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Syria as a Shatter Belt and the Great Power Competition

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SYRIA AS A SHATTER BELT AND THE GREAT POWER COMPETITION

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Abstract

In geopolitics, the term 'shatter belt' refers to a region that is highly vulnerable to conflicts and is often an arena for great power competition through proxy wars. For more than a decade, Syria has been engaged in a similar unprecedented state of conflict involving domestic and foreign actors – a conflict that has exacerbated the dilapidated political, economic, and social security. As per the Fragile States Index 2021, Syria is one of the world's top three most fragile states, indicating its vulnerability and unsustainability. Using qualitative data through secondary sources, this paper highlights how Syria serves as a shatter belt for major powers, explicating interests of the US, Russia, Iran and Saudi Arabia. In order to understand the dynamics of conflict, the paper applies Amos Tversky's Prospect theory which highlights stakeholders' loss aversion and risk-acceptant behaviour. In addition, the paper highlights that conflict resolution strategies applied to resolve the conflict have failed so far. In this regard, John Burton's Human Needs theory is applied to the case study to emphasize what can be done to resolve this protracted conflict.

Keywords: Shatter Belt, Syrian War, Human Needs Theory, Prospect Theory, Conflict Resolution.

Introduction

The term 'shatter belt' in geopolitics is associated with a region that is highly vulnerable to conflicts and is often an arena for great powers competition who try to achieve their interests through proxy wars.¹ The Middle East fits perfectly into this definition; not only does the region remain most vulnerable, with two of its states in the top three fragile states of the world, but it is also an important centre for great power competition. Even though the traditional neo-realist perspective of geopolitics has been under criticism in the last few years, the case study of Syria reflects adherence to traditionalist geopolitics. From US intervention in Iraq to its reduced military presence in the Middle East and China and Russia stepping in to fill an existing vacuum, the region has seen the world's most devastating wars that proliferated through Arab Spring and continue to haunt the Middle Eastern population.

The Syrian crisis is an imbroglio of multiple actors and one of the most devastating wars of contemporary times. Starting as an insurgency a decade ago, the crisis has become a civil war, religious war, and proxy war. As of June 2022, according to

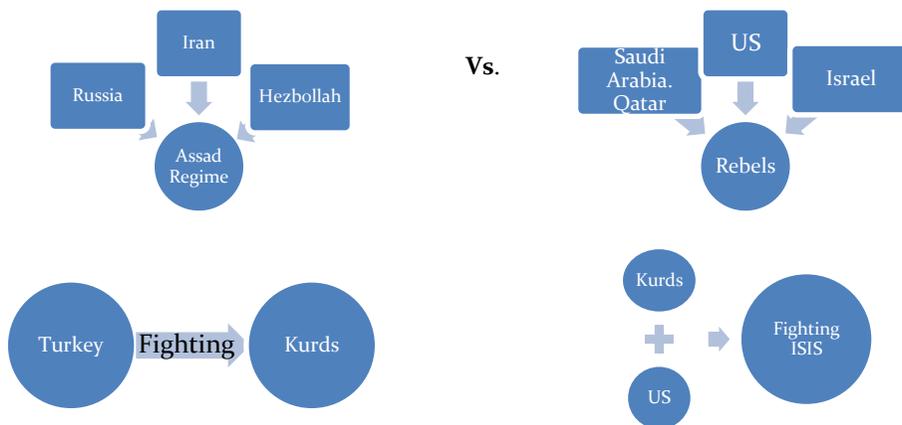
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UN reports, 350,209 deaths have occurred directly from the conflict, of which 143,350 are civilians.² But despite grave human rights violations and using chemical weapons against civilians to suppress insurgencies and uprisings, Bashar al-Assad remains in power. Major conflicting parties to the conflict, their categorization (who’s backing whom), and issues of contention between parties are discussed in this paper.

