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Hijacking the Syrian Revolution

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HIJACKING THE SYRIAN REVOLUTION

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ABSTRACT

HIJACKING THE SYRIAN REVOLUTION

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The civil war in Syria (started in March 2011) marks one of the greatest tragedies in the Middle East during the twenty-first century, and a fear that its destructive consequences may affect the entire region. The Syrian crisis coincides with the democratic wave that shaped the Arab Spring. The thesis will discuss the decision-making system and the primary actors in the Syrian crisis within the framework of three distinct phases. Each phase contributed to the hijacking of the peaceful demonstrations that sought freedom in a democratic state and of the dramatic developments on the Syrian stage. The first stage of the crisis started domestically with a peaceful demonstration founded on the principles of liberty and equality but that evolved rapidly into political upheaval and civil war. The second stage was the involvement of regional actors in the Syrian crisis motivated by various political or religious viewpoints. The third stage witnessed the involvement of the two global powers, the United States and Russia, and the revival of the Cold War. This thesis will discuss the Syrian Democratic Revolution, its short history, the actors, and their motivations, and of how these actors hijacked the Syrian Revolution and deviated it from the original peaceful goals. I conclude with a prognosis for the future of Syria.

This thesis is dedicated to my late father Khairat Nanoua and to my beloved kids Reena Assassa and Sammy Assassa.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The civil war in Syria marks one of the greatest tragedies in the Middle East

during the twenty-first century. There is a fear that the destructive aftermath may affect

the entire region. The Syrian crisis coincides with the democratic wave that shaped the

Arab Spring, where for the first time individuals were empowered to turn their sails

towards realizing their potential. The thesis discusses the decision-making system and the

primary actors in the Syrian crisis within the framework of three distinct phases: the civil

war and the regional and global stages. Each phase contributed to the hijacking of the

peaceful movement that caused catastrophic developments in Syria.

THE SYRIAN UPRISING

After decades of oppression, the Arab Spring that started in Tunisia in December

2010 reached Syria in March 2011. The conflict in Syria has since grown into a full-scale

civil war. While the Syrian regime lead by President Bashar Al-Assad lost its legitimacy,

the revolutionaries appeared to have relatively little experience with democracy. The

Revolution activists knew only the domestic political system, lacked the experience of

being the movement leaders and were inexperienced in executing a social revolution.

Their expectations did not meet their predictions, which created chaos and as a

consequence, several regional and global actors tried to take advantage of the situation to

implement their self-interest agenda.

The Syrian Revolution against the Assad government that began on March 15,

2011 by indigenous demonstrators within Syria has deviated greatly from the original

goals. The first stage of the crisis started domestically with a peaceful demonstration

founded on the principles of liberty and equality and evolved rapidly into political upheaval and a civil war. Recent social and political changes in the Middle East and northern Africa have morphed the revolution into a proxy war for the diverse interests of the world at large. Syria's strategic importance in the Middle East has been enhanced following the Arab Spring. After the start of the Egyptian revolution in 2011, Egypt, a strong moderating force in the region, is now weakened and dealing with serious internal social and political issues. The fall of Gaddafi regime in Libya in 2011 and the terrorist attacks in Mali in 2013 opened the door to more trouble in northern Africa. The Arab Spring has also sowed seeds of protests in some Gulf States, like Bahrain, raising concern in what was once a stable region.

The second stage was the involvement of regional actors in the Syrian crisis who were motivated by various political and religious viewpoints. Two crucial axes—the Sunni axis that supports the anti-Assad regime and the Shia axis that supports the Assad regime— represent the regional actors. Each regional axis has declared a legitimate interference in the Syrian crisis. The third stage of the Syrian crisis witnessed the involvement of the two global superpowers—the United States and Russia—and the revival of the Cold War. The West worries the world is undergoing a dramatic shift in the balance of power from a unipolar system to a bipolar or multipolar system.

The numerous and diverse interests of the governmental actors within the Middle East, Southwest Asia, Europe, Russia, China and the United States have created a chaotic situation. These outside groups have supported one side or another, fueling a prolonged civil war. The lack of commitment of the international communities and the reluctant response from Western governments, who have traditionally acted as the regional police,

have opened the door to other rising states, authoritarian agendas, outdated ideologies, and terrorist groups to undermine the revolution in the name of their cause and hijack its peaceful origin. Now there is a serious risk the conflict will expand outside the borders of Syria and destabilize the region further. The thesis discusses the revolution, its short history, the actors, and their motivations, and of how these actors hijacked the Syrian Revolution and deviated it from its original goals.

Domestically, the thesis digs deeper and beyond the overall view of a conflict between anti-regime and pro-regime groups. It analyzes different perspectives and explains the true complexity of the Syrian Crisis. Two different arguments are discussed to characterize each group's perspectives and differences. The Syrian crisis reflects a conflict between two ideologies and a conflict between two cultures: a dictatorship ideology survived on outdated culture of loyalty and a democratic ideology that adopted the new culture wave of the Arab Spring. The Syrian tolerance for the turmoil fluctuated on different levels, causing a division in the social base. One group has no tolerance to change due to the fear of the unknown future; another group has no tolerance to the Assad regime's brutality. The last group has no tolerance to the war and lost hope in the revolution. This group prefers a pragmatic solution to the dramatic trajectory that led Syria to the current devastating situation. Idealism gives way to pragmatism and democracy gives way to security.

The devastating situation in Syria generates an emerging need for a government that will offer the safe shelter for the Syrian people that surpasses the need of one political system or another. Syrian politics has failed to prioritize its obligations and as a

consequence, devastating challenges led to the collapse of the concept of harmony that once unified Syrian social segments.

The regional stage reflects the exclusionary politics of Islam, where each religious sect proclaimed that it represents the pristine form of Islam. The regional actors escalated the conflict of sectarianism over regional hegemony. This sectarian conflict is exercised on the Syrian stage, adding more complexity to the civil war. The sectarian conflict ravaged the social structure of Syria and deteriorated the social solidarity. The thesis outlines the foundation of the regional conflict and argues whether it is based merely on religious ideological faith or on national interest and hegemony. Regardless, enormous Syrian casualties were the price. The regional stage witnessed an emergence of an extremist group who played a crucial role in boosting the civil war in carving a new trajectory for the Syrian crisis.

The regional and global sections address the extremist ideology. The regional section discusses the emergence of extremist terrorists and explores whether their agenda is religious or political. The global section addresses the extremist ideology within the content of Islam and the differences between fundamentalism and extremism terrorists. The connotations apply to all Islam sects and not exclusively to the Sunni sect.

The global stage section highlights the conspiracy theorists of two adversaries: pro-Assad versus anti-Assad. An ideology of self-interest escalated the Syrian crisis. The collapse of the unipolar global system and revival of the Cold War between two superpowers (the United States and Russia) were pursued on the Syrian stage, causing one of the most devastating situations in recent history. The thesis argues the geopolitical interests of these global powers and proposes the best intellectual foreign policy theory to

best guide the decision-makers. Who is taking the lead in the recent development? I will

argue the reasons beyond the inconsistency of the United States foreign policy versus the

tangible effect of Russia and China. Who is using soft power and who is using hard

power? What is the real motivation beyond the United States foreign policy: defeating a

rising state or defeating the authoritarian system? The ideology of self-interest of these

two nations hijacked the Syrian stage, causing the current political turmoil. This unjust

system contributed to the deteriorating situation in Syria instead of the collapse of an

illegitimate centralized system.

Kofi Annan, The UN-Arab league envoy to Syria 2011-2012, summarizes the

arduous path toward democracy and the challenges in seeking political changes:

> In any such ambition, where the aim is to alter the balance of power between
> state and citizen, progress will be slow and fitful. None of us behind the
> development of this emerging international norm imagined that states
> everywhere suddenly would respect the rights of their people or that the answer
> when they failed was necessarily military action in the name of human rights.[1]

These following two sections highlight the political components that shaped the

Syrian political system and the recent developments that led to the Syrian domestic

turmoil.

THE BA'ATH PARTY AND THE ASSAD REGIME

To understand the current Assad regime within Syria, this section will highlight

the political transformation in Syria. Several critical stages were involved, starting with

the genesis of the Ba'ath Party and of how the party evolved into a dictatorial regime.

Michel Aflaq, a Syrian Christian, and Salah al-Din Al-Bitar, a Syrian Sunni[2] founded

the Ba'ath Party in 1945 soon after Syria's independence from France. The Syrian

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[1] Kofi Annan. *Interventions, a Life in War and Peace* (New York, John Wiley & Sons, 2008) 369.
[2] Strategic Information and Development, *Syria: Country Study Guide* Volume 1 (USA: Ipb , 2013) 30.

Country guide states, "the Ba'ath Party embraces secularism and attracted supporters of all faiths."[3] It began modestly, primarily as an idea focused on finding common ground and principles that could unite the Arab nations. Nikolaos van Dam, a specialist on Syria, outlines how the Ba'ath party and the Assad regime took the rule in Syria.

