

GEOPOLITICS OF SYRIAN CRISIS AND FUTURE OF ALAWITE HEARTLAND

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Abstract

Since the Arab Spring, chaos seems to have further engulfed in the volatile Middle Eastern region. The ongoing unrest in Syria is alarming for state-based nationalism and it may end for the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which had divided the Ottoman Empire after the World War I and had created the modern Middle East. The war in Syria, Iraq and Yemen has become the root cause of destabilization in the Middle Eastern region. Further, the Syrian crisis has now become an important part of the global politics and it seems that without radical internal political changes in Syria, the situation will further complicate the Middle Eastern politics.

Keywords: Syrian Crisis, Civil War, Unrest, Destabilization, Sectarianism, Violence.

Geopolitics of Syria

Syria has specific geographic location and is situated on the East coast of the Mediterranean Sea in South Western Asia and in the North of the Arabian Peninsula in the Middle East¹. It may not be rich in oil, but its key location would likely to make it a very convenient transit country for main Arab land and the Mediterranean region². Strategically, its border is linked with Turkey in the North, Lebanon and Israel in the Southwest, Iraq in the East and Southeast, and Jordan in the South, which endows it potential geographical importance and equally have historical value in the region. The coastal Syria has a narrow plain, stretches South from the Turkish border to Lebanon, in back of which a range of coastal mountains is, and still farther inland a steppe area. The area includes about 185,180 square kilometers of deserts, plains, and mountains. It is divided into a coastal zone with a narrow, double mountain belt enclosing a depression in the West and a much larger eastern plateau. In the East is the Syrian Desert and in the South, is the Jebel Druze Range. The highest point in Syria is Mount Hermon, which is around 9,232 feet on the Lebanese border. Strategically, Syria is located at the crossroads of regional and global power interests as defined by Bernard Lewis, that the region is the “cross-roads” of civilizations.³ The location of region is becoming more volatile because of a number of important border passes and regions between Syria and neighboring countries.

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Thus, strategic region of Yabroud, (North of Damascus), Golan Heights, Abu Badih, Latakia, Belen Pass (Known as the Syrian Gates), Burj al-Qasab (Latakia hinterland), Jabal Turken, and Jabal al-Akrad (Mountain of the Kurds) are the important areas in the country. These mountain areas are corridors of invasion and commerce between Syria, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. Historically, Syria was the part of Roman Empire and later it came under the suzerainty of Hebrews, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Persians, Macedonia and the Arabian. In the first half of the 7th Century, Syria came under the Islamic Caliphate and later Umayyad and Abbasids Caliphates extended the frontier of Arab empire. Mongols invaded under Timor and later during 1831-40, Syria was ruled by Egyptians and from 1840, the European powers (British, Austrians, and French) intervened and controlled the area for their strategic interests. Furthermore, the League of Nations accepted the French Mandate for Syria and Lebanon in 1922 and established constitutional suzerainty over the area. In 1930, France recognized Syria as an independent republic and in 1936, the Franco-Syrian treaty was signed for the autonomy of Syria, which happened because of the 'Popular Front' movement. However, Syria got independence on 17th April 1946, when last French soldier left the country and the colonial mandate ended.

Formation of Ba'ath Party

The Syrian Ba'ath Party or Socialist Renaissance Party was founded in 1943 by Michel Aflaq, a school teacher, whose brand of radical Arab nationalism won supporters across the region. Aflaq advocated the formation of a single Arab socialist nation and supported non-alignment and opposition to Western imperialism and colonialism. The party started work in Syria and rapidly achieved political power in 1963, when the party became centric and undergone radical domestic changes as a result of Alawites military officers' leading role to strengthen Ba'athist rule. Thus, the military coup led by Hafez Al-Assad restored the Ba'ath Party to power in Syria, and ultimately real political power fell into the hands of military. By this way, Alawites religious minority became more conscious and politically dominated in the country. That was the time, when the Syrian government introduced the political party reforms and did not permit any other group for existence outside the National Progressive Front (NPF).⁴ Moreover, Assad deliberately pushed the minority officers from home region of Latakia into senior ranks of the Ba'ath Party and under the planned method Sunni military officers were kept suppressed in the army.⁵ The regime of Alawites was bent upon getting government employment added with Assad's nepotism.

