

THE UPRISING IN SYRIA: IS IT A SECTARIAN RISE OR SOMETHING ELSE?

INDRANI TALUKDAR

The Syrian civil war which started in 2011 at the provincial level for political freedom and economic modernisation has engulfed the whole country and has implications for the regional and global levels. The crisis became the battleground for state and non-state actors, including the Islamist groups, to test and hone their capabilities. The year 2019 marks the eighth year of the civil war in the country. An interesting observation during the Arab Spring has been that the protests which took place in most of the Arab countries in the region, including Syria, were pro-democracy and for economic reforms. However, these demonstrations or protests turned their course towards a sectarian conflict, revealing the fragility of the societies.

Factors such as the clashing interests of the former Cold War rivals—Russia and the US—along with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s ‘divide and rule’ policy¹ and the vested interests of regional players such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Qatar and Turkey, etc. have complicated the civil war.

Outright, it seems to be a sectarian crisis that has been caused because of the Syrian regime’s actions, but is being sustained due to the regional players

Dr **Indrani Talukdar** is a Research Fellow at the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), New Delhi. The views expressed are personal.

1. Jackson Diehl, “Lines in the Sand: Assad Plays the Sectarian Card”, *World Affairs*, vol. 175, no. 1, May/June, 2012, pp. 7-15.

Syria is home to many sects and religions. Its ethno-religious composition could have helped it to become a model multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-ethnic country based on secularism. In reality, this has not been the case.

supporting the conflicting parties within Syria such as, Iran, a Shia country, supporting President Bashar al-Assad, and Saudi Arabia, along with Turkey and other Arab countries supporting the opposition group. However, restricting the Syrian crisis to merely a sectarian problem is being simplistic.

Syria is home to many sects and religions. Its ethno-religious composition could have helped it to become a model multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-ethnic country based on secularism. In reality, this has not been the case as the country has a history of conflicts amongst the ethnic groups such as the Sunnis and the Alawites (the sect to which the incumbent president belongs). The presence of bias in the sectarian roots within the government structure has been unavoidable. Paradoxically, a parallel development is also seen in the country. There are examples under Hafiz al-Assad and Bashar al-Assad of the appointment of Sunni Muslims from rural backgrounds² to high ranks in the government, including in the Syrian Army. Hence, attempting an understanding of Syria through only the lens of sectarianism is not only puzzling but also incomplete.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF SECTARIANISM

The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Factbook reports on the composition of diverse ethnic and religious groups in the Syrian society. It is composed of Muslims comprising 87 percent of the population (including Sunnis 74 per cent, Alawites, Ismailis and Shias 13 percent), Christians make up 10 percent (including the Orthodox, Uniate and Nestorian), Druze accounting for 3 percent and some Jews (in Damascus and Aleppo). With the current problems, it seems that diversity in Syria has also created political tension and rivalry.

2. On July 18, 2012, after Defence Minister Dawoud Rajiha was assassinated in a bombing in Damascus and Fehd Jassem al-Frej was appointed by Bashar al-Assad as his successor. Al-Frej is a Sunni.

During the 20th century, Syria witnessed two parallel complications: on one side, the Syrians were fighting against the French occupiers, giving birth to nationalism, and, on the other, they were fighting against each other.

According to Philip Khoury, Arab nationalism took birth in the midst of the struggles against the French rule in Syria. The policies of the French officials in the country paralysed the socio-political and economic structures, leading to discontentment and anger amongst the citizens. The elite, consisting of the landowning class and the commercial bourgeoisie, and intelligentsia, artisans, peasants and Bedouin tribes came together and fought against the officials.³ These ideas of nationalism, social reform, etc. also provided the channels to the citizens of the country—the growing middle class of the cities, the teachers and students, and army officers (many of them of rural origin)—to end the social power of the old elites and retrieve their lands which were under the elites.⁴ The French were successful in creating the intra-class conflict because of the problem which was embedded in the Syrian society, especially since time of the Ottoman Empire. Under the empire's rule, the officials displayed greater loyalty towards their own ethnicity rather than to the empire. For example, a man was a Sunni Muslim, a Druze, or a Maronite Christian first; his imperial affiliation came next, highlighting its secondary importance.⁵ This was evident during the 1925 revolt.

The Sunnis, who were in power because of the support from the external powers, found it impossible to exclude the newly radicalised intelligentsia

During the 20th century, Syria witnessed two parallel complications: on one side, the Syrians were fighting against the French occupiers, giving birth to nationalism, and, on the other, they were fighting against each other.

3. Philip S. Khoury, "Factionalism Among Syrian Nationalists During the French Mandate", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 13, no. 4, November 1981, pp. 441-469.

