

Title: Kurdish Territorial Gains as a Result of Islamic State's Collapse: An Analysis of the Strategic Contestation over Territorial Control

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Abstract: The Islamic State (ISIS) controlled 32 percent of all settlements during the Syrian Civil War at its peak in January 2015. Yet, by 2018 Islamic State (ISIS) had lost nearly all this territory. Most of the territory was lost to the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), who declared victory over ISIS in north-east Syria in 2019. The Kurdish forces, however, had to deal with another force. Turkey and a coalition of Turkish-backed rebel groups known as the Syrian National Army (SNA) had launched several military operations against SDF-controlled territories since 2016 and captured a swathe of territory running along hundreds of kilometers of the border. What explains these patterns of territorial losses and gains? We model this using a contest success function technology, relying on three actor model, the Kurds, Islamic State, and Turkey. We analyze this question using a novel micro-level dataset of Syrian settlements observed monthly between 2014 and 2022. Linking fine-grained georeferenced data on territorial control with fatalities from ground battles, and local structural factors, we analyze the dynamics of ISIS decline and Kurdish gains with generalized linear models including temporal and spatial fixed effects. The results demonstrate that Kurdish coordinated ground attacks with the American led coalition's aerial bombardment resulted in gains in Kurdish held territory. We also find that the underlying demographic and economic characteristics of the settlement plays a role in who controls the territory. These findings advance our understanding of territorial gains and losses in civil wars by highlighting the spatial dependencies and diffusion mechanisms that shape the dynamics of armed group decline.

Keywords: Civil War; Game Theory; Security; Contest Success Functions; GIS; territory; spatial statistical analysis