A HISTORICAL-POLITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR (2011-2017), ITS CONSEQUENCES AND ITS POSSIBLE STABILIZATION

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Abstract
This article highlights that Syria was not at the forefront of Middle East politics as it is today, but different events in the past history of the region brought Syria to such key position. Presently, it has become a geopolitical front for the players involved - a geopolitical front for the Kurdish' status in the countries with significant Kurdish minority; for the status of Iran-Gulf balance in the Middle East; and for the positions of the US and Russia in the new Middle Eastern political configuration. These factors have complicated the political settlement and the military solution. They have also regionalized and internationalized the civil war, because the current internal fractures of the Syrian situation stand between the Sunni and Shia sects, Iran and Gulf, the US' coalition and the Russian alignment states. The political-military target of each of the players has been about territorial gains on the ground and denying such gains to the other side. Nevertheless, despite the high level of violence, both the regime and the opposition forces agree to address the Syrian political settlement in terms of national territorial integrity.

Introduction

The Syrian crisis started as a continued wave of uprisings due to people's awareness of the need for a more active political involvement and social-economic reforms that would improve the standing of the minorities and people as a whole within the country. It was a continuation of Middle Eastern wave of uprisings, yet different because the situation and perception of the Middle Eastern political elites and their masses had already become tense due to the previous experiences in Iraq, Tunisia, Yemen, Libya, and Egypt. Even Afghanistan is included in this chaotic scene. Therefore there was a certain perception about the violence used by all warring sides in these countries, creating thus a confusing chaotic scenario for the elites as well as for the masses. Due to these violent experiences, the governments of the countries involved in uprisings as well as their masses responded to each other with a maximum violence level, often supported by outside forces in terms of sponsors and political-military back-up.

Even though the Syrian civil war contains many warring parties, the regime and the opposition are the two most important players. Even the alignments are built according to the scope that relates to these two domestic players because the contest for legitimacy and power of the future Syria stands between these two players. The outsiders' scope has been according to the capabilities and intentions to shape the outcome of the Syrian settlement and advance their interests through one of these two players. Despite how chaotic the internal devastation has become, there is still a government with legitimate institutions and army, although not strong enough to impose the term of the negotiated settlement upon the opposition, if not backed up by external support.

A negotiated settlement has been initiated many times from either of the players, but the crisis has become prolonged and transnational due to two factors: neither a quick decisive military victory, nor an agreed format between the US and Russia has been possible. Same points of discussions, same obstacles - with the intention of gaining territory and preventing such gains to the opposing side, in the name of defeating the jihadi groups and ISIS.

Important to note that the legitimacy still stands on the side of the regime and the outcome of this civil war represents to Russia a vital interest since Syria is the only ally, whereas to US it does not threaten the US' core interests in Middle East. Between US and Russia, wherever the two are involved on the opposite sides, none can afford to challenge the other, but it also depends whose vital interests are at stake. Syria has been a long-standing ally of Iran and Russia during and after the Cold War. This article asserts that in terms of alignment strategy, the Saudi-Gulf side is concerned with bringing Syria's strategic alignment away from Iran and Russia, while Egypt, Jordan and Turkey seem more ready to accept any negotiated settlement that can bring an end to the civil war.

In 2015, the US, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and Jordan represented an alignment supporting the opposition with training and forces to withstand ISIS and the regime in Syria.[1] Russia's interference has balanced the US' role, and the Syrian civil war is characterized by a balance of threat through balance of alignments. Regarding Iran-Gulf's stance, the region is balanced because at least until now, none of the major Middle Eastern players can have predominance over the other. David Wallsh attributes the Syrian-Iran alliance to the common strategic interests rather than to the common Shiite identity, because both these countries have identified similar perception regarding foes and threats - Israel and the Sunni side in the region.[2]This article holds that all civil wars' cases produce different alignment strategy and their targets are two points: the territory and the institutions of the country where the civil war occurs. Complexity of the relationships between the domestic conflicting sides with the regional and international players creates balance of threat. But the legitimacy always stands with the government, whether the government is perceived as being on the right or the wrong side of the civil war. In the case of Syria, the purpose of the alignment strategy means, to US and Russia an open-door access into the new emerging Middle Eastern politics. Outsiders ally with the domestic player that supports the scope and the balance of power versus the other's external involvement. This has made the Syrian conflict balanced in terms of the powerful contradictory alignments that are being built, not in terms of successfully negotiating a solution. Both opposition and the regime want to maintain the unity of Syria, and whatever new settlement takes place - with or without the same pre-civil war government, the legitimacy remains on the government's side.

The great powers' worldview is always hawkish, the regional powers' worldview depends on the degree of support they find from the great powers. Middle East became the ground of many significant and dangerous events since 2001, each with its own uniqueness, violence and outcome, such as the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, the fall of the previous regimes in Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia, Libya, and the Arab uprisings and revolutions. The outcome of the Syrian crisis has become one of the hotspot areas in this web of events, because the purpose of transforming Middle East moved forward successfully, but it stopped its advances at the point of Syria. And this outcome relates to the great patrons of this civil war proxies –US and Russia.