4. Richard T. Antoun and Donald Quataert, *Syria: Society, Culture, and Polity* (SUNY Press, 1991), p. 26.

5. Joyce Lavery Miller, "The Syrian Revolt of 1925", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 8, no. 4, October, 1977, pp. 545-563.

and members of the compact minorities—the Druze, Ismailis, and especially Alawites. These people who comprised the minority class, belonged to the peasant and lower middle classes, from the rural periphery and smaller towns. At the political level, these new forces gravitated towards modern political organisations—the Communists, Muslim Brotherhood, Syrian Social Nationalist Party, and Ba’ath Party—which had begun to make their presence felt in the years before independence.⁶

From 1942 till 1963, the Sunnis, urbanites and people from the well-to-do classes and conservative political parties, filled the senior and most powerful positions in Syria. On the other hand, members of religious minorities (and especially the heterodox Islamic ones), and people from the rural areas were under-represented. However, a change occurred in this structure, and after 1963, the Syrian political life came to be dominated mainly by people from the lower middle class and from progressive political parties; this seemed to be a national emancipation because of the role reversal.⁷ At the same time, the army was also slowly and steadily making its presence felt. Though the Sunnis were fighting against the French, at the same time, they were not comfortable with the rise of the Alawites, who were increasing in numbers. In the *Troupe Speciale* battalion, three out of eight comprised the Alawites.⁸

Since the French occupation, the Syrian political system also came to be influenced by the competition and clashes between France and Britain, and later the USSR and the US. The Hashemite vision of an Arab union also complicated the Syrian system, laying the foundation for the rise of Hafiz al-Assad. The competition for power within Syria, pre-1963 and post-1963, highlighted a fragmented social order. In 1958, the contentious

6. Philip S. Khoury, “Continuity and Change in Syrian Political Life: The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries”, *The American Historical Review*, vol. 96, no. 5, December 1991, p.1393. Amongst the minority groups, the Alawites, with the support of the French, started strengthening their stronghold in the country. This group, with the help of the rural Sunnis in the army, started weakening the urban Sunnis, helping thereby their way to gain power over the country.
7. Nikolaos van Dam, “Sectarian and Regional Factionalism in the Syrian Political Elite”, *Middle East Journal*, vol. 32, no. 2 Spring, 1978, p. 203. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/4325740.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A085a27672d54875142cb569f02696617>. Accessed on January 28, 2019.
8. Adham Saouli, “The Tragedy of Ba’athist State-Building” in Raymond Hinnebusch, Omar Imady, eds., *The Syrian Uprising: Domestic Origins and Early Trajectory* (Routledge, 2018), p. 28.

politics involving intra-regime and regime-opposition struggles of power led the country to the brink of a civil war.⁹ And the 1963 coup ended Syria's democratic journey.¹⁰

The Arab Sunni President, Amin-al-Hafiz, tried to underplay the sectarian card, however, the emergence of the minority groups in the Ba'ath Party unknowingly strengthened the sectarianism within the system. In 1966, the National Command, formed by the Sunni leaders, was dissolved. With the defeat in the Six-Day War of 1967 and the 1973 Yom Kippur War with Israel, there was a clash within the Ba'ath Party between the then President Salah Jaddi and Hafiz al-Assad, the defence minister, that led to the ouster of the former and the consolidation of power by the latter. Though the fight between these two military officers was one for power rather than due to sectarianism,¹¹ the strengthening of the minority groups was visible.¹² Hafiz al-Assad, in 1970, led a final intra-party coup which is referred to as 'the corrective movement', helping him to consolidate his power.¹³ It was seen as a preemptive strike against the Ba'ath Party's civilian wing, which was preparing to oust him from his post.¹⁴

Under Hafiz al-Assad, Sunni businessmen and rural Sunnis were also given preference in the economic and military domains. He appointed people based on their loyalty to him.¹⁵ The Ba'athist Party justified its rule with this ideology of being Arab even if the regime leader belonged to a different religious sect. At the same time, the party was becoming strong, based on

9. Ibid., p. 30.

10. Thomas Pierret, "The Syrian Baath Party and Sunni Islam: Conflicts and Connivance", *Middle East Brief*, no. 77, February 2014. <https://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/MEB77.pdf>. Accessed on January 29, 2019.

11. Both Jaddi and Al-Assad were Alawites.

12. Sean Burns, *Revolts and the Military in the Arab Spring: Popular Uprisings and the Politics of Repression* (I.B. Tauris, 2018), p. 53.

13. Esther van Eijk, "Family Law in Syria: A Plurality of Laws, Norms, and Legal Practices", Leiden University, September 29, 2013, p.37. https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/21765/1_1.pdf?sequence=16. Accessed on January 29, 2019.