> The Ba'th wanted a secular Arab society with a socialist system, i.e., a society in which all Arab would be equal, irrespective of their religion.... The Ba'th ideology appealed strongly to Arabic-speaking religious minority members, who may have hoped that the Ba'th would help them to free themselves of their minority status and the narrow social frame of their sectarian, regional and tribal ties.[4]

The Ba'ath Party merged with the Arab Socialist Party in 1952. After this merger, the Ba'ath Party became one of the top two parties within Syria, next to the Communist party. Its influence outside of Syria within the Arab world was limited to Iraq under Saddam Hussein's rule. The Ba'ath Party functioned within an independent Syria until 1958, when Syria and Egypt combined into a single nation: the United Arab Republic. Up until 1961, the Ba'ath Party had gained a number of seats in the Syrian Parliament, but not enough to have much of a dominant political impact. In 1963, its influence grew dramatically after "a group of Ba'athist and other officers seized power in Syria by means of a military coup. The civilian members of the Ba'ath were too few, approximately 600, to cope with the great government responsibility which the Ba'athist military leaders had successfully claimed on their behalf."[5] They took advantage of a political vacuum and the associated confusion that arose when the new regime in Syria seceded from the United Arab Republic and sought again to be an independent nation.

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[3] Ibid.

[4] Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society Under Assad and Ba'th Party* (New York: I. b. Tauris, 2011) 17.

[5] Ibid, 22.

From 1963–1966, the Ba'ath Party gained more power within civilian and military circles. Every president and prime minister was a member. However, the party was unstable due to an internal struggle between individuals who sought to control it and to dominate the political landscape. During this era, Hafez al-Assad emerged as a party leader. He gained control over the military and became defense minister in 1966. Assad recruited high-ranking military personnel and appointed members from his direct family and from his religious sect, the Alawits, to influential positions in the party, the Defense Ministry, and the military. In his renowned book *Syria*, Lesch indicates, "most of the generals were Alawite, the minority Muslim sect in Syria that comprises 12–13 per cent of the population, which had dominated the ruling apparatus since the mid-1960a when the Ba'ath party had consolidated its hold on power."[6]

At the same time, Assad forced some officers to retire and undermined the authority of other senior ranking personnel. The Ba'ath Party was wary of Assad's tactics and accused him of trying to take over by splitting the party. In 1969, Assad used the military against the party, mobilized a coup, and took control of Syria. He imprisoned, killed, or deported most of the leaders of the Ba'ath Party. Until Assad took power in 1970, Syria had enjoyed political freedom and had been functioning as a democratic state. Free elections were held regularly, and many parties competed for control.

Assad was a fierce and brutal dictator. He ruled with an iron fist, infusing fear in the citizenry, including those from his own party. In 1982, he ordered his special forces

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[6] David W. Lesch, *Syria: the fall of the House of Assad* (U.S.: Yale University Press, 2012), 2.

to destroy the town of Hama because they demonstrated against him. Assad killed an estimated 40,000 people by bombarding the town for over three months.[7]

The Ba'ath Party operated its political party with a warlike domination and a form of continuation of war. Foucault indicates, "Certain party leadership could circulate instructions, impose warning signs and dangerous zones to prevent people from talking about important issues."[8] The Ba'ath Party sought to use the regulations to limit a citizen's right to make statements that criticized its politics and actions. Assad ruled Syria for 30 years, controlling the nation's wealth, distributing much of it to his family and a few of his secular party members. He solidified his power within the government and the military, rewarding loyalists with vital positions in the government and in the security forces. He destroyed his opposition through murder, intimidation, or exile. He ensured that his successor Bashar al-Assad, his son, would inherit the nation and the wealth without any opposition, including ideological differences.

Bashar Al-Assad took control of Syria in 2000 after his father died. Bashar was perceived originally as an intellectual with limited political prowess. He graduated from medical school in Syria and studied ophthalmology in England. As the second oldest son, he was not the original heir apparent to Hafez. But after his oldest brother died unexpectedly, Bashar returned to Syria and became the heir apparent to his father.

Bashar was known for his progressive ideology. "Indeed, even before he assumed the presidency, in Syria he was being called "The Hope" – as in the hope for the future."[9] He promoted himself as the person who would change Syria and take it

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[7] M. Clement Hall, *The History of Syria: 1900–2012. Uprising Associated with Islamists.* (Amazon Digital Service, CreateSpace Publishing, 2013) loc 1029.

[8] Michel Foucault, Paul Rabinow *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon,1984). 53

[9] David W. Lesch, *Syria: the fall of the House of Assad* (U.S.:Yale University Press, 2012), 2

from oppression to freedom. He proved quickly to be political adept by continuing to take control of the country smoothly. He was not as aggressive as his father was until the arrival of the Arab Spring to Syria. As Lesch wrote,

> Bashar, could not have guessed that, eleven years on, he would face a popular uprising against his rule. Nor could he have suspected that – as a result of the regime's brutal response, which has already left thousands dead – he would one day be almost universally reviled as a bloodthirsty killer who has lost legitimacy to rule.[10]

Whether his intention, Bashar proved that he is just as brutal and violent as his father.

The Assad regime, representing the unipolar political party—the Ba'ath Party— ruled the country for more than four decades, exercising authoritarian ideology, and reinforcing dictatorial rule by exploiting nationalism. The regime diverted attention from domestic political issues by promoting unification against external threats using two analogies: the threat of being recolonized by the West or of being occupied by Israel, focusing mainly around the Palestinian issue.

NATIONALISM

The Assad regime imposed their authoritarian rule based on a political strategy to exploit nationalism. This "tyranny" model, based on a nationalist foundation, is a fundamental political strategy used to support fledgling and established dictatorships. Governments used it frequently after gaining independence from colonial rule to justify authoritarian rule by the newly independent nation. The strategy takes advantage of the euphoria and nationalistic pride evident in a newly freed people.

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[10] Ibid.

A national culture to unify the Syrian people and gave them the determination to put an end to the French colonial regime failed to grant them the political freedom they sought. Decolonization and the postcolonial periods were so hard fought for. This allowed the Syrian regime to claim that only their uncontested authority would prevent a return to the past.

In various ways, Postcolonial Time Disorder (PTD) affects how the Assad regime runs its country. An authoritarian regime contends that its uncontested powers protect their people from the dangers of a neocolonial world. James D. le Sueur illustrated the PTD syndromes:

> They suffer from what can be called Postcolonial Time Disorder, or PTD, meaning that they still subscribe to an out-of-date philosophy of governance, according to which authoritarianism is the only cure for external or internal political challenges. They have a Manichean inability to think outside the logic of totalizing state power.[11]

The second strategy the regime played was the Palestinian/Israel conflict to justify the authoritarian system. For too long, the politics in the region had largely been focused on the Arab–Israel conflict. The government justified the authoritarian rule and the burden placed on the Syrian people by claiming Israel was an enormous and imminent threat on the Syrian border. The regime promoted Israel as the true enemy of the Syrian people since Israel had captured the Golan Heights during 1967 war and there was a potential that Israel would expand their influence and control over the region. The Assad regime violently repressed any political opposition and banded all domestic political debates, proclaiming the Israeli/Palestinian issue was the only threat for Syria's security. As Shroom describes,

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[11] James D. le Sueur, *The New Arab Revolt, Postcolonial Time Disorder* (U.S.:Council on Foreign Relations/ Foreign Affairs, 2011) 121.

Emergency law, in place since 1963, effectively suspended all constitutional rights of citizens and gave the security forces unlimited powers of arrest and detention for suspected opponents of the regime. The justification for its continued application was the 'war with Israel' and it was probably this attempt to suppress internal dissent which was the main reason behind the Assad regime's supposedly anti-Israel stance and rhetoric.[12]

They used the Israel/Palestinian conflict to marginalize the value of democracy. The Assad regime claimed that democracy was a scourge, a bane to the Arab world and in particular, to Syrian nationalism. Annan wrote:

The Arab world has been held back for decades by the parlous state of its political systems. Regional leaders continually exploited the deep feelings of their people about the plight of the Palestinians to divert attention from the mix of authoritarianism, sectarianism, fanaticism, poverty and ignorance that grew more potent in the Arab world over several decades.[13]

The two strategies of exploiting nationalism and uniting against a common external enemy worked successfully in keeping the regime in power and in derailing the Syrian's mindset from thinking about their lack of freedoms and prosperity.

The second chapter focuses on the current Syrian crisis within the context of what some consider a civil war. This thesis evaluates the Syrian crisis from different angles including political, religious, and social dimensions.

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[12] Leila Shrooms, "Syria: Hostage to politics." *Tahrir-ICN*, March 2014 http://tahriricn.wordpress.com/2014/03/06/syria-hostage-to-politics-syrias-prisoners/
[13] Annan, *Intervention*, 310.

CHAPTER II

THE ARAB SPRING AND THE BEGINNING OF THE SYRIAN TURMOIL

The Arab Spring, born in Northern Africa and the Middle East, is a revolutionary movement started in December 2010 against authoritarian governments. In *The Arab Spring, Change and Resistance in the Middle East*, Haas and Lesch wrote,

> It began in Tunisia, where a young man trying to eke out a living as a street vendor engaged in an act of defiance against the government borne of frustration and disillusionment over the socioeconomic malaise and political repression in his country. He lit himself on fire. Little he did he know that he would light a fire across the region. Soon mass protests forced the Tunisian president to leave office. In neighboring Egypt, also suffering from many of the same systemic maladies, throngs of protesters gathered at Tahrir Square in the center of Cairo, eventually forcing President Husni Mubarak from power. Protests sprang up elsewhere in the Arab world from the Persian Gulf to North Africa, most spectacularly leading to the death of Libyan President Muammar al-Gadafi following a campaign of armed popular resistance supported militarily by NATO and the Arab League.[1]

This democratic wave began in Tunisia, moved to Egypt and Libya, and then expanded to Syria in March 2011. The purpose of the movement was to gain more political, economic, and social freedoms, as well as a guarantee of human rights. It has been credited with causing changes in governments in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen. A democratic movement arose in Syria with peaceful protests in early 2011, but it was faced immediately with an aggressive crackdown by the Syrian regime.

