is affected by the presence and strength of Kurdish forces. The results demonstrate that although aggregate patterns of civilian targeting clearly show civilian men being the primary target of Syrian state violence, the presence of Kurdish fighters significantly increases both the proportion and absolute number of women non-combatants killed by the Regime.

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Introduction

Last September, the LA Times published an article titled 'How the Syrian crisis is particularly deadly for women and children'.¹ The egregious violence perpetrated in the ongoing Syrian conflict has led to the largest contemporary humanitarian disaster, but when looking at the demographics of those who have lost their lives, the overwhelming majority of victims claimed are in fact men. In a report commissioned by the UN Human Rights Office in August 2014, Price, Gohdes and Ball (2014) show that of the 191,369 uniquely identified victims in the time period between March 2011 and April 2013, 85.1% of all victims were men (p.1).

The central explanation for why the majority of casualties in conflicts such as the Syrian case are men pertains to governments' inherent threat perceptions of the civilian population it intends to rule. As such, able-bodied men at draft-age are generally perceived to be the most threatening element of a civilian population - either for being 'opposition in hiding' or for being potential recruits for those armed forces challenging central political authority. Killing young and middle-aged able-bodied men is thus frequently justified as a rational strategy for governments set on clinging to power at all costs necessary.

The Geneva Conventions define combatants as 'organized armed forces, groups and units which are under a command responsible to that party for the conduct of its subordinates. (ICRC, 1949)' - alluding here to a person's status-based activity, not their personal characteristics or identity. In theory, armed forces should therefore distinguish between 'harmless' civilians and actively armed and fighting opposition troops. In practice, the targeting of civilians, and in particular men at draft age, is a much-used military tactic aimed at cutting the recruitment base of oftentimes poorly trained and equipped insurgent or rebel groups who are highly reliant on a continued inflow of new fighters (Jones, 2000).

Against this notion of men being the sole instigators and violent threat to governments stands a slew of empirical research on women's involvement in the perpetration of violence (e.g. Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007; Bloom, 2012; Cohen, 2013; Thomas and Bond, 2015). Women participate in violent organizations all over the world, hold a multitude of positions, and regularly perpetrate egregious violence against combatants and non-combatants.

This paper asks whether women's involvement in fighting is linked to the active targeting of women civilians in armed conflict. If the targeting of civilian men is in fact linked to rational considerations of future threats associated with opposition recruit-

¹<http://www.latimes.com/science/sciencenow/la-sci-sn-syrian-war-deaths-women-children-20150928-story.html>

ment, we should expect to empirically observe an increase in the number of women civilians targeted where they are also seen as a future threat. The ongoing Syrian conflict presents a case of government forces fighting against a number of different actors, including Syrian opposition groups, Kurdish groups, and Islamic State groups.² Of these three main anti-government factions, the Kurdish defense forces (dominated by the People's Protection Units, YPG) are the only group that has women heavily involved in armed activities. If the Syrian Regime forces do in fact adjust their threat perception of local civilians based on the gender composition of the local opposition they are fighting, we should expect higher levels (and proportions) of women civilians killed in regions where Regime forces are engaging in armed combat with the Kurdish forces, as compared to other regions without Kurdish involvement.

To answer this question I conduct a quantitative case study of Syrian state violence committed between July 2013 and December 2015 - thus covering a period of the conflict that included heavy Kurdish involvement, but also heavy involvement of the Islamic State. Drawing on a new database of more than 80,000 killings perpetrated by the Syrian Regime against Syrian civilians during this time period, and newly collected data on armed group presence across the country, I test whether the gender distribution of selective violence, measured as violence perpetrated through the use of selective weapons, is associated with the presence of Kurdish fighting forces. The results reveal a number of interesting findings. First, Syrian Regime forces kill more women (when compared to the number of men) through selective methods (such as executions, shootings, in detention) in regions where they enjoy territorial control or where control is contested, than in areas controlled by other conflict parties. Second, the results suggest that in areas where Kurdish groups are present, more women are killed by both selective and indiscriminate methods, but that in areas controlled by Kurdish groups fewer women are killed overall. While the aggregate gender distribution of violence against civilians perpetrated by the Syrian Regime thus shows an overwhelming targeting of civilian men, the proportion (and absolute number) of women killed is indeed significantly associated with the presence of Kurdish armed forces that include women combatants.

Killing civilians in conflict

Civilian victimization in conflict takes on many different forms, where armed groups are known to kill, maim, torture, sexually abuse, rape, displace and forcedly recruit civilians during conflict (Slim, 2007). In the context of this paper I focus on lethal violence committed by government actors against non-combatants. Research on the logic of violence against civilians in conflict generally agrees that civilians are often killed for

²Frequent clashes between opposition groups and Kurdish groups, as well as ongoing fighting between the Islamic State and all other conflict parties persist, but will not be the objective of this study.

instrumental purposes, but emphasizes different conditions and motives as principal drivers of such violence (Valentino, 2014).

Group-level explanations have focused on the organizational attributes as main predictors of violence against civilians. The (in-)ability to police group behavior has been identified as a central explanation for why civilians are killed (Humphreys and Weinstein, 2006), where violence perpetrated by groups is dependent on the level of resources at their disposal (Weinstein, 2007). Others have argued that violence against civilians is a product of organizational control (Manekin, 2012), and that the commander's ability to create institutions that promote restraint ultimately determines the nature of violence committed against civilians (Hoover Green, forthcoming).

Much recent research has argued that the killing of civilians in civil war is not merely due to the lack of control, but that the targeting of those not directly involved in the fighting constitutes a strategy of warfare. This strategy is found to be particularly pertinent in conflicts where governments are confronted with non-regular armed forces, such as insurgent groups, and where the frontlines aren't clearly drawn (Kalyvas and Balcells, 2010). Valentino (2014) summarizes,

'From this perspective, civilians are not merely bystanders to armed conflict; they play a central, if often involuntary, role as the underwriters of war's material, financial, and human requisites. Sometimes they become the objects of war itself (Valentino, 2014: 94).'

As such, the deliberate use of violence against civilians by governments in counterinsurgency warfare has been used as a way to cut off and disenfranchise rebel groups from local supply networks (Valentino, Huth and Balch-Lindsay, 2004).³ Valentino, Huth and Balch-Lindsay (2004: p.400) find that the higher the level of military threat posed by armed insurgencies, the more likely it is that government forces will use excessive violence against civilian populations associated with insurgencies. Fjelde and Hultman (2014) find evidence for entire ethnic groups being targeted if armed forces associated with said ethnic group are deemed threatening to the government. The strategic value of killing civilians is highlighted by Downes (2006) who argues that government forces will be particularly likely to attack civilians in ongoing, protracted conflicts. His 'desperation logic' contends that governments will lash out against civilians when they become increasingly desperate to win:

Incumbents [...] eventually strike at the guerrillas' Achilles' heel—the civilian population from which they draw recruits, supplies, shelter, and information (Downes, 2006: p.164, fn. 42).