Thus, their representation went over within the state institutions. The Alawites made a strategy of setting up torture cells in the army and in the Ba'ath Party to suppressed opponents, when the struggle of the rebel leader, Sulayman Murshid failed. In Matti Moosa's opinion, it was certain that officers were acting as Nusayris rather Ba'athists with the purpose of using armed forces and the Ba'ath Party for grasping power in Syria. M. Sadoski is of the view that sectarian powers do not play important role in the Ba'ath Party, and even confessional

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bonds are only one among many avenues by which patronage is extended.”⁶ The mere fact is that once Alawites came into power, they systematically controlled the key positions in every section of the government and civil-military administration, and Alasdair Drysdale calls this situation “reductionist” to focus on ethnicity and minority empowerment or dominance within the Ba'ath Party and establishment.⁷ Thus, in 1973, Hafez Al-Assad’s regime amended the Syrian constitution and was given the Ba'ath Party unique status as the “leader of the state and society,” ushering it into all areas of public and private sectors. General masses and youth (from schools and colleges) were indoctrinated with the party's ideology and also extended influence to trade unions and the military committee watched the activities of military personnel.

Religious and Ethnic Composition

Syria is officially a secular country. It is multiethnic, multicultural and multi-religious with 22.1 million of population. The country is socially heterogeneous and a home of diverse communities. The detail is as under:

Religious and Ethnic Composition

Sunni Muslims	75%
Shia Muslims	14%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alawites: 11% • Imamis: 2% • Ismailis 1% 	
Druzes Muslims	3%
Christians	7.8%
Jews	0.2%
Total	100%

This religious diversity is always problematic for Syrian nation-building and state-building and continues as a source of tension between Sunni and Alawites (Shia Muslims) in many parts of the country. The map of religious and ethnic composition of Syria and Iran is as under:



The multiplicity of the country has given an opportunity to jeopardize its regional standing and international image. On the other hand, Syria has become a battleground in a proxy sectarian war between Shia and Sunni Muslim sects with foreign players offering financial and logistical support to one group or other as part of a wider tussle for influence in the volatile region. In fact, Iran behind Shia and Saudi Arabia behind Sunnis are fighting proxy war in Syria thus the gulf between the two sects of Islam is being widened to the extent of startling sectarian violence. This violent sectarianism is spreading in other countries of the region, leading to the legacy of change in the Arab World. In the era of decolonization (1945), many countries in the Middle East including Syria, prevented the minorities from identifying itself with the core identity. The French mandate replaced the existing order and empowered minorities and weakened the culture of Sunni elites, while Alawites begged the French to grant them a separate state, though demand was refused, but were given with advantages in the region.

Brief History of Alawites Community

One million Alawites live in Syria, out of around 1.3 million of the population. Tracing the origin of Alawites, it is considered that they are the

followers of Hazrat Ali. They believe in the divinity of Hazrat Ali. They are also known to the world as Nusayris or Ansaris.