14. Lars Hasvoll Bakke, *Facing Assad: American Diplomatic Relations with Syria, 1969-76* (University of Oslo, 2013), p. 32.

15. Joris Bos, "Sectarianism in the Lebanese and Syrian Civil War: A Study towards a Possible Sectarian Nature of the Syrian Conflict", Leiden University, S1739417, August 2016, p. 32. <https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/47387/Masterthesis%20Joris%20Bos%20s1739417.pdf?sequence=1>. Accessed on January 30, 2019.

clannism and personal ties.¹⁶ The reason behind balancing the Alawites was to protect Assad's power, making the composition of the political structure in Syria a complicated issue.

In Syria, though the regimes have tried to abolish the communal atmosphere, at the same time, they have protected their own ethnic/sectarian interests, while suppressing the other sects. The suppression of communal disharmony and attempt to bring the other minority sects into the main political stream, in a way, helped in building a national identity. Influenced by modernisation, secularisation and the education system, the country was moving towards a common national identity. Apart from this, the socio-economic gaps that were existing in the country were getting reduced, which also paved the way towards a positive direction. The emergence of the middle class that influenced the political system of the country was formed from the ranks of peasants, intelligentsia and workers who helped in forming new political elites in Syria based on Arabism, Syrianism, socialism and secularism. However, with time, divisions began to emerge within the conservative groups—the Muslims and Christians. In their eyes, the military-sectarian faction ruling Syria and carrying out a secular policy by excluding other communities did not go down well.¹⁷ Even after Hafiz al-Assad's taking over, the power struggle continued. His own brother, Rifat Al-Assad, also tried to revolt against him, but was eventually crushed. The brother's dissent highlights the fact that the struggle was more for power than due to sectarianism, though it was played according to the situation. In fact, the events that took place in Syria, such as the Hama and Aleppo incidents as well as the suppression of Islamist parties, highlight this aspect of the power struggle.

Meanwhile, the emergence of an authoritarian regime under Hafiz al-Assad, also led to the rise of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. This Islamist party challenged the regime in the 1970s-1980s, which led to the uprisings

16. Burns, n. 12, p. 55.

17. Moshe Ma'oz, "Attempts at Creating a Political Community in Modern Syria", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 26, no. 4. Autumn, 1972, pp. 400 and 403. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/4324985.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A87756b48f6267ed99591f14d407d98a9>. Accessed on February 1, 2019.

in Aleppo and Hama; these incidents were suppressed through massive repression.¹⁸ From 1976-82, Syria witnessed massacres which were the most severe under Hafiz al-Assad's rule. During this phase, the power struggle between the Alawite-dominated security forces and their Sunni opponents continued. There were several assassination attempts on the president as well as other important leaders in the system.¹⁹ Meanwhile, President Hafiz al-Assad also bore the impact of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. The defeat of the Syrian Army and the fear that the Islamist parties, including the Muslim Brotherhood, would take advantage of this defeat, led the president to take measures of violent repression.²⁰

The Hama rebellion led to the formal establishment of a broad-based opposition front, the National Alliance for the Liberation of Syria, in March 1982. The alliance was formed by the Muslim Brothers and Islamic Front with the dissident Ba'athists and various socialist and Nasserist groups. Its charter called for the regime's overthrow. It also called for a constitutional, multi-party democracy with the *Shari'a* (Islamic law) as the basis of legislation. However, there was backlash against the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamists too after this rebellion. In fact, shortly after the Hama uprising, there was a rally to back the regime.²¹ The rally highlighted that the problem in Syria was more one of power politics than sectarianism.

In Syria, the Alawites came to power by defeating the Sunnis, which highlights the sectarian divide; however, at the same time, the Alawites were able to gain ground because of the support of the rural Sunnis, who were

18. Alastair Drysdale, "The Assad Regime and Its Troubles", *MERIP Reports*, No. 110, November-December., 1982). <https://www.merip.org/mer/mer110/asad-regime-its-troubles>. Accessed on February 1, 2019.

19. David Kenner, "When Assad Won", *Arab Uprisings: The Syrian Crisis*, POMEPS Briefings, February 27, 2012, p. 9. https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/POMEPS_BriefBooklet9_Syria_Web.pdf. Accessed on February 1, 2019.

20. Elie Chalala, "Syrian Policy in Lebanon, 1976-1984: Moderate Goals and Pragmatic Means," *Journal of Arab Affairs*, vol. 4, no. 1 Spring 1985, pp. 21-22. http://homepage.smc.edu/chalala_elie/reading/Syrian_Policy_in_Lebanon_May_25_08.pdf. Accessed on February 1, 2019.

