The Collapse of Syria: A Case of the failure of Counter-Insurgency (COIN) from Clausewitz Trinity Perspective

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
	The Syrian conflict, beginning in 2011, escalated into a complex civil war, challenging the government's counterinsurgency (COIN) efforts. This study analyzes Syria's COIN failure through Clausewitz's Trinity, focusing on the interplay between government, military, and people. Using qualitative document analysis, data from government reports, academic articles, and expert analyses are examined. The research highlights an imbalance in Clausewitz's Trinity: the Assad regime lost legitimacy, the military fragmented, and excessive reliance on force alienated civilians. External support for rebels further hindered COIN efforts. The study underscores the need for balanced COIN strategies, integrating military action, government legitimacy, and popular support. These insights offer valuable lessons for addressing future insurgencies with a holistic approach.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Syrian conflict, which erupted in 2011 amid the broader regional turmoil of the Arab Spring, stands as one of the most devastating civil wars of the 21st century. What began as peaceful protests against the Assad regime quickly transformed into a complex multi-dimensional conflict, presenting an intriguing case study of counter-insurgency (COIN) failure in modern warfare [1]. The Syrian government's inability to effectively implement COIN strategies has resulted in catastrophic consequences, including the displacement of millions, the emergence of various militant groups, and the fragmentation of national sovereignty. This research examines this failure through the theoretical lens of Carl von Clausewitz's Trinity concept, which provides a sophisticated framework for understanding the intricate relationships between government, military, and people in warfare [2].

The relevance of Clausewitz's Trinity to modern COIN operations cannot be understated. Clausewitz argued that warfare is fundamentally shaped by three interrelated elements: the government's political direction, the military's operational capabilities, and the people's passion and will [3]. In the Syrian context, this theoretical framework offers valuable insights into how the breakdown of these relationships contributed to the regime's inability to maintain control and legitimacy. The Assad government's approach to counter-insurgency demonstrated a critical misunderstanding of these essential relationships, particularly in its failure to address the underlying grievances of its

population while attempting to maintain military superiority.

The evolution of the Syrian conflict presents a highly complex case for COIN analysis. Unlike traditional insurgencies, the Syrian situation rapidly evolved into what experts term a "compound war" – where multiple actors, including state and non-state entities, operate simultaneously with varying objectives and allegiances [4]. The involvement of international powers such as Russia, Iran, the United States, and various regional actors has further complicated the implementation of effective COIN strategies, creating what [5] describes as a "hybrid warfare" environment where conventional military operations, insurgency, and counter-insurgency operations occur simultaneously.

The failure of Syria's COIN strategy can be attributed to several critical factors when viewed through Clausewitz's Trinity. First, the government's political approach, characterized by brutal repression and unwillingness to engage in meaningful reform, severely undermined its legitimacy among the population [6]. This represents a fundamental breakdown in the relationship between the government and the people – one of the critical elements of the Trinity. As argued by [7] in their influential COIN manual, population-centric approaches are crucial for successful counter-insurgency operations, yet the Syrian regime opted for enemy-centric tactics that ultimately proved counterproductive.

Second, the military dimension of the Trinity was compromised by the fragmentation of Syria's armed forces, with significant defections early in the conflict creating what [8] terms a "military legitimacy crisis." The inability to maintain military cohesion while conducting COIN operations against an increasingly sophisticated insurgency highlighted the operational limitations of Assad's forces. This military weakness was partially offset by external support, particularly from Russia and Iran, but this dependency further complicated the Trinity relationship by introducing external influences into what was originally an internal conflict [9].

Third, the people will – the third element of Clausewitz's Trinity – was irreparably damaged by the regime's indiscriminate use of violence against civilian populations. The deployment of chemical weapons, barrel bombs, and siege warfare tactics not only violated international humanitarian law but also fundamentally undermined any possibility of winning "hearts and minds" – a crucial element of successful COIN operations [10]. The resulting displacement of millions of Syrians and the creation of vast refugee populations in neighboring countries further complicated any attempts at implementing effective COIN strategies [11].

