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Syria: A Multifaceted Theatre of War

By

¹Jahanzeb Sheikh, ²Jahanzeb Khan

Abstract:

In the wake of the Arab Spring, various political revolutions emerged one after the other to bring an end to the repressive rule of dictators. The Syrian uprising that began in 2011 as an anti-regime protest against the long-term dictatorship of Bashar al Assad was an offshoot of Arab Spring. The crisis soon turned into a civil war. consequently, the war engulfed the whole country and made the Syrian land a blood bath thereby paving the way for the dreadful humanitarian crisis by killing nearly half a million people and left half of Syria's population displaced. It has encouraged external major powers to fight a proxy war for their vested interests. In this context, this paper is an attempt to analyze the genesis of the Syrian crisis, global politics behind the crisis and its aftereffects. This article presents various factors, such as the dictatorial rule of Bashar al Asad, sectarian rift and already worsened social and economic conditions of the country. A faction of Syrian opposition forces along with external powers, namely Saudi Arabia, the United States, multiple Sunni militant outfits are the principal opponents of the regime. The study concludes besides, its adverse effects on Syria's SOCIO-political and economic condition, the crisis has wreaked havoc on the whole region. It has also created a humanitarian crisis and has displaced a large number of people. The crisis has paved the way for the emergence of various terrorist and extremist groups which pose a serious

¹M.Phil. scholar, Area Study Center University of Balochistan Quetta Pakistan

Email: jahanzaibshaikh51@gmail.com

²Jahanzeb Khan, PhD Scholar, Assistant Professor, Area Study Centre University of Balochistan Quetta Pakistan Email: jahanzeb.rind@gmail.com

threat to the political stability and territorial integrity of Syria and regions beyond.

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Introduction:

The Syrian crisis is one of the deadliest conflicts which has been ongoing for a decade. The crisis evolved from a peaceful protest and soon turned into a violent conflict. The slogans of regime change and mass uprising appeared in 2011 when the people in the Deraa city protested against the detention of 14 school children who had been apprehended and badly punished by the authorities for their alleged writing on a wall, the popular slogan of the mass uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt “The people want the downfall of the regime.”

Government’s coercive response made the situation worst. Soon the uprising spread across the country. The conflict was initially indigenous and the opposition forces wanted an end to the long rule of President Asad. The Syrians wanted an end to despotic rule and its replacement with a democratic political setup that could bring socio-economic prosperity to the people, however, the situation became much complex owing to the involvement of various regional and global actors in the conflict. The conflict in Syria has many dimensions. it is at the same time civil war, a sectarian war, a proxy war and so on. Some actors are taking an active part in the conflict to farther their vested interest. The protagonist of the regime in Iran, Russia and Hezbollah. These parties have been supporting president Asad and are the strong advocates of the regime. On the other hand, the USA, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel have been pushing all efforts to oust president Asad by supporting the rebels and opposition forces. Up till now the deadly conflict has claimed almost the lives of half a million people, displaced nearly half of the country’s total population, and has resulted in a mass migration. It has heightened the tensions among core world powers and has paved the way for the rise of infamous terrorist organizations like ISIS. The unending conflict brings home the fact that there is no military solution to the Syrian crisis. The regional and global powers must take concerted actions for peace and stability in the country by the means of democratic reforms. UN has to play its due role in the restoration of peace.

It is high time the world community took serious actions against the ISIS and its offshoots so that the world could be made a safe place to live in.

Geopolitics of the Syrian Crisis:

Syria's unique demographic features and geographical location is by and largely responsible for the ongoing crisis. It is imperative to understand the geopolitics behind the Syrian crisis to have an explicit understanding of the current crisis. Geographically Syria has always remained significant in the region in the annals of history (Jalen, 2013). The country's proximity to resource-rich countries of the world has added to its importance. Two important energy pipelines pass through Syria namely Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline and the Qatar-Saudi Arabia-Jordan-Syria-Turkey pipeline which further add to its significance.