21. Drysdale, n.18, and Yvette Talhamy, "The Muslim Brotherhood Reborn", *Middle East Forum*, March 1, 2012. <https://www.meforum.org/articles/2012/the-muslim-brotherhood-reborn>. Accessed on February 4, 2019.

During the 1963 coup, the Ba'ath Party eliminated scores of Sunni officers and replaced them with the Alawites, Druze, and Ismailis, and retained Sunnis from the rural parts of the country, who were discontent with the urban Sunnis' exploitation.

the mainstay of the government.²² During the 1963 coup, the Ba'ath Party eliminated scores of Sunni officers and replaced them with the Alawites, Druze, and Ismailis, and retained Sunnis from the rural parts of the country,²³ who were discontent with the urban Sunnis' exploitation. For example, through the 1963 coup, an 'economically modest provincial counter-elite' consisting of Alawites, Ba'athists and rural Sunnis²⁴ started to dominate the military section, which was earlier under the Sunni elites. Hence, sectarianism in Syria can be viewed as a means to achieve the people's

ends as well as to usurp power.

With the Alawites in power, the composition within the political system was dominated by them. Over time, this imbalance created fissures within the system and in the country. The regime turned a deaf ear to the grievances of the citizens as well as the opposition's voice. It projected nation-building as the objective and any form of protest or discontentment by the people or any group was seen as an encouragement of sectarianism and also as acting for Syria's enemies—at both regional and global levels. The civilian aspect which had got suppressed after Hafiz al-Assad, gave way to a conventional and authoritarian regime.²⁵

The regime under the former president (Assad senior) followed an independent and balanced inter-Arab policy,²⁶ by improving its

22. Eyal Zisser, "Can Assad's Syria Survive Revolution?" *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2013, p. 66. <https://www.meforum.org/middle-east-quarterly/pdfs/3529.pdf>. Accessed on April 2, 2019.

23. Jawad Anwar Qureshi, "Thomas Pierret, Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution", (Cambridge University Press, 2013), (Review), *Milestones: Commentary on the Islamic World*, May 9, 2018, p. 3. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/588c2af8be659421ed624113/t/5af39f0a88251b2ecb38b353/1525915403551/syrian+ulama.pdf>. Accessed on April 4, 2019.

24. Leïla Vignal, "The Origins of the Syrian Insurrection: A Review of Souhail Belhadj's *La Syrie de Bashar al-Asad, Anatomie d'un régime autoritaire*, [Bashar Al-Asad's Syria: Anatomy of an Authoritarian Regime], Belin, 2013", January 26, 2015. <https://booksandideas.net/The-Origins-of-the-Syrian-Insurrection.html>. Accessed on April 5, 2019.

25. Ma'oz, n. 17, p. 404.

26. Ibid., p. 404.

relationships with conservative countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Jordan while, at the same time, creating a united Syrian nation. He ruled the country with an iron fist that started creating disgruntlement amongst many, including his own tribe and sect. After Hafiz al-Assad's death, President Bashar al-Assad took over in 2000. The new president had to face various challenges including the following:

- Firstly, the collapse of the peace process and the eruption of the Al-Aqsa *intifada*; the repercussion was an end to the prospect of regaining the Golan Heights.
- Secondly, the demand from the Syrian citizens for reform of the economy and opening up of the political system (the Syrian people have been demanding these changes for a long time). However, the political system which existed or was evolved by the predecessors, made it difficult to bring about some real changes.²⁷
- The third challenge was the rising pressure from Lebanon for the Syrian military forces to pull out of the country—a demand which in 2005, the Syrian Army had to comply with.

The regime under the former president (Assad senior) followed an independent and balanced inter-Arab policy, by improving its relationships with conservative countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Jordan while, at the same time, creating a united Syrian nation.

The Assad regime circulated *infatih* (openness) in politics and *islah* (reform) of the economy as the mottos for the country and the upliftment of the people.²⁸ The Syrian economy that the senior Assad left behind was beset with the typical problems of command economies: inefficiency, corruption, and redundant employment. The Syrian people were willing

27. Najib Ghadbian, "The New Asad: Dynamics of Continuity and Change in Syria", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 55, no. 4 Autumn, 2001, pp.624-625. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/4329687.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A7263aa6fb71e1b862bc2f59806008b00>. Accessed on February 4, 2019.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 634.

to support any leader who was ready to tackle these issues. The young Bashar al-Assad had projected himself, before taking over the reins of presidency from his father, as a person fighting corruption.²⁹ This gave hope to the people who supported him. Syria, under the regime of the senior Assad, had opened up to liberalisation but it fell short on the deliveries as promised to the people. Under Bashar al-Assad, new economic institutions were established, however, these establishments were controlled. These institutions were given freedom to the extent that they did not pose a threat to the president.³⁰ These were cosmetic changes to appease both sides.