> The regime in Syria, which many had thought would weather the storm of Arab Spring, began to encounter mass protests. The regime in Damascus, however, unleashed a brutal crackdown against the opposition, displaying a resiliency that confounded the prognostications that it, too, would fall.[2]

The Syrian revolution did not turn out as well as it had elsewhere.

THE MAIN INTERNAL ACTORS

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[1] Mark I. Haas and David W. Lesch, *The Arab Spring, Change and Resistance in the Middle East.* (U.S.: Westview Press, 2012) 1.

[2] Ibid.

The earlier brutal response of the security forces to the peaceful demonstration was first implemented in the village of al-Jeeza in the Daraa governorate with the arrest and murder of thirteen-year-old Hamza al-Katib, "whose body was badly mutilated and returned to his family, promoting nationwide protests in Syria."[3] An article in the Telegraph stated that, "Fury at the death of Hamza al-Khatib has pushed Syria to its most bloody day of protests so far in the 10-week uprising."[4]

The level of violence used by the security forces on the peaceful demonstrators rapidly divided the populace into two main factions: anti-regime versus pro-regime. The anti-Assad group wanted a democratic government and basic human rights, while the pro-Assad group sought to maintain the status quo and claimed any change would undermine the nation's strength and open it up to outside influences and radical ideologies.

CONSPIRACY AND PROPAGANDA HIJACKED THE FACTS AND DERAILED THE ORIGINAL IDEALS

The promotion of conspiracies became a major tactic used to undermine the anti-Assad opposition group. The Assad regime, in an attempt to divert the attention from its harsh attack on the civilians, claimed this opposition movement was not homegrown, and that the United States and its allies, who have a pro-Israeli and pro-Sunni agenda in the region, promoted and supported it. The Assad-regime accused Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia of supporting Syria's enemies to implement a

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[3] Malu Halasa and Zaher Omareen, and Nawara Mahfoud, *Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline*, (Great Britain: Saqi Books, November 11, 2014) 171.

[4] Harriet Alexander, "How a 13-year-old boy became the face of the Syrian uprising," *The Telegram*, March 2014, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/8556619/How-a-13-year-old-boy-became-the-face-of-the-Syrian-uprising.html.

conspiracy to strengthen a Sunni axis of power in the Arab world and to undermine the stability in Syria.

The Assad government is trying to convince their people and supporters that there is a pro-Western conspiracy and plan to weaken Syria. In general, Assad claims the West wants an anemic Syria because a weak Syria will:

- Eliminate any counterbalance or threat to the interests of the United States and its allies in the region.

- Increase the influence of the Arab, Sunni-dominant states in the region (Syria is dominated by the Alawit sect and has strong ties to Shia dominated governments, primarily Iran).

- Eliminate any credible counterbalance to Israel in the region.

- Undermine Iran's influence in the region and further isolate Iran in the Arab world.

- Reduce the power and influence of Hamas in the Middle East.

The SANA news agency stated: "The Syrian people will not allow this conspiracy to achieve its objectives," and we will defeat it "at any price," Assad said. "What is happening now is not only directed at Syria but the whole region. Because Syria is the cornerstone, foreign powers are targeting it so their conspiracy succeeds across the entire region."[5]

On the other side, the original anti-Assad group began as a movement to seek peaceful and deliberate political reform in the current government. They shared

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[5] Agence France- press, "Assad Vows Syria will Defeat 'Foreign Conspiracy'," *News Bank*, January 2014, http://docs.newsbank.com/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:AWNB:WAFP&rft_val_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft_dat=140ECE13F969A1C0&svc_dat=InfoWeb:aggdocs&req_dat=9817F67DBE97431D928E8FD560949AB2.

the hopes and dreams of other Arab Spring supporters and sought to grow a political movement that would topple the authoritarian regime and open the door for a new Syria. Some of the basic tenets of the anti-Assad group are:

- Promotion of democracy, freedom, and basic human rights.

- Opposition to the global powers, such as Russia, who are hijacking the will of the Syrian people to support their own political agenda.

- Standing against regional powers, such as Iran, who are promoting an expansion of their Shia agenda at the expense of the stability of the Sunni states.

- Opposition to local Shia-dominated groups, such as Hezbollah, who are undermining the revolution and seek to promote chaos.

- Condemnation of the Assad regime's barbarian crackdown.

This conspiracy-focused political approach taken by Assad is grounded in the realities of the sociopolitical history, both in the region and globally. These conspiracies have some basis in truth and that is why they seem to take hold with so many people. The civil war in Syria is steeped in a war of ideologies very real to the local population of Syria, to the regional actors, and even to the global powers of the United States and Russia, whose influence in the Middle East has waxed and waned over the years.

The dynamic in Syria is different from some of the other countries that experienced the Arab Spring. In Egypt and Tunisia, for instance, the political situation is less complicated. Generally, each of these two countries has two basic political influences: one with a religious identity and the other with a secular-military identity. The majority of the population fits into one of these categories. The Syrian dynamic is more complicated because of the massive sociopolitical interactions between the actors.

Local actors, regional powers, and global powers all exert influence, creating a highly volatile situation.

PRO-ASSAD REGIME DOMESTIC COMPONENTS

During the Hafez era,[6] the Assad regime succeeded in attracting supporters by adding a spark of liberalism in the mix of ideology. A marriage between authoritarian and liberalism ideologies was more appealing to the Syrian elite, Christian's minorities, and even to the secular and modern Muslims than the alternative offered by the conservative Muslims. Nevertheless, the ideas of reformation and democracy that characterize the Arab Spring movement were appealing to mostly everyone. Anti-regime and pro-regime supporters are aware of these values and understand their appeal as fundamental aspects of modern civilizations.

After Bashar replaced his father, he promised a reformation and the pro-Assad supporters favored the notion. However, Bashar al-Assad is "the product of an authoritarian system – one that is a paradigm of stagnation and control. The Syrian system is not geared to responding to people's demands: it controls people's demands. Nor is it geared to implementing dramatic reform: it is constructed to maintain the status quo and survive."[7]

In the recent crisis, the pro-Assad constituents remain the same: the Ba'ath Party members; minority groups; Christians and Alawits who fear Muslim fundamentalism; and opportunistic and influential groups, mostly Sunni, that announced their solidarity with the regime with an interest in partnering to exploit the Syrian wealth. As the violence grew and the domestic situation became more devastating, the regime attracted

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[6] The Assad family has ruled Syria since 1971.
[7] Lesch, *Syria*, 218.

a new group of supporters: the anti-war group. This group of people originally did not support the government fully, but now feel victimized and helpless in the current civil war. They are caught in the crossfire between the government, rebels, and terrorist groups fighting in their cities and the countryside.

Dr. Richard Cincotta provides a theoretical model that describes how a group of civilians support an authoritarian regime: the authoritarian bargain thesis of Thomas Hobbes: "Hobbes argued that polities are born of a trade-off: when threatened, elites and citizens willingly trade their political and civil liberties for guarantees security."[8]This group just wants the war to stop so that they may go back to a more peaceful existence, even if it means life under the brutal and tyrannical Assad regime.

The primary power and support for Assad comes from the highly professional Syrian Republican Guard and the proficient Syrian Regular Army. They execute the Assad decisions and their allegiance stems from one of loyalty or a state of fear. Of these military forces, the Alshabiha, the semi-military militias are an armed group and the most aggressive one

While the coalition of Assad domestic supporters seemed to be relatively large, they are not a monolithic group. The Assad regime lacks any political morality; a regime that revolves around self-interested and power seeking that uses aggression as the only tool to support its position. The Assad regime has a very tight grip over the country, and many supporters are marginalized and controlled through a combination of loyalty or fear. Many, especially the regular army, are not the decision-makers and are mostly pawns on Assad's chessboard.

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[8] Richard Cinotta, Life Begins After 25: Demography And The Societal Timing of The Arab Spring, *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, February 2014, http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/?ots591=0c54e3b3-1e9c-be1e-2c24-a6a8c7060233&lng=en&id=150636.

