

THE SYRIAN CRISIS AND THE CONTOURS OF EMERGING ORDER IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Abstract

The Syrian crisis is quite important for Middle Eastern Security dynamics because it has gradually transformed the entire regional order. There are many regional states involved. Moreover, the crisis has seen how foreign involvement became a new norm for the semantics. The placement of Turkey and Iran and the formation of a triffecta between Russia-Turkey-Iran are of large value. The added plunge of China in Syria is going to have certain impacts for both Middle East and China. Furthermore, non-state actors have a role to play as well. All in all, the regional order and the security milieu give an insight as to the multiple impacts for the region due to the lingering Syrian Crisis.

Keywords: Non-State Actors, Emerging Order, Middle East Dynamics, Syrian Crisis.

The international order at all times, remains highly elusive. Similarly, the regional order is no different because it is something which cannot be at one time calculated as a whole and is abstract. Middle East is a valid example because its regional order is full of significant cracks and craters and is manifest in a war without end. This is largely because of various wars and conflicts. The Syrian crisis is no doubt one which is highly intricate and important for the region. And because of the high stakes, it has become equally important for the international realm as well. Thus the international order and the regional order become somewhat tangled in the realm of Syria.

The Syrian crisis has given birth to a series of important features and is responsible for transforming the regional order and with it, perhaps, the international order as well. Its history shows how complex all the actors involved in it have been and going further it will be noticed that though the dynamics greatly changed, the complexity remains obscure. The US remains an involved state but new actors like Russia and China have also become involved. Not only that the regional actors like Israel, Iran, Turkey and KSA have greater stakes and have fairly used non-state actors. The inception and spread of the armed non-

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state actors is another phenomenon which has grown steadily after the Syrian crisis. All in all, the quest for the transformation of security regime and the regional order has manifold impacts which will be insightful. Therefore, this paper looks into the Syrian crisis through the role of state and non-state actors involved and the emerging regional order in the region due to the lingering crisis and conflicting interests of the actors involved.

Role of State Actors

- **Iran:** Initially, Iran sought out to support logistically the Assad's regime, which had deep rooted history with Iran as a chief ally in the region. Iran soon took a more hammering role and entering militarily in the conflict alongside the Syrian forces. In 2013, Iran met with other pro-Assad states in Doha as 'Friends of Syria' and this turned out to be mainly a bid to supply ammunition to the regime and the pro-regime factions.¹ This also marked the active support of Iran politically, logistically and strategically.
- **KSA:** The inherent antagonism of the KSA towards a secular and Ba'athist regime in the conflict impelled the Saudis to join the communiqué of Assad opposition alongside Turkey, Jordan and the Western states. Another factor was that with a weakened Syria, the KSA figured that the time would be perfect to instigate instability or at least aim to blunt Iran's growing influence. Under its influence, the Arab League suspended the Syrian government.² It has many stakes for the anti-Assad rebels and to this end it has supplied military and economic aid to many of the insurgent groups. They also joined US-led forces for the ground attacks in Syria as well.
- **Israel:** The role, which Israel has played in the crisis, is one which can be called highly 'watchful.' Israel for that matter never got along with the Assad's regime as it always saw in it, a strategic and military competitor for influence in the region. As soon as the Syrian conflict came on the surface, Israel plunged into hope for a diminishing influence of Assad in the state. At one end, Israel wished an end to the regime, but at the same time it was highly unsure and somewhat troubled at the concept of a government which could take over as one being more hostile towards Israel. Thus, its role in the conflict has been watchful as to how it could leverage the situation to its cause.

