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# Strategy and ideology in the Syrian civil war: Geopolitical & psychological consequences

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**Abstract**---Syria is a particular country in West Asia where the worst turmoil occurred after the great event of Arab Spring in 2011, which spread to many of the Arab countries. This paper will provide the appropriate assumptions to understand strategies, Ideological phenomena and geopolitical factors which contributed decisive role in the Syrian civil war. It tries to analyze the root cause of the Arab Spring and discuss how the movements and protests emerged as the most violent and intense in Syria against the Asaad regime. It is an attempt to analyze the great power involvement in the crisis and their strategy in the Syrian Civil War. The study is very significant in the context of contemporary world politics. This study also evaluates the psychological effects of the unrest on the Syrian people. The methodology of the paper is descriptive and analytical, which deals with the overall situation of the Syrian Civil War.

**Keywords**---Arab spring, Syria, civil war, geopolitics, psychological effects.

**Introduction**

A disagreement between two opposed groups or parties or individuals results in a conflict, where either one of the opposing groups, parties or individuals plays the role of the Aggressor while the other is the Defender. Internal conflicts or external conflicts themselves are not entirely negative, they are geared toward bringing about a positive change. In the international system, Conflicts are both plethoric

and inevitable; they arise due mainly to perceived differences or clashes of interest in the dealings or relations between system actors. Conflicts between state actors can occur within the constraints of the state borders, which are referred to as "domestic conflicts," while those that occur over state borders are referred to as "interstate or international conflicts." Presently, due to the emergence of New World Order, which brought about the increasing importance of non-state actors and their ever-increasing transnational activities. A new system is rapidly evolving where conflicts may arise between non-State actors, such as, a terrorist group and a state actor.

Syria is a particular country in the West Asian region where the worst turmoil occurred after the great event of Arab Spring in 2011, which spread to many Arab countries. It started in December 2010, where an anti-government protest began in Tunisia over the unjust killing by soldiers, of a roadside fruit seller who was protesting his civic rights to sell fruits at a roadside corner. In Syria, it began in response to corruption and economic stagnation and was influenced by Tunisian Revolution. From Tunisia, the protest spread into other countries such as Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain. Arab Spring was a series of anti-government protests uprisings and rebellions against the authoritarian and monarchial system to establish democracy demand freedom, human rights and employment and change regimes. (Zuber & Moussa,2018)

But the movements and protests emerged as the most violently and intensely in Syria against the Asaad regime. In retaliation for these protests and uprisings, Asaad forces used brutal strikes on the protesters and rebellion groups. It was alleged that the Asaad regime used chemical weapons on protesters and civilians. This incident attracted the world's attention particularly the USA to indulge and intervene to protect the civilians on the basis of humanitarian intervention with the help of NATO forces. The other aspect of this civil war was the emergence of the brutal terrorist group ISIS, which was fighting in Syria. US Parliament started to make strategies to fight against ISIS. They entered into war against the ISIS group with NATO forces concerning terrorism a common threat to the whole world. (Huber,2015)

The other component was a ferocious sectarian contest between Shia forces led by Iran and the Sunni camp supported by Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar. Asaad's regime gained strong support from Russia and Iran. The geopolitical factor is also concerned with the border countries and ISIS also captured a large area in the Syrian region. This support enabled to Syrian government forces to maintain control over key civilian areas and recover some lost territories and restart conciliation for the peace process with protesters and rebellion groups. Initially, the Syrian movement was peaceful, later it turned into violence. Syrian civil war was totally based on the civil movement for democracy in the Arab World which emerged from the Arab Spring 2010 in Tunisia. This movement was also concerned with ideological, strategical and geopolitical factors in the Syrian civil war. It created a violent atmosphere against the Asaad regime in Syria in retaliation forces strikes chemical weapons on protesters. This also drags the USA on the basis of ideological assumptions based on destroying terrorism which is a common threat to each one in this world and humanitarian intervention. The Syrian crisis has escalated into a guerrilla-type civil war due in most part to a

misunderstanding and subsequent breakdown in communication, lack of dialogue and an unwillingness to compromise their stands on both parties. Apart from its disastrous influence on Syrian socio-economic and geopolitical circumstances, the crisis has shaken entire West Asia in particular and its relations with great powers in general. This strategic region was constantly unstable and ravaged by conflicts in which the USA was sometimes the perpetrators or the intermediaries: but no events were out of the US control in the Arab world.

