

CAUSES AND RESPONSIBILITY SHARED IN THE SYRIA CONFLICTUAL OUTBREAK

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Abstract: Started in March 2011, the conflict in Syria produced numerous casualties, severe human rights abuse and extensive material damage. The causes of its outbreak and development are not limited to politics but include economic and socio-demographic factors (social unrest was accentuated by the restrictiveness of the natural environment). The parts involved in this conflict (the Bashar al-Assad regime, the opposition, the international community), all share the responsibility. The inefficiency of the Security Council in managing this conflict proved, once again, that it should be reformed. The Conflict in Syria is, unfortunately, just another example to ponder upon.

Key words: conflict in Syria, consequences, causes, responsibilities

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INTRODUCTION

The Syrian Arab Republic is located in a region faced with socio-political unrest over the last half century. Its good geographic and geo-political location entailed significant commercial benefits but, over the time, it also caught the eye of different influential powers. Less than two centuries after the proclamation of their independence, in 1963, the Baath Party (of socialist orientation) came to power, and so did the Assad Family (Hafez al-Assad and Bashar al-Assad), later, in 1970. Delayed political and democratic reforming, the government's inefficiency in managing socio-economic issues and the events in Tunisia, Egypt or Libya triggered ample pro-democracy protests first in Deraa, later in Baniyas, Latakia, Homs, Hama, Alep and Damask (figure 1). Protests erupted in March 2011 after a group of teenagers was arrested and tortured for having written revolutionary slogans on the walls of their school in south Deraa. Next, security forces opened fire during a march against arrests, and killed four people (BBC News, 8.06.2012).

Since the conflict began, as per the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (December 2013), 126 thousands have died, out of which 44 thousands civilians (6600 children and 4400 women). Besides these documented casualties, it was estimated that another 40 thousands army suits, rebels and non-Syrian fighters also died, 16 thousand people were arrested and detained by the regime and 5

thousand military and pro-governmental militia were captured by the rebels. To these add 6.8 million Syrians in need of humanitarian assistance, out of which over 2 million are refugees and the other 4.2 million had to move within the borders of the country (Canadian Red Cross, 2013). The number of refugees registered in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt increased over time from a mere 8000 in December 2011 to 567 thousands in January 2013 and 2.3 million in January 2014, and more than half of them are children. (UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency, 2014).

Furthermore, the conflict brought forth human rights abuse, war crimes and crimes against humanity (Amnesty International, 2013) causing severe disruption of the socio-economic environment as it limited access to even the most elementary products (water, food, medicine, electricity). The economy was tremendously affected, the tourism and oil industry in particular, two vital sectors, not only by the conflict itself but also as a result of the sanctions imposed by the Arab League, USA and EU.



Figure 1. General map of Syria

PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the current analysis is to find answers to a series of questions that might prove useful in relatively similar cases. Identifying and analysing the causes that led to the outburst and development of the conflict and particularly understanding the responsibility of each of the actors involved

was given great importance. The study interprets and analyses data available from different sources relying also on specific bibliography.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Although the trigger was political, alimented by an authoritarian and inefficient government, the roots of this conflict go much deeper and have a lot to do with the socio-economic realities and with the restrictiveness of the natural environment, quite vulnerable and undergoing great pressure. All these factors contributed to a deterioration of the living standards generating unemployment and poverty and ultimately unrest.

The Economic Factor. The unsuccessful economic policies and its limited natural resources, in particular energetic (compared to other countries in the region), affected greatly Syria's economy, poorly developed and incapable of providing for the population's needs. Taking over the most important economic sectors (major industries and the banking system) the state, through its leaders – the Baath Party (McGowan et al., 1987), proved inefficient in the long run. Furthermore, oil production, which contributed significantly to the state's income, began to decrease. Oil was discovered in 1956 in the north-west part of the country whereas a more intense exploitation began in 1970 reaching a peak in mid-1990's (583 thousand barrels/day) and gradually decreased to 332 thousand barrels/day in 2011. Its oil resources were estimated to 2.5 billion barrels (BP Statistical Review of World Energy, 2012). In the context of diminished oil incomes, the Assad Regime was forced to initiate economic and financial liberalization reforms including a reduction of subventions. The measures taken were not well received by the common folk who had to withstand increasing prices therefore decreasing living standards.