In addition to it, Syria has always remained an important strategic partner for Tehran and Moscow to safeguard their interests in the region. Russia wants to protect and operate its navel instalment namely the Tartus port in Syria. Whereas for Iran, Syria serves as a secure and direct supply line to Hezbollah and a tool to expand its influence across the Middle East. Iran's hostility to Israel is yet another factor that has enhanced the significance of Syria for Iran (Jalen, 2013). In addition to this, Syria's growing ties with Russia and Iran have deteriorated its relations with the USA. Likewise, being a member of Alawites, a minority Shia sect, the ruling elite in Syria has aggravated the majority of Sunni sections and has paved the way for sectarian rifts in the region. The above-mentioned factors have given rise to the emergence of the protagonist and antagonists of the regime (Jalen, 2013).

The Regime:

The regime comprises the government of President Bashar al Assad. It veils both political military might. Initially, the regime suffered certain setbacks in its fight against the rebels.

Radical Islamists also posed a threat to the regime's territorial integrity. However, with the support from its key allies mainly Russia and Iran, President Asad managed to tackle the opposition forces (Youssef, 2007).

The Syrian Opposition Coalition:

The opposition consists of mainly political and military factions that are divided on many key issues (Seal, 1989). Moreover, other factions are

characterized by ethnic, jihadist, Islamists and sectarian motives. Initially, the opponents formed a strong alliance known as the National Council of Syria is to bring an end to the despotic rule and establish a democratic state. Later on, it joined hands with several other opposition factions and formed The Syrian National Coalition. Many external world entities including the USA, France, the UK, the EU, along with the Gulf states, recognized this National coalition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people (Youssef, 2007).

Role of Foreign Actors Iran:

Since the beginning of the crisis, Iran is one of the significant actors in the crisis. It is the key ally of President Asad. Syria links Iran with militant Hezbollah through Syrian territory.

Iran aims at protecting the Syrian regime as it serves its interests in the region. Resultantly, Iranian assistance to Syrian government gradually increased manifolds. Iran also extended its financial and logistic help to Syria. Moreover, Iran has been supplying weapons and other military equipment to Syria for fighting against the opponents of the regime.

Moreover, Iran's enmity with Israel further encourages Tehran to help Asad in the ongoing conflict (A. Vatanka, 2017).

Russia:

Another staunch advocate of Asad is Russia, as both countries have maintained cordial bound since inception Syrian independence. Syria maintains consolidated economic and military ties with Moscow (A. Vatanka, 2017). The Syrian uprising has endangered the very interests of Russia in the region since it was unacceptable for Russia to lose a key ally. Hence Russia is determinant to prevent the fall of the incumbent government and oppose the US influence in the region. In the beginning, Russia's great role in the Security Council has helped Syria in the world body (Lanblack, 2016). As the escalation and violence increased, Russia also increased its support in great proportional. Later on in 2015, Russian also launched aerial strikes against which proved a turning point in the conflict (Sajedi, 2013).

Hizbullah:

Hizbullah is also a key ally of the regime. It is based in Lebanon and is one of the old allies of the regime. Hizbullah is helping the Asad in his Struggle against Syrian opposition forces. The US has alleged Hezbollah of financing and maintaining the militant organizations that back Assad government (Haddad, 2011).

The Antagonists of the Regime Saudi Arabia:

Since, the start of the crisis, Riaz has been backing the opposition groups against the Syrian government. There a historical and sectarian difference between both states. Syria's greater intruding role in Lebanon is also a matter for concern for Saudi. The enmity between Iran and Saudi has further forced them to help the opposing factions (Filkins, 2018).

Turkey:

Turkey is a major critique of President Assad since the first of the upheaval. It is a main proponent of the Syrian opposition. Turkey is also bearing the brunt of the Syrian refugee (Lanblack, 2016). The violent mass uprising in Syria has also created a threat to Turkey.

Turkey fears that the Syrian Kurds might support ethnic Kurds dwelling in bordering areas of Turkey, which inconsequent might accelerate the cause of greater Kurdistan which Ankara considers a matter of grave concern for her territorial integrity (Lanblack, 2016).

Role of Israel:

Compared to other neighbouring countries, Israel's role is limited in the Syrian conflict.

The rivalries between both the nations date back to the creation of Israel where Syria extended its support to Palestine and opposed the Jewish state. Both states did not maintain diplomatic relations since then. Israel cherishes the fall of Assad's regime because it considers the Iranian –Syrian alliance a threat to its stability. On the other hand, Israel is frightened that the presence of the radical organization on Syrian soil might cause various security threats for her (Dincer, 2011).

