



CIVIL WAR IN SYRIA: ORIGINS, DYNAMICS, AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS



Civil War in Syria: Origins, Dynamics, and Possible Solutions

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Introduction

Since its independence from France in 1946, Syria has passed through many periods of political instability. Increasing Arab nationalism fuelled many military coups, until the Syrian Corrective Revolution in 1970 brought the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party and Hafez Al-Assad to power. The new regime was autocratic, one-party, and very totalitarian, meaning that any opposition was to be repressed. The President fully and directly controlled the military and security apparatus, which controlled the public administration including the Baath Party itself, the Council of Ministers, the People's Assembly (the Parliament), the judiciary, all trade unions, the media, and the economy. With Hafez Al-Assad's death in 2000, his son Bashar Al-Assad took office as Syria's leader. Although in the beginning his policies seemed to be progressive and more liberal, in some years became clear that the main features of the regime were to be unchanged. In 2011, protests against the regime started to occur. They were suppressed with the usual violence. It was the beginning of the civil war.

Origins, Structure, and Current Dynamic

When Bashar Al-Assad took office in 2000, there were great hopes he would turn Syria to a new era. Although civil rights and individual freedom continued to be suppressed, the removal of several officials who represented the regime's darkest features, together with some efforts to open the economy, resulted in a progressive outlook. He was able to assert his authority overcoming internal resistance to structural reforms, faced great external pressure, and won considerable foreign regional influence. He became considered a benevolent dictator, one able to promote change at the same time maintaining national unity (International Crisis Group, 2011). There are three factors to understand why his reforms resulted in a civil war.

First, although the regime claimed to be fighting sectarianism, in reality it followed Philip II, king of Macedon (382-336 BC) policy of "divide and conquer" towards the Greek city-states. Since 1963 (the year of the Baath Revolution), the Sunni rural population had been one of the regime's main supporters, including during the "Corrective Movement" and Hafez Al-Assad ascent to power in 1970 and afterwards. As a result, many minority groups as Allawite, Christian, Druze, Tsherkess, Shiite, and secular Sunnis, feared a possible hegemonic Sunni Islamist rule thus, notwithstanding a sense of mutual distrust among these groups, the regime was considered to be a lesser evil (Zisser, 2013).

Second, Al-Assad's economic reforms to promote economic stabilization and strength the private sector resulted in unemployment and income concentration. As they had a significant Neoliberal bias with the main advisors being the International Monetary Fund – IMF and the World Bank, the result was the strengthening of the financial sector

and speculation with real estate at the expense of the real economy. Thus, notwithstanding the fact that investment rates increased from 17 percent of the GDP in 2000 to 23 percent in 2007, private investment was concentrated in short-term or single-deal finance, real estate, and trade. The share of agricultural investment fell from 16 percent in 2000 to 9 percent in 2007, and investment in industry was significantly reduced, making once exporting local firms to change to trading or importing.

Although accordingly to recent official data unemployment rate was 8.1 percent, in 2009 Syrian economists estimated it to be 24.4 percent. In 2010, the poverty rate as a whole was 34.3 percent, while in rural areas it was considered to be around 62 percent. Real wages fell, with nearly 71% of workers earning less than S£13,000 (around USD 274 in 2012), at the same time the average household monthly expenditure with food was approximately USD 295. Finally, severe droughts between 2006 and 2011 resulted in significant losses to farmers and oil revenues decreased 39 percent in 2009 reflecting depleted oil reserves (Matar, 2012). Thus, as Neoliberal policies neglect income distribution and social protection, the Syrian population did not feel developmental and welfare gains, but rather the contrary.

Third, political repression. With the economic problems experienced by the country, such issues as corruption, lack of adequate infrastructure, and the perception that the Baath regime has been privileging the minority Allawite community, some minor protests were already occurring in January 2011. As usual, the security services strongly repressed any sign of dissent. The arrest of a group of young men for spraying anti-regime graffiti in the southern city of Dar'a, followed by the usual violent repression by the security services, sparked a cycle of growing protests. Many were arrested, tortured, and murdered. This resulted in people seeking revenge. Because of the regime brutality suppressing the waves of protest, many people joined the conflict seeking to take personal revenge for the losing family members or destroyed property.