The complexity of the Syrian conflict is further exacerbated by the involvement of multiple external actors, each with their own strategic interests. Russia's intervention in 2015 significantly altered the balance of power, providing crucial air support to Assad's forces and demonstrating the limitations of Western-backed opposition groups [12]. Iran's involvement, primarily through proxy militias and the deployment of Revolutionary Guard advisors, added another layer of complexity to the conflict dynamics [13]. These external interventions not only prolonged the conflict but also made it increasingly difficult for any single actor to implement a coherent COIN strategy.

The rise of extremist groups, most notably the Islamic State (ISIS), further complicated the COIN landscape in Syria. The emergence of ISIS as a potent force not only challenged the Assad regime but also diverted international attention and resources away from the original conflict dynamics [8]. This development forced a recalibration of priorities among both internal and external actors, leading to shifting alliances and further fragmenting the opposition landscape.

The failure of Syria's COIN strategy also highlights the limitations of traditional COIN doctrine in the face of 21st-century challenges. The rapid spread of information and misinformation through social media platforms created a volatile environment where perceptions could shift quickly, complicating efforts to win over the

population. The Syrian government's attempts to control the narrative were often undermined by citizen journalists and activists who were able to broadcast the realities of the conflict to a global audience.

Moreover, the protracted nature of the conflict has had profound effects on Syrian society, further undermining the government's COIN strategy. Years of violence, economic collapse, and displacement have torn apart the social fabric of the country. This societal fragmentation has made it increasingly difficult for the government to implement effective governance and reconciliation programs, key components of successful COIN operations [9]. In light of these dynamics, this research seeks to answer how the Assad regime's failure to balance the three elements of Clausewitz's Trinity—government legitimacy, military effectiveness, and popular support—contributed to the failure of counter-insurgency (COIN) strategies in the Syrian civil war.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Power Theory

Clausewitz's Trinity, also known as the Clausewitzian Trinity, is a fundamental concept in war theory proposed by Carl von Clausewitz in his renowned work, "On War". This concept provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex and dynamic nature of warfare.The Clausewitzian Trinity consists of three main interrelated and interacting elements:

a. *Primordial violence, hatred, and enmity (associated with the people)*
b. *Chance and probability (associated with the military)*
c. *Subordination of war as an instrument of rational policy (associated with the government)*

Clausewitz argued that these three elements must be balanced to achieve success in warfare (Clausewitz, 1832/1976). In modern contexts, this trinity is often summarized as "passion, chance, and reason" [3]. The first element, primordial violence, reflects the

emotional and irrational aspects of war. It is closely tied to the people and represents the passion, hatred, and enmity that can ignite and sustain conflict. Clausewitz emphasized that "the passion that is to be kindled in war must already be inherent in the people" [14]. The second element, chance and probability, relates to the military and its commanders. It encompasses uncertainty, risk, and unpredictable elements in warfare. Clausewitz described this as "the space in which the creative spirit is free to roam" [15]. This element emphasizes the importance of flexibility, adaptation, and decision-making under pressure in military operations. The third element, subordination of war to rational policy, is associated with the government. It emphasizes that war must always be a means to achieve greater political ends. Clausewitz is famous for his statement that "war is the continuation of politics by other means" [16]. The interaction between these three elements is dynamic and unpredictable. Clausewitz likened it to "an object suspended between three magnets" [2]. The balance between these three elements is constantly shifting, creating the inherent complexity and uncertainty in warfare. The relevance of Clausewitz's Trinity in modern conflicts remains significant. Although the nature of warfare has changed with the emergence of non-state actors and asymmetric warfare, Clausewitz's framework still provides valuable insights. As Colin Fleming states, "Clausewitz's Trinity attempts to reconstruct the application of the trinity by focusing on the true trinity of passion, chance, and reason" [14]. In the context of modern counter-insurgency (COIN), Clausewitz's Trinity can help understand the complexity of conflicts. For example, in the Syrian conflict, we can see how the three elements of the trinity interact:

a. *Primordial violence is evident in the sectarian and ethnic hatred fueling the conflict.*

b. *Chance and probability are reflected in the rapidly changing dynamics on the battlefield and the involvement of various external actors.*

c. *Subordination to rational policy is seen in the strategies of various involved parties, including the Syrian government and international powers* [6].