³Whether the large-scale killing of civilians is in fact an effective counterinsurgency strategy remains a much debated field of research (see e.g. Kalyvas, 2004, 2006; Lyall, 2010; Condra and Shapiro, 2012; Lyall, Blair and Imai, 2013).

Destroying the opposition's support base by killing civilians is thus seen as a way to reduce the future cost of fighting by weakening the enemy, not least by targeting the group's pool of future recruits (Downes, 2006, 2008). And unsurprisingly, the targeting of future recruits turns out to be a highly selective process. Depending on the main conflict cleavages, civilians are deemed a potential future threat based on their race, religion, ethnicity (Kaufmann, 1996; Fjelde and Hultman, 2014), education (Kiernan, 2002), previous political activity (Balcells, 2011) or mere geographic location (Kalyvas, 2006). But what most instances of civilian targeting in conflict have in common is the selection of victims based on their sex (Jones, 2000; Carpenter, 2005, 2006b).

Sex-selective targeting of civilians in conflict

The assumption that governments use civilians' identities as a short-cut to their political alignment, and thus can be used to evaluate the potential threat they pose to the survival of a political regime, has found widespread empirical support. One of the most prominent examples of this was the Serb forces' use of extreme violence against Bosnian civilians between 1991 and 1995, where men of 'fighting age' were explicitly sorted out from the rest of the population and killed, while women, children, and old men were forcedly displaced (see Danner, 2009: p.165).⁴

The intentional targeting of men at draft age or 'battle-age' is an age-old military tactic (Jones, 2000), where

military-age men and adolescent boys are assumed to be 'potential' combatants and are therefore treated by armed forces – whether engaged in formal battle, in low-intensity conflict, or in repression of domestic civilian populations – as though they are legitimate targets (Carpenter, 2006b: 88).

The illegitimacy of killing civilians, regardless of their likelihood of taking up arms in the future, is clearly laid out in the Geneva Conventions. The categorization of combatants and non-combatants here is clearly based on activity status, not on identity traits (ICRC, 1949). Yet distinguishing between these categories in reality is far more complicated. Two - related - main explanations for why men of fighting age are frequently perceived as a legitimate target can be made. Importantly, neither of these explanations seek to justify the killing of civilians not involved in combat; they merely seek to explain the empirical disparity between law and common perception.

First, in the absence of official uniforms or visible weaponry, many argue that it is impossible to tell whether individuals are in fact civilians or not, and that in conflicts that involve population-supported insurgencies the assumption that all able-bodied men

⁴As (Sjoberg, 2006) points out, this is by no means to say that women and children suffer less during wartime, but that violence in war is inherently gendered and takes on different manifestations.

of fighting age are also fighters is reasonable, given that most combatants are part of this demographic. A recent prominent example are controversies surrounding civilian casualty numbers in Gaza. In 2014, the New York Times published an article titled 'Civilian or Not? New Fight in Tallying the Dead From the Gaza Conflict', which re-analysed the UN data on the demographic composition of killings by the Israeli Defense Forces in Gaza. The article argues that - based on what is known about the demographic composition of the militant Hamas, knowing the age and sex of a victim could provide essential insight into combatant status, concluding that 'the population most likely to be militants, [are] men ages 20 to 29', while 'women and children under 15 [were] the least likely to be legitimate targets (Rudoren, 2014)'.

This justification ignores the fact that the majority of young men caught in conflict generally don't directly participate in violence. It also ignores the ample empirical evidence showing that women actively participate in violent organizations all over the world (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007; Bloom, 2012; Thomas and Bond, 2015; Trisko Darden, 2015), oftentimes while taking part in the most egregious perpetration of violence (Cohen, 2013).

For this reason, the alternative explanation for why men of fighting age are more likely to be killed in conflict argues that gender essentialism has led to a general understanding of the term civilian to generically exclude (able-bodied fighting-age) men from its definition (Carpenter, 2006*b,a*). As Carpenter (2005) argues, international norms related to the so-called 'civilian protection network' have translated the civilian/combatant binary into a gender binary world-view. Such gender essentialist notions manifest themselves in masculinity being equated with aggressiveness or danger, and femininity being equated with peaceful, nurturing characteristics. Demographic information about an individual's biological sex (and age) is consequently used to infer the person's propensity to participate in the production of violence. This binary worldview has led to the fundamental misperception of what constitutes a civilian - thus building a definition that is based on biological traits, and not activity status:

In public perception (although not in international humanitarian law), within the civilian population as a whole women have tended to be classified in the single category of "women and children", and men have tended to be largely forgotten as civilians, as if they were all combatants. Yet the civilian population comprises many men who are of combatant age but have not taken up arms, as well as boys and elderly men who should not be recruited because of their age and specific vulnerabilities (Lindsey, 2001: p.28).

A quick look at the casualty statistics available for the Syrian conflict confirm this gender essentialist, binary argument: the overwhelming majority of civilians killed in the Syrian conflict have been men (Price, Gohdes and Ball, 2014). However, if governments

- at least in part - target men based on the fact that they are the primary demographic involved in the production of violence, we should expect to see a higher proportion of women civilians being targeted by the government in areas where they are more likely to be 'mistaken' for combatants.

If governments do in fact adapt their strategy of civilian victimization based on the gender composition of the local opposition they are fighting, we should be able to observe significant variation in the gender distribution of civilian casualties depending on local opposition group presence. In the case of Syria, we should expect to see a higher proportion of women casualties in areas where Kurdish groups are present.

Hypothesis 1: In the presence of opposition groups that include women combatants, the proportion of civilian women killed by state forces will be higher.

Alternatively, given the persistent stereotypes of the 'civilian protection network (Carpenter, 2005)' that equate able-bodied men of fighting age with combatants and women and children with innocent civilians we could expect government forces in the midst of conflict to hold these same gender stereotypes. If this were the case, women would never be seen as an oppositional threat, regardless of their involvement in combat. In the case of Syria, we would then expect the gender distribution among civilian casualties to be relatively constant - regardless of which armed groups are present.

A further explanation for why governments might refrain from targeting women civilians in conflict is fear of reprisal from the international community. If governments are concerned about attracting attention from foreign governments, international organizations and human rights groups, they might be more reluctant to target women even if they perceive them to be a potential threat. In either case, the observable implication should be little to no variation in the proportion of women civilians killed.