The Syrian economy under Bashar al-Assad moved from socialism to a social market economy. It experienced radical changes such as the launching of private banks and the establishment of a legal framework aimed at stimulating foreign direct investment. However, the benefits of this liberalisation, along with the oil boom of 2003, were limited to the elite as well as to the businessmen and the religious leaders—the *ulema*.³¹

On the political front, the country is ruled by a one-party system. It is a democratic, popular, socialist and sovereign state. Syria is run by two parallel but unequal power structures—the official one, which is the face of the government, and the clandestine one which is the real power behind running the government. The official system is represented by the Cabinet, Parliament, the ruling Ba'ath Party, and several small parties that are allowed to exist. However, the real decisions are made by the elites comprising the chiefs of the army and various security forces, created to preserve the regime. In the initial period of Bashar al-Assad's rule, there were demands for reform in the political structure and economy,

29. Radwan Ziadeh, "Countries at the Crossroads 2011: Syria", *Freedom House*, p. 2. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/inline_images/SYRIAFinal.pdf. Accessed on February 1, 2019.

30. Ivan Briscoe, Floor Janssen and Rosan Smits, "Stability and Economic Recovery after Assad: Key Steps for Syria's Post-Conflict Transition", Conflict Research Unit, Clingendael Institute, November 2012, p. 9. https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/20121100_syria_stability_recovery_cru.pdf. Accessed on February 11, 2019.

31. Thomas Pierret, "The Syrian Baath Party and Sunni Islam: Conflicts and Connivance", *Middle East Brief*, no. 77, February 2014, p. 5. <https://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/MEB77.pdf>

specifically from the Muslim Brotherhood and the Syrian intelligentsia, to which the Syrian president agreed,³² ushering in a Damascus Spring, which was later restricted. There were manifestos and pacts respectively by these two groups which were tabled for the regime, demanding democracy and economic reforms.³³ The intelligentsia was silenced but the Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood could not be silenced.

All the above three challenges were intertwined with each other—political, security and economic. Economic and political reforms for the common people decentralised power and made the elites accountable. If the president made economic reforms and brought political changes, then he not only risked losing his legitimacy from the support of the elites in power but also stood to lose the support of the army which was interested in retaining its power on Lebanon. President Bashar al-Assad managed to survive without addressing these issues. However, he could not stop the current of the Arab Spring from flowing into the country, which resulted in the protests that took place.

Another factor that also contributed to the challenge in the country was the management of natural disasters. This problem might not seem to have directly affected the president's rule but somewhere it showed the incompetence and ignorance of President Assad and his team. Natural disasters struck Syria in the form of dust storms and periodic droughts from 2001 till 2010 and from 2006 to 2011 respectively. The Syrian scientists had warned the president about the problem of water scarcity³⁴ that the citizens would face, leading to a fragile condition within the country. The country

32. Banks were privatised, the internet was introduced, and foreign investment was made easier. The introduction to the internet world back then laid the foundation for the 2011 protests as the Syrian people were in touch with the outside world. Max de Haldevang, "The Enigma of Assad: How a Painfully Shy Eye Doctor Turned into a Murderous Tyrant", *Quartz*, April 21, 2017. <https://qz.com/959806/the-enigmatic-story-of-how-syrias-bashar-al-assad-turned-from-a-painfully-shy-eye-doctor-into-a-murderous-tyrant/>

33. Ghadbian, n. 27, p. 634.

34. "Syria Climate Study Warned Assad of Drought Dangers in 2010", *Climate Home News*, September 19, 2015. <http://www.climatechangenews.com/2015/09/18/syria-climate-study-warned-assad-of-drought-dangers-in-2010/>. Accessed on February 5, 2019.

faced multi-year and multi-season agricultural failure due to the droughts.³⁵ But the Syrian officials did not take the matter seriously.³⁶ Though there is no evidence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) taking advantage of the situation in Syria, there are reports of this group using water as a weapon of war against the government in Iraq.³⁷

In addition to all the internal issues that the country faced, there was also the challenge that the external powers were posing to Syria—from the neighbourhood as well as from the US. Due to the strategies of the global and regional powers, the middle powers in the region started to face problems such as Iraq being attacked by the US. The US Administration's 'axis of evil' in 2002 that included Syria, Cuba, and Libya was not received well by President Assad. Syria faced sanctions by the US for the presence of the country's troops on the borders of Lebanon as well as its support to the terrorist groups in Iraq. The sanctions made it difficult for the country's already depreciated economy. The then US President George W. Bush's rhetoric of "democracy promotion" and "regime change"³⁸ created insecurity within the Syrian presidency. The fate of the Iraqi and Libyan presidents may have also influenced President Assad to tighten his grip over the country.