The difference between Alawites and other Muslims sect is that they believe in the divinity of Hazrat Ali. Tracing the history of Alawites, it is found that they separated from Shia Islam in the ninth century in Iraq. The Alawi doctrines appear to derive from Phoenician paganism, Mazdakism and Manicheanism. They also celebrate the festivals of Christianity and Zoroastrian like Christmas, New Year's Epiphany, Easter, Pentecost and Palm Sunday. Regarding prayers, they do not consider this as religious obligation, because in their opinion the religious truth can be preserved with their Shaykhs and a few Alawites also gave the doctrine of mystery. Moreover, they believe in the cross-denominational marriages for the growth of their community population. Therefore, they are closely integrated with other sects in community relationship. (References Needed)

Syria under Hafez Al-Assad

President Hafez Al-Assad belonged to Alawites faction, a minority Islamic sect and joined the Ba'ath Party in 1946 when he was a student. He started his career as Syrian Air Force pilot-officer in 1952 and during 1959–61, Hafez Al-Assad and his other military colleagues formed the Military Committee to resurrect the fortunes of the Ba'ath Party. He assumed power in 1963 as a result of bloodless coup and became the Commander of the Syrian Air Force. In February 1966, he toppled the civilian leadership (Nur al-Din al-Atasi) of the party and sent into exile, and became the Minister of Defense and pursued more radical foreign and domestic policies. Hafez Al-Assad formed the Military Committee on sectarian level and majority members of the committee were Alawites and there was not a single member from majority Sunni faction.⁸ He formally assumed the post of Party President and then his government gave importance to Alawite religion and community, which emerged as powerful identity in the country.⁹

Under Hafez Al-Assad regime, the Ba'ath Party grew steadily in Syria and organized strong military group to protect supporters and community. Hafez Al-Assad restructured the Ba'ath Party and its membership grew from few hundred to millions and the party became popular on mass level with increasing frequency. The party emerged as to control virtually all political, social, and cultural activities in the country and its vast and complex hierarchy was

structured like a German Nazi's pyramid, with party-controlled mass organizations for youth, women, workers, and other groups at the bottom. According to Aljazeera, "President Hafez Al-Assad supported predominantly Alawite network of military officials and many non-Alawites opponents suppressed by harsh methods."¹⁰ By 1969, the Ba'ath Party was divided between two factions, i.e., a civilian wing, led by Jadid, and a military wing, led by the Air Chief, Hafez Al-Assad. The final coup was carried out by Assad himself and brought the Alawite minority to power in November 1970 and became Prime Minister, and later on elected as the President (1971) and brought stability to the country and established a powerful presence in the region.

The incident of 1979 was irreversible when many massacre appeared in the Aleppo Military Academy and Alawite officer candidates killed by the Muslim Brotherhood including the assassination of Alawite Sheikh Yusuf Sarem happened and that incident parted two communities forever.¹¹ Later, in 1982, the Muslim Brotherhood mounted a rebellion in Hamah, Alawite military officers in the Ba'ath Party forcefully crushed domestic opposition by suppressive means and killing between 25,000 and 40,000 citizens.¹² Despite various human rights violation and continued denial of constitutional rights, Syrians continuously protested against the government until Hafez Al-Assad died in 2000 after ruling for 30 years. In spite of government crackdown, the Muslim Brotherhood remained influential in the diasporas-based opposition, which increased Alawite fears. Syria again came under the grip of domestic violence in March 2011, when opposition coalition called protest against the government. The democratic movement crumpled by the Alawite dominated army, who ruthlessly suppressed opposition at a cost of some 20,000 lives.¹³ According to an Asia Watch report, "during Hafez Al-Assad regime violence and repression was common and more than 30,000 people had been killed and about 29,000 tortured."¹⁴ The worst scenario, which had appeared during Assad's regime, was the arrest of under fifteen school children in the city of Deraa, as the catalyst for the uprisings in the country. It was reported that the children "be mischievous", and had graphitized "down with the regime" on their school wall. The security services arrested the children, mistreated and perhaps tortured some of them.¹⁵ Nonetheless, Hafez al-Assad era was popularly known as authoritative, which involved in massive kidnappings, locked several of the key subordinates behind bars, house arrests, torture and many murdered. Furthermore, under the Hafez Al-Assad, the country entered into a period of political instability, unrest, and experimentation of domestic political order and failed to create sectarian harmony and social

coherence. According to Patrick Seale, “Assad ruled the country through the “Gang of Alawites” brutally and viciously.¹⁶ His personality cult declined and described as ridiculous, unpleasant, and hostile.

