



**Geopolitical Dynamics in the Syrian Civil War:
The Role of National and Transnational Veto Players
in Determining the Future of Syria**

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Abbreviations

AAS/ HASI	Ahrar al-Sham/Harakat Ahrar al Sham al Islamiya
AKP	Justice and Development Party
ANF	Al-Nusra Front
AD	Anno Domini
BBC	British Broad Cast
CNN	Cable News Network
CSCW	Center for the Study of Civil
EU	European Union
Daesh	al Dawla al Islamiya fi al Iraq wa al Sham
FSA	Free Syrian Army
HASI	Harakat Ahrar al Sham al Islamiya
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GPI	Global Peace Index
GTI	Global Terrorism Index
HAMAS	Ḥarakat al-Muqāwamah al-ʿIslāmiyyah/Islamic Resistance Movement
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ISIS/ISIL/IS/	Islamic State in Iraq and Sham/the Levant
ISW	Institute for the Study of War
JN	Jabhat al Nusra
LCs	Local Councils
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NC	National Coalition for Opposition and Revolutionary Forces
PKK	Kurdistan Workers Party
PYD	Kurdish Democratic Union Party
SAF	Syrian Armed Force
SNDF	Syrian National Defence Forces
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republic
UAR	United Arab Republic
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
US(A)	United States of America
USD	United States Dollar
WWI	First World War
YPG	People's Protection Units

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Abstract

The current Syrian civil war is full of political complexities. Syria's flux has been accompanied by various narratives and geopolitical interests that are promoted by international, regional and national actors with diverse positions and weights. The US, Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant (ISIL) are among the main actors on Syria's conflict pattern. These and other actors provide different and incompatible as well as complex narratives to the Syrian conflict that, in turn, makes the Syrian conflict the worst of all at the global level. It can be observed that (a) Russians and Iranians support the Syrian state and oppose anti-regime groups and ISIL (b) The United States of America backs moderate rebels and Kurdish forces and is against the Syrian state, ISIL and Islamist groups (c) United Kingdom and France assist moderate rebels and are in opposition to the Syrian state, ISIL and Islamist groups, (d) Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Jordan sponsor Islamist and moderate Syrian opposition groups and challenge the Syrian state and ISIL and (e) Turkey helps out rebels and Syrian Turkmen and confronts ISL. These different and complex narratives have not brought any viable solution to the Syrians to date. This research concludes that the interaction of these national and transnational veto players closed the path to peace and security of Syria at the cost of Syrians and Middle Eastern peace. It is very difficult to think of a viable solution through these deliberately formulated and intricate situations where the various irreconcilable interests of the veto players are on the agenda. Durable solutions will not come unless each of the veto players leave or minimize their egoistic interests.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

It has been more than five years since the Syrian version of the Arab Spring broke out with daunting intricacy and humanitarian crises. Syria is now inundated by civil and proxy wars as a result of discontent, sectarianism, radicalization, and regional and international rivalry. As a result, Syria's territorial integrity is fragmented, the economy is crippled, people are displaced internally and externally, and natural resources, (as a curse), have fallen to extremist groups. The copious troubles in the Syrian civil war are so much interrelated and difficult to solve. Different actors strive to bring about different outcomes from such a complicated situation. The international community is looking for a viable solution but the process suffers from lack of neutral or non-partisan peace negotiators.¹

The Syrian war resulted in a significant shutdown of the provision of public basic services for the Syrian people. Schools are closed, the scourge of poverty is widely spread, gender-based violence is rampant and the country is controlled by “regional warlords, extremist groups, regime forces, foreign militias, and civilians and military factions”.² Because of the crisis, Syria has lost both its economic and human resources. The regime, under the direct assistance of the Russians, has regained a vast swathe of territory which was controlled by the extremists. As Human Rights Watch explains

¹ Spencer, C., Phillips, C., Kinninmont, J. (2013). *Western Policy towards Syria: Ten Recommendations*. Chatham House.

² ARK Group DMCC. (2016). *The Syrian conflict: A systems conflict analysis*.

(2013), the regime deliberately slaughtered civilians with the aim of depopulating opposition controlled areas and used chemical weapons which are prohibited. All these conditions downgraded the regime's status and it is a critical factor for any kind of negotiation.³

The Syrian conflict is comprised of different actors with varied motives. These actors make investments into the conflict in political, military, and socio-economy forms. Russia backs the Syrian regime substantially. The survival of the Assad regime, in turn, is critical to maintaining Russia's interest in Syria and beyond. Russia is mainly interested in restoring its prestige and advancing its influence in the Middle East. The USA is interested in deposing Assad from power. Iran is interested in challenging Saud's influence and advances its influence in the Middle East. Others have also their own interests and hidden agendas. In its October 2015 report, BBC reported that Russia blocked resolutions critical of President Assad at the UN Security Council and has continued to supply weapons to the Syrian military despite international criticism. Russia has a naval facility at the Syrian port of Tartous which serves as its sole Mediterranean base for its Black Sea fleet. BBC also reported that Russia also has forces at an air base in Lataika, President Assad's Shia Alawite heartland. Narrating about US's investment in Syria, BBC revealed that it supports Syria's main opposition alliance, the National Coalition, and provides limited military assistance to moderate rebels. It has been conducting air strikes on IS and other jihadist groups and it provides trainings and arms to Syrian rebels. According to BBC, Saudi Arabia also provides military and financial

³ Human Rights Watch. (2013). *Attacks on Ghouta: Analysis of Alleged Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria, Report*.

assistance to several rebel groups, including those with Islamist ideologies, and take part in the US-led coalition air campaign against IS. Turkey also supports the Syrian opposition and challenged by the burden of refugee crisis as it is hosting millions of them who fled Syria. It also provides air bases for strikes against IS. BBC also mentions the role played by Iran who is believed to be the major Shia power in the region. It provides billions of dollars to the Alawite-dominated Syrian government. It also provides military advisers and subsidized weapons.⁴

It is believed that the involvement of complex regional and international actors in the Syrian conflict, the sectarian character of the conflict, and displacement of half of the Syrian population are critical impediments for conflict resolution and stabilization in the country. Although there are peace negotiation attempts at the international level, the complex nature of the conflict has limited impact for a possible resolution in the near future.⁵ It is against the backdrop of the aforementioned problems in Syria that this study tries to investigate the role of the various veto players in influencing the future of Syria and its people.

⁴ BBC October 2015 report.

⁵ Asseburg, M., Wimmen, H. *Civil War in Syria, External Actors and Interests as Drivers of Conflict*. German Institute for International and Security Affairs.

1.1 Major Research Questions

It is the accumulated discontent of the Arab citizens over decades that brought the Arab Spring into squares and streets in many Arab capitals.⁶ The Revolution has effectively challenged the authoritarian regimes of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. It has extricated Tunisia, Egypt and Libya from their dictatorial leaders.⁷ The Revolution in Syria has however taken a different form and is still going on. Syria has now emerged as a place for international and regional proxy wars, Islamic extremism, unlikely alliances, insurgency and civil war. As a result of this disordered state of affairs in Syria, more than four hundred thousand Syrians were killed and about half of the population has been displaced internally and abroad.⁸

The Revolution that started as a peaceful demonstration was crashed violently by the Assad government, tempting opposition groups to organize themselves with Salafi-Jihadi groups taking the forum. Specially, Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) advanced unpredictably and changed Syria into a hell and overshadowed the secularists. Now, more than ever before, it became the major threat to global security. The United States formed a coalition comprised of Western and Arab countries to downgrade and destroy ISIL. In

⁶ Mansfield P. (1991). *Middle East*. United States of America: Viking.

⁷ <https://www.shoreline.edu/gac/documents/.../arab-spring-timelines.pdf>

⁸ Dana Visall. (2016). <http://www.methownaturalist.com/48-Syria%20Articles.pdf>

addition, the Assad government, opposition groups and even Salafi-jihadists have been fighting ISIL since it entered into Syria.⁹

This study tries to explore the pre- and post-2011 political dynamics in Syria, the patterns of the conflict, the role of international and regional interventionists (veto players)¹⁰ and whether peace can be achieved or not. It gives emphasis to the following research questions.

1. What brought the Syrian 2011 revolution?
2. How have the secularist and Islamist opposition groups thrived during the conflict?
3. What are the patterns of alliances of the conflict that involved national, regional and international veto players?
4. What is the role of national and transnational veto players in determining the future of Syria?

1.2 Significance of the Study

Syria is one of the countries that have been severely damaged by the consequences of the Arab Spring since March 2011. The number of the death toll and refugee crisis that resulted from this ongoing civil war attracted many writers. Individual and common interests of national, regional and international veto players or major actors complicated

⁹ Cordesman, A. (2016), *The Human Cost of War in the Middle East: A Graphic Overview*.

¹⁰ David E. Cunningham defined veto players in the *Journal of Peace Research* (2011). He said that veto players are a set of actors with the ability to continue the war on their own even if the other actors reach agreement.

the problem and prolonged the sufferings of Syrians inside and outside Syria. There is more than one line of conflicts. In the first line, the Syrian government fights opposition groups and Islamic-Jihadi groups. In the second line, regional allies support the Syrian government and oppose Syrian opposition groups and Islamic-Jihadi groups. The third line is comprised of US-led veto players planning to depose Assad from power and fights the IS. The fourth line is between the whole world and ISIS. All veto players in all lines are considered to be capable of influencing the outcome of the conflict in the country and beyond. Therefore, it is very imperative to study the effects of national and transnational veto players in deciding the duration of a civil war similar to the Syrian case.

1.3 Methodology

In order to answer the major research theme, i.e. *the Role of National and Transnational Veto Players in Determining the Future of Syria*, a qualitative and in-depth behavioral analysis of some of the major veto players in the current Syrian civil war will be conducted. The research covers the five years period starting from March 2011, the commencement of the Syrian civil war.

This research employs data collection from historical and political books, journals, international organizations, academic writings, news and other publications regarding the current Syrian civil war. The research will analyse the role played by each veto player: national and transnational actors that are directly or indirectly involved in the war.

The main hypothesis here is that what role the national and transnational veto players are playing in determining a peaceful Syria through their interactions. The Syrian civil war has religious and political dimensions. National opposition groups, home grown Jihadi groups, neighboring countries, regional and international powers have involved themselves in the conflict and the intricacy should be studied in detail.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

David E. Cunningham (2013) describes veto players as having the capability to unilaterally block settlement of a civil war. He says that there are at least two veto players in a civil war, a government and a rebel group. He continued to say that there are multiple veto players in a civil war when external forces are heavily involved in the conflict. Cunningham argues that the USA and Soviet Union involved in many civil wars during the Cold War period and they were known to be veto players as they were prolonging any civil war if they did not get the result they planned. If some combatant groups cannot block any kind of political settlement, they cannot be considered as veto players. As Cunningham generalizes combatants that have greater numbers of troops, more popular support, operate in terrain that provides protection from government attacks, have more advanced military technology and better trained and equipped troops, and have access to funding sources are more likely to be veto players.¹¹

In another publication,¹² Cunningham (2013) explains that all civil wars end either in military victory or in negotiated settlement. He noted that civil wars last longer, and are more resistant to negotiated settlement when they contain a set of actors who can block settlements. He concludes that for civil wars to end in negotiated settlement, all internal

¹¹ David E. Cunningham, April 2013, Who Should Be at the Table?: Veto Players and Peace Processes in Civil War. *University of Maryland & Centre for the Study of Civil War at the Peace Research Institute in Oslo*, Penn State Journal of Law & International Affairs.