However, the application of Clausewitz's Trinity in modern conflicts also faces challenges. Martin van Creveld argues that Clausewitz's theory may be less relevant in dealing with asymmetric warfare and non-state actors [17]. Nevertheless, many scholars argue that Clausewitz's framework can still be adapted to understand contemporary conflicts. In analyzing modern conflicts, it is important to consider how the three elements of the trinity interact and influence conflict dynamics. For example, how public opinion (first element) influences political decisions (third element) and military strategy (second element). This understanding can help policymakers and military commanders formulate more effective and comprehensive strategies.

2.2 Conflict Theory

Conflict theory is a sociological perspective that views society as an arena of inequality and conflict arising from differences in power, resources, and social status. This theory emphasizes competition between groups, often framing issues in terms of domination and subordination [18]. The roots of conflict theory can be traced to the thoughts of Karl Marx in the 19th century. Marx argued that capitalist society is divided into two main classes: the bourgeoisie (owners of the means of production) and the proletariat (working class). He believed that conflict between these classes was inevitable due to their conflicting interests [19]. The basic assumptions of conflict theory include: competition in social relationships, structural inequality, social change through revolution, and the role of

conflict in uniting or destroying society. Conflict theory has evolved beyond Marx's class analysis, with Max Weber expanding the theory by including factors such as status and political power. Modern theorists also apply the conflict perspective to issues such as race, gender, and religion [14].

In modern contexts, conflict theory is used to analyze various social phenomena such as global economic inequality, racial and ethnic discrimination, gender inequality, political conflicts and war, and injustices in the education system [6]. Conflict theory argues that dominant groups use their power to maintain the status quo, with social institutions such as law, education, and media seen as tools to maintain inequality [4]. Although this theory faces criticism for overemphasizing conflict, being less able to explain social stability, and tending to ignore consensus [17], conflict theory remains an important perspective in sociology. This theory provides a framework for analyzing inequality, social change, and power dynamics in society. In an era of increasing global inequality, conflict theory offers a valuable tool for understanding and challenging unjust social structures [15].

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design to analyze the failure of counter-insurgency (COIN) strategies by the Assad regime in Syria. The qualitative method is chosen to enable an in-depth understanding of the complex socio-political dynamics underlying the Syrian conflict, focusing on the interplay between government, military, and society as conceptualized in Clausewitz's Trinity.

3.1 Data Collection

Data for this research are collected through two primary techniques:

1. **Literature Review:** The study systematically reviews books,

peer-reviewed journal articles, and research reports that discuss the Syrian conflict, the application of COIN theory, Clausewitz's Trinity, power theory, and securitization. The literature review aims to map the state of the art, identify knowledge gaps, and provide a theoretical foundation for the analysis.

2. **Document Analysis:** The research examines primary documents such as official reports from international organizations (e.g., United Nations, Human Rights Watch), government statements, and reputable mass media coverage. These documents provide empirical evidence regarding the trajectory of the conflict, government strategies, and the impact on civilian populations.

No interviews or primary fieldwork were conducted in this study, ensuring that all data sources are transparently documented and can be independently verified by other researchers12.

3.2 Data Analysis

The collected data are analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative technique that allows the identification and interpretation of key themes and patterns relevant to the research question8. The steps in thematic analysis include:

1. **Familiarization:** Reading and re-reading the data to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content.
2. **Coding:** Systematically labeling relevant features of the data across the entire dataset.
3. **Generating Themes:** Collating codes into potential themes that reflect recurring patterns or issues, particularly those related to the failure of COIN strategies and the imbalance in Clausewitz's Trinity.