- **Turkey:** Initially, Turkey sought out to have a very strong and monochromatic policy towards the Syrian crisis; helps the rebel groups to gain control and power in a bid to get rid of Assad's regime whilst hitting at the ISIS for security purpose in the region. That is why it was quick to group together with other oppositional states and supply armament to the rebel forces.³ It also formed the Syrian National Council in 2011 with the aim of getting rid of Assad without showing signs of support to ISIS and the likes.
- **US:** When the initial shades of conflict emerged in Syria, of course the US under President Obama was well aware of the looming dangers. Yet the motivating force of the then Obama Doctrine was the bid to not use any force within Middle East. But of course, this form of idealism was short-lived and very soon the US began to embroil in various textures of the conflict. In 2013, after the growing use of force by the Assad's regime towards the demonstrators and the rebels came on surface along with the question of use of biological and chemical weapons, both the US and the UN began to take keen interest in the crisis.⁴ The quest for the global war on terrorism made the case quite simple for the US, to get rid of ISIS at all costs. Thus, Turkey, France and KSA motivated or rather forced US to streamline its cause for the military incursion.
- **Russia:** Russia and Syria had always been strong allies in all major realms building bridges between soft and hard powers. Syria had high stakes for the Russians because of trading, political and other reasons which included to stop the propagation of terrorism within any Russian zone of influence. When the crisis began, it was a cause of major alarm for the Russians because not only did it mean weakening of the regime but also the birth of active Islamist factions. In the initial phases, Russia had all the logistical and political backing for Assad. Moreover, it was the core state to make the bid for no-military intervention in Syria after the chemical weapons fiasco in 2013.
- **China:** When the Syrian crisis began, China was the most neutral state of all. Having economic interests in and out of the region which it had to look out for, it remained elusive and largely invisible. It only became somewhat visible on the whole idea of military interventions by the West. Not only would that disrupt the Middle Eastern non-existent stability for economic prowess of the Chinese to influence but also would make the US become a focal state within the region.

Involvement of Non-State Actors

- **Free Syrian Army:** The major role within Syria when talking about the non-state actors largely was put forth by the Free Syrian Army. This was the armed rebel group which leaped in the conflict. Had they not been so active against the Assad's regime, the conflict might have died down. These armed rebels were active in instigating the crisis and standing up as an armed opposition to the regime which made the regime arm up as well. The faction was then militarily supported by the US-led alliances and mostly by Turkey which only complicated the situation.
- **ISIS/IS:** It was another faction with its own interests and aims which thrusts its existence in Syrian crisis and emerged to be a part of the framework in 2014. This entity was not just a common insurgent but was at one time an active part of al-Qaeda and its very existence in Syria meant alarm bells for the region as well as for the West. The basic aim of ISIS was, and perhaps will always be, to ouster the secular government of Assad and enforce a radical version of Islamic government and also to eradicate Assad and expel Western powers from the region.⁵
- **Al-Nusra:** Initially, the Al-Nusra Front had been a part of al-Qaeda as well, and when the ISIS detached itself from al-Qaeda, Al-Nusra came into existence in 2011 and entered Syrian crisis in 2014.⁶ "In late July 2015, Al-Nusra expanded its operations against US backed forces and attacked the US-trained Division 30 (D30) in the town of Azzaz, kidnapping seven of its fighters."⁷
- **Hezbollah:** This was perhaps one earlier faction which had an active part throughout the history of the crisis. Hezbollah was, and still is, heavily pro-Assad and it was one non-state actor, which was armed to protect and aid the Assad's regime. It had the aid from Iran and a heavy military and logistical participation in the Syrian war.
- **NATO:** Just like the armed insurgents which made up the non-state actors league, the NATO was another non-state actor of a different sort which had major stakes in the crisis. France and Germany were the other primary powers which had great influence in the Syrian conundrum and weighed heavily under the pretext of NATO.
- **UN:** The role of UN had been somewhat blurry throughout the Syrian conflict because its main job initially was to prevent an actual war

within Syria and it failed in that. In terms of mediation and sponsoring negotiations, it had a role in brokering various chemical weapons resolutions, monitoring various ceasefires and peace deals.⁸

- **Kurds:** The Kurds were really not a part of the conflict dynamics but were made to be, because of their own political and military impacts which they saw on the horizon as how ISIS is taking power in the crisis. Moreover, the aggression from Turkey prompted them, which was further aggrandized by various international and regional actors approaching them for help.
- **Others:** The Syrian crisis was not just subject to these non-state actors but it turned out to be a vast web of convoluted actors with various interests. The crisis saw that there had been various pro- and anti-Assad non-state armed groups which had their own interests within the conflict.