State of Emergency 1963

In 1963, due to coup d'état, constitution was suspended and emergency was imposed and the country was being run under the special Constitutional Order. The Military Committee had taken control of the country and arrested many politicians. In his proclamation of emergency, Hafez Al-Assad identifying himself as President and argued that the rising poverty, violence and extremism in the country were basis for his imposing emergency law. The law imposed during the so-called emergency reduced public freedom and their civil rights such as gatherings in public, censorship on media, free movement, and permission to arrest anyone of creating threat to the security. The government protected the Ba'ath Party using emergency powers as instrument. The security forces were given the powers to harass and even some times they could kill opponents. In this regard, the state judicial system worked as “Kangaroo Court” and helped Assad for repression.¹⁷ Thus, Assad used unrestricted power through the emergency laws and systematically crushed Syrian liberal opposition in its first five years; the regime arrested approximately 130,000, many of whom were tortured.¹⁸ Therefore, Assad's regime brutally murdered and tortured thousands during his repressive rule and promoted hardline policies during 1960s to 1990s, who worked to culminate Sunni faction people in which more than 15,000 died.¹⁹ Nevertheless, after the death of Assad's autocratic rule (2000), his son Bashar al-Assad²⁰ brought an end to 48-year of emergency and abolished state security courts and afforded citizens the right to peaceful protest.²¹ However, the country's situation remained gloomy because popular movements toppled dictatorial regimes in some Middle Eastern countries, but it perceived that Syrian people have to go long way. Furthermore, the international community will remain divided on Syrian situation and implicitly will back Bashar al-Assad's regime.

Syrian Spring 2011

The year of 2010 was the watershed for the Arab world, when the political upheaval started mostly in the North African Muslim countries (Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, and Libya), known as the Arab Spring and rebellions had brought down unpopular regimes across the Arab world. The waves entered

Syria on 26 January 2011, when the people of Deraa (near the Jordanian border) peacefully protested to end corruption and demanded democratic reforms in the country.²² The turmoil in Syria was not because of economic issue or the uncertain situation widely spread in the country rather it was the corruption of the autocratic rule, reached to the level of common man ultimately resulting into regional and global issues being at stake. It is very much right that the crisis had created new geostrategic vistas for balancing the economic and political interests because domestic stalwarts had lost influence and legitimacy and this has created opportunities for the authoritarian rulers either to fight for status quo or to surrender for democratic norms. All depends on the will of internal democratic forces that they have to continue their struggle for socio-political change, which are certainly dissatisfied with Alawites ruling elites and are indicative of a profound popular appeal for a different sort of political order.

Role of Global and Regional Actors

Political developments in the Syrian case are uncertain and unsettled, and will remain confuse because of the regional and global actors. The mass movement is effective, but has no operative external backing to euphorically bringing down Bashar al-Assad's regime and equally there is no hope for revolutionary sociopolitical change in the country. But, at the same time, the reality is that Arab blood is warm and in Syria, ethnic and sectarian rivalry is on the rise, therefore, the movement will continue. The intervention of the US and NATO on humanitarian grounds will be damaging for the movement. The struggle between the conservative Sunnis and Shias has placed Syria on the path of disintegration. For Saudi Arab, the United Arab Emirate (UAE), Kuwait and other moderate states, who have deep association with the Arab world, would never like Iranian influence over the region. But, in the Syrian context, it appears that "Arab awakening" has been hijacked by the geopolitical game.