Another fallout of the Syrian civil war has been the ethno-sectarian divisions which has seriously fragmented the Syrian and other Middle Eastern countries' political structure and institutions. Nevertheless, despite the sectarian polarisation and how it has affected the national and the regional stability, the national and territorial terms have prevailed over the situational interpretation as Sunni-Shia, North-South, East-West of the country, or regime-opposition territorial lines. Despite the attempts by the regime and the opposition to build local governance, civil society and self-regulation mechanisms in the towns and cities under their control, the regime and the opposition, each defines its role in national terms rather than in ethnic and sectarian terms. Although ISIS and Kurdish groups hold a strong status too, they have been used with the purpose of weakening or strengthening the battle for territory and legitimacy between the regime and the opposition.

A Historical-Political Perspective of the Syrian Civil War
This section highlights the historical-political perspective that made the present Syrian crisis the core of Middle Eastern geopolitics. Looking at the historical events that have taken place in the Middle East, after the Ottoman Empire era, the British-French pact divided Middle East into colonial territories until the end of World War II when the Middle Eastern countries gained independence. In this geopolitical map of changes Syria was not at the core of Middle Eastern concerns. Through different political events that took place in 19th century, the Syrian significance shifted from the periphery in the past to the core in the present Middle Eastern geopolitics.

The Middle East region has been one of the great powers' contesting arena for sphere of influence, from Ottoman Empire to the British-French European powers and later to the US-USSR, and recently still US-Russia. The regional players' significance and importance has been shifting and adjusting according to the involvement of the great powers. Also, among the Middle Eastern countries there have been different types of nationalism course, as a country, as a Muslim country, or as an Arab country. The Sunni-Shia differences have not been a component of the nationalism's stream until the post-Iraq War situation in 2003.

When the Middle East started to take shape as a region according to the independences of the emerging new Arab countries in Middle East, Iraq, Iran, and Egypt were considered as the core Arab countries in terms of strength, size of the country, army and their ambition for a pan-Islamism or pan-Arabism leadership.[3] Within the geopolitical ambitions between these Arab countries, different wars were initiated for defensive and offensive national interests, such as Iraq-Kuwait war (1990), Iran-Iraq War (1979), and the Arab countries constant attacks and plans to attack Israel. However, in the global war against terrorism after 2001, the core of the Arab countries shifted from the fall of regimes in Iraq, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Tunisia, a wave proceeding towards Syria (and intended to Iran too) because Syria was part of the revolution and terrorism waves that spread in the Middle East, but the only uprising in which the regime has not fallen yet. For this purpose Syria has become the core of the current Middle Eastern politics and its possible future political configuration.

To understand the current Syrian crisis it is necessary to know its internal and international interactions since its independence in 1946. Syria itself is the fallout of the great power agreements since World War I and World War II. Syria as a country was created through the Sykes-Picot agreement between Britain and France who divided the post-Ottoman era Middle East into 'Zone A' and 'Zone B' and Syria was the Zone A under the French Mandate. During the British-French agreement (1920) there was no feeling of nationalism and nation-state as Syria yet. In 1920, under the League of Nations' charter, France had to accept the Damascus' choice for independence.[4] From 1920-1946, during the 26 years of French rule over Syria-Damascus, the native Syrian population gradually developed a sense of nationalism. There were the Baath Party and the Muslim Brotherhood struggling for the version of Syrian nationalism in the country, which resulted into a period of coups and counter-coups that dominated the country's political movements between 1946-1971, when Hafez al-Assad successfully consolidated the victory of Baath Party and his presidency from 1971 until his death in 2000. For decades the political system in Syria has been under the Baath Party led by Assad's family. Between 1970 and 2000's presidency of Hafez al-Assad, the situation in Syria was more repressive with the secret police established to defend the governance of Hafez al-Assad and Baath Party from internal rivals and challenges. Alawites, Christians and Kurds have been the loyal segments of the Baath Party. The Sunni uprisings were resolved by reforms to incorporate the Sunnis within the government, and the Muslim Brotherhood uprising in 1982 was oppressed by force.[5]

In 2000, the Syrian presidency was continued by Bashar al-Assad, the son of the previous president, who lifted the four-decades emergency law in the country and decided to offer some new reforms for the Syrian democracy movement. Furthermore, Bashar al-Assad released the political prisoners and allowed the intellectuals of the country and media to hold meetings and publish their opinions about the country's democratic reforms. This was a temporary phase because soon the government started to limit such movements of the intellectuals and the media. Another important difference is that the new Syrian administration under president Bashar al-Assad (2001-2011) was involved in a new type of regional circumstances different from the previous administration under Hafez al-Assad, which was the terrorism and global war against terrorism campaign in Middle East. Post-2001 brought new risks to the status quo of the Middle Eastern countries, even to their territorial integrity and sovereignty to most of them. Each event, such as the war on Iraq 2003, the revolutions in Yemen, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, including Syria, were closely affecting each other's internal stability, cooperation and allies. Furthermore Syria was against the US' Iraqi War in 2003 and supported the Iraqi militants against the US troops. Also in 2005, the assassination of the former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Tariri created doubts that it was conducted by the Syrian regime, and the public opinion forced the Syrian regime to withdraw its forces from Lebanon's territory after 29 years' presence. In terms of foreign policy, Syria has always expressed determination to return back the Golan Heights to the Syrian territory, thus it has been in conflicting posture with Israel over this issue.