Adversaries and their Categorization in the Syrian War

The dynamics of the Syrian civil war have evolved in the past few years. With time, foreign powers have become a party to the war, making it a proxy war between the US and Russia and the two regional powers, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Besides, several non-state actors like ISIS, al-Qaeda and Hezbollah have also become a part of this war, giving it another dimension of a religious war. The relationship between warring parties is complex because fighting groups are divided within themselves. The central conflict is between the Assad regime and rebels (Syrian Democratic Front). Bashar al-Assad is an important ally of Russia and belongs to the Alawite community (a branch of Shia Islam). Assad also has support from Iran. On the other hand, the US and its allies like Saudi Arabia and Türkiye support rebellious forces fighting Assad. However, Türkiye’s involvement is even more intricate because Türkiye, despite being a NATO ally, is fighting Kurds in Northern Syria, and Kurds have been fighting along with the US against ISIS.

Figure 1.1: Conflicting Parties in the Syrian War



(Source: Author’s Compilation)

Major Issues in Contention

a) **Identity and Recognition**

According to John Burton, fulfilling basic human needs is the central issue in most protracted conflicts, and such disputes cannot be resolved until basic human needs

are fulfilled.³ For Burton, basic human needs are not material needs like food and shelter; instead, they need to be recognized and identified as a specific group. Such needs are non-negotiable and cannot be traded off, unlike values and interests that can be negotiated to resolve or transform a conflict. Hence, applying Burton's theory, the primary cause of contention, i.e., recognition of identity, is non-negotiable in the Syrian conflict for Sunni Arabs that are not being given due recognition in politics and other platforms. Syria is composed of various ethnic and religious groups; hence it is an ethnoreligious struggle for identity and power between different factions – Sunni Arabs, Alawites, and other minorities, including Christians and Druze – who form religious divisions. The problem is that Syria is ruled by Bashar al-Assad, an Alawite, whereas the Alawite community comprises only a minor percentage of the Syrian population. The Alawite community has enjoyed privileges under Assad, and the Sunni majority faces discrimination, leading to grievances among the Sunni population.

When the uprising began in 2011, Alawites, along with some other minorities, showed their support for the Assad regime because they feared that ousting Bashar al-Assad would threaten their identity and lead to discrimination against them.⁴ At the same time, Sunni Arabs, being in the majority, wanted to be recognized and eliminate discrimination they had faced because of their identity. The Christian community also supported the Assad regime because it feared losing its identity if Sunni Arabs came to power. In 2021, the Syrian government announced that Yazidis would have to refer to Islamic courts for their religious matters. It has raised concerns among Yazidis, claiming that the use of Islamic courts depicts that their religion is a part of Islam.⁵ It also indicates that there is little or no recognition of other identities.

b) **Control of Resources**

Control of resources is another issue between conflicting parties, making agricultural violence a vital part of this crisis. Conflicting parties have been trying to control agricultural fields, crops and harvests. There have been multiple attempts by opposing parties to deny other party access to agriculture.⁶ Climate change also exacerbated the crisis because of the degradation of natural resources. It is well documented that the drought of 2007-2010, which resulted in the loss of agricultural land and water resources and severe food insecurity, was one of the significant causes of the 2011-uprising – Arab Spring. The degradation of natural resources also became a cause of conflict and terrorism.⁷ Water shortages dilapidated economic conditions, thus indirectly becoming a cause of the conflict. According to the World Food Programme report, as of July 2022, about 12 million people in Syria are food insecure, and almost 2.5 million are severely food insecure. It shows the intensity of the conflict and the devastation it has caused over the years.⁸

In addition, the US had most of the oil-rich areas in its control, leaving behind fewer resource-rich areas for the Assad regime. Al-Tanf military garrison, which neighbours important land routes to Iran, had been under US control.⁹ In 2021, Bassam Toma'a, the Syrian Oil Minister, said, "The Americans and their followers are acting like pirates as they are targeting the Syrian oil wealth and oil supplies."¹⁰ At one point in

time, the excessive involvement of the US in Syria was primarily defined by its objectives to secure Syrian oil. Even after President Trump decided to withdraw troops from Syria in 2021, the US administration made clear that some forces might stay there for oil.¹¹ It is argued that regime change and stability in the region were merely tools for major powers to justify their involvement in the conflict. The crisis was primarily due to the energy pipeline politics.¹²

