

Super Powers Conspiracy and the Unending Civil War in Syria: An Analysis

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Abstract

The desire of aggrieved Syrians to replicate the scenario that played out by the Arab spring revolt of 2011 which culminated in the ouster of the regimes of President El Albadine Ben Ali of Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt in their home country was violently resisted by the Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. This resulted in the killing of hundreds of demonstrators with several more thrown into jail. The Syrian civil war is currently adjudged the deadliest in the 21st century. This study is set out to probe the actual reason for the intervention by Russia and United States of America in the Syrian civil war. Utilizing the concept of 'National Interest' as a framework of analysis, the paper opines that, while it is a welcomed development for such intervention, with the aim of bringing succor to the suffering people of Syria, emerging facts point to the realities that both Russia and U.S.A. have different national interest-oriented agenda, thus leading to the unending nature of the war. To this end, the paper recommends that the United Nations should step up its mediation strategy by way of political solution as military panacea appears abortive.

Keywords: Super Powers, Conspiracy, Civil War, Syria

Background

The discontent among citizens within countries in the Middle East that heralded violent protests in 2011 which led to the ouster of president El Albadine Ben Ali of Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and also the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces operation in Libya that led to the death of President Gaddafi in what is popularly termed 'Arab Spring' is significant in x – raying the nature and dynamics of the current unending civil war in Syria.

The Arab spring can be said to be a demonstration against bad governance, insensitivity to the plight of the citizenry and the continued stay in power of the governing elites within the Middle East countries. This development brought a lot of disenchantment among the people prompting their reaction and the call for regime change. The regime change protest in 2011 was successful in Tunisia, Egypt and equally in Libya with the help of NATO coalition forces. However, replicating the Tunisia and Egypt episodes in Syria was met with a brick wall as President Assad regime in Syria killed several protesters and many more imprisoned. Manfreda (2017) corroborated this position as he noted that the Syrian uprising began in March 2011 when security forces of President Bashar al- Assad

opened fire on and killed several pro –democracy protesters in the Southern Syrian city of Deraa; that uprising spread throughout the country demanding Assad’s resignation and an end to his authoritarian leadership. He also remarked that Assad only hardened his resolve to hold on to power, and by July 2011, the Syrian uprising had developed into what we know today as the Syrian civil war.

For Nassar (2013) the present crisis in Syria is as a result of government’s insensitivity to the people’s clamour for freedom, rule of law and the stamping out of corruption in the polity. Thus he avers that: the conflict in Syria began as a protest against the corruption that permeated every aspect of people’s lives and the lack of freedom as well as the people’s demand for radical reforms on how Syria was governed. He further opines that the lack of response to these demands was followed by severe and sustained military action against those who protested, and this violence drove some in the opposition to seek help from foreign governments in the region, hence the protracted civil war in Syria.

Also contributing to the reasons for the Syrian civil war, Beauchamp (2017) observes that the Syrian government’s handling of the protest by the citizenry led the protesters and others opposed to the government to form a rebel army to fight the government and that the grim way of slaughtering protesters en masse until they were forced to pick up arms in self defense got Assad what he wanted. Hence, in July 2011, defectors from Assad regime formed an organized militia called the ‘Free Syria Army’ (FSA) to protect protesters and strike back at Assad. By January 2012, the Syrian uprising had devolved into a full blown civil war pitting the FSA and other assorted rebel groups against Assad and his supporters.

There is no gainsaying the fact that the Syrian government misjudgment, especially as it relates to the manhandling of the protesters is the immediate cause of the present unending civil war in Syria. Regarded as the worst crisis in the 21st century, the Syrian war has claimed many lives and properties while thousands has been rendered homeless. Aljazeera News aptly captured the current situation in Syria thus:

As the Syrian conflict enters its seventh year, more than 465,000 Syrians have been killed in the fighting, more than a million injured and over 12 million Syrians – half of the country’s pre-war population have been displaced from their homes (www.aljazeera.com/news of 1st Oct. 2017).