Regarding the uprising that started in 2011 and led to the civil war, Assad offered initially a national dialogue to the opposition. Meanwhile the opposition was armed to stand up against the government's use of force, it refused to offer negotiations to the government's tactics and started gaining territory. Furthermore for more than six years of the civil war (2011-2017), the map of the Syrian crisis has shifted between the towns, villages and provinces captured or lost by the regime, opposition, Kurds and ISIS through fighting each other. In such event, Bashar al-Assad has rejected the calls by the UN, US, EU and the opposition to give up power and allow a transitional government without his presidency and his team.

Prior to the new chapter of international politics related to the global war against terrorism which started in 2001, Middle East was trying to adapt to the post-Cold War challenges and opportunities. The political system of the Middle Eastern countries has been secular and authoritarianist since their independence, whether the Gulf Monarchies, Iran or the supposed moderate secular system such as Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. In the post-cold war, all the Middle Eastern countries attempted to discuss the regional decision-making in regional meetings with each other. Syria cooperated with US when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, and after 2001, Syria cooperated with the US for intelligence information on al-Qaeda, but after the US' Iraq War on 2003, Syria shifted closer to Iran and Russia.

The uprising that contributed to the present civil war started in 2011 as a continued wave of revolutions in the Middle Eastern countries. The opposition's protests demanded the resignation of President Assad, and each side responded by force. The Syrian civil war has become one of the most complicated civil wars, from 2011-2017, still ongoing.

The Syrian Civil War

The scenario of the Syrian civil war has reached a point that it can safely be asserted that through the six years of the civil war, each of the main players that holds some territory within the internal Syrian territory conducted battles with the purpose of gaining institutions, legitimacy and territory for these are the decisive factors that determine the victor of the civil war. The vacuum created by the regime-opposition battles created space for the jihadi terrorists. Between the US and Russia, each suggested the option for a no-fly zone over Syria

with the purpose of shifting the military balance on the ground in favour of its proxy. Therefore, this article suggests that a decisive factor of shifting the outcome of the Syrian civil war is about the ISIS territory and right now both US and Russia are contesting for capturing Manbij and Raqqa, and about whose warplanes must observe the protection of the four-safe zones in Syria, as decided in April and May, 2017negotiations in Astana, Kazakhstan. Russia, Iran, Turkey are the guarantors of this new ceasefire initiative. Still there are disagreements, Russia demands no US warplanes observing the four-safe zones. US rejects such Russian requirement, and Saudi Arabia rejects the participation of Iran in the ceasefire process and Iranian troops on the Syrian ground to observe that the ceasefire is implemented.

Whatever the outcome of the Syrian civil war, it is not as strategic interest between the Saudi Arabia and Iran as claimed. To the domestic players it means survival and power; whereas to the powerful patrons, US and Russia it means an ally for open-door access into the new Middle East politics. Middle East's regional structure contains many important players, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Turkey, and Israel, a structure in which none is the most important one because militarily each is sufficiently equipped to deter each other. Israel is an exception for it is the most powerful military country in the region and with complicated political connections with the region's important players, concerned with the Sunni and Shia jihadi. Therefore, the contemporary Middle East needs a mutual deterrence between the major regional players, each assured of its security. While trying to analyse the Syrian civil war, it is not easy to clearly cut the explanation between domestic, regional and international nuances because the three these layers are closely connected with each other in this civil war.

The Internal Dimension
The internal layer of the civil war: Syria became an uprising that stood out of the rest of the uprisings in the Middle East because of the direct interference of Russia that changed the intended course of the Syrian civil war. The US and the Gulf countries, including Turkey and Israel stood by the side of the opposition's preference to overthrow the regime. Whereas Russia and Iran stood by the side of the government. It became a clash of US' responsibility to protect the opposition versus Russia's stance for pro-legitimate government, and a clash of regime's national defense versus the opposition's self-defense. This became more intense due to the Iranian and Russian backup. Even though that support evolved gradually, both Iran and Russia remain determined to prevent the loss of their only ally in Middle East- especially given how chaotic Middle East turned to be. According to a RAND report "the regional balance of power hinges on the [Syrian] conflict's outcome."[6]

In Syria, the political-military stalemate took place because neither the regime nor the opposition could ensure a quick decisive military victory and this triggered a dangerous sectarianism all over the country. Sectarianism and terrorist groups had sufficient vacuum and support to organize and spread, causing fragmentation along the ethno-sectarian lines within the existing state boundaries, and the regime isstill struggling to expand the territory under its control. Internally, the opposition also established certain presumed post-civil war institutions such as the Supreme Military Command, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, the Assistance Coordination Unit, Aleppo Free Lawyers Association, Revolutionary Security Force- as zones under civilian control and zones under military control. An important factor to be taken into account is that both Kurds and the opposition boycotted the regime's elections at the end of 2011.[7] Each continued the course for either in charge of the new transformed Syrian government, or for a symmetric or asymmetric decentralization of the country.