### **Review of Literature**

In order to understand the Syrian Civil War different works have been done by several scholars in a number of ways. Literature on the Syrian Crisis often lacks a Geopolitical and ideological context. Several scholars researching on “The Arab Spring or the Syrian Civil War” frequently ignore the decades preceding the ongoing crisis and thereby researchers tend to wrap up too narrowly. Dalacoura (2012) in her paper “The 2011 uprisings in the Arab Middle East: Political change and Geopolitical Implications,” argues that the Asaad administration attempted to pacify particular minorities in 2011 but the discontent persistently increased. Following that, the harshness and brutality of the regime against the opposition increased, making support for the regime increasingly implausible. The author makes no attempt to explain why the Asaad can still be able to justify itself in the face of such low support from its citizens.

Nepstad (2013), in his article “Mutiny and Nonviolence in the Arab Spring: Exploring Military Defections and Loyalty in Egypt, Bahrain and Syria,” investigate the origin of the Arab Spring by looking at how the Syrian military and security forces are linked to the Assad administration. Nepstad argues that civic uprisings have a good opportunity of overthrowing a system if they can persuade the security forces to break relations with it. Wieland, Almqvist, and Nassif (2013) conducted a study on “The Syrian Uprisings: Dynamics of An Insurgency,” arguing that during Asaad’s decade in power, he missed lots of opportunities and committed numerous political blunders. They also argue that Assad was a victim of his own modernization policies in Syria and that the political decisions made by Syria’s developing political environment since 1970, under both Asaad and his father have resulted in a dissatisfied, disconsolate Syrian population divided along with sectarian ties.

Karim and Islam (2017) in “Syrian Crisis: Geopolitics and Implications” seek to examine the geopolitical and regional factors behind the Syrian crisis and its consequences. The author identified various factors like Asaad’s authoritarian nature, sectarian schism and deteriorating socio-economic circumstances within Syria, competing for oil and gas export interest from regional and global powers as major reasons for the Syrian crisis. They argue that apart from its disastrous influence on Syria’s socio-economic and geopolitical circumstances, the crisis has shaken entire West Asia in particular and its relations with great powers in general. Dagher (2019) in his seminal work “Assad or We Burn the Country: How One Family’s Lust for Power Destroyed Syria” discussed the origin and trajectory of the Syrian crisis which is framed in the context of Assads individual history and perspective of power. The study is motivated by an inherent outrage at the

Asaad regime's violence and its effects in Syria. Dagher criticizes the West for failing to act more forcefully, claiming that the US-led allies should have implemented a "no-fly zone" to prevent the regime from striking civilian areas in Syria. The author ignores the potential for complications, as well as the challenges of maintaining a balance between civilian protection and intensifying an armed confrontation in which US diplomats have believed diplomatic solution was required.

Phillips (2019) in his work "The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East," argued the critical but underexplored roles of the US and other countries in influencing the Syrian continuing civil war. Most depictions of the enduring Syrian civil war focus on a domestic conflict that started in 2011 and was only later fueled by foreign countries into the increasing conflict in Syria. Phillips wraps up with some thoughts on Syria and the future of the region that a great challenge for the USA is to regain popularity in West Asia which seems to decline in recent times and mentioned that the Syrian crisis is part of a larger "geopolitical puzzle and the greatest humanitarian catastrophe of the twenty-first century"(Phillips,2019).

### **Arab Spring**

Nearly twelve years ago, the massive civil unrest in West Asian and North African countries shocked the region more than anyone could have imagined. On December, 17th 2010, after being prevented from selling vegetables, Muhammad Bouazizi set himself on fire and dies in January, 4th 2011. This humiliating death gave a hand to the massive democratic voices spread from one country to another in the West Asian region which is known as 'Arab Spring'. These democratic protests spread throughout the Arab world, including Syria. Tunisia and Egypt had experienced revolutions by February 2011, while Libya was engulfed in civil war. A large percentage of Egyptians in Cairo went to 'Tahrir Square' to organize a rally to fight against the force's brutality, bad governance, and economic disaster, which led to President Hosni Mubarak's overthrow. These revolutions took the form of a long-awaited civil uprising in West Asia, led primarily by Arab youths, in an attempt to revitalize a democratic wave in the region. Without a doubt, the Arab Spring of 2011 is one of the most significant events of the twenty-first century. Apart from the tragedy of Bouazizi's suicide, there is also the 'domino' effect from Tunisia. The foremost factors behind the Arab Spring are namely economic growth, misuse of political authority, social demographic, religious fundamentalism and the advancement of social networking. All of these variables have played a crucial role in the popular uprisings that have resulted in the toppling of past regimes in different West Asian countries. Among these variables, the advancement of social networking was marked as the main factor in the revolution's success and it was characterized as a new form of political agitation in the Arab world. These revolts were not events prepared over a night but many years before. They supposed many operations involve great efforts, good strategy, and the help of the leaders' closest circle. (Hashemi,2012)