Hypothesis 2: The proportion of civilian women killed by state forces is not dependent on the presence of women combatants.

Women involvement in Kurdish armed groups in Syria

Since March 2011, when protests started to erupt across different cities in Syria the Syrian Regime under President Bashar Al-Assad has responded with extreme use of repression against Syria's civilian population. Five years later, the country finds itself in the middle of a highly protracted conflict with a multitude of armed anti-government groups fighting next to Syrian government forces and their associated allies. Next to the Syrian government, these groups include opposition groups (such as the Free Syrian Army on the one hand, and the al-Nusra Front (Jabhat al-Nusra) on the other), Islamic

State forces, and Kurdish forces, of which the YPG, the Kurdish People's Protection Unit is the most prominent force.

The YPG is a sister organization of the Turkish-based Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and constitutes the largest Kurdish opposition group operating in Syria (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016). To understand the importance of women involvement YPG is, it is worth looking at the history of the PKK, where the inclusion of women in all echelons of the party has a long tradition. As such, women are known to fight on the frontlines for the PKK; for example, women have long since been known to make up a large proportion of the PKK's suicide attackers (Bloom, 2005: 56). In his book on the birth and evolution of the PKK Marcus (2009) writes that

[b]y 1993, women comprised about a third of the PKK's armed forces. The jump in female recruitment coincided with [party leader] Ocalan taking a more vocal state in favor of women's rights [...] he certainly understood that he could gain a powerful ally in women if he defended their rights. (Marcus, 2009: 173)

The Kurdish People's Protection Unit (YPG) in Syria follows the same ideological foundations as the PKK, both set on establishing an autonomous pluralist democratic Kurdish confederation (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016). Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, media coverage of Kurdish women fighting in the North of the country has been extensive, oftentimes bordering on orientalist and voyeuristic (Dirik, 2014). The Northern, predominantly Kurdish part of Syria - known as *Rojava* includes parts of Al-Hasakah governorate, as well as parts of Ar-Raqqah and Aleppo governorate. The largest ethnic group in Northern Syria comprises of the roughly 2 Kurds living in Syria (forming around 9% of the population) ⁵.

Discrimination against Kurds living in Syria has been rampant since the birth of the Syrian nation; most notably during the 1962 census 120,000 Kurds (20% of the Kurdish population at the time) were stripped of their Syrian citizenship, the census being a 'component of a comprehensive plan to Arabize the resources-rich northeast of Syria, an area with the largest concentration of non-Arabs in the country.' (Human Rights Watch, 1996). Stripped of their citizenship, Syrian Kurds endured discrimination in their everyday life under both Hafez al-Assad and his son Bashar al-Assad, being unable to vote or travel abroad, own land, housing or businesses (Human Rights Watch, 1996).

In January 2014, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) self-declared the Rojava region to be autonomous from the Syrian government. Although the Syrian government has not been actively fighting the Kurdish forces to the same extent as other opposition groups (such as the Free Syrian Army on the one hand, and the al-Nusra Front (Jabhat al-Nusra) on the other), and the Kurdish forces in the North of the country have been

⁵Census data is from 2004.

principally concerned with fighting Islamic State forces, repeated clashes between Kurdish and Regime forces have occurred, and importantly, Regime forces have repeatedly killed civilians in areas with Kurdish presence. On the other side, the Kurdish People's Defense Units (YPG) Press Office have been self-reporting to have killed hundreds of Syrian soldiers and Regime forces over the course of the conflict.⁶

State repression in the Syrian conflict

To measure state killings of civilians, I make use of the combined data by four organizations collecting information on killings in the ongoing Syrian conflict. These include the Violations Documentation Center (VDC), the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), the Damascus Center for Human Rights Studies (DCHRS) and the Syrian Center for Statistics and Research (CSR-SY). All four groups collect data on the name, sex, date of death and location of every victim they record. Additionally, every group collected additional notes on the cause and circumstances of each death. Because all four groups have informants based all across Syria, much of the victim information overlaps between the different sources. To arrive at a 'de-duplicated' number of reported killings, the four data sources are combined using semi-automated record-linkage techniques.⁷ In short, a human coder reviews a sample of all records to determine which records are matches (i.e. refer to the same victim), and which records aren't matches. This training sample is used to build a machine learning model that assigns probabilities to every record pair. This iterative process is repeated until the accuracy of the model is satisfactory. Clustering of all positive matches then produces a list of 'unique' victim records. Each of the four sources included in this process provides a substantive number of records not found in the other sources, which makes their inclusion important for completeness.⁸

The data used for this study covers killings by state forces between July 2013 and December 2015. The data collected by these four groups also includes limited information on combatant killings (e.g. fighter of the Free Syrian Army), killings perpetrated by Islamic State fighters, International Coalition forces, Russian forces, and Opposition forces. All killings not perpetrated by Syrian Regime forces are omitted from the analysis.⁹

⁶see <http://www.kurdishinfo.com/ypg-release-balance-sheet-war-2013>.

⁷The record-linkage project is joint work with Megan Price and Patrick Ball of the Human Rights Data Analysis Group.

⁸In future iterations of the paper, these four sources will be used to estimate the number of undocumented civilian casualties, in order to check whether the results are robust to varying levels of underreporting of violence.

⁹The data collection efforts of the documentation groups mentioned above focus on violence perpetrated by Syrian Regime forces.

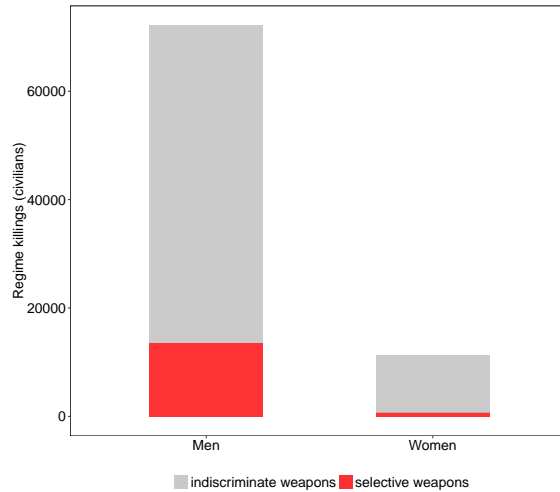


Figure 1. Civilians killed by the regime, by sex and weapon type, July 2013-December 2015

Depending on the weapon type, perpetrators are able to discriminate between individual victims. For example, when a house is hit by a bomb, everyone in that building is likely to be affected by it, no matter their demographic. In line with the Hypothesis 1, it is therefore important to distinguish between weapons that allow for selective targeting, and weapons that do not. I make use of the ‘cause of death’ and ‘circumstances of death’ information provided by the data collecting groups to determine for each victim whether they were killed by a selective or indiscriminate weapon. Importantly, the selection of weapon does not perfectly map onto the concept of selective vs. indiscriminate violence: many people are killed indiscriminately by selective weapons, and conversely, indiscriminate weapons can selectively target specific locations or buildings. For the purpose of this study, however, the question is whether the perpetrator was able to distinguish between men and women when they launched the attack.