Role of the United States of America:

The USA is one of the topmost opponents of the Syrian regime. The US, being opposed to Iran and Russia and their assistance to the Asad government, stood firmly against the regime and supported the rebels

against the established government of Bashar-ul-Asad. From the day first the US is blaming Asad for the rife human rights violation and asking for his. To materialize this idea, the US has extended its military and logistic support to the opposition factions against the incumbent government. US has also initiated aerial strikes against ISIS (Dincer, 2011).

Jihadist Groups:

The emergence of various jihadist groups has further added to the miseries of war-torn Syria. The surfacing of these groups and their endeavours for the establishment of Islamic Caliphate has further complicated the. These organizations are deemed as a serious threat to the whole world by the international community. They pose a looming threat to the stability and territorial integrity of Syria. These groups cherish the idea of establishing an Islamic caliphate based on their version sharia characterized by cruelty and bloodshed (M. Eddy, 2012).

Implications of the Crisis a Host of Humanitarian Crisis in Syria:

The violent crisis has destroyed the social fabrics in Syria. It has created feelings of uncertainty among the masses. According to the Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR), the war has killed more than half a million Syrians. The rest of the Syrians are living in a miserable situation. According to a report published by The UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), almost 1/5 of the Syrians are registered under the United Nations as refugees. Additionally, the war has displaced a huge number of its population. At present, there is a widespread humanitarian crisis in Syria. Acute poverty, crippling economy and feelings of uncertainty have further aggravated the crisis in the country. The health system is also in jeopardy as the war has destroyed the country's national hospitals and health care centres. Moreover, the spread of extremist and terrorist outfits is looming threats to society (Vpharan, 2016).

The Economic Cost of the War:

The economic cost of the Syrian crisis is also enormous. The country has suffered enormous economic losses. The value of Syrian pond has fallen to one of the lowest values.

The State infrastructure and industries have been destroyed in the war. Inflation is one of the highest in its entire history. The people are living in

a miserable condition. Moreover, the economic sanctions imposed by the USA have further aggravated the situation.

Currently, Syria is under acute economic turmoil. The country's trade sector has been badly affected by the violent crisis. Consequently, the price of consumer goods multiplied manifolds. The war has destroyed several historical sites which were included in the UNESCO World Heritage sites. The destruction of various historical sites has a bad impact on the economy generated by tourism. The war has also depleted the natural resources particularly the oil and petroleum resources of the country to a great degree. Despite being an oil producer, the country currently suffers from a power shortage (UNESCO, 2016).

Impacts on the Region:

The Syrian crisis has also brought several significant changes in regional politics. The entire Middle East and its politics have been changing due to many developments that have been appeared in the Syrian crisis. It has heightened the tension among Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey. As, both Iran and Saudi Arabia have always aspired to exert greater influence in the affairs of the Middle East (Vpharan, 2016). Currently, they are involved in a struggle to bring changes in the region that are parallel to their vested interests in the region. This struggle has escalated the Shia Sunni conflict in the region. It has engulfed the entire region including Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain etc. Likewise, the Syrian crisis has also posed a great challenge to Turkey. Turkey wants to protect its national borders in the wake of separatist tendencies raised by the Kurds in Syria (Calabrese, 2012). Turkey fears that this movement would ignite Greater Turkistan movement thereby paving the way for the Kurdish militias in their struggle for a separate Kurdish country. Secondly, Turkey currently hosts the major chunk of Syrian refugees. The refugee crisis has created many socioeconomic problems for Turkey. Turkey has also apprised the international community of the refugee crisis and currently seeking ways to handle this crisis (Mchugh, 2013).

Global Implications of the Crisis:

The Syrian crisis has grave implication for both the region and the world beyond. It has brought mass migration, division among European countries

on the fate of refugees, increasing the threat of ISIS and resurgence of Russia (Marc, 2012).

Mass Migration:

The foremost impact of the Syrian crisis is mass migration. The deadly war has compelled the masses to find a safe place to migrate and live in. They fled from their homes to the neighboring countries, thereby, creating various socio-economic problems for the host countries. Some Syrian refugees have also migrated to European countries. The Europeans have raised their concerns in the wake of this mass exodus (Calabrese, 2012).