US and the European Union (EU) Reaction

There is neither oil in Syria nor does it produce rather it is involved in the regional disputes of the Middle East. Its geographical location is such that it is adjacent to supplier countries. It has served for long hosting of pipeline connection with Mediterranean. Syria is an important country in the region. It is allied with Iran, a country having geopolitical imperatives. It poses threat to Israel and Saudi Arabia and security of the Persian Gulf oil supply line, therefore, the US cannot remain detached from it. It cannot remain out of the disturbance

in Syria. There is no choice left with the US leaders except to intervene against the hardline countries especially those posing threat to Israel's national security. The US administration wanted negotiations for the settlement before the ruling regime quittance of the office and the formation of the transitional administration. For the time being, the US provided legitimate representative to the opposition alliance on one hand and on the other hand put economic sanctions that were under the Syrian Accountability Act that does not allow some of the US products to Syria.²³

Moreover, it has also perceived that Sunnis fighting against the Bashar al-Assad regime are backed by Saudi Arabia and other affiliated groups.²⁴ Presently, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or Daesh militants have entered in the Syrian civil war, as much as they established a presence in Iraq during the sectarian civil war, which began after US-led invasion in 2003.²⁵ According to Seymour Hersh, "the Saudi government, with Washington's approval, would provide funds and logistical aid to weaken the government of Bashar al-Assad, of Syria, "the bolstering of Sunni extremist groups" hostile to the US and "sympathetic to al-Qaeda," with a view to pressure him to be more conciliatory and open to negotiations with Israel.²⁶ However, in the present situation, the US and the EU have one point agenda in the Middle East to isolate Iran from the region and to prevent backing to Bashar al-Assad (Alawites) regime. The West perceived that the fall of Damascus as a strategic ally of Tehran would be a blow to Iran in its showdown against Europe, the US and Israel.²⁷ On the other hand, Iran would like to continue its strategic alliance with Syria to maintain its Shia "axis of resistance" (Iraq-Syria-Lebanon with the Hezbollah) to counter the isolation imposed by the EU and US sanctions through the United Nations.²⁸ Syria was caught up in the cobweb of geopolitics in which western powers, Israel, Iran, Lebanon and other world powers were involved. The US for making the region safe for Israel tries to remodel the whole region along the line and the struggle for ousting Bashar al-Assad from power.²⁹

Russia and China Support to Bashar al-Assad Regime

Another important angle of Syrian imbroglio is the involvement of Russia and China. This is yet a dilemma for the US, because Syria is the main strategic asset of Russia. It's important naval base at Tartus, on the Syrian Mediterranean coast, is the outcome of the long-established ties with the leadership, which started from Hafez al-Assad. The Syria was in position to bargain with the West with the intention to gain geopolitical advantage from the

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West, while emerging militancy's favour would also be taken. On the other side, China has its own economic and political interests in the region. Syria has displayed committed support on the issues related to Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang and human rights. Beijing believes that Syrian people must be respected for their demand of reforms and the protection of their security. Therefore, it is very important to bring an end to the violence and killing of people.³⁰ However, Russia is determined to give diplomatic support to Bashar al-Assad's regime even at the cost of becoming isolated in the Arab League and the world. At present, Syria buys arms worth of 4 billion dollars from Russia annually. A major shipment of arms from Russia includes MiG-29 fighter jets and S-300 air defense missile systems. According to Jeffery Mankoff, the main reason of Russian help to Syria is because both countries are facing extremism. Extremism is in progress especially in Muslim North Caucasus Republics i.e. Abkhazia, Chechnya, Dagestan and Tatarstan, which the Russian Empire (Tsar) occupied in the latter half of the 16th century and 19th century. Therefore, the worrisome situation for Russia is if Bashar al-Assad's regime is overthrown then the Pandora box of Islamic insurgency would open and it would result into instability and the most vulnerable is Chechnya. Moscow has considerable and strategic reasons to support Damascus that is to contain the Western influence over there. That is the message Kremlin is sending to the Western countries.

