

SYRIAN CRISIS: ROLE OF MAJOR POWERS

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Introduction

The unrest in Syria started in the early spring of 2011 as a sequel to Arab spring. Protestors raised their voice against President Bashar-al-Assad's government whose military forces responded with violent crackdowns. The conflict turned into an armed rebellion within a short period of time which was overtly sectarian in nature between Alawite-dominated govt forces, militias and other Shia groups fighting primarily against Sunni-dominated rebel groups. Opposition got splited into different groups of rebel fighters instead of having single entity. Meanwhile an extremist group called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) started taking over large swath of the country using violence. ISIL also persecuted other groups including Christians and Yazidis. Since then.

Syria's internal politics were entangled with inter-Arab competition and the Great Powers' struggle. U.S. wanted to step down President Assad by imparting training to Syrian rebels. At this backdrop, the Russian engagement since September 2015 has turned the tide in favor of the Syrian government. Russia's military operations in Syria have triggered many discussions about their intention in the region and its effects on the regional political-security equations specially geo-political or global standing. With the involvement of international powers namely Russia and China that vetoed UNSC resolution of Syria in February 2012, the situation seems to taken an international dimension from being domestic and regional¹.

The political crisis in Syria has concerned major regional and international actors in such a way that, a new political alignment has taken shape at the regional level as well as in the international arena in a short period of time. Two major regional powers formed coalition i.e. Russia, Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah and Palestinian Hamas form the anti-Western coalition and United States, Turkey, European Union and the Persian Gulf countries are in the opposing side. Peace talks in Geneva began to end the five year civil war peace talk broke up in May 2016 as the opposition groups left accusing Assad govt of ignoring the ceasefire. Resuming further peace talk is yet to be decided.

1. Singh Priya and Chatterjee Kingshuk 2011, *Interpreting Arab Spring* K W Publishers Pvt Ltd New Delhi, p108.

Mapping Major Theories of International Relations

International relations is defined as the diplomatic strategic relations of states whose characteristics focus on issues of war and peace, conflict and cooperation. IR scholars believe international politics as anarchical because there is no central govt and states are sovereign and autonomous.

Realism, Liberalism and constructivism theories are mapped as major IR theories. Since the beginning of academic IR the dominant theory of world politics was seen in realism that states prevail in a shadow of anarchy and always compete for power and security. The traditional realist emphasizes on the unceasing lust for power inherent in human nature. Liberalism referred as utopianism. Liberal ideas have profoundly shaped how everyone thinks about the relationship between govt and citizens. It seeks to project values of order, liberty, justice and tolerance into IR. Constructivism is a theoretical approach in which states socially “construct”.

Comparison between the Theories

According to realist, states remain critical actors; conflict, competition and rivalry are and will be always predominant modes of interstate interaction international politics. The underlying forces of change are creating opportunities for increased cooperation and a greater realization of peace, welfare and justice.² Realism talks about the role of the state and national power shaping the foreign policy believing in use of force on state and promoting country's national interest. Liberalism focuses more of international institution in shaping state behavior underestimating the role of use of force rather they see the use of diplomacy and negotiation in resolving the disputes. Realism is pessimistic theory whereas liberalism is an optimistic theory. Machiavelli in his famous book 'The Prince', when the entire safety is at stake, no consideration of what is just or unjust, merciful or cruel, praiseworthy or shameful, must intervene.³

2. R. Thompson William 2001, evolutionary Interpretation of world politics, Routledge new York and London, 2001, p 77.

3. Swain James Edgar 1938, A history of World Civilization, Eurasia Publishing House (Pvt) Limited, Ram Nagar, New Delhi, p 384.

Conceptualizing Syrian Crisis

Syrian conflict is a conflict that is prolonging, 4,70,000 Syrians have got killed and the future of Syria is uncertain. Different players have exploited sectarian conflict for fulfilling their own political agenda. Prolonged sectarian civil war in Syria has turned the battleground for a regional proxy where U.S. and Russia have become embroiled in the conflict.