The protests spread first in rural areas and the periphery, including the Jazira region, the agricultural cities of Homs and Hama, and the Northern region of the country. Only at a later stage unrest reached large cities as Damascus and Aleppo (Zisser, 2013). Thus, in contrast to the Arab Spring, which is essentially urban, the Syrian uprising is rooted in the Sunni rural periphery's perception. Thus, it was only later that the conflict expanded with jihadists fighting against the regime's heretical Allawite nature, and its alliance with Shiite Iran and Hezbollah. It also differs from the Arab Spring, as it put together two exceptional dynamics:

First, it has three levels of confrontation:

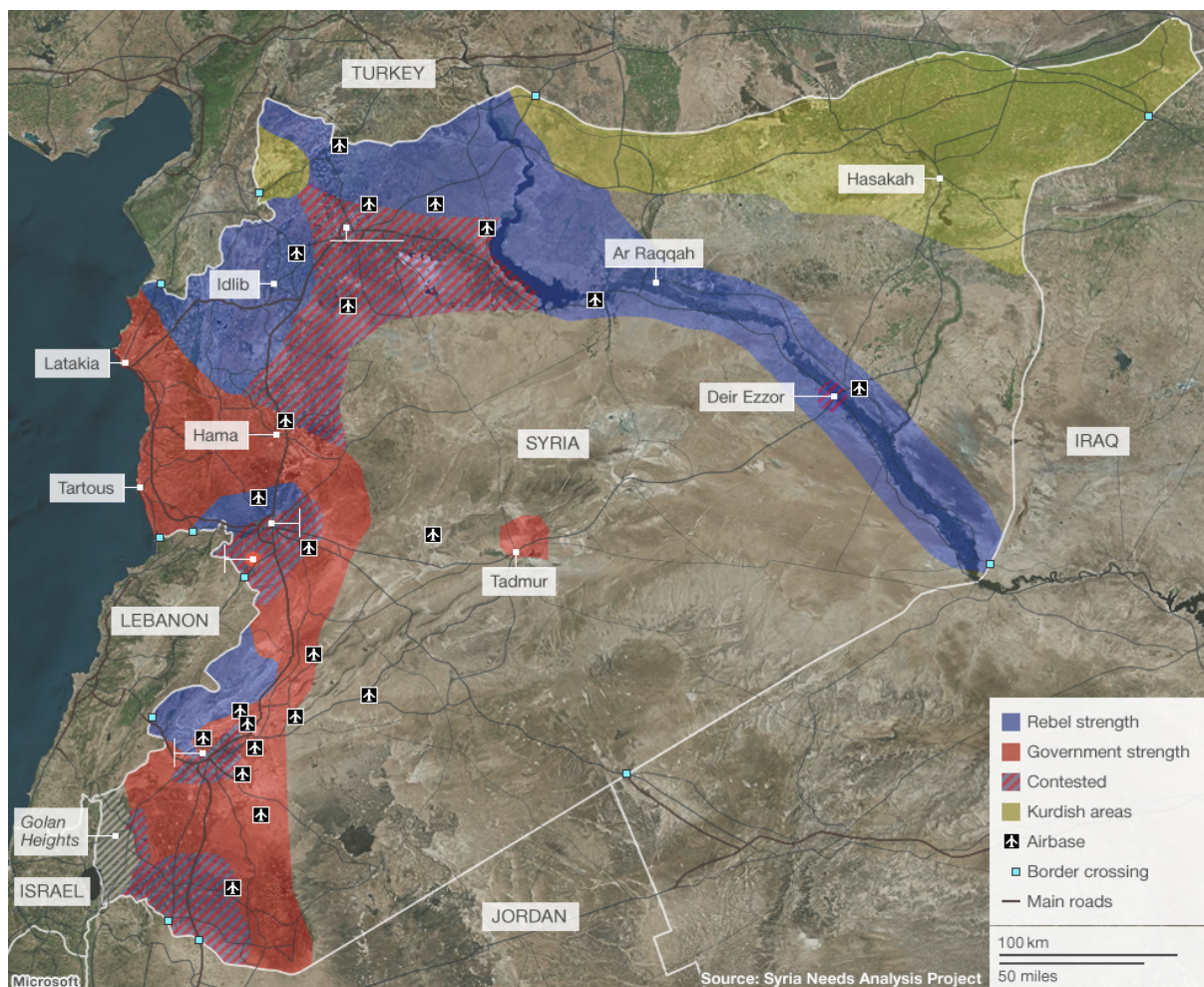
- a. The internal battle between the opposition and the regime;
- b. it has become a regional proxy battleground, in which a group of countries and movements (like the Hezbollah and other political forces around the region - Iran) confront another group of countries, a more conservative one, led by Saudi Arabia. These groups are very heterogeneous. Some are Islamic, some are Leftist, some Nationalist, being impossible to make a clear division among them.