ANTI-ASSAD REGIME DOMESTIC COMPONENTS

The anti-Assad regime started as pro-Arab spring: the Syrians who suffered

oppression for decades and recently witnessed how the Arab-Spring wave toppled many

authoritarian regimes and ousted dictators. Rebels tortured and killed Muammar Al-

Gaddafi, the deposed leader of Libya in October 20, 2011. Husni Mubarak, the former

president of Egypt, was arrested and jailed on June 2, 2012. These scenes retrieved the

hope of overthrowing the authoritarian regime and gaining back the missed dignity and

human rights. Radwan Ziadeh described the state of the revolution as a hope for

political reform. He wrote:

> One of the aims of the Syrian Revolution can be seen to be a desire to achieve
> political reform, reform that should culminate with a whole new democratic
> constitution. This kind of constitution should be one that guarantees the
> fundamental rights of all citizens, and emphasizes the strict separation between
> the three branches of the government; legislative, executive, and judicial.[9]

At the beginning of the Syrian crisis, the pro-Arab Spring groups limited their

activities to peaceful demonstrations. Led by the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the anti-

Assad movement was compelled to change their tactics after brutal attacks by the

government. "The Free Syrian Army (FSA) was formed in August 2011 by army

deserters based in Turkey, led by Col Riad al-Asaad. Its banner was soon adopted by

armed groups that began appearing across the country."[10] The peaceful movement

evolved quickly into an armed conflict and what the anti-Assad regime called a

revolution. While on the surface there appeared to be sympathetic support from the

West, initially the struggle was primarily between the Syrian domestic groups.

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[9] Radwan Ziadeh, *Power and Policy in Syria*, (New York: I. B. Tauris, December 24, 2012) xvii.
[10] Aron Lund, "The Non-State Militant Landscape in Syria," *Combating Terrorism Center*, May 2014,
https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-non-state-militant-landscape-in-syria.

The FSA could not manage all the brigades on the ground; therefore, the Supreme Military Council (SMC) was created in 2012 under the Chief of Staff General Idris to unite the rebels under one center leadership. Beside the main rebel coalitions of the Martyrs of Syria Brigades, the Northern Storm Brigade, and the Ahrar Souriya Brigade, Islamic fronts like the Islamic front and the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front along with other independent groups joined the SMC.[11]

The Syrian National Council (SNC) and the National Co-ordination Committee (NCC) were the two coalitions formed to find a credible alternative to the Assad's regime. While the SNC is the main point of contact for the international community, the NCC is strongly opposed to any form of international intervention.[12] Statfor Analysis in February, 2012 stated: "it is clear that even the SNC itself is not united, with members of the group expressing varying opinions for options such as foreign military intervention and arming the opposition."[13]

The brutal crackdown perpetrated by Assad on his people escalated the conflict and turned the demonstrations into a full-scale rebellion. The fighters took a hard-line approach, no longer willing to compromise with the Assad regime, and fought back. The goals changed from seeking change to overthrowing the government. The conflict grew quickly, engulfing the civilian population. The movement was now in the news on a daily basis, displaying the conflict on the world stage. Unfortunately, the rebels on the battlefield have been fragmented, similar to most opposition elements, due to different

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[11] BBC News, Desember 13, "*Syrian Crisis: Guide to armed and political opposition*," April 2014, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24403003.

[12] Clement Hall, *The History of Syria*, loc 1410.

[13] Global Intelligence, Stratfor, "Analysis: More Divisions Among the Syrian Opposition," *Lebanon Wire*, March 2014, http://www.lebanonwire.com/1202MLN/12022815STR.asp.

political views and failing to form one coalition uniting all political and military

activists.

The anti-Assad movement includes more than the hardliners fighting on the

ground. One group has a deep solidarity with the revolution but a sense of fear prevents

them from declaring their solidarity. Consequently, they could offer minimum support

to the armed rebellion. They comprise an internal element that still live in the country

and are essentially a de facto Arab Spring movement, and Syrian nationals or ex-

patriots who live abroad, mainly in the West. They have a limited effect and are mainly

focused on generating financial support for their cause.

An initial characterization of the anti-regime group depicts them as fighters on

the ground and civilians who have deep solidarity with the Arab Spring wave. A deeper

analysis illustrates a different dimension of addressing this anti- Assad regime group. At

the beginning of the Syrian revolution, there was a unified approach between all the

pro-Arab Spring advocators. After three years of devastated conflict, the United Nations

(UN) categorizes the situation in Syria as a human disaster. According to several news

agencies, over 150,000 have been killed, while the United Nations has stopped updating

the Syrian death toll after the death of 100,000 Syrians.[14] The number of displaced

people and registered refugees in neighboring countries has reached eight million,[15] an

enormous part of Syria's infrastructure has been demolished, and the international

community has failed to solve the Syrian crisis or work an efficient plan to stop the

Assad regime from chaos artillery and airstrike shelling on both the revolutionaries and

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[14] John Heilprin, "UN Decides To stop updating Syria Death Toll," *The World Post*, January 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/01/07/un-stops-updating-syria-death-toll_n_4554226.html.

[15] World Bulletin/ News Desk, "UN: Syrian Refugees o reach 4.1 million by end of 2014," *World Bulletin*, April 2014, http://www.worldbulletin.net/middle-east/133151/un-syrian-refugees-to-reach-41-million-by-end-of-2014.

civilians. This devastated situation divided the anti-Assad regime into two different groups seeking two different approaches in an attempt to solve the Syrian crisis: the Decisive approach that reflects a political adherence, and the Pragmatic approach that reflects a situational ethics.

The Decisive approach represents rebellions and fighters who are not willing to compromise with the Assad regime, no matter the casualty and high cost civilians are paying on a daily basis. The Decisive approach has a political pledge: a political coup d'etat. They are challenging all the tough circumstances and not giving up on their goal until they achieve freedom and a democratic state. "Gen. Salim Idris, the head of the Supreme Military Council urged Syrian soldiers to join the rebels in a fight for freedom and democracy. In a video obtained by The Associated Press, He said: Dear friends, the Free Syrian Army (fighters) will not give up."[16]

The Decisive approach also includes activists who mainly live abroad. They have been accused of being opportunists who are only willing to fight the war from their comfortable homes in the West and of inciting the fighters to continue the revolution at the expense of much civilian suffering. Lesch describes the resentment of anti-war group:

> It was seen as being a puppet in the hands of foreigners, made up mostly of exiles who had not lived in Syria for years and who were, in the eyes of many, enjoying the comforts of five-star hotels and the diplomatic cocktail circuit while they are suffering the daily hardships and dangers of war.[17]

The anti-Assad domestic support, while well-intentioned, is fractured and mostly ineffective against Assad.

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[16] Zeina Karam and Karin Laub, "Syria Conflict Anniversary," *The World Post*, April 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/15/free-syrian-army-will-not-give-up_n_2883275.html.

[17] David W. Lesch, *Syria, The Fall of The House Of Assad.* (U.S.: Yale University Press; New Upd edition, August 22, 2013) 247.

The revolutionaries failed to gain substantive support from the international community and quickly saw the tide turn against them in the war on the ground. Without a credible response from the West, Assad became emboldened and greatly escalated the conflict, causing enormous casualties. Without any real support from the West, there was a vacuum to fill. This opened the door to extremists. At first, the extremists were seen as the lesser of two evils and as a way to stem the losses in the battles against Assad. But very soon, they too hijacked the revolution. The extremists are fighting for their own cause, often at odds with the FSA.

Early on, Assad's regime appeared unified and strong. One man and one party represented the regime, with a strong coalition of domestic support from the Republican Guard, Army, and militias. The opposition, however, lacked a cohesive constituency and a systematic and pragmatic political agenda. The opposition failed to convince the Syrian people that they offered a better alternative for the future. The civilian population wondered whether the war has been worth it. They have seen their lives turned upside down, witnessed the death of hundreds of thousands of people, and have seen millions become refugees, fleeing to Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon. To them, the cause appears lost and in hindsight, maybe even misguided.

The mindsets of many of pro-Arab Spring supporters have changed out of necessity.

> After three long years, many friends and people in the field have fallen into deep depression and disappointment. Of course, none of them support the regime anymore but they have lost their ability to back the revolution because it has become so complicated. Those who participated in it have changed, as have its political perspectives.[18]

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[18] Malu Halasa, Zaher Omareen, and Nawara Mahfoud. *Syria Speaks*. (Great Britain, Saqi Books, November 11, 2014) vii

At these circumstances, a new approach is being taken: a Pragmatic approach that reflects situational ethics, even at the expense of the dream of democracy and freedom. This side's first priority is one of preservation—of their lives, their way of life—and a return to some form of normalcy. They are anti-Assad regime, anti-dictatorship ideology but above of all, they are anti-war. Therefore, they are willing to compromise with Assad. These two controversial approaches— the Decisive versus Pragmatic— have added additional complexity to the Syrian crisis.

The situational pro-Arab Spring group adapted the pragmatic method that reveals "an attitude of looking away from first things, principles, 'categories,' supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, fasts."[19] This new revolutionary approach recommends compromised negotiation with the current regime to ease tensions and contain the civil war. They hope the decisive opposition will use an effective strategy to gain support for the core priorities: the end of the civil war and a promise for some future changes in Syria. This group does not in any way accept what has happened, but are making a compromise forced upon them by the tragic humanitarian situation on the ground.

The pragmatic group calls for the hardliners to rethink the war in Syria, to consider the human suffering and the massive displacement of the population, and to approach a compromised resolution. The pragmatic approach is more permissive. The civilians, most of whom are bystanders, are exhausted from all the collateral damage caused by the brutal Assad government and the dysfunctional coalition of opposition

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[19] William James, "What Pragmatic Means," *Marxists Internet Archive*, https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/us/james.htm.

groups, not to mention the extremist elements that have hijacked the revolution's cause and replaced it with a radical, anarchistic, militant, and feudal approach.