The control of resources can be theorised using Amos Tversky's Prospect theory, which argues that when an individual chooses between two options that provide him with the prospects of gains, one tends to select the option that offers less loss as compared to the other. In other words, fear of loss has a more significant impact on one's psychology than the impact that gains can leave on one's mind. The fear of loss makes states act in a certain way. From this assumption, one can argue that the crisis did not attract major powers only because of its security implications or because of fears of spillover effects that the situation may cause later. Instead, the energy factor had much to do with the conflict because parties feared losing rich oil reserves to their adversaries. Thus, the control of resources has been a critical factor in defining crisis dynamics.

Interests of Competing States – the US

a) Diplomatic Interests

US intervention in the conflict occurred when Assad allegedly used chemical weapons on protestors in 2013, killing around 1400 people.¹³ Some US interests had humanitarian grounds like the removal of the Assad regime and its replacement by a legitimate and democratic government that is not oppressive towards its nationals, rebuilding the state to help achieve peace and prosperity, and the safe return of refugees back to Syria. In comparison, other objectives were more political and diplomatic, for instance, the removal and complete neutralization of al-Qaeda and ISIS and the containment of Russia and Iran. The US has been directly involved in the war against ISIS in northern Syria.¹⁴ Because Russian and Iranian governments have backed Bashar al-Assad, the US wanted to limit the influence of Iran and Russia in the region by supporting rebels.¹⁵

b) Security Interests

The US had some security interests in the conflict. Syria borders Türkiye on one side and Israel on the other. Strategically, Israel is one of the most important allies of the US, and Türkiye being a NATO member, is also a military ally of the US. Hence, containing the Syrian war was in the US interest because of the spillover effects it could have on the region and the havoc it could cause, because of which the US could have been forced to be a part of the conflict to help its allies.¹⁶ Syria is known to have one of the world's largest chemical weapons stockpiles and the largest stockpile in the Middle Eastern region. This grave security concern also attracted the US into the conflict because the control of these weapons by terrorist groups would have caused colossal

havoc and devastation.¹⁷ Another study mentioned five core interests of the US in the region, including mitigating the refugee crisis and its implications, terrorist threat, excessive violation of human rights, Russia's stronghold in Syria, and Iran's expansion towards the western side.¹⁸

Interests of Competing States – Russia

At President Bashar al-Assad's request, Russia intervened in the conflict in 2015¹⁹ when it directly conducted airstrikes on rebel groups protesting against the Assad regime. Even though Russia claimed air strikes were meant to target ISIS, US officials stated that air strikes conducted by Russia attacked non-ISIS rebels.²⁰ Since Russia's intervention in the conflict, not only has Putin provided the Assad regime with artillery and armament but also given full support on the international level.

a) Diplomatic Interests

The diplomatic and cultural ties between Syria and Russia date back to the Cold War era. Even though relations became a little tense for a few years, both states mostly have remained close allies. A bilateral treaty on military cooperation was signed in 1980.²¹ Russia has good relations with the Middle Eastern states based on the religious aspect. Russian orthodox religion allows it to become integrated into the Muslim world better than the West, which is why Russia took it as a fair chance to unite Muslim states against NATO and the US.²² On the other hand, some scholars argue that despite cultural and historical ties with Syria, Russia has been backing Assad's government because, for Russia, the status quo seems to be less chaotic as compared to a deadly regime change like other Arab states. Where close friendship with Assad might be one of the reasons, maintaining a presence in global diplomacy through the Middle East and containment of western powers were key objectives behind Russia's intervention in the Syrian war.²³

b) Strategic Interests

Considering that Russia is not a part of the Middle East, it was initially the only state to militarily become a party to the conflict when it conducted air strikes on rebels; the US intervened afterwards. Other states which were a part of the conflict either directly or indirectly were all Middle Eastern states like Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkiye. One of the significant objectives of Russian foreign policy towards Syria was to contain the US and western powers in the region. Russia, as mentioned earlier, aimed to unite Muslim states of the region against NATO and the US. It is also noteworthy that Russia's military had been facing a slight downfall for some time, which is why ensuring its presence militarily in the conflict aimed at signalling the West that the Russian army was still capable. The fear of the Islamist revolution and NATO's expansion towards the East encouraged Russia to maintain its regional presence.²⁴