The agricultural sector faces equally serious problems: lack of water, frequent drought and soil degradation. Most of the terrains are arid and semi-arid, only 6 million hectares, 32% of the surface, meet the conditions for agricultural use, wheat (1.6 mil hectares) being the main culture (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Animal breeding is nomad and semi nomad using the 8.2 mil ha of pastures, 44% of the country, and there are also specialized farms. During these past decades, the agricultural production failed to provide for the rapidly growing population. Successive years of drought are common in Syria and they impact the whole economy. Precipitations, ordinarily low in quantity, vary considerably from one year to another, under these circumstances agricultural activities are highly vulnerable given the lack of an irrigation system. Therefore, extreme draughts, pushed 2-3 million people on the verge of extreme poverty, the population in the north-east of the country being the most affected. As a result, thousands of people left their homes heading for Damasc and other big cities (Rivlin, 2011). Under these circumstances, the state's capacity to provide food to the population was severely threatened.

The socio-demographic factor. Over the last half century, Syria's population increased from a mere 4.5 million inhabitants in 1960, to 22 million nowadays, the state proving inefficient in adopting family planning measures to reduce population growth. The Alep Governorate, inhabited by 5.9 million people, is the most populated administrative division in Syria, Homs, Hama and Idlib follow, each with around 2 million inhabitants (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Although the number of births decreased to a mere half its values are still high, life expectancy is currently over 75 (increased significantly)

and the young population, under 25, is quite numerous (table 1). These indexes demonstrate not only an increased need for food, water or energy but also a greater demand for jobs and social assistance.

Table 1. Syria, main demographic indexes

(Source: Population Division of the United Nation Department of Economic and Social Affairs)

	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2020
Total population (mil. inhabitants)	4.5	6.3	8.9	12.3	15.9	20.4	24.0
Annual population growth rate (%)	3.4	3.3	3.3	3.0	2.4	1.9	1.6
Birth rate (‰)	50.1	46.8	45.4	38.4	29.7	23.9	20.7
Mortality (‰)	18.1	12.5	8.3	5.3	3.8	3.5	3.6
Life expectancy at birth (years)	51.0	58.1	64.8	70.0	73.5	75.3	76.8
Population under 25 (%)	61.4	65.8	68.3	67.3	62.5	57.3	50.4

The Arabs, present all over the country, represent over 90% of the population. They are divided into several religious communities the most numerous of which are the Sunnite Muslims (74%). The Kurds represent the main ethnic minority in Syria, over 6% of the population. Generally, non-Arab populations (Kurds, Armenians, Turkmens, Circassian, Assyrians) live in communities, north of Alep and in the Al Jazirah region, preserving their own distinct cultural elements. Ever since Hafez al-Assad came to power, all political and security decisions were placed in the hands of the Alawite community, representing only 12% of the population, which generated a lot of discontent among the Sunnite Muslims. Located mostly along the Mediterranean coast in the port cities of Latakia and Tartus, Alawites are Shia and they moved in the region around the IX and X centuries as supporters of Ali, son in law to Muhammad, the Prophet. Alawites are regarded by the other Muslims in the Middle East as very liberal and sometimes even as heretics.

Restrictive natural environment. Syria, has a restrictive natural environment which affects its socio-economic development. More than half the country is semiarid and arid with precipitations that range between 200mm/year to under 50 mm/year in some areas (Ali et al., 2007). Summertime temperatures rise above 40°C and the sand storms, common in February-May, affect significantly agricultural activities. The water resource is scarce, the Euphrate River, originating in east Turkey with an average flow of 583 m³/s (the longest and most important river), provides over 80% of Syria's resources. Most of the surface is covered in desert and semi-deserts vegetation: grass, bushes and dispersed trees. Forests, present in areas that receive more rain, only cover around 3% of the country's surface. The soils are also influenced by the amount of precipitations therefore a large part of the country (47.5% with precipitations under 250mm/year) is covered in arid soils, greatly affected by erosion. Underdeveloped soils (entisol), occupy 16.9% while immature soils occupy 21.7% (incipient soil) (International Fund for Agricultural Development, 2007). Human activity, especially grazing and farming affected considerably the soil cover. Therefore, according to FAO (2003), 17.3% of Syria's surface is affected by soil degradation.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE NUMEROUS HUMAN DRAMA?