4. **Reviewing and Defining Themes:** Refining the themes to ensure they accurately represent the data and are relevant to the research objectives.
5. **Interpretation:** Integrating the themes into a coherent narrative that explains how the regime's reliance on militarization and repression undermined its legitimacy and fueled opposition.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Results

A successful COIN strategy requires careful consideration of how these three elements (Government, Military and Population) interact and influence each other. A failure to understand or account for this dynamic frequently leads to mission failure [5].

a. Government Role: The government provides the legitimacy, resources, and overall strategic direction for the COIN effort. Its effectiveness is paramount. A corrupt or weak government can undermine the entire operation, as it loses the trust of the population and provides little incentive for cooperation. Conversely, a strong, just, and responsive government is vital for winning hearts and minds [20].

b. Implementation in COIN: This involves establishing or strengthening governance structures, delivering essential services (education, healthcare, infrastructure), promoting the rule of law, and fostering economic development. It also necessitates transparency and accountability to build public trust. Government actions should be carefully calibrated to avoid alienating the population [21].

c. Military Role: The military provides force protection, conducts kinetic operations

(when necessary), and supports the government's efforts to regain control of territory and defeat the insurgency. However, its actions must align with the overall political strategy, rather than becoming an independent force. Excessive force can be counterproductive, fueling resentment and further alienating the population [7].

d. Implementation in COIN: Effective military action in COIN involves targeted operations, minimizing civilian casualties, and focusing on disrupting insurgent networks. It necessitates close collaboration with intelligence agencies and utilizing unconventional warfare tactics such as information operations, psychological warfare, and civil affairs [10].

e. Population Role: The population is the most critical element in COIN. Winning the "hearts and minds" of the population is the ultimate objective. Their support can decide the outcome of the conflict by providing intelligence, denying insurgents resources and recruits, and generally undermining insurgent operations. Conversely, a hostile or indifferent population can provide sanctuary and support to the insurgency, making success extremely difficult [22].

f. Implementation in COIN: This involves understanding the population's needs, grievances, and aspirations. It necessitates building trust through engagement, providing essential services, and promoting reconciliation. Respect for local customs and traditions is vital. Winning over the population often involves offering alternatives that make insurgent

ideology and tactics seem undesirable [10].

g. The Interplay: The effectiveness of a COIN operation depends on the synergistic interaction of these three elements. A strong government can leverage military capabilities effectively while simultaneously addressing the population's needs. The military's actions must be guided by the government's political objectives and aimed at gaining the population's support. The population's cooperation, in turn, makes the government more effective and allows the military to operate more successfully. A breakdown in any of these relationships can have devastating consequences [20].

4.2 Challenges in Implementing the Trinity in COIN

a. Balancing competing priorities: The need to maintain security with the need to win over the population can create tensions [5].

b. Coordinating different agencies and actors: Effective COIN requires a well-coordinated effort across different government departments and military branches [21].

c. Assessing and responding to the evolving situation: The nature of insurgency changes over time, requiring constant adaptation of strategies and tactics [7].

Maintaining long-term commitment: COIN operations often require sustained effort over many years, which can be challenging for democratic governments with short electoral cycles [22]. The application of Clausewitz's Trinity to COIN operations provides a valuable framework for understanding the complex dynamics at play. It emphasizes the need for a comprehensive, integrated approach that balances political, military, and social

considerations. However, the implementation of this framework in real-world scenarios remains challenging, as evidenced by the difficulties faced in recent COIN operations in places like Afghanistan and Iraq [10].

The application of Clausewitz's Trinity to counter-insurgency (COIN) operations provides a valuable framework for understanding the complex dynamics at play. However, the implementation of this framework in real-world scenarios remains challenging, as evidenced by the difficulties faced in recent COIN operations in places like Afghanistan and Iraq [10].