## **Geopolitical Factors and Great Powers Involvement in The Syrian Civil War**

Geopolitics is the study of the impact of geographical factors, such as physical location, ethnicity, climate, and others on a country's global politics and inter-state ties. In the case of Syria, these elements are significant because this paper follows Syria's policy choices to align with specific regional partners. Geopolitical issues are also significant because pan-Arabism is such a big factor in Syria's politics. As the geopolitical considerations seem to surpass any humanitarian relief, the Syrian crisis is the one that resists any efforts coming from the international community. (Vaessen,2014)

The crisis in Syria was triggered by protests in mid-March 2011 demanding to free the political prisoners, and the surrender of Assad, whose family has been ruling Syrian for a long time. National security forces responded to the initially peaceful demonstrations with brute force. However, the protests persistently escalated. Syrian President Assad initiated massive military strikes against alleged restive areas in the country. Heavy artillery was used in the operations, resulting in a large number of collateral damages. The de facto contenders in the Syrian crisis are innumerable, with more groups and factions declaring for or against the Bashar al-Assad led regime.

There are Three major recognized belligerent parties, these parties are firstly, the Syrian Administration: The main objective of the Syrian Government and its proxy, the Syrian Army is to quell the insurgence and maintain the pre-existing status quo of the Assad led Ba'ath party regimes mode of governance. Secondly, the Syrian Opposition under the umbrella of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, comprises the Free Syrian military, Islamic group, Al-Nusra group (a known terrorist Group), Ahfad al-Rasul Brigade, and others: their main objectives are toppling the Assad and its symbols and pillars of support, dismantling the security services, uniting and backing the Free Syrian military, refusing dialogue with the Asaad regime, and holding accountable those responsible for killing Syrians, destroying Syria, and displacing Syrians. Thirdly, the Kurdish Supreme Committee, which includes the Popular Protection Units assume that the post-Assad administration will give autonomy to the Kurdish People within Syria. Their objectives including to attaining full citizenship rights, full representation in the Syrian National Council, to get the basic rights as civil, cultural, economic, and social.

The Syrian crisis is more likely to be integrated into the strategy of antagonistic great powers, mainly the USA and Russia and there are a lot of expectations and shadings laying ahead of the Syrian crisis. If the Geneva talks of 2012 assembled for the first time the regime and the opposition around the ideal of a peace treaty, in no way did it introduces a resolution to the conflict. Geneva was rather a diplomatic battlefield between the USA and Russia. Indeed, each country presented its own vision of the Syrian crisis in the Geneva talks, the Russia rejected any plan that would claim Al-Assad's departure and Americans opted for a post-Assad Syria where the Assad regime would be excluded from the ruling. Later the Geneva talks mark as a failure and it becomes a diplomatic battlefield between the USA and Russia.

Yet the US strong support of the rebels at the beginning of the Syrian uprising was less wholehearted, as the rebel's identity was more and more suspicious, some of whom are linked to Al Qaeda. Thus, there was a call for a more nuanced approach to the Syrian opposition. In fact, the opposition includes socialists, secularists and Muslim Brotherhood which acknowledges that there are true differences and problems. However, a lingering deep split characterized the position of the global power. Putin strongly rejected any involvement of NATO in Syria and held firmly the Russian position that highlights the importance of Al Assad's staying in power.

When the Arab Spring started in December 2010, Russia and China showed discretion in commenting on the events in Tunisia and Egypt. In the context of Libya, both countries abstained to vote on the American-led resolution of imposing an exclusion zone to "protect civilians". Their voices were heard when Syria tipped over into a civil war. China's presence is mainly due to its huge economic emergence and its demographic power. As for Russia, its political weight dates back to USSR power, and its intransigent positions vis-a-vis the US positions. Russia and China constitute then a politico-economic alliance. Indeed, Russia is better placed to defy the US political hegemony than China. On the other hand, China is better placed to challenge Western powers economically than Russia. This alliance is actually complementary: Russia tries to defy the US strategically and politically and this tends to gain credibility with the assistance of China and the latter does act politically calling for the Russian assistance.

Russia also acts economically to challenge the Western powers especially when it comes to the energy sector and Russian production of natural gas. The reasons that motivate both countries to block any US involvement in Syria are different. Economically, Russia and China have developed over the last five years very fruitful exchanges in the Arab world. China has no specific economic or military interests in Syria but the Chinese diplomacy is known for having a fundamental belief in state's sovereignty even when the regimes are killing their own people. If the Chinese strongly reject any military intervention in Syria, it is mainly because they do not want to see the Libyan scenario to be repeated in Syria. Actually, the NATO intervention in Libya had consequences on the Chinese economy in Africa.

