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‘Talkin’ ’bout a revolution’? The strategic narratives of the Syrian Democratic Council

This is the final peer-reviewed author’s accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

Published Version:
Corradi, E. (2025). ‘Talkin’ ’bout a revolution’? The strategic narratives of the Syrian Democratic Council. MEDIA, WAR & CONFLICT, 19(2), 475-493 [10.1177/17506352251334901].

Availability:
This version is available at: https://hdl.handle.net/11585/1015873 since: 2025-10-22

Published:

DOI: http://doi.org/10.1177/17506352251334901

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17 October 2026

"Talkin' 'bout a Revolution"? The Strategic Narratives of the Syrian Democratic Council

Abstract

What strategic narratives did the Syrian Democratic Council develop during the Syrian civil war? Existing scholarship on strategic narratives and civil wars often overlooks how non-state armed actors developed their strategic narratives and how rebel groups developed their foreign policy. Through qualitative content analysis and narrative analysis of 559 documents published in English by the SDC between 2019 and 2023, the article finds that the SDC developed two strategic narratives. The first narrative, related to the international system, argues that the international military and political interventions weakened the Syrian peace process, criticising how the promoters of such peace processes have been extensively involved in military operations in Syria. The second narrative contends that the SDC self-identifies as a different and responsible actor in the Syrian context—aiming to achieve national dialogue and an inclusive peace agreement among armed factions—reinforcing the dichotomy between in-groups and out-groups. To this extent, the article fills the gap in the scholarship on civil wars—particularly rebel diplomacy—and strategic narratives, bridging the two literatures and advancing the current understanding of non-state actors' foreign policies.

Keywords: strategic narratives, civil wars, rebel diplomacy, Syria, Syrian Democratic Council, Qualitative Content Analysis

Introduction

Amid the Syrian Civil War (Baczko et al., 2017; Lister, 2017), the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) emerged as one of the leading actors in the conflict (Ozcelik, 2020; van Wilgenburg and Fumerton, 2022). Opposing different actors such as the former Assad government, the Islamic State, and other Islamist and jihadist groups, the YPG and YPJ increased their relative strength in the conflict by forging a multi-ethnic alliance with several different armed groups, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) (Boyraz, 2021; Corradi, 2023; Corradi and Cama, 2024; van Wilgenburg and Fumerton, 2022). Alongside the military coordination, the SDF instituted in 2015 its political institution, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) (Al Jazeera, 2015), and, in 2018, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). While functioning as a political institution in the area controlled by the SDF in Northeast Syria, the SDC immediately worked to lobby with the international community using different strategies and tools. For example, the SDC established its foreign office in the United States[1] and organised meetings in and outside Syria with various individuals

[1] The website of the U.S. mission of the Syrian Democratic Council is accessible at https://www.syriandemocraticcouncil.us, last accessed April 29, 2024.

and delegations, such as the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov,[2] and members of the parliament and party members from different countries, such as Austria,[3] Germany,[4] and the United Kingdom.[5] Also, since 2019, the SDC has started publishing several articles, press releases, and declarations in Kurdish, Arabic, and English.

What strategic narratives did the Syrian Democratic Council develop during the Syrian civil war? The article aims to understand how the Syrian Democratic Council communicates abroad, unravelling the main topics discussed by the SDC and its strategic narratives (Huang, 2016; Miskimmon et al., 2014, 2024). Employing qualitative content analysis and narrative analysis of 559 documents published online in English by the Syrian Democratic Council, it finds that the SDC established two strategic narratives: the first based on their understanding of the international system, while the second focuses on fostering in-group solidarity through ideological and organisational identity. The first narrative argues that the current international system seeks to address the Syrian conflict through ineffective and exclusionary peace processes, with the main actors of such negotiations being militarily involved in Syria. The second narrative highlights the progressive ideology of the SDC's leading actor, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and its commitment to achieving a national and inclusive solution to the Syrian crisis, thereby promoting in-group solidarity with other significant actors in Syria, mainly Islamist and jihadist groups.

The article contributes to the emerging literature on rebel diplomacy, connecting the literature on civil wars, foreign policy, and strategic narratives. Specifically, the article develops a qualitative empirical analysis of how rebel groups, specifically the SDC, create strategic narratives to communicate with the external world during civil wars.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows: first, it analyses the current scholarship on civil wars and strategic narratives, particularly understanding how non-state actors develop strategic narratives as a rebel diplomacy tool. Second, it delves into the analysis of the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the main groups part of the coalition, specifically the People's Protection Units (YPG), the Women's Protection Units (YPJ), and the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and their ideology. The subsequent section is about the research design of the article, detailing the corpus of documents and the methods used. The fourth and fifth sections delve into the empirical analysis of the data and the discussion of the results.

Strategic Narratives and Non-State Armed Actors

[2] MSD (2020). "SDC" Meets With Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, available at https://m-syria-d.com/en/?p=2688, last accessed April 29, 2024.

[3] MSD (2023a). The Bilateral Parliamentary Group in Austria meets with Representatives of the SDC in Vienna, available at https://m-syria-d.com/en/?p=5709, last accessed April 29, 2024.

[4] MSD (2023b). The SDC Meets Members of German Parliament in Berlin, https://m-syria-d.com/en/?p=6647, last accessed April 29, 2024.