The regional section discusses how the Assad regime has been derailed by regional and global interests as a proxy actor. At this stage, Assad proves there is a form of unity between its entire regime's elements and that they have steady feet on their strongholds. And the opposition's strategy that started as an extension to the Arab Spring has morphed into a fractured, dysfunctional one that is highly self-destructive. In summary, it became very clear to the opposition that they could not win without the support of external elements. This opened the door to a more volatile situation with the introduction of regional and global interests.

THE ESCALATION OF THE SYRIAN CRISIS

The escalation of the Syrian crisis is the result of Assad's obvious unwillingness to discuss a political compromise toward containing the civil war and preventing further expansion. Brinjikji stated:

> The Syrian Expatriates Organization (SEO) is dismayed by Bashar al-Assad's unwillingness to negotiate with the Syrian opposition despite repeated calls for talks from opposition leader Mouaz al-Khatib. Recently, Syrian opposition leader Mouaz al-Khatib offered to sit down with the Syrian regime to negotiate an end to the conflict in order to save Syrian lives and what remains of the country's infrastructure.[20]

In 2011 and since the very beginning of the Arab Spring wave in Syria, President Assad designated the pro-Arab Spring elements (including its early stage as peaceful demonstrators) as a terrorist group. The Assad regime rebuffed all diplomatic efforts and compromises and focused entirely on a decisive military response to

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[20] Waleed Brinjikji, "Assad Showing No Will To Negotiate With Opposition, Refusing To Let Syrians Live in Peace," *PRWeb*, February 20014, http://www.prweb.com/releases/Syrian-expatriates-org/assas-reject-alkhateeb/prweb10416237.htm.

preserve his regime. Assad's army and air force pummeled the lightly equipped

opposition. The regime used the dreaded security branches, including the Shabiha, to

punish and intimidate any supporters of the opposition. Incidents of torture and

massacres against his opponents have been widely reported.

> The 31-page confidential report, first disclosed by CNN and the Guardian
> newspaper, lays out in excruciating detail "direct evidence" of the "systematic
> torture and killing" of thousands of men between the ages of 20 and 40 who are
> thought to be victims of the regime's notorious security agencies.[21]

At the Geneva 1 Conference held in Geneva on 2012, Assad's representative

claimed he was willing to negotiate a settlement with the Syrian opposition. The

Pragmatic pro-Arab Spring movement welcomed the Geneva initiative. Their pragmatic

approach has pluralistic perspective: they have a more pragmatic approach to resolving

the war and they see the pro-Assad group as an inevitable part of the Syrian political

trajectory. They believe the only resolution is one that includes them.

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[21] Aryn Baker, "Systematic Tourture and Killing," *TIME*, January 2014,
http://world.time.com/2014/01/20/systematic-torture-and-killing-a-new-report-points-fingers-at-syrias-assad/.

CHAPTER III

THE PRESS, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND REGIONAL ON FLUENCE ON THE CIVIL

WAR

The press, social media, and religion have one important element in common:
they all have an important effect in shaping Syrian opinions. In the absence of a
cohesive opposition party and the dominance of one political party, the media and
religion were the basic voices and foundations that influenced the public opinion. The
impact of the media and religion introduced complexity into the situation, inflaming
viewpoints, often with irrational and emotional arguments. News reports and social
media offered biased reporting and commentary, which perpetuated conflicting
information.

The Syrian state media regularly reports propaganda in an attempt to undermine
the opposition and to vilify the West as the instigators. State media supports the
government's agenda and validates the Assad regime's strategy on the Syrian crisis. The
opposition or rebels are portrayed as armed gangs controlled by regional actors, such as
Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabian and Israel, and by global interests (United States) in
maintaining global hegemony.

Tony Cartalucci, a geopolitical researcher, posted an article on Global
Research's website validating the Assad regime's claims of why the West is arming and
training terrorist groups:[1]

> Bleeding Syria is now the agenda – which is the only reason they are still arming
> and training terrorists on Syria's borders, predominantly in NATO-member
> Turkey to the north of Syria, and in Jordan to the south. The West is also still,
> very intentionally, sabotaging reconciliation and reconstruction. This is the

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[1] AFP, "Assad deems all those who oppose his regime "terrorists"," *Al-Akhbar*, January 2014,
http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/18301.

[2] Tony Cartalucci, "Bleeding Syria is Now the Agenda: Elections are a Battle Won, but the War Goes On,"

West's real agenda on full display – spiteful extraterritorial aggression recklessly destroying the lives of millions for the sake of maintaining global hegemony.[2]

Cartalucci demonstrated his view by analyzing a quote documented by United States' policymakers from the Brookings Institution, which stated: "the United States might calculate that it is still worthwhile to pin down the Assad regime and bleed it, keeping a regional adversary weak, while avoiding the costs of direct intervention."[3]

External news agencies like Aljazeera (broadcast from Qatar) and Al-Arabiya (broadcast from Saudi Arabia) tried to convey the developments on the ground. Although the Assad regime prohibited these news agencies from reporting from within the country, globalization, technology, and social media were the main information providers of the development on the Syrian crisis. It is not easy to discern truth from the chaos created in the "fog of war." Without a baseline for the truth, it was and still is easy for emotion to rule the day.

The news media and social networks are normally a mechanism to report facts, share opinions, close gaps, and mitigate differences. In the case of the Syrian crisis, social networks and the media may have contributed to the provocation and the erection of barriers to any possible resolution. The media, including social media, blossom and prosper in an era that is witnessing the emergence of extremist and terrorist groups. While social media provides a voice to a marginalized and oppressed people, it can be used to promote extremist and irrational ideologies. Rumor and misinformation is used to inflame situations that can in fact, hijack the original intent and ideology of a

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[2] Tony Cartalucci, "Bleeding Syria is Now the Agenda: Elections are a Battle Won, but the War Goes On," *Global Research*, June 2014, http://www.globalresearch.ca/syria-elections-are-a-battle-won-but-the-war-goes-on/5385682.

[3] Ibid.

movement. The social media may then be used to undermine or derail the movement by dividing its supporters, or even radicalizing viewpoints.

RELIGION

Religion has had an impact on the civil war. Prior to the civil war, sectarian difference barely influenced the Syrians as individuals. All Syrians, regardless of their religious beliefs, were highly integrated into Syrian society. Segregation between each sect was never a societal issue. Christian, Sunni, Allawi, Shia, and Kurds all experienced good relations with each other. However, with the beginning of the Syrian civil war and with the need of extra support, religion was politicized and became a rostrum to call for more supporters.

Religious leaders adopted a similar strategy used by political parties. In the Syrian case, the leaders of each sect rallied their followers in support of one side or the other. The religious leaders inside the Syrian state promoted the Assad regime (out either a state of loyalty or a state of fear) and called their followers to stand up for the current regime. Pro-Arab Spring religious groups promoted support for the opposition party. It is clear, however, that even within each religious sect, loyalties are divided. Not all Christians support pro-Assad and not all Sunni are anti-Assad.

The religious cleavage was pivoted mainly around the two main Muslim ideologies: Sunni and Shia. While there is often a wide divide between Shia and Sunni, the Sunni within Syria, probably out of fear of reprisal by Assad, chose to support Assad. This is not the case outside of Syria. The Sunni–Shia dynamic is a crucial issue

addressed later in Chapter four, the regional actors and their influence on the Syrian crisis.

In this current crisis, religious groups deviate from a religious message of faith to focus on a fundamentally politicized message. Religious beliefs and one's loyalty to their faith is being exploited to provoke an emotional and irrational response based on hatred, fear, and intimidation. Minority sects are being told other religious groups will persecute them if Assad is removed from power. "The government's secularism meant that many members of religious minorities, such as the Alawites, Druze, and Christians, supported Assad, fearing a return to historic persecution under Sunni Islamic successor government to Assad."[4]

These minority groups are fearful of a radical Islamic regime coming to power in a post-Assad Syria. The Christian case is a good example. Pro-Assad Christians were warned that Sharia law would prevail without Assad and that it would be imposed on them. On the other hand, the pro-Arab Spring Christians share the hopes of democratic reform in new Syria and believe the new Syria will be a Syria for all. The opposition is promoting a message of a new Syria for all Syrians with secular rule of law, but many religious leaders are exploiting the general fear of a more radical group seizing power.

While religious leaders have exploited their positions, religion itself has played a very important role in appeasing populations. In the absence of personal freedoms in Syria, as well as in all Arab-Spring countries, religion became a refuge that offered peace to the mind and soul. Marx wrote, "Religion is the opium of the people." Religion can have a vital role in containing the crisis. The religious leaders could have called for

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[4] M. Clement Hall and Charles River Editor, *The History of Syria: 1900–2012*, (Amazon Digital Service: CreatSpace Publishing, 2013), loc1168.

solidarity between all parties and sought to mediate a spiritual reconciliation to retrieve

peace and call the Syrians to honor basic human rights. Instead, they hijacked their

followers to serve certain political agenda at the expense of the interests of citizens.

THE SOCIOPOLITICAL DIMENSION OF THE SYRIAN CRISIS

With the absence of political pluralistic parties within the Assad regime and the

absence of a cohesive coalition of opposition groups, cultural and religious influences

dominate and shape the mindset of the population. The Syrian crisis was escalated by a

conflict between two cultural ideologies: the culture of political and religious loyalty

and the culture of a revolution. The culture of revolution (pro-Arab Spring) laid the

groundwork for a new Syria, and the culture of loyalty (pro-Assad) worked against the

progress of this dream.