By 2006, there were problems such as in the conduct of free elections, establishment of opposition parties, grant of Syrian citizenship to the ethnic Kurds and the widening disparity the country was facing. Along with these issues, the large groups of terrorists who were fighting in Iraq and were helped by President Assad, had settled in Syria, which became the

35. Peter H. Gleick, "Water, Drought, Climate Change, and Conflict in Syria", *AMS*, July 1, 2014. <https://journals.ametsoc.org/doi/10.1175/WCAS-D-13-00059.1>. Accessed on February 5, 2019.

36. Phil Sands, "Syria's Water Shortage Causes Alarm", *The National*, October 6, 2010. <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/syria-s-water-shortage-causes-alarm-1.555043>. Accessed on February 5, 2019.

37. Ben Doherty, "Climate Change will Fuel Terrorism Recruitment, Report for German Foreign Office Says", *The Guardian*, April 19, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/apr/20/climate-change-will-fuel-terrorism-recruitment-adelphi-report-says>. Accessed on February 5, 2019.

38. De Haldevang, n. 32.

pool of recruitment for the ISIS. Meanwhile, the Salafist ideology was being promoted by the group Ahrar al Sham since 2012. This group became a political and military force whose goal was to overthrow President Assad. The rise of this group's popularity made the situation more complicated. This group started to reach out to the Syrian people through social service and humanitarian aid,³⁹ creating more dissent towards the Syrian government, especially the president. The genesis of this group belongs to the prisoners who were released in 2011 by President Assad as a gesture to appease the masses when dissent in the form of protests had started.

The release of these prisoners was a cosmetic strategy in the name of political reforms to be undertaken within the country, which has backfired on the government. The activities of this group have made the government appeal to the UN to term it as a terrorist group. The US, Turkey and Qatar do not see it as a terrorist group and have not pressured the UN to designate it as one, while the Syrian government and Russia have.⁴⁰

AMBIGUITY IN THE SOCIETY

The Syrian society comes out as ambiguous in the ongoing malaise confronting Syria. This is, because, on the one hand, the people do not want to be categorised or recognised through their ethnic or religious identity (as they take pride in their harmonious coexistence), while, on the other, there is a sectarian divide. Interestingly, the regime uses both, the coexistence narrative and sectarian divide, to its advantage. In Syria, there are two narratives that highlight the ambiguity in the society—one has been the official version wherein the regime stresses that there is coexistence between the different sects. However, the country faces a threat because of the vested interests of 'foreign agents' who threaten to create disharmony in the country. The second narrative is that the problem of sectarianism does exist,

39. Michael Jonsson, "Biding Its Time: The Strategic Resilience of Ahrar al-Sham", Asian and Middle Eastern Security Programme, Project number: A16104, December 2016, p.3. file:///C:/Users/Lenovo/Downloads/http___webbrapp.ptn.foi.se_pdf_980e00a2-30de-44fa-adf9-b6be5790b2af.pdf. Accessed on February 10, 2019.

40. Ali El Yassir, "The Ahrar al Sham Movement: Syria's Local Salafists", Wilson Centre, August 23, 2016. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/the-ahrar-al-sham-movement-syrias-local-salafists-0>. Accessed on February 10, 2019.

During the initiation of the 2011 protests, two types of slogans were being used—one was based on sectarian division and the other was based on unity and nationalism wherein the demonstrators rejected any form of sectarianism.

as it has for centuries, which the regime uses accordingly. During the initiation of the 2011 protests, two types of slogans were being used—one was based on the sectarian division (which the demonstrators believed was the regime's propaganda to colour the protestors negatively) and the other was based on unity and nationalism wherein the demonstrators rejected any form of sectarianism and intervention of foreign agents or Islamist movements like Salafism and Muslim Brotherhood.⁴¹ This dichotomy created complexity within the country.

In Syria, the system of cross-confessionalism has been entrenched deeply. There is an overt, sophisticated display of religious tolerance even as the political structure is sectarianised.⁴² It is because when the protests broke out in the 2011, it was not about the Sunnis against the Alawites, but for economic reforms and political freedom, with the objective being the development of the Syrian people. It was also a protest to make the government accountable for the woes the people were facing due to climate change which the regime was ignorant about. The civil uprising was against an inefficient government. With force applied on the citizens by the government, the radical groups, discontented opposition groups and Islamic groups who were sidelined within the country, took advantage of the situation. The regime's high-handedness led to the militarisation of the issue. The regime coloured the protests on the lines of sectarianism. In order to maintain its grip over power, the government also tried to garner support from countries like Russia that were uncomfortable with the rise of Salafist

41. Friederike Stolleis, "Discourses on Sectarianism and 'Minorities' in Syria" in Friederike Stolleis, ed., *Playing the Sectarian Card: Identities and Affiliations of Local Communities in Syria* (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2015), p. 8.

