The Syrian Crisis: From Local Uprising to Regional-International Struggle

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Abstract
In this paper, I will analyze two current views regarding the Syrian crisis. Based on this analysis, I will refer to “soft powers” such as political and economic reforms and “hard power” such as the crackdown on the uprising and the militarization of the opposition. The analysis section of paper is divided into three parts. In the first part, I will illustrate the socio-economic dimensions of the uprising, such as unemployment, class struggle, unequal development between village and town areas. I will use the theory of upgrading authoritarianism as a part of the reform programs introduced by the President Assad, which was not successful and couldn’t solve the problem. In the second part I will provide the arguments of President Assad and the regime supporters, and I will try to question them. This part is divided into 3 sections, the first section I will analyze how Syria became unstable. In the second section I will counter argue the conspiracy or “hidden hand theory” which blames the Syrian crisis on foreign powers. While in the third section I will analyze the influence of Islamist groups in the uprising and rebellion. In the third part I will analyze how the Syrian crisis shaped the Sunni-Shia and Turkish-Iranian struggle on the regional level and the formation of the bipolar system on the international level. Finally, I will give my opinion/solution regarding the Syrian crisis. In the conclusion, I will raise questions regarding the ambiguous future of the Syrian uprising or crisis.
I. Introduction

“Syria should not belong to one family, to one coterie, or to one party. It belongs to all the people of Syria equally, in all their religious and ethnic diversity.” 1 William Hague, British foreign secretary

In an interview with Wall Street Journal, Syrian president Bashar al-Assad claimed; “we have more difficult circumstances than most of the Arab countries but in spite of that Syria is stable. Why? Because you have to be very closely linked to the beliefs of the people.” 2 The following quotation shows Assad’s assumption that Syria would be stable during the Arab Uprising. By looking at the current crisis in Syria we can realize that the calculations of the Syrian president went wrong; he assumed that his country would be stable but it turned to be unstable and entered in an era of civil war 3, and the peaceful uprising took a violent path. In the beginning of the uprising Assad tried to make reforms and used soft power such as introducing new constitution, giving some executive powers to the Prime minister, giving the right of formation new parties and so on, but as the protests continued, government forces tried to crack them down. As a result group of soldiers were defected from the army and formed an armed rebellion, Free Syrian Army (FSA), their aim was to overthrow the regime, this lead to the use of hard power, such as using heavy weapons against the rebels.

It would be inaccurate to classify the Syrian uprising as a secular one. Most participants are devout Muslims inspired by Islam. A minority is secular, and another minority is Islamist (some even radical) while the vast majority is religious minded nationalist people from rural areas. In addition, mosques became central to Syria’s demonstrations in the first months of the uprising, and Sunni clerics played an important role in it. Therefore it is important to mention that the majority of Syrians who are protesting and fighting against the regime, are neither fighting to defend secularism nor to establish a theocracy.

1 "We must show that we will not abandon the Syrian people in their darkest hour"
The Syrian crisis is important part of the Arab Uprising and the regional balance of power; in addition within the Syrian context the theory of soft and hard power can be used. The above quotation can be linked to another one where President Assad denied the existence of civil protests in Syria and spoke of the “foreign backed conspiracy” threatening his country. “Many people were misled in the beginning, thinking that what is happening is a state of excitement, a wave of the ‘Arab Spring’…. [But it] isn’t a revolution or a spring; it is terrorist acts in the full meaning of the word,” he proclaimed. The two quotations or interviews are related to each other, since in both; the Syrian president disregarded the popular demands and believes of the people and claims that it’s a foreign backed conspiracy. Moreover, not only Syria became unstable but the conflict spread to the neighboring countries, the crisis took a sectarian form hence polarizing the Sunni-Shia tensions in the region. Finally the conflict took a global form and a new cold war era started from Syria. In this paper I will analyze how this local uprising turned into regional and international crisis.

II. Socio-economic dimensions of the uprising

“The concept of ‘homeland’ loses its meaning if its citizens are not equal” Hafez al-Assad

While most of us assume that the recent protests in Syria are solely a reflection of Syrians’ aspiration for democratic government, the core drivers of unrest are largely centered on a broader sense of socio-economic inequity, poor governance, unemployment, favoritism, systematic corruption and injustice. Therefore the Syrian uprising is a reflection of the significant economic and social crisis faced by large segments of the Syrian population since the early 1980s.