Contemporary Security Regime in Middle East

The contemporary security regime in the region is dictated largely by five factors: proliferation of the conflict dynamics, Russian entry into the entire war arena with its own set of agenda, setback to the position of US dominance in the region, formations of new alliances between Russia-Turkey and other actors, the state versus non-state actors and finally the non-state versus non-state actors. An in-depth analysis will give an insight of the contemporary security dynamics of the region.

Proliferation of the Conflict

It looks pretty simple as to how the crisis was only manifested within Syria because of the actors involved and the objectives of the various actors. The Syrian crisis began spreading out to other states as well and it soon entered Libya and Iraq. These were not separate conflicts even though some analysts believe them to be, but they were all a part of larger control and influence. The structure and the system within the region was wrought with intricacies and it also became a motivating factor.

Moreover, it was a larger race for power which took its roots and very soon Mosul in Iraq was captured by ISIS in 2014 in a bid of an assassination attempt on Maliki in Mosul.⁹ Soon it had not only Mosul but Fallujah and other cities came under its control. It was in 2015 that ISIS formally took control of

some areas of Sinai Peninsula and the Libyan city-Sirte which was also the throttlehold of Qaddafi. Moreover, Libyan city Derna for a short amount of time also came under ISIS influence. It also began to nurture itself in Benghazi, Ajdabiya, Misrata and etc.¹⁰ This gave all the active states in Syria an opening to enter Iraq as well and Libya was not very far behind as ISIS out-paced and out-manuevered the militarily strong state actors regionally as well as internationally.

Russian Entry in Syrian Crisis

Russia had always stayed out of the region for its volatility and war culture. Yet in 2015, there was a radical change in Russian policy towards Syrian crisis and Middle East. Perhaps there was a consideration that their long-standing ally needs more than just logistical support or maybe it was some other politically motivated reason. Whatever the case was, Russia after careful deliberations finally entered into the foyer of Middle East and Syria served as the entry point. For Russia, an entry in Syria served as a mean for an entry into Middle Eastern affairs, because the Syrian crisis is a focal crisis upon which depends much of Middle Eastern fate.

Russia made an entry by moving beyond the logistic support and striding ceremoniously on the pretext of military intervention. "Over the course of two weeks, Kremlin commenced a major military intervention into the brutal four-and-a-half-year-old conflict, deploying thousands of troops, breaking ground on a new air base in Latakia, and dispatching an array of heavy war material (including tanks and fighter aircrafts) to the Syrian theater."¹¹ Russia propelled its way by moving its troops within Syria and perhaps even branching out some necessary means of hurling massive air-strikes.

In the first place, there were some clear military achievements for Russia. These came in the face of blocking the grim defeat which the Assad's regime was about to face at the hands of US-led forces and particularly ISIS. It was also an add-on that because of the military intervention, the siege of Aleppo by the Jahabat-al-Sham and its affiliates was mainly diminished.¹² Moreover, the Russian forces made progresses in diminishing the ISIS and its affiliates from Syria. In the second place, Russia achieved some political gains as well. In the Geneva Peace Talks held in 2016, President Putin embraced the idea of being able to hold a ceasefire successfully in February 2016 brokered between all the participants of the crisis.¹³

Impediments to US Dominance in Middle East

In the backdrop of a broken Syria and an addition of another power-broker in the shape of Russia within the crisis, the US power has faltered to a great extent. The US may have initiated the entire fabric of war to topple ISIS in the region, yet it had many failures which out-grew the achievements. This ultimately led to a change in the security equation in which the US no longer was the lone protector. The US role was thwarted towards the assembly of Syrian Opposition and establishing safe-zones and has to some extent isolated Raqqah for ISIS.¹⁴ Yet, somewhere along the line failed to up-hold its position in the area despite its many military incursions.

It took President Obama a fair amount of time to actually enter the crisis state. But as per the same idea, there was seen to be on the surface a US foreign policy which seemed to be getting nowhere. At one time, there were careful steps taken and at other time the US tried to supersede its own power in the conflict. While at one time, President Obama wanted to re-balance at the other there was seen that he wanted US to stay committed to Middle East.¹⁵ Moreover, the US considered ISIS and its elimination to be the ultimate goal to resolve the conflict but ISIS had only been a symptomatic feature of a larger issue of turbulence to be dealt with.