c. Russia/China/Iran *versus* the United States global confrontation, somehow a revival of the Cold War. Although it is not comparable to it, it still is a clash between worldviews, resulting in competition for global hegemony.

These three levels are superimposed, what explains the intensity, the determination, and the violence of the conflict. They are not only intense because of ideological confrontation, but because the local players consider the civil war an existential matter. In other words, it is considered that one side is going to win and the other will disappear from History (Assad family *versus* the Opposition).

Second, the various confrontations capture almost every major confrontation that has gone on in the last 50 years, i.e. the Arab-Israeli conflict is mirrored (although not directly), as the Syrian government has positioned itself as the Arab resistance leader against the Zionist expansion, trying to protect the Arab world from Israel's expansion. There are dimensions of the Iranian-Arab conflict, with Saudi Arabia clearly trying to use this opportunity to push back the Iranian regime. This resulted in many regional actors being against the Assad's regime to reduce Iran's influence in the region.

Figure 1
Map of the Syrian Conflict – June 2013



Source: Syria Needs Analysis Project.

There is some Sunni-Shia confrontation, reflecting also Iran's influence in Syria (Assad family close to Shia). It also echoes a long running confrontation in the Arab world between traditional/conservative Arab monarchies and the Republics (i.e. socialist, nationalist, revolutionary). There is also a fuzzy dimension - not very apparent - a struggle between Islamist nationalists (Muslim Brotherhood, Salafi terrorist groups, fundamentalist Sunni groups, al-Qaeda type groups infiltrated in Syria through Iraq as a consequence of US and British actions) and secular nationalists, who support the regime fearing the establishment of a radical Islamist regime. Finally, local groups have maintained order, while the government is able only use air power, unable to send land force; historically, this is known (Vietnam to the US and Afghanistan to the USSR) to be ineffective to win a battle against a determined nationalist uprising.¹

With death tolls reaching 100,000 and nearly 1.8 million people as refugees in neighboring countries, Syria is divided: the rebels are in control of much of the North and the East, with some regime pockets in those areas. In August 2013, the opposition was able to capture a key airbase in Aleppo province. The regime controls the coastal mountains in the North West, much of the central city of Homs and most of the capital, Damascus. The regime, with direct support of Iran and Hezbollah, has secured the corridor from Homs to Damascus, and recaptured the strategic town of Al Qusayr, near the Lebanese border. In other words, it has the control of key ports to the Mediterranean and Damascus' airport. This is fundamental to ensure supplies to Hezbollah-controlled territories.

Besides the battle between regime and opposition, with extremist jihadists joining both sides, a third front has been being established in the last months. On one hand, the regime allowed Hezbollah forces to enter the country to fight the opposition. On the other, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the military arm of the opposition, also started collaborating with Jihadist groups, although hostility has been increasing since al-Qaeda linked fighters killed Kamal Hamami, commander of the Western-backed FSA supreme military council. The two main jihadist organizations involved in the Syrian conflict are:

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant: umbrella organization of Iraqi insurgent groups. It was established in 2006 and has around 2,500 members. The group is responsible for several car bombs and suicide attacks. In April 2013, it announced the merger with the al-Nusra Front – what was denied by al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri – and added "Levant" to its name, becoming deeply involved in the Syrian civil war.