Submerging into these two cultural spaces may enable the reader to understand

the current sentiment in the region. Each group promotes one ideology at the expense of

discounting the ideology of the other. This cultural dynamic is highly problematic. It

allows each group to "Syrianize" its own ideology.

The Culture Of Loyalty

The culture of loyalty is an outdated one, featuring unconditional dedication to a

decision-maker or leader. "Tyranny always tries to make culture its handmaiden"[5] A

culture of loyalty can be bastardized to allow a leader to brainwash his followers.

Followers are at risk of becoming mindless minions, blindly following a cause. This

irrational approach adopts one ideology over the other regardless of its merit. "There is,

in my opinion, an essential difference between culture and the practices of state power

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[5] Halasa, Omareen, and Mahfoud, *Syria Speaks*, (Great Britain: Saqi Books, 2014), 178.

in Syria under the Assads. It's more appropriate to speak of employees working in the field of culture rather than state intellectuals."[6]

Loyalty has to be combined with rationality to produce a reasonable outcome. The loyalty approach makes sense in terms of an internal approach to unifying smaller groups, such as families, clans, or religious groups. However, it is a highly divisive and ill-sought approach when used to promote a single agenda at the expense of depriving another of their human rights, the basis of which is survival.

Pro-Assad groups took this loyalty culture to the extreme and granted Syria to one person. They even gave Syria his surname, naming the country "Syria Al-Assad", as if the Assad family owned it. Loyalty was so indoctrinated that even the pro-Assad supporters that migrated to foreign countries sustain the image that Syria belongs to Assad.

> Husam Wafaei wrote:
>
> Another group had gathered on the south side of Queen Street, and a few of its members started shooting negative slogans. Apparently, they were pro-Assad regime supporters and the timing of their appearance was intended to confuse spectators and divide popular opinion. Neutral Canadian territory was ideal. They shouted, "Syria, Bashar, Long live Assad's Syria,' A slogan heard time and again in rallies organized by the regime within Syria.[7]

Loyalty is an ideology that enables all sorts of injustice, pain, and suffering for those who are in opposition and to those powerless to resist the abuse heaped upon them by the powerful. We cannot generalize the entire pro-Assad regime as brainwashed or mindless, as a group of the intellectual class shows solidarity with the regime:

> This group of intellectuals is not in need of backing for their positions and opinions. Even when they do not stand at the heart of the regime's fascism, they

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[6] Ibid.

[7] Hussam Wafaei, *Honorable Defection*, (Amazon Digital Service: FriesenPress, October 2012), 210/211.

remain its cultural partners, who never oppose any element of its intellectual world and share the regime's condescending view of society and desire to terrorize it.[8]

The Culture Of Revolution

The current culture of revolution in Syria is a modern ideology. It is a culture of free speech and resistance. "It was a radical departure from a forty-year- long history of silence."[9] It is a twenty-first century approach that emerged from the Arab-Spring movement. Although it revived on revolutionary elements, it does not exclusively represent armed groups only. A culture of revolution can be illustrated via art journalism and social networking. "Art can be non-violent defiance. It challenged and undermines narratives of power, no matter where they originate."[10] The culture of revolution is intended as a peaceful approach, seeking political changes to create a new Syria based on principles of democracy and freedom. It is based on a rational philosophy. It appeals to those people that suffered oppression for decades and now to those who witnessed the barbaric assault on the initial peaceful movement.

Different from the outdated ideology of the extremists who put their violent fingerprint on the Syrian revolution (an issue discussed in the following section), the culture of revolution remains a peaceful ideology against oppression, albeit one that has developed into one of armed resistance. The opposition party is far from a monolithic group, and now it is shaped by different spectrums to include: fundamentalist Islamic extremists, secular groups, common citizens, elite academics, businessmen, and expatriates that live in and outside of Syria. The primary thing they have in common is the culture of revolution.

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[8] Halasa, Omareen, and Mahfoud, *Syria Speaks*, 179.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid, 232.

The Culture Of Revolution Born To Arab-Spring Relatively Successful Elsewhere, Was Not As Fortunate In Syria

The Arab Spring could not find a symbolic harbor in Syria that could help in strengthening and unifying their position and empowering their path into a democratic future. There was no opportunity to develop a symbolic space to stimulate the people's feelings and unite them like those in Al-Tahrir Square in Egypt. The government's crackdown was swift and harsh, dissuading many from protesting in public. The media was so stridently supportive of Assad that there was no way to express or communicate an alternative viewpoint to the government within conventional media. Unfortunately, the images of the Assad "the lion", the myth of the ultimate and undefeatable strength dominated all public sites. Public spaces, all social facilities, all schools and universities displayed pictures or edifices constructed in the likeness of both Hafez and Bashar Al-Assad. The symbols of fear and intimidation were on every road and every corner.

In this atmosphere, the indigenous opposition could not gain much traction, which in turn, left the revolution open to being controlled by other interests and other competing agendas, including those of the West, and those in the region, including extremists and terrorists.

WHY THE PRO-ARAB SPRING LOST CONTROL OF THE WAVE

The Syrian opposition party, who adopted the Syrian revolutionary cause, is poorly organized and led. They have little experience in both politics and the military. Nonetheless, they are forced to take on these roles to keep the cause alive. They failed to establish a solid strategy on the ground, leaving themselves open to be marginalized. The Global Think Tank views the position of the SNC as the following:

However, international wariness over the SNC's continuing splits and schisms and its failure to unite the rest of the opposition behind a clear program and strategy prompted most countries which recognized it only as a legitimate representative—rather than the sole representative—of the Syrian people.[11]

As with other experiments with democracy, the developments on the ground proved the political environment in Syria is not ready to proceed with a democratic agenda. The opposition was surprised by the widespread internal and external support for the Assad regime and by the lack of fortitude by Western democracies to aid their cause. Russia's strident support for Assad and its vetoes alongside with China to the United Nations' resolutions were unexpected. The United States' and the West's limited and mostly symbolic support of the revolution's cause were baffling to the pro-Arab Spring supporters.

Taking this anemic cue from the West, the Assad regime's response to the Arab-Spring wave was ferocious. Everyone who opposed Assad's system was subject to being arrested, tortured, or killed. The policy of fear was the overarching strategy to maintain his authoritarian regime. The regime's brutality surprised the FSA, and they were not prepared for the enormous casualties and destruction caused by the crisis.

The revolutionaries lost control of the revolution. The merciless offensive strategy of the Assad-regime on the opposition party (the FSA and civilians), the lack of unification within the opposition elements, their short-sighted calculations, incorrect assumptions, and the lack of any tangible international support all contributed to a much different outcome from other Arab-Spring experiences.

The desperate situation in Syria opened the door to groups with even more nefarious intent. The opposition groups accepted assistance from wherever they could

[11] Aron Lund, "Syria in Crisis, The Syrian National Council" *The Global Think Tank*, March 2014, http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=48334&reloadFlag=1.

get it. The opposition had to figure out a way to gain substantive external support, funding, food, weapons, medicine, and even outside military intervention or they would surely lose the cause. At this stage, the opposition representatives had to unify their key ideas, solve their arguments, and find a new political agenda that reflected the reality on the ground. They needed a situational agenda weighing costs and benefits for each action. They needed a rational perspective to determine whether the process could be successful. The opposition representatives needed to acknowledge the deteriorating situation and find ways to compromise with the Assad regime, or at least stem the tide of the battle until help could arrive.

In the meantime, the war rages on the ground and is even more complicated. Radical Islamic groups, initially fighting alongside the opposition, are also fighting against the opposition and against each other when it suits them. Many consider their agenda to be more heinous than that of the Assad regime. This has also alarmed the West because they fear their support provided to the opposition may get into the hands of the radical groups, which could then be used against them in the future.

In summary, after independence, the proletarian regime hijacked the nationalism ideology to remain in power. The Arab Spring captured the Syrian dreams and derailed their pass through democracy. The Arab Spring was a new ideology of freedom and human rights and could not guarantee the perfect society.

The Assad regime's brutality against the peaceful demonstrations derailed them into an armed revolution. The different political ideologies (democracy vs. dictatorship), the different cultures ideologies (revolution vs. loyalty), not to mention the religious factors and the minority fears, hijacked the Syrian individuals' mindset, splitting them

into pro-Assad and anti-Assad, leading them to a civil war, causing this course of devastating development on the Syrian stage.

As of today, the authoritarian ideology has failed while the authoritarian regime continues a brutal battle to remain in control. Although Bashar Al-Assad still holds the Republic Palace, the dictatorship has failed, or at least one can claim, the fears of the dictatorship failed, the feelings of hatred of these outdated authoritarian regimes have been exposed, and the sound of justice and freedom have emerged. While the opposition has taken many losses on the ground, a moral victory may be all they have to count on so far.

CHAPTER IV

REGIONAL GEOPOLITICAL DIMENSION

GEOPOLITICAL FACTORS

The Syrian revolution has deviated greatly from the original goals and has been

hijacked by the interests of regional states and by many extremist groups. Now there is a

serious risk the conflict will expand outside the borders of Syria and further destabilize

the region. The lack of commitment and the anemic and inconsistent response from the

international community has opened the door to regional actors and extremist groups to

undermine the revolution in the name of their own cause.