Another factor happens to be the US-led forces and the direct arming of forces opposed to the regime, simultaneously warding off ISIS. This was perhaps a paradox for the US policymakers and one which cost them substance. "That the endeavor ended in a fiasco in which, for example, the US-trained rebels surrendered equipment to al-Qaeda-linked Al-Nusra Front in exchange for safe passage, was as much a result of the administration's fecklessness as it was bad luck."¹⁶ Moreover, it was a decision which spread crisis instead of curbing it.¹⁷ Then, the debacle of US-led NATO forces and certain instable moments within it weakened the entire resolve for the conflict. As claimed by some analysts, "Policy inconsistencies, intermittent support for the rebels, confused messaging, and the absence of strong international leadership have contributed to this protracted conflict and allowed space for regional and international actors to rip the country apart."¹⁸

Role of Russia-Turkey-Iran Trifecta

The troika between Turkey, Russia and Iran is actually one prompted by not just political motives, as claimed by many, but is in fact a politico-security alliance. This is due to the fact that all the states have individual interests which are similar, yet varied. It can be said that it was security which built the political need for them to get together and this political need further escalated in making certain security changes in Syria and the region. The states came to a point where all of these began intersecting and the one common goal emerged; peace and stability in Syria with minimum damage to their own power. The idea behind growing Russia-Iran ties was obviously grounded within the mutual need to secure the Assad's regime. This largely manifested itself into out-maneuvering the US in the war.

Then there is the Turkey-Russia alliance, which has seen its fair share of ups and downs but in the post-2016 coup in Turkey, Russia and Turkey have only grown close. What started as diplomatic rapport between them further aggrandized to a military affinity.

State Actors versus Non-State Actors

The Syrian conflict may go deep and becomes entangled in various complexities but largely it is about power; this is the dictate of the international system. Yet there is a slight addition in this aspect, especially in the current century which has seen a rise in many armed non-state actors. This has come to dictate the newly emerged security dynamics of Middle East because the Syrian crisis is mainly a battle fought between state and armed non-state actors.

First of all, for the US, the chief armed non-state actors, which are also their foremost enemy, is the ISIS in the crisis. It was ISIS which roped the US into the Syrian crisis and steadily warding off ISIS became an active part of the global war on terror. The US actually has formed a milieu of strategies and policies in the Middle East and Syria to topple ISIS,⁹ Al-Nusra Front and al-Sham with their many affiliates and splinters. The main idea is to stop the proliferation of the ISIS and their ideology in Europe, Middle East and even Afghanistan.

For Russia, ISIS and Al-Nusra Front like branches pose a threat to not just the Assad's regime and their Middle Eastern interests but if these strands of extremist ideologies are not taken care of the Caucuses and the Central Asian region will become highly vulnerable to them. This is not in the interest of the

Russians since both these regions are the direct Russian influence zones. This will heavily undermine the Russian presence in these areas.

Thirdly, for Turkey warding off Kurds gains primary position rather than ISIS. In fact, initially Turkey started off by hitting the ISIS in Syria when it joined the conflict. But with time when Ankara noticed that many states are using the Kurd forces as their proxies; this meant trouble. For Turkey, Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG) (Kurdish People's Defense Unit) and the importance given to it meant that Turk interests are being played with. Thus it began hitting the Kurds more than it hit the ISIS. For Iran of course, keeping ISIS away and out of the region and Syria is the main objective. For this purpose, it has used its own proxies and military scrimmages to ward off not just the ISIS but all Sunni-led militias which challenge Iran-led dominance within the region. This includes Al-Nusra, Ahrar-al-Sham and the multitude of splinter groups which are active in Syria and Iraq.

Non-State Actors versus Non-State Actors

The contemporary security structure is multi-featured. It not only sees states opposing other states politically and diplomatically, but states fighting non-state actors militarily. Moreover, another somewhat new feature of this security scheme happens to be the various non-state actors fighting other non-state actors militarily as well. This is either in a way via which states utilize various non-state actors as their proxies or interestingly the intra ideological and power struggles between all of them.

