

The International Divide on Syria and Pakistan

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Abstract

Stretched over more than two years, the Syrian conflict, with worsening security and humanitarian situation, needs urgent political solution. The Syrian conflict has protracted due to a number of reasons, both internal and external. Pakistan faces a dilemma in devising its foreign policy response to the Syrian crisis. The article seeks to understand the internal and external dynamics of the Syrian conflict and analyses Pakistan's response to it.

Key Words Syria, Crisis, Conflict, Internal Dynamics, External Actors, Hezbollah, Pakistan.

Introduction

The Syrian crisis has entered its third year now. In the worsening violence as many as 94,000 people are estimated to have been killed and around 1.5 million have been made refugees. Neither the government nor the opposition seems to be making any headway on the battlefield, hence the impasse. Efforts to find a political solution or unify the opposition have not borne results so far. The response by international community has been slow and divided. The consensus that was seen on a military intervention in Libya is not being seen in Syria. Syria is a staunch ally of Iran and supporter of Hezbollah in Lebanon. It is the only Arab country allied with the Shiite Iran in the Sunni populated region. A change in regime will significantly affect the balance of power in the region. Hence, external actors, both opposing and supporting the government, are pursuing their vested interests. This division among international actors has put Pakistan in a foreign policy predicament. The paper aims to study the complexity of the situation by analysing the factors at play both at the national and international levels. It also examines Pakistan's response and its appropriateness.

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Syrian Crisis

The wave of Arab Spring that swept Tunisia and Egypt also hit the Syrian nation in 2011. It all began with peaceful protests against President Bashar al-Assad's four decades long rule. The protests turned violent when troops killed civilians in the town of Deraa. Initially, the Assad regime also tried to appease the opposition and made some concessions such as lifting of emergency law that had been in place since 1963 and release of political prisoners etc. But with the increasing number of people killed during the security crackdowns, the protests turned into an uprising against the regime.¹

Violence has spread across the country and the opposition forces have acquired strongholds in certain parts of the country. The death toll in this protracted conflict is estimated at 94,000 people, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.² However, the number could actually be as high as 120,000. Amongst those killed, 41,000 are Alawites.³ According to UNHCR, the number of Syrian refugees has surpassed 1.5 million.⁴

The Syrian conflict has well-defined ethnic and sectarian divisions; a Sunni population is pitted against the ruling Alawite regime. But this is only partly true. The Syrian regime still enjoys support among some sections of Sunnis and from other minority communities.⁵ The Alawites, are an offshoot of Shiism comprising ten per cent of the population in the Sunni majority country. Christians and Kurds are the other minorities each consisting of ten per cent of the population. There are sub-divisions of these minorities too.⁶

Initially, the opposition in Syria demanded constitutional reforms for fair representation of different communities. President Bashar al-Assad,

¹ IISS Strategic Comments, "Making sense of Syria," <http://www.iiss.org/en/publications/strategic%20comments/sections/2011-a174/making-sense-of-syria-0e61> (accessed May 12, 2013).

² Reuters, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/05/14/us-syria-crisis-deaths-idUSBRE94D0L420130514> (accessed May 15, 2013).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Mathew Weaver, "Syria crisis: number of refugees tops 1.5 million, says UN," *Guardian* (London), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/may/16/syria-crisis-refugees-million-un> (accessed May 21, 2013).

⁵ IISS Strategic Comments, "Syria: foreign intervention still debate, but distant," <http://www.iiss.org/en/publications/strategic%20comments/sections/2012-bb59/syria--foreign-intervention-still-debated--but-distant-f796> (accessed May 15, 2013).

⁶ Glenn E. Robinson, "Syria's Long Civil War," *Current History*, vol. 111, no. 749, (2012), 332.

who had succeeded his father President Hafez al-Assad in 2000, soon lost public support when his government too became repressive like his father's and close to the start of the present turmoil the economy also suffered due to years of drought in the peripheral areas. The pro-rich economic policies of the regime were also instrumental in building up the popular uprising.⁷

The Syrian crisis has been protracted due to a number of factors and most importantly due to absence of organized opposition under a recognized leadership. There have been numerous efforts by the external elements, especially those in exile, such as the Syrian National Council based in Turkey and the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces based in Qatar. Other causes are also significant. The Syrian people generally do not like to indulge in activities that may destabilise the country. The chaos in the neighbouring states — Lebanon and Iraq — has served as a constant reminder to them of what may follow if Assad regime falls. This fear is also prompted among the people by the regime. There have been no large scale defections in the Syrian army and security forces, as they are still loyal to the Assad government.⁸ The Free Syrian Army is composed of military personnel who deserted the armed forces. But it was not in large numbers. In Tunisia and Egypt, the army had refused to take sides which proved helpful in toppling Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak. But there is a strong presence of Jihadists among the Syrian opposition, coming from Muslim Brotherhood of Syria and also from other countries. Against the government's strong use of force against the opposition the latter has not been too weak either and even in the initial period inflicted losses on the security forces in the ratio of one to four.⁹