Chapter Three discussed the nature of the conflict in Syria as a primarily internal

struggle between two ideologies: dictatorship versus democracy. This political struggle

expands beyond the domestic borders of Syria and involves many regional states. The

struggle in Syria is a complicated matter. It exists in many layers. There is the domestic

struggle between the government and the opposition groups. There is also the regional

element, whereby power brokers in the Middle East exert their power and influence

directly or through proxy groups. This element also includes extremists groups that have

no formal sovereign connection, but may be supported by various sovereign nations. The

final element includes the global powers and their allies. This chapter focuses on the

regional conflict and discusses the overarching political dimension where these regional

powers have promoted their political agendas while exploiting and politicizing Islam to

empower one agenda over another.

THE SECTARIAN CONFLICT

Syria's revolution was hijacked to be a platform for sectarian conflict, and this

section identifies the main regional actors and discusses their interests and their values.

Yoel Guzansky and Gallia Lindenstrauss stated:

> The upheavals that have gripped the Arab world since late 2010, however, have
> led to the formation of a new geopolitical landscape, with changes in the
> composition and cohesion of the radical axis. They have also sparked the
> formation of an Arab-Turkish/ monarchial-republican Sunni axis, which
> constitutes a counterweight to Iran, and is challenging the power and influence of
> Iran and its proxies in the region." [1]

The Syrian crisis reflects a sectarian story line where various states have aligned

with either the Assad regime or the opposition party. There are two main elements. The

Sunni axis supports the anti-Assad regime and primarily, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar,

and the Sunni groups in Iraq, Bahrain, and Lebanon represent this axis. The Shia axis

supports the Assad regime and is represented mostly by Iran and the Shia elements in

Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain.

Each axis proclaims a legitimate and altruistic interest in Syria. Each group seeks

to counter the influence of the other in an attempt to protect its political interests and

economic activities in the region. One may argue that this political jockeying for power

and influence has done little to ease the conflict and has done nothing more than promote

the regional actors' self-interests.

Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, the Sunni axis has been promoting a

democratic settlement in Syria in response to the initial Syrian demonstrations. They have

asked for the withdrawal of the dictatorial regime in Syria. But how effective has the

Sunni support been, and what are the true motivations behind their position? Michael

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[1] Yoel Guzansky and Gallia Lindenstrauss, "The Emergence of the Sunni Axis in the Middle East," *Speaking Assessment* Volume 16, No. 1 (April 2013) 37.

Stephens depicted the motivations of the Sunni axis as "Turkey is a neighboring state and as such faces critical stability and security concerns. Saudi Arabia largely views the conflict through the Iranian lens, and the larger geostrategic game that plays out between the two purported leaders of the Muslim world."[2] Nonetheless, the outside support has largely been symbolic and without substance. They have provided some funding and possibly weapons for the fighters, but not enough to make a difference in the tide of the war.

On the other side, the lead power of the Shia axis, Iran, is supporting the Assad regime. Iran feels isolated in the Arab world with the Sunni ruling most of the stronger and wealthier Arab nations. The Iranian primary influence in the region can be witnessed in Iraq and Lebanon. Iran wanted to expand its influence through Syria.

> The Syrian civil war is not a rallying call for the region's Shia communities in the same way that it is for foreign Sunni jihadis. The involvement of the region's Shia actors—Iran, Lebanon's Hezbollah, and Iraqi groups—is often presented in religious terms. But the motivations of Shia fighters in Syria (or at least of those states or groups who send them there) are nuanced, and owe more to a number of factors such as geopolitics, a sense of self-preservation, and defense than it does to clear-cut sectarianism—as it is often presented.[3]

The sectarian factor and the regional security fears are addressed in the next five sections. Iran has a strong national interest in expanding its influence in the Middle East and Southwest Asia as a counterbalance to the Sunni-dominated regimes, primarily the Gulf States and Pakistan. Its ambition of developing a "Shiite" bomb as a balance to Pakistan and the power and influence of the Sunni states offers one proof to Iran's

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[2] Michael Stephens, "What is Qatar doing in Syria? ," *The Guardian*, January 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/aug/08/qatar-syria-opposition.

[3] Rodger Shanahan, "What Does Syria Mean for the Region's Shia," *Sada*, February 2014, http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2014/01/07/what-does-syria-mean-for-region-s-shia/gxpr.

paranoia in the region. As a consequence, the Sunni axis of fear of the potential

hegemony of Iran in the region is acute.

THE SECTARIAN MOTIVATION

There was a major schism in Islam during the first century AD. In the Arabian

Peninsula, Shi'ism broke away from Islam when dwellers refused the Caliphate's passing

from the Prophet Muhammad to Abu Bakr rather than to Ali, the prophet's cousin. The

rivalry between Shiism and Sunnism "goes back to the early days of Islam and the

succession crisis that followed the Profit Muhammad's death in 632 C.E."[4]

Today, Iran and Iraq are in the Shi'ism heartland. The modern Iranian revolution

has been one of the major issues in the development of Shiite politics in the Middle

East. The Hezbollah in Lebanon, the success of the Shiite candidates in the current

election in Iraq, and the Shiite's success in creating turmoil in Bahrain have elevated

Shiite political identity in the Middle East. As Shanahan stated, "The recent success of

Shiite's political parties in elections in the regions of Iraq signifies a surge in the region's

Shiite political activism in the region."[5] The elections of Iraq offered the capability of

achieving and raising the strong political voices of almost 60 percent of the Shiite's

population. Kropf added: "Sunnis far out-number Shiites in the world of Islam, except in

two places–Iran, which is about 90 percent Shiite, and Iraq, where Shiites are almost 60

percent of the population."[6]

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[4] Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflict within Islam Will Shape the Future*, (New York: Amazon Digital Service, W. W. Norton & Company, 2007) loc 277.

[5] Rodger Shanahan, "Shiite Politicization in the Middle East." *Carnegie*, January 2014, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/Shanahan_PDF.pdf.

[6] Richard. W. Kropf, *Views From A Hermitage. Reflections on Religion in Today's World*, (U.S.: Lexington Books, April 2008) 121.

Iran is expanding its hegemony in the region by developing political influence, not only in Iraq but also with Shia organizations within Lebanon and Bahrain. Iran is supporting armed militias and pro-Iranian factions in Iraq and Lebanon and building economic ties within Iraq. Iran seeks widespread influence in the Middle East. The role of Iran in Lebanon is helping and supporting Hezbollah. It is obvious that Hezbollah is controlled and dominated by Iran. The influence of Iran's government over the government of Iraq, part of Lebanon, and the Shia sect in Bahrain will help in building a trustworthy platform to project influence further abroad and in other countries of the Middle East, especially Syria.

The common thread that ties the regional supporters for Assad is Shi'ism. The religious component is the driving force, but the power they enjoy is implemented through political, military and economic means. The Iranian regime, the Maliki regime in Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon, all belong to Shia sect. They believe it is in their interest to support Assad and his Allawit-dominated regime. While not Shia, the Allawit sect shares similar doctrinal beliefs. The cooperation between all these Shia elements is a springboard to achieving their main agenda—a strong unified Shia counterbalance to the Sunni strength and influence in the Middle East and Southwest Asia.

Kenneth Katzman wrote on Iran involvement in the Syrian war through the Hezbollah in Lebanon:

> Lebanese Hezbollah is Iran's chief protégé movement in the region; their
> relationship began when Lebanese Shiite clerics of the pro-Iranian Lebanese
> Da'wa Party began to organize in 1982 into what later was unveiled in 1985 as
> Hezbollah. Iran's political, financial, and military aid to Hezbollah has helped it

become a major force in Lebanon's politics and Iran reportedly has been instrumental in persuading Hezbollah leaders to become directly involved in the Syria conflict on behalf of Assad[7]

THE SHI'ISM CONNECTION

Iran supports the Assad Regime and gets involved in the civil war in Syria, as it has a strong and active alliance with Syria. This political alliance can be viewed on the basis of religion. The Assad regime, the dominant power in Syria, belongs to the Alawite sect, and Alawite officers are in charge of Assad's army and the security apparatuses.[8] The Alawite sect's beliefs are very similar to the Shia:

> Sunnis believe that succession to prophet Mohammed (d. 632) rightly followed through the line of his most able and pious companions. Alawites follow the Shiite interpretation, claiming that succession should have been based on bloodlines. According to Shiite Islam, Mohammed's only true heir, imam, was his son-in-law Ali bin Abu Talib.[9]

Ali Bin Abue Talib is the prophet Mohammed's son-in-law and his cousin. These common religious interests are used as a major reason to justify Iran's involvement in Syria.

While Iran plays up this religious connection, Assad is careful not to alienate the other sects within Syria, as the pro-Assad regime is not inclusive to the Alawite sect. Assad is playing the sectarian card only in areas where the cost-to-benefit ratio is in his favor. Elizabeth O'Bagy depicted these attacks as sectarian, "Since May 6, the predominantly Sunni villages of Bayda and Baniyas have witnessed a sharp escalation in

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[7] Kenneth Katzman, "Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses," *Congressional Research Service*, July 2014, 39. https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=751095.

[8] Primoz Manfreda, "The difference Between Alawites and Sunnies in Syria." *about*, April, 2014, http://middleeast.about.com/od/syria/tp/The-Difference-Between-Alawites-And-Sunnis-In-Syria.htm.