With the present staggering number of deaths which obviously is still counting by the day, properties that have been destroyed and the millions that have been sent to the refugee camp, one cannot but believe that the present civil war in Syria is one too many and the worst in the present century.

While the belief is that the intervention of the United Nations would have done the much anticipated magic in de –escalating the crisis, the support the two warring groups to the crisis are getting from outside have fuelled the crisis rather than bringing any foreseeable solution. While it is obvious that Russia is interested in the stability of Assad regime in Syria as a geo–strategic good ally and trading partner, the United States on the other hand want a regime change and the coming into power of a group of leaders that will be favourably disposed to the United States and its allies. So taking into cognizance the helplessness of the world body (the United Nations) in the Syrian civil war especially with the failure of the Koffi Anan Mediation Committee to broker peace between the warring factions, the dilemma that worries or agitates the minds of statesmen and international scholars is the extent to which the involvement of the two super power nations, Russia and United State of America in the intractable Syria war is for the interest of the Syrian people.

Theoretical Explication

The protest that metamorphosed into a full blown war in Syria started in 2011 and till date there is no end in sight. However, the most disturbing trend in the crisis is the development where Russia and United States of America are leading a coalition of other interested parties to intervene differently with varying agenda in the Syrian crisis. This scenario brings to the limelight the realities that there exists

some underlying variables that have made these countries to intervene in their own way in the Syrian crisis. To holistically capture the pure objectives for these intervention and the reasons there-from, the concept of ‘National Interest’ stands out as the best explanatory framework for this study.

The concept of National Interest principally avers that a country is usually guided by her national or domestic interest in her relationship or dealings with other countries in the global system. This concept according to Olusola and Amadu (2002:87) is one of the most controversial concepts in contemporary international relations. They posit inter-alia that:

Several factors are responsible for the controversy over the concept of national interest; first, the concept has been and continues to be the subject of various interpretations/misinterpretations by both analysts and practitioners. Secondly, and closely related to the first point, is the abuse of the concept particularly by politicians and decision makers the world over. Thirdly, the concept is not easily susceptible to rigorous academic analysis and finally, and closely related with the last point, is the fact that there is as yet no universally acceptable single definition of what constitutes the national interest of a state.

For Asogwa (2009) the controversy in pinning national interest to a universally accepted definition is basically because of the meaning given to the concept by the two basic schools of thought, the **Objectivist** and the **Subjectivist**. The Objectivist School of thought is led by Hans J Morgenthau whose works advance a ‘realist theory of international politics’ which emphasized that the objective of foreign policy must be defined in terms of national interest defined in terms of ‘power’, while the Subjectivist School is concerned more with explaining why nations do what they do when they engage in international action.

Be that as it may, Adeniran, (1983:191) defines national interest thus:

When statesmen and bureaucrats are expected or are required to act in the national interest, what it means is that they are being called upon to take action on issues that would improve the political, economic and social well – being, the health and culture of the people as well as their political survival. They are being urged to take action that will improve the lot of the people rather than pursue policies that will subject the people to domination by other countries..., policies which are likely to make them unable to stand among other nations.

Also Obasi (2005:282) sees national interest as:

Whatever may promote the realization of the objectives of the state and its raison d’être as defined by the ruling class, sometimes national interests are equated to the ultimate aims themselves, making them both a goal and a means of attaining it. In other words, both the purpose itself and the continuous diplomatic and other tactical maneuvers promoting that purpose may, depending on the circumstances and the actors involved, be all perceived as the national interest.

From the foregoing, it is crystal clear that national interest is the decisions and actions which policy makers take usually in the best interest of their various nations.