42. Emile Hokayem, "'Assad or We Burn the Country': Misreading Sectarianism and the Regime in Syria", *War on the Rocks*, August 24, 2016. <https://warontherocks.com/2016/08/assad-or-we-burn-the-country-misreading-sectarianism-and-the-regime-in-syria/>. Accessed on February 9, 2019.

Islam. For example, Russia sees President Bashar al-Assad as a bulwark against this ideology and the terrorist groups that uphold this ideology. Moscow has been fighting the battle for containing Islamist insurgency, including against the Islamic State (IS) that had declared that it would create a Caliphate in the neighbourhood of Russia.

President Assad took advantage of this insecurity of Russia. He knew that it would be difficult for him to have the US' support as America was already at the crossroads with the Syrian government over the latter's role in Iraq and Lebanon. It was also difficult to win the support of other Arab powers such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey⁴³ and Egypt. Hence, only Russia, from the context of a major power, and

Iran, from the regional perspective, were available to the Syrian regime to protect itself from the threats it faced from the various dissent groups that were supported by the people. The conflict which started out as a struggle for political and economic reforms, brought out the ethnic and religious fault lines to the surface.

CONCLUSION

The uprising in Syria started not as a sectarian revolt but the protest of the Syrian people against a corrupt regime that was not able to keep any promises made by it. The suppression of the protesters by the regime created an opening for other groups such as the radical Islamist groups, terrorist groups belonging to the Salafi sect, the intelligentsia, etc. to get involved in the demonstrations. The proxy war which Saudi Arabia and Iran have

The uprising in Syria started not as a sectarian revolt but the protest of the Syrian people against a corrupt regime that was not able to keep any promises made by it. The suppression of the protesters by the regime created an opening for other groups such as the radical Islamist groups, terrorist groups belonging to the Salafi sect, the intelligentsia, etc. to get involved in the demonstrations.

43. Russia has managed to bring Ankara to its camp, however, the fragility of the relation remains because of the Kurdish issue.

always been carrying out in the region only helped the conflicting parties garner support from these two regional adversaries. The civil war, along with the involvement of the regional players, also helped in the involvement of the former Cold War rivals.

The divide and rule policy of the regime led to the unending murky civil war wherein the fate of the Syrian people—especially the refugees—remains questionable. The regime which is unbending over the demand of the opposition for the removal of President Bashar al-Assad, makes it difficult for the resolution of the civil war.

It could be said that Syria, a country which was already reeling under many problems—political, economic and social—got further messed up into more complications of sectarianism, dictatorial rule, based on ‘divide and rule’, by the playing of the sects against each other, under the influence of the region’s sectarian objectives, thus, becoming the home ground for the terrorist groups fleeing or coming from Iraq or bordering Iraq. The terrorist groups such as the ISIS had captured large swathes of ground in Iraq and Syria.⁴⁴ This group later formed the Islamist State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) which wanted to merge with the Al-Nusra group and create a ‘Caliphate’ from the Mosul city of Iraq, and expand. These groups, along with other foreign fighters from the Central Asian countries, European countries, etc., infiltrated into Syria. Initially, the IS wanted to join the Al-Qaeda group in Syria, however, that did not take place. The disunity amongst the various terrorist groups fighting within Syria has further complicated the situation. The Syrian authorities have been able to rescue the places under the terrorists’ control, including of the IS. The border around Albukamal city near the Syria-Iraq border, was closed by the Syrian authorities after the IS had taken over. The Syrian military took back the city from the IS in 2017, however, the border was still not open due to security concerns. But on February 2019, the Syrian government,

44. Mohammed Ebraheem, “Iraq will Receive 250 Detained IS Militants from Syria Within Hours—Expert”, *Iraqi News*, March 5, 2019. <https://www.iraqinews.com/features/iraq-will-receive-250-detained-is-militants-from-syria-within-hours-expert/>. Accessed on April 5, 2019. The genesis of the IS goes back to 2003 when the US attacked Iraq

in consultation with the Iraqi government, was planning to open the border⁴⁵ though there is no update on it.