Selective weapons: Where the circumstantial information indicates that the victim was shot, killed through primitive tools (e.g. knives), previously tortured or detained, arrested, kidnapped or executed, this victim is categorized to have been killed through the use of selective weapons.

Indiscriminate weapons: Where the circumstantial information indicates that the victim was killed during air strikes, bombing, shelling, mortars, landmines, explosions or explosives, this victim is categorized to have been killed through indiscriminate weapons.

Figure 1 shows the overall number of regime killings of civilians, for both women and men, and types of weapon used. Between July 2013 and December 2015, the record-linkage results in 83,673 uniquely recorded civilian killings perpetrated by the Syrian Regime, of which 72,150 are identified as men, 11,345 as women, and 178 had sex in-

formation missing. The classification results in 69,166 victims killed through indiscriminate weapons, and 14,329 through selective weapons. The gender distribution between the two forms is radically different: 93.3% of all women are killed by indiscriminate weapons - more 9 out of 10 women are killed through bombs, mortars, landmines, and similar means. Only 6.7% are killed by selective weapons. In contrast, 18.8% of all civilian men killed by the Regime in this time period were killed by selective weapons, almost 3 times more than civilian women. The stark difference in the sex-distribution between weapon types strongly supports the gender essentialist argument alluded to above: women are killed through weapons that don't discriminate, men are specifically targeted and then killed through weapons that can precisely select them. The empirical difference also indicates that the distinction between selective and indiscriminate types of killings indeed represents the theoretical distinction of interest in this paper.

What is more important for the object of inquiry here is, however, the number of women killed in proportion to all killings of a specific type. As such, the data reveals that while 15.3% of all indiscriminate victims are women, overall only 5.3% of all selective state killings targeted women. Figure 2 shows the proportion of state-perpetrated women casualties for both selective and indiscriminate weapon types between July 2013 and December 2015. The scales vary strongly between the two maps, but in relative terms, the aggregate proportion of indiscriminate and selective women killings seem to vary in different ways geographically. The two most Western governorates of Syria - Tartus and Latakia need to be understood as clear outliers in this map; they form the predominately Alawite Western region of the country which has remained the central Regime stronghold and has witnessed very low levels of state violence throughout the conflict.¹⁰ Apart from the Alawite region, women were killed by indiscriminate weapons at high rates in a number of governorates, such as the territorially contested Hama, Aleppo and Daraa, as well as in the Al-Hasakah - the Kurdish stronghold. What remains unclear from these maps is how changes in contestation and armed group presence change the gender composition of civilian casualties.

Armed group presence

In order to test whether the gender distribution of state violence in Syria is dependent on the gender composition of the groups the Regime is fighting, dynamic geographic information on group presence across the country is needed. To measure this I make use of data collected by the Syria Conflict Mapping Project (SCMP) that is part of The Carter Center, a non-profit NGO founded by former US president Jimmy Carter. The SCMP

¹⁰With some exceptions, such as the al-Bayda and Baniyas massacre's that occurred in May 2013 (see <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22684359>).

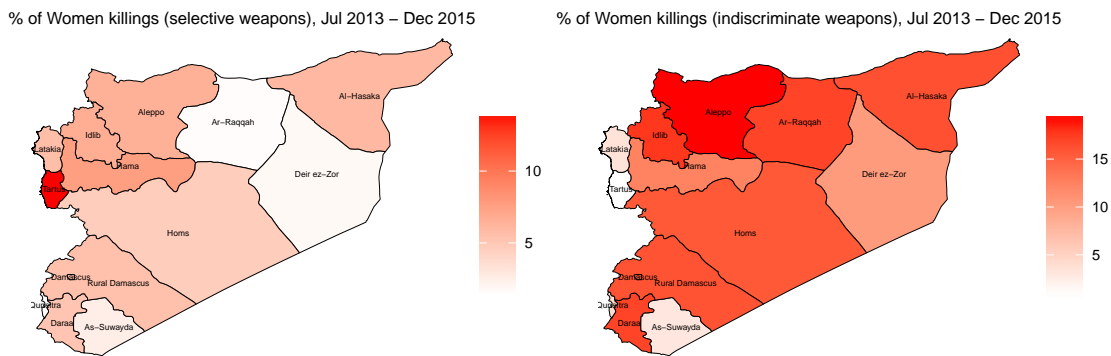


Figure 2. Proportion of state-perpetrated women casualties, by governorate and type of killing

started out in 2012 and collects open source information on conflict events occurring across the country, including information on changing relationships between the main conflict actors. The project tracks more than 5000 local communities and determines which conflict party is in control. While SCMP tracks thousands of local opposition groups, for the purpose of this study I follow their broad categorization of four main conflict lines: Opposition forces, Islamic State forces, Government forces, and Kurdish forces.¹¹

Figure 3 shows the different factions controlling presence for January and June of 2014 and 2015, respectively. Red communities are controlled by Government forces, blue by the Opposition, black by Islamic State forces and purple areas are controlled by Kurdish forces, most notably the YPG. In Figure 3 the progression of Islamic State forces in both Al-Hasakah (the North-East) as well as Aleppo and Ar-Raqqah governorate are clearly visible. By January 2015 (Figure 3c) Islamic State forces have pushed out Kurdish forces from even larger parts of Aleppo, Ar-Raqqah and Al-Hasakah. But not only the Islamic State has gained ground in the Kurdish North-East territory, so have Regime forces (as can be seen in red in the top right corner of the map). By June 2015, Kurdish forces have won back large parts of these territories - yet the Syrian Regime forces maintain control over a number of communities right in the heart of Rojava - the autonomous Kurdish region.

Since information on state killings is only available at the governorate level, I create a number of aggregate measures from the community-level control data that reflect both armed group presence, control and temporal changes in control at the governorate level.