In the light of the above, it is believed that the actions of Russia and the United States in the unending Syrian crisis is purely in the pursuit of their various national interests or benefits. Russia has over the years been a good trading partner and ally of Syria especially the government of Assad. In that vein, Russia believes that promoting regime stability in Syria, especially the government of Assad, will go a long way in maintaining and promoting their partnership and has therefore led other countries, especially Lebanon to help the government of Syria against those she termed ‘Terrorists’ fighting to topple the government. On the other hand, the United States and her allies like Turkey and Saudi Arabia are interested in regime change and to that extent would want Assad out of power. They believe that the alliance between Assad regime and Russia is not to the benefit of the West and therefore a Syrian regime without Assad will serve better her national interest. In this connection, it is obvious that

in the pursuit of foreign policy goals, a nation's national interest is her driving force. Thus, therefore, makes the concept of national interest an apt explanatory framework in the present study.

Syrian Civil War Explained

Since gaining independence from France in 1946, Syria had had to contend with unstable government. This stem from the fact that in less than three years of self rule, there was a military coup in March 1949 and this was subsequently followed by two other coup d'état that same year. However, respite came the way of Syrians when a popular uprising against military rule in 1954 led the army to transfer power to civilians under a parliamentary system but was to later change to a centralized system. This position was corroborated by Scott (2011) when he noted that from 1958 to 1961, a brief union with Egypt replaced Syrian parliamentary system with a centralized presidential government. He was further to state that the centralized presidential system could not bring the much needed stability in Syria as in 1963, a secular Ba'ath Syrian Regional Branch government came to power through a successful coup and that for the next several years Syria went through additional coups and changes in leadership.

The coming into power in March 1971 of Hafez al-Assad brought a kind of stability of government in Syria and equally led to the holding of democratic election in 2012. According to Alan (2003:56):

In March 1971, Hafez al – Assad, an Alawite declared himself president, a position that he held until his death in 2000. Since 1970, the secular Syrian Regional Branch has remained in dominant political authority in what had been a one-party state until the first multi-party election to the People's Council of Syria was held in 2012.

The regime of Hafez al-Assad did not however go well with the opposition especially with the January, 1973 implementation of a new constitution that did not require the president of Syria to be a Muslim unlike other constitutions prompting a fierce demonstration organized by the Muslim Brotherhood and the Ulama. Hafez al – Assad was labeled the “enemy of Allah” and a Jihad was called against his rule. The government survived series of armed revolts by members of the Muslim Brotherhood from 1976 until 1982 (Human Right Watch, Oct. 2007:8-13).

From the foregoing, it is crystal clear that Syria has experienced series of instability as a consequence of the activities of the opposition against successive governments. As a consequence, the current civil war in Syria cannot be isolated from the consistent governmental activities which more often than not have to do with contending with the activities of the opposition. So it could be stated that when Bashir al – Assad ordered a crackdown on opposition demonstrators in their attempt to bring down the government, it was not surprising as the government in Syria since 1971 when Hafez al – Assad came to power has been repressive and hard on the opposition. In 1982, Bashir's father, Hafez al – Assad, ordered a military crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama, which killed over 10,000 people and flattened much of the city. (www.aljazeera.com of 1st of Oct. 2017).

While the March 2011 demonstration against the Syrian government and the government's response with a severe military action against the opposition can be said to be the immediate cause of the present but unending civil war in Syria, several other factors have been advanced for the war in Syria.

For Ryan (2016) there was no single cause of the Syrian uprising. He avers that the conflation of social, economic and political factors alongside the breakdown of a culture of fear in the country all contributed to the protest movement. He further stated that the Assad regime responded to the protests in two different ways: the first way was through severe aggressive repression of protesters, and the other way was simultaneously reforming political discrepancies within the government. However, the protesters rejected the reforms that the government aimed to institute. Thus, a more destructive set of political protests with the idea of destabilizing Syria “devoid of political dialogue resumed”. (Reese, 2014:76).

Alisa (2013), Ayse (2014), and Manfreda (2017) adduce to the fact that multiple factors are responsible for the present civil war in Syria and they identified these factors to amongst others include, political repression, bad economy, social media, corruption, state violence, minority rule.

For Alisa (2013) the continued political instability in Syria can be explained from Syria's involvement in the 1967 Arab – Israeli war in which Syria and its Arab allies were defeated by Israeli forces. The conflict planted the seeds of animosity to grow between the two countries while giving way to the rise of nationalist sentiments and concentrated military power. This goes to show that the consequences of Syria joining the Arab – Israeli war were the growth of internal dissent that created instability in the polity.