Taking realist view argument is that major powers are playing competing role for which the war is taking this shape. The UN is having ineffective role because major powers interests are not having consensus, talks have become futile as the national interests of major powers are not compatible to each other. The war is prolonging and the humans are humans are having unprecedented sufferings.

Sectarian Conflict

Shia-Sunni conflict in the region remains a primary struggle in the Arab world and Syrian crisis is found to be centre of gravity of the ongoing process of major powers strategic equation in reshaping the environment. Sectarian violence between Shia- Sunni comes from idealism, identities which are basically constructing. Realism fails to appreciate how these differing identities are also shaping this conflict. Identities are playing small role but it is major powers interest that ultimately shape the conflict. Major power competition is a realist discourse in the world.

Regional and International Dimension

The armed conflict in Syria has drawn Iran, Iraq and the Lebanese Hezbollah movement in favour of Assad regime and Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey behind the rebels. The international community is splited by Syrian crisis into two opposite camps. U.S.A, Turkey, France, Britain and other EU countries, The Arab League, Saudi Arabia and Qatar and the other front is headed by Russia, The Syrian conflict became internationalized with the partisan stakes of many global and regional powers who are locked in competing regional and geo-political interests. Realist view is that it is great powers interest that ultimately shape the discourse in this world. Interest of major powers are not compatible to each other. Because major powers are not agreeing rather they are shaping the nature of war. Eventually this is a state centric and power centric explanation determining the conflict pattern.

Overview of the Situation

Following independence in 1946 the country was ruled by Assad family for long who used the sectarian difference as a political tool. Small community became the important power block after 1970. Arab revolt unfolded through Tunisia and Egypt but Assad's brutality by security forces put his role in opposite slant. Subsequently non state actors took the advantage of the situation and foreign intervention finally got through and the scenario turned into a complicated one. From the beginning, Syria had a sectarian conflict between its Shias and majority Sunnis. Besides Jihadist, militant group's command, proxies of regional powers with vested interests continue to operate in the country.

Since World War II, the Syrian crisis has turned into worst humanitarian crisis. Due to civil war different groups had been active in different parts of the country. Certainly, the interplay of geopolitics at global, regional and local level is becoming more complex than ever⁴. Syrians Arab tribal groups are committed to protecting their tribes and autonomy from both the Syrian state and the armed opposition. Tribalism served as a primary form of communal identity in Syria irrespective of their location whether in rural or urban areas⁵. The spark of the Syrian revolution started a predominantly tribal area in Dar'a when a tribal delegation met Atif Najeeb, in Dar'a to request the release of children. By way of response Atif took the headbands and threw them into the rubbish bin⁶. The Country and the economy had stagnated under the repressive rule of army and a party dominated by a minority sect⁷.

Conflict Background

Uprising turned into violence soon after security forces opened fire at the demonstrators. The govt use of force to crush the dissent merely hardened the protestors resolve⁸. Sectarian violence sharply accelerated tensions in neighboring countries, where Sunni fighters are now staging attacks into Syria and also in Iraq. Rebel brigades were formed to fight against govt forces . The rise of the jihadist group Islamic State (IS) has added a further dimension.

4. Beaumont Peter and H. Black Gerald and Wagstaff J. Malcolm 1976, *The Middle East A Geographical Study*, David Fulton Publishers, London, p548.

5. The Jamestown Foundation, 2013, *The Tribal Factor in Syria's Rebellion* <http://www.fairobserver.com/region/middle_east_north_africa/tribal-factor-syria-rebellion/> [accessed on] 03 Jun 2016.

6. Collins, Dylan, 2015, *Tribal Blood Ties and Syria's Civil War: Q & A* <<https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2015/12/11/tribal-blood-ties-and-syrias-civil-war-qa/>> [accessed on] 03 Jun 16.

7. Zogby James 2010, *Arab Voices*, Publish by Palgrave Macmillan, p219

8. Rodgers Lucys, Gritten David and Patrick Asare and James Offer 2016, *Syria: The story of the conflict*, BBC News <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26116868>> [accessed on] May 2016.

Opposition Groups

One of the main opposition groups, the Syrian National Council (SNC), an umbrella organization formed by activists in Istanbul on 24 August 2011. In contrast, another main group, the National Co-ordination Committee (NCC) advocated for dialogue with the government. Another group Free Syrian Army (FSA) defected Syrian soldiers executed retaliatory attacks against Syrian forces. The formation of FSA was declared publicly in the summer of 2011 endorsed by the Syrian National Council, the main opposition bloc.

Internal Conflict

Determining Factors for security situation in the conflict those turned into violence in Syria are stated below:

Lack of Good Governance: Syria has been suffering from good governance and rated as one of the worst ranking by the World Bank. The breakdown of social order maintained through repression by authoritarian rulers. The situation was gravely aggravated by the centrally controlled economic system State run industries were overstaff and inefficient⁹.

Law and Order Situation: The humanitarian situation in Syria continues to worsen due to intense fighting, high levels of violence, widespread violation of human rights and other international law and the obligation to protect civilians.

External Terrorist Threat: The general course of the complex war has changed significantly since 2013, as the fighting has moved into a new phase, with the Syrian government and the IS evenly matched in terms of their respective capabilities.

Domestic and Regional Impacts

Human Casualty: Due to 5 years conflict in Syria, approximately 4,70,000 civilians were killed and life expectancy has sharply dropped to 55.4 years from 70 before the war. Prior to the uprising the population in Syria was 21 million out of which more than 4.8 million have fled the country and 6.36 million got displaced within Syria.

9. George Alan 2003, Syria Neither Bread nor Freedom, Zed Books Publisher Limited, London and New York, p25.

Largest Refugee Exodus: Syria's crisis reaches into Europe crossing the regional boundary. The latest wave of fast-moving migrants includes refugees from Syria and Iraq. Most Syrian refugees remain in the Middle East, slightly more than 10 percent of the refugees have fled to Europe.

Human Rights Violations: The human right violation in Syria has been numerous due to extremist group, IS and government forces, including allied militias. IS executed hundreds of civilians and forced women into sexual slavery.

Crime Wave: Many cities have been engulfed in a wave of crime with the expansion of conflict across Syria. Since fighting caused disintegration in most of the civilian state, and many police stations are almost dysfunctional, crime like thievery, looting and kidnapping increased in manifolds.

Loss of Cultural Heritage: The cultural loss threatens to expunge some of the lasting reminders of what binds together Syrians of all faiths, ethnicities and political persuasions¹⁰. Destruction of antiquities has been caused by shelling, army entrenchment, and looting at various museums and monuments.

Global Impacts

Migrant Crisis: The 2015 European migrant crisis, arose through the rising number of refugees and the majority of the refugees come from Syria, Afghanistan and Eritrea. Thousands of refugees are attempting desperate trip across the Mediterranean sea for batter future.

Rise of IS: IS is an organization that is built on the foundation of narrow and dogmatic interpretation of Islam¹¹. IS has established control over vast landlocked territory of Iraq and Syria. Islamists and Jihadists, whose actions were brutal in nature attracted global attention by fully utilizing the prevailing conflict.

Other areas have been cut off by IS militants, leaving their populations dependent on foreign aid and black-market food supplies¹². By 2013, the terrorist group dominated western Iraq and eastern Syria¹³. With changing strategy of IS, it becomes more and more hotspot of international terrorist attack.

10. Eaton Tim 2015, Destroying Cultural Heritage: The End of (Syrian) History <<https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/17117>> [accessed] on 03 Jun 16.