The Al-Nusra Front: it is an extremist group with deep connections with the al-Qaeda. It has declared allegiance to al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. It was established in 2012, and has around 6,000 members backed by al-Qaeda.

The problem turns to be dual. First, there is the conflict between regime and opposition. Second, as Syrian people are Islamic moderates, now there is a third front, a "war within a war" against jihadist groups. Thus, although the regime has been able to defeat

¹ The Syrian National Coalition is the block recognized by most of the West as the "opposition." It is formed by seven groups: the Muslim Brotherhood, the Syrian National Council, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party, the National Coordination Committee, the Kurdish Supreme Committee, the Kurdish National Council, and grassroots movements (Al Jazeera, 2013).

the opposition in some fronts, the latter has been capable to maintain and win some positions. The outcome is a situation of equilibrium, where both sides are unable to achieve a decisive military victory. With the block led by Russia arming the regime and the United States and its allies supporting the opposition, there is a real risk of Syria becoming the stage of a proxy war between the two blocks. As a result, the only possible solution for the conflict is a diplomatic one. It also needs to be reached fast to avoid two interrelated risks. One, the destruction of infrastructure and industrial/agricultural sectors, capital and human resources flight until a point they turn to be useless, making potential output, thus long-run aggregate supply, to be much less than before the conflict. The result is structural underdevelopment resulting in poverty, unemployment. As there is a strong relationship between income inequality and personal insecurity, and religiosity (Rees, 2009), a radicalization of the until now moderate Syrian society most probably will strength the presence and action of jihadist groups with the obvious consequences.

International Players

The United States

The United States has obvious motives to support the Syrian opposition. First, there is the ideological motive. With the exception of North Korea and Cuba, Syria is the last totalitarian regime in the world. Thus, there is a strong interest to establish a democratic pro-Western values regime, facilitating political and economic dominance. Second, there is the geopolitical question. Assad's regime is aligned with a certain group of countries, including Russia and China, which are against the United States as global hegemon. A friendly, if not aligned, regime in Damascus would strength the American, thus also the Israeli, position not only in the region, but also in the world.

Until now, the debate in Washington has been framed in terms of non-intervening or avoiding an Iraq-style intervention. At present, the United States military's role has been limited to helping deliver humanitarian assistance, and providing security assistance to Syria's neighbors, and nonlethal assistance to the opposition. Also Patriot batteries have been deployed to Turkey and Jordan for strengthening their defense against missile attack. Finally, an operational headquarters and additional capabilities, including F-16s, are positioned to defend Jordan have been established (Dempsey, 2013).

The potential use of U.S. military force in the Syrian conflict considers five non-excluding scenarios (Dempsey, 2013):²

i. **Train, advise, and assist the opposition** using nonlethal forces on tasks such as weapons employment and tactical planning. It is also possible to provide help in the form of intelligence and logistics. The scale can range from some hundred to thousand troops, with estimated costs being US\$ 500 million per year. The positive impact is the opposition's capabilities improvement. The risks are, but not limited to, extremists gaining access to additional capabilities, retaliatory crossborder attacks, and insider attacks or inadvertent association with war crimes resulting of vetting difficulties.

² The five points presented below are a *quasi* reproduction of General Dempsey's letter to Carl Levin, chairman of the United States Senate Committee on Armed Services.

ii. **Conduct limited standoff strikes** using lethal forces to strike selected military targets that enable the regime to carry out military operations, distribute advanced weapons, and defend itself. The main targets are high-value regime air defense, air, ground, missile, and naval forces, including supporting military facilities and command nodes. Stand-off air and missile systems are the logical choice, as they can be used to strike hundreds of targets at the same time. Force requirements include aircraft, ships, submarines, and other enablers. Costs are estimated to be in the billions and the positive impact is the significant deterioration of government capabilities and an increase in desertions. Risks include uncertainty, as the government may be able to cope with limited attacks by dispersing its resources. In the case of retaliatory attacks, there is a real risk for collateral damage affecting civilians.