From the geostrategic point of view, Syria is vital to Russia. Maintaining its naval and aerial presence in Syria has been essential for its strategic interests.²⁵ Prospect

theory is again helpful in explaining Syria's significance to Russia. Beyond the territory of the former Soviet Union, Tartus is Russia's only military base in Syria, given that Syria is the only ally of Russia in the Middle Eastern region. Hence, preventing the fall of the Assad regime has been essential to Russia because the fall of the Assad regime and the installation of a pro-western government will deprive Russia of its only military base in Syria. The base is strategically and geopolitically important to Russia because it allows Russia access to deep water ports.²⁶ And as per Prospect theory, Russia's fear of losing its only ally in the Middle East encouraged it to keep supporting Bashar al-Assad.

Interests of Competing States – Iran and Saudi Arabia

As the US left a vacuum in the region after the Iraq war, Iran took it as a fair opportunity to fill the void. Syria acted as an arena for a proxy war between the US and Russia and between the two regional powers, Saudi Arabia and Iran. As mentioned earlier, Assad belongs to the Alawite community, an offshoot of Shiite Islam, and the rebels fighting against the Assad regime are Sunni Arabs. The religious Shia-Sunni divide has always been a bone of contention between Shiite Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia, which is why both countries are engaged in a proxy war in Syria. Iran's involvement in Syria highlights Iran's quest for regional hegemony.²⁷ Iran and Syria have multiple points of convergences in their objectives; for instance, the containment of Israel and the US in the region. Syria also has geostrategic importance for Iran because it serves as a major route for Iran to deliver arms to Iran's allies in the Middle East, like Hezbollah, Lebanon and Iraq.²⁸

For Saudi Arabia, the primary aim was to contain the growing Iranian influence in the region. Saudi Arabia has been directly involved in the conflict, with its troops on the ground and armament being supplied to Syrian rebel groups.²⁹ But after the intervention of Russia into the conflict, Saudi Arabia's strict stance towards the Assad regime changed. Saudi Arabia approached Bashar al-Assad and assured him the support if he agreed to cut off its ties with Iran.³⁰ Using Prospect theory, it can be argued that when Saudi Arabia wanted to retain its hegemony over the Middle East, the fear of losing power and influence in the region made it a direct party to the conflict. At the same time, the fear of losing a chance to gain influence in the region also prompted Iran to jump into the conflict.

Conflict Resolution Efforts

Various attempts have been made to resolve the Syrian crisis and mediate between conflicting parties. However, so far, all efforts have been unsuccessful mainly because of the involvement of foreign actors exploiting the conflict and changing nature of the conflict that altered the interests of the powers involved.

a) Mediation by Arab League

Mediation by Arab League was one significant effort back in 2011. The League has a non-interventionist policy, so initially, it refrained from investigating the matter,

considering it a domestic issue. But with time, when things got worse, the League finally had to mediate the issue. The League asked for a ceasefire and encouraged parties to dialogue while simultaneously suggesting the withdrawal of weapons and armament.³¹ However, the mediation was a failure for several reasons. The Assad government took it as an effort dominated by Saudi Arabia and Qatar and refused to comply with the agreed terms. The League also made a second attempt in December 2011, when Assad's government agreed to send a monitoring group to Syria by the Arab League. However, the Monitoring Mission Group (MMG) failed because the group was insufficiently equipped to resolve the dispute.³²

b) Geneva Negotiations

The UN also played an important role in mediation efforts. A round of talks (Geneva Talks) was held between conflicting parties from 2012 to 2017. Conflict transformation was given more importance in these talks than conflict resolution; therefore, expected to bear fruit, unlike previous efforts by the Arab League. At the end of the negotiations, the parties agreed to form a transitional government where all parties could be inclusively represented.³³ However, these talks were an absolute failure mainly because of the veto powers; the US and Russia had opposing interests. It also made it clear that the Syrian war is not a conflict that can be resolved through negotiations anytime soon.³⁴

c) Astana Talks

The UN-mediated Geneva talks were a failure, so the Astana talks were later held in 2015 and consisted of nine rounds of negotiations to resolve the conflict.³⁵ It also had some positive aspects, but it failed because the Syrian government refused to participate in the conference. Russia and Türkiye agreed on a ceasefire and decided to establish de-escalating zones, but the panel did not include all conflicting parties. For instance, Assad refused to attend the conference and was represented by Bashar Jaafari; likewise, the Syrian Democratic Council was not invited because of Türkiye's objection.³⁶ The process again failed to bear fruit and is often criticized for extending the period of the Assad regime.³⁷

Current Scenario

The war in Syria is a protracted conflict exacerbated by the involvement of more and more actors. The deadly war has killed more than 300,000 people since its eruption³⁸ and displaced hundreds of thousands. Despite the defeat of ISIS and al-Qaeda in Syria, the US presence in Syria remains. The Obama administration refrained from getting directly involved in the conflict, but the Trump administration did not. After getting militarily involved in the conflict, Trump conducted airstrikes in Syria and later decided to withdraw troops from Syria – a highly appreciated decision throughout the US. The Biden administration was expected to withdraw completely from Syria, as it did from Afghanistan, but this has not been the case yet.

ISIS has been defeated and no longer controls any territory in the state. President Assad has successfully established its stronghold in the state and regained the territory captured by ISIS through Russian and Iranian support. However, even though Assad has regained control of important cities previously captured by ISIS, most of the territory is still under the control of rebel groups. Realizing that the regime change is not likely to occur in Syria because of continuous support from Russia and Iran, Saudi Arabia has also stepped back and changed its policy towards Syria. Saudi Arabia is now more focused on engaging with Assad rather than opposing him.³⁹ On the other hand, Russia and Iran have escalated their attacks in Syria, giving strong signals in support of Assad. Some of the attacks by Russia and Iran in June 2022 were referred to as 'provocative' and 'escalatory' by the US.⁴⁰

Despite several mediation efforts to end this deadly conflict, the conflict is still going on, with the same issues of identity, recognition and control of resources. Application of Prospect theory also suggests that Bashar al-Assad's fear of losing power has not allowed him to decentralize or share his power with rebellious groups. Every conflict resolution has also been unsuccessful because the war got increasingly complex with the involvement of multiple actors, which has exacerbated Assad's fear even more. However, acknowledging the identity of opposing parties and recognizing them on multiple platforms might help the conflict transform and reduce the devastation it has been causing for a decade. At the same time, equitable distribution of resources without foreign involvement and the use of lethal weapons by the Assad regime are key concerns that need to be addressed to transform the conflict.

Conclusion

The great power competition has been quite evident in some conflicts worldwide, and the Middle East is an important region to witness. The case study of Syria as a 'shatter belt' within the Middle East highlights how great powers have exploited a decade-long conflict for their motivations and interests. The major causes of the conflict have been figured out using John Burton's Human Needs theory, in which recognition and identity are non-negotiable needs of human beings. The research argues that the control of resources by conflicting parties, Russia's support for the Assad regime, and Iran-Saudi Arabia's struggle for power can be explained through Prospect theory, which suggests that the fear of loss motivates states to do what they do. The Prospect theory identifies the fear of losing power and territory by Bashar al-Assad as the major reason all conflict resolution efforts have failed to bear fruit.

In addition, previous mediation efforts have been unsuccessful because the parties are unwilling to recognize their adversary's identity. Sunni Arabs want recognition and a Sunni regime to rule the state because the Sunni population is the majority. The Alawite regime is not ready to back off because, being in the minority, the community fears their identity will be threatened if the Sunni regime takes over. This dilemma has continued for over a decade now, and the stubborn approach of both

parties to strictly exclude any identity that is not like theirs' has led to one of the most devastating wars of contemporary times.

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