Understanding the Syrian Civil War through Galtung's Conflict Theory

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Abstract

Johan Galtung's conflict theory provides a framework for understanding the Syrian Civil War. Galtung defines conflict as a triadic construct consisting of attitudes, behaviour, and contradictions. Attitudes and contradictions reflect the latent, subconscious level of conflict, while behaviour is manifest and reflects conscious actions when confronted with contradictions and hostile attitudes. Conflicts can start from any point of the triangle and are categorised as direct or structural. Direct conflicts have manifest attitudes and contradictions, while structural conflicts have latent attitudes and contradictions. Galtung also defines three types of violence: direct, structural, and cultural. Direct violence is quick and visible, whereas structural violence is slow and invisible, reflecting the injustice and inequality in societal institutions. The Syrian Civil War can be analysed using Galtung's theory, considering the attitudes, behaviour, and contradictions of the parties involved, as well as the direct and structural violence present in the conflict. Understanding these elements is crucial for developing strategies for peaceful resolution and transformation of the conflict.

Key Words: Galtung, Peace Theory, Violence

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Introduction

As the founder of the discipline of Peace and Conflict Studies, Johan Vincent Galtung has outspokenly advocated for a world without nuclear weapons and has placed the placed the focus of his research on scientific terminologies and methods to understand and deal with conflicts. Having coined the term "peace research", Galtung has devoted much of his time in formulating the influential and unique 'transcend approach',' wherein the focus is on peace, rather than security. He advocated for a model that is holistic and is based on deep understanding and dialogue with one party at a time.

Having coined the term "peace research", Galtung has devoted much of his time in formulating the influential and unique 'transcend approach', wherein the focus is on peace, rather than security.

The underlying cause of any violence, according to Galtung, is an unresolved conflict, one that has not been transformed or transcended, due to the existence of incompatible goals. If the goals are among the four basic needs of survival, well-being, identity, or freedom, the conflict is then concluded to be deep, and most difficult to resolve if left unattended. It is important to remember that a conflict does not progress linearly, but rather goes around in a circle, through a cycle of non-violence, to violence, then to post-violence, and likely back to violence again if it fails to be resolved.

The escalation of a conflict to a violent level is largely a result of disequilibrium among the actors or parties involved, leading to polarization and dehumanization of the Other, and finally reflected in their aggression, the output of which is violence. What follows violence is traumatization, and consequently acts of revenge (Galtung, 2010), leading the cycle of conflict back to its first level.

Galtung's Notion of Conflict

Johan Galtung, in his book, 'Peace by Peaceful Means (1996)', defined conflict as a "triadic construct" (pg.71), consisting of three important factors – Attitudes, Behaviour, and Contradictions.

While both, Attitudes (A) and Contradiction (B), reflect the latent, subconscious level of conflict, Behaviour (B), on the other hand, is always manifest and reflects how people consciously act when confronted with contradictions and hostile attitudes and assumptions. Behaviour may thus be seen as an act of violence, both physical and verbal.

Attitudes and assumptions may include the person's perceptions about an actor or an institution; his/her emotions – how s/he feels about the actor/institution involved; and what s/he wants or expects from the given actor/institution. Thus, attitudes may include sexist beliefs about women or discriminatory attitudes towards minorities.

Contradictions, on the other hand, refer to the content of the conflict, the incompatibility between the goals. It may include a territorial dispute between two or more actors over a single piece of territory, as in the case of Israel and Palestine, or as in the case of multiple parties laying claim to the same group of islets in the South China Sea. In the case of structural or indirect conflict, the contradictions may refer to the disequilibrium in the positions of the parties involved, as in the case of inequality between different classes.

A conflict, according to Galtung, could start from any of the three points of the triangle. It could start from point (A), wherein the actor's hostile attitude could be in disharmony with those of other actors, leading to contradiction, and later reflected in violent behaviour. A conflict may also start from point (B), where the

actors involved may develop capacities or inclinations towards negative/aggressive behaviour, which may get stimulated when a contradiction comes along.

Galtung further divides the conflicts into actor/direct conflicts and structural/ indirect conflicts. The main point of departure between the two lies in their categorisation into manifest, and latent levels. In a direct conflict, both attitudes and contradictions are manifest, that is, they are conscious and overt, the actor being aware of them at all times.