One of the Assad regime’s main claims to legitimacy is that it treats all Syrians equally, reduces sectarian tensions and holds the country together. While there is no official state religion,

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5 Nikolos Van Dam, The Struggle for Power in Syria; Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba’th Party, 2011, p. 94
the constitution requires that the president be Muslim and states that Islamic jurisprudence is a principal source of legislation\(^6\), something that contradicts the secular believes of Baath party ideology. While Alawites (the religious sect that Assad belongs to) make up around 12% of the Syrian population, in the officer corps they make around 80-90\%\(^7\). Moreover, the country’s most military elite units are exclusively Alawite, and are commanded by close relatives of Assad. The Republican Guard or the 4th brigade is headed by the current president’s younger brother, Maher al-Assad, somehow similar to the Libyan case where Mouammar al-Qaddafi’s son Khamis al-Qaddafi was also the head of the al-Khamis brigade. The Syrian army can thus be characterized as a largely patrimonial force. It has been dominated by sectarian and family ties to the Assad regime, with widespread emphasis on cronyism and favoritism. Instead of being a relatively apolitical institution committed to the national interest, the army has been an instrument of crackdown\(^8\).

However, it is very simplistic if we say that the Syrian regime is an “Alawite rule”. Alawite political dominance takes such forms as the control of security, military and intelligence positions. However, there is a civilian decision-making group in which Sunnis, with a strong Damascus component, have the upper hand. Hence, the al-Assad regime was consolidated through a historic alliance between the predominantly Alawite military officer corps and the Sunni merchant-business class, in particular, its Damascene component. Thus maintaining the support of traditional Sunni “industrial bourgeoisie” became a key policy for the survival of Assad regime. The events of 1980s, during the armed led insurgency lead by the Syrian branch of Muslim Brotherhood, and

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\(^6\) Ben Smith, The Syrian Crisis, May 2012
\(^7\) Eyal Zisser, “The Syrian Army on Domestic and External Fronts’, Armed Forces in Middle East. Politics and Strategy (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 113
\(^8\) Derek Lutterbeck, Arab Uprisings and Armed Forces: Between Openness and Resistance, Geneva Center for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, 2011, pp. 46-47
the support of middle class merchants to the regime proved this point\textsuperscript{9}. Thus, the dissolution of this alliance would undermine the structural foundations of authoritarianism in Syria in the coming future. Also the co-option of the religious elite (ulama) is best illustrated by the regime’s continuous reliance on the support of ulama like Shaikh Said Ramadan al-Buti and the current mufti, Ahmad Badr al-Din Hassoun\textsuperscript{10}.

Regarding the pre-uprising reforms introduced by Bashar al-Assad, we can use two elements of the theory of upgrading authoritarianism; capturing the benefits of selective economic reforms and controlling new communications technologies\textsuperscript{11}. Over the past decade, Bashar al-Assad has attempted to drive Syria along the Chinese path of development, in which political stability through one-party rule is relentlessly maintained while modernization through market-based reform is pursued. This was reflected in the June 2005 Baath Party Congress’ announcement that Syria would adopt a “Socialist Market Economy”\textsuperscript{12}. Therefore a process of economic liberalization took place and Assad’s family members took part of this process. In addition, families and clans tied to the regime known as the “awlad al-sultah” (sons of authority) have become major economic actors. Today, Rami Makhluf, the president’s maternal cousin, known as ”Mr. Ten Percent” of the Syrian economy, enjoys monopoly over mobile phone services, and in the running of duty-free markets on Syria’s borders\textsuperscript{13}. He also has assumed a majority stake in many major enterprises and holding companies and ensured that the al-Assad family maintained control over the economy\textsuperscript{14}. But the move toward the market economy neglected equitable income distribution and social protection, thereby culminating in anti-developmental economic growth. The income inequality between rich and poor has widened since 2000, and social differences have become more visible. With seven million people living below the poverty line, the poverty rate as a whole was 34.3 percent in 2010. In rural areas, it

\textsuperscript{9} Paul Aarts, Pieter van Dijke, Iris Kolman, Jort Statema, Ghassan Dahhan, From Resilience to Revolt; Making Sense of the Arab Spring, University of Amsterdam, p. 14
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid, p. 25
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid, p. 14
\textsuperscript{12} Aram Narguizian, U.S. and Iranian Strategic Competition: The Proxy War in the Levant, Egypt and Jordan, a report of the CSIS Burke Chair in Strategy, March 2012, pp. 68-69
\textsuperscript{13} Fred H. Lawson, Demystifying Syria, SOAS Middle East Issues, 2009, p. 19
\textsuperscript{14} Aram Narguizian, U.S. and Iranian Strategic Competition: The Proxy War in the Levant, Egypt and Jordan, a report of the CSIS Burke Chair in Strategy, March 2012, pp. 68-69
reached around 62 percent\textsuperscript{15}. According to the 2004 UN poverty report, "While between 1996-1997 and 2003-2004 poverty declined, the wealth gap widened"\textsuperscript{16}. Since then, both the wealth gap and poverty have been on the rise. Furthermore, the free trade agreements signed with Turkey, led to an "invasion" of Turkish products in the local market that put countless industrial plants and workshops out of business and, consequently, thousands of Syrians out of their jobs\textsuperscript{17}. Unsurprisingly, unemployment was between twenty and twenty-five percent by 2008.