Despite the present jihadi and sectarianism component in all the warring combatants involved in the Syrian crisis, this article asserts that instead the Syrian civil war is about the

contest for influence in the region. The fierce fighting in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, including the Sunni jihadi and Shia militia groups highlight the sectarian component of the violence and conflict in these countries. This article concurs with the opinion of Gregory Gause III, that such sectarianist clashes are not impossible to political solution because 'conflict axes in the past in the Middle East did not develop along the Sunni-Shia lines. Because it is about the particularities of the current politics and not about "centuries-long hatred" the reason that has sparked the recent Sunni-Shia tensions, and these particularities are subject to change."[8]Furthermore, Gregory Gause argues that "it is the weakening of Arab states, more than sectarianism or the rise of Islamist ideologies, that has created the battlefields of the new Middle East."[9] "The conflicts have not seriously impaired America's core regional interests. The guiding principle of the American response should be to prefer order over chaos, and thereby support the states that provide effective governance, even when that governance does not achieve preferred levels of democracy and human rights."[10] In 2014, the Vice President Joseph Biden claimed that "our allies in the region were our largest problem in Syria, and they were contributing to a proxy Sunni- Shia war."[11]

Even though the requirements and concessions for the transitional Syrian government has been an either-or stance about with-or-without Assad's figure, the regime and the opposition speak in terms of Syrian sovereignty and territorial integrity. Therefore a regime-opposition mutual national framework seems possible. The possible stabilization of the Syrian crisis has been argued around the defeat of ISIS and the alternative to the Assad's regime. Here the cards depend on Russia's role, because in the integrated Syria-Iraq civil wars, Iraq is a US proxy and Syria is a Russian proxy. Among the numerous weakened governments and fallen leaders in Middle East, Assad is the only ally to Russia, also an open-door for the Russian further access into Middle East due to its air base and naval base in Syria.

The External Dimension
The regional and international actors tried to shift the balance of military and negotiations' successes on the side of their relevant proxy on the ground because it has been impossible to agree on a Syria with or without Assad's figure through the numerous ceasefires and negotiations for six years of the violent Syrian civil war. Then each is targeting the option of defeating ISIS and capturing its territory. This option on one side will contribute to less terrorist activities and less external involvement in the name of defeating ISIS' terrorism. On the other side, the retreat or defeat of ISIS might be followed up by Kurdish military stand up for self-determination and autonomy. The turmoil caused by ISIS might be replaced by the Kurdish military struggle to rise in the countries of Kurdish minorities. In a proxy war, the conflicting and warring parties intend to capture territory, for this purpose each warring side makes use of the competent ground forces and ground offensives.

The safe zones have been often recommended by the US and Russian side, which means a zone specifically for the safety of the internally displaced population. The disagreement has been whether the safe zone would have to be under Russian air defense or the US' air defense, or two zones of air defense. This disagreement is still present in the current four-safe zones. Battlefield setbacks are to be expected and this article argues that to stabilize the Syrian civil war, it is necessary to defeat ISIS and capture its territory, not just weaken it and containing its spread. Because, despite the diplomatic and coercive pressure that has taken place between the players involved in the Syrian puzzle, the current territorial balance between the regime and the opposition will change significantly for who gets hold over the ISIS territory. Nevertheless it seems very possible that ISIS' rise and fall will be replaced by the Kurdish minorities' rise for autonomy and independence.

Another factor that proves that the regional divisions have not been about the Sunni-Shia lines, is the fact that while Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Jordan supported the Sunni side of the Syrian civil war, it was not a coordinated Sunni support for the Sunnis in Syria. Also Saudi Arabia has not been supportive of the Brotherhood in Egypt, Syria and Iraq, so Saudi's policy has not been driven by sectarianism. The current regional instability is not due to sectarianism but due to weak states and weak institutions in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, which has created domestic political vacuum in these countries. And this vacuum became filled by the fight for power of different ethno-sectarian identities who in the absence of strong government sought for external support. It is hard to keep track on the numerous jihadi, Sunni, Shia, Iraqi, Syrian, Egyptian, and Brotherhood militias who became strong non-state actors in the vacuum of the fallen states, but in the regional matters, Iran has successfully balanced Saudi's influence in the Palestinian issue, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. Instead there has been a more coherent Shia alliance Iran-Syria-Hezbollah than a Sunni alliance. The Shia team been more united and cooperative with each other than the Sunni countries.

