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Middle East Flashpoint

Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East & Islamic Studies
University of Peloponnese

No 49 25 October 2013

THE SYRIAN CONFLICT:
Regional Repercussions and Outcomes *

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The purpose of this paper is to analyse the Syrian crisis and its regional repercussions in three circles. The first circle refers to Syria's neighbourhood i.e. Turkey, Iraq and Lebanon. The second circle concerns the Arab-Israeli conflict comprising Israel, the Palestinians and Jordan. The third one is the great regional circle, which refers to the antagonism for regional hegemony and includes Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, Qatar and of course the USA.

* This analysis is a synopsis of a much larger chapter which is going to be published soon. Special thanks are going to ***Evangelos Diamantopoulos*** for summarizing and editing the original text.

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The regional repercussions of the Syrian crisis are closely linked to the ethno-religious and socio-economic divides of the country and the role played by certain powers in the region. Sunni business people and intellectuals are asking for multiparty democracy with free economy on the one hand and the Muslim Brotherhood capitalises on the Sunni mostly poor majority discontent for heterodox Alawi corrupt rule, on the other. Meanwhile different militias, jihadists and others are exploiting the long-standing resentment of the rural population against affluent urban strata.[1] The bloody suppression of first the protests and then the rebellion by Alawi plainclothes militia al-Shabbiha using indiscriminate deadly violence, further fostered the sectarianisation of the strife.[2]

The neighbourhood circle

The Syrian civil war, the ongoing state of turbulence in Iraq and the weakness of the Lebanese state has blurred frontier lines. Iraqi Sunni tribal affiliations cross the Syrian borders forming a wide clandestine network of arms smuggling and revenues. Jihadist groups, like Jabhat al-Nusra, are numbering thousands of fighters and they operate beyond the command of the oppositions' Syrian National Council and of its military wing the Free Syrian Army. Sectarian divides are also underscored by the Muslim Brotherhood because they consider "Alawi/Shi'ite Assad regime as part of a Shi'ite/Iranian scheme intended to establish or restore the glory of the old Persian empire and impose Shi'ite doctrine in the various Arab and Muslim states".[3]

Meanwhile, the sectarian conflict is spilling over to Lebanon as Hizbollah is becoming all the more involved in the Syrian crisis and particularly after its successful battle in al-Qusayr on the side of Assad's regime. Although this strategy serves the party's needs to keep the lines of supply from Iran secure, it increases the presence of salafist armed groups in Lebanon. Another by-product of the Syrian crisis is the blow that it dealt on the Lebanese economy. The growth of GDP has fallen from 3.5% in 2011 to less than 1% in 2012, with gloomy prospects for 2013. At the same time, as the Syrian war is worsening, Lebanese banks, though still very strong and safe in 2013, are threatened by increasing capital flight and lower loans due to the slower economic activity.[4]

Moreover, the Kurdish issue has made the Syrian crisis the most serious domestic issue for Turkey. Turkey is now faced with the prospect of not one but two autonomous Kurdish enclaves on its south-eastern borders. Syrian Kurds seem to defy both Turkey and the Syrian rebels and they have already engaged in fierce battles with jihadist groups. Anyway, the break-up of Syria may lead to the emergence of a "Greater Kurdistan" notion posing enormous challenges not just for Turkey, but for Iraq and Iran as well.[5]

The Arab-Israeli circle

Together with Lebanon Jordan is the most vulnerable neighbour of the Syrian crisis. With more than 800.000 Syrian refugees amounting to 11% of the total population, the Hashemite Kingdom is facing grave socioeconomic and political challenges. The concentration of large refugee population is not only putting more burdens on the already problematic Jordanian economy but it could also nurture extremist groups which would entangle the northern part of Jordan in plans for a greater Sunni controlled zone from Syria to Iraq. A possible collapse of the Jordanian Kingdom would change radically Israel's security strategy and scrap today's basis of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

For Israel, the regime in Damascus has been for years the lesser evil, a force that could guarantee the security and calm of the borders in the Golan Heights. On the other hand, Syria became an indispensable part of the Hizbollah-Iran axis and a collapse of the Assad Alawi regime would deprive Iran from a most valuable corridor to the Eastern Mediterranean and to Israel's backyard. Thus, Israel is drawing red lines of deterrence to both the Syrian regime and non-state actors of the region. The first red line concerns the transfer of chemical weapons and ballistic missiles to Hizbollah from the regime or through the regime, which would alter the balance of power in Israel's northern frontier. The second red line would be the use of Syria by jihadist groups as a pad for attacks against Israel.

Another aspect of the Arab Spring and particularly of the Syrian uprising is the decision of Hamas to distance itself from the Assad regime. This decision has weakened the group's relations with both Syria and Iran, opening a true window of opportunity for Hamas to partially redefine its regional alliances by moving away from the 'Axis of Resistance' and reposition itself closer to the rising Sunni camp.[6] However, the prospects of a strong alliance between Egypt, Qatar and Turkey seem rather bleak after the demise of Erdogan's political influence and particularly due to the Egyptian coup. The only remaining alternative for Hamas seems to be the return to the Iranian Axis of Resistance lap under much worse terms and conditions.