[5] MSD (2021). The British Special Envoy for Syria meets Autonomous Administration officials in Al-Qamishli, available at https://m-syria-d.com/en/?p=3235, last accessed April 29, 2024.

The scholarship on strategic narratives is made of different concepts that built what has been defined as a "fog of words" (Coticchia and Catanzaro, 2022), a haze in which various concepts such as narratives, master narratives, frames, master frames, and strategic narratives are used interchangeably. According to the existing scholarship, narratives are "frameworks that allow humans to connect apparently unconnected phenomena around some causal transformation" (Miskimmon et al., 2014: 7). However, the extant literature posits that there is a conceptual difference between narratives and strategic narratives. In this context, strategic narratives are "representations of a sequence of events and identities, a communicative tool through which political actors – usually elites – attempt to give determined meaning to past, present, and future to achieve political objectives" (Miskimmon et al., 2014: 7), or, as argued by Roselle and colleagues (2014), power resources that actors strategically use to convince a broader public or audience.

The increasing relevance of non-state actors in the international system raised questions regarding if and how non-state actors develop strategic narratives. While the state-centric realist and liberal approaches focused on state systems rather than sub-national actors (Josselin and Wallace, 2001), the increasing number of civil wars and the new communication technologies, such as the Internet, increased the relevance of non-state armed actors and how they develop strategic narratives (Mason and McLaughlin Mitchell, 2023; Miskimmon et al., 2014). Conceptualising new media ecology as "the whole complex of interdependent relationships through which communication is generated, circulated, and interpreted in world politics" (Miskimmon et al., 2015: 57), scholarship on strategic narratives stresses how the Internet, social networks, smartphone comments, and other instruments broaden the concept of media ecology giving voice to more actors that can operate in this communication system.

However, most of the scholarship regarding non-state armed actors and strategic narratives focused specifically on Islamist and jihadist organisations due to their relevance in the post-9/11 international system. The rise of the Islamic State (Byman, 2016) and the security concerns posed by the phenomenon of foreign fighters (Hegghammer, 2010), connected with the innovative use of the Internet by such groups, raised interest regarding how the Islamic State and other jihadist groups, such as al-Qaeda, developed narratives to attract foreigners and domestic supporters (Ingram, 2016, 2017; Ingram et al., 2020; Kruglova, 2021, 2021; Papale, 2021; Schmid, 2014, 2015). However, focusing on jihadist narratives, the extant literature neglected those non-state armed groups that develop strategic narratives for external governmental audiences. Against this background, the scholarship highlighted how framing strategic and master narratives by jihadist and Islamist groups aims to represent specific conflicts to influence people inside a country or abroad for recruitment and plot and commit terrorist attacks abroad. For example, Papale (2021) investigated how al-Shabaab framed its narrative to seek legitimacy within the Somali people in Kenya. Through framing analysis and Social Movement Theory, the author unpacked the al-Shabaab narrative in *diagnostic frames* (identifying problems, such as discrimination against Muslims in

Kenya), *prognostic frames* (proposing solutions, such as violence as retaliation and revenge against discrimination), and *motivational frames* (incentivising mobilisation, challenging individuals to take arms to regain dignity against discrimination).

Similarly, Schmid (2014, 2015) analyses how al-Qaeda and the Islamic State frame their narrative in historical and cultural contexts. As done by Halverson, Goodall, and Corman (2011), who analyse the narratives of Islamist organisations within the framework of master narratives, Schmid (2014, 2015) points out how al-Qaeda and IS used narratives to inspire individuals to join their ranks. Specifically, Schmid shows how both organisations frame the world in a constant struggle between the Muslim world and the Christian-Zionist West and that the use of jihad is the legitimate way to defend the Muslim population. Despite both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State having an external audience, the use of strategic and master narratives was functional to intercept Muslim people with grievances by showing the legitimacy of their actions and, specifically related to the Islamic State, that the creation of the Caliphate was the land of Islam and joining it was a mandatory obligation for all Muslims (Schmid, 2015). Against this background, Da Silva, Bamber-Zryd, and Lemay-Hebert (2024) analysed the Islamic State's strategic narrative in the state-building process in Syria and Iraq, underlining how "the main audiences of IS's strategic narrative was the transnational community of jihadists and local Sunni Muslims" (Da Silva et al., 2024: 57).

While understanding the strategic narratives of Islamist and jihadist groups is crucial for grasping their recruitment patterns and the security concerns linked with terrorism, other groups formulate their strategic narratives to seek "public support or persuading foreign governments to cooperate either with foreign policies on specific issues" (Miskimmon et al., 2024: 454). In this context, non-state armed groups can craft strategic narratives to articulate and conduct their foreign policy by informing foreign governments about their identity, their goals, and their view of the world (Brown, 2017; Schmitt, 2018; Sguazzini and Mazziotti Di Celso, 2024). In contrast to state actors, who primarily aim to influence domestic audiences on controversial policy decisions— e.g., waging wars or intervening in conflicts abroad (Colley, 2017; De Graaf et al., 2015)—non-state strategic narratives are predominantly directed towards foreign audiences. In this regard, their aim is to influence, describe, and convince foreign audiences about their nature, aspirations, and potential political solutions to conflicts, thereby attracting the interest of foreign countries and ultimately seeking external support.

However, the large body of literature on civil war dynamics (see, for example, Arjona et al., 2015; Balcells and Stanton, 2021; Cederman and Vogt, 2017; Mampilly and Stewart, 2021; Mason and McLaughlin Mitchell, 2023; Shesterinina, 2022) paid little attention to how non-state actors developed forms of foreign policy (Plundrich, 2024). While Islamist groups might not be seeking to gain international legitimacy, specifically with state actors, some other groups engaged in various forms of rebel diplomacy (Bos and Melissen, 2019; Coggins, 2015; Huang, 2016; Joshi, 2023; Loyle et al., 2023; Loyle and Bestvater,

2019; Malejacq, 2017). Rebel diplomacy is defined as a "rebel group's conduct of foreign affairs during civil war for the purpose of advancing its military and political objectives" (Huang, 2016: 90). Particularly, Huang operationalises rebel diplomacy when a non-state armed group either "(1) opens a political office abroad; (2) sends representatives abroad on political missions; (3) creates a political body devoted to the conduct of foreign affairs" (Huang, 2016: 94). Coggins defines the concept as "when rebels engage in strategic communication with foreign governments or agents, or with an occupying regime they deem foreign" (Coggins, 2015: 107). However, both definitions are linked with rebel groups' activity with international actors seeking legitimacy and potential support. In doing so, insurgent organisations might use different strategies and means, such as direct meetings with foreign officers, instituting offices abroad (Huang, 2016), or communicating via websites or social media (Bos and Melissen, 2019; Jones and Mattiacci, 2019).

The Syrian Democratic Council in the Syrian Civil War

In 2015, in the context of the Syrian civil war, the US-supported Kurdish militias, the People's Protection Units (YPG) and its sister organisation, the Women's Protection Units (YPJ), formed a multi-ethnic and multi-ideological alliance named Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) (Corradi, 2023; van Wilgenburg, 2020). Subsequently, the SDF formed its political institution, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), as an elective governing body of the territories under SDF control (Allsopp and Wilgenburg, 2019; Corradi and Cama, 2024). As pointed out in the constitutive document known as the Charter of the Autonomous Regions of Afrin, Jazira, and Kobane, the SDC comprises forty-two members with at least one member for each ethnicity, namely Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Arameans, Turkmen, Armenians and Chechens. At the same time, the presidency of the SDC is shared between a Kurd and an Arab.[6] Within the SDC, the most relevant member is the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the political wing of the YPG and YPJ (van Wilgenburg and Fumerton, 2022). The SDF, and thus the SDC, emerged as a prominent member of the Syrian opposition forces, controlling large parts of the Syrian territory, enforcing governing institutions (Jongerden, 2019; Ozcelik, 2020; van Wilgenburg and Fumerton, 2022), remaining a relevant actor in the post-conflict period in the negotiation process with the new Syrian government led by Ahmad al-Sharaa, formerly known as Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani and leader of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (al-Ahmed, 2025).

Ideologically, the YPG, YPJ, and PYD refer to the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan's ideological framework, namely democratic confederalism. According to Öcalan, nation-states represent the interests of bourgeoises and capitalism. Therefore, the solution to the Kurdish question does not rely on the creation

[6] The Charter of the Autonomous Regions of Afrin, Jazira, and Kobane is accessible at: https://rojavainformationcenter.org/storage/2021/07/2014-Social-Contract-of-the-Autonomous-Regions-of-Afrin-Jazira-and-Kobane-1.pdf, last accessed on June 6, 2024.

of an independent Kurdish state but instead on the establishment of a grassroots democratic system in the larger framework of a democratisation process "of the countries exercising hegemonic power over different parts of Kurdistan" (Öcalan, 2017d: 22), all of this without endangering the current territorial demarcation of states (Ozcelik, 2020). To this extent, Öcalan introduces the concept of democratic confederalism, defined as "a non-state democratic nation organisation" (Öcalan, 2017d: 19). Drawing from Bookchin (Gerber and Brincat, 2021; Morris, 2009), Öcalan claims that democratic confederalism should be formed on a centralised system only in the field of internal and external security. At the same time, social dynamics should be governed with a bottom-up approach through self-governance, such as local committees, youth organisations, and women's organisations (Öcalan, 2017d). The idea of democratic confederalism not only impacts the constitution of a political identity for the Kurds but also affects relations with other ethnicities, religions, and even the role of women (Öcalan, 2017c). According to Öcalan, the nation-state is based on the concept of identity and people, leading, for example, to the forced assimilation of minorities, the exclusion of religious denominations other than the one accepted as 'national', and the subordination of women, considered the crucial step necessary to subjugate the entire population (Öcalan, 2017c). The model of democratic confederalism, based on self-administration and a horizontal hierarchy among municipalities, councils, and local organisations, aims to overcome these dynamics. Ethnic and religious minorities could thus be represented without the need for assimilation, and women could form associations and councils to contrast patriarchy, which, according to Öcalan, is an intrinsic characteristic of the classic nation-state (Gerber and Brincat, 2021).