However, the same does not apply when one takes into account the structural or indirect conflicts. Here, both attitudes and contradictions are latent; that is, they are subconscious, and the actor is unaware of them. This is not to say that the contradictions or the incompatibilities are non-existent, rather only that the actor involved finds himself/herself completely unaware of such contradictions.

Types of Violence

While stating that the two types of violence – Direct and Structural–are to be considered as the starting point of any strategy for a peaceful resolution, Galtung also defined a third category of violence, namely, Cultural Violence.

Direct violence is an event that is often quick and visible, reflecting the capabilities and intentions of actors to engage in conflict. It includes a victim and a perpetrator and can be seen explicitly in societies. Structural violence, on the other hand, is a process that is slow and often invisible. It refers to the injustice and inequality built into the structural institutions of society. It is reflective of a position "higher up or lower down in a hierarchy of exploitation-repression-alienation' (Galtung, 2012, pg.12), where the parties involved are determined either to keep the hierarchy intact or to completely obliterate it.

An example of structural violence, as seen from a top-down approach would include colonial aspirations of the European nations. In the case of India and the British empire, the aggression from top existed in the form of material exploitation at the hands of the latter. It became visible once the natives demonstrated their will to oppose colonialism and break the hierarchy of exploitation. The same holds for the Indian caste system, wherein the structural violence, in the form of exploitation and marginalisation, has remained intact because of the capability of those higher up, namely the Brahmins, to maintain the disequilibrium in positions between themselves and the communities they perceive to be lower than them.

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Cultural violence refers to those "aspects of culture that can be used to legitimise or justify both structural and direct violence' (Galtung, 1990, pg.291). It renders the use of violence as acceptable in society and makes it okay for actors to use violence without making them feel guilty. In a brilliant example, Galtung discusses how the internalisation of culture makes it morally easier for actors to employ violence, such as in the interpretation of murder on behalf of one's country being seen as right (Galtung, 1990, pg.292). In the case of direct and structural violence faced by immigrants, it is the culture that allows for such violence to be tolerated. The cultural violence, in this case, justifies the indirect and direct violence by dehumanising the immigrants and portraying them as thugs or aliens. This allows societies to tolerate policies of forced child separation while continuing to deny them equitable means of living.

Escalation of conflicts into violence

Violence is most often an outcome of deprivation of needs. The more basic and non-negotiable the needs, the more likely it is that aggression will come into existence. While classifying the basic needs into four broad categories of survival, welfare, freedom, and identity, Galtung warns his readers against prioritising any one need over the others. To put survival above freedom and identity, would result in repression and alienation (Galtung, 1985), failing to end structural and cultural violence.

When the goal of an actor (A) is incompatible with that of an actor (B), such that it obstructs the attainment of the goal by the actor (B), the pursuit of such goals would then most likely result in frustration among both actors, the consequence of which would be a polarisation of the two extremes. Polarisation would imply a zero-sum game, where the scope of transcendence is low, and the likely outcome is a position of no compromise. Because the contradiction in goals is absolute, the victory of the actor (A) would thus necessarily imply the loss of actor (B).

Polarisation, accompanied by the dehumanisation of the Other, may galvanise into hostility and hatred, manifesting itself into aggressive behaviour, finally resulting in escalation. The conflict, however, does not stop at violence. What follows violence is the traumatisation of victims harmed by violence and the breeding acts of revenge (Galtung 2010, pg.16).

In an actor conflict, polarisation between the two sides can almost immediately lead to direct violence. This is because actor (A), who has incompatible goals with actor (B), can easily identify the object/subject of the

obstruction of the attainment of its goals. Therefore, what follows is violent behaviour by actor (A) towards actor (B).