Israel's Views about Syrian Regime

For decades, Israel viewed Syria as its most bitter Arab adversary because of its 'nationalist ideology,' which is fiercely anti-Israel and border disputes left the two countries perpetually on the brink of unending conflict. Conversely, the outbreak of Muslim militancy in the Middle East is alarming for the security establishment of Israel and preferred that the Bashar's regime to remain in power rather than change with an unknown successor, this "the devil we know" approach is no longer valid.³¹ Israel's policy makers perceived that change of regime will benefit to its "Resistance Axis" (Iran and Hezbollah) and to Sunni militants. Additionally, Israel's leaders have largely reached a consensus that Assad's departure from power will preferably benefit to militancy in the region but desire to replace by moderate elements.³² It hopes for a secular

regime, which will emerge with the support of the West, but move can backfire due to Tel Aviv toxic reputation in the region.

Syria between Turkey and Iran

Since the inception, Turkey and Syria have territorial, ideological, and political oriented uneasy relations and most of the time confrontation appeared due to Kurds problem. Turkey accused Damascus for their support to the Kurdish rebels, providing them with training camps first in Lebanon and later in Syria itself, not least by hosting the leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Ocalan in Damascus.³³ Moreover, during the Cold War, Turkey was a friend of the West, while Syria was in the former Soviet camp and still has cordial relations. Turkey has close political and military ties with Israel with whom Ankara signed a military accord in 1996 and brought a genuine threat of military intervention in Syria.³⁴ Turkey is one of the countries who is also demanding condemnation for a harsh crackdown on pro-democracy activists in Syria and supporting to impose sanctions on Syria and to demand that President Bashar al-Assad should step down. On the other side, Iran has cordial ties with Syria and both have common religious affinity, centered on common Shia roots, between the ruling Syrian Alawite minority and the Iranian leadership.³⁵ Syria has given open access to Iran to the waters of the Mediterranean Sea and also allows Iran to gain a maritime route from the Gulf, via the Suez Canal, to the Northern waters of the Mediterranean sea.³⁶ Moreover, Syria also shares a long border with Turkey, which is Iran's historical geopolitical competitor and both needs pressure over Ankara to neutralize Saudi Arabia and the West and to limit Ankara. Nonetheless, the conflict can be viewed as a broader struggle between mainly Russia and Western countries, which attempt to advance their national interests. Nevertheless, Syria is a long way away from stability after the unending violence between the ruling Bashar al-Assad's regime and majority Sunni population. The crisis has entered into the worst-case scenario, where radicalization is occurring rapidly and anonymously because of the continued violence and suffering.³⁷ Moreover, humanitarian crisis in Syria has worsened and involvement of regional and super powers has aggravated the existing situation. The Syrian crisis is changing its character due to the presence of radical militants such as Daesh, al-Qaeda and the ISIS in Syria and the global actors would not be happy with empowering opposition with the fears to backfire them.

Conclusion

Syrian uprising has progressively entered into an armed rebellion and civil war and an underlying competition for influence has attracted international actors and regional powers. The current situation is no longer a struggle against a dictatorship, neither a simply civil war between two ethnic and sectarian camps, but the country has become the hub of a proxy war for regional and global actors. Meanwhile, Bashar al-Assad's regime considered emotionally unstable destined to maintain his iron grip on the country and unrelenting willingness to use state terror against regime opponents, which is opposed by the international community. More importantly, thousands of Daesh, ISIS and al-Qaeda militant groups have taken roots, because some regional countries have been indirectly involved and aiding the rebels for the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime. Nonetheless, the US and Western nations have adopted Machiavellian posture and are not willing to intervene in the ways that Muslim militants should not take control. On the other hand, Russia and China both dislike the destabilizations of the regime and oppose overt intervention in Syria. Moreover, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other regional players desperately do not want to stay under Tehran's orbit in the region. Turkey is the hostage of Kurdish matter and has fears that Syria can create instability for the regional countries. Nevertheless, the world must response to the humanitarian disaster and widespread human rights violations which perceived to be not halting without coercive diplomacy.

NOTES

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