iii. **Establish a no-fly zone** with lethal force. In this case, the government would be unable to use its military aircraft to bomb and resupply. It would also neutralize rival aircraft on air and on the ground, strike airfields, and supporting infrastructure. In short, it would result in air superiority over Syria, shooting down the regime's advanced, defense integrated air defense system. Costs are estimated to be between US\$ 500 million and US\$ 1 billion per month during one year, mobilizing hundreds of ground and sea-based aircraft, intelligence and electronic warfare support, and enablers for refueling and communications. Positive outcomes are the complete neutralization of the regime's air power, including bombing the opposition. Negative outcomes can include the loss of U.S. aircraft resulting in the need to use recovery forces, and the failure to decrease the regime's action, as it basically uses surface fires (mortars, artillery, and missiles).

iv. **Establish buffer zones** using both lethal and nonlethal force to protect some key geographic areas, mostly across the Turkish and Jordanian borders. These zones can be used to organize and train the opposition, and also can be used as safe areas for distributing humanitarian assistance. It is considered to be necessary thousands of U.S. ground forces, even if stationed outside Syria to physically defend these zones. Also, a limited no-fly zone is needed. The costs are estimated to be over US\$ 1 billion per month. Positive outcomes are the improvement of the opposition's capabilities, the reduction of human suffering, and lifting some pressure off Turkey and Jordan. Negative impacts are similar to item iii.

v. **Control chemical weapons** by using lethal force to prevent their use or distribution to destruct portions of Syria's massive reserves, impeding its movement and delivery. It is indispensable to assure a no-fly zone and air and missile strikes by hundreds of aircrafts, ships, submarines, and other enablers. Taking in consideration also the need of special operations forces and other ground forces to assault and maintain critical positions, costs are estimated to be over USD 1 billion per month. The positive result is the control of some, but not all chemical weapons, and preventing their additional propagation into the hands of extremists. Risks are similar to items i and iii.

The conclusion is that the combined use of all five possibilities would increase the opposition's capacity to put more pressure on the regime. However, two points must be considered. First, changing the balance of military power is not enough. It is also necessary to preserve the basics of a functioning state, otherwise extremist groups can be empowered

and even get access to chemical weapons. Second, since the U.S. loose readiness because of budget cuts and fiscal uncertainty because of the current economic crisis, some options may not be viable without jeopardizing American security elsewhere. Third, American action should be in concert with allies and partners to share the burden and increase the outcome. Finally, whatever the U.S. decision is going to be, allies and partners are expected to share the burden of American actions. (Dempsey, 2013)

The letter is an answer to the critic that Washington position is ambiguous and it has been focusing in Assad itself too much instead of focusing in removing the regime, and that it should make clear that the maintenance of structures of Iranian influence is against American interests. Notwithstanding some political groups pressuring for a more proactive action, it lacks internal political support. Also, because of the economic crisis, the allies and partners do not have enough economic power or internal political support to enroll in operations in Syrian soil.

Russia

Western commentators and pundits usually believe that Russia supports Assad's regime because of two main general ideas. First, that it is a matter of national pride concerning Russia's place in history and its unifying obsession (Nekrasov, 2013). Second, that there is an autocratic solidarity between Putin and Assad. Third, that the Arab Spring can stimulate similar movements inside Russia. Fourth, that Russia has many economic interests, including arms contracts. Fifth, both countries collaborate in the field of defense, including a naval-base and plans for nuclear energy cooperation (Trenin, 2012).

Another line follows the idea that Putin supports Assad for fearing state collapse and the possible "Yugoslavization" of Russia. The logic is that Syria is too similar to Chechnya and Assad's fall would result in four questions. First, who will be responsible for the consequences of the regime collapse? Second, who will fight Sunni extremists? Third, who will avoid Sunni extremists away from Russian peripheral regions with considerable Sunni populations, specially the North Caucasus? Fourth, who will guarantee that chemical weapons will be safe (Hill, 2013)? The author also argues that Syria and Chechnya are not comparable, implicitly concluding that Putin is shortsighted and does not take in consideration broader geopolitical aspects.