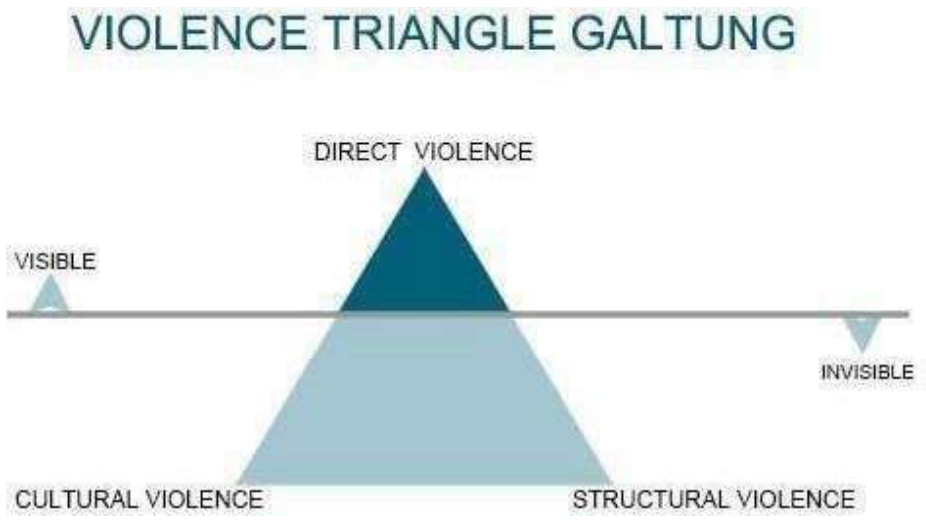
However, in a structural conflict, polarisation may result in acute disequilibrium between the rank positions of members in a society. However, Galtung in his essay on the "Structural Theory of Aggression" argues that violence is unlikely to occur unless all methods of maintaining equilibrium have been tried and unless culture facilitates violence wherein those lower down are constantly reminded of their position and their consequent mistreatment (Galtung 1964, pg.99).

A system of injustice or inequity which refuses to break the hierarchy of oppression and exploitation would likely result in frustration, the outburst of which would be reflected in the form of violence. The often-visible naxalite violence in India can be seen as a result of deep-rooted structural violence, wherein the parties involved have suffered exploitation and marginalisation due to unequal economic development and inequitable distribution of resources for years.

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On the other hand, the genocide that took place against the members of the Rohingya community in Myanmar is a crude example of direct violence. They claimed to have been living in the state since the 9th century but were eventually labelled Bangladeshi Immigrants. Years of discrimination (structural violence) and hatred (attitudes, assumptions, and cultural violence) have led to ethnic cleansing (direct violence). They were murdered, raped, and evicted from their homelands. It only took one law, which rendered them stateless, for the majority of Myanmar to consider them as sub-humans and readily accept the atrocities committed against them.

Syrian Conflict through Galtung's Conflict Theory



The civil war in Syria is, unfortunately, an example of one of the bloodiest conflicts of this century. The war is often seen as a result of the outburst of pro-democracy protests in 2011, under the appellation of the Arab Spring.

However, when approached using Galtung's conflict theory, the conflict can be divided into three categories of violence. First, what we have been witnessing is the horror of direct violence in Syria, as a consequence of years of repression, facilitated by the government's violent response towards peaceful protesters in 2011. Second, the structural violence in the form of decades of economic restraints and systemic corruption, which exacerbated the existing poverty and inequality amongst the citizens. Further, four years of drought between 2006 and 2011, and the consequent failed economic policies forced 2 million to 3 million Syrians into abject poverty (Polk, 2013). The dwindling Syrian economy and infrastructure finally led to the deprivation of the basic need of welfare and threatened their need for survival, resulting in frustration. Third is the cultural violence that has helped in sustaining the ongoing violence, in the form of distortion, denial, and dehumanisation of the victims of violence has helped Assad and his foreign allies in continuing the mass murder of Syrians. Here, the sanitisation of language is of key importance, where attempts to distort reality often end up changing the moral colour of violence, as argued by Galtung, wherein violence from being unacceptable begins to be tolerated without question.

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Direct Violence in Syria

Syrians have been victims of decades-long political repression in the form of restrictions on freedom of speech and expression, torture, and enforced disappearances. Political institutions have historically been unstable, with three military coups taking place in 1949, followed by one in 1954, in addition to the Ba' athist-led coups of 1963 and 1966. Syrian security forces (Mukhabarat) are known to have detained citizens without proper warrants even before 2010, many of whom have reportedly been tortured in prisons (Human Rights Watch,2010). In their attempts to keep the hierarchy of power relations intact, centralised institutions are known to clamp down on any public demonstrations, with frequent arrests and the employment of state violence. Several actors are involved in perpetrating the more visible, direct violence, and it is clear that the Syrian conflict cannot be looked at as a conflict solely between the state and armed rebellion groups.

In 2011, 15 school-going children under the age of 17 were reportedly arrested and tortured to write anti-graffiti on a wall, leading to the protests of 2011. The government responded by opening a fire on peaceful protestors, killing four civilians (Macleod, 2011). More than 400,000 people have died because of the Syrian conflict since 2011, with five million seeking refuge abroad and over six million displaced internally (World Bank). This section identifies several actors involved in perpetrating the more visible, direct violence and contends that the Syrian conflict cannot be looked at as a conflict solely between the state and armed rebellion groups. It would also be myopic to look at the conflict entirely from the perspective of sectarian divisions, given that each rebellion group has a different motive, and is being backed by several different actors.

While soldiers supporting the Syrian president and the opposition armed groups continue to remain prominent actors, recent years have seen the rise of Islamic State, Al-Qaeda and their affiliated members. The war has also seen a large-scale presence of two categories of foreign actors – those supporting the Syrian regime (Iran, and Russia), and those who continue to be the key rebel supporters (US, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia). All of these actors have their motives and intentions of being engaged in the war. While Iran sees Syria as its primary ally and a transit point for Hezbollah, Russia thinks of Syria as its last remaining stronghold. On the other hand, the United States and Saudi Arabia are driven by their intentions to maintain the regional balance of power away from the Iranian axis of influence. Meanwhile, Turkey continues to battle the spillover effect of thousands of Syrian refugees who continue to cross the border to Turkey.

The anti-government groups based in Ghouta, including Jaysh al-Islam, Ahrar al-Sham and Faylaq al-Rahmane, have killed and mutilated hundreds of civilians in indiscriminate attacks on Damascus. These armed groups have also regularly arrested and tortured civilians in Douma, including the members of religious minority groups. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an Al-Qaeda affiliate present in Idlib, has carried out arrests and kidnappings that targeted local political opponents and journalists, while also continuously interfering with humanitarian access and aid distribution in areas under its control (CSIS).

Cultural Violence in Syria

Cultural violence in Syria, like elsewhere, is most often perpetrated in the form of sanitisation of language, where years of structural violence are termed mere discrimination and where civilians are seen as mere targets to be killed. A few years ago, in an attempt of distorting reality, the Russian media described a Syrian documentary on Helmet volunteers in Aleppo as a "thinly disguised Al Qaeda promotional vehicle" (Hamad, 2018). Such attempts of distortion aim at normalizing even the most brutal violence. In the case of Russia,

these attempts help to legitimise its airstrikes, even when the number of civilians killed in these strikes surpasses the number of ISIS members it sought to target. According to a report, approximately four thousand civilians have been killed by Russian airstrikes as opposed to 2758 ISIS members (Armstrong & Richter, 2016).

Additionally, cultural violence in the form of ideology and religion has helped to sustain violence in the region. Here, religion has acted as a form of cultural violence, where the fight is between the 'Chosen' and the 'Unchosen'. In Syria, this fight has taken the form of sectarian divisions between the minority Alawi community and the majority Sunni population. The legitimisation of violence at the hands of the state is rooted in its fight against 'extremism', which depends upon the promulgation of the narrative that all rebel forces have the same ulterior motive -of building an intolerant Islamic caliphate. The state's reliance on its alleged effort to curb extremism has allowed its forces to justify the use of heavy artillery, bombardment of residential places, and subsequent massacres. Another factor that helps explain the sustenance of violence is its normalisation, where violence is seen as natural and a part of everyday life. Decades of repression in Syria have helped normalise torture, rampant arrests, and restrictions.

Structural Violence in Syria

While countries continue to witness the horrors of visible atrocities and war crimes, the underlying layers of structural violence continue to buttress egregious brutality which is often more direct, and physical. Although war is often seen as a result of the outburst of pro-democracy protests in 2011, a close examination of the country's socio-economic structures would enable one to obtain a detailed insight into the underlying layers of frustration caused by large-scale poverty, inequality, and marginalisation.