Despite the complex scenario of the Syrian civil war and the implications of the outcome for the geopolitical contest and security dynamics in Middle East, the fact is that the US and Russia predominate the civil war in Syria and its outcome. And this article highlights that as a consequence, in the Middle Eastern regional politics the countries that are not in good terms with the US shift towards Russia and vice versa. This explains the fact the regional players in any region shift their alliance according to which major player has the greatest influence in the region at the moment. The relations between countries, including mistrust, perception, mutual or not, reconcilable or irreconcilable differences, threats and interests vary according to the influence and security shaping of any relationship. In the view of many scholars and political elites, the US' initiatives to transform the Middle East democratically have not been successful., and presently Syria represents another geopolitical line between the US' and Russia's grand strategy regarding the Middle Eastern region. Furthermore, the fall of the Syrian regime will produce less room for Russian access into the Middle East. The Syrian regime remains still well-positioned to resist a protracted civil war against the opposition groups due to Russia's support. Middle East has been shaped by the Ottoman Empires for many centuries until 1918-1919, the British-French secret pact (1919-1945), the US-USSR (1945-1990), and now again US-Russia in the post-Cold War.

Prior to the direct Russian intervention in September 2015, the fall of Syria was almost completed, the country was on the brink of collapse from the violent jihadist fractures who controlled different cities and towns of the Syrian territory. Iran and Russia were assisting the regime, whereas the US was supporting the opposition groups deemed as 'moderates" with logistical support in 2013 for the transfer of weapons funded by Saudi Arabia and Qatar.[12]Previous ceasefires and talks aimed to convince Russia that the fall of the regime was a mutual interest, or to convince Russia and the regime to settle for a Syrian state with an Alawite population along the coastal side of the country, a settlement that could address the vital interest of both Russia and the regime. Neither Russia nor the regime accepted a political settlement according to such scope. Since the USSR time, Russia declared its intention to maintain a permanent military base in Middle East and in 1971, the USSR and the Syrian regime signed an agreement to use the Tartus port as a permanent base for surface combatants, submarines and cargo ships.[13]The Russian-Syrian regime cooperation has deepened with an agreement to maintain a permanent Russian air base in Hmeimim and expand the Tartus naval base. Russia has also deployed missile defense system in Syria to prevent any US no-fly zone. Sergei Zheleznyak, State Duma member has described the agreement on the military bases in Syria "to strengthen the stability in Middle East, in order to protect the Syrian people from the terrorist threat and to make possible to consolidate

stability across the Middle Eastern region."[14]Until Russia entered the picture, the US was at the centre of the Syrian ongoing civil war. When Russia decided to prevent the loss of another client state, then the US acted according to the Russian acts in Syria and took a more prudent approach towards the Syrian crisis to avoid collision and reach a mutual convenience with Russia.

Regarding the shape of conflict, this article agrees with the opinion that "Any peace would be better than this war."[15]Among the different opinions offered about ending the six-year Syrian civil war, whether to maintain the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of Syria which is the preferred solution, or to divide Syria either according to the ethno-sectarian divisions or according to the current regime-opposition-Kurds-ISIS territorial lines, the opposition and the regime target full territorial control of a new moderate and democratic Syria. To achieve this, each is cooperating with external support to capture the ISIS territories of Raqqa and Manbij. According to the opinion of Pollack and Walter "resolve the civil war, however, and the source of ISIS' strength and appeal disappears."[16]

The civil war's alignment strategy of the Syrian case shows that the external regional and great power involvement goes according to the political and national interests' imperatives. Russia, Turkey, and Iran form an important trilateral alignment of the Syrian civil war settlement and these three countries seem to emerge into a new era of tactical and strategic alliance in the Middle East.[17]According to Karim Sadjapour "for Tehran, the Syrian conflict is not just about who controls Damascus. It is the epicentre of a broader ideological, sectarian, and geopolitical struggle against a diverse array of adversaries, including radical Sunni jihadists, Arab Gulf states, Israel, and the United States."[18]Between Russia, Turkey and Iran there is a strategic compatibility and a moment of strategic interests' divergence too. Russia needs Turkey and Iran as the conflict with the West over Ukraine and Syria goes on, Iran needs Russia because the main global powers define Iran as a terrorist state – an assessment Russia does not agree with. And Turkey although it competes with Russia in the Black sea, at this moment it needs to deal or to prevent the rise of an independent Kurdish break-up from Turkey as the circumstances in Iraq and Syria seem to make it possible. The Kurdish question is a mutual concern that can easily turn into strategic interest for Turkey, Iraq and Iran. Turkey is also a NATO missile defense member, but frustrated with the delays of entering into EU, to the extent that the Turkish President Erdoganeven proposed to become member of the Russia-China led SCO as an alternative to the EU in 2013.[19]And the recent military coup against Erdogan in 2016 contributed significantly to a closer Turkey-Russia and Turkey-Iran relations.

