

The unfolding crisis in syria politics essay



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The civil war like situation in Syria has been the focus of much of the worlds attention for the past year. What began as a peaceful ‘ Arab spring’ revolution against an authoritarian regime has deteriorated into a brutal conflict leaving over 20, 000 people dead. The recent surge in violence after the holy month of Ramadan has left many more people dead. The International community has so far been divided on the course of action to be taken regarding the crisis in Syria, this inaction can be attributed to the fact that Syria is a complex, diverse country located in a geopolitically important region. Syria is where a number of interests, both political and economic in nature, converge. Added to this is its volatile sectarian mix, a conducive environment for the regional spiritual superpowers to fight their proxy wars.

Syria has been under the rule of the authoritarian Ba’ath party for over four decades, under the leadership of first Hafez al Assad, and now his son Bashar al Assad. The Ba’ath party is known for its staunch secularism and opposition to obscurantist religious revivalist groups. Syria under the Ba’ath party has been famous for its liberal credentials, it is known to be the most liberal country in west Asia in terms of womens’ rights. One could easily confuse the streets of Damascus with those of European cities, with women freely moving about in western attire. This is quite the opposite to what one would normally expect to find in Arab countries, known for their conservative attitude. During this period, Syria had also been able to keep sectarian tendencies largely at bay, with the Assad family belonging to the minority Alawite sect. Syria was an example of sectarian and religious harmony with Sunnis, Alawites and Christians enjoying equal cultural rights.

Before the outbreak of the conflict, Syria had a largely stable and progressing economy with a growing class of entrepreneurs and highly skilled professionals. These classes that benefited from the economic policies of the Assad administration continue to support the government even today (the movement at its core is a working class, Sunni-dominated struggle).

After the ' revolution' started in a largely peaceful manner, the Assad administration cracked down brutally on the protestors and committed many atrocities on innocent civilians. This has been pointed out by many International human rights organizations. What followed is history, people took to arms, taking a cue from what was happening in Libya, and today what was once a progressive liberal country has become a cesspit of violence and the center stage for international political maneuvering and regional sectarian rivalries.

To understand the international politics being played, one must look at the background of the Syrian state's foreign policy and those of its rivals. Syria has for long been a strong backer of the revolutionary resistance movement Hezbollah, which has been fighting Israeli aggression in Palestine and Lebanon. Syria has its own long history of conflict with Israel itself. Iran, another major player in the region and a rival of Israel considers Syria a close ally and uses the Syrian route to fund and arm Hezbollah. This is where the role of the US, a perennial backer of Israel, and the other powerful western countries such as Britain comes in. The west seeks to break the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis by installing a friendly regime in Damascus. This has meant that the west has been backing the Syrian opposition, the self-styled ' Free Syrian Army' in its fight against the Assad regime. They have been

aided in this fight by regional powers such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the gulf monarchies. Turkey has had a not too friendly past with Syria and is a member of the US-led Nato alliance. Saudi Arabia and the gulf states have their own reasons for supporting the Syrian rebels, one is to assert their growing political power as a result of the revenue generated from oil, the other is to cut the influence of Iran, Saudi Arabia's regional political, economic and cultural rival. The fact that Saudi Arabia wants to set up a Sunni majoritarian state in Syria, as opposed to the present Alawite-led pro Iran regime is very clear. These dangerously high interests at play meant that the battle lines were drawn from the outset.

Deliberations on this issue in the UN have so far been inconclusive, the security council especially has been a divided lot. The US-led group in the 'P5' want to impose punitive sanctions on Syria followed by a Libya-like 'No Fly Zone'. Aware of the consequences the 'No Fly Zone' had in the Libya saga, Russia and China have vehemently opposed such an idea and have vetoed all moves to bring punitive sanctions against Syria. Libya has progressively deteriorated since the death of Gaddafi last year with tribal divisions appearing and the looming threat of rapidly increasing religious fundamentalism. The one ray of hope that appeared from the UN was the Kofi Annan-led peace plan, but that too appears to have disappointed with ceasefire violations from both sides and the US, in particular not being too supportive of the peace plan, perhaps because cessation of hostilities in the short to medium term does not conform with their strategic plans.

It is clear that the bulk of the 'Free Syrian Army' (FSA) is made up of militant Sunnis conforming to Salafist doctrines, ideologically, economically and

militarily backed by Saudi Arabia. The hypocrisy of the west is clearly visible in this case, it fights Salafi extremism in Yemen, Pakistan and Afghanistan on the one hand, and on the other hand fully supports these same type of people against a secular regime run by a person from a minority community. This should not be surprising if one recalls that it was the US, along with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, that created the notorious Taliban to fight the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. This sectarian bias of the opposition groups has minorities such as Alawites and Christians worried, and for now they seem to be firmly behind the Assad regime.

In all of this, if we were to be genuinely disappointed at something, it would be the coverage of this entire issue by the international media, every single one of the major media houses showing their biases. The western media has been criticized for concealing facts deliberately in an attempt to show Assad in a negative light. They have also been accused of doctoring footage and misrepresenting amateur videos. Take for instance, the coverage of the recent ' Houla massacre' , the BBC had aired pictures of the Houla massacre, showing pictures of the mutilated bodies of the victims, claiming that these were the bodies of the people killed by Assad's forces. The BBC however, had to withdraw these images after it was pointed out that they were old pictures from Iraq. → Similarly Arab news networks like Qatar's state funded Al Jazeera, and Saudi Arabia's state funded Al Arabiya have also been accused of doctoring footage in an attempt to discredit the Assad government. Russia's state sponsored ' Russia Today' and Iran's state owned ' Press TV' have on the other hand, shown a distinct pro Assad bias in their coverage, often ignoring the human rights abuse committed by forces loyal

to the regime. These biases and distortions have meant that common people around the world have not been able to get a correct, balanced picture of what has been going on in Syria over the past year or so, this is indeed a matter of shame for the media houses involved and humanity in general.

To conclude, I will suggest what should be done, in my opinion, to bring an end to the violence and bloodshed in Syria. First, the solution must come from inside Syria and not imposed upon the Syrian people by outside powers. The rebels and the government have to come to an agreement facilitating the disarming of the rebel groups and their integration into the mainstream as proposed by Assad in his idea of a new multiparty system. President Assad's new constitution is a welcome step in this direction. He should step down and a caretaker administration should come into force, like what used to happen in Bangladesh in between elections. Elections should be held and the normal procedure as in all democratic countries should be followed. More importantly, outside powers must quit supporting sectarian organizations and stop interfering in the internal affairs of Syria. A lot of the exasperation could have been avoided had countries such as Saudi Arabia and the US not decided to fuel sectarian sentiment. The UN must play a constructive role in the process and serve as the ground for a formation of an international consensus."

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