Bashar al-Assad Regime. The Bashar al-Assad regime is considered in many ways the main responsible for the outbreak and long-term development of this conflict as it did not take proper measures in promoting democracy, respect for human rights, socio-economic development and a wise protection of natural resources. On the other hand, the use of excessive force against the protesters

was faced with a violent response. Later, while the conflict was developing, according to Amnesty International, representatives of the government committed numerous war crimes by attacking settlements, where the opposition was supposed to have sought refuge, from the Homs, Idlib, Hama, Damasc or Alep Governorates, killing or wounding thousands of civilians. Many of the casualties were the result of an improper use of weapons in densely inhabited areas or of some internationally forbidden ones, including chemical (used on 21st of August 2013 in the Ghouta Suburb of Damasc). Hundreds of people, among which human rights activists, journalists, humanitarian activists and children were detained, killed or wounded during the marches or raids. Despite this, the regime does not seem willing to give up power.

The opposition. The opposition can be blamed for having reacted so violently to the actions of the Syrian regime instead of manifesting calmly and attempting negotiations. The forces of the opposition are guilty of abuse, violation of human rights and war crimes against the people known/suspected to be part of the governmental forces who were tortured and killed after apprehension. They also threatened and kidnapped civilians, used suicide and other types of attacks in populated areas (Amnesty International, 2013).

A resolution of the Syrian conflict is rendered difficult by the lack of unity of the political and military opposition which is made up of numerous groups, around 100 thousand fighters (Lister, 2013), whose ideologies and motivators vary tremendously - including Jihadist groups associated to al-Qaeda, such as the Al Nusra (Jabhat al-Nusra) Front and Islamis State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). ISIS, formed primarily of foreign fighters, was accused of many atrocities during the conflict including of having attacked other forces of the opposition such as the attack in north Azaz (BBC News, 25.09.2013). ISIS is also accused by the Syrian activists of not acting in the spirit of the Syrian revolution.

In 2012, in Doha, the Syrian National Coalition was formed, aiming to stand for a viable and believable political alternative with the capacity to channel international efforts. Its founders are part of the moderate Syrian opposition, based in Turkey, and militate against the Assad Regime and for the instauration of a democratic state. The coalition, supported by the Free Syrian Army is considered to be the only legitimate representative or the legitimate representative of Syria/the Syrian people by countries such as: USA, France, Italy, Germany, UK, Turkey, Spain, Saudi Arabia, EAU or Qatar. On the other hand, several other representatives of the opposition, especially Islamic groups, and also the Syrian activists, are very much against the coalition considering it to be a product of the Western World. An alternative to this coalition was founded in November 2013 – the Islamic Front, which resulted from the union of seven important Islamic groups: : Ahrar al-Sham, Liwa al-Tawhid, Suqour al-Sham, Al-Haqq Brigades, Ansar al-Sham, Army of Islam and Kurdish Islamic Front (Al Jazeera, 22.11.2013). The resulting military force has taken upon itself to fight against the Assad Regime and to build an Islamic state based on Sharia.

Given that the moderates and the Islamic have different views on what the future of Syria should look like represents a risk factor very likely to manifest beyond the ideal of democracy and therefore, should the Assad Regime be defeated, the population might still not be free to choose for itself.

The international community. The international community is guilty for failing to mitigate the conflict. There is enough ground to state that this conflict is no longer just an internal matter based on the attitudes and actions of the

international community. Furthermore, this conflict bears a clear religious component: the Shia, representing the government, the Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon and the Iranian military support (Sharp and Blanchard, 2013) and the Sunni supported by the Arab States around the Persian Gulf, especially Saudi Arabia and Qatar, but also by Turkey.

As per the first article in the UN Charta, one of the fundamental purposes of UNO is to preserve the international peace and security. To this end UNO endeavors to take collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace. In order to ensure rapid and effective action, the members of the organization delegated the Security Council with the responsibility of maintaining peace and international security (Article 24). Under certain circumstances, should the recommended methods and peaceful means for the resolution of a conflict prove ineffective, the Council can sanction or even authorize forceful interventions in order to maintain or restore international peace and security.

The international community failed to find a solution to end this conflict despite the actions taken. From the very beginning of the conflict, the Security Council initiated several resolutions condemning the extensive violence and human rights abuse carried out by the Syrian authorities and the rebel military groups including their breach of some international agreements such as the use of chemical weapons. The resolutions against the Syrian Regime such as the ones in October 2011, February 2012 and July 2012 did not pass as Russia and China vetoed them. Similarly unsuccessful was the peace plan proposed by the Action Group for Syria (constituted from representatives of the main international states and organizations, including Russia and China) united in Geneva, in June 2012, which targeted the instauration of a transitional government and organization of free elections.