11. dri Wanto and Abdul Mateen Quadri, Raja Ratnam School of Institutions studies (RSIS), -Islamic State: Understanding the threat in Indonesia and Malaysia Date 29 October 2015, RSIS.

12. Islamic State group: Crisis in seven charts <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27838034>> [accessed] on 04 Jun 16.

13. K. Anderson Dr. Sean 2016, Indo-Asia-Pacific Defense Fourm ISIL and the Hezbollah Effect Terror Watch Volume 41, Issue, 2016.

Increasing Number of Foreign Fighters (FF): According to data provided by the soufan group between 27000 and 31000 people have travelled to Syria and Iraq to join the IS and other violent extremist groups in the region¹⁴. Foreign Fighters from across the Middle East and North Africa had been pouring into Syria to train and fight while refugees are flooding into Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Turkey¹⁵.

Rise of 'Lone Wolf Terrorism' in the West: IS ideology possessing terrorist groups of Western countries are increasing their lone wolf attacks. Europe has been also rocked by a series of shocking terrorist attack perpetrated by lone individuals.

General

The US and Russia, the two main powers got embroiled in Syria, remaining on opposite sides. The great powers are influencing the region, the region is influencing the great powers and the great powers are influencing one another¹⁶. President Barack Obama leads a coalition against ISIS backed by Sunni Arab states and Turkey. While Russian President includes Assad regime, Iran-backed Shia and Hezbollah axis.

Strategic Orientation of USA

USA came forward in 2011 to step down Assad but they started training Syrian rebels in the following year in Jordan. U.S. led coalition launched air strikes in September 2014 inside Syria TO destroy IS .

There have been many criticism of the Obama administration's policy toward Syrian ever since fighting between the Assad regime and the opponents began in 2011. President Obama's nonintervention policy may have different reasons like withdrawing troops from Iraq and Afghanistan . Again limited intervention in Libya but Libya's continued violence might give Obama an impression that same intervention in Syria may not bring positive result. USA did not want to alienate Russia when it was looking for lot of cooperation on different issues.

Russian Intervention into Syrian Conflict

The Russian military intervention started on 30 Sep 2015, Russia waited till the time was ripe. However, Russian strikes killed mostly the western backed rebels including

14. Kirk, Ashley 2016, Iraq and Syria: How many foreign fighters are fighting for Isil <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/03/29/iraq-and-syria-how-many-foreign-fighters-are-fighting-for-isil/>> [accessed] on 12 Jun 16)

15. Miliband David, Syrian's Human Tragedy, The Daily Star 14 Jul 2013.

16. M. Pollack Kenneth, Al-Turk Akram, K.Baev Pavel, Michel S.Doran, Elgindy, The Arab Awakening Brookings Institution Press, Washinton, D.C,Page 278.

civilians as claimed by opposition party. Russia decisively backed Assad regime due to close political link with Syria. Syria enjoyed close ties with the soviet union as a means of countering the west's apparently open-ended support for Israel¹⁷. Moscow's reasoning over the Syrian conflict is manifold, its foremost motivation is to firmly defend the international legal principle of sovereign states¹⁸.

Moscow wants to protect the key naval facility that it leases at the Syrian port of Tartous which serves as Russia's sole Mediterranean base for its black sea fleet¹⁹. Russia launched air campaign against rebels mentioning the so-called IS. The Russian quick and determined action not only prevented the oppositions to establish influence on Assad but also stabilized Assad govt to hold on to power.

Russia is determined to ensure that the Iraq episode is not repeated in Syria and that the present Syrian govt continues²⁰. The West shows no desire to go to war with Russia over Syria since counter escalation might lead to more violence, extremism, breakdown of state and refugees. Putin' gave a clear message to the West through his bold action that Russia is a world power to be reckoned with and Russia is ready to use its military power for achieving its diplomatic goals²¹.