In this context, the PYD and the SDC used democratic confederalism as the central ideology for their organisations and allegedly in the system of governance they established. In particular, the PYD formed a full-female military unit, the Women's Protection Units (YPJ), integrated into the SDF. The SDC established bottom-up forms of rebel governance in the territories under its control, providing public goods, collecting taxes, and holding elections (Corradi and Cama, 2024). Moreover, the SDC engaged with international representatives and developed its foreign policy. Supported by the US-led coalition to fight the Islamic State since 2014, the SDC engaged with several governmental officers and members of parliaments abroad and welcomed foreign missions to its territories. In addition, the SDC instituted a website that publishes several types of articles, such as meeting resumes, public statements, and declarations, to engage with a larger audience abroad. However, the SDC used "coercion, displacement and violence to consolidate territorial control and assert ideological hegemony" (Ozcelik, 2020: 691), and it received claims of ethnic cleansing, human rights abuses, child soldiering, and ethnic discrimination (Ozcelik, 2020). Moreover, the SDC maintained relations with the former Syrian government, for example, allowing the Syrian National Army, alongside al-Assad's main sponsor, Russia, to enter SDC-controlled territories such as Kobani and Manbij to counter a potential Turkish military offensive (BBC,

2019; Reuters, 2019). In this respect, the SDC adopted an "open-door" policy, claiming to be interested in negotiating with the former Syrian government to reach a political solution to the conflict.[7]

The SDC, by embracing PYD and Öcalan's ideology, positioned itself as a pro-democracy, pro-feminism, and anti-sectarian actor in Syria, securing US support during the Syrian Civil War. I use Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín and Elisabeth Jean Wood's definition of ideology as "a set of more or less systematic ideas that identify a constituency, the challenges the group confronts, the objectives to pursue on behalf of that group, and a (perhaps vague) program of action" (2014: 214). In this context, ideologies "lead to the emergence of significant differences over the definition of the groups' core orientation in terms of aims, preferences over organisational setups, and operation strategies" (Moro, 2017: 944) and provide "road maps, including different strategies to reach their goal" (Costalli and Ruggeri, 2015: 131). To this extent, since ideology reinforces in-group solidarity vis-à-vis out-groups —defining a specific group's aims, strategies, organisational structure, and identity—the high level of fragmentation in the Syrian context (Walther and Pedersen, 2020) and the presence of different types of actors with Islamist and jihadist ideologies (Byman, 2016; Lister, 2017; Schwab, 2023), I expect that the Syrian Democratic Council specifically developed a strategic narrative based on its ideological pillars. In this respect, I expect the SDC to develop its strategic narrative through three topics, namely "Self-Administration", "Feminism", and "Environment". The first topic is linked to how the YPG, YPJ, the PYD, and the SDC broadly understand the polity of the future state or region under its control and how they are practically instituted in the area under its control (Öcalan, 2017a, 2017b). The second topic is linked explicitly to gender dynamics (Öcalan, 2017c; Piccardi and Barca, 2022), such as women's participation in politics, women's empowerment, and the use of violence against women. Finally, the third topic concerns the environmental issue, the last central tenet of democratic confederalism (Hammy and Miley, 2022).

Research Design

What strategic narrative did the Syrian Democratic Council develop during the Syrian civil war? To understand the strategic narratives developed by the SDC, I have collected 559 documents published online on the official website, in their English translation, of the Syrian Democratic Council[8] in the category "News" between the first publication, which happened on May 14, 2019, and the last publication of 2023, titled "Co-Chair of SDC Emphasizes Necessity of Establishing National State According to Constitution Agreeable to All – Fourth Conference of SDC".[9] I have removed a document from this corpus since it has been published in Kurdish Kurmanji and not English.[10]

[7] MSD (2022). "Syrians are called upon to work together more than ever" The Presidential Council said, available at: https://m-syria-d.com/en/?p=4505, last accessed on January 30, 2025.

[8] The Syrian Democratic Council's website is accessible at: https://m-syria-d.com/en/, last accessed on April 24, 2024.

[9] This document is accessible at: https://m-syria-d.com/en/?p=6805, last accessed on April 24, 2024.

[10] This document is accessible at: https://m-syria-d.com/en/?p=6196, last accessed on April 24, 2024.

Using Nvivo, I created the three topics (Self-administration, Feminism, and Environment) I had expected to find during the analysis. Then, I coded different parts of the text to assign them to their relative topics. In this context, the unit of analysis is the theme that "might be expressed in a single word, a phrase, a sentence, a paragraph, or an entire document. […] assign a code to a text chunk of any size, as long as that chunk represents a single theme or issue of relevance" (Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009: 3). Coding techniques have evolved through the analysis of documents, which means that the first technique adopted has been revised due to the different structure of documents. The evolution of the coding technique results in a second revision of existing coded documents to maintain a coherent coding technique. Throughout the coding process, I deductively created issues directly linked to the expected topics and other topics that inductively emerged from the qualitative content analysis. Qualitative methods led me to delve into the documents, understanding how they are written, the vocabulary used in the texts, and the style used to write these documents and eventually control for typos. The documents do not follow any specific institutionalised vocabulary, contrarily to, for example, the mandates published by International Organisations such as the United Nations (Knapp, 2024) and the European Union (Levorato and Sguazzini, 2024), which makes qualitative content analysis more suitable for exploring the entire corpus of SDC documents.

I employ a sequential design, identifying the main topics discussed in the documents through qualitative content analysis and then conducting a narrative analysis to understand how topics are framed in the SDC strategic narratives (Isoaho et al., 2021). Relying on the literature on strategic narratives (Coticchia and Catanzaro, 2022; Miskimmon et al., 2014; Schmitt, 2018; Sguazzini and Mazziotti Di Celso, 2024), I present how the SDC framed the topics that emerged throughout the content analysis, providing examples of its storytelling and summarising the different strategic narratives that the SDC developed in its online communication.

Qualitative content analysis

The analysis of the 559 documents published online in English showed that the SDC focuses on different topics in their texts. The topics discussed in the SDC documents vary from sub-topics, here defined as *issues*, related to, among others, cohabitation and coexistence, gender equality, their relationships with the former al-Asad government, the peace processes, to the military role of Turkey in the North of Syria. In this context, issues are different categories linked to each topic. To this extent, the various topics can be aggregated into macro-topics. The first is related to the SDC's ideological dimension, while the second is related to the dynamics of the Syrian conflict. Table 1 summarises the different macro-topics, topics, and issues discussed by the Syrian Democratic Council.

Table 1: The main topics and issues discussed by the Syrian Democratic Council

Macro-topics	**Ideology**			**Conflict**		
Topics	Self-administration	Feminism	Environment	Conflict dynamics	Peace processes	Turkey
	Cohabitation and coexistence	Gender equality & women empowerment	Alternative energy methods	Civilian victimization	Criticism of existing peace talks	Humanitarian crisis
	Democracy and decentralization	Violence against women	Environmental issues	Covid-19 pandemics	National dialogue	Protest against Turkey
Issues	Revolution	Women's organizations	Environmental political institutions	Damascus & central government	Respect for international law	Relations with PKK
	Tribes and clans	Women's participation		International community	Responsible actor	Turkish support for ISIS and terrorism
		Gender equality & women empowerment		ISIS	SDF defeating ISIS	Turkish civilian casualties and violations

For example, in Document 129[11], titled "A forum on "Women in light of the Syrian Crisis" is organised by Women Council in east of the country", published in 2020[12], it is written that

> The second session discussed the resistance that women displayed during the Syrian crisis, where the axis took strategic and military doctrine that Women Protection Units followed in their war against the aggression, and stressed the necessity of its continuity and development as a strategic option to preserve the gains of women and achieve more of them.

This text fragment discusses women's active role in conflict and is related to gender dynamics. To this extent, I have coded different parts of the text into the issues "Women's participation" and "Gender equality & women empowerment", which belong to the topic named "Feminism" and to the macro-topics named "Ideology" since it is strictly intertwined with Öcalan's ideology.

Table 2 summarises the results of the qualitative content analysis, showing that the most relevant macro-topic discussed by the SDC in its online documents is the one related to the Syrian conflict dynamics, with 2515 different codes. On the contrary, the topics related to the ideology of the PYD have an aggregated result of 962 codes. Within each topic, the "Peace Process" is the most relevant topic discussed by the SDC with 1084 codes. The "Turkish Conflict" is the second most relevant topic, with

[11] I have numbered documents from 1 to 559, in which Document 1 is the first published on the SDC website.
[12] This document is accessible at: https://m-syria-d.com/en/?p=2254, last accessed on April 24, 2024.

891 codes. Regarding the SDC ideology, the topic "Environment" is irrelevant and rarely discussed by the SDC, with just 12 codes. The other two main topics are almost equivalent per the number of codes. Moreover, I assigned each document its actual year of publication to evaluate the different topics discussed temporally.

Table 2: Codes per topics and issues

	2019	**2020**	**2021**	**2022**	**2023**	**Total**
Ideology	230	171	60	285	216	962
Self-administration	127	77	38	149	106	497
Feminism	103	94	11	135	110	453
Environment	0	0	11	1	0	12
Conflict	733	330	248	689	515	2515
Conflict dynamics	141	68	68	145	118	540
Peace Processes	260	125	122	270	307	1084
Turkey	332	137	58	274	90	891
Number of documents	122	111	61	166	99	559

In 2019, the main relevant topic concerned the Turkish conflict. This high number of documents discussing Turkish involvement in the Syrian conflict arises from the 'Operation Peace Spring' launched by Turkey in October 2019, which led to the occupation of a portion of Syrian territory (4,820 square kilometres) that was previously under the control of the SDC. (Jager, 2016). In 2022, the number of codes concerning Turkish involvement in Syria rose again. In this context, Turkey conducted a series of air strikes following the 2022 Istanbul bombing in the so-called Operation Claw-Sword. Despite no terrorist or rebel groups claiming responsibility for the attack, the Turkish authorities held the PKK and the SDF accountable (Colibăşanu, 2023; Eralp, 2020). Over time, the macro-topic related to the Syrian conflict has been the most discussed by the SDC regarding the number of codes (Figure 1). The decline in the number of codes can be linked to the decrease in documents published by the SDC, as in Figure 2.