¹¹A dynamic version of the data starting in January 2015 can be found here: <http://www.cartercenter.org/syria-conflict-map/>

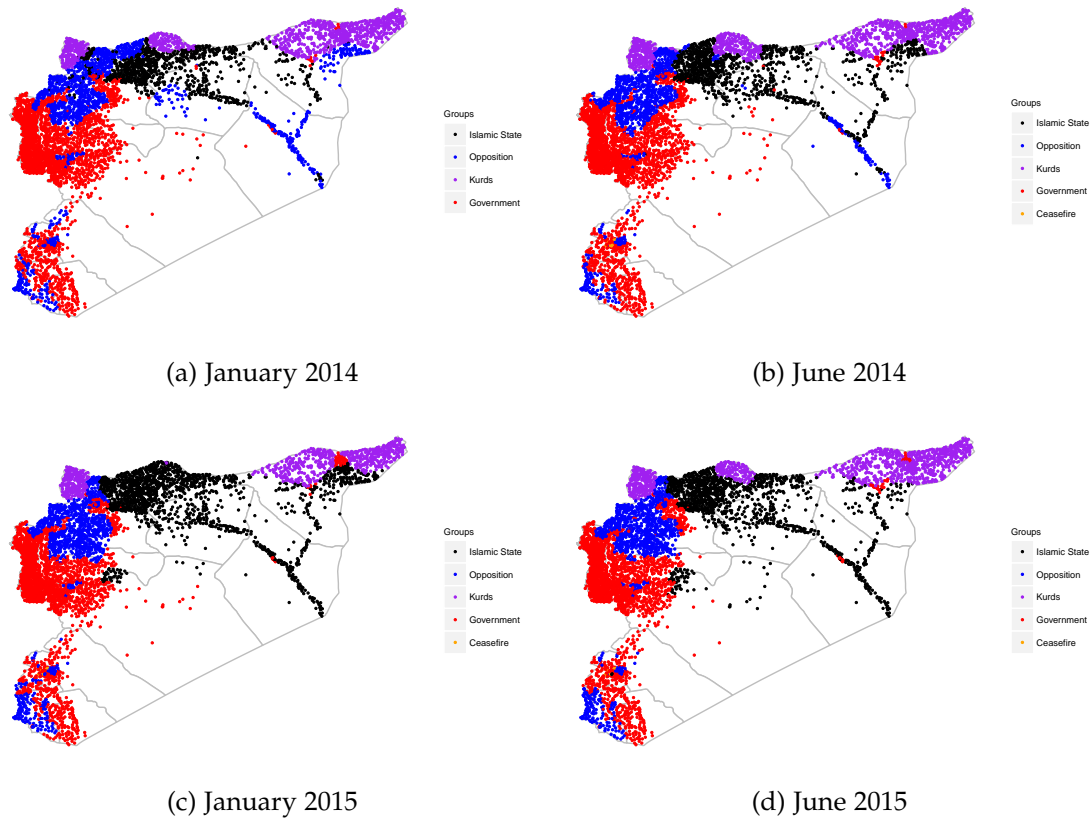


Figure 3. Armed group presence in Syria - community level, 2014-2015.

Since the control data is updated once a month, the unit of analysis is the governorate-month.

Percentage of control For each month and governorate, the percentage of communities controlled by each of the conflict factions are calculated. For example, in Aleppo in January 2014, Government forces controlled 15%, Kurdish forces controlled 21%, Opposition groups 32% and Islamic State forces controlled 35% of all communities. In June 2014 the proportions had changed to 12% Government, 27% Kurds, 26% Opposition and 35% Islamic State control in Aleppo.

Changes in control: Based on these proportions I calculate for each conflict faction whether control was lost or gained. In June 2014 the Government and Opposition had lost control, Islamic State control remained constant, and Kurdish forces gained control in Aleppo.

Control: As a general measure of control, I create binary variables for each conflict faction which take on a (1) when and where the group had more than 60% of a governorate under its control, and a (0) where it did not. In governorate-months where none of the groups held more than 60% (such as in Aleppo in June 2014), an additional binary variable *Contested control* takes on (1), otherwise it is zero.

Results

Figure 4 shows how the percentage of women victims (as a proportion of all victims) varies over time, depending on who the main controlling force is in a given month. The dark bars denote the proportion of women killed through selective means (such as shootings, executions, or in detention) as compared to all selective killings. The light grey bars show the proportion of women victims killed in indiscriminate offensives, such as air raids, through landmines or mortars. The first panel shows that the proportion of women killed in contested areas through selective means varies significantly over time, but is generally above the national average of around 5%. Around 20 to 25% of victims of state-perpetrated killings through indiscriminate weapons occur in contested areas are women - which is above the aggregated average of roughly 15%.

The top middle panel of Figure 4 shows that where the government is in control, the percentage of women victims killed through selective weapons is comparable to the percentage in contested regions. Recalling that the national average for this time period is that only 5% of all victims killed through selective weapons are women, the percentage here is again above average. Where the Islamic State is in control (top right panel) state killings rarely target women in a selective way - instead most women in these areas are killed through bombings and other indiscriminate weaponry. However, in the months where women are killed, the proportion women victims is far higher than the aggregate average, with more than 20% of victims killed through selective weapons being women. The Kurdish controlled areas show some interesting variation. The lower left panel suggests that state forces do not target women civilians as regularly in areas controlled by Kurdish forces as they do in areas under state control or where control is contested. However when state forces do target civilians in these areas, the proportion of civilians killed by selective weapons who are women is significantly higher than it is in areas outside of Kurdish control. In November 2014, the number reaches around 50%. From the beginning of 2015 onwards, state killings in areas controlled by the Kurdish forces seem to almost fully subside, corroborating increasing reports of a 'silent agreement' between PYD and Regime forces to avoid confrontation in areas controlled by Kurdish forces.¹² However, this only accounts for areas under Kurdish control; it does not account for areas in which Kurdish combatants are present and fighting, but where control is either contested or predominantly held by a different conflict party.

The lower middle panel lastly shows the targeting of women civilians in area controlled by the opposition. While the percentage of women victims killed by selective weapons is comparably low in 2013 and 2014 the numbers increase substantially in 2015. Only looking at proportions can, however be misleading as the scale of violence

¹²See e.g. <http://www.economist.com/news/21690203-city-was-once-syrias-largest-faces-siege-assadu2019s-grip-Kurdish-and-government-continue-to-clash-in-areas-that-remain-under-territorial-contestation>.

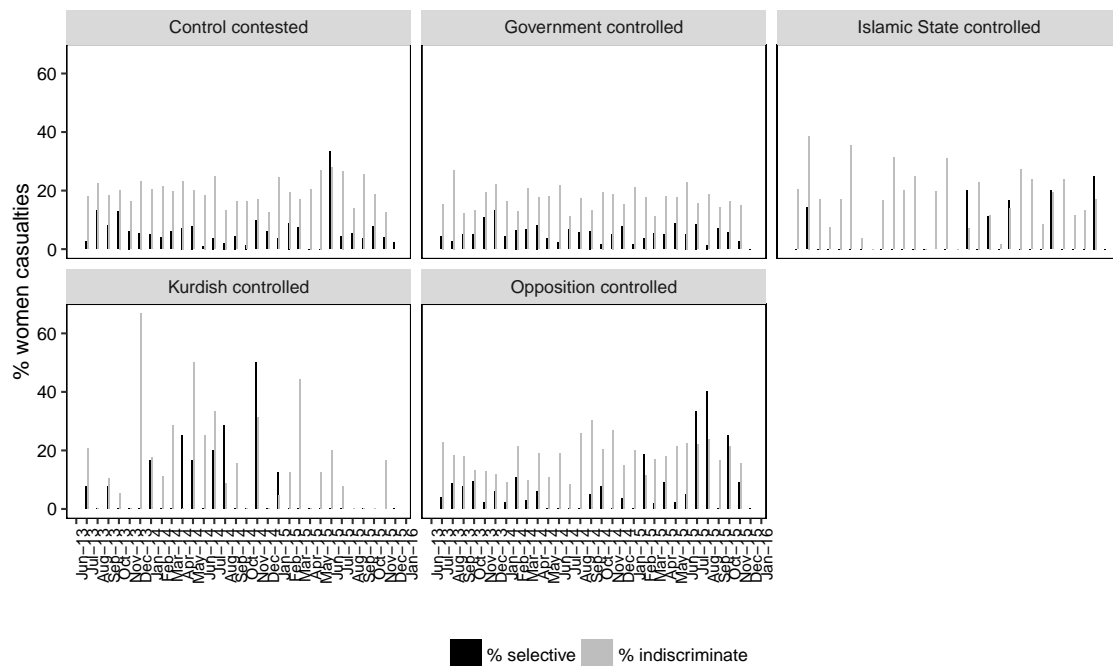


Figure 4. Percent of state-perpetrated women casualties, by type of killing and territorial control

between these areas differs substantially. Figure 5 shows that the exceptionally high proportions of selective killings of women in Kurdish and Islamic State controlled areas are due to the low number of killings (fewer than 5 per month).

Figure 6 maps the number of documented women casualties by weapon type. The map clearly shows that in absolute numbers, most civilians are killed in Rural Damascus, which has predominantly been controlled by Regime forces, and in Aleppo, which has remained territorially contested for most of the time period under investigation. In conclusion, the descriptive statistics indicate that the Syrian government tends to kill a higher proportion of women through selective weapons in areas that it either controls or in which control is contested.

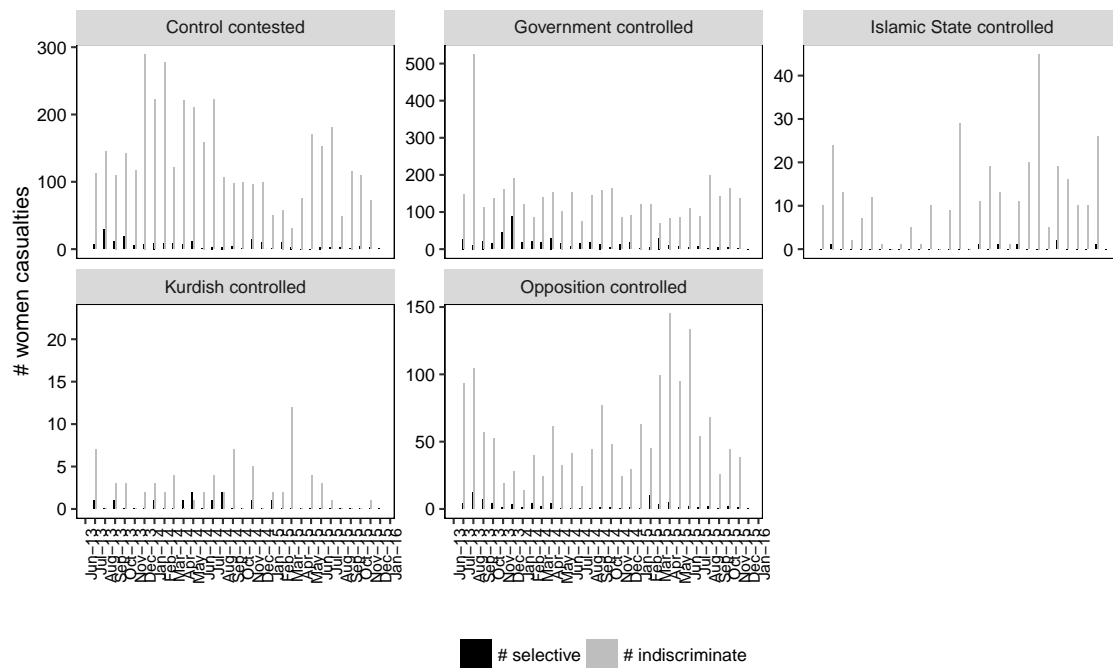


Figure 5. Number of state-perpetrated women casualties, by type of killing and territorial control. Note different y-axes.

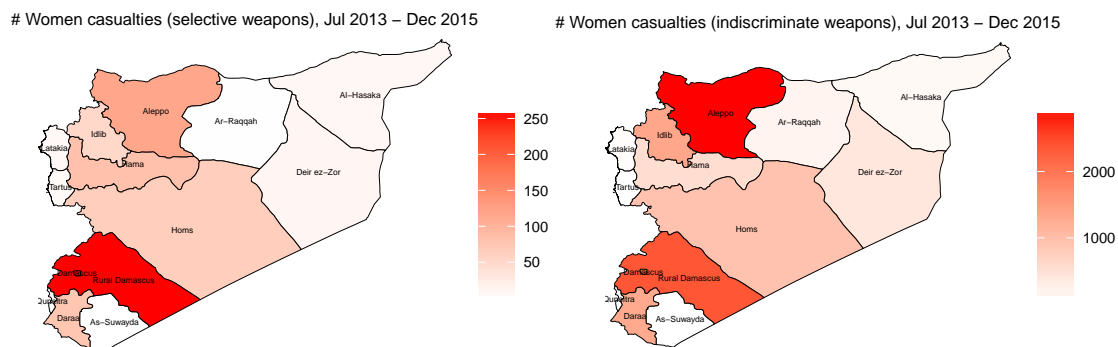


Figure 6. Number of state-perpetrated women casualties, by governorate and type of killing

The multivariate analysis investigates the question of how women are targeted through selective and indiscriminate weapons when Kurdish fighters are present. Because both the scale and the proportion of violence perpetrated against women through selective and indiscriminate weapons offers us interesting insights into the government's practices of gender-based targeting, I model both the absolute number of women and the

proportion of women (from the total) killed by selective and by indiscriminate weapons, respectively.