Regional Actors of ME

Saudi Arabia

Diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and Syria have long been strained by major events in the region. Saudi Arabia is a closest ally of USA, but remain historically antagonistic against Israel. In order to undermine the Iran-Syria alliance, the Saudi leadership declared its support for the opposition in Syria²². Saudi Arabia has begun supplying the U.S backed rebel Free Syrian Army (FSA) in order to shift a balance of regional power. Sending ground troops by Saudis is aimed at drawing the U.S into a more direct involvement to confront IS to keep Syrian president Bashar Al Assad in power²³.

17. George Alan 2003, Syria Neither Bread nor Freedom, Zed Books Publisher Limited, London and New York, p18.

18. Hokayem Emil 2013, Syria's Uprising, Routledge Publisher Limited, p172.

19. Syria crisis: Where key countries Stan, 2015, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-23849587>> [Accessed] on 20 April 2016.

20. A Chaudhury Enam, The Crisis in Syria, as it Looks now, The Daily Star 15 October 2015.

21. Hasan Mahmood, The Russians have come to Syria, The Daily Star 05 October 2015.

22. Singh Priya and Chatterjee Kingshuk 2011, Interpreting Arab Spring K W Publishers Pvt Ltd New Delhi, p161.

23. James M. Dorsey 12 Feb 2016, Saudi Strategy in Syria: Rewriting Mideast's Political Map? <<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/CO16033.pdf>> [Accessed on 12 February 2016.

Iran

Iran have propped up the Alawite-led government of President Assad by enhancing its support. It would be a key player in shaping the new ME order and would take on what it considered to be its rightful role in the affairs of the region²⁴. Iran maintains a strategic relation with both Hafez and Bashar for more than three decades. From geopolitical perspective and balance of power in the region. Iranian-Turkish relations have become more complicated since the Arab spring uprising began four years ago.

Turkey

Development in Syria which was a test case for the limits of Turkey's power projection led it to revising its approach more than once. Turkey beefed up its military presence on its border with Syria and provided the Syrian rebels all material and moral support. The wave of protests spread throughout the Arab World, the Turks, like their regional rivals in Tehran, found themselves increasingly embarrassed by the strong and determined to the rule of their friends in Damascus and the regimes brutality, violent reaction to the opposition²⁵.

Israel

Israel, an overwhelmingly dominant power in the ME regime, has so far maintained a low profile but has long been pursuing a policy to guide any outcome in ME. Focusing on Hezbollah in Lebanon, Israel looks at the Syrian war through the narrow prism. Israel is continuing semi-clandestine war to restrict the flow of sophisticated weapons from Syria to Hezbollah.

Solution to the Crisis

The peace process has been moderated by the AL, the UN peace envoys on Syria, Russia and Western powers which remain as a coordinated outfit for initiatives to resolve the ongoing civil war in Syria. The negotiating parties are represented by the Syrian Baathist govt, and the opposition while the Western backed Kurdish forces have stayed out of the negotiation framework²⁶. AL tried

24. Katouzian Homa and Shahidi Hossein 2008, Iran in The 21st Century, Politics, Economics & Conflict, Published by 2008, Canada. p146)

25. Inbar Efrain 2013, The Arab Spring, Democracy and Security, Domestic and international ramifications, Published by Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, p19.

26. <<http://ch.wikipedia.org/wiki/syrian.peace.process>>.

twice to accomplish an end to Syrian government and opposition violence and convince both parties to start talks instead of fighting²⁷.

The Kofi Annan drew up six point peace plan, intended to commit both the Syrian government and opposition to a cease fire. On 12 April after Annan had assumed that both parties had agreed to a cease fire on 01 May both the Syrian govt and the opposition were violating the ceasefire²⁸. Lakhdar Brahimi, was appointed as the new U.N.-AL special representative for Syria. Government and most of the opposition groups agreed to his appeal yet, the lull in the fighting lasted very short, according to Brahimi, after which both parties accused the other of not having stopped its violence. Lakhdar Brahimi, tried to pursue the conference in close cooperation with the U.S. and Russia, but ended on 31 January without reaching any agreement.