The power struggle between the regime and the opposition party seems unending, leaving the common people to suffer. The establishment of the Syrian National Congress, which the conflicting parties have supported, remains questionable. The fate of this Congress is also doubtful because of the various opposing thought processes in the country. It is debatable whether the country, minus President Bashar al-Assad, would want to have an Islamist flavoured government. Syria faces two examples of the government: one is government in Egypt and the other is the one in Turkey—an Islamist government. People in the rural areas may not mind being ruled by an Islamist government because of their earlier experience with governments. As long as the basic needs of the citizens are taken care of, the Syrian people would not focus on the ideology of the government or the party (at least for the time being). Meanwhile, in the urban areas, the elites might want to be ruled by a so-called secular party or government or by a military junta where the power remains concentrated in the hands of the elites. The dilemma that the country faces—of being ruled by a secularist or an Islamist or a military dictator—would make it difficult for the country to recoup itself. Apart from these issues, there is also the problem of minorities such as the Druze, Christians, Jews, Alawites and others who would not want to be ruled by conservative Islamists. Hence, the tussle for power will continue and in this contest for power, President Assad may be able to manoeuvre his way around in the country.

Meanwhile, the dynamics of the regional players and the former Cold War rivals cannot be ignored. The complexity of the Syrian crisis is also because of the matrix being woven by the regional and former Cold War rivals' ambitions. These powers claim that their interest in Syria is to find a solution which is based on the people's consent and want an end to the civil

45. "Syria Preparing to Reopen Public Border-Crossing with Iraq: Report", *Iraqi News*, February 17, 2019. <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/syria-preparing-to-reopen-public-border-crossing-with-iraq-report/>. Accessed on April 5, 2019.

war. They lend their support towards the ending of the civil war and the elimination of the various terrorist groups that had become strong during the civil war. However, these players' support conflicting parties – some support the Assad regime and some the Syrian rebels. This gives a picture of vested interests taking priority rather than a genuine concern to end the civil war for the sake of the Syrian people.

For example, Russia is supporting the Assad government because it fears the repercussion of terrorism flourishing in its own territory when the home grown terrorists return. It was reported that many of the terrorist groups from Russia's neighbourhood had joined the ISIS to fight against the Syrian government. Moscow also fears losing out on the various economic and energy contracts that it has with the country. The Syrian government has signed contracts with the Russian government for the exploitation of the energy reservoirs on the Syrian side of the Mediterranean Sea. Russia is also taking keen interest in the Syrian crisis because of the arms market and the military bases it has in Syria. Russia is a major supplier of arms and ammunition to the Syrian government. During the war, Syria also became a testing ground for the Russian military equipment that is required to be tested. To retain a foothold in West Asia, the military bases situated in Syria are important for Russia. Also, the refugee problem is a threat to the Kremlin. Russia already accommodates refugees from eastern Ukraine after the 2014 crisis. Intake of more refugees, along with the sanctions, will be dangerous for the country. Hence, there are multi-vectored interests that are behind Russia's support to the Assad regime. If there is a regime change in Syria, Russia will face uncertainties in the future. The new government, if supported by the US, might not want to extend the lease for the military bases or energy contracts with the Kremlin. If America lifts the sanctions from Syria and extends a hand of friendship to the new government, then the position of Moscow becomes weakened as an arms exporter. The position becomes further undermined with the coming together of the US, Qatar, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia.

On the other hand, if President Bashar al-Assad survives with the help of Russia and Iran, then these two powers would become strong in the future, which will further push the other regional powers to form a group against them. Turkey, for the time being, has come along with Russia and Iran to form the Astana peace process (which looks into the resolution of the crisis) as the guarantor state, but how far this would be successful remains to be seen. Though Ankara is a part of the Astana peace talks, it supports the Geneva process and believes that a solution lies therein. This highlights the dynamics of the regional and major powers against each other and its impact on the Syrian crisis as well as other regional conflicts. Nevertheless, all the stakeholders involved in the Syrian challenge need to understand that the continuation of the civil war and attempts to find a solution keeping only one's own vested interests uppermost will not lead to a solution but will further complicate the problem.

The cost of rebuilding and relocating the people is high. The return of the refugees is another matter of concern and complexity. The solution would need compromise from the conflicting parties and the non-involvement of both Russia⁴⁶ and the US.

46. Moscow definitely wanted to fill the vacuum left by the US under the Obama Administration but with the new President Donald Trump and his renewed policies in West Asia, it looks like a complicated situation is in the making in the region. How far Russia is willing to compromise and let go of its interest would be interesting to observe in the future. The Kremlin is trying to strengthen its hold in the region by coming close to Saudi Arabia, Israel, Turkey and Egypt. At the same time, it is maintaining its relationship with Iran despite the divergences in their objectives. President Trump has announced the withdrawal of troops from the country, however, till far it will be successful and to what extent it will help the country will be clear in the coming times.