Manfreda (2017) saw the information revolution with the existence of the social media as a great point in the Syrian crisis, though he listed other factors but the social media gave a lot of sensitization and information which before now was highly regulated making the people more aware of the happenings in the country. Although the state media was highly controlled, the proliferation of satellite TV, mobile phones and the internet after year 2000 meant that any government attempt to insulate the youth from the outside world was doomed to fail. The use of social media became critical to the activist networks that underpinned the uprising in Syria.

Ayse (2014) argued along the line of minority rule in Syria as a fundamental cause of the present crisis. He opines that the Alawites who are the minority with only 12% of the Syrian population have been in power since 1971 to date from Hafez al – Assad to Bashar al – Assad and the majority ethnic groups have grown frustrated and hence the current tempo of the civil war aimed at regime change.

In sum, it could be stated that the under listed led to the remote and immediate causes of the Syrian civil war.

- Political Repression: where the government of Bashar al-Assad instead of fulfilling its promise of political reform turned aggressive against the people especially the opposition through a military crackdown.
- Bad Economy: in a bid to reform the remnants of socialism, the door was wide opened for capitalism which however benefited the wealthy and privileged families with ties to the regime.
- Minority Rule: Syria has a Sunni Muslim majority in population. However, the top positions in the military are in the hands of the minority Alawite, a Shiite religious minority to which Assad family belongs. During the protest March in 2011, majority of the protesters are the Sunnis, little wonder that the protest was greeted with a military crackdown. This is reasoned as the backdrop that with a Sunni majority in the protest and Alawite dominated military out to quell the protest, the effect is better imagined.
- Corruption: the country was enmeshed in corruption. The political reform that Bashar al – Assad embarked upon saw the country embraced capitalism that led to further impoverishment of the people as wealth went to only a few privileged citizens and those with close ties with the regime. Also as the protest raged on, anti – Assad rebel bought weapons from government forces and families bribed authorities to release relatives detained during the uprising.
- State Violence: the dreaded Syrian Intelligence Agency, the infamous 'Mukhabarat', penetrated all spheres of society as such, state violence was on the high side as cases of disappearances, arbitrary arrests, executions and repression in general was the order of the day. The brutal response of the security forces during the peaceful protest in 2011 is a confirmation of this fact.
- Tunisia and Egypt Effect: the successful protests that led to regime change in Tunisia and Egypt in early 2011 made millions in Syria believe that they can replicate this in their own country and change their authoritarian regime, but this was not to be (Sharwood, 2016).

- Syria as stated earlier had had unstable regime as a consequence of coups and various forms of protests. When Hafez al – Assad took over power in 1971, his constitutional reform that made it a constitutional matter that a non – Muslim can be Syrian President pitted him with the Moslem Brotherhood bringing a regime of repression and terror which his son Bashir al – Assad inherited.

Russia and the United States in the Syrian Crisis

It is indubitable that the Arab Spring saw to regime changes in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya though a hard fought one in Libya which saw the NATO forces joining the rebel in Libya to bring down the government of Gaddafi, the attempt to replicate similar situation in Syria had plummeted into a civil war that its end cannot be said to be in sight as at present. This war has raged on for over six years and it is increasingly becoming even more complex. According to Zachary (2017), Syria's civil war has grown ever more complex in the six years since protesters first challenged the government. President Assad aims to reassert control nationwide, while the predominantly Sunni Arab opposition forces seek to wrest the state from him. The diverse groups making up opposition (including Islamic Fundamentalists), however, differ on their vision for a post – Assad state, with their ostensible aims ranging from 'Liberal Democracy' to 'Islamic Fundamentalist Theocracy'.

Unlike the citizens' revolt that swept the governments of Tunisia and Egypt without external support, similar scenario in Syria graduated into a civil war that saw the opposition against the government. However, the concern of the present study is the development where there are so many external forces teaming up with both the government and the opposition in the civil war in Syria especially the two world super powers (Russia and United States of America) in the war.

The involvement of Russia and United States in the Syria war with their various allies raised certain questions, what interest are these two world powers pursuing in Syria? Are they assisting opposition groups to the crisis for ego or testing their military capabilities in a foreign land? Why is the United Nations helpless in the face of the current happenings in Syria?

Today, with Russia and United States including their allies, the situation in Syria is made worse. The Syrian government and the opposition have the following support base:

On the Syrian government side:

- Russia – Carries out airstrikes and provides political support at the United Nations (UN)
- Iran: provides arms, credit, military advisers and reportedly combat troops.
- Hezbollah: the Lebanese Shia movement has sent thousands of fighters.
- Shia Muslim Militias: recruited by Iran from Iraq, Afghanistan and Yemen.

And on the side of the rebels:

- Turkey: provides arms, military and political support
- Gulf Arab States (especially Saudi Arabia): provide money and weapons
- The U.S.A: provides political support at the UN, arms, training and military assistance to the moderate groups.
- Jordan: provides logistical support and training

(www.bbc.co.uk/news of April, 2017)

It is unarguable that the mandate of the United Nations is purely to intervene and bring out the desired peace in situations like the present one in Syria, however, it is understandable that the helplessness of the UN can be judged from the varying interest of the two most powerful members of the world organization in the Syria civil war. What then is the interest of the two super powers in Syria?

On Russia's interest in direct military intervention in Syria war, Pakhomov (2015), Dmitri (2017) and Hamilton (2017) summed up the Russia interest in the Syrian crisis as follows:

- Middle East power politics
- Location

- Importance of gas (economy)
- Preserving Russia friendly game
- Striking a blow to Sunni terrorism
- Ending U.S.A inspired regime change in states friendly to Russia.

For Pakhomov (2015) Russia had to stand by her ally in the difficult period. According to him whether one thinks that Russia is rescuing Assad, which tends to be Western perception or fighting ISIS, first of all Syria is considered Russia ally in the Middle East and President Assad asked Moscow for help, and Russia has stood by its ally in very difficult circumstances judging that Syria was Russian ally during the cold war.

Dmitri (2017) in his argument opines that Russia's foreign expeditions can reduce the immense domestic pressure on the regime and hence the need to intervene in Syria at least to curb American influence and to undermine the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). He further listed Middle East power politics, the strategic importance of Syria to Russia and Syria providing a safe route for the transportation of natural gas as the major interest in the Russia intervention in Syria.

However, Hamilton (2017) opines that apart from preserving the long friendship tie between Russia and Syria, the need to stop the growing Sunni terrorism in the world and curbing America's agenda of regime changes especially in countries friendly with Russia was uppermost to Russia. On the issue of American engineered regime change he states that

Syria figures prominently in Russia geopolitical calculus for what it represents; a chance for Russia to take a stand against what it sees as a U.S engineered series of regime change that target the stability of Russia itself. From the "Colour Revolutions" in the former Soviet Union to the Arab Spring uprisings, many Russians believe the U.S is carrying out a deliberate and comprehensive program of enforced democratization, with Russia as its ultimate target. Reflecting on this belief, Russia representatives to the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) in Geneva remarked to their United States counterparts on multiple occasions in 2016 that Russians are not fond of the 'Iraq Model'.

On the other hand, one of the major interests of the U.S in the Middle East generally and Syria in particular, is to ensure free flow of oil and directly and indirectly engineer pro-U.S/Israel regime changes (as witnessed in Gaddafi's Libya, Saddam's Iraq, Mossi's Egypt, Taliban's Afghanistan, etc and on-going efforts against Syria, Iran, Qatar, etc) as well as support cum maintain the *status quo* for already pro-U.S regimes (such as Saudi Arabia, Mubarak/Asisi Egypt, Bahrain, Kuwait, etc) and anything that will impede this will not be acceptable to the U.S.

Busby (2003) as well as Cassidy (2015) observed the initial unwillingness of the U.S to be deeply involved in the Libya crisis because Syria has been a Soviet and (later) Russian client and with the U.S having no bases and hence, no physical assets to defend within Syria. However, U.S geo-strategic Middle East national interests and general global hegemonism, later propelled the U.S (both under President Obama and Trump) to back anti-Assad "moderate liberal-oriented rebels" (amidst anti-U.S Islamic fundamentalist rebels including ISIS, and Al-Qaeda) under her double-standard foreign policy of global promotion of democracy cum human rights.

However, Eze (2014) had earlier observed that the U.S, has, in line with the 'Theory of Political Realism' (Power Politics) and at the stand point of "double standard justice" been promoting her national interest globally under the smokescreen or camouflage of promoting democracy and its inherent human rights.

Worthy to note is that Syria was a major participant (on the side of Palestinians) in the 1948/49, 1967 and 1973 Arab- Israeli wars (while the U.S supported Israel). She had a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the defunct Soviet Union. With the expulsion of Egypt from the Arab League in 1979 consequent upon President Anwar Saddat's Camp David Accord with Israel, Syria became the 'beating heart of Arabism' and hence, a rallying ground for anti-Israel and her U.S led Western supporters. Till date, the United States regards Syria as one of what she (the U.S) calls 'Axis of Evil' that must be dealt with.

In the 2011 Arab spring, while President Obama was merely using ‘oral condemnation’ against her allies’ excessive violent crackdown of pro- democracy peaceful demonstrators in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Egypt, the same mere oral condemnation was not extended to Syria government’s crackdown on violent demonstrators. Contradictorily, U.S- led anti-Assad Western media imperialistic propaganda as well as arms support for rebels were visited on Assad for a possible pro-U.S regime change. While pro-U.S Egypt’s Mubarak was given soft landing by the Pentagon backed Egyptians military political engineering, Syria’s Assad has been engaged in a protracted civil war with U.S (and her allies) backed Free Syria Army in addition to other Islamic Fundamentalist rebels.

In highlighting the U.S national interest oriented subjectivity and double standard justice against Assad’s Syria, the Associated Press (<http://www.wggb.com/2013/08/17/Egypt-challenges-Obama's-Arab-Spring-philosophy>) notes inter alia:

For 30 years, the U.S propped up Egyptian autocrat Hosni Mubarak in part to ensure that he maintained Egypt’s peace treaty with Israel while in Syria, the U.S has levied economic sanctions and approved light weaponry for rebels fighting President Bashar Assad’s government.

As of the time of writing this paper, while Russia’s President Putin and United States’ President Trump are cooperating in decimating Islamic fundamentalist rebels in Syria (such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda affiliates), the over six years catastrophic war between Russia backed Assad forces and the United States backed anti-Assad ‘Free Syria Army’ (and other Islamic rebels) continues – the various U.N initiated diplomatic panacea notwithstanding.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, there is no gainsaying the fact that unending civil war in Syria is due principally to the intervention of the external forces in pursuit of their varying national interests. While Russia sees Syria as a great ally and therefore the need to assist the government to continue to remain in power as a regime change would bring a paradigm shift, the United States on the other hand, want a regime change in order to effect a new crop of pro-U.S leaders. While the U.N becomes ‘amputated’ and hence, ‘lame’ in the face of the opposing interest of the world’s most powerful two countries, the scene created in the Syrian debacle remains that of intractable war with the attendant escalating obituaries, continued Syria infrastructure cum property destruction, internal displacement of Syrians, humanitarian crises, Syria-generated international terrorism and external refugee crises that is overheating global peace and security. In the face of these existential realities and the need to arrest the worrisome escalating loss of lives and properties, it is recommended that the U.N (especially through its General Assembly) should relentlessly step up efforts to ensure that a political solution is reached by bringing the two national interest oriented veto-carrying Security Council powerful members-Russia and United States of America to agreement on the best diplomatic way of addressing the Syrian problem.

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