> The injustice and inequality built into the structural institutions of the Syrian society can be referred to, what has been called as the 'structural violence', by Johan Galtung.

One would also find that the relatively peaceful structure, which existed before the protests of 2011, remained largely intact because of the existence of single-party dominance, where one actor (Hafez al-Assad, and later Bashar al-Assad) held all power and authority, while those existing in the lower ranks of society continued to lack resources, as well as opportunities to challenge the dominant power. The violence, here, is reflective of a position "higher up or lower down in a hierarchy of exploitation-repression-alienation", where the parties involved are determined either to keep the hierarchy intact or to completely obliterate it.

In the case of Syria, deprivation of the most basic and non-negotiable needs, which threatened citizens' need for survival, has been the primary cause of aggression to come into existence. The factors that, thus, led to the conflict in Syria can be seen as rooted in years of repression, poverty, and lack of representative institutions,

which manifested in the form of protests, or the Arab Spring of 2011. The Syrian economic crisis has existed long before the commencement of the civil war. Since the beginning of the economic crisis, Syria's institutional structures have failed to meet the rising needs and rights of its population. In the 1980s, the country was trapped in a downward spiral of a fiscal crisis, as a result of large-scale drought, and due to both, domestic and external factors. The crisis led to a high food deficit and an increase in the cost of living, leading to a rise in patronage networks which provided small circles of elite with profitable businesses. These networks became increasingly popular in real estate and land management, leaving out large sectors of Syria underdeveloped. While the country witnessed a decreasing overall debt and a noticeable rise in the GDP in the 2000s, large sections of the population were excluded from benefitting from these growth rates due to differences in wage rates and declining job opportunities. Increasing inequality was reflected in a paper published by the UNDP, which claimed that 65.6% of all labour in Syria belonged to the informal sector in 2010, with Aleppo and Idlib ranking first with over 75% of their workforce belonging to the informal sector (UNDP, 2018).

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Additionally, oil revenues fell from more than 14% of GDP in the early 2000s to about 4% in 2010 due to the depletion of reserves. According to a report, overall poverty in Syria in 2007 impacted 33.6% of the population, of which 12.3% were estimated to be living in extreme poverty. Noting the degree of inequality in Syria in 1997, the report found that the lower 20% of the population had a share of only 8% in expenditure, while the richest 20% of the population shared about 41% of the expenditure (Abu-Ismail, Abdel-Gadir & El-Laithy). Moreover, the widely disputed region of North-Eastern Syria witnessed the highest levels of inequality in 2007, in addition to the deprivation of living standards, the worst levels of illiteracy, and access to safe water just four years before the outbreak of the civil war. The unequal access to resources was also starkly reflected in the housing situation of the country before the war, where over 40% of the population lived under informal housing conditions through squatting or on lands obtained without legal contracts (Goulden, 2011).

Years of conflict have exacerbated the economic crisis, pushing both the state and its citizens, into chaos, with more than 80 per cent of the Syrian population living below the poverty line, with an unemployment rate of at least 55 per cent in 2018. With most of the business networks now being controlled by the selected few elites, the population at large continues to suffer the brunt of both structural, and direct violence.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to explain the theoryof conflict, as proposed by Johan Galtung. In doing so, it has referred to six primary sources of the author. It has taken into account Galtung's two triangles of conflict. First, the attitudes-behaviour-contradiction triangle, which seeks to explain the notion of conflict, and demonstrates how a conflict consists of all three, with attitudes and contradictions existing at the latent level, manifesting themselves into violent behaviour which is conscious and visible. The second triangle divides violence into three broad categories of direct violence, structural violence, and cultural violence, and demonstrates how the latter two facilitate and bring about direct violence. This paper has also attempted to employ Galtung's theory of conflict to explain the civil war in Syria, where it has identified the three categories of violence and has tried to apply the theory into practice. The conflict, which started with citizens demanding their basic needs and rights has been sustained over the years by the involvement of foreign states, and increased state brutality which has been responded to by an increasingly similar, if not equal, force by the rebellion groups. The country, now, witnesses itself entangled in a cycle of conflict, where the war has led to steep economic deterioration, political repression, and physical violence, which in turn has led to further widespread cataclysm.

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