Figure 1: Relative frequencies of the SDC topics, 2019-2023

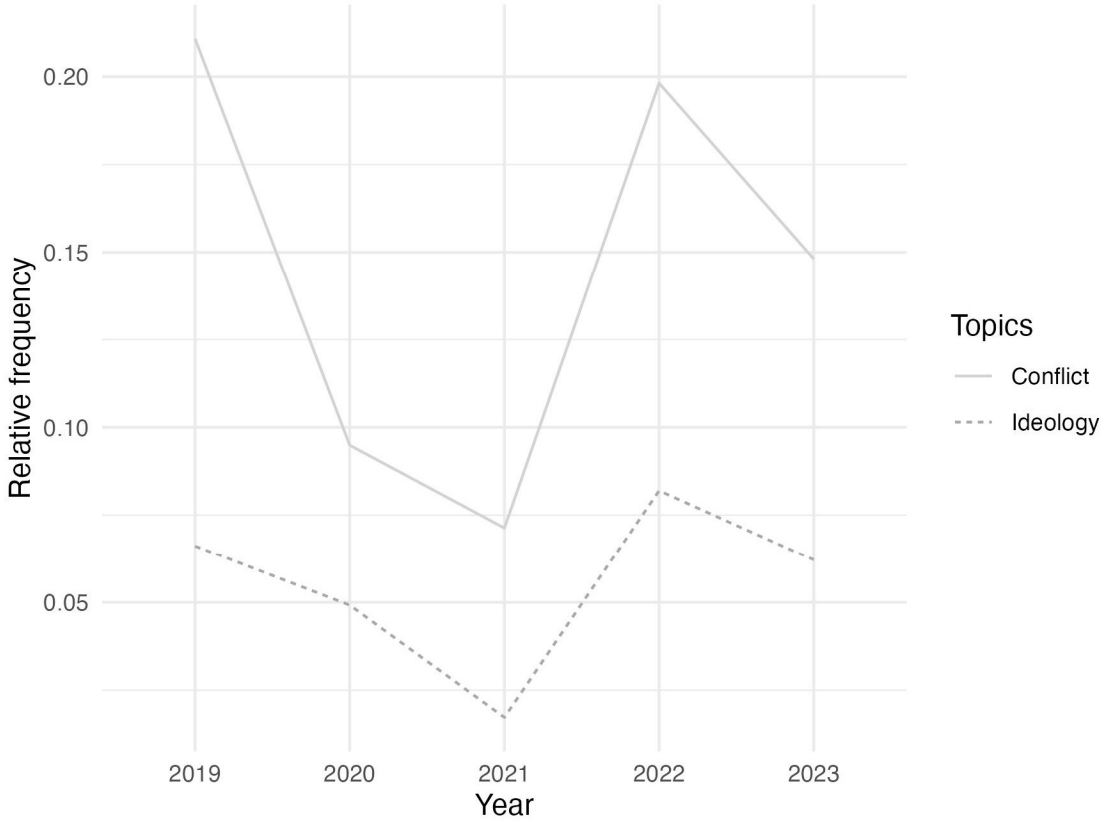
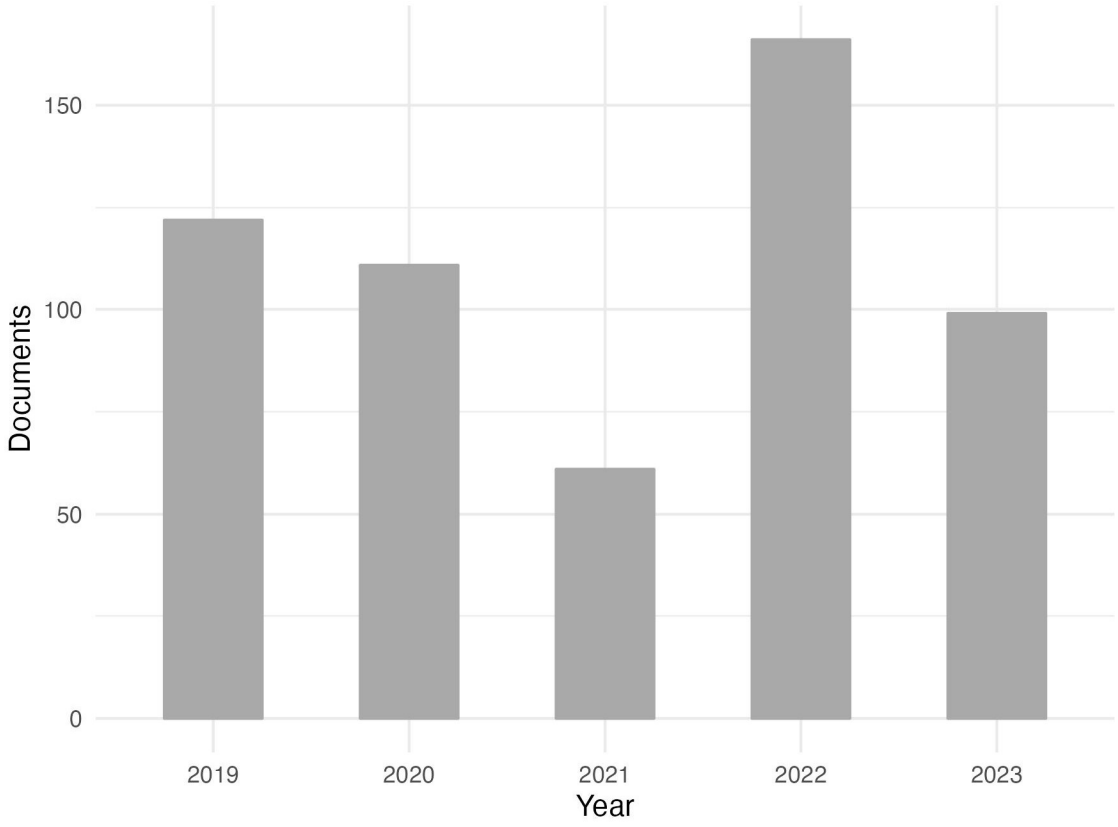


Figure 2: SDC documents per year of publication, 2019-2023



Qualitative content analysis identified topics in SDC documents and their importance. Unexpectedly, the SDC focused mainly on conflict issues rather than its ideological stance. However, ideology remains a key part of the SDC's communication strategies. The following paragraph examines how the SDC frames these topics in its online documents.