Figure 7 presents the coefficients (and 95% confidence intervals) for negative binomial regressions that model the absolute number of civilians killed.¹³ The purple lines present the results for women victims, the red lines show the results for the men. For men and women, there are separate models for those killed by indiscriminate weapons (coefficients shown as filled boxes), and for those killed by selective weapons (coefficients shown as filled triangles). The binary measures of control (=60% or more of communities are controlled by a group) reveal a number of interesting patterns. Compared to areas that are territorially contested (the reference category), government forces use of lethal violence against women is not significantly different in areas under government control. Across all models, government forces kill fewer men and women in areas under Islamic State and Kurdish control, empirical confirmation for the fact that the government has not been attempting to fight over areas already under Islamic State/Kurdish control (and evidence that is compatible with the argument that the main force combating the Islamic State in Syria has been the YPG, not the Syrian Regime).

Despite the Regime's seeming restraint in killing women with selective weapons in Kurdish controlled areas, the presence of Kurdish combatants outside of Kurdish strongholds is significantly associated with a higher number of women killed by both selective and indiscriminate weapons. Overall the measure of Kurdish combatant presence reveals that women civilians are generally at higher risk of being killed when Kurdish troops are present, than when and where they aren't. Men on the other hand, are only more likely to be killed through indiscriminate weaponry when Kurdish forces are present. Thus while a greater number of civilians, regardless of their gender, are killed through indiscriminate weapons when and where Kurdish forces are present, only women civilians have a higher risk of being selectively singled out and killed through direct methods such as after arrest, torture, or through a sniper targeting them.

A further interesting finding is that in areas where the government has lost territory (when compared to the previous month) the number of civilian women and men killed through selective weapons significantly decreases. Future iterations of this paper will investigate the relationship between battle wins and losses and civilian targeting in more detail.

Figure 8 offers a different take on the same question - by modeling the proportion of state-perpetrated women casualties. The first two models (in black) employ the same set of independent variables as the previous table, but here women casualties are modeled as the proportion of all casualties using a generalized binomial regression.¹⁴ In areas

¹³(see Table I for full regression output).

¹⁴Observations where the total number of civilians is zero are dropped from the analysis.

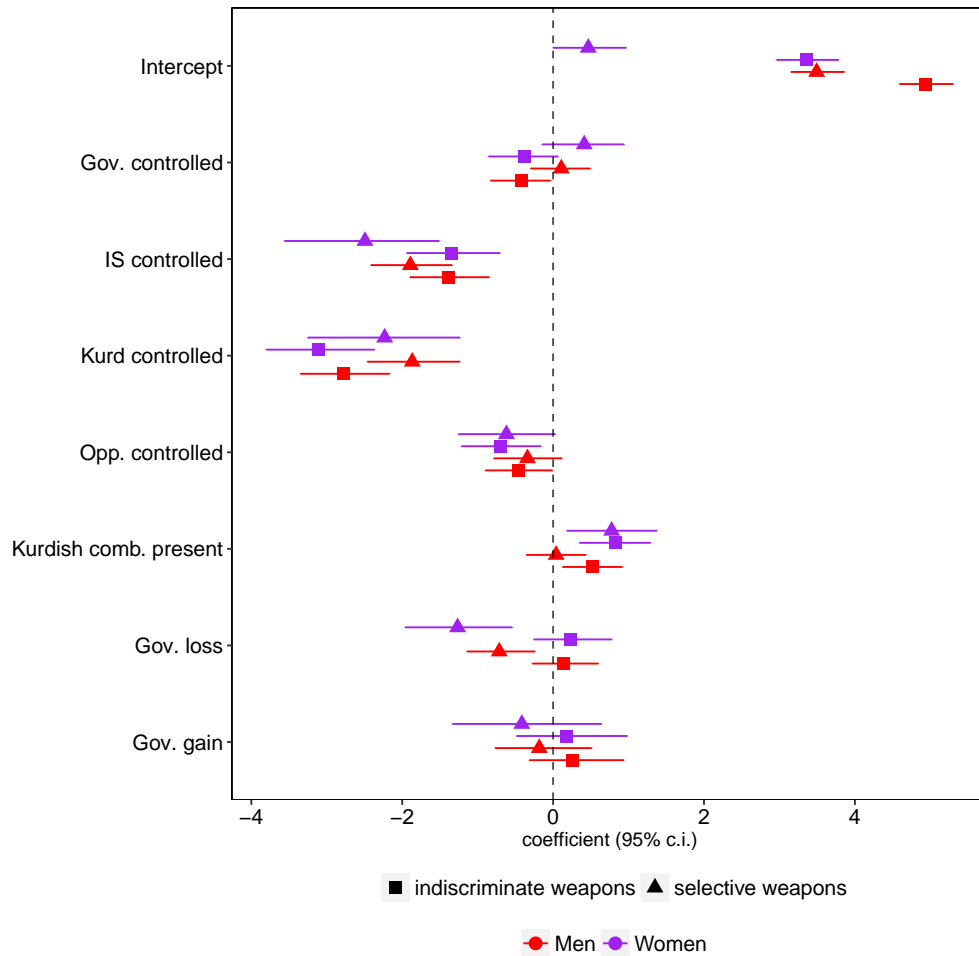


Figure 7. State-perpetrated civilian casualties (count), by gender and killing method

controlled by the Syrian Regime the relative number of civilian women killed through selective weaponry is significantly higher. Only selective killings of women civilians are affected by this, no significant effect is found for women killed by indiscriminate weapons. Most importantly, the proportional results show that the presence of Kurdish combatants is not only associated with an absolute increase in the number of women killed in a selective way, it is also associated with a *relative* increase of women civilians being targeted. The Syrian Regime targets more women civilians - both in absolute and relative terms - when members of the Kurdish forces are present. This empirical finding supports the theoretical argument that women are more likely to be targeted when and where governments are confronted with armed groups that actively employ women combatants.