One of the key challenges in applying the Trinity to COIN is the asymmetric nature of insurgencies. Unlike conventional warfare, where the military element often dominates, COIN operations require a delicate balance between all three elements of the Trinity. The government must maintain legitimacy and provide effective governance, the military must adapt to unconventional warfare tactics, and the population's support becomes crucial for success [21].

The government's role in COIN operations extends beyond merely providing resources and direction. It must also address the root causes of the insurgency, which often stem from political, economic, or social grievances. This requires a comprehensive approach that combines security measures with political reforms, economic development, and social programs. Failure to address these underlying issues can lead to a prolonged conflict and ultimately, the failure of the COIN effort [20].

In many cases, the government's legitimacy is challenged by the insurgents, who often present themselves as an alternative to the existing power structure. This competition for legitimacy plays out in the eyes of the population, making effective governance and the delivery of basic services crucial. The government must demonstrate its ability to protect and provide for its citizens better than the insurgents can. This often involves rebuilding infrastructure, establishing functional institutions, and fostering economic growth in areas affected by the insurgency [5].

The military's role in COIN operations is equally complex. While kinetic operations remain important, the military must also engage in a range of non-kinetic activities that support the overall COIN strategy. This includes gathering intelligence, conducting civil affairs operations, and supporting the development of local security forces. The military must also be prepared to operate in a highly politicized environment, where its actions can have significant political ramifications [7].

One of the key challenges for the military in COIN operations is adapting its tactics and culture to the unique demands of counter-insurgency. Traditional military training and doctrine often emphasize overwhelming force and decisive battles, which can be counterproductive in a COIN environment. Instead, COIN requires patience, restraint, and a nuanced understanding of the local context. This often necessitates a shift in military culture and training to emphasize these skills [21].

The population, as the third element of the Trinity, plays a crucial role in COIN operations. The concept of "winning hearts and minds" is central to many COIN strategies, reflecting the understanding that the population's support is essential for success. This involves not only providing security and basic services but also addressing the population's grievances and aspirations. It requires a deep understanding of local culture, traditions, and social structures [22].

However, engaging with the population in COIN operations is often complicated by the presence of the insurgents, who may intimidate or coerce the local population. This creates a complex environment where the population may be caught between the government forces and the insurgents, making it difficult for them to openly support either side. In such situations, providing security becomes paramount, as it allows the population to engage with the government without fear of reprisal [10].

The interplay between these three elements of the Trinity in COIN operations is dynamic and often unpredictable. Actions in one domain can have significant impacts on the others. For example, a military operation that causes civilian casualties can undermine the government's legitimacy and alienate the population. Conversely, effective governance and economic development can support military operations by reducing support for the insurgency [20].

This interconnectedness highlights the need for a comprehensive and integrated approach to COIN. All elements of national power – diplomatic, informational, military, and economic – must be coordinated and aligned toward the common goal of defeating the insurgency and establishing stable governance. This requires effective interagency cooperation and a clear, unified strategy that guides all aspects of the COIN effort [7].

The application of the Trinity to COIN also underscores the importance of adaptability and flexibility. Insurgencies are often protracted conflicts that evolve over time, requiring COIN strategies to adapt accordingly. This adaptability must occur at all levels – from strategic policy decisions to tactical operations on the ground. It requires robust feedback mechanisms, continuous assessment of the situation, and a willingness to change course when necessary [5].

One of the key lessons from recent COIN operations is the importance of local ownership and capacity building. While external support can be crucial, particularly in the early stages of a COIN campaign, long-term success depends on the ability of the host nation government to effectively govern and provide security. This requires a focus on developing local capacity across all elements of the Trinity – strengthening government institutions, building capable security forces, and fostering a resilient civil society [21].