Although every commentator and pundit claims to know the real motives, the fact is that there is not a single truth explaining why Russia is standing by Assad's regime. Rather, each factor plays its role. In addition, what seems to be a very strong explanatory factor is Putin's project of rebuilding Russia as a major power and its own security. The *Obzor Vneshney Politiki Rossiskoi Federatzii* (Survey of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation), published by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in March 2007 resumes Russia's three main concerns, which must be understood not only as a critic to the USA and NATO, but the assessment that these policies are dangerous for Russia (Oliker et alli, 2009, p.85):

- i. Foreign states can intervene in Russia's domestic issues;

ii. there is a strong effort to create a unipolar world, with foreign political and economic systems and approaches being forced on third countries;

iii. some states strongly believe in military power as instrument of policy.

As a result, Russia's support for Assad's regime cannot be understood in a simplistic "the real truth is" way. It is true that Russians are nostalgic for the times the Soviet Union was a global player vis-à-vis with the United States. Second, it is to believe that Russia is rather indifferent to which political model one country has. Democracy is a Western necessity, which nowadays comes combined with economic (Neo)liberalism and political alignment with the United States and Europe. Often pundits and annalists are unable to understand that, rather, the issue is with the latter than with democracy itself. The possibility of a Russian Spring is remote, since Putin and its regime have an approval rating of 63% (June 2013) and at this moment there is no sign of internal political or economic problems that can result in strong opposition for the regime.³

Some Middle-East sources and Western diplomats disclosed to the news agency Reuters that Saudi Arabia offered Russia several economic agreements, including a major arms deal and a guarantee to not challenge Russian gas sales in Europe, in exchange of Russia scaling back support for Assad and his regime. Russia's initial answer was inconclusive (Oweis & Bakr, 2013). Finally, the Russian naval facility in Tartus is significant as repair and replenishment spot, but alone would not result in Russia's support in face of the huge international diplomatic pressure. Any of these points alone would not justify Russia's support for Assad's regime. It is their interaction with Russia's strong opposition to the USA becoming the leader of a unipolar world that explains Russia's approach to the Syrian question. As a result, for Russia the only acceptable solution is a diplomatic one, avoiding radical Sunni groups to seize power.

Final Remarks

The Syrian conflict is the result of three factors. First, the regime ceased to unify the Syrian minorities, ceasing to act as a factor promoting stability. Second, unemployment and income concentration as result of the Neoliberal reforms promoted by Assad, fuelled by droughts. Third, the brutal repression of protests. These three factors reduced the loyalty for the regime, expressed first as "voice" and then as "exit" (Hirschmann, 1970). In other words, the regime transformed pacific protests into a civil war.

Russia is backing the regime with weapons and diplomatic support. The United States is not arming the opposition, but has no objections if some country starts doing so, resulting in Syrian rebels becoming frustrated. Also, the opposition is fighting an internal war against jihadist groups, which are using the conflict seeking to turn Syria into a radical Islamist country. The result was the regime achieving some victories. However, there are reports that Sudan has starting to sell Sudanese and Chinese-made arms to Qatar, which organized delivery through Turkey to the opposition (Chivers & Schmitt, 2013). Even if this is true and the United States will also implement some of the options discussed above, none of the sides seen to able to guarantee a decisive military victory. With the conflict be-

³ See <http://www.levada.ru/indeksy>.

ing prolonged indefinitely, the human and economic costs are such, that Syria's level of development and welfare will considerably retrocede, giving ground to radical jihadist groups to gain local support, thus being able to use Syria as a terrorist base. Also, refugees are increasing regional instability.

Russia's support for the Syrian regime is ambivalent (Katz, 2013), the only viable option is a diplomatic one led by the United States and Russia together with an immediate ceasefire. It is clear that Assad and the regime represented by him have lost the mandate to represent the Syrian people. Thus, even in the shadow of the recent chemical attacks, there is no alternative but to form a secular transitional government body with members of the regime, the opposition, and the minorities. The final objective must be the Syrian people leading the political transition by themselves with the help of a multinational transition body.

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