Therefore, not surprisingly, in the areas that historically formed the core constituency of the Baath party that the protests have been strongest, in particular the southern city of Daraa that sits at the heart of an agricultural plateau, the cities and rural areas of Homs, Idlib, Hama, and the suburbs of Damascus\textsuperscript{18}. Due to three decades of state divestment, trade liberalization, neglect of agriculture in the rural areas and government priority to the services sector\textsuperscript{19}.

Within days of the protests the government announced an increase in salaries and used soft powers. On March 25, a day after the president’s political and media advisor Bouthaina Shaaban announced these decisions, protesters in Daraa chanted: "\textit{Oh Bouthaina Shaaban, the people are not hungry, the people want freedom}"\textsuperscript{20}. As a result, the state of emergency, in place since the Ba’ath party came to power, was lifted in April 2011, and thousands of Syrian Kurds were granted nationality. In addition, a constitutional referendum took place in February 2012, where the Syrian constitution was amended, thus allowing multi-party elections to the parliament. While in article 8 of the old constitution the Ba’ath Party had been described as the “leading party in society and the state”, the same article 8 in the new constitution was changed to: "\textit{The political system is based on the principle}"

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\textsuperscript{17} Jihad Yazigi, Syria Needs an Economic Revolution, http://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2012/05/24/syria_needs_an_economic_revolution_100061.html


\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{20} Syria’s Revolution, Society, Power, Ideology, Heinrich Boll Sriftung, p. 24
of political pluralism, and rule is only obtained and exercised democratically through voting.”[21]. The new constitution also set a limit of two seven-year presidential terms. The new article 88 reads: “The President of the Republic is elected for 7 years as of the end of the term of the existing President. The President can be elected for only one more successive term.”[22]. But yet the president retains the power to form and dismiss governments.

Despite the reforms in the constitution might in the long term loosen the grip of the Ba’ath Party on power and open up Syrian political system, they were clearly not satisfactory to the protesters in Syria, who continued to take to the streets and started demanding the overthrow of the Assad regime. As the regime continued to use force against the protesters, the uprising took a violent path and the country entered into a crisis.

III. President Assad’s wrong assumption

a. Why Syria turned unstable?

"This problem gets bigger and deeper when some start thinking that victory and defeat are possible. The opposition forces combined cannot decide the battle of overthrowing the regime militarily, unless they aim to pull the country into chaos and an unending circle of violence. Meanwhile, I do not see that what the security forces and the army units are doing will reach a conclusive end." Syrian presidential deputy Farouq al-Shara’[23]

As the crackdown of the protesters continued, the uprising took a violent path, in July 2011, defected Colonel Riad al-As’ad declared the formation of the “Free Syrian Army” (FSA), which would “protect the peaceful protesters from Assad’s army”. Few months later FSA declared that it will overthrow the regime by the use of force and “liberate the country”. Meanwhile, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said that Syria is in state of

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[22] Ibid.
civil war\textsuperscript{24}. As the rebels tried to organize themselves and gained weapons and ammunitions from Western and Gulf countries, they tried to balance the power of the Syrian army and the military balance on the ground gained a stand-off. It seems neither of the conflicting sides will manage in the near future to empower the situation for his side. Furthermore the influx of the Syrian refugees and the sectarian dimensions of the Syrian crisis not only destabilized the country, but also its surrounding neighbors such as Lebanon and Turkey.

The FSA is mainly composed of defected Syrian soldiers and local militias. It is best described as an insurgency-in-making; it tries to exhaust government troops with guerilla-style hit-and-run attacks\textsuperscript{25}. Though many other rebel groups exist and fight the Syrian army some of them are homegrown militias and others are foreigners. Though the leadership of the FSA is secular but most rebels on the ground have Islamist aspirations, even some of them have radical Jihadi views. Although there have been some defections from the Syrian military’s lower ranks; however the bulk of the Syrian military till now has remained loyal to the Assad’s regime . Today, Sunnis are reported to make up the majority of the army’s mainly-conscript force while the Alawites dominate the officer corps and key command positions\textsuperscript{26}. Thus as the conflict continues it’s clear that without any direct foreign military intervention it’s unlikely that the regime will fall, and since neither of them is able to win over the other the bloodshed will continue. However incase the regime is overthrown, it’s unclear whether the leadership of the FSA, will be able to contain

\textsuperscript{24} Syria in civil war, Red Cross says, \url{http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-18849362} , December, 6, 2012

\textsuperscript{25} Primoz Manfreda, Syria’s Armed Opposition: Free Syrian Army, \url{http://middleeast.about.com/od/syria/p/Syrias-Armed-Opposition-Free-Syrian-Army.htm} , December 5, 2012

\textsuperscript{26} Aram Narguizian, Instability In Syria: Assessing the Risks of Military Intervention, Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 13, 2011, p. 18
the militarization of the Syrian society, and prevent radical Islamist groups from filling into the vacuum left behind by the collapsed state and a divided Syrian opposition. Meanwhile, Syria undoubtedly is trapped in a civil war situation, and the recently witnessed massacre of entire families may well be viewed that the conflict is taking a sectarian form; this issue may also lead to counter-massacres as an act of revenge. Moreover the state lost its monopoly over the bordering regions which increased the amount of arm smuggling and the inflow foreign Jihadists, something that created more violence.