The role of external actors in COIN operations adds another layer of complexity to the application of the Trinity. In many contemporary COIN operations, coalition forces or international organizations play significant roles. This can create challenges in terms of coordination, unity of effort, and strategic coherence. It also raises questions about legitimacy, as the presence of foreign forces can be a source of resentment among the local population [10].

The information domain has become increasingly important in modern COIN operations, adding a new dimension to the Trinity framework. The ability to shape narratives, counter propaganda, and effectively communicate with both the local population and international audiences has become crucial. This requires sophisticated information operations that are closely integrated with other aspects of the COIN strategy [7].

The ethical dimensions of COIN operations also merit consideration within the Trinity framework. The need to balance security imperatives with respect for human rights and the rule of law can create significant challenges. This is particularly true in the military domain, where the pressure to achieve short-term security gains must be weighed against the long-term implications of actions that may alienate

the population or undermine the government's legitimacy [20].

4.3 Discussion

The application of Clausewitz's Trinity to counter-insurgency (COIN) operations provides a valuable framework for understanding the complex dynamics at play in modern conflicts. However, the implementation of this framework in real-world scenarios remains challenging, as evidenced by the difficulties faced in recent COIN operations in places like Afghanistan and Iraq [10]. One of the key challenges in applying the Trinity to COIN is the asymmetric nature of insurgencies. Unlike conventional warfare, where the military element often dominates, COIN operations require a delicate balance between all three elements of the Trinity. The government must maintain legitimacy and provide effective governance, the military must adapt to unconventional warfare tactics, and the population's support becomes crucial for success [21].

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The conflict in Syria under President Bashar al-Assad follows this pattern closely. Political repression, economic hardships, and pervasive corruption all contributed to the rise in discontent with Assad's regime. The government's response to the Arab Spring's peaceful protests in 2011 was brutal crackdowns rather than reforms. Instead of stifling dissent, security forces' use of arrests, torture, and military force against protesters heightened public resentment.

The Free Syrian Army (FSA), Islamist factions, and Kurdish forces were among the rebel groups that emerged as the fighting intensified. They had one thing in common, despite their divergent ideologies: opposing Assad's tyranny. International censure resulted from the government's ongoing use of excessive military force, including chemical and airstrikes. Some foreign nations, such as the U.S. and Gulf states, supported rebel groups, while others, like Russia and Iran, backed Assad.

Over time, rebels gained control of significant territories, including parts of Aleppo, Idlib, and Eastern Ghouta. However, internal divisions among the opposition weakened their ability to overthrow Assad completely. The Syrian government, with Russian air support and Iranian-backed militias, launched major counteroffensives, reclaiming lost territories. By 2018, Assad had regained control over most of Syria, though some rebel-held areas still exist.

The Syrian Civil War shows how government repression can turn public dissatisfaction into armed resistance. While the opposition made significant advances, their lack of unity and international political complexities prevented them from fully toppling Assad. Instead, the war resulted in massive civilian casualties, displacement of millions, and ongoing instability. This conflict highlights the dangers of responding to political grievances with military force and the long-term consequences of civil war.

5. CONCLUSION

While Clausewitz's Trinity offers a powerful lens through which to view and plan COIN operations, it is not a universal solution. Effective implementation requires careful consideration of local contexts, sustained commitment, and a willingness to adapt strategies in response to changing circumstances. As insurgencies continue to pose significant challenges to global security, the ongoing development and application of comprehensive COIN strategies, informed by frameworks like the Trinity, will remain crucial in addressing these complex conflicts. The complexity of current insurgencies, frequently fueled by transnational networks and ideological extremism, demands a nuanced response beyond traditional military solutions. COIN practitioners can anticipate better and defeat counterinsurgent strategies by combining Clausewitz's principles with

contemporary tools such as data analytics and cultural intelligence. Moreover, developing trust and collaboration with local residents is crucial, as their support generally determines the long-term sustainability of COIN programs. In this rapidly evolving world, the COIN strategies guided by frameworks such as the Trinity will be essential for achieving long-term peace and stability.

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