[9] Ibid.

Sunni massacres."[10] O'Bagy added a quote written by Hassan Hassan that stated that

"these sectarian attacks are rather for other strategic purposes, including recruitment of

Alawi fighters, deepening sectarian tensions in Assad's favor, and ensuring a popular

base of support."[11]

Syria and Iran have been strategic partners and have a long-standing defense

relationship. The Assad regime has granted vital access to Iran's proxies, such as

Hezbollah, and permitted Iran to move military equipment, money, and technical training

to Hezbollah. Through a mutual defense agreement, Iran is assisting Assad's regime in its

attack on the rebels by sending weapons and fighters to fight alongside the Syrian

military. In the *Washington Times*, Scarbough wrote: "Iran's strategy in Syria aims to

keep President Bashar al-Assad in power as long as possible while setting conditions to

ensure Tehran's ability to use Syrian territory and assets to pursue its regional interests

should Assad falls. Iran has conducted an extensive, expensive, and integrated effort to

achieve these objectives."[12]

This strategic advantage provokes Iranian religious leaders to call the Shia

followers to support the Syrian regime. In one aggressive action, Hezbollah militia

invaded al-Qusayr in Syria and fought against the Syrian's revolutionaries. After taking

the town back from the FSA, Hezbollah fighters raised their flag on the al-Qusayr

Mosque. Wirtschafte covered this in *USA Today*: "The number of people killed as a result

of the continuing bombardment of al-Qusayr is not known. One estimate is 237 people

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[10] Elizabeth O'Bagy, "Syria Update: Assad Targets Sunni Along Syria's coast," *Institute for the study of War*, December 2013, http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/syria-update-assad-targets-sunni#sthash.WbejIGLk.dpuf.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Rowan Scarbough, "Proxy War," *The Washington Times*. December 2013, http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/sep/5/a-us-strike-on-syria-would-amount-to-a-first-slap-/?page=all.

from the beginning of the military attack on the city and more than 2,400 wounded, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights. But, other activists say the death toll is far higher."[13]

The war in Syria has contributed to fueling the regional tensions with sectarian overtones. Iran is fueling Shia members within the Sunni dominant Gulf States and igniting disorders and disturbances in the Gulf States.

THE SUNNI CONNECTION

The battle for the hearts and minds involved in the Syrian crisis is happening on both sides. The Sunni-dominant Gulf states that have close relations with the United States are aware that Iran is a dangerous state and consider it a threat to their security. They have always viewed Iran's political ambition with suspicion. The Sunni states rallied behind the FSA,[14] which is dominated by Sunni sect. Sunni religious leaders have called for a regional collective security mechanism to address the Iranian threat.

Sunni clerics and religious leaders share a common fear over the expansion of the influence of Shia in the region. Some Sunni clerics called on Sunni Muslims to join the FSA in Syria, claiming that Iran and its allies are aiming to exterminate the Sunnis communities. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an influential Muslim cleric with millions of followers called the Sunni Muslim to join the rebels to defeat the Assad Regime: "Every Muslim trained to fight and capable of doing that (must) make himself available to support the Syrian rebels."[15] Referring to Hezbollah as the leader of the party of the Satan, al-

[13] Jacob Wirtschafter, "Key Syria town of al-Qusayr falls to government troops," *USA Today*, December 2013, http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/06/05/syrian-tv-army-in-control-of-key-town-of-qusair/2390947/.

[14] Free Syrian Army.

[15] AFP, "Yusuf al-Qardawi urges Sunnis to join Syria war," *Egypt Independent*, December 2013, http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/yusuf-al-qaradawi-urges-sunnis-join-syria-war.

Qardawi continued: "…the leader of the party of the Satan comes to fight the Sunnis…
Now we know what the Iranians want… They want continued massacres to kill Sunnis."[16]

An overall look at the Syrian crisis shows that the Syrian crisis has renewed the
sectarian conflict between Shia and Sunni sects. Charles River illustrates the sectarian
factor that derailed the political trajectory of elements of the Alawit sect, "what important
to remember is that regardless of whether they are true Shi's, the Alawi hatred of the
Sunni is a strong as in any other Shi'a grouping."[17] This supports the notion I stated
earlier that the civil war started as an ideological conflict and was hijacked to be the stage
for the regional sectarian conflict, as the sectarian tension is escalated in mixed Sunni-
Alawite areas.[18] This sectarian conflict is spreading throughout the region. Sectarian
clashes in Iraq, in Bahrain, and in Lebanon were the norm in 2013.

Iran's support for the Assad regime illustrates that Iran does not want a Sunni-
dominated Syria, especially as the FSA's main supporters are Iran's Persian Gulf rivals:
Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia.

Although the two Muslim axes, the Shia and the Sunni states, are using sectarian
ideology to define their position in the Syrian crisis, inside Syria, Assad's regime and the
opposition party deny any affiliation of a sectarian ideology. In Syria, both the
government and its opponents insist that their civil war is not a fight between religious
sects. In an article in the *New York Times*, Arango, Barnard, and Adnan stated: "Rebel
leaders say their only aim is to depose a dictator. Mr. Assad says he is fending off

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[16] Ibid.

[17] M. Clement Hall," *The History of Syria: 1900–2012*, edited by Charles River, (Amazon Digital Service, CreateSpace Publishing, 2013) Loc 489.

[18] Primoz Manfreda, "The Difference Between Alawites and Sunnies in Syria." about, April, 2014, http://middleeast.about.com/od/syria/tp/The-Difference-Between-Alawites-And-Sunnies-In-Syria.htm.

extremist terrorists, and he is careful not to frame the conflict as a fight against the country's Sunni majority, which he praises for its moderation."[19]

Assad is framing the Sunni axis as more of a political alliance, careful not to incite a religious war. He does accuse the Sunni axis (Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Sunni sect in Iraq) of igniting chaos in Syria by supporting the opposition party and fomenting the civil war. Assad's regime claims that the Sunni axis is promoting the Western and Israeli agenda. He has said that they all want a weak Syria that will promote the security and special interests of the United States and its allies in the region to include Israel and the Sunni-dominant Gulf States.

Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia are primarily Sunni and want to counter the influence of Iran, a major Shiite state. They want to protect their rule and their economic activities. They are also nervous about the influence of the Arab Spring in their own countries. They need stability in the region. Showing sympathy for revolutionaries in Syria and showing that they are progressive will lessen trouble in their countries.

Although the Syrian conflict was a conflict between political ideologies— dictatorship versus democracy— the regional powers succeeded in hijacking Syrian soil and in making Syria a geopolitical platform for their interests. The sectarian conflict is passed on outdated ideology but is politicized to serve the regional interests. Therefore, it has largely prolonged the civil war.

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[19] Tim Arango, Anne Barnard, and Durain Adnan. "As Syrians Fight, Sectarian Strife Infects Mideast," *The New York Times, Middle East.* May 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/02/world/middleeast/sunni-shiite-violence-flares-in-mideast-in-wake-of-syria-war.html?pagewanted=all&_r=2&.

THE SECTARIAN CONFLICT AND THE ARAB-SPRING

The Arab Spring started as a battle between ideologies in March, 2011. Within a year, it had evolved into a more complex form to include a sectarian conflict. The sectarian war between Shia and Sunni sects has overshadowed the initial reasons for the upheaval in Syria.

The Arab Spring is a call within Muslim countries to move away from authoritarian regimes toward a modern, secular, and democratic society. In Muslim countries, one cannot ignore the Islamic perspective within the country's political trajectory but the Islamic ideology cannot standalone and be the mere political decision-maker in the Muslim state.

The Egyptian experience is the best example to address the newer twenty-first-century Muslim ideology. The Egyptian revolution in 2011 succeeded in overthrowing a dictatorial regime and through a democratic process, Egyptians elected the Muslim Brotherhood party to rule. The excitement did not last long. The Muslim Brotherhood party did not understand the point of the Arab Spring movement. Globalization enlightens the mentality of the new generation. The old-fashioned, extremist, and exclusionary ideologies adopted by the Muslim Brotherhood marked their end as a political party in Egypt. Mohamed Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood's candidate who won the president election in June 30, 2012 after the ousting the former president Husni Mubarak and his authoritarian regime, did not last in his position. On July 3, 2013, military chief General Al-Sisi removed President Morsi from power.

> Morsi should have laid the foundation for a democratic state that respected all of its citizens. Instead, he isolated himself by issuing a constitutional decree in November 2012 that essentially rendered the judiciary powerless, since it gave Morsi the power to bypass its authority. In turn, the judiciary protested, adding

itself to a list of institutions Morsi had lost control of, despite his handpicked cabinet.[20]

As a result, sectarian ideology cannot be set as the priority at the expense of democratic principles. The survival of an Islamic party requires a strong pragmatic tendency toward modernization.

Although the majority of Syrians were integrated in the society regardless of one's religious affiliation, it cannot denied that the sectarian conflict found its way to some fractions within both the pro and anti-Assad groups. Both parties are aware that the sectarian conflict will ravage the social structure and social solidarity. However, the ignition of the sectarian tendency between some Syrian fractions caused a decline in rational decisions, a decline in free speech, and an escalation of the Syrian crisis. Consequently, none of the parties wins the majority approval. Both parties are prone to collapse if they continue their trajectories based on sectarian tendency. In other words, sectