

The Syrian Civil War as a Global Crisis¹

■ ITAMAR RABINOVICH

[Israel Institute, Washington and Jerusalem]

Abstract

The article explains the complexity of the Syrian crisis by analyzing three dimensions of its manifestation: domestic, regional and international. It focuses on the regional level of the crisis but also on the international one with all its ramifications: the resurgence of a „cold war“ of sorts in the Middle East, the emergence of ISIS and a new terrorist threat and the refugee problem.

In 1965 the British writer and historian, Patrick Seale, published his classic book „The Struggle for Syria, 1945-1958“. In it he described how the weak Syrian state became the focus of regional and international rivalries. Regional powers, primarily Egypt and Iraq, but also Jordan and Saudi Arabia, meddled in Syrian politics and stood behind a variety of army officers who staged a series of coups d’etat. These regional moves also had an international dimension as Britain and France, and to a lesser extent the United States, participated in what the CIA operative Miles Copeland called „The game of nations“. This stormy period ended in February 1958 when Syria merged itself into the United Arab Republic, dominated by Egypt. Syria seceded from the UAR in September 1961 and a Syrian entity was reestablished. Another nine years of weakness and instability followed until Hafez al-Asad established his Ba’ath regime in November 1970. Asad was the first ruler in Syria to establish a powerful state and a relatively stable regime but he could not fully overcome the fundamental frailty of the Syrian state and political entity determined primarily by

Keywords

Syrian crisis; diplomacy; Middle East

1 This article is based on a keynote speech delivered at the conference „The Burden of History and Geopolitics: Contemporary Israeli Governance“, 28th – 29th of April 2017, organized by the Center for Israeli Studies, The National University of Political and Administrative Studies, Bucharest, Romania.

the failure to form a political community that would accommodate the country's diversity. First and foremost, the country's Sunni Arab majority could not accept the dominant role of the Alawite heterodox community. Hafez al-Asad himself quashed in 1982 a lengthy rebellion killing more than 20, 000 of his own people in the cities of Aleppo and Hama.

After almost 30 years of apparent return to stability the country's fundamental frailty was again exposed when in March 2011, under the impact of the Arab Spring, a civil war broke out in Syria. This war has continued down to the present and has wreaked havoc in the country, claimed the lives of more than half a million Syrians, displaced more than half of the country's population and has become the focus of a regional and international crisis. Unlike the crisis of the 1950s, this crisis acquired a global dimension.

The three levels of the crisis

The complexity of the Syrian crisis that has unfolded for more than six years now and does not seem close to resolution, can largely be explained by the fact that it is conducted on three different levels: domestic, regional and international. It insists on the regional level of the crisis but also on the international level

The domestic crisis

The Syrian civil war began in March 2011 with demonstrations in the southern city of Dera'a. These demonstrations were inspired by the Arab Spring which began a few months earlier in Tunisia and had shaken the foundations of several Arab regimes. It also reflected unhappiness in the Syrian countryside with the regime's handling of several years of drought. At that point the crisis could probably have been contained had Bashar al-Asad and his lieutenants responded mildly and wisely to the initial demonstrations. Instead, they chose to quash the protest brutally and triggered an ever expanding a cycle of violence that in short order turned into a full-fledged civil war. At the core of that war are numerous grievances against a corrupt and dictatorial regime, most important of which is the Arab Sunni majority's refusal to accept Alawite hegemony. The Alawites constitute 12 percent of the county's population and as an offshoot of Shiite Islam are not seen by conservative Sunnis as proper Muslims.

The regional dimension

It did not take long for the Syrian civil war to acquire a regional dimension. It became first and foremost the focal point of the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the Shiite and Sunni coalitions that the two protagonists have built. Iran participates directly in the civil war and has used its Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah, as a main fighting force as Bashar al-Asad's army has disintegrated over the past few years. Iran has also dispatched to Syria Shiite fighters from Iraq and Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia does not participate directly in the fighting but like other Sunni states it supports several opposition groups with money and weapons. Iran has very high stakes in the Syrian crisis. The greatest success of the Islamic Republic's policy of exporting the revolution has been in Lebanon where through its proxy, Hezbollah, it practically dominates Lebanese politics. But this position is precarious and Iran's relationship with Syria has, among other things, been built in order to offer access to and support of its Lebanese assets. Under Bashar al-Asad, the Iranian-Syrian relationship has been transformed from partnership and alliance to dependency. As the Syrian civil war escalated and the danger to the regime's existence has grown, Iran was forced to increase its investment in Syria. It could not contemplate the

prospect of losing its Syrian base, let alone of Syria coming under Western or conservative Arab influence. In time, Iran and its proxies have taken over a large part of the fighting.

Since the American invasion of Iraq and the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime, Iran's drive to the West has been expedited. With influence in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, Iran is now seeking a land corridor to the Mediterranean that would bring it from the Eastern periphery of the Middle East to its core area. Needless to say, as Iran's drive becomes more ambitious and more apparent, the opposition by its Sunni opponents led by Saudi Arabia becomes stiffer.

Another regional dimension of the Syrian crisis has been the movement of some four million Syrians as refugees to Turkey (about two million), Lebanon and Jordan (about one million each). As the large country with a population of more than 80 million, Turkey can host these refugees with relatively ease, but the impact on the stability of Lebanon and Jordan is much greater.

Turkey's response to the Syrian crisis has been complex. Prior to the crisis, as part of a policy of extending Turkish influence over parts of the former Ottoman Empire, President Erdogan took Bashar al-Asad under his wings. But their relationship was spoiled by the outbreak of the civil war. As an Islamist regime, supporting the Muslim Brotherhood across the Middle East, Erdogan's government could not tolerate the Syrian regime's suppression of the Sunni majority and the large scale killing of Sunni population. Turkey gradually became an important base, political as well as military, of the Syrian opposition as well as a point of transit for thousands of volunteers to the ranks of the Jihadi organizations. More important, from a Turkish point of view, has been the empowerment of the Kurdish minority in northern and northeastern Syria. Turkey itself has a minority of some 20 percent Kurds, and from its government's perspective the idea of Kurdish independence and sovereignty in either Iraq or Syria is intolerable. Turkey has a fairly good relationship with the autonomous Kurdish area in Iraq whose leaders are careful not to cross the line separating autonomy from independence. But in northern Syria, a large part of the Kurdish militias are affiliated with the radical Kurdish Turkish party, the PKK. It is against this background that Erdogan's willingness to collaborate with ISIS in order to weaken the Syrian Kurds should be seen. This issue is also a source of tension between the US and Turkey. The US views the Syrian Kurds as the most effective local military ally against the Islamic State, while Turkey resents this cooperation. Turkey is also ambivalent about Russia's military involvement in Syria. Having Russian military presence south of its borders is uncomfortable for Turkey, to say the least.

Ironically, of all of Syria's neighbors, Israel has been the least involved and the least affected by the Syrian crisis. Israel has an obvious interest in the civil war's outcome and in the identity of the country and the regime to its north. During the past thirty years Israel and Syria have negotiated a peace settlement while continuing to be engaged in a bitter conflict. In fact, Netanyahu's government has been engaged in a mediation with Bashar al-Asad's regime through the Obama Administration until the eve of the 2011 crisis. Once the crisis broke out and its magnitude became apparent, Israel needed to formulate a policy. Two schools of thought crystallized in Israel: 1) The school known as „the devil we know“ school that argued that with all his deficiencies, Bashar al-Asad was preferable to an Islamist, let alone Jihadi alternative. 2) The school which argued that a victory by Asad with the support of Iran, Russia and Hezbollah, would place Israel with an unacceptable threat. In any event, neither school was adopted by the government which chose not to intervene in the Syrian crisis, with two exceptions: 1) Offering humanitarian aid; 2) Interdicting the transfer of sophisticated weapon systems to Hezbollah and other terrorist groups.

The international dimension

There have been three major aspects to the global ramifications of the Syrian civil war: 1) The resurgence of a „cold war“ of sorts in the Middle East; 2) The emergence of ISIS and a new terrorist threat; 3) The refugee problem.

A new „cold war“

Since his assumption of power in Russia Vladimir Putin has sought to rebuild Russia's position and prestige. Putin knows well that Russia is not the Soviet Union and it does not possess the resources of a real super power but he has been very skillful in exploiting limited resources. With the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, Russia's support for Bashar al-Asad was essentially diplomatic. With China's help it blocked all moves in the Security Council directed against the regime and its atrocities. In the fall of 2015, Putin moved forward by deciding to intervene militarily in order to save Asad from military defeat and dispatch its air force and air defense systems to northern Syria. This presence was thus added to Russia's naval base on the Syrian coast. Russia's military intervention, particularly through its air force, had decisive impact on the regime's success in Aleppo and other parts of northern Syria.

This Russian policy and success was facilitated by the Obama Administration's policy. In the context of a larger policy of reducing American involvement in and commitment to the Middle East, the Obama Administration resolved to avoid „boots on the ground“ and other forms of serious involvement in Syria. In 2011, most of President Obama's senior aides supported the creation of „no fly zones“ of „safe zones“ and other forms of involvement, but the president decided against it. More dramatically, when his own red lines were crossed by Asad who used chemical weapons against his own population, the president decided not to punish the Syrian President. He agreed instead to a Russian mediation that led to Syrian commitment to destroy its own chemical arsenal (as the world found out in 2017, this arsenal was not fully destroyed and was again used against civilians). The Obama Administration's Syria policy has been one of the most controversial aspects of his foreign policy and will likely continue to be debated when Obama's legacy is analyzed and discussed in the future.

The emergence of ISIS and a new terrorist threat

ISIS is essentially an Iraqi organization predicated on a partnership between al-Qaeda in Iraq and elements of Saddam Hussein's regime, but the organization took off in Syria where it excelled in the fighting against Asad's regime. The very name ISIS is an acronym for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. The name reflects also a long standing Arab resentment of the Sykes-Picot agreement and the creation of the Arab state system by Britain and France in the aftermath of World War I. Indeed, ISIS obliterated the Syrian-Iraqi border and at the height of its success created a de-facto state, which it named „caliphate“ on both sides of the Syrian-Iraqi border, with its capital in the Syrian city of al-Raqqa. Within a short span of time, ISIS threatened the foundations of the Iraqi state, as well as Jordan and other Arab states. It attracted thousands of volunteers, mostly Arab and Muslims from European countries, many of whom returned to Europe as trained terrorists. The terrorist threat in Western Europe and to some extent in the United State over the past few years is thus a direct result of the Syrian crisis.

Currently, the multinational campaign against ISIS in both Iraq and Syria had significantly reduced the territory the „caliphate“. It is likely to end with the capture of both Mosul and al-Raqqa. When this happens, ISIS will be denied the territorial base and many of the assets it has enjoyed during the mid-years of this decade but will continue to pose a significant terrorist threat globally.

The refugee problem

The Syrian civil war has significantly exacerbated the challenge posed to Europe by waves of refugees from African and Middle Eastern countries. The issue had existed prior to the Syrian civil war, and will continue to pose a significant challenge in years to come, but the waves of refugees from Syria brought the issue to ahead in 2015 – 2016. The issue created serious problems for the European Union as well as for individual member countries and its repercussions could be seen during Brexit, the British, French Dutch and German elections. IT is worth noting that Turkey has used the issue as a point of leverage in its relationship with Europe.

Future prospects

Unfortunately, a political diplomatic solution to the Syrian crisis is not in sight. When Donald Trump was elected as President of the United States, it was widely expected that his foreign policy would be predicated on a „grand bargain“ with Russia. A resolution of the Syrian crisis was to be an important dimension of such a deal. This may or may not have been realistic but the notion of such a bargain had to be shelved due to the issue of Russian involvement in the American elections and the charges of collusion. Trump himself introduced an important change in US policy when in April 2017 he ordered a strike against Assad’s air force after yet another use of chemical weapons against civilians. Currently, US troops are directly engaged in the effort to capture al-Raqqa. When this happens, a fresh phase in the conflict will begin as both sides will try to take over the areas liberated from ISIS control. Syria’s southern part is another area in which a new wave of fighting is to be expected.