There is Hezbollah, a predominantly Shi'a group which served the purpose of being pro-Assad and is unwavering in their fight against Sunni militias of ISIS and Al-Nusra Front.²⁰ This is followed by Kurds which are also being utilized as a proxy by the US who try to underscore ISIS majorly.²¹ On the main turf, al-Qaeda splinter groups also do not get along among themselves and the Syrian crisis saw how ISIS and Al-Nusra, which is just another name for al-Qaeda, have major power struggles among themselves which have taken somewhat of a small level military shape. Then the Free Syrian Army (FSA) also has major power struggles with not only the ISIS but also Hezbollah and other factions. This is a power struggle wherein the ISIS and the FSA are at the opposite ends. For the FSA, ISIS is the only other side of Assad's regime. Finally, there is a lot of hue about how ISIS has become somewhat internally weak leading to a two way split. This means that perhaps there is going to be a second

ISIS in Syria and Iraq which will automatically mean that there might follow an armed opposition between the two factions.

Chinese Military Incursion

Though China had a mild involvement in the Syrian crisis, as of 2016 this began to change. Exactly what motivated this move is unsure but the strategic and security plan of the crisis and the region has changed drastically. China now plans to have an open military incursion in the Syrian crisis.²² This it aims to do by aligning itself with the Russian-led bloc which means that China supports the Assad government.

It does so because of many reasons; firstly, it wants to out-pace the US in the region, both economically and politically and now militarily. Moreover, China also sees in the region an economic haven whereby it can expand its fiscal and trading might and sees in Assad a proponent which might support it. Lastly, it is for the sake of economic stability that it perhaps has moved in the military game, considering what it can achieve with its arms market and oil gains by aligning with Iran and Russia.

Emerging Order in Middle East

There are six fluctuations which contribute to an emerging regional order in Middle East. In fact these fluctuations make up the new order for the region. A further in-depth breakdown will give an insight into the new regional order which are in the succeeding paragraphs.

Anchorage for Foreign Involvement

There is no doubt that the emerging regional order is one marked with a heavy influx of foreign involvement. Initially, there was only one foreign power which had involved itself in the regional power-politics. In fact, the US had managed to be a visible power with certain capabilities to vouch for. The new regional order seems to embrace multi-polarity in terms of foreign power meddling. Not only has Russia begun to militarily weigh in but now China is also profoundly involved.

This makes the region a key one in terms of power determination and political leverages for the external actors. Because each actor which gets involved comes in with their own sets of interests, policies, agenda and alliances. These then either go through a clash or combine together as was seen with Turkey and

Russia. Even though the regional power politics is itself rigorous, but with each regional power being powerful and dependent on foreign actors, the state of affairs becomes largely unpleasant.

Arena of Russian Clout

The most atypical situation which has occurred and contributed to the shifts in the regional order of Middle East is the Russian presence in the Syrian crisis. This has given Russia a sort of validated supremacy to guide certain dynamics of the region as well. Moreover, it has turned the usual US dominated crisis-prone region somewhat of an arena marred by Russian clout. In terms of Syria, the region is no longer an asymmetrical zone of external powers.

First, Russia is being somewhat of a goliath as it has successfully managed to create politico-military alliances with Turkey and Iran, which are two powers having a lot of influence in the region. It perfectly glided within all the loopholes by previous hegemony within the region. And if that is not enough, Russia has managed to keep close to Israel as well. This is indeed very strange for one external power to perfectly manage relations with certain odd states, which do not get along that well, at the same time in a region where alliances are highly precarious and vulnerable.

Second, the old regional order was one where it was understood quite well that the US interests prevail and then things take place. This had created asymmetry in the system because the regional states could either form alliances with the US or be left alone.²³ With Russian clout, regional states are given another option; even though it is surprisingly a crude one.

Neo-Ottomanism versus Persian Supremacy

The entire region is complex because of the fact that it was multi-layered and inter-connected to multiple power centers without any dominant one. The KSA and Iran had been located at the top of the hierarchy and Turkey had always been found streamlining. Yet with the change of pace and the transformations within the security regime, the new regional order sees two major powers in the shape of Turkey and Iran on the surface. Especially, in terms of Syrian crisis; the two states have a fair amount of leverage.

Even though the two states seem to be working together along with Russia yet the surface is not as uniform as it seems. The two states may have put

aside their differences momentarily for the Syrian Peace Deal; there is no doubt that the inherent dissimilarities between their ideologies is manifest in the idea of a certain rivalry which has somewhat pushed the Arabs to one side.

Iran is one of the powerful states in Middle East and it has two main points wherein it can play at the concept of supremacy in the region; being the sole Persian state with remarkable amount of power and secondly, the idea of being the chief Shi'ite state. Both points have their certain relevance for Iran especially in terms of Middle East.

The Turkish factor is somewhat different and more complicated. Not only has Turkish policy started tilting more towards the Middle East but it has been done so as to construct a security structure much like that of the Ottoman Empire. There is no doubt that this is because of the idea that Middle East for Turkey is not only a region wherein it can hold brokering power over the West but also one where it can become somewhat of a big power because of its social, cultural and even religious attributes.

Power-play of Non-State Actors

The emerging regional order actually sees that there is not only a rise of non-state actors but also an elevation of their role in terms of power and strategy. This goes beyond their otherwise role as proxies but stops short of any non-state actor gaining actual legitimacy. At least few variances emerge out of the new regional order in Middle East, which deals directly with non-state actors.

Firstly, because of the fact that the non-state actors are ever-increasing in the region and that they have not only military strength to account for but also a robust structure of economy, especially ISIS, it seems that the non-state actors now have a delayed stay in the region. And second, they do dictate certain terms of conflicts ranging from the Syrian crisis to the Libyan one and the Yemeni conundrum.

Impacts on Middle Eastern Dynamics

There are altogether five dimensions of the various impacts on the region of the changing regional and security order;

Firstly, there is going to be a general set-back to Arab power and ideals in the region because of Turkey and Iran gaining more ground of the regional semantics. This does not mean that the most important state of Arabs, the KSA is

completely going to be swept under the rug. It only means that the KSA has much been sidelined and in order for it to regain its position, it might need to reorganize itself.

Secondly, in the transformed security regime of Middle East, which has enabled a change in the regional order, another contour which can be seen on the surface is that Israel will be propagated to take part in the Syrian crisis. It was already seen in 2017 that Israel hit Syria²⁴ and with time it will hit more.

Thirdly, the conflict dynamics will perhaps further branch out and jostle up the security of the region. Already Egypt is going through turmoil and if the ISIS spreads in the region then there will be trouble. Fourthly, there is perhaps going to be an increased notion of state-sovereignty and nationalism among each Middle Eastern state as a result of the changing regional order and the transformed security regime. The idea is very obscure because this newly gained insight of state-sovereignty and nationalism is going to be infused with Islamization. This Islamization is not going to be of the radical sort but is of a kind which serves to counter the radical Islam.

Another factor is that because of the region having turned into a giant zone of active non-state actors, which are vehemently at odds with each other and keep being pushed back, there might come a point where all the armed groups join forces. Instead of fighting each other, they might re-group and fight their common enemies. This then might be a point where the current regional order will swing for a transformation.

Finally, since more and more states are now involved in the crisis and with the proliferation of the scheme of hostile state of affairs, there will be a holistic increase in the already critical immigrant and refugee issue. This of course means that there is perhaps going to be no end in sight and the humanitarian crisis will linger on.

Conclusion

Middle East is a fragile and volatile region of acute importance. Most of the dynamics which takes place here go on to contribute largely to the various international power politics. And, because of the Syrian crisis, this has become largely manifold. All in all, the region has now a new security regime and with this there is a new regional order. Of course, Russia, Iran and Turkey emerge as

core states with visible setbacks to the US and the KSA, and each of these things have now multiple repercussions and implications for the region.

It can easily be said that there is no way that the region is ever going to be stagnant even though currently there is a stalemate within the Syrian conflict. Yet, because of the multiple powers involved along with the armed groups, it will only become somewhat more dangerous and vulnerable to both inside and outside forces. The prospects of peace in the crisis are muddled and the region has turned into a diplomatic zone. Middle East as a region always had geostrategic importance which at one time even converted to geo-economic importance. Of course, even today it holds immense value for China and Russia in terms of geo-economic and geostrategic value respectively. But it must also be brought into light that the atmosphere and the regional order as well as the security regime in Middle East dictate that the region be known as having certain geopolitical value for not only the internal but also external states. These things have already shaped the regional order into a rather convoluted paradox.

NOTES

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