UN Security Council agreed on Syria peace plan draft resolution calling for peace conference in January 16 and ceasefire adopted unanimously by council's 15 members in ending the war. All 15 members agreed to approve the text which came after hours of negotiation between world powers²⁹. International Syria Support Group (ISSG) was formed following a meeting in Vienna.

The Geneva talks broke up in May 2016 accusing the Syrian govt of ignoring the ceasefire. UN envoy staffen de Mistura informed his strong desire to keep the to keep the momentum. Fresh date of resuming further peace talk is yet to be decided. Defeating extremism in Syria is essential to bring the Syria conflict to an end. For the sake of global security and stability U.S. need to have more balanced policy towards the Middle East which will serve every country's long term interest.

Recommendations

- Constant engagement of U.S., Europe, Russia and the regional allies in constructive dialogue may be ensured for attaining a political solution.
- In order to improve the dramatically insufficient humanitarian responses in Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon, the humanitarian practices and the policy issues need to be reviewed.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Aljazeera, UN Security Council agrees on Syria peace plan, 19 February 2015, < <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/12/security-council-agrees-syria-peace-plan-151218210833550.html>>

- In order to launch large-scale humanitarian operations UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) need to work with civil society to devise a localized relief effort reflective of each area's unique needs and characteristics.
- For the sake of global security and stability de-escalation and freezing of the conflict should be strongly pushed.
- A humanitarian corridor should be formed to ensure the healthy delivery of aid to the battered city or crisis zone.
- Beyond the plan of the U.S. and Russia, an attempt may be made to form the basis for a mediated solution which will address the main drivers including the outcome of the conflict.
- An informal multilateral arrangement may be made with the help of major powers.
- Syria should not be dragged to a situation to be fragmented into pieces rather the integrity of the country need to be maintained having conscientious of all international and regional powers.

Conclusion

The multi-ethnic and multi-confessional Syrian society has now been profoundly and irreversibly torn apart by civil war. The power vacuum in Syria has opened the door for entry of ISIL into the country. The conflict in Syria and the sufferings of the Syrian people is showing no sign of abating. The scale of the tragedy is now the world's largest humanitarian disaster with no parallel in recent history.

Following the unrest in Syria USA govt involved in Syria and started hunting down the terrorist by air campaign in order to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. U.S. provided training, besides cash and intelligence to the Syrian rebels Assad to leave the power. In order to arrest the destruction of Syria and protect US security the USA sought both to defeat ISIS and to remove the Assad regime from power.

Russian involvement in the Syrian civil war began in September 2015 which consisted of air strikes to help the Syrian Govt retake the territory from various opposition groups. The conflict in Syria has become one of the greatest humanitarian disasters of recent times. Unless a major geopolitical shift brings change in the prevailing situation inside Syria.

This war isn't over yet. The rebels who mostly hail from Syria's Sunni majority are not strong enough to take Damascus, but nor are they in any mood to withdraw. And the The Alawite minority to whom Bashar al-Assad belongs to won't surrender, out of fear ; they 'll lose their property and lives if the regime falls. Even if Bashar al-Assad himself does not survive, Syria still faces a final showdown of a profoundly sectarian nature³⁰.

Some Syrians become the victims of the game fighting with each other and many others are fleeing the scene, taking refuge elsewhere. Russians are too concerned about the fate of their Naval base in Tartu's and the lucrative market of their arms, Iranians for losing one of its best allies in the regional power game, Americans, on the cannot wait for Assad to go to grab the next big market for their arms the Saudi, Qatar, are waiting for a post-Alawites regime to shift the balance of regional politics, while Israel would be ever happy to see another of its fierce foe down without costing it a single bullet.

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6. Davis John 2013, The Arab Spring And Arab Thaw Ashgate Publishing Limited, England, p99.
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