Efforts to find a political solution have not borne results. The UN brokered Peace Plan, enforcing a ceasefire in April 2012, did not work. Another diplomatic initiative is the Friends of Syria Group, an effort outside the UN to find a solution. Countries in this group include the United States (US), the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Britain, France, Germany, Egypt, Jordan and Turkey.

Hezbollah has openly declared its involvement on the side of the government. Hassan Nasrullah, Hezbollah's chairman, expressed his fears that in case of Assad's fall, the US, Israel and extremist forces will take

⁷ Eyal Zisser, "The Struggle for Syria: Return to the Past?," *Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 17, no. 1, (2012), 108.

⁸ David W. Lesch, "The Arab spring—and winter—in Syria," *Global Change, Peace and Security* vol. 23, no. 3, (2012), 423.

⁹ Glenn E. Robinson, "Syria's Long Civil War," 333.

over Syria and Israel will also enter Lebanon.¹⁰ The involvement of Hezbollah and the recent claims by Israel, the US and UK about the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government, which in the words of President Obama draws a red line and could provide an excuse for foreign intervention. There is a need, therefore, for the UN to investigate the charges about the use of chemical weapons.

International Divisions on Syria

The Syrian crisis has a domestic dimension as well as an external one. In fact the crisis has been complicated by the involvement of outside actors, regional and global, both overt and covert. Each actor is in pursuit of an outcome that is suitable to its interests showing disregard for long term implications of their policies. A metaphor used for the Syrian crisis aptly depicts the present situation: "Syria... presently looks like a house to which many of its near and distant neighbours have invited themselves to partake of the Thanksgiving dinner, gratuitously. And every gate-crasher wants to have a slice of the turkey."¹¹ Who these gate-crashers are?

Brothers in Arms

Syria is Iran's only Arab ally; their alliance goes back to the 1980s when Iraq invaded Iran. Syrian alliance with Iran is the main reason that Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Israel and the US are hedging against the Assad regime. A regime change in Syria will prove a great loss to Iran. Assad's fall would mean Hezbollah's fall, against Israel. Tehran considers the Syrian crisis a well-planned scheme by the Western and Arab states to weaken not only Assad but also Tehran. Therefore, Tehran has extended support to the Assad regime in all possible ways.

Striving for Arab Leadership

Syria's ties with Iran along with growing influence over Lebanese and Palestinian affairs have been a cause of concern for Saudi Arabia. There is also competition over influence in the region. However, as the Arab public approves Syrian stance against Israel, Saudi opposition has been in low key. The crisis in Syria provides an opportunity which Riyadh does not want to

¹⁰ Robert Fisk, "Hezbollah's War in Syria threatens to engulf Lebanon," *Dawn* (Islamabad), May 27, 2013.

¹¹ Karamatullah K Ghori, "The Arab Spring in Progress," *Pakistan Horizon*, vol. 65, no. 4, (2012), 43.

miss. With Assad regime gone, Riyadh can become a leader of Sunni and Arab worlds.¹²

Saudi Arabia and Qatar, both want Assad to go. Hence, they are providing material and financial support to the Syrian rebels. These countries are also pro-active in rallying regional and international support to facilitate a political transition in Syria. Qatar is asking for military intervention on the lines of Libya. The Arab League and OIC have both suspended Syria's membership. But there is strong disagreement between Saudi Arabia and Qatar over who should replace Assad. Qatar supports the Muslim Brotherhood and the Saudis back the Salafists.¹³

Qatar's proactive role in the Arab politics and in Syria has confounded many. Some ascribe it to Qatar desire to be "in the limelight" and becoming known to the world.¹⁴ But Qatar believes in finding Arab solutions for Arab problems.¹⁵

'Better the Devil You Know'

For the past two years, Israel has refrained from interfering in the Syrian crisis. Israel has literally been acting on the dictum 'better the devil you know'.¹⁶ Syria has been respecting the ceasefire line and the Golan Heights have been quiet since 1973. Even the occasional irritants — Hezbollah and Hamas — have not broken the peace. But Israel's position is changing. It carried out three aerial strikes in Syria, one massive near Damascus, against providing support to Hezbollah. The Syrian regime has also accused Israel of supporting the rebels.¹⁷ Nevertheless, Efraim Halevy insists that Israel's ultimate goal vis-à-vis Syria has always been 'stable peace' and it has not

¹² Emile Hokayem, "Syria and its neighbours," 12.

¹³ Fredric Wehrey, "A New Saudi Arabia," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/05/22/new-saudi-arabia/g5em> (accessed May 23, 2013).

¹⁴ David B. Roberts, "Punching above its Weight," *Foreign Policy*, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/04/12/punching_above_its_weight?page=0,0 (accessed May 15, 2013).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ David W. Lesch, "The Arab spring—and winter—in Syria," 425.

¹⁷ "Syria and Israel in exchange of fire," *BBC News*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-22608489> (accessed May 22, 2013).

changed even in current circumstances. “Jerusalem has no interest in hastening the fall of Bashar Al Assad.”¹⁸

Israel’s involvement in the Syrian crisis could work both ways for Damascus — armed engagement with Israel could weaken Assad against the Syrian opposition but win him Arab popular support. Hezbollah has always been a concern for Israel as well as the US. The demise of Assad regime can effectively end the nexus between Iran, Syria and Hezbollah. Moreover, Israel would not like to risk straining relations with Russia over Syria.¹⁹

Roller Coaster of Bilateral Ties

While the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt did not pose a foreign policy issue for Turkey, the Syrian crisis certainly did so. The bilateral relations between Turkey and Syria have oscillated from hostility to close friendship and now back to enmity. During the 1980s and the 1990s, Syria and Turkey had differences over the Kurd separatist movement and use of water of the River Tigris and River Euphrates. However, after change in regimes in Ankara and Damascus in 2000, the relationship improved significantly. When the uprising began in Syria in 2011, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan advised President Assad to implement political, economic and social reforms. This sympathetic stance towards an Arab dictator dented the Turkish image internationally and later Erdogan denounced the violence and failure to implement the promised reforms.²⁰ Turkey’s opposition grew and ultimately Erdogan demanded Assad to step down. Turkey has provided shelter to Syrian opposition particularly the Free Syrian Army. Turkey has also provided refuge to a large number of Syrian refugees. In line with its policy of ‘zero problems with neighbours’ Turkey has shown much restraint in involving itself militarily in the conflict. In June 2012, a Turkish jet was shot down by Syrian army for alleged violation of its air space and in another incident in October 2012 there was an exchange of artillery fire on the border.

¹⁸ Efraim Halevy, “Israel’s man in Damascus,” *Foreign Affairs*, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139373/efraim-halevy/israels-man-in-damascus> (accessed May 25, 2013).

¹⁹ Jodi Rudoren, “Israel finding itself drawn into Syria’s Turmoil,” *New York Times*, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/23/world/middleeast/israel-is-drawn-into-syrias-turmoil.html?_r=0 (accessed May 22, 2013).

²⁰ Omer Taspinar, “Turkey’s Strategic Vision and Syria,” *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 3, (2012), 136, 137.

Turkey has varied concerns to take care of while formulating a policy towards the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Turkey is not promoting sectarianism in Syria but it is natural for a Sunni Turkey to feel for the Syrian Sunni population which the forces of Assad are fighting.

The fear of the Kurdish card that Syria could use has forced Turkey to strike a peace deal with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Moreover, the common threats faced by Turkey and Israel from Syria have also facilitated a rapprochement between them.²¹

Caution Defines the Game

Initially, the US could not decide between status quo and uncertainty in the Syrian situation. Chaos could follow Assad's fall.²² Another consideration was the Iraq-Syria border; where US and Syria have been cooperating on keeping a check on Jihadists entry into Iraq from Syria. US sanctions against Syria were ineffective due to negligible trade between them. Now the US is shoring up support for regime change and has implored Russia to help in a political solution. A peace conference is to be held soon that will bring the representatives of the regime and the opposition together.

A Fragmented Response

The European Union (EU) imposed sanctions on Syria in May 2011. The impact has been most harmful on oil imports from Syria. However, EU does not have a unified position on Syria. While there is consensus in bringing this protracted conflict to an end; there is much disagreement over how. There are differences over lifting the embargo on arms supply to rebels. Britain and France favour the supply, others oppose it for fear the arms would land in the hands of Al-Qaeda²³ Britain and France are determined to do so on their own. The rest of the EU sanctions on Syria still remain in place. The EU also does not have a consensus on a military intervention in Syria. UK and France want a military intervention but Germany is opposed to it.

²¹ Dr. Can Kasapoglu, "Future of Turkey-Israel Rapprochement in Light of Regional Events," ORSAM.

<http://www.orsam.org.tr/en/showArticle.aspx?ID=2201> (accessed May 17, 2013).

²² Eyal Zisser, "The Struggle for Syria: Return to the Past?," 108.

²³ Patrick Wintour and Ian Traynor, "Syria: EU split over push to lift arms embargo," *Guardian* (London), May 27, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/may/27/syria-eu-split-rebel-arms-embargo> (accessed May 27, 2103).

Strong Supporter

Syria enjoys strong unflinching support from Russia. Their bilateral relationship goes back to the 1950s and has produced “several tens of thousands of bi-nationals, mixed marriages and expatriates.”²⁴ Russia’s support also comes for nearly one million Christians in Syria, half of whom are Greek Orthodox. Russia is posing itself as the guardian of the Christians in the Levant.

There is an economic dimension to this relationship. In 2010 Russian exports to Syria were worth \$1.1 billion and Russian investment in Syria stood at \$20 billion.²⁵ Russia is the biggest arms seller to Syria. Russian defence industry has \$ 400 billion worth agreements signed with Syria. Russia has a naval base at Syrian port of Tartus.²⁶ Russia has threatened to veto any Security Council resolution on Syria. China and Russia have vetoed Security Council resolutions thrice on Syria, in October 2011, February 2012, and in July 2012.

Assertive China

China has also opposed any military intervention in Syria like its reservations on UN action in Libya. However, China’s interests in Syria go beyond humanitarian concerns²⁷. China was the third largest import partners of Syria, after the EU and Saudi Arabia in 2012.²⁸

Pakistan’s Stance

The Syrian crisis has put Pakistan in a foreign policy predicament. Pakistan has friendly countries on both sides of the Syrian divide i.e., Saudi Arabia, Turkey on one side and China on the other. Therefore, Pakistan took long in responding to the Syrian crisis. A belated response came from Pakistan on the Syrian crisis in August 2012 in the Summit of Non-Aligned Movement hosted by Iran. Pakistan does not favour any side but has taken a stance in

²⁴ Karim Emile Bitar, “Syria: proxy theatre of war,” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, June 2013, <http://mondediplo.com/2013/06/02syria> (accessed May 31, 2013).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Holly Yan, “Why China, Russia won’t condemn Syrian regime,” *CNN*, <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/02/05/world/meast/syria-china-russia-relations> (accessed May 16, 2013).

²⁷ Holly Yan, “Why China, Russia won’t Condemn Syrian Regime.”

²⁸ European Commission, “Syria EU Bilateral Trade and Trade with the World,” http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc_113451.pdf (accessed May 18, 2013).

line with its traditional stance based on non-interference and non-intervention in internal affairs of a country. Pakistan opposes any forceful regime change in Syria. In the UN too, Pakistan holds the same position on Syria. Pakistan respects the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria. Recently, President Asif Ali Zardari reiterated this position to the visiting Syrian deputy foreign minister.²⁹

Pakistan wants a peaceful resolution based on a political settlement. Pakistan believes that any change in Syria should come from inside and it must be based on consensus and dialogue. Change must be non-violent. At the same time Pakistan believes that the regime must also respect the aspirations of the people and undertake reforms accordingly. Pakistan also has serious concerns about the worsening security and humanitarian situation in Syria. President Zardari has also stated that the security and safety of the Syrian people is the responsibility of the regime.

Apart from the global and regional divisions, Pakistan has its own domestic concerns vis a vis the sectarian nature of the conflict in Syria. The majority of Pakistan's population is Sunni, yet the Shia minority enjoys equal status in all walks of life and their belief system does not figure in national politics as a factor of discrimination. This attitude of national culture also governs Pakistan's relations with other Muslim countries irrespective of their sectarian complexion.

Pakistan's response has been cautious. Neutrality is the right policy on Syria considering that close friends are pursuing conflicting interests in Syria. It has also pursued neutrality vis-à-vis the Syrian government and the opposition forces, and rightly so. Nevertheless, Pakistan can play a constructive role through offering good offices and can help find a political solution. It must uphold its opposition to any military intervention as it would be disastrous for the whole region.

Conclusion

The Syrian crisis is complicated by its internal, regional and global dynamics. The main hurdle is the disparate response of the international community. The Syrian logjam is likely to continue for some time. However, in the long run the continuation of rule by the present regime is highly unlikely. Assad faces hostility in the region. The rising tide of the people may sweep the regime away like others that were stronger but fell more easily.

²⁹ *Dawn* (Islamabad), April 29, 2013.

A political compromise is the only viable solution out of this quandary. The allies of the Assad regime and the Syrian opposition can bring this about. The upcoming peace conference brokered by the US and Russia seems a good opportunity that must not be missed. ■