Regime change is a threat to every political elite, system and regime in every country. This article concurs with the opinion of many scholars, such as Gregory Gause III, who claim that an improvement of the Saudi-Iranian relations would greatly enhance the chances for political settlements in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain (even Yemen) and would lessen the poisonous sectarianism that so dominates the region's politics now."[20]A Saudi-Iran improved bilateral affair is very crucial for the Middle Eastern balance, order and peace. It can be asserted that the alliance strategy has affected the course of the civil war in Syria because the balance of threat is achieved through balance of alignment between the regime and opposition - politically for legitimacy, militarily for territory. Moreover, the Sunni side of Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Gulf lacked a common goal towards the Syrian civil war, even lacked a common opposition representation. Whereas the side supporting the regime maintained a united goal of preserving the regime in power.

The contest between Iranian regional influence and the mutual Israeli-Gulf countries perception is about regional predominance or regional deterrence stability. As the Middle Eastern scenario stands, with Russia' decision to assert Russia's influence in Middle East, the US' cautious approach of how to design the US' influence in the current Middle East,

through the course of Iran off the Syrian settlement, off the alliance with Russia, and Russia's influence in the region as limited as possible. This has become a new era for the reconstruction of influence designs and alignments in Middle East, same powerful patrons – US and Russia, same Middle Eastern regional players – Turkey, Israel, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, even Jordan. Just a change of current politics.

Attempts to Stabilize the Civil War

Many steps were undertaken to build a regime-opposition mutual framework regarding the status of Syria and regarding the defeat of the extremist groups, such as, Geneva Communique-2012, Geneva II-2014, Geneva Talks-2016, March 2016-ceasefire I; December 2016-ceasefire II, January 23, 2017- Astana talks; February 20, 2017- Geneva negotiations. These dialogues intended to build some confidence building measures between the Syrian warring sides, and all warring sides agreed with the United Nations' suggested frame that "Syrians are committed to rebuilding a strong and unified national army, also through disarmament and integration of members of armed groups supporting the transition and the new constitution."[21] Meanwhile, James Dobbin *et.al* argues that the fragmented groups of Syria agree to such UN statement due to the expectation that they would be in charge the post-transition institutions and country.[22]

The recently held talks in Astana and Geneva intended to strengthen the ceasefire, the mutually agreed upon cessation lines, and clear the division of the opposition groups from the jihadist groups, also to bridge the gap of perception regarding the territorial integrity of Syria between the regime and the opposition. Such configuration of the Syrian scenario represents a thin and delicate line between bridging the regime-opposition gap and direct their mutual efforts towards the terrorist groups in Syria, or the configuration might produce recognized lines of fragmentations within the internal borders of Syria. Such negotiations depends on the will of the national players and the skill of the external players.

A negotiated settlement seems to be ongoing after the December 2016 ceasefire, which led to the recent negotiations and dialogue conducted in Astana, Kazakhstan – January 2017, and Geneva, Switzerland – February 2017. Another wave of negotiations again in Astana, Kazakhstan in the end of April 2017 seems to be a more concrete mechanism to bring an end to the civil war by means of a negotiated settlement between the regime and the opposition, spread of the humanitarian needs, basics and security to all Syrians. A four-safe zones type of cease fire has been agreed by all parties, but still there is disagreement these safe zones should be safeguarded by Russian or American planes. ISIS has been defeated in Mosul by the US forces, now the US forces are targeting to defeat ISIS in Syria's Raqqa, but the defeat of the Syrian ISIS is Russia's target too because, in terms of regional alignment, Iraq is a US' proxy and Syria is a Russian proxy.

The allies of the regime (Russia, Iran, Turkey) and the allies of the opposition (Saudi Arabia, Gulf) have tried to conduct different phases of talks to encourage cooperation between the two main domestic players, to ensure that the divided opposition creates one delegation that speaks in the name of the Syrian opposition, and to ensure that each will observe the nationwide ceasefire, except areas under the control of ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra. All the participants agreed with the terms of the negotiated settlement except Saudi Arabia, for it wants Iran off the Syrian outcome discussion. In terms of the compromise regarding the alternative solution to war and violence – there are difficulties and barriers in reaching a mutually acceptable settlement between the regime and the opposition, but the two need to realize the price of the continued fighting compared to the price of the settlement.

Implications

The destruction of the state structures in Middle East and Africa has been very costly in every meaning, and restructuring and rebuilding the new geopolitical shape will be costly too. The outcome of this has been the creation of terrorist militia groups expressing their aims through different terroristic activities and capturing territory and population in different Middle Eastern and African countries due to the fallen governments and weak institutions rather than terrorism phenomenon per se. The weak countries have become prey of the external game for political influence in Middle East and Africa, demonstrating itself in the fact that even the war against terrorism is divided into different alignments – pro-Russia, pro-US, pro-Saudi, pro-Iran. The alignment strategy for the war against terrorism is being shaped according to the interests of the current regional politics to a degree that has caused regional implications and international concerns for Europe, Middle East, Africa and Asia, Western and non-Western sides. Turkey's shift of stance from a Syria-without-Assad policy to a not unrealistic option of Syria with Assad has altered the regional balance between Iran and Gulf. Furthermore, the regional players can accommodate their interests accordingly regarding a Syria with or without Assad's figure. But at the level of regime-opposition it means power and survival, and at the level of US-Russia it means whose ally is the future Syria going to be.