The strategic narratives of the Syrian Democratic Council

The content analysis showed that the SDC mainly discussed topics related to its ideology and conflict-related issues, with the latter being more relevant per the number of codes. However, to assess how the SDC framed its strategic narrative, it is necessary to understand how these topics are framed in the SDC online documents. Relying on Miskimmon, O'Laughlin, and Roselle (2014), I identify two main narratives developed by the SDC. The first is deeply interconnected with their view of the international system, particularly emphasising the international community's role in the Syrian conflict. To this extent, the SDC claims that international military and political interventions are detrimental to long-lasting peace in the country. In particular, the SDC criticises the relevant role of Turkey in such peace processes[13] since Ankara has been militarily involved in Syria with different on-the-ground operations and excluded the SDC from the negotiation tables. The Turkish military involvement in Syria is one of the key aspects of the SDC's system narrative. Specifically, the SDC argues that Turkey is aimed at reshaping the current regional balance of power through its military involvement in Syria and through its main proxy ally, the Syrian National Army. To this extent, Document 128 claims that

> "Turkey's Erdogan project goes beyond the region and his ambitions are to revive the dreams of the Ottoman Sultanate at the expense of the peoples and geography of the region, noting that Turkish interventions undermine peace and security".[14]

In this context, the SDC argues that Ankara's activities in the country's northern regions threaten any potential peace process, mainly interested in securing a relevant influence on Damascus. For example, in Document 103, it is written that the SDC co-chair, Ilham Ahmed

> "demanded from the international community and the USA to get out the factions associated with the Turkish state from the territories they occupied with the Turkish state and declaring these areas as a demilitarized zone, in addition to punishing those factions for their criminalization and putting them on the lists of terrorism".[15]

[13] The most relevant peace processes have been the Geneva peace talks (2012, 2014, 2016, 2017), the Astana talks (2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021), and the Vienna Process (2015).
[14] This document is accessible at: https://m-syria-d.com/en/?p=2245, last access on January 9, 2025.
[15] This document is accessible at: https://m-syria-d.com/en/?p=1410, last access on January 7, 2025.

In its system narrative, the SDC repeatedly accused Turkey of obstructing the current effort for peace in Syria, underlying how "Turkey puts obstacles in front of the solution and tries to seek solutions according to Astana course which does not take into account the reason that the Syrians revolted for"[16]. However, the SDC's system narrative also criticises "the inability of the international community to find a political solution to end the Syrian crisis and make the country a democratic state in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2254",[17] particularly the "lack of seriousness by the international community in dealing with the Syrian crisis, despite the nine Geneva meetings and nineteen Astana meetings that have proven futile".[18]

The second narrative developed by the SDC is strictly intertwined with how the SDC identifies itself vis-à-vis other opposition groups. The Syrian civil war has been highly fragmented (Walther and Pedersen, 2020), with multiple actors adhering to different ideologies (Byman, 2016; Schwab, 2023). To this extent, the SDC developed an identity narrative based on two out of three ideological pillars—democratic self-governance and feminism—and its willingness to achieve national dialogue, to defend Syrian integrity—despite the SDC being accused of separatism—and its fight against extremism and sectarianism, recalling its efforts to fight the Islamic State on the battleground. For example, Document 419 states that "decentralization does not mean separation, but rather means strengthening of the national unity and building a new Syria, the future Syria, if this model is applied to the entirety of its territories",[19] and that that

> "Autonomous Administration is an expression of a resolution that accommodates the aspirations of Kurds in their regions to participate in a political and societal presence within the multi-ethnic Syrian state. He clarified that it is not a separatist project, as it was claimed, but rather a more mature and inclusive approach to a societal solution".[20]

In this sense, while the SDC is portraying itself as part of a future multi-ethnic Syria—and not an actor seeking independence—it stressed its efforts in building an inclusive and democratic society in Syria. In this regard, the SDC aims to position itself differently from other actors, in particular, actors with Islamist and jihadist ideologies. In the documents, such groups are often portrayed as terrorist groups[21] and fascist organisations, and that "Islamic fighting movements such as ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, and Jaysh al-Islam have all participated in the demographic change and in committing sectarian massacres in some areas,"[22] while, contrarily, the "SDF achieved with the coalition forces a victory for humanity and

[16] This document is accessible at: https://m-syria-d.com/en/?p=1451, last access on January 9, 2025.
[17] This document is accessible at: https://m-syria-d.com/en/?p=3902, last access on January 11, 2025.
[18] This document is accessible at: https://m-syria-d.com/en/?p=6027, last access on January 31, 2025.
[19] This document is accessible at: https://m-syria-d.com/en/?p=5064, last access on January 15, 2025.
[20] This document is accessible at: https://m-syria-d.com/en/?p=6167, last access on January 17, 2025.
[21] This document is accessible at: https://m-syria-d.com/en/?p=6494, last access on January 22, 2025.
[22] This document is accessible at: https://m-syria-d.com/en/?p=5661, last access of February 2, 2025.