As in the count model, an interesting finding here too is that where governments have lost territory (as compared to the previous time period), they are *less* likely to kill women through selective weapons in both absolute and relative terms. Where territory has been

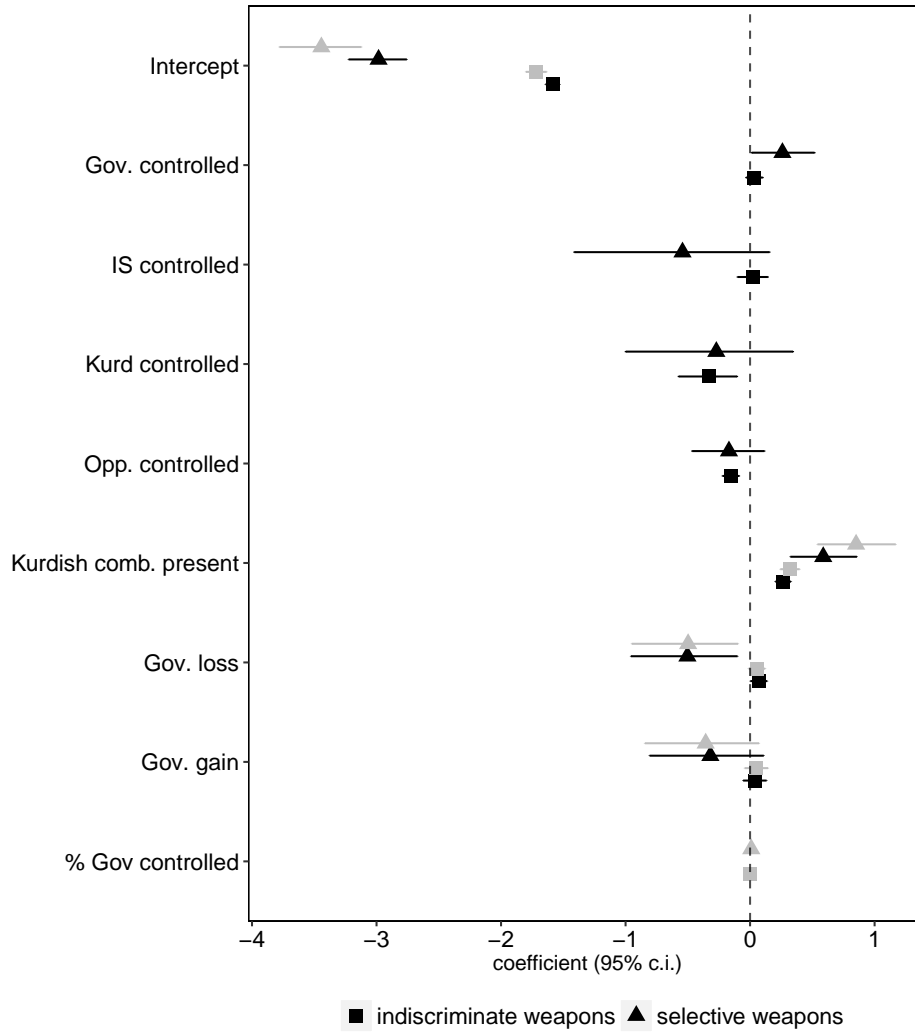


Figure 8. Proportion of state-perpetrated women casualties, by method of killing

lost, the killing of women civilians as a warfare strategy is less likely to be used. In future iterations of this paper it will be interesting to investigate whether more women (in both absolute and relative terms) are killed in the period immediately preceding territorial losses - for example as part of scorched earth campaigns (see Hultman, 2007).

To further unpack the effect of government control of the targeting of women in conflict, the third and fourth model in Figure II (in grey) model the proportion of civilian women killed as depending on the actual proportion of territory controlled by Syrian Regime forces. While the results show that the higher the proportion of territory controlled by the Regime is, the higher the proportion of both selective and indiscriminate killings of civilian women, the substantial effect is very small (see Table II for full regression output). Notably, the effect of Kurdish combatant presence remains robustly significant in these models as well.

Conclusion

The preliminary findings presented in this working paper are compatible with the hypothesis that the Syrian government adjusts its threat perception of local civilians based on the gender composition of the local opposition they are fighting. Where Kurdish combatants are present, women are more likely to be killed by Regime forces. While the aggregate gender distribution of violence against civilians perpetrated by the Syrian Regime does indeed show that civilian men are the primary target of selective weapons used by the Syrian government, the proportion (and absolute number) of women killed is significantly associated with the presence of Kurdish armed forces that include women combatants.

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Appendix

	Women (selective)	Women (indiscriminate)	Men direct (selective)	Men (indiscriminate)
Intercept	0.466 ⁺ (0.242)	3.353*** (0.197)	3.493*** (0.171)	4.933*** (0.168)
Gov. controlled	0.412 (0.272)	-0.380 ⁺ (0.223)	0.109 (0.193)	-0.419* (0.191)
IS controlled	-2.494*** (0.503)	-1.343*** (0.312)	-1.892*** (0.277)	-1.388*** (0.266)
Kurd controlled	-2.233*** (0.513)	-3.107*** (0.370)	-1.867*** (0.318)	-2.777*** (0.308)
Opp. controlled	-0.618 ⁺ (0.326)	-0.694** (0.265)	-0.340 (0.230)	-0.458* (0.227)
Kurdish comb. present	0.776* (0.304)	0.822*** (0.235)	0.040 (0.205)	0.523** (0.201)
Gov. loss	-1.266*** (0.362)	0.229 (0.259)	-0.713** (0.227)	0.138 (0.222)
Gov. gain	-0.415 (0.471)	0.174 (0.371)	-0.183 (0.322)	0.255 (0.316)
AIC	1298.463	3135.352	3333.252	4423.822
BIC	1334.520	3171.409	3369.309	4459.879
Log Likelihood	-640.232	-1558.676	-1657.626	-2202.911
Deviance	346.006	470.782	478.845	491.291
Num. obs.	406	406	406	406

Negative binomial regression. Reference category for control is contested control

Table I. State-perpetrated civilian casualties, by gender and method of killing.

	% Women (selective)	% Women (indiscriminate)	% Women (selective)	Women (indiscriminate)
Intercept	-2.984*** (0.119)	-1.585*** (0.029)	-3.443*** (0.168)	-1.717*** (0.043)
Gov. controlled	0.260* (0.128)	0.035 (0.034)		
IS controlled	-0.543 (0.394)	0.023 (0.062)		
Kurd controlled	-0.271 (0.339)	-0.333** (0.119)		
Opp. controlled	-0.170 (0.148)	-0.154*** (0.034)		
Kurdish comb. present	0.587*** (0.136)	0.266*** (0.032)	0.851*** (0.160)	0.320*** (0.040)
Gov. loss	-0.503* (0.218)	0.070* (0.035)	-0.498* (0.217)	0.055 (0.034)
Gov. gain	-0.319 (0.233)	0.039 (0.048)	-0.357 (0.233)	0.051 (0.048)
% Gov controlled			0.009*** (0.002)	0.002*** (0.001)
AIC	1178.982	3075.725	1166.309	3089.141
BIC	1211.032	3107.776	1186.341	3109.173
Log Likelihood	-581.491	-1529.863	-578.155	-1539.571
Deviance	678.012	1700.408	671.340	1719.823
Num. obs.	359	384	359	384

Generalized linear regression (binomial with logit link). Reference category for control is contested control

Table II. Proportion of state-perpetrated women casualties, by method of killing.