¹² Project on Middle East Political science, 2013. The Political Science of Syria's civil War.

and external actors that have the ability to continue the conflict unilaterally have to agree to a settlement and actually stop fighting, or international actors have to be willing to impose a peace on unwilling veto players. Based on his argument, he sees the Syrian civil war as follows:

When there are many veto players, as in Syria, it is extremely difficult to find an agreement that all veto players can agree to, and thus conflicts drag on. In Syria, the level of international commitment required to impose a peace is lacking, and, while there are strategies that international actors can use to assist veto players in reaching negotiated settlements, they are unlikely to work there. The civil war in Syria, therefore, is likely to last much longer and the prospects for any sort of negotiated settlement are extremely low (p28).

Center for the Study of Civil War (CSCW) [2010] defines external veto players as transnational factors who possess the capability in the initial outbreak of civil wars or play an important role in the escalation and dynamics of conflict once underway. They also play a critical role in prolonging or resolution of such conflicts.¹³ The same document argues that:

The conventional wisdom tends to portray civil wars as problems of poor and weak states, driven largely by the greater opportunities for conflict when states are unable to enforce control or deter protest, or by the greater incentives for participation in conflict when the formal economy affords few rewards for normal economic activities. It is often inferred that civil wars are best prevented by shoring up the capacity of the central government, achieving sustainable economic growth and, more controversially, establishing more representative political institutions (p1-2).

Countries cannot be immune from transnational dimensions; they are not impervious to events and actors outside their boundaries. A conflict in one country may be dependent on actors and events on neighbors and nearby regional states. The actors in civil war do not necessarily confine themselves to a specific country. Ethnic groups with transnational kin, spanning international boundaries and resources mobilized transnationally can

¹³ Center for the Study of Civil War, 2010. Transnational Dimensions and the Myth of Civil Wars as National Events.

significantly affect a civil war in a country. For instance, the presence of Kurds in Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran poses more risks if violent conflicts erupt in one of these countries.¹⁴ CSCW argues that:

External support requires some degree of ‘demand’ by insurgents and of ‘supply’ by a potential supporting state. Empirically, it can be shown that support seems more likely in instances when groups have transnational segments, when states have a prior history of antagonisms, and when rebel groups are moderately strong relative to the government. One interpretation of the last-mentioned is that rebels must be sufficiently weak for foreign support to be attractive, given the problems that this may entail with respect to potentially competing goals of the patron state and potential loss of legitimacy, yet also sufficiently strong to be considered plausible candidates for potential supporters (p3).

CSCW concludes that civil wars are not domestic events, and transnational linkages are very important in the risk of the outbreak of conflict and in how conflicts evolve. Common approaches to civil war treating these as domestic events build on misleading foundations and suggest inappropriate policy implications. Transnational linkages create challenges for responses to peacekeeping operations that are unlikely to be successful unless they have a broader focus and take account of actors and implications in other states. Transnational linkages influence prospects for cooperation and possible solutions to preventing violence. Transnational kin can increase the power of groups and their ability to gain concessions from governments. Neighboring states at greater risk of conflict also have greater incentives to provide and support conflict management efforts.¹⁵

¹⁴ Center for the Study of Civil War, 2010. Transnational Dimensions and the Myth of Civil Wars as National Events.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Individual states can no more be treated as individual states in civil war since transnational factors and linkages between states can exert strong influences on the risk of violent civil conflict. “Understanding the dynamics of civil wars and the prospects for their resolution requires that we consider potential contributing factors both within states and in transnational relations and interactions across state boundaries”.¹⁶

In his work *Syria: a state of imbalance and war*, Viking Bohman (2016) stated that the many different actors persisted in and intensified their fighting because of four manifestations as domestic factors. The first one is that Syria is a state without a nation. Ethnic nationalism in Syria did not act as a unifier in Syria due to the fact that ethnic affiliations and state borders do not overlap. Civic nationalism has not been installed in Syria since people feel more Sunni or Kurdish than Syrian. This shows that nation-building in Syria remains unaccomplished. The same author mentions Miller’s theory to categorize Syria as a state without a nation. He adds that for more than four decades, the ruling Alawite Assad family formed a loose coalition with Christians, Druze and smaller secular Sunnis and this resulted in the 2011 uprising which is considered to be a Sunni Arab bid to overthrow the loose coalition. In fact this was inspired by the Arab Spring in the North Africa region. In essence, it has bore ethno-sectarian affiliation. The revolt was between the Sunni Muslim majorities and the minority Shia rulers.¹⁷

¹⁶ Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, 2007, Transnational Dimensions of Civil War, Journal of Peace Research.

¹⁷ Syria: a state of imbalance and war, Viking Bohman (2016).

Bohman took radical Islam as the second manifestation. The opposition in Syria initially had a secular nature. As the war intensified, radical Islamic tendencies grew significantly. This situation created opportunity for the Syrian government to maintain and strengthen its coalition with minorities. Assad used the increase in Islamic extremism to justify its legitimacy and repression. Bohman continued to say that most extremists subscribed to the pan-Islamic identity of an Islamic Umma (or “nation”) and aspire to establish a political authority (a Caliphate) beyond Syria’s borders. ISIS also sees itself as a transnational uprising to sweep away existing states. This shows that extremism is playing its role in protracting the Syrian civil war. The third manifestation is the state of Kurdish people as a nation without a state. These people are ethnically and linguistically distinct people and they live close to Turkish and Iraqi borders. These people are skeptical of the opposition in Syria and they viewed it as Arab nationalism and Islamism. The rest of the opposition alienated them and the fight is also between them. They fight Daesh and other radicals. As a result, they reinvigorated their demand for autonomy. They want to ensure an improved status for Kurds in post-Assad times. Following withdrawal of security forces, they have their own flag in municipal buildings. The fourth manifestation is the weakness of the Syrian state. The Assad regime could not control its borders as the war continues. Extremists gained hospitable terrain in the country. As Bohman has articulated “the weakness of the Syrian state appears to have acted as permissive factor that allowed violence to play out, territories to be grabbed, and extremist forces to proliferate”.¹⁸

¹⁸ Syria: a state of imbalance and war, Viking Bohman (2016).

Bohman continues to explain that the sectarian nature of the war exacerbated the situation. Hezbollah, Iran and Iraqi Shias as Shia-alliance and Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the Persian Gulf States as Sunni-alliance supported groups as Sunni coalition play an important role in protracting the war. The sectarian motivations in Syria have transborder ties. The pronounced support from religious leaders in the MENA region spurred the inflow of foreign fighters in Syria. This is evidenced by Egyptian Sunni-scholars' issuance of a *fatwa* in 2013 calling all Muslims to support Syrian opposition. The transborder ties of the Kurdish people in Syria and Turkey have also an effect in prolonging the war. Besides, the weakness of the Syrian state attracted regional forces to enter the country. This is the regional dimension of the Syrian war.¹⁹

The Syrian civil war has also its own international dimension. The United States and Russia are the external forces that try to determine the future of Syria, with the latter serving as the supplier of arms to Syria since the 1970s. Russia has also provided a diplomatic cover up to Syria at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). As explained earlier, Russia blocked resolutions critical of President Assad at the UNSC. The Assad regime is now dependent on Russia's intervention in Syria. The West provided assistance to the opposition. This has escalated the war. The main involvement of the West now is to destroy al Dawla al Islamiya fi al Iraq wa al Sham (*Daesh*), which is an Arabic acronym for ISIS. This competition between the West and Russia prolonged the war. Bohman (2016) mentions Miller as saying that great power competition tends to

¹⁹ Syria: a state of imbalance and war, Viking Bohman (2016).

sustain protracted regional conflicts through the support that the great powers provide to the local antagonists who are their clients. He continued to say that the assistance granted by the patrons to their regional clients shields these clients from the costs of the regional rivalry and thus reduces their incentives to make the concessions necessary for a diplomatic compromise. In other words, he said, great power aid enables small states to persist in regional conflict and even intensify it.²⁰

²⁰ Syria: a state of imbalance and war, Viking Bohman (2016).

CHAPTER THREE

Historical Background

It is well known that the Arab Spring is the result of years of citizens' discontent due to lack of good governance and provision of basic services. This, in turn, is the result of the failure of nation-building in almost the whole of the MENA region. This failure is, again, the result of colonial and post-cold-war interests of national and international powers. Today's Syria is the result of all these synergies and it is very important to see its political dynamic since the beginning of the 20th century.

3.1 Ottoman Syria, Independence and the Formation of Baath Party

Syria was used to be one of the provinces of the Ottoman Empire that had amorphous territories. Ottoman Syria was more than today's Syria, comprising the current states of Jordan, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon and Syria itself. Before the end of the First World War (WWI) in 1916, France and Britain agreed under a secret pact that divides the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire between them. Created by this pact, the Sykes-Picot Agreement, Syria spent much of its time in political flux until 1970. The border was carved out by these colonialists. In 1920, the League of Nations accepted the Sykes-Picot Agreement and declared Syria as a French Mandate, with the French, as an advanced state, tutoring Syria, as a less advanced state, until it can administer its own affairs. But France acted as a colonizer rather than a tutor. The French, then, followed a divide and

rule strategy in order to suppress Arab nationalism among the Sunnis and granted the Alawites and Druze to administer their own autonomous areas in modern Syria.²¹

The French used Alawites to subdue local rebellions. It is through this colonial strategy that the Syrians lost unity and identity with prevalent sectarianism. Syria gained its independence in 1946 without viable political institutions and identity. It became a geographic identity with tensions of sectarianism that was planted by the French mandate.²²

French legacies and the fragility of the Middle East left Syria unstable until 1970. Syria and its Arab allies were mortified by Israel in 1948 in the first Arab-Israeli war as a result of which the geopolitics of the Middle East has been changing since then. Until 1970, Syria experienced more than ten coups and all succeeding governments experienced unity, governance and stability dilemmas. With a majority Sunni population, 75%, Syrian leaders promoted Arab nationalism as their political identity, to ease sectarianism in the country. Their promotion of Arab nationalism also helped Syrians to unite with Egypt to form the United Arab Republic (UAR) – (1958 – 1961). In his work *The Ba'ath of Syria and Iraq*, Isaac concluded that Syrians became despondent after giving away their freedom, power and sovereignty to Egypt which instituted socialist ideology and state-based economy as well as authoritarian rule in the country. Political parties were not allowed under the UAR and later became the foundation for the Baathists to rule under

²¹ Dostal, J. (2014). *Post-independence Syria and the Great Powers (1946-1958): How Western Power Politics Pushed the Country Toward the Soviet Union*.