According to the Syrian government there are still over a million internally displaced persons inside the country, and about 400,000 refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq. Given Syria’s ethnic-sectarian structure, any demographic change or shift in internal balance may reflect on the ethnic-sectarian composition of the neighboring countries. Turkey and Lebanon are the most to be effected from this crisis. As the military conflicts escalated thousands of refugees crossed the borders.

The reaction of the Lebanese people to the ongoing crisis in Syria is split along sectarian and party lines. With some difficulty, all parties agreed to the “self-distancing” policy. The government of Prime Minister Najib Mikati depends on this policy in order to avoid domestic confrontations related the events in Syria. Though there were some clashes in North Lebanon and some kidnappings happened towards Syrian opposition activists, but the government interfered. Before the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, divisions over national and political issues split Lebanon along party and sectarian lines. The March 14 alliance mainly composed of Sunnis, sympathizers for the Syrian opposition and allied with the West and Gulf countries, and the other camp March 8 alliance mainly Shii lead by Hizbulla allied to Iran and the Syrian regime. Both camps bet on Syria. March 14 believes that the fall of Assad regime would isolate Hizbulla and the Lebanese government, thus the government will fall and the alliance will empower. While for March 8 alliance, Syria has long served as a supply bridge between


Hezbollah and Iran and strengthening the alliance between them, and thus the overthrow of the Damascus regime would jeopardize Hizbulla’s strategic interests. Furthermore the influx of Syrian and Palestinian refugees from Syria is adding more problems on the Lebanese politics, till now the Lebanese government is unable to support them and unwilling to register them as refugees due to political reasons. As Syria’s civil war degenerates into a bloody sectarian path, tensions are increasing across the border between Turkey’s Alawite minorities and the Sunni Muslim majority. The Alevi (Turkish term of Alawites), estimated at 15 million to 20 million, are one of the biggest minorities in this country, most are located at Hatay province (annexed from Syria in 1939)\(^\text{29}\). They support Syrian president Bashar al-Assad while Turkey’s government lead by Prime Minister Erdogan, and many Sunni Turks support the opposition. In addition Turkey not only hosts Syrian refugees but also hosts and supports the Syrian rebel groups. Therefore, this issue may create sectarian tensions in the country. On the other hand, Turkey has also another problem, the Kurdish factor; most of the Syrian Kurds are supporters of PKK, which has launched operation inside Turkey. Some intelligent news claims that the Syrian regime is supporting the Kurdish militants in response of Turkish government’s support of the FSA\(^\text{30}\). Already there were some clashes reported between FSA and Kurdish fighters in Northern Syria. Turkey is also concerned that the “Balkanization” of Syria may lead to the emergence of a new Kurdish state, and will threaten the Turkish sovereignty.

Hence, the militarization of the Syrian conflict is not only destabilizing Syria but also threatening its neighbors from sectarian and ethnic conflicts. As the number of the Syrian refugees increases in neighboring countries their situation is becoming worse day-by-day. This humanitarian crisis should be the responsibility of the hosting governments and UNHCR to shelter them and protect them from any kind of abuses. Furthermore the current crisis in Syria shows that the military solution from both sides is failing, none of them is able to solve the issue to his side and the country is being driven towards uncertainty and vacuum. Thus Syria may enter in a phase of a “failing state”.


\(^{30}\) Ibid
b. Always the blame on others…

“Just a few minutes’ political chat with a sophisticated Middle Easterner makes it clear how much he interprets great public issues through the prism of conspiracy theories.”

The conspiracy theory became part of Arab culture. If you engage in a political debate with an Arab you will hear a lot the words; “anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism, anti-Zionism, international plots, Jewish conspiracy...” Some of these notions make us to go back to the days of World War 2, something that Hitler and Stalin used these propagandas to legitimize their authoritarian regimes and even justify the killings of the “domestic enemies”. Even nowadays Arab political leaders use these notions to boost their domestic legitimacy; the Syrian case is a clear example. President Hafiz al-Assad in his announcements, many times has mentioned examples of hidden hand or conspiracy theory: “enemy plots”, “plots against the central cause of our nation’s struggle”, “conspiracies”, “and dangers facing our nation”, “we in Syria will confront the conspiracy”. Supporters of conspiracy or hidden hand theorists believe that a powerful foreign hand or local collaborators will endanger their interest and destabilize their country, thus the blame is always put on others, without looking to the actual causes of the problem, which is mostly domestic due to corruption, injustice, poverty… Syrian official media describes the uprising as foreign made, imperialist and Zionist invasion on Syria; according to them, Syria is targeted due to its support to the resistance movement and its alliance with Iran. Most pro regime supporters justify their argument by quoting the Zionist declaration of 1980:

“...The dissolution of Syria, and later Iraq, into districts of ethnic and religious minorities following the example of Lebanon is Israel’s main long-range objective on the Eastern Front. The present military wreaking of these states is the short-range objective. Syria will disintegrate into several states along the lines of its ethnic and sectarian structure...As a result there will be a Shiite Alawi state, the district of Aleppo will be a Sunni state, and the district of Damascus another state which will be hostile to the northern one. The Druze-eve those in Golan-should form a state in Huaran and in northern Jordan...”