This article asserts that the closure of the Syrian civil war means whose ally it is going to be, the US ally or the Russian ally, and a contest between the Russia-Iran-Turkey alignment, and US-Gulf-Saudi Arabia alignment. Between the regime and the opposition, both commonly admit that ISIS is a serious threat that must be eliminated. The difference is that the US wants to conduct the anti-ISIS military campaigns through cooperating with the opposition and the Kurdish group, whereas Russia wants to conduct it through cooperating with the regime. Among the local actors, the legitimacy still falls on the side of the regime. According to different estimations, this civil war has resulted in almost 470.000 lives lost,[23](reference) almost half of the Syrian population as refugees in different parts of the world, and an internal displacement of the population inside the country. Such figure refers to the 2016's estimations, until the 2017 the rate of casualties has increased.

The situation on the ground will depend on who captures the territory hold by ISIS, for it will mean added territory to what they currently control- the regime or the opposition, and will result in a different choice to bringing closure to the Syrian civil war. It will also decrease the level of violence and will erase the real and perceived threat in Middle East, and beyond Middle East. Since neither the regime nor the opposition has been able to convince the other of a common attack against ISIS due to certain unacceptable concessions, then the defeat of ISIS and getting hold of its territory could be a possible option that might change the course of the Syrian civil war, closer to stability. This same option could change the course of the civil wars in Iraq and Libya too, according to who captures the territory hold by ISIS - it decreases the terrorist activities significantly, and will force the regime-opposition-Kurdish groups to establish a legitimate form of cooperation and mutual convenience.

It is necessary and probable to bring the Syrian civil war to a closure by pursuing the course of defeating ISIS and capturing the territory hold by ISIS in Syria. (Iraq and Libya also) Eventually, a new format of cooperation between the regime and the opposition and the Kurdish groups will emerge. Something decisive about terrorism, ISIS and the territories it holds can bring the civil war of Syria, (even Iraq and Libya) closer to transitional government and domestic mutually agreed compromise. The Kurdish call for autonomy or independence in Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria, and the ISIS' captured territory are serious internal fragmentations. Kurdish minorities hold a potential significance over these countries. Regarding the reactions of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria towards an independent Kurdish state in Iraq, it will depend upon the internal circumstances of these countries, to what extent the

new Kurdish state will affect the status of the Kurdish segment in their countries, and whether the Kurds in these countries will seek to join the possible new Iraqi-Kurdish state.[24] It is also to be expected that an independent Kurdish state anywhere will definitely shape the spill-over effect over the Kurdish ethnic groups in Iran and Turkey, because they have demonstrated their self-determination resistance in these countries too.

For almost six years, a political compromise has proven impossible and the level of violence has escalated according to the political aims for legitimacy and territory rather than according to the humanitarian perspective. Regarding who will the regime, the opposition and the Kurdish group choose to ally with, these frames seem associated with the Russian alignment with Iran and Turkey, and the US' coalition with Gulf and Saudi Arabia. This alignment equation is imbalanced because the strength of the Kurdish provinces in Syria and Iraq affects the status of the Kurdish province in Turkey - a vital Turkish national interest. Also the military coup of 2016 and any possible future provocation against the regime have made Turkey to navigate prudently between US and Russia, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Consequently the transitional Syrian government with or without al-Assad's figure becomes secondary in terms of national interests. Israel is another important regional country concerned with the flow of weapons to Hezbollah through Syria and with the presence of Iranian-Hezbollah-Syrian regime on the Golan Heights. Jordan and Egypt will not go against any form of settlement that may precede the Syrian negotiations as long as it brings some peaceful settlement. Whereas Iran remains concerned with not losing the Syrian ally in the Middle Eastern politics to deter the influence of its rivals.

The Syrian civil war contains many dimensions at once, clash of regime and opposition, clash of jihadi groups and the internal sectarianized militias which have regionalized and internationalized the Syrian political-military situation – a mixture of different purposes, each expressed with war and violence. Sectarianism and terrorism of the different jihadi groups are among the numerous implications of the Syrian crisis which has given way to the different operations and strategic directions for those in favour of the regime and those in favour of overthrowing the regime. Sectarianism was notthe factor of the uprising, or of the other uprisings in the other Middle Eastern countries. But it created the ground for Iran to support the Shia side, and the Gulf-Turkey to support the Sunni side as a tool and rationale to expand its influence in the complicated political show of the Syrian civil war. Sectarianism has become closely associated with terrorism, but terrorism also seems to be a strange phenomenon because it is too general and not clearly specified as a theatre. Instead this article interprets the unfolding of the Syrian scenario as moving and shifting according to the geopolitical value of different players, whether in coalition formation or in unilateral initiatives, just excusing their behaviour under the religion and giving it different facets. Instead the civil wars in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya have become arenas of strategic competition for the external players. Even the global war against terrorism has become divided in perception, threat assessments, counter-terrorism efforts and alignment strategies according to the geopolitical value of the important players. Kenneth M. Pollack and Barbara F. Walter in their article argue that,