But after all, it is vital to underscore that the Sino-Russian support for Al-Assad is due to ideological reasons. Firstly, Russia and China are allies. Both have a common Communist heritage that stimulates the give and take policy. China has always defended Russian interests in the region and in return Russia would serve China when its strategic goals are menaced. Secondly, both countries share the same mistrust towards the Arab revolts. These democratic fights could inspire the anti-Putin protesters in Russia or the Chinese activists that are contesting the Regime in Beijing. In December 2011, the elections in Russia led to the outright victory of Putin whose results were contested by Russian opponents. Similarly, in 2011, many confrontations between the police and protesters took place in some Chinese cities. Finally, Syria is a real asset for both countries. Indeed, the Tartus military base that Russia has in Syria permits the alliance to have access to the Mediterranean Sea and to West Asia. However, if this alliance limits the US handling of the Syrian crisis, it does in no way marginalize the role of the United States in Syria. The deal that the USA and Russia reached on the chemical

stockpile of Syria shows the US's weight in putting Russia under pressure. In reality, one may say that if the Russians and Americans reached a common deal on Syria, namely the chemical stockpile destruction, the strongly divergent anti-Assad forces are what make the Syrian crisis unresolved and the bloodshed continues. Each of the opposition parties is on either side of the USA (or the USA's allies in the region) or Russia. This deal makes it difficult to pursue stability and hardly release the Syrian people from the civil war that benefits a lot to global powers (Chahida,2013).

War adversely affects both physically and psychologically. Injury, death, malnutrition, illness, sexual violence, and disability are some of the threatening physical consequences of war, on the other hand, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety and depressions are some of the psychological effects. The horror and terror spread by the violence of war disrupt lives and severs relationships and families, leaving individuals and communities psychologically distressed. Since 2011, Syria has experienced war, leaving over 80 per cent under the poverty line and millions of people have been displaced. Civil War has significantly impacted the psychological impact of Syrians. According to different research, almost a decade of the unrest has left Syrian children mentally scarred, traumatised and angry. The impact appeared worse in girls, who reported a higher predominance of PTSD and a worse quality of life.

To sum up, the US-Russian indirect fights in Syria are also incited by a new map in West Asia. If Iran used to have with the US and more friendly ones with Russia, the trend is being reversed. The new deal with Iran permits the United States to have access more easily to the Syrian crisis and to defy more efficiently Russia in Syria and track Sunni fighters in the Arab world. For being Shiite, Iran can closely cooperate with the USA to dismantle Sunni fighters that threaten the Shiite axis, Iran's presence in the Arab world. Al-Assad, father and son, were very tactical in bolstering up their relationships with Iran. This alliance permits Syria to have an influence in the region and to play the intermediary between Iran and the Gulf countries which are known for not having good ties with Iran. Syria played also a vital, though contradictory, role in post-Saddam Iraq when it participated along with Shia militiamen in the attacks against the American forces since the fall of the Baath dictatorship of Saddam affected the regime in Damascus. It hosts the resistance parties of Palestine like Hamas and the Lebanese Shiite armed group Hezbollah to maintain its loyalty to the Arab dignity.

## **Conclusion**

Syrian Civil War broke out from the protest of anti-government in Arab countries in the name of the so-called Arab Spring in 2011, which was the initial stage of the civil war. During this protest, there was the emergence of different groups of protesters against the government of Assad in Syria. The rebels were trying to topple the Assad regime from Syria (Ebrahim & Seo,2016). These groups were supported by border countries by means of training, equipment, arms and immunizations. From among rebellion groups, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) emerged in the form of a new dangerous threat to the world. It brought the concern of the world to its cruel activities against the common people. Finally, the USA indulge with other countries to destroy this deadly terrorist group from the

Syrian region on the basis of the ideological phenomenon. The USA was feared of once again being attacked on American soil by this group, therefore, the USA along with other countries could jump into a civil war in Syria where they warned Syrian forces not to use chemical weapons on civilians and starting a war with terrorist groups.

Furthermore, in early December 2018, Donald Trump, President of the USA announced the withdrawal of their forces from Syria. The United States strategy has been confused since the beginning of the Arab Spring. Indeed, this challenging period has been a revelator of the US decline in the region. The complexity of the Arab conflicts incites global powers to develop short-term strategies that might quickly fail many times. As the status quo is no longer sustainable, the Arab world would certainly change radically after a political storm in the West Asia region. The global powers are trying to impose their vision of West Asia. It is observed that Chino-Russian influence is rapidly increasing in the region. The civil unrest largely effected Syrian people psychologically, especially in children's lives.

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