general democratic societies. The struggle still continues at the same pace until the sources of extremism are drained, its ideology and sleeper cells are uprooted."[23] Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, the leading actor involved in the military operation "Deterrence of Aggression" and whose leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, was elected interim President, is consistently referred to as "al-Nusra Front" and labelled as a terrorist organisation,[24] recalling Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's previous allegiance to al-Qaeda. In reinforcing such dynamics, feminism takes a central role. In several documents, the SDC highlighted the role of women in fighting against terrorism and their role in the SDC's politics. As reported, women

> "are prohibited from exercising their rights to live in the areas of control of extremist factions linked to terrorist organization of Al Qaeda. This is also the case for women under Baathist regime.
> On the other hand, the name of women in N-E Syria was associated with courage and sacrifice, as they fought and faced the most powerful terrorist organization the world has known, and fought alongside men for freedom, peace, and decent living".[25]

Interestingly, the identity narrative in its ideological component rarely relies on the environmental topic, one of the three main pillars of PYD and Öcalan's ideology, and it is not salient in creating the SDC's identity narrative. In this context, the (alleged) democratic self-administration in North-Eastern Syria (AANES) and the participation of women in formal politics and the army (in particular, the creation of the Women's Protection Units), became more salient in their identity narrative to distinguish them from other non-state armed actors, in particular Islamist and jihadist groups.

[23] This document is accessible at: https://m-syria-d.com/en/?p=1305, last access on January 25, 2025.
[24] This is visible in several documents, and see, e.g., https://m-syria-d.com/en/?p=6494, https://m-syria-d.com/en/?p=5661, https://m-syria-d.com/en/?p=5289, last access on February 2, 2025.
[25] This document is accessible at: https://m-syria-d.com/en/?p=2288, last access on January 31, 2025

Table 3: The Syrian Democratic Council's strategic narratives

	System narrative		**Identity narrative**	
Main narrative	International military and political interventions weaken Syrian peace process		SDC self-identification as a different and responsible actor in the Syrian conflict	
Sub-narratives	Exclusionary peace processes without considering the UNSC 2254 resolution are detrimental to the peace processes	External intervention and the Turkish military operations in N-E Syria are detrimental to Syrian cohesion, territorial integrity, and peace processes	The ideological pillars of the SDC (confederalism, feminism, environmentalism) show the progressist ideology of the SDC vis-à-vis jihadist or Islamist groups in the country	SDC's efforts to fight against ISIS, promote national dialogue, and respect international law position SDC differently from other (jihadist or Islamist) actors

Conclusion

Through qualitative content analysis and narrative analysis of 559 documents published online by the SDC, the article examines the strategic narratives of the Syrian Democratic Council. Strategic narratives, conceptualised as "representations of a sequence of events and identities, a communicative tool through which political actors – usually elites – attempt to give determined meaning to past, present, and future to achieve political objectives" (Miskimmon et al., 2014: 7), are intended here as a tool to exert rebel diplomacy, strategically framing and connecting events to reach external governmental actors. To date, this is one of the first qualitative empirical analyses of rebel diplomacy, showing how rebel groups develop strategic narratives that do not intend to recruit, contrary to the case of jihadist organisations (Ingram, 2017; Kruglova, 2021; Papale, 2021; Schmid, 2014, 2015).

The qualitative content analysis of the documents sheds light on the main topics covered by the SDC, such as grassroots self-administration, feminism, the different peace processes, Turkey's military operation and occupation, and the SDC's relations with the former Assad government. On the other hand, the narrative analysis identified two main strategic narratives developed by the SDC—a system narrative and an identity narrative. The SDC system narrative focuses on criticising the international order and powers, unable to pressure conflict parties into achieving a comprehensive and inclusive peace process and not considering the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254. The inability to sign a peace process was, according to the SDC, due to the involvement in the negotiations table of

international actors involved in Syria, particularly Turkey, that militarily occupied some portions of territory in Northern Syria. On the other hand, the SDC's identity narrative primarily hinges on its ideology, its role in fighting against ISIS, and its efforts in fostering an inclusive national dialogue that eschews extremism and sectarianism while adhering to democratic principles. While the system narrative showed the SDC's understanding of the international order and the problems concerning the achievement of peace processes in Syria, the SDC identity narrative stressed their ideological and practical diversity, underlying the SDC's willingness to achieve a post-conflict multi-ethnic country, positioning the SDC differently from other actors in Syria, and making them more appealing for international support.

Rebel diplomacy remains underexplored in civil war literature. Further research should theoretically and empirically investigate the different tools non-state armed actors might use in crafting their foreign policy and the possible variation in the use of various tools, such as, among others, individual diplomatic visits, the establishment of foreign offices, and the role of diasporas. Moreover, further research should investigate how non-state armed groups develop strategic narratives to influence foreign governments, thus developing forms of public diplomacy (Plundrich, 2024). The relevance of social networks and the Internet provided more tools for non-state armed actors to engage in rebel diplomacy, opening spaces for further research on how rebel groups engage with foreign states and audiences and strategically communicate their goals abroad.

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