The broader regional circle

In the broader regional context two non-Arab countries, Turkey and Iran are competing for hegemony in the Middle East. Turkey of AKP has been searching for strategic autonomy first by being more active in regional and other multilateral institutions. Second, it has been aspiring to play the role of policy producer instead of policy implementer in Syria, Gaza Strip and elsewhere. Third, it has increased business and strategic relations with the Gulf mostly by building mutual economic and political co-operation with Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.[7] The ideological-political rivalry between Turkey and Iran for influence on the Arab uprisings in the region is evident over Syria, where Turkey decided to support the opposition.[8] Iran, in contrast, regards the possible fall of the Alawi-Baath regime as a serious blow to its geopolitical axis in the region. Syria has been the lifeline of Hizbollah and an outpost of Iranian presence in the Mediterranean and the Levant along the frontline of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Turkey tried to reach to Riyadh in creating a "model" of regional co-operation, which could contribute to stability. However, the two countries had from the beginning, different views as to the shape of events in Syria. Turkey initially tried to persuade al-Assad to accept a compromise with the Muslim Brotherhood and proceed with free elections. The Saudis, in a clear departure from their negative stance towards the Arab Spring, supported the Syrian rebellion. They saw the collapse of the Baathist Alawi/Shia regime as forerunner for the demise of Iran and the end of Hizbollah's grip over Lebanon in favour of the Sunni-led March 14 coalition. In addition, as the GCC military intervention in Bahrain shows, Saudi Arabia seems ready to play the bold role of the protector of Sunnis in the region, thwarting a surge of the Shiite-Iranian influence.[9] As the civil strife became heavily militarised, Ankara had to change position and to follow a strong line by allowing the military wing of the Brothers to consolidate themselves in Turkey and the rebel Free Syrian Army to establish bases in Alexandretta area.[10] Furthermore, Saudi Arabia mistrusted the Brothers and saw in them a potential threat for the Throne whereas Ankara saw them as conduits of her "moral" soft power.[11]

The geopolitics of the Arab Spring have formed two rather contending camps: Turkey, Qatar and Egypt during Morsi's reign on the one hand and Saudi Arabia, the Emirates and Jordan on the other. The first is closer to the Muslim Brotherhood while the second seeks to balance the Brothers' ascent by supporting the hyper conservative Salafi groups and other Islamic front organisations. Morsi decided to mend fences with Teheran so as, being the only Arab power with working relations with Iran, to mediate a solution on Syria.[12] Furthermore, Morsi tried to re-assert Egypt as leading Arab power and he called for a regional solution to the rebellion in Syria and stated Egypt's desire to play a role in addressing global issues.[13]

As the world's chief exporter of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG), Qatar competes with the world's biggest oil producer, the Saudis, over the global energy markets. Though adherent of conservative Islam the previous Qatari Amir, Shaykh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, has supported the Arab revolts through both al-Jazeera coverage and generous funding in order to expand his influence in the Arab world. However, in the case of Syria, Qatar keeps working relations with both Hizbollah and Iran while giving a great amount of funding to the Brotherhood and facing accusations of funding jihadist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra. The Egyptian coup d'état and the fall of Morsi as well as the US decision to promote Saudi Arabia as the "principal supporter of the Syrian rebellion" turned the tide in favour of the camp of Saudi Arabia, the Emirates and Jordan. The new Qatari Amir, Shaykh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, seems to follow now the Saudi line on Syria.[14]

The news of a horrendous attack with chemical weapons allegedly by Assad regime has set the engines for a US military intervention in Syria. Irrespectively of the motives behind a possible intervention against Assad, US strategy of regime-change in the region, either by the forceful Bush Jr. Doctrine or by the more subtle Obama doctrine of change from within, has largely fulfilled its targets.

Some Remarks about the Future

The collapse of the bi-polar system, the difficulty of the region to keep up with globalisation, the ascent of non-state actors as protagonists in the regional balance of power and the emergence of various forms of political Islam as leading reforming force led to the demise of the systems of Arab presidents for life and thus to a serious challenge for the existing borders. New political fault lines are being drawn along religious divides such as the Sunni-Shia or the Sunni-Alawi ones. At the same time, new political entities are being set up in the form of unrecognised states. From the 1990s onwards we have seen a number of these entities such as Nagorno Karabagh, Abkhazia, Somaliland, Kosovo or Iraqi Kurdistan. Shall we see a constellation of such states in the Middle East, a Syrian (Western) Kurdistan state, an Alawi state, a Sunni state (uniting Syrian and Iraqi parts), where statecraft is never fully accomplished but instead they are in constant process of "becoming state?"[15]

Last, but not least, the Saudi decision to decline a rotating seat on the UN Security Council is by all means an unprecedented move on the part of the Kingdom. One analysis might argue that declining the seat the Saudis are avoiding controversial voting on Syria and Iran in the Security Council and, thus, allow a lot of space of maneuvering in regional politics. The Saudis are aware that the Security Council is not the proper forum for attaining a solution for Syria. A viable solution should take the form of a regional understanding among themselves, Iran, Turkey, USA and Russia, a "Syrian Taif".

Nonetheless it is the first time since the oil embargo of 1973 (perhaps with the exception of then Prince Abdullah Peace Plan in 2002) that the Kingdom is asserting a

leadership role in the region. Two non-Arab states, Iran and Turkey, are competing for regional hegemony in the last decade. The Gulf monarchies seem to realize that they should not overwhelmingly rely on American protection and they are seriously contemplating a rather autonomous role in the Middle Eastern regional system, more so since a deal between Washington and Teheran seems more plausible now.

Notwithstanding the reasons behind this refusal, this is the first time that a state, mostly considered as a pillar of the international status quo, has in practice challenged not only the effectiveness of the UN Security Council but, most importantly, the usefulness of participating in it. What is more, this can be also seen as a challenge to the universal underpinnings of the UN system by a state, which had not participated in the building of this system and has been seriously questioning the universality of its values.

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