> "The underlying dynamics of the region's civil wars are the same as countless others globally, whether in Muslim or non-Muslim countries. The fact that the Middle East is predominantly Muslim, that it has Sunni-Shia divide, that it is awash in oil, or has other unique attributes makes little difference. These civil wars have consistently behaved much like other civil wars across the globe over the past century."[25]

Heydermann argues that "Civil wars tend to redraw the internal boundaries, or the transformation of internal boundaries into international boundaries."[26] While James Dobbin is of the opinion that the Syrian civil war "has evolved into a Hobbesian war of all against all, pitting the regime against the opposition, Shi'a against Sunni, Arab against Kurd, and moderate against extremist. It has attracted tens of thousands of foreign fighters from Europe, North America, and Africa; exacerbated geopolitical rivalries among Saudi Arabia, Iran, Russia, the United States, and others; and drawn in the armed forces of nearly a dozen external states."[27]Daniel Byman argues that the fall out of the Syrian civil war has left the regime "too strong to fall at the hands of fractious rebels, but too weak to reconquer the country and restore stability."[28]

The implications of the Syrian civil war have been severe for the country and the region. The core of Middle East countries have weakened and fallen one after another. The configuration of the Syrian civil war and the question of the Kurdish minorities remain the final steps to a reversed Middle East transformation continued since 2001 or to a completed new Middle East geopolitics.

Conclusion

There have been many nuanced explanations about the Syrian civil war, strategic and tactical questions have dominated the debate of the Syrian crisis, assessing the challenges and opportunities it can bring for the country and the region, expressing the case through nationalistic or sectarianist sentiments. There are also differences and gaps between researches and the situation on the ground, but thorough analysis and concepts contribute into clarity of peaceful ways to this crisis. Among the findings of this article, firstly, amidst the struggles brought by sectarianism, uprisings, civil wars, insurgencies-counterinsurgencies, there has been an enduring significance of nationalism in Syria, (also in the other uprisings and civil wars' experience in the Middle East). The strategic purpose of the Syrian civil war was political transition of the country without Assad's figure. The second finding is that at the core, the Syrian civil war is political, rather than Sunni-Shia divide or sectarianist. Any violence, revolution, civil war, internal disagreements in every country can easily highlight the differences within that country, in terms of population and its segments. This same impact has happened in Syria, where the civil war has fractured the country internally into Sunni, Shia, Kurdish and ISIS parts; between the regime and all these players together; and externally, between Iran and Gulf, between the US' coalition and the Russian coalition.

It has become one of the most complicated civil wars because both major powers are involved to preserve its proxy on the ground. A very intense involvement for political role and foothold has taken place and continues to, but the Turkish paramount concerns for the Kurdish status and possible future internal provocation in the country has brought Turkey more inclined towards the Russian-Iranian viewpoint, thus shifting its strategic viewpoint according to the current imperatives of national interests. The diplomatic and military equation of the Syrian crisis have kept changing due to different factors - the direct intervention of Russia to ensure that it is not going to lose its only remaining ally; the fall of Aleppo and Palmyra into regime's side; the shift of Turkish stance toward the Syrian civil war, and the strategies of the Kurdish tactics, support and strength in Syria, Turkey and Iraq. The situation depends on whose forces will be conquered, get the territory and establish the desired political will. It has become a war about either to achieve certain objectives or to enforce compliance.

Another finding of the article is that the political settlement of the Syrian civil war stands between two courses, either a fragmented Syrian state or preserving the territorial integrity of Syria under Assad and the course of the internal political transition that will follow in the future. The issues of democratic peace and war against terrorism in Middle East

have become once again a contest of allies between the US and Russia. Russia is the player that turned the tide of the civil war to its side, it changed the map and the status of the Syrian crisis, also its own standing in the Middle Eastern affairs because the outcome of this civil war affects Russia's foreign policy in Middle East. To US, whether the victor of the Syrian civil war is the regime or the opposition, it does not threaten or serve the US' core interests, and it does not imbalance the Saudi-Iranian regional positions.

Finally, since a political compromise between the regime and the opposition has been impossible, then probably the course of defeating ISIS and capturing the territory it holds would decrease terrorism, internal and regional destabilization, the sectarian clashes and misunderstandings, and the central internal players will be forced to establish some confidence building measures. If a mutual regime-opposition cooperation against ISIS would be possible, it could end the Syrian civil war and pave the way towards the Syrian and regional stability.

Notes

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