On his turn, President Bashar al-Assad declared that his nation’s enemies (pointing to the West and Israel) are working every day to divide Syria and bring Israeli agenda in the country and they will try this every time. In his interviews Assad also claimed that Syria became target of a “global war” due to its anti-imperialist and rejectionist stance and its position on the Palestinian cause. But one should not forget how the Syrian regime “betrayed” Arabism during the Gulf war and supported the US lead invasion on an Arab country, Iraq. Thus Syria had cooperated many times with Washington, whenever it feels it’s necessary. In her article “Syria, imperialism and Zionism: Fighting the real oppressor”, Lebanese political analyst Amal Saad-Ghorayeb claimed that the violence in Syria is a result of a proxy war where the “Syrian army was dragged into as it sought to stamp out a US-NATO-GCC-backed armed insurrection”. A question here one may ask; was the Syrian uprising in its earliest weeks also organized by the GCC and Western block? The GCC countries were calling for dialogue from the first months, and they called their ambassadors only after 6 months from the uprising, while USA and its allies called for Assad’s resignation at the end of 2011. Therefore, it’s wrong to overlook the domestic factors of the Syrian uprising, and blame the others mainly Israel, the Gulf States and the West on the violence, at least from the first few months. Eventually, the regime’s refusal to accept the legitimacy of the opposition from the first months and continues crackdown of the peaceful protests lead to the foreign intervention and militarization of the uprising which dragged the country into a violent civil war.

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33 Ibrahim al Marashi, The strange logic behind Syria’s culture of conspiracy, April 21,2011, http://www.thenational.ae/thenationalconversation/comment/the-strange-logic-behind-syrias-culture-of-conspiracy#full
c. Is it a “Salafi-ekhwanji rebellion”?

“In Syria one party cannot win over the other parties. We refuse to work under any party. We don’t want a party that society doesn’t accept…Syria is a Sufi society…”

A Sufi Sheikh from Hama

From the first months of the protests, regime supporters and government media portrayed the uprising as if it’s organized by the Syrian branch of Muslim Brotherhood (Ekhwan Muslimun-Arabic) (SMB) and radical Salafi groups, but in reality, although both groups have a role in the uprising, the Syrian uprising is shaped by religious-nationalist inspirations; it’s aim is the overthrow of Assad regime and establishment of a democratic and pluralistic society. In this section I will talk briefly about Syrian Sufi tolerant society, the defeat of the SMB (Syrian Muslim Brotherhood) in 1980s, its role in the uprising, the emergence of religious-nationalist militants and flourish of the militant Salafi Jihadism.

Syria historically is a Sufi society. Sufism stresses on the elimination of all gaps between individual and God. It’s a mystical spiritual path, and its followers claim that life is based on moral and ethical principles. Most Sufis are tolerant and peaceful. In Syria most of ulamas (Muslim clerics) and the urban middle class favor the Sufi way. Syrian Sufis have their religious institutions and schools while their charitable networks played a vital role during the worsening of the socio-economic conditions in the 1990s. Therefore the Syrian society is far from religious fundamentalism; it has a history of moderate

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34 Arab Uprisngs, The New Salafi Politics, Project on Middle East Political Science, October 16, 2012. p. 43
35 James Fadiman, Robert Frager, Essential Sufism, 1997, p. 2
Islamic practice and has long prided itself on peaceful and cross-confessional coexistence. But things changed in the 70s and 80s as clashes erupted between the Baathists and Islamists.

The only occasion where the Syrian regime was shaken in the pre-uprising period was when the confrontation with the Muslim Brotherhood reached its climax during the Hama rebellion in 1982, which was suppressed by the army. As in 1980, President Hafez al-Assad narrowly escaped from an assassination attempt by the SMB, the army imprisoned about 550 SMB members and executed them in their cells. As a response, various Islamist opposition groups formed an alliance called the “Islamic Front in Syria” mainly dominated by SMB, and published a manifesto “Declaration of the Islamic Revolution in Syria and its Program”, where it was declared that the rights of all religious and ethnic groups will be guaranteed. Moreover, a special call was made to the Alawites to “revise their accounts”, and “come to reason before it’s too late”. The organization was responsible of many bombings, assassinations and attacks on the army barracks. Finally, in 1982 the SMB declared a wide-scale Islamic revolt against the “Godless” Baath regime in Hama, calling through the loudspeakers of the mosques of Hama for Jihad. The SMB also tried to provoke a sectarian polarization between the Sunni and Alawite officers in the army, hoping the Sunnis defect and join their struggle against the regime, but their strategy failed. The army and Baath militants entered Hama, crushed the rebellion and according to some reports committed collective punishment against the local people, about 20,000 people lost their lives, the events in Hama marked the defeat of SMB and its expulsion from Syria. But in exile the SMB tried to reorganize and modernize itself and played an initial role in the formation of Syrian National Council and took a role in the uprising.

Many observers draw similarities between the SMB and the AKP in Turkey. According to these observers both are in broad terms promoters of liberal economic policies in combination with a religious and conservative worldview. The Syrian National Council (SNC) which was founded in October 2011 mainly is composed of SMB and Liberal members. The liberal members of the SNC, who define themselves as right of center, find themselves more

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36 Nikolaoas Van Dam, The Struggle for Power in Syria; Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba’th Party, 2011, p. 106
37 Ibid. p. 107
38 Ibid. p. 113
comfortable allying with the Brotherhood, than do those in the secularist/leftist camp. The liberal SNC members seem to think that they share enough common political ground with the SMB to be able to work well together in a coalition. At the same time however, Samir Nashar, a secular, liberal member of the SNC Executive Committee from his office in Istanbul expresses his conflicted views on the seemingly strange alliance: “Even though I fear an Islamisation of society under the Islamists, I am optimistic on behalf of the group they represent”\textsuperscript{40}. Nashar is content with his alliance to the Brotherhood, as they share some basic political views. As the protests expanded all over Syria, the SMB established underground networks with the protestors on the ground including members of FSA. Khaled Nasrallah, a leader of an armed group operating in Hama and Idlib said; “we are not with the Brotherhood. We are a popular revolution. They want to control you and we are nationalists…We won’t finish this oppression so somebody else will come and tell us what to do”\textsuperscript{41}. While Yusuf al-Hassan a former cigarette struggler who now is leading an armed group claimed that the SMB is a corrupt organization and divided the revolution by sending money and arms to those who support them. He also added “the Brotherhood is not accepted among us, we are middle Islam”\textsuperscript{42}. Therefore, though the SMB is playing a crucial role in the political umbrella of the opposition and is supported by some Arab Gulf countries and Turkey but on the ground especially on the military field it has few followers, and yet unclear how much support the SMB enjoys by the local people and the middle class merchants.

In June 2011, Lieutenant Colonel Hussein Harmush, announced that he and his companions were defecting from the Syrian army to “\textsuperscript{40} Jonas Bergan, Two forgotten dimensions to the Syrian conflict, 11 October 2012, http://www.opendemocracy.net/jonas-bergan-dr%C3%A6ge/two-forgotten-dimensions-to-syrian-conflict
\textsuperscript{41} Arab Uprisings, The New Salafi Politics, Project on Middle East Political Science, October 16, 2012. p. 42
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
demand freedom and democracy”, adding: “No to sectarianism, the Syrian people are one”⁴³. Months later the FSA was formed. Most FSA battalions neither release public political platform nor address broader ideological issues, yet portray the uprising as national struggle against an authoritarian corrupt regime rather than a Sunni Jihad against Alawites. Though FSA is mainly composed of Sunnis and derive personal inspiration from Islam, but they are nationalist in their opposition activities⁴⁴. A proof for this, are the flags in the YouTube videos, released by FSA, where we can realize the Syrian revolutionary flag next to the Islamic al-shahada (martyrdom) flags, something which totally contradicts al-Qaida’s global Jihadist views. Thus the rebels within the FSA ranks are religious nationalists, though this doesn’t mean that FSA doesn’t have Islamic battalions such as the al-Farouq battalion in Homs, but they have declared their commitment to international conventions and democracy, whether true or not, their activities on the ground will prove it. But the role of Salafi clerics, the ineffectiveness of FSA; its failure to defend the protestors and its dependence of Western support lead a frustration within some of its ranks which lead to the growth of radical Salafi Jihadism and the formation of the Jubhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham (The Support Front for the People in Syria) radical battalion.