Division among European Countries Due to the Increasing Number of Refugees:

The Europeans hold conflicting views about migrants. Germany has adopted a soft policy towards migrants. However, the other European countries hold the view that the huge inflow of Syrian migrants would pave the way for the radicalization of European society. Therefore, they are in direct opposition to mass migration in Europe (Sajedi, 2013).

The Increasing Threat of ISIS and other Extremist Organizations:

ISIS has its roots in Syrian territory. It is a violent Jihadist organization which believes in the formation of an Islamic caliphate based on their version of Sharia solely dependent on force and cruelty. This organization is a great threat not only for the region but also for the entire world. Its roots have also appeared in Iraq and Afghanistan, where it has established its links with other extremist organizations. If not checked, the ISIS would find its roots in Central and South Asia (Sajedi, 2013).

The Growing Rift between former Cold War Rivals:

The Syrian war has also brought the appearance of former cold war rivals in the affairs of the Middle East. Both countries are supporting opposite ranks in the conflict. Russia is a staunch advocate of the current regime and is opposed to the US influence in the affairs of the Middle East. The US, on the other hand, is supporting the rebels in their fight against the Syrian government. The involvement of global powers in opposite ranks is very alarming for international peace (Sajedi, 2013).

Resurgence of Russia:

Russia is once again playing a major role in the Syrian crisis. After the cold war, it is for the first time that Russia has initiated an adventure beyond its

area of the sphere. It clearly shows the resurgence of Russia in world politics. Russia has proved itself a dominant world player after three decades. The Russian role has greatly strengthened Assad's position in an ongoing conflict. Because of Russia's military and economic help, the incumbent emerged triumph (A. Vatanka, 2017).

The Current Economic Turmoil:

Currently, Syria is under the clutches of grave economic crisis. The acute economic crisis has impoverished the people and has brought about the collapse of the Syrian currency.

Government salaries have become nearly worthless. Resultantly, protest against falling living standards has broken out in the South-East. About Eighty per cent of Syrians live in acute poverty, forty became unemployed at the end of 2018. The United States has imposed its toughest sanctions over Syria. The current sanctions on Syria have penalized Thirty-nine companies and individuals. The new sanctions can freeze the assets of anyone dealing with Syria irrespective of nationality. The overall current scenario in Syria presents a dismal picture. The incumbent government is finding it very difficult to cope with the critical economic and socio-political challenges (Akram, 21 Nov 2019).

The Political Solution is the only Way Forward:

Astana Talks:

The decades-old deadly conflict manifests that there can be no military solution for the ongoing conflict. Therefore, the political solution is the only way forward to achieve durable in the region. Though Peace is elusive but alternative to peace is unthinkable. In this context, Iran, Russia, and Turkey recently held talks to find a political solution to the crisis. And these negotiations, the three sides expressed the conviction that there was no military solution to the war and it must be settled through political means. The Russian president has denounced the newly imposed US sanctions, while Turkish president urged for the restoration of peace. Further, the Iranian president asserted that the only solution the Syrian crisis is a political, not a military one. Additionally, the three parties welcomed the United Nations-backed constitutional committee which will be held in August. And they also agreed to hold the next trilateral peace summit on Syria in Iran (G.P.J, 2017).

Conclusion:

The Arab spring brought about various regime changes in middle East and North Africa, however, it turned into Arab winter in Syria. It has halted in Syria due to the intervention of different regional and global powers. The peaceful protests turned into a violent demonstration that rapidly engulfed the entire country. The country was soon caught in a complex web of multifaceted crisis. The emergence of ISIS along with other Jihadist and separatist groups added fuel to fire. The conflict also sparked a sectarian rift in the region.

Similarly, the conflicting global interests in the region have further exacerbated the already worsened situation. It has heightened the tensions between former cold war rivals. The involvement of a conglomeration of rival countries brought all political solutions into a standstill. The crisis has brought its social, political and economic impacts not only in the region but also worldwide. Though it is a complex issue, it could only be solved through a strong political will. Thinking an alternative to a political solution will only bring further destruction. Therefore, it is high time the world community took concerted measures for the restoration of peace and stability in the country. The United nation has to play its due role in the ongoing conflict resolution. Pragmatic political reforms would certainly yield positive changes. Only then peace and prosperity can prevail.

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