The international actors understand differently Syria's current realities and the possible ways out of this conflict, Russia and China being the main supporters of the Syrian Regime along with Iran. Regionally, Iran, a former ally of Syria, is the greatest supporter of Assad's Regime and of the state structure in place (with the Alawites occupying and controlling the most important functions) and provides economic and military assistance (Sharp și Blanchard, 2013). Internationally, though, Russia was Syria's main supporter, providing it with weapons. This happens because Syria has been an important ally of Russia ever since 1970's when Hafez al-Assad came to power not only through its geopolitical position but also as a commercial partner (military included). As a matter of fact, Russia continued to provide the Syrian Regime with weapons and military equipment even after the conflict broke out.

China's position can be explained by the main principle of its external policy - no interfering in the internal affairs of sovereign states, and appears to be more of a stand against the Western World's critiques related to China's human rights breaches. On the other hand, China's external policy is influenced by its economic interests and ignores the conflicts and crises outside of its borders. Although China's interests in Syria are limited, the region as a whole, the Middle East, is important for its oil resources which China is dependent upon.

In February 2012, in response to China's and Russia's veto, several states, among which USA, UK, France, Germany, Italy, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates, formed a group called Friends of

Syria which aimed to find a solution for the initiation of a political transition in Syria. In October 2013, they met in London with the Syrian National Coalition and unanimously agreed that the President Bashar al-Assad shouldn't be part of the future Syrian government.

From the very beginning of the conflict, USA took attitude against the violence in Syria asking for Assad's resignation (starting august 2011), extended sanctions and militated for the consolidation of the opposition with the purpose of achieving a political transition. In December 2012 USA acknowledged the National Coalition of Revolution and Opposition Forces as legitimate representative of the Syrian people providing humanitarian and non-lethal assistance (medicine, food, communication devices). After the chemical attack in August 2013 USA initiated discussions for the launch of a military response against the Syrian Regime. Some of the most important states in the EU (UK, France, Germany, and Italy) supported USA's efforts and initiatives, yet, except France, they were all in favor of a political plan instead of other actions. Starting March 2011, the EU adopted many sanctions against Assad's Regime. In July 2013, EU declared the military branch of Hezbollah to be a terrorist organization for having supported the Syrian Regime.

From the very beginning, the Arab League was actively involved in the conflict. In November 2011, the League removed Syria from the organization as Assad's Government refused the proposed peace plan, and later, in January 2012, formally requested Bashar al-Assad's resignation. In March 2013, the 22 members of the organization offered Syria's place to the Syrian National Coalition and decided to allow the members to provide the rebels with weapons (Al Jazeera, 1.09.2013). Yet, some influential member states (Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Tunisia and Algeria) were against a foreign military intervention in Syria.

IS A REFORMATION OF THE SECURITY COUNCIL NECESSARY?

At present, the Security Council includes fifteen member states with the following permanent members: USA, Russia, China, France and UK. The other members are elected for a period of two years based on their contribution in maintaining international peace and security in such a way that an equitable geographic distribution is preserved. There were serious discussions and critiques against the Council's permanent members which have a right to veto. These states were accused of taking decisions in view of their geostrategic interests especially when it comes to military and humanitarian interventions.

In the current geopolitical and economic waters, characterized by a balanced distribution of power and a globalized market, many states might place their national interests ahead the need for international peace and security, as such, the right to veto, might constitute an instrument to this end. Therefore, having a healthy decision making process should be a priority rather than deciding on whether increasing the number of permanent members or totally dismissing the concept. Increasing the number of permanent members and imposing a two thirds favorable quota for decisions to pass might prove a better solution than the current.

CONCLUSIONS

The current political crisis, the result of various tensions, was determined not only by the mishaps in the political system but also by an inefficient management of the socio-economic issues, including population growth, in the

context of a restrictive natural environment, prone to degradation and with limited resources. This conflict could have been avoided should the Regime had taken measures and actions towards the instauration of democracy, the preservation of human rights, and socio-economic development through employment creation (especially for young people), family planning and the protection and rehabilitation of the environment. Also, the conflict wouldn't have resulted in so many casualties should the Syrian opposition have chosen to protest in a peaceful way and if the international community had responded more rapidly. The inefficient response of the Security Council is a clear sign that it should be reformed to become an organization capable to stand by the international need for security and peace and not by the interests of the member states.

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