Salafi Jihadism, denies the idea of modern state and engages in militant Jihad (Islamic term of religious struggle) to establish an Islamic state based on the Sharia, Islamic law⁴⁵. Syria’s homegrown Salafi Jihadist movement is called the Jubhat al-Nusra, which recently declared the establishment of an Islamic state in Aleppo⁴⁶. Even though other Salafi groups tried to establish Islamic Emirate in other areas but the rebels and the people turned against them⁴⁷. But what are the reasons that lead to the growth of such groups in Syria? The first reason is the role of radical Salafi clerics such as Adnan al-Arour. Al-Arour is a Syrian Salafi preacher exiled in Saudi Arabia; he repeatedly characterizes the uprising as a “Sunni struggle against Shites and Alawite oppression”⁴⁸, something that contradicts the spirit and the nature of the uprising. Though he has supporters within the Syrian Salafi ranks but most opposition members reject his radical ideas.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth O’Bagy, Jihad in Syria, Institute for the Study of War, Middle East Security Report 6, September 2010, pp.18-19
⁴⁵ Ibid, p.18
⁴⁷ Arab Uprisings, The New Salafi Politics, Project on Middle East Political Science, October 16, 2012. p. 44
The second reason is the inability if FSA to protect the protestors as the death toll increases day by day. If the US and European countries really want to contain the radicalism within the opposition ranks on the ground and at the same time topple the Assad regime then they should send arms to the secular or religious-nationalist FSA so that the later can check the power of Salafis on the ground. Moreover, a turning point occurred in February 2012, where the leader of al-Qaida Ayman al-Zawahiri called Muslims to declare Jihad in Syria, few weeks later the U.S. intelligence officials publicly blamed the Damascus and Aleppo bombings on groups linked to al-Qaida that infiltrated from Iraq\textsuperscript{49}. (Just to mention that during the US invasion on Iraq, the Syrian regime supported the infiltration of Mujahidins to Iraq for fight against US troops).

According to some this group was the militant Salafi Jihadist Junhat al-Nusra. As a reaction, in late July 2012, the current head of FSA Supreme Military Council General Mustafa al-Sheikh warned about the growth of Salafism and declared: \textit{``They are getting bigger and bigger. And day by day they have more powerful positions inside the country. The situation is very dangerous''}\textsuperscript{50}. The third reason is the feel of being betrayed by the international community. As the crackdown increases, the local protestors’ and fighters’ sense of abandonment by the outside increases, therefore it’s normal that people will become more religious and the voices for Jihad will get louder, thus radicalization will be something inevitable. As Western countries are hesitating to arm the FSA, due to fear that these weapons may pass in the hands of radicals, actually this issue is creating radicalism by itself. Therefore, the abandonment by the outside world mainly the West and its inability to support the opposition by diplomatic, political and military mean and the prolongation of the crackdown by the regime are planting the seeds of fundamentalism in Syria.

As the security forces and the army intensified the crackdown of the opposition activities, fundamentalist elements in the Syrian society and the rebel ranks have become more visible. On the other hand, though the role of the SMB and the Salafi Jihadists can’t be ignored in the Syrian uprising, we can’t claim that the uprising is shaped by these two groups. Due to the aim of the uprising which is to overthrow the regime and establish democratic system, though the means of

\textsuperscript{49} ``Tentative Jihad: Syria’s Fundamentalist Opposition’’, ICJ, Middle East Report N. 131, October 12, 2012, p 13
\textsuperscript{50}Ibid. p 5
some groups differ but mainly the aim is the same. Hence the uprising and the rebellion is based on religious nationalist principles.

VI. From regional to international crisis

“This crisis is deteriorating and represents a danger to the Syrian people, to the region, and to the whole world.” UN-Arab League envoy Lakhdar Brahimi

Once again, regional politics shows many signs of an Arab cold war and, once again, that broader conflict is reflecting in the struggle on Syria. The Syrian conflict became out of the control of the Syrians and thus, due to its geopolitical position, the crises internationalized and lead to the emergence of a new World Order. This new order, as Russian President Putin claimed was the end of US hegemonic unipolarism and hence bipolarism was formed; Russia, China and Iran from one hand, and the US, West, Turkey and the GCC from another hand.

The Arab uprisings also deepened the divisions of the new Arab cold war, including along Sunni-Shi’a lines. Today’s Arab cold war features not only state-state rivalries, but also state-society conflicts characterized by reemerging Arab identity politics, a public sphere expanded by a revolution in media and communication, a rise of Islamist social and political movements challenging resilient regimes and, finally, new norms and popular expectations regarding participation in public life. The battle lines outside Syria, on international level, are already drawn, with the US, Britain and France in conflict with Russia and China, while regional non-Arab powers Turkey and Iran similarly back opposite sides. Israelis are torn between which outcome is worse for them. The struggle on Syria polarized the Sunni-Shi’a tensions. Turkey started publicly supporting the Syrian opposition and its rebels. Officials in Ankara have begun


to speak openly about creating a “buffer zone” inside Syria where it could protect refugees from the crackdown without having to admit them to Turkish territory. That, of course, would mean sending Turkish troops into Syria. But Turkey is waiting for international permission to take such a step. “It seems out of the question for us to do that on our own,” said an adviser to President Abdullah Gul.  

Saudi support for the Syrian opposition is motivated by a decades-long desire to break the alliance between Syria and the Islamic Republic of Iran, Saudi Arabia’s chief rival for dominance in the Persian Gulf and the wider Middle East. Saudi reaction to the “Arab Spring” is based on two principles: containing the unrest before it reaches its territory, and ensuring that Iran does not benefit from any changes to the regional balance of power. In this context, the outbreak of the Syrian uprising came as a golden opportunity for the Saudis to strike at Iran’s key Arab ally the collapse of the regime would be a significant blow to Iran’s strategic interests. Syria has been one of the Islamic Republic’s closest and most strategic allies. Iran with the Syrian support armed the Lebanese resistance, Hizbulla and had an upper hand in the Lebanese politics. The fall of the Assad regime would seriously affect Iran’s ability to project power into the eastern Mediterranean Levant region. Ali Akbar Velayati, a former foreign minister and currently a senior advisor to Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamene’i, emphasized on one occasion that Syria is “the golden ring” in the “chain of resistance against Israel.” Furthermore, Turkish media claimed that Iran started to support Kurdish PKK fighters in revenge of Turkey’s support of the FSA.

The Russian and Chinese double veto was a message that the West can’t ignore them and it most take into consideration of the interests of the new emerging powers. Therefore, from the Russian-Chinese point of view, Syria was not Libya and military intervention at the heart of Arab-Israeli conflict is intolerable. This was clear sign that the Western block already lost its hegemonic power in the international politics. On the ashes and the blood of the Syrian people the political map of the world was being drawn. Non-interference in internal affairs of sovereign


states is one of central tenets of Russia’s diplomacy. Like China, Russia feels this principle was blatantly violated in NATO’s campaign against late Libyan leader Col. Muammar al-Qaddafi in 2011. “Regime change” by force in Syria is a red line for Moscow, and no UN Security Council resolution that comes close to authorizing an international military intervention against Assad can hope to bypass a Russian veto. But it should be clear that Russia’s support for Syria is a reflection of Russia’s own interests. Russia is concerned of its own national security in the Caucasus region. Russia is worried that the loss of secular regime in Syria and the rise of radical Islam will reflect on the Russian Caucasus, which already is witnessing emergence of radical Islamic movements. In addition Russia’s support for the Syrian regime is motivated by extensive trade and military interests that go back to the Soviet era. One should not forget that Syria’s port city of Tartous, is Russia’s only navy outpost in the Mediterranean. Syria unlike Libya is not rich of natural resources, but it has a geopolitical significance. U.S. and Western states need a Syria that acts under their umbrella far away from Iran and Hizbullah. U.S. wants the Assad regime to be replaced by a pro-Western Sunni-dominated rule that is more favorable to its foreign policies. This could include the degradation of ties with Iran and effect negatively on the arm flow from Iran to Hizbullah. Thus Iran’s road towards the Mediterranean will be cut off and Hizbullah will be politically and militarily isolated. Failing to push a UN resolution, US stated its plans to arm the Syrian rebels, rather than engage in a costly direct military intervention, having an opposite outcome. It should also be clear that Western interests in Syria are geopolitical and not humanitarian or based on human rights. Finally the clash of interests and inability of any side to solve the Syrian crisis to its side, is adding more violence on the conflict which may threaten the region on the long run.

Therefore, Syria needs a political solution the prolongation of the civil war will lead to a regional crisis and instability. Thus it’s the interest of both US and Russia to solve the conflict before it gets out of their control; both should pose pressure on their allies and actors in Syria to stop the bloodshed and start a transitional period.

57 Christopher Harmer, Russia Naval Base Tartus, Institute for the Study of War, July 31, 2012
V. Conclusion

It’s wrong to say that the Syrian uprising was violent from the beginning, as some want to portray it. From the first months protestors used to express their ideas by singing, and raising slogans and pictures. But as the crackdown intensified, the people had no choice but to raise arms; the rebellion took a violent path and radicalized and foreign Jihadists infiltrated. Syria’s geopolitical importance and its relations with Iran and Russia internationalized the domestic crisis. At the present time the country is engaged in a minor form of a civil war, that we can call a confined civil war. If both conflicting sides want the situation to be calmed, then the regime and the armed rebels should agree on a ceasefire, this process must be guaranteed by the UN. In order to avoid any confrontation, UN peacekeeping soldiers should be sent to the country, Russia and the West, including Arab countries must take part in this process. After this, a national unity government should be formed with high executive powers, the army should be re-institutionalized and President Assad should step down and not participate in the next presidential elections. Hence a establishment of a transitional governing body is necessary, with full executive powers and made up by members of the current government and the opposition, as part of important agreed principles and guidelines for a Syrian-led political transition. The head of the transitional governing body can be held to the current presidential deputy Farouq al-Shara’, who is one of the best candidates to fill the vacuum after Assad, till democratic, free and transparent elections are made. It is for the interest of both sides, regional and international actors to pressure on both sides, so that the fighting stops and the refugees return safe to their homes. Both camps must compromise for the sake of their country. But several questions can be raised; why the conflict is being prolonged? Who have interests in the Syrian bloodshed? How radicalism will be contained and most importantly what if there will not be a political solution, will the alternative; military solution end the conflict?
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