²² Ibid.

one party. Some also argue that UAR produced the many parts of the Baath Party.²³ The Sunnis take the Alawites as conspired with the French since they were favored by them during the French mandate period. As a consequence, the Sunnis barred the Alawites from government positions. Using their position in the military, the Alawites led the Baathist coup in 1963.^{24 25}

Syria and its Arab allies have been mortified again by Israeli forces in 1967 and General Hafez al-Assad who controlled the military attempted the last and successful coup in 1970 in the Syrian history. Hafez al-Assad came to the political scene and created an Alawite dominated security and governance apparatus that temporarily pacified the country through quashing political dissent. This can be testified by the fact that one out of two hundred forty Syrians was a security officer and the cost of the security sector (an instrument for state control) was USD three billion per year. Al-Assad learned political maneuvering when he was an officer in the Syrian Air Force. He had a very good knowledge of preventing military coups and strategies in consolidating his power. He positioned Alawite family members and loyalists in critical positions including military posts. He had also promoted people from other minorities such as the Druze, Christians and Kurds. He encouraged his family members to intermarry with Sunni business elites who obtained the regime's protection politically and in the provision of profitable

²³ Isaac, S. *The Ba'ath of Syria and Iraq*.

²⁴ The Baathists combine socialism, secularism and Arab nationalism. Socialism was the predominant ideology of the time. After seizing power in 1963, the Baathists made some reforms including land reforms and nationalization of major sectors of the economy and gained the support of the rural people.

²⁵ Davidson, L., Goldschmidt, A. (2010). *A Concise History of the Middle East*. United States of America: Westview Press.

government contracts.²⁶ He had been commended for the creation of trusty Sunni business class and organization of a number of equivalent military and security agencies. He did not forget the peasants who served as the bases for the Baathism. He had always been supporting and subsidizing the farmers. Despite his authoritarian nature, he had been credited for creating a relatively stable Syria.²⁷

As Colbert and John (2014) explained, the historical and geographical Syria has often functioned as the geographical keystone of the Middle East as it is lying between the Mediterranean and the middle Euphrates.²⁸ Syria has important routes that served as the major passageways for the movement of people and goods for thousands of years before and after its creation by the Sykes-Picot agreement. “Indigenous Syrians” have been influenced by these persistent movements that resulted in the current ethnic and cultural pattern. Syria was a home for Umayyad Empire (661-750 AD) and a focus of Islamic-Arab aspirations and potentially a modern political-spiritual center of the Arab world. Syria has undergone so many changes including its Baathist ideology and conflict with neighbors and the West. The many problems that were accumulated over years erupted into protest, insurgency movements and civil war progressively.²⁹

²⁶ Held, C., Thomas, J. (2014). *Middle East Patterns – Places, Peoples, and Politics*. United States of America: Westview Press.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

Syria has a unitary multiparty republic with one legislative house (People's Assembly). Its population is over 22.2 million³⁰ with various ethnic compositions (Arab – 86.2%, Bedouin – 7.4%, Palestinian – 3.9%, Armenian – 2.7%, and Circassian, Turkmens, and Assyrian – 3.8%) and religion compositions (Muslim – 85% of which Sunnis account for 74%, Alawis 11%, Christians – 10% and Druze and others – 5%(Colbert and John, 2014).³¹ As mentioned earlier Syria and Egypt were merged to form UAR. Here the original purpose of the merger was forestalling a feared pro-Communist coup in Syria, but Egypt's domination as a standard-bearer of Arab nationalism offended the Syrians. The unequal partnership that was created by Egypt obtained its culmination by a coup in Damascus and Syria became independent again.³²

After Egypt was attacked by Israel in 1967, Syria entered into war with Israel and resulted in the devastation of its air force and lost the Golan Heights to Israel. The occupation of the Golan Heights has continued until this moment. General Hafez al-Assad had continued the legacy of the 1963 policies that combined socialist economic policy, neutralist approach in international affairs, and mainstays of Baath philosophy – Arab nationalism and secularism. Assad developed a more parochial characteristic with the objective of putting his military allies (Alawis) at the top positions of power. The Alawis profess heterodox Shii-origin creed and originally concentrated in the western mountains of Syria. This can be linked to the French authorities', under the French

³⁰ BTI 2016, Syria Country Report

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

Mandate, practice of heavy recruitment of the Alawis for military service to suppress Sunnis.³³

After the death of his elder brother in a car accident, Bashar al-Assad was called by his father from London in 1994 and succeeded his father when the latter died of a heart attack in June 2000. Bashar al-Assad made some reforms including reducing or relaxing the heavy hand of the state on the economy, licensing private banks, loosening foreign exchange, lessening import controls, and opening stock exchange. But the pace of change was very slow and uneven. The regime preserved the Baathi/Alawi domination and suppressed political dissent. The benefits of economic growth were unevenly distributed. There was a widespread discontent among the majority of Syrians before the 2011 uprising. Americans consider Syria as a member of the “Axis of Evil” when George W. Bush addressed State of the Union in 2002 but Syria improved relations with the European Union (Colbert and John, 2014).³⁴

Colbert and John (2014) explained that historic or “Greater” Syria was much larger than the current republic, and it continued to exist theoretically in some form through the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1918. With the League of Nations mandates, it was truncated in several ways. Syrians were not consulted when Britain and France divided up lands of Syria to their mandate. Lebanon was also declared independent by the French mandate in 1920. Part of Syria was also annexed to Turkey by the French mandate in 1938. Israel

³³ Held, C., Thomas, J. (2014). *Middle East Patterns – Places, Peoples, and Politics*. United States of America: Westview Press.

³⁴ Ibid.

also occupied the Golan Heights in 1967. These significant circumstances affected Syria's foreign policy and "have been used to justify policies of internal repression". Syria experienced a number of coup d'états until early 1970s.³⁵

Father and son and assorted family members from Alawi minority dominated the Baath Party and the government. Muslim Brotherhood challenged the secularist Baathi-Alawi alliance violently. The regime responded brutally. Kausch (2015) said that despite these divisive forces, "Syrian nationalism and Arab nationalism" brought Syrians into a "viable national group". Syrian's divorce from Egypt's marriage and Israel's threat and occupation of the Golan Heights helped the Syrian government to solidify its hold on the population. The situation around Syria makes it relatively stable until early 2011 and "stability was far more important than political freedom" for most Syrians.³⁶

3.2 The Syrian Version of the Arab Spring

When Hafez-al Assad passed away in the year 2000, his son Bashar al-Assad has been bestowed with the presidency. Bashar has taken Syrian governance and security system courses from his father, including manipulation and endurance. When Bashar became the president of the country, he had promised economic reform and modernity to the state bureaucracy.³⁷ In an interview with *The Wall Street Journal* at the beginning of 2011, Bashar said that his country is the most stable provided that his government is associated

³⁵ Choueiri, Y (Ed). (2005). *A Companion to the History of the Middle East*. Australia: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

³⁶ Kausch, K (Ed.). (2015). *Geopolitics and Democracy in the Middle East*. Spain: Artes Graficas Villena.

³⁷ Raphaeli, N. (2007). *SYRIA'S FRAGILE ECONOMY*, Middle East Review of International Affairs, Vol. 11, No.2.

to the beliefs of the people as a core issue and there is no divergence that creates vacuum for any kind of disturbance.³⁸ In that interview, he warned other Arab countries to be prepared for the consequences of the uprising if they have not brought any kind of reform previously. Al-Assad's immune Syria was hit by the same uprising a month later inspired by the Arab Spring.

It becomes very interesting to find about the causes of Syria's version of the Arab Spring. Among the long list of the causes of the Syrian version of the Arab Uprising, economic and demographic causes are at the apex. In 2005, Bashar implemented IMF orchestrated and prescribed liberal economic reforms that included redirecting food subsidies and privatization of government companies.³⁹ This move was an antithesis to the socialist ideology which was instigated by Egypt during the union time as UAR and advanced by his father until 2000. A severe drought hit Syria from 2006 – 2010 hitting up to 75% of the farmers who lost their entire crops. Bashar continued in his IMF reform plan and ignored the rural people who were treated by his father judiciously. Bashar al-Assad, without predicting the consequences, ended the social contract and the adeptly designed legacy of his father with the rural people. The privatized companies fall on the hands of the few. His reform efforts resulted in elevating the few and impoverishing millions. And it ended undesirably. In his work *Syria's Bloody Arab Spring*, Philips described that the economy was shouldering the increasing population especially the youth below 25 and undergraduates. Because of the fragmented identities, the people of Syria tolerated their

³⁸ The Wall Street Journal. (2011). *Interview with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad*.

³⁹ Raphaeli, N. (2007). *Syria's Fragile Economy*, Middle East Review of International Affairs, Vol. 11, No. 2.

grievances for so many years and finally inspired by the political and social movements in other Arab countries.⁴⁰

The current Syrian uprising started at the town of Deraa where school children condemned the Assad regime with their banner on the school wall that was read as “Down with the Regime”.⁴¹ The school children were interrogated and tortured at Damascus. Because of this incident and inspiration from other uprisings, Syrians took to the streets protesting the Assad regime. The regime responded violently and things became out of control. Syrian intelligence tortured and killed 13-years-old Hamza al-Khatib and this became a uniting factor for the Syrian version of the Arab Spring.

Most Syrians were glued to their televisions to follow up events in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. Demonstrations began in Syria and broken up by the authorities violently. The arrest and beating of young boys and their parents “for posting pro-Arab Spring graffiti” yielded wider demonstrations that “led to outright civil war”.⁴² The protesters targeted and burned party related properties including Syriatel which used to operate more than fifty percent of the country’s telecommunication network. As a result, a bigger rift between Assad supporters and opponents was created. At the beginning, the

⁴⁰ Philips, C. *Syria’s Bloody Arab Spring*.

⁴¹ Danahar, P. (2013). *The New Middle East – The World after the Arab Uprising*. London. Newdelhi. New York, Sydney: Bloomsbury.

⁴² Ibid.

demonstrators were asking only for some reforms, while opponents called for the end of the Baath Party and Assad's presidency.⁴³

After a nationwide protest in March 2011, the government took harsh measures against the protesters and the opposition group began to coalesce. Some Syrian army members deserted the government and joined the opposition group with their ammunitions. Moreover, oppositions' stock of weapons had been enlarged by "local captures and external suppliers". Opposition coalitions began to form in June 2011 and refugees began fleeing to neighboring countries for transit to other destinations. The government of Syria considers its opponents as "criminals, mercenaries hired by foreign enemies, fundamentalist Islamists known as Salafis, and Islamist terrorists". But it is believed that Assad's oppressive tactics attracted many moderate and Islamist groups, including members of al-Qaida in Iraq, to join the civil war. Assad was condemned by the Arab countries for his atrocious actions against his people and the Arab League finally suspended Syria's membership from the organization in November 2011. Western countries and Turkey called for Assad to relinquish power and the EU sanctioned purchase of Syrian oil with the purpose of preventing the Syrian government from getting "revenue and foreign exchange".⁴⁴

⁴³ Danahar, P. (2013). *The New Middle East – The World after the Arab Uprising*. London. Newdelhi. New York, Sydney: Bloomsbury.

⁴⁴ Lyme, R. (2012). Sanctions Assad's Syria, Mapping the Economic, Socioeconomic and Political Repercussions of the International Sanctions Imposed on Syria Since March 2012. *DIIS Report*.

The UN was heavily involved in providing humanitarian services for Syrian refugees inside Syria and refugee camps in neighboring countries. On the other hand, China and Russia blocked the UNSC from adopting a broader sanction against Syria. But later in 2012, Russia and China “seemed to be distancing themselves from the regime, which, as it became more isolated, also became more dependent on its one last ally - Iran”.⁴⁵ But later Russia came to Syria with full force because of its interest to restore its prestige and advance in the Middle East.

In 2012, the government lost large swaths of territory because of the widespread chaos. This condition helped the infiltration of “foreign Salafai elements” who later gained support from Syrian Sunni Arabs. The long and porous border in Iraq as a result of security gap facilitated their infiltration. The weak organizational structure and division of Syrian opposition groups also facilitated the permeation Salafi-jihadi groups. When time passes, the Syrian Arab Spring becomes the most tragic one, with the rate of casualties increasing day by day and millions fleeing the country. The acts of savagery by the Assad regime and the insurgents increased. The Alawis became vulnerable to the insurgents movement across the country especially the Salfis and al-Qaida. As a result, they confined themselves in their mountains. Other minorities, such as the Christians, who concentrated in Damascus, Aleppo and other places, and the Druze, who have traditionally lived in the south of Damascus, fear that their future is uncertain and may lead to “persecution, displacement and exile”. This scourge created an opportunity for the

⁴⁵ Ferdinand, P. (2013). *THE POSITIONS OF RUSSIA AND CHINA AT THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL IN THE LIGHT OF RECENT CRISES*. Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Warwick, UK.

Syrian Kurds to hold an autonomy that was long wanted in their mind. The Kurd's aspiration is to unite with the Kurds in Iraq and Turkey.⁴⁶

World Bank data shows that Syria's population growth rate was between 3.5 and 4% before the Arab Spring. As people migrate, it became 1.8% by 2011 as millions migrated. Syria's version of the Arab Spring resulted in high rate of unemployment, still per capita income, and housing shortages. EU was the largest assistance provider in the 2000s that enabled Syria to make its exports in the pre-2011 atmosphere. But a 2007 EU report explained why an apparent barrage of economic reforms had brought only modest result was quoted as follows: "The political and economic reforms announced at the beginning of President al-Assad's term are materializing slower than expected, causing frustration among some parts of the population". Economic growth and population growth did not go at equal pace, with the former lagging behind the latter. Improvements in the standard of living have been forestalled and the youth bulge outnumbered the job creation by the economy.

The 2015 Global Terrorism Index (GTI) puts Syria as the most affected by terrorism. Iraq, Afghanistan, Nigeria and Pakistan are also the most affected. Foreign fighters are increasingly joining ISIL. UN and government reports indicate that nearly 30,000 individuals travelled to Iraq and Syria to join ISIS. This number is larger than foreign fighters (20,000) who traveled to Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation. From Muslim countries, Tunisia contributes the largest number of foreign fighters who joined

⁴⁶ Turunc H. Turkey and Iraq, www.lse.ac.uk/IDEAS/publications/reports/pdf/SR007/iraq.pdf.

ISIS (5,000), followed by Saudi Arabia (2,500), Jordan (2,000), Morocco (1,500), Turkey (1,400), Lebanon (900), Egypt (600), and so on. The rest of the world also contributes its share, including Russia (2,900) followed by France (1,650), Germany (550), United Kingdom (500), Belgium (450), and so on.⁴⁷ These foreign fighters are the greatest threat for their respective countries since they are capable of committing terror acts as was observed in France and Belgium. These countries also suffer from lone wolf terrorism.⁴⁸⁴⁹

As Christina Schori Liang writes in GPI 2015, the world became fixated on the rise of ISIL, the richest and most violent terrorist group in modern history.⁵⁰ It is recruiting foreign fighters to achieve its goal of “lasting and expanding caliphate”. When compared with other terrorists, ISIL is greater in significance for it has transformed terrorism from a “regional to global security threat”. Its use of the 21st century ICT, attraction strategy in the recruitment of foreign fighters, and security gaps that created ungoverned spaces in Iraq and Syria have made it successful. Its power base has also been built on its unprecedented wealth which is the result of “diverse and sophisticated financing strategies”.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Global Peace Index (GPI), 2015.

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ “Lone wolf terrorists are individuals or a small number of individuals who commit an attack in support of a group, movement, or ideology without material assistance or orders from such group.”

⁵⁰ Global Peace Index (GPI), 2015.

⁵¹ Ibid.

The US and coalition is targeting ISIL only through kinetic approach. Dr Christina explains that from August 2014 to October 2015, the cost of the campaign was USD 11 million per day. Despite these efforts, ISIL has been resilient for a long period of time. Its brutal actions have not been limited to Mesopotamia and the Levant. It was spreading in the form of allegiance. The killing of Ethiopians and Coptic Egyptians in Libya, its terror acts in Yemen, Egypt, Tunisia, France and Belgium are some of the examples. Although the West considers ISIL as rogue state,⁵² it should have not forgotten that it is governing a territory and is a “successful criminal enterprise”.⁵³

3.3 International Relations

At the end of the First World War, Damascus led Arab nationalism was accepted in the Fertile Crescent. Syria was the center of the leadership that led the Arab revolt of 1916 – 1917. A Kingdom was established in 1920 by Faysal ibn Husayn who was forced to abdicate by the French forces. But its neighbors were envious of its leadership role in the region. Israel was established in 1948 consequently. Thousands of Palestinian refugees fled to Syria since Syria fought Israel in three wars and showed partisanship to Palestinians, who enjoyed greater rights in Syria. Although Syria is a member of the Arab League, it has “advocated and practiced a greater degree of secularism”.⁵⁴

⁵² US foreign policy and the abstraction of threat. (2016). *The Islamic State lexical battleground*. The Royal Institute of International Affairs.

⁵³ Global Peace Index (GPI), 2015.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Its relation with the neighbors is full of frictions and hostilities. Syria had an excellent economic relationship since Iraq's petroleum outlets were flowing through it. "Serious and persistent disputes arose" when Baathi regimes controlled both countries in 1960. Ideological differences and "disagreements over oil royalties" became the bases for their disputes. Putting aside its extensive and strong advocacy for Arab unity, Syria supported Iran during the Iran-Iraq war. Syria became a non-permanent member⁵⁵ of the UNSC in 2001 and "supported the resolution requiring Iraq to readmit weapons inspectors". In the year 2003, with many members in the UNSC, Syria "refused to sanction preemptive military airstrike" that did not become an impediment to the US-UK invasion in Iraq. Iraq joined many other Arab countries to suspend Syria from Arab League membership in November 2011.

Syria tried to invade north-western Jordan twice to show its opposition to the Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty of 1994. The two countries renewed their diplomatic relationship after the ascension of King Abdullah to Jordan's throne in 1999 and the same with Bashar al-Assad to Syria's presidency in 2000. Jordan also voted to support the suspension of Syria from Arab League membership in November 2011 and King Abdullah officially advised al-Assad to step down from his presidency.

Despite the incompatibility between "Baathi, secular and Alawi-led Syria" and "conservative, religious, and Sunni Saudi Arabia", Syria has received a considerable

⁵⁵ Non-permanent members of the UNSC only participate in decision making but the final decision rests upon the will of the Super Powers.

amount of financial support from Saudi Arabia. Although Saudi Arabia is unhappy about Syria's relation with revolutionary Iran, it enjoyed Syria's partnership in the coalition against Iraq. But after the outbreak of the Arab Spring in Syria, al-Assad's increasingly anti-Sunni strategy inspired the Saudis to support the insurgents.⁵⁶

Besides border disputes, Syria and Turkey quarreled over Euphrates water problems. This was exacerbated by Syria's support for the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Syria's relation with Turkey was accompanied by Alexandretta irredentism, interference in Euphrates and Syria's unhappiness over Turkey-Israel collaboration. Turkey joined the Syrian insurgency supporters' club in 2011. Turkey is now hosting Syrian refugees and has entered into controversy with the EU.⁵⁷

Syria-Iran relation was strengthened by their common antipathy toward Saddam Husayn. Hundreds of thousands of Iranian pilgrims flock to Syria for Shii shrines in Damascus. Syria's neighbors have been disturbed by this particular relationship with Iran for Iran provides finance, weapons and military advisors for al-Assad regime.⁵⁸

France was an advocate of reform in Syria before 2011. And it began to support the FSA with nonlethal weapons in 2012. Because of US-Israel relationship in the 1950s, Syria

⁵⁶ Moniquet, C. (2013). *The Involvement of Salafism/Wahhabism in the Support and Supply of Arms to Rebel Groups Around the World*.

⁵⁷ Icdyyg, A. (2015). *Syrian Refugees in Turkey: The Long Road Ahead*, Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.

⁵⁸ Nasur N. (2014). *Syria-Iran Relations (2000-2014)*, *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* Vol. 4, No. 12.

was in deep hostile relations with the US. Then it established relationships with the USSR and Eastern world for its financial and military assistance. When the Eastern bloc disintegrated, Hafez al-Assad changed his policy and became an ally with the Western world. Because of the Arab Spring in Syria, Russia used Syria to prove itself as a spoiler of the West and is playing its role. As mentioned earlier, Russia was the supplier of weapons since 1970s. The US supported the Balfour Declaration and its policy towards Israel created a tense relation with Syria. USSR's support for Syria in the Arab-Israeli war played its own role in making US-Syrian relations a strained one. The disintegration of the communist bloc and Syria's participation in the coalition against Iraq in 1990-1991 improved US-Syria relations. The US is now supporting "moderate opposition groups" against Bashar al-Assad. The support includes finance, ammunition and technical support.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Lister, C. (2014). *DYNAMIC STALEMATE: SURVEYING SYRIA'S MILITARY LANDSCAPE*, Brookings Doha Center.

CHAPTER FOUR

Discussion and Findings

Once an Islamic Caliphate, Syria is home to various ethnic and religious groups, including Kurds, Armenians, Assyrians, Christians, Druze, Alawite Shia and Arab Sunnis. After its independence, Syria has lived through successive periods of political instability driven by the conflicting interests of various groups and external forces. Following the 2011 Arab Spring in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, there are now extremely tense civil and proxy wars in the country. The world's top military spenders in 2015 (the US (USD 596b), China (USD 215b), Saudi Arabia (USD 87.2b), Russia (USD 66.4b), United Kingdom (USD 55.5b), France (USD 50.9b) and others) are bulldozing Syrian buildings and soil in the name of destroying the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant (ISIL) and establishing a democratic regime.⁶⁰

Syria has seen Bashar al-Assad's vindictiveness, strong protests, defections, sanctions, recognition of opposition groups by the West and some Middle Eastern countries, rise of radical Islamist groups, ISIL's atrocious actions, internal and external displacements and most recently the official involvement of Russia in favor of Assad and against Islamists and moderate oppositions. More than 400,000 Syrians have lost their lives in the five years of armed conflict, which began with anti-government protests before escalating into a full-scale civil war. More than 11 million Syrians have been forced to leave their homes and emigrate to Europe for shelter and security reasons. The civil war has been

⁶⁰ Trends in World Military Expenditure. (2015), SIPRI Fact Sheet.

underpinned by a complex pattern of alliances and enmities. The Assad regime and its local opponents are backed by military powers from near and far in varying degrees and in different configurations. On September 30, 2015, Russia launched airstrikes against groups fighting Assad after building a military presence in his western strongholds. A US-led coalition has used regional bases to launch its own airstrikes against predominantly Islamic State targets since June 2014. Syria is roughly divided between four groups: (a) regime forces supported by Hezbollah, Iran and Russia, (b) Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), (c) other Islamist groups, such as Jabhat al Nusra and (d) more moderate opposition groups, such as Free Syrian Army. Kurdish militias separately control areas in the north of the country.

Analysts relate Syria's ongoing conflict to nation-building trajectory starting in the beginning of the twentieth century. Like many European creations that would eventually crumble into violent disorder, the country felt more like a concept, created from a few stray thoughts left over from some big colonial ideas. It has slipped into civil war since the Arab Spring and the world has been glued to the tragedy since that time. Although there is a common understanding to fight ISIL until it disappears, the crisis in Syria reached to a level that seems to be a fight between Russia on one side along with the Iranians and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members on the other side.⁶¹

⁶¹ Project on Middle East Political Science, 2013. *The Political Science of Syria's Civil War*.

4.1 The Syrian Version of the Arab Spring

At the beginning of the Syrian conflict, the protests/oppositions were absolutely peaceful and secular. Assad's brutal counter-protest strategies and fragmented opposition in the country created a beneficial environment for Islamic insurgency to rise.⁶² The insurgent groups joined the civil war in 2012 and 2013. Syrians were not experienced in protests as the regime was extremely repressive. That is why every pocket of Syria presented its own opposition group. Then the Assad government followed the "Hama Strategy" which was followed in 1982. This is a strategy to encircle an area which is inhabited by Islamists and inhumanely molest all the area including the many innocents.⁶³

Pro-regime stakeholders are fighting to maintain the pre-2011 political and socio-economic status quo in Syria. The history of Syria shows how the reluctance to share power and lack of accommodation of diversity will result in violence and fragmentation of national sovereignty. The ARK Group (2016)⁶⁴ described the Syrian situation as follows.

The Syrian state has, since the 1970s, been characterized by a strong presidential system maintained by a cult of personality, control over political expression through single-party rule, brute-force repression of political dissent through the state's military and security institutions, family favoritism, Alawite privilege, and clientelism (p10).

Alawites today hold key positions in all key government structures. Even Assad's family is included in the list of high position holders. These people are now

⁶² Danahar, P. (2013). *The New Middle East – The World after the Arab Uprising*. London. Newdelhi. New York, Sydney: Bloomsbury.

⁶³ Wiedl, K. (2006). *The Hama Massacre – reasons, supporters of the rebellion, Consequences*.

⁶⁴ ARK Group DMCC. (2016). *The Syrian conflict: A systems conflict analysis*.

resolute to maintain the political status quo.⁶⁵The socio-economic infrastructure was also headed by relatives and loyalists since 1970. They took the privilege in government contracts and engaged in illicit and illegal activities. Because of the war, some have fled with their wealth. “Among Syrian citizens in regime-held areas, religious minorities are believed to be the most steadfast supporters of the Assad regime. This is particularly true of Alawites, but also of Shi’a, Isma’ili, and various Christian minorities. Members of minorities have been observing the rise of Islamism in the opposition, as well as the trope that minorities are accessories to the Assad regime’s violence. In this environment, they fear that the long-term empowerment of Syrian opposition civilian and military groups would, at best, threaten their socio-economic opportunities, and their religious and political freedoms, or, at worst, threaten their survival. The Syrian regime has had some success portraying itself as a secular regime that is a bulwark against “terrorism” and the best protector of Syria’s religiously diverse population”.⁶⁶

The military intelligence apparatuses were very wide and headed by relatives and loyalists. These apparatuses are characterized by coercion and violent behavior in order to subdue civilian and military opposition. They pursue their goal through illegal means including torture, imprisonment, sexual abuse, etc.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ ARK Group DMCC. (2016). *The Syrian conflict: A systems conflict analysis*.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Lund (2015) explained the Syrian Armed Force (SAF), which currently dependent on Hezbollah, Iran and its backed militias and Russian military and supported by paramilitary forces⁶⁸, as follows:

It is comprised of an army, air force and a small navy which is mandated to challenge the opposition militarily, but it also executes the Syrian government's strategy of degrading the moderate opposition by demoralizing its civilian supporters and exercising extreme and indiscriminate violence against both militants and civilians. Meanwhile, the SAF also attempts to deploy in as broad a geographic area as possible, keeping hold of provincial capitals and distant points in all corners of the Syrian map. This enables the regime to maintain its claim to sovereignty over the entire national territory and to assert that it has the ability to regain over control all of Syria in the future (<http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/59215?lang=en>).

4.2 Opposition and Islamic-Jihadi Groups

The opposition group is determined to topple the Assad government. As stated by Lund (2015), these oppositions differ in their ideological motivations, regional and international alliances, spheres of activity, and visions for the future of Syria.⁶⁹ Because of Assad's regime prohibitive behavior to exercise democratic and human rights, no opposition organization was founded in the pre-2011 Syria. In effect, all opposition political organizations are created consequently and yet they could not unite until now. But the National Coalition for Opposition and Revolutionary Forces (NC), based in Turkey, is one of the attempts to create a civilian interlocutor that would speak on behalf of Syria's civilian and military groups opposing the Assad regime. But it was

⁶⁸ Lund A. (2015). *Who are the Pro-Assad Militias?* Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

⁶⁹ Project on Middle East Political Science. (2013). *The Political Science of Syria's War*. George Washington University.

marginalized internally. Even the international media reports that Syrian opposition is characterized by infighting and corruption. Because of this donors became selective.⁷⁰

Lund also explained that at the local level, opposition-held areas of Syria host a large number of grassroots organisations and governance bodies. One key set of actors are the Local Councils (LCs). Local Councils are approximations of municipal councils, composed of activists, professionals, local notables, and former public-sector employees. They seek to keep public order, contain brain drain, and maintain a suitable standard of living in opposition-held areas by delivering services and humanitarian aid (usually with funding from international aid organisations and expatriates from their own towns).⁷¹

There are many opposition and Islamic-Jihadi groups fighting the Syrian government and ISIL. Some of the major ones have been mentioned below.

1. The Free Syrian Army (FSA) was founded as anti-Assad regime entity and is comprised of defected Assad's military officers and lower-ranking conscripts. It suffers from lack of chain of command. It receives funding, intelligence and training from the West.⁷²

⁷⁰ Project on Middle East Political Science. (2013). *The Political Science of Syria's War*. George Washington University.

⁷¹ Lund A. (2015). *Who are the Pro-Assad Militias?* Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

⁷² Project on Middle East Political Science. (2013). *The Political Science of Syria's War*. George Washington University.

2. Ahrar al-Sham (AAS) is an Islamist organization that receives funding from Qatari, Saudi and Kuwaiti individuals. Jaish al-Islam is also another organization. The Al-Nusra Front (ANF), al-Qaeda's branch in Syria, is one of the groups that have strong ties with transnational Salafi-Jihadi networks. It aspires to establish an Islamic Emirate in Syria.⁷³

3. ISIL was not in good relations with ANF as the latter refused to show any allegiance to the former. ISIL established a Caliphate in June 2014 and called for all Muslims to enter its territory. It doesn't accept the concept of a nation-state. It is anti-Sykes-Picot agreement. The group is known for its "hyper-brutality".⁷⁴ Taking this hyper-threat into account, the international community started to down grade ISIL through air strikes since September 2014.⁷⁵

Assad's political and economic marginalization tactics in the pre-2011 Syria also contributed to the establishment of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the People's Protection Units (YPG) in the northern part of Syria which is adjacent to Turkey. They have now established cantons and are exercising self-governance. The Assad regime established an alliance with PYD in the fight against ISIL. YPG has also taken the security aspect. PYD and YPG aspire to establish a decentralized regional

⁷³ Project on Middle East Political Science. (2013). *The Political Science of Syria's War*. George Washington University.

⁷⁴ Obama Speech. (2014). *We will Degrade and Ultimately Destroy ISIL*.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

government in the post-conflict Syria. YPG receives military aid from US-led international coalition with the aim of fighting ISIL. YPG has relations with Salafi-jihadi groups but the latter are not happy about US-led coalition support to the former.⁷⁶

4.3 Major Veto Players

Defeating ISIS is the common interest of most of the veto players in the Syrian conflict. But they have so many varied interests and strategies that led the veto players to direct and proxy wars in the conflict. Major neighboring and Middle Eastern countries have been discussed below as veto players. The following two images of the conflict describe the complexity of the Syrian conflict satisfactorily.

⁷⁶ *ISIS and the sectarian conflict in the Middle East.* (2015). RESEARCH PAPER.



Image 1: This Venn diagram nicely illustrates just how complex the situation in Syria.
pic.twitter.com/XZHXS6q92G.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Raziye Akkoc on twitter.

THE TANGLED WEB IN THE FIGHT FOR SYRIA'S FUTURE

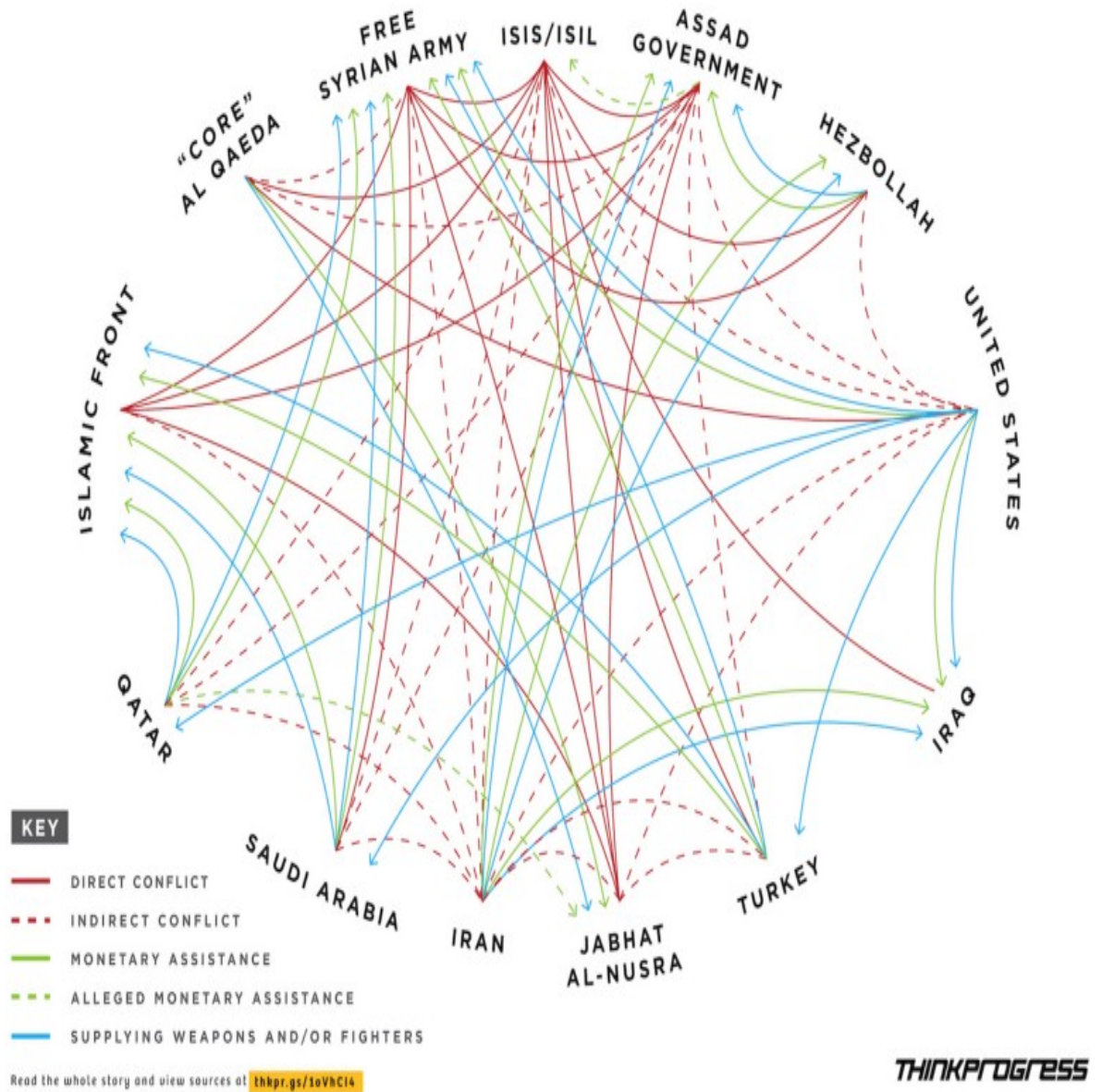


Image 2: The Tangled Web in the Fight for Syria's Future: diagram of the relationships between 13 governments and organizations conflicting around Syria.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ <http://i.imgur.com/h8j3Frv.jpg>

4.3.1 Russia

Russia changed the geopolitical dynamics of the Syrian conflict when it started bombing both the moderate and Islamist opposition groups to Assad. It can be said that Russia joined the Syrian-Iran-Hezbollah club (Axis of Evil) as it fights the same target with the members. This game changing role of Russia is a manifestation of resolving the Syrian conflict through a battle field rather than a political one. Just after this intervention, the rebel and Islamist groups lost their strongholds for which the Syrian government is upgraded and invigorated. It seems that Russians and the club members meticulously calculated that military gains precede political gains which can bear fruition in the future negotiation settlements. If Russia helps the Assad regime to regain its control over the rebel governed spaces, it can easily win political negotiations with weaker and fragmented opposition groups.⁷⁹

Meanwhile, Russian and US-led coalition air strikes commonly target ISIS. Their difference lies in their positions with regards to the future of the Assad regime. While America and its allies want Assad to step down,⁸⁰ Russia and its surrogates want the Alawite dominated Assad regime to remain as an important actor in the formation of an

⁷⁹ Cafarella, J. (2015). *A Political Settlement in Syria?*

⁸⁰ Ibid.

inclusive political transition.⁸¹ US and EU's "ISIS first" approach may also strengthen Assad to gain control of its lost lands and its bargaining power to remain in power. But the opposition camp has not accepted this move by Russia and allies.⁸²

CNN recently traveled with Russian troops in Syria and depicted Moscow's bigger military muscle in the country.⁸³ CNN crew reported that this visit which was orchestrated by the Russians themselves and showed not only that Moscow had a role in liberating the ancient heritage site, Palmyra, but also the capability of Russian army and the magnitude of their military assets in Syria. Russia has a "massive logistical and security operation". CNN has learnt that Moscow also appears to have built up substantial ground forces in various locations in Syria. There are no reliable numbers on the Russian troop levels in the country but it appeared to CNN and other news sources that there were at least several thousand troops on the ground along with modern weaponry and infrastructure. According to CNN (May 9, 2016), "aside from dozens of jets, Russia also has a wide range of combat helicopters, main battle tanks, armored personnel carriers and surface-to-air missile systems". The same source concluded that Russia will not leave Syria in the near future given the size of Russia's military presence in the country with its sophisticated military weaponry.

⁸¹ Lucas, S. (2015). *The effects of Russian intervention in the Syria crisis*. Birmingham, UK: GSDRC, University of Birmingham.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/05/09/middleeast/russia-military-syria/index.html>

As Vladimir Putin said on the 10th of May 2016, Russian jets conducted over 10,000 sorties in Syria, destroying almost 30,000 targets (including 200 oil refineries) during the course of the operation.⁸⁴ He added that over 500 cities, towns and villages including 'the "pearl" of world culture and civilization – Palmyra' have been liberated from terrorists since the beginning of Russia's involvement in Syria. During the operation in Syria, the effectiveness and quality of Russian weaponry were clearly demonstrated. He also suggested that although the situation is very complex, conditions should be created for political solutions. He also said that each problem in the Syrian conflict is problematic that need separate investigation. Russia's intervention in September 2015 is based on its firm stance to support the Assad regime. The air strikes have also targeted non-ISIL opposition groups. It is known that the support is also in tandem with Russia's aim to challenge and downgrade US's dominance in the Middle East.

President Putin is in aggressive competition with the United States of America. He wants to reassert Russia as a great power rival to the US. As stated by Trenin (2012), "Putin's confrontation with the U.S. serves his grand strategic objective of regime preservation by mobilizing domestic support against a foreign enemy and insulating Russian society from U.S. influence. Putin seeks to diminish U.S. power directly, including by expelling sources of Western influence from Russia and by building partnerships to counter the U.S. abroad".⁸⁵ It is clear that Russia wants to "regain lost territory and sphere of influence, diminish US influence globally, reestablish Russia as a global power, divide

⁸⁴ <http://sputniknews.com/russia/20160510/1039365651/russia-syria-operation-putin.html>

⁸⁵ Trenin, D. (2012). *Russia's Policy in the Middle East: Prospects for Consensus and Conflict with the United States*.

and deter NATO, divide and weaken EU, expand influence in the Middle East and Europe, preserve façade of Russian international legitimacy, and expand Russian military footprint in Arctic, Pacific, Middle East, and former Soviet Union”.⁸⁶

4.3.2 Iran

According to the ISW (2016), Iranians want to preserve and export their Islamic revolution, establish regional hegemony, expel US from the Middle East, eliminate the state of Israel, defeat Islamists’ threat to Iran and allies, lead the Muslim world and protect Shia globally. What is common for the US and Iran is fighting the Salafi-jihadi. “Iranian objectives are almost entirely antithetical to the objectives of the United States and the West”.⁸⁷ It is anti-American and anti-Zionist. “Iran is a Shi’a theocracy, and its leaders view the defense of Shi’a populations around the world as its right and obligation”.⁸⁸

According to ISW (2016), “Iran is the creator of “axis of resistance” including the Assad regime in Syria, Lebanese Hezbollah, Shi’a militias in Iraq, some parts of the Iraqi government itself, HAMAS, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad”.⁸⁹ Yemen Houthi is also included in the resistance. The objective of the axis is to confront Israel and the US, their

⁸⁶ Institute for the Study of War. (2016). *U.S. Grand Strategy: Destroying ISIS and al-Qaeda, Report One, Al-Qaeda and ISIS: Existential Treats to the U.S. and Europe. Report.*

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid

allies and partners. The two most important members of the axis, namely, the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Assad regime, are now with Iran in confronting the US-led coalition directly or in proxy forms. Iran employed its forces together with Hezbollah and Iraq Shia forces. The objective is simply to keep Assad regime in power. Iran still needs “the Alawite coastline and Damascus environs to support Hezbollah in Lebanon”.⁹⁰ If these communication lines are disrupted, Iran’s support to Hezbollah automatically vanishes. Lebanese infrastructure to provide weapons to Hezbollah is not safe as it is under Israelis strong scrutiny.⁹¹

According to the Institute for Study of War (2016) Iran, as part of this global world, believes that the two most known terrorists, al-Qaeda and ISIS, must be destroyed. It provided its own troops and military support for the Assad regime against these terrorists (and Assad opponents). Iran’s Supreme Leader believes that ISIS is the creation of US with the “purpose of sowing disorder in the Middle East”.⁹²

Iran is one of the top supporters of the Syrian regime that is providing financial and military assistance. It also plays a direct military role on the ground. Iran has a geopolitical interest in Syria as the Assad regime promotes Shia dominance which is against the GCC Sunni supremacy. Syria recognized Iran’s Revolution in 1979 and supported Iran during Iran-Iraq war.

⁹⁰ Institute for the Study of War. (2016). *U.S. Grand Strategy: Destroying ISIS and al-Qaeda, Report One, Al-Qaeda and ISIS: Existential Treats to the U.S. and Europe. Report.*

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

In a statement made in 2012, the head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, Sa'id Jalili, stated that what is happening in Syria is not an internal issue, but a conflict between the axis of resistance and its enemies in the region and the world. Iran will not tolerate, in any form, the breaking of the axis of resistance, of which Syria is an intrinsic part".⁹³ Syria's access to the Mediterranean Sea is a geopolitical interest not only for Iran but also for countries that are directly involved in the war now.

Hezbollah, as the major Iran partner, is a Lebanese political party and militant group. It was founded in 1982 with financial, military, training and fighters support from Iran. It fights to maintain the status quo. A post-Assad regime might not serve as a bridge between Iran and Hezbollah. If this happens, non-Assad regime and Israel will make Hezbollah a sandwich. Hezbollah is the greatest threat to Israel and supported by Iran. It provides Iran highly-trained loyal Arab partners "through whom Farsi-speaking Iranians can interact with other groups in the Arab world".⁹⁴ Hezbollah played a critical role in the training of Iraqi Shia groups after 2003 and integrate them with Syrian forces in the current civil war. Hezbollah's existence is dependent on Iran's assistance. It receives weapons from Iran through Syria's infrastructure. It finds Syria as its safe haven when Israel attacks its targets in Lebanon.

⁹³ Institute for the Study of War. (2016). *U.S. Grand Strategy: Destroying ISIS and al-Qaeda, Report One, Al-Qaeda and ISIS: Existential Treats to the U.S. and Europe. Report.*

⁹⁴ Ibid.

“Iran has recruited, trained, supported, and directed para-military forces drawn from Iraq’s Shi’a population since the Iran-Iraq War”.⁹⁵ Iran’s effort in this respect was strengthened after US’s overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003. Iran provides considerable support and direction. According to ISW (2016):

The appearance of elements of these militias on Syrian battlefields demonstrates that Iran has created the capability to mobilize external groups, move them from Iraq to a foreign theater, and integrate them into a coherent fighting force there, along with the military and para-military forces of Assad and Lebanese Hezbollah (p15).

4.3.3 The US and EU (The West)

America is always the target of most Islamist terrorists at home and abroad. Europe is also feeling even in a greater sense. The current movement of people from the Middle East to Europe challenged the free movement of peoples in the continent.⁹⁶ It is not the free movement of people that is being challenged but also other tenets of democracy, tolerance and diversity. These tenets are challenged because of the Salafi-Jihadi attacks which raised anti-Muslim sentiments in both places.⁹⁷ And this situation exacerbates alienation and marginalization of Muslims and radicalization. This vicious circle of radicalization and terror attack is being used as a justification by the Islamist organizations, including ISIS.

⁹⁵ Institute for the Study of War. (2016). *U.S. Grand Strategy: Destroying ISIS and al-Qaeda, Report One, Al-Qaeda and ISIS: Existential Treats to the U.S. and Europe. Report.*

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

According to Institute for the Study of War, the US working hard to do away with these Islamist groups, namely ISIS, Jabhat al Nusra, al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria (and al-Qaeda in Iraq) unto grave. Supported by the Salafi-jihadi ideology, the terrorists who control terrains, populations and resources in the Middle East are always ready "to conduct numerous and series attacks within the West". America and Europe should eliminate the regional support bases these terrorist organizations enjoy. As stated by the same source, "efforts to disrupt or stop attacks against the West through network targeting, law enforcement, and immigration controls will fail as long as the enemy has regional bases in which to reconstitute attack groups, conduct research and development, gather intelligence, plan, and amass resources on a large scale".⁹⁸ Clearing the Salafi-jihadi groups in a place and withdrawing from that place without ensuring the state's ability to reconstitute and emerge stronger is costing the whole world. But the prime responsibility lies on the West, especially on the United States of America, who has created security gaps in Afghanistan and Iraq.

This has also been exacerbated by NATO's military intervention in Libya which left the country controlled by these Salafi-jihadi groups. This shows that the West should give military and political attention to the Middle East uninterruptedly. ISW says that "U.S. must not only destroy the enemy groups, but must also commit to the effort needed to create conditions that will prevent their return or reconstitution".⁹⁹ ISW also said that

⁹⁸ Institute for the Study of War. (2016). *U.S. Grand Strategy: Destroying ISIS and al-Qaeda, Report One, Al-Qaeda and ISIS: Existential Treats to the U.S. and Europe. Report.*

⁹⁹ Ibid.

what the US has to do is destroy the enemy group. It argues that destroying is different from defeating. Defeating which is “to deprive the enemy of the will or ability to continue to fight” is temporary.¹⁰⁰ Destroying al-Qaeda and ISIS doesn’t pose a dilemma. But there are some Salafi-jihadi groups such as “Ahrar al Sham that are not formally part of Jabhat al Nusra but are deeply intertwined with it”¹⁰¹ and have “significant popular support and provide governance in parts of Syria”.¹⁰² It is impossible to attack these groups as it inspires the sizeable Sunni Arab population against the West. But, ideologically, these groups are believed to have given fertile grounds for al-Qaeda and ISIS to reconstitute if destroyed.

ISW (2016) believes that:

Fragmenting these Salafi-Jihadi groups in order to separate the hard-core leadership committed to the Salafi-jihadi ideology from the mass of members who support the groups for other reasons, therefore, is by far the preferable alternative if it is feasible. Ahrar al Sham in particular is large and complex enough that it may be possible to splinter the group into various factions that will be willing to give up jihad and specific forms of governance in return for internationally-accepted participation in a post-Assad government (p30).

Therefore, the best solution is to de-radicalize the group members through persuasion and coercion, “to renounce jihad; abandon governance through Sharia courts; reject ISIS, Jabhat al Nusra, and other foreign Salafi-jihadi groups; expel the members of those organizations from Syria; expel their own al Qaeda-linked leadership; and prevent their

¹⁰⁰ Institute for the Study of War. (2016). *U.S. Grand Strategy: Destroying ISIS and al-Qaeda, Report One, Al-Qaeda and ISIS: Existential Treats to the U.S. and Europe. Report.*

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

return”.¹⁰³ The other solution is to end communal, sectarian civil wars. These wars create ungoverned spaces and security gaps in which these Salafi-jihadi groups will make their own safe haven. This has been observed in Syria and Iraq.

The third solution is to set conditions to impede the reconstruction of the Salafi-jihadi groups. Until now, the struggle against Salafi-jihadi groups is characterized by defeat and resurrection of these groups. This has been costly for the whole world. Destroying is the lasting solution. Establishment of competent security forces which are inclusive, supporting post-conflict reconstruction and development and facilitating the return of refugees and resettlement of internally displaced persons are the conditions to be set. These conditions contribute to negotiated political settlement.

The fourth solution is to unravel the Middle East from regional and global conflicts. Besides the sectarian conflicts in Syria and beyond, Russians and Iranians are trying to influence the US presence in general with the aim of evicting their remnant forces from the Middle East. This move does not help the creation of political solutions for Syria and others. In addition to the destruction of the Salafi-jihadi groups, the US should work on averting the role of Iranians and Russians. The US and other peace loving actors must work with regional powers to make the effort successful. The US is in the forefront to call for Assad to step down from power. It believes that Assad’s replacement with a completely different political scenario will undermine Iran’s undesired role in the Middle

¹⁰³ Institute for the Study of War. (2016). *U.S. Grand Strategy: Destroying ISIS and al-Qaeda, Report One, Al-Qaeda and ISIS: Existential Treats to the U.S. and Europe. Report.*

East and it also prevents Russia from getting a place in the Mediterranean Sea.¹⁰⁴ The US government is worried about the shape of the post-Assad government since there are too many actors involved.

Restrictive measures or sanctions are a policy imposed by the EU to manage and pressure actors in crises. The Council of the EU used this policy in Syria and imposed a variety of sanctions since May 2011. In April 2013, the EU applied an amendment to the oil embargo, and in May 2013 the Council decided to drop the arms embargo. Albeit the fact that the EU reviews the sanctions dropping some and adding others, however, the restrictive measures policy has not been accompanied by an attentive evaluation of their effectiveness.¹⁰⁵ “Despite the sanctions, the conflict in Syria continued and escalated. Moreover, the sanctions on Syria did not prevent the Syrian regime from using chemical weapons against the civilian population in 2013”.¹⁰⁶ As Turkmani (2016) concludes imposing sanctions neither change Assad’s behavior nor end the conflict. Neither of the sanctions which were imposed by the EU, US and other important actors stopped Russia and Iran from supporting the Assad regime.

Rim and Mustafa (2016) argue that despite their good intentions and being swiftly imposed to show the EU condemnation of the repression, and to limit the Syrian regime’s

¹⁰⁴ Institute for the Study of War. (2016). *U.S. Grand Strategy: Destroying ISIS and al-Qaeda, Report One, Al-Qaeda and ISIS: Existential Treats to the U.S. and Europe. Report.*

¹⁰⁵ Danahar, P. (2013). *The New Middle East – The World after the Arab Uprising.* London. Newdelhi. New York, Sydney: Bloomsbury.

¹⁰⁶ Turkmani, R., Haid, M. (2016). *The role of the EU in the Syrian conflict, Security in Transition: An Interdisciplinary Investigation into the Security Gap.*

resources, sanctions on Syria helped to accelerate the war economy. They continue to say that the sanctions also contributed to the rise in unemployment and thus indirectly provided human resources for the war. For Assad to step down, Iran, Russia and China must play a pivotal role. What the EU profited from this action is the cost of the humanitarian crisis which is mostly related to refugee crisis and suffering from extremism.¹⁰⁷

4.3.4 Saudi Arabia

According to Bert and Guzansky (2014)¹⁰⁸, Saudi Arabia has the following grand objectives.

Saudi's grand objectives are to promote Salafism, strengthen US commitment to its traditional partners in the region, prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons or acquire nuclear deterrent, maintain domestic security and regime preservation through succession. It also wants to replace Assad with Syrian government that is not a proxy of Iran, and drive Iranian forces and proxies from Syria, Iraq and Yemen (p28).

Saudis aspire to lead the Muslim world and be a regional hegemon. As Bert and Guzansky (2014) said the Saudi royal family envisions itself as the rightful leader of the Muslim and Arab world, protector of the Muslim holy sites, especially Mecca and Medina, and defender of the Sunni sect globally. It therefore wants to preserve the Islamic way of life as the regime defines it, both domestically and internationally, and protect Saudi Arabia's

¹⁰⁷ Metcalfe, V. (2015). *The migration crisis? Facts, challenges and possible solutions.*

¹⁰⁸ Bert, B., Guzansky, Y, (2014.) *Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy on Iran and the Proxy War in Syria: Toward a New Chapter?*

territorial integrity and economic welfare.¹⁰⁹ Secularism and counter religious movements are not their comfort zones.

From the current chaos in the Middle East, one can understand that Saudis take Iran as their principal threat to their aspiration of being the leaders of the Muslim world. They are not happy with the nuclear deal. They are highly concerned about the realignment of American partnership in the region. Bert and Guazansky (2014) believe that the lifting of sanctions against Iran on January 17, 2016 gives Iran much greater scope to rebuild its economy and expand its influence throughout the Middle East. The Saudis thus seek to stop or at least slow Iran's rise in the region with greater urgency than before.¹¹⁰

Cafarella (2014) states that ISIS is heretical for the Saudis and considered as a threat to their Kingdom. ISIS does not integrate with other Salafi-Jihadi groups and can easily be targeted for Saudis'.¹¹¹ The declaration of a Caliphate by ISIS is also a threat to the Saudi leadership in the Muslim world.

Saudi Arabia is the largest backer of armed opposition groups in Syria. It can be said that it is also a counter to Iran's increasing influence in the region. As stated by Cafarella (2014), Saudi Arabia supports two major Salafi-jihadi powerbrokers within the Syrian

¹⁰⁹ Bert, B., Guazansky, Y, (2014.) *Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy on Iran and the Proxy War in Syria: Toward a New Chapter?*

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Cafarella, J. (2014). *JABHAT AL-NUSRA IN SYRIA AN ISLAMIC EMIRATE FOR AL-QAEDA*. MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 25.

opposition: the Damascus-based *Jaysh al Islam* and the major cross-front actor *Ahrar al Sham* (Harakat Ahrar al Sham al Islamiya or HASI). Saudi Arabia's partnership with Jaysh al Islam provides Riyadh with influence in Syria's capital, which it can use to block Iranian proxies from dominating any ultimate resolution of the Syrian Civil War".¹¹²

Riyadh tried to employ different approaches in asserting its leadership of the Sunni world in the Middle East. It always faces challenges from anti-monarchical elements and it always wants its sustainability through influencing in what it considers its natural sphere of influence. More specifically, "Saudi Arabia has been preoccupied with undercutting Iranian influence and co-opting and undermining the Muslim Brotherhood as an alternative to Wahhabi Islam following the Brotherhood's brief ascendancy following the 2011 Arab popular uprisings".¹¹³ Saudi Arabia is working to undermine Iran's influence in the Middle East. Together with the US and its coalition, Saudi Arabia is supporting both moderate and Salafi-jihadi groups. ISIL is planning to topple the Saudi government and establish another Caliphate in the Arabian Peninsula. That is why Saudi Arabia marched itself in downgrading and destroying ISIL. Saudi Arabia tries to coalesce the opposition in Syria. This move by Saudi Arabia is a clear indication of its intention of rivalry with Iran. Saudi Arabia continued to be the pivotal player in the Syrian civil war.

¹¹² Cafarella, J. (2014). Jabhat Al-Nusra in syria an Islamic Emirate for Al-Qaeda. Middle East Security report 25.

¹¹³ Vidino, L. (2013). *The West and the Muslim Brotherhood after the Arab Spring*.

4.3.5 Turkey

Turkey shares a longer (800km) borderline in the northern part of Syria. So it suffers the most as Syrians cross the border while fleeing their country and it is also a porous border used by extremists. Turkey supported the Muslim Brotherhood when Arab Uprising erupts. As ARK Group describes Turkey has often presented itself as a successful and benevolent alternative to Iranian and Saudi regional hegemony. The group also said that although Turkey has had marked disagreements with Russia, Iran, and China on Syrian matters, economic and energy considerations have constrained Turkey's willingness to take unilateral action. While the United States and Saudi Arabia have worked towards limiting Russia and Iran's regional influence and have been prepared to confront them through proxies, Russia, China, and Iran remain three of Turkey's main trading partners, which has likely influenced the Turkish balancing act on Syria.¹¹⁴ Turkey is also threatened by the collapse of the Syrian state as a result of which an autonomous Kurdish entity may be established in the northern Syria.

Turkey also extends its hand in providing money and military support to FSA and other Salafi-jihadi groups in the Syrian civil war. The support for the coalition therefore represents Riyadh's pragmatic resolution to the competing requirements of checking al Qaeda, supporting the Syrian opposition, and blocking Iranian aspirations".¹¹⁵ Turkey's grand strategic objectives are "reasserting its role as an independent regional power vis-à-

¹¹⁴ ARK Group DMCC. (2016). *The Syrian conflict: A systems conflict analysis*.

¹¹⁵ Institute for the Study of War. (2016). *U.S. Grand Strategy: Destroying ISIS and al-Qaeda, Report One, Al-Qaeda and ISIS: Existential Treats to the U.S. and Europe. Report*.

vis US and NATO, reestablish a quasi-imperial sphere of influence over the former Ottoman Empire, promote the formation of Sunni Islamist governments across the Middle East, achieve a position of leadership over the Islamic world, restore the former imperial grandeur of Turkey, advance turkey as a model for successful Muslim democratic leadership”.¹¹⁶

Turkey tried to take advantage of the Arab Spring in bringing about regimes which are similar to the one led by Justice and Development Party (AKP).¹¹⁷ This is evidenced by Turkey’s support of Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. That is why it has condemned the ousting of Mohammed Morsi by a military coup. Currently, it is providing military assistance to Sunni Islamist rebels in Syria. That also includes al-Qaeda affiliates.¹¹⁸ Turkey is blamed for turning a blind eye to more militant Islamist groups including ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra (JN).¹¹⁹ Turkey and the Gulf states are now providing financial, military and political support to Sunni Islamist groups.

4.4 Saudi-Iran Rivalry

The world witnessed that Saudi’s execution of a “high-profile Shiite Muslim cleric”, Nimr al-Nimr, who was involved in Saudi’s Arab Spring in the Eastern province and who

¹¹⁶ Institute for the Study of War. (2016). *U.S. Grand Strategy: Destroying ISIS and al-Qaeda, Report One, Al-Qaeda and ISIS: Existential Treats to the U.S. and Europe. Report.*

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

called for Saudi Shiites to secession in 2009, on terrorism charges resulted in political and diplomatic commotion intensifying sectarian tensions and further divisions along Sunni-Shia lines.¹²⁰ Discontented by the execution, Shiite Iranians stormed and burned Saudi's Embassy in Iran and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei denounced Saudi's measure. Saudi Arabia in turn severed diplomatic relations with Iran and called for allies to follow the same path. This was the result of an already deteriorating diplomatic relations between the two countries. Saudi's discontent emerged from Iran's support of Iraq's and Syria's Shia dominated governments in the fight against their oppositions. Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen against Shia Houthi rebels exacerbated the situation.

Saudi Arabia is currently challenged by low oil price, youth bulge that is attuned to events of the Arab Spring, questions on political leadership, the threat from al-Qaida and Islamic State and conflict in Yemen.¹²¹ Iran's nuclear deal with Europe and the superpowers was not welcomed by Arab countries. Iran's hardliners criticize President Rouhani for his ignorance of the Arab world. Saudi allies, Bahrain and Sudan have cut their diplomatic relations with Iran. This move by the Saudi allies may hurt Iran's economy. The feud between these two countries may lead to the escalation of Sunni-Shii long aged conflict in the Middle East. The execution of al-Nimr is directly challenging Bahrain, Lebanon and Iraq as there are sizable amounts of Shiite living in each country.

The state of peace and security in these countries is deteriorating. Saudi and Iran backed rivals are already warring in Syria. When Saudi Arabia and allies send money and

¹²⁰ *Saudi Arabia and Iran – The Escalation in Tensions*. (2016). A Drum Cussac Global View.

¹²¹ Blanchard, C. (2016). *Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations*.

weapons to Syrian rebels, Iran supports the Assad regime troops, money and weaponry. This can potentially affect any peace talks between the Assad Regime and rebel fighters. It seems that Saudi and Iran on the one hand and US and Russia and their allies should seat for a negotiated peace settlement on Syrian peace and security.

4.5 Hezbollah's Involvement in the Syrian Conflict

Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's leader, justifies his involvement in Syria as a "confrontation with Israel, the West, and Sunni extremists".¹²² He argues that the Syrian regime is not only the backbone of the resistance but it is also the front line in the defense against the spread of Sunni extremism into Lebanon. Hezbollah is actively helping the Assad regime in the fight against its opponents. It was training Syrian National Defence Forces (NDF) and "has enabled the regime to bring larger and more effective fighters to bear in the fight".¹²³ "Hezbollah has proven its value as an increasingly deployable asset for Iran, which can also be used to train up additional resistance forces, such as Iraqi Shi'a militants, that could be brought to bear for future conflicts".¹²⁴ It seems that the Assad government cannot fight its opponents without the help from Hezbollah and Iran. This strengthens the relationship between the Axis of Resistance members to achieve their objectives.

¹²² Sullivan, M. (2014). *Hezbollah in Syria*. MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 19.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

In the Syrian civil war, Hezbollah has taken the advantage of practicing its military training which was meant for attacking Israel. Its fighters are now gaining fighting experience in Syrian urban areas. But it is feared that it may lose sight of attacking Israel. “Nasrallah reaffirmed in November 2013 that his organization would stay in Syria as long as the reasons [to fight in Syria] remain” although it has also lost elite veteran fighters in the Syrian civil war.¹²⁵ The combination of fighting forces comprised of Syrian, Iranian and Syrian forces will be a challenge to regional rivalries such as Saudi Arabia and Israel. BBC reported that one of the known Hezbollah’s top commanders, Badreddine, was killed in a targeted artillery bombing near Damascus airport. Hezbollah declared that Sunni extremists take the responsibility.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Sullivan, M. (2014). *Hezbollah in Syria*. MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 19.

¹²⁶ BBC News, May 13, 2016.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

This study mainly saw the role of national and transnational veto players in determining the future of Syria. It described the historical and contemporary political dynamics in Syria especially the current interaction of national and international veto players in the Syrian civil war which was started in 2011. The 2011 uprising in Syria is the result of decades of political oppression which was conducted by the Alawite dominated Shia led military based government. The uprising in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya which resulted in ousting their long governing leaders inspired Syrians. Unlike these countries, the Assad government became resistant to any opposition because of the intricate interaction of national and transnational veto players in the civil war. Veto players are those national, regional and international actors that are involved in the civil war.

It has been more than five years since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. It has resulted in the death of more than four hundred thousand people and more than half of Syrians to be displaced internally and externally. Europe is especially shaken by refuge crisis and homegrown terrorists who have taken trainings in Syria. The involvement of regional, international and non-state veto players in the Syrian civil war besides the Syrian government, opposition groups and home grown terrorists have made the Syrian situation unresolved. The brutal response from the Assad regime (including its use of chemical weapons), the fractured nature of the Syrian moderate opposition groups, the desire of Islamic-jihadi groups to establish an Islamic Empire in Syria, proxy wars and

irreconcilable interests of regional powers, inconsistent strategies of the US-led coalition, the competition between Russia and the USA and the ambitions and inhumane actions of ISIS to establish a wider Caliphate through beheadings, immolations, hand cutting, raping, bombing and other similar methods contributed to the escalation, exacerbation and protraction of the Syrian conflict.

Every veto player mentioned earlier is still active in the civil war directly or indirectly. No veto player has been exhausted by the war. This makes any peace making effort a futile. The egoistic approach of Russia and the USA in peace deals and their opportunistic influences in the UNSC, including China, ruined the very opportunity to bring the Syrian conflict to an end. Political settlement through international veto players is unachievable at this stage. Sunni veto players, Saudi Arabia and Turkey mainly, could not defeat the Syrian government that is mainly supported by the Shiite Iran government. The US and its coalition support to defeat Assad and Islamic-jihadi groups did not bring the desired result. Iran and Russia who are supporting the Assad regime could not make the regime win its enemies. The IS itself is losing its ground but can still influence the whole world. Every veto player is on the scene without significant victories.

This situation leaves Syrians to suffer from lack of political settlement and Syria remains divided and a state of a state without a nation will continue for some time to come. The majority Sunnis in Syria, supported by the US-coalition will not stop their struggle against the Assad regime. The Assad regime, in return, will continue to ensure its survival through abolishing its Western and Middle Eastern supported Sunnis and

Islamic-jihadi groups. Russia, with Iran and the Assad regime, will continue to solidify its presence in the Middle East with the objective of regaining its dominance which is against a unipolar world. Islamic-jihadi groups, including ISIS, will continue to make use of the ungoverned spaces and political disturbances through their own strategies. The UN will also remain futile in resolving the Syrian crisis.

In the midst of this ambivalent situation, Iran is still using Syria to support Hezbollah that maintains the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis that confronts Israel as an enemy. One of the objectives of the USA is to break this axis by destroying the Assad regime and install a pro-Western government in Damascus. Although Israel is not involved in this civil war directly, the US was expected to serve its interest. That is, breaking away the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis. Iran's involvement in Iraq, Syria and Yemen as a Shiite power is still in its existence.

Russia effectively protected the Syrian regime diplomatically and militarily before and after its intervention in September 2015. The US was ready to destroy the Assad regime if it uses a chemical weapon in any circumstances. But it is Russians who have intervened diplomatically and protected the Assad regime from the US-led military attack and for crossing the chemical weapons red line. Russians are also emerging from the US-led Westernized UN sanctions for its annexation of Crimea from Ukraine. Its newest alliance with Turkey is a severe headache for NATO members. Turkey cannot be member of the EU now. Its membership in NATO is now at risk. I believe that Russia and China are becoming a critical player of the multipolar world which is going to be realized in the

coming decades. This has been accompanied by the US's weakness to effectively coordinate the moderate opposition groups against IS and the Assad regime. It was very crucial to deploy a ground force by the Americans in order to destroy the IS from Iraq and Syria. But the Obama administration was very reluctant on this and the IS was permitted to commit crimes at the cost of Syrians and other Middle Easterners. Before the Russian intervention in 2015, it was the Syrian opposition groups and ISIS who were gaining political and ground spaces. After September 2015, Russia changed the game and it is the Syrian government that benefited a lot. It is through Russian support that the Assad regime regained Palmyra. Russians also undermined US's intervention by bombing US supported moderate opposition groups.

The interaction of these national and transnational veto players closed the path to peace and security of Syria at the cost of Syrians and Middle Eastern peace. It is very difficult to think of a viable solution through these deliberately formulated and intricate situations where the various irreconcilable interests of the veto players are on the agenda. Calming situations will not appear unless each of the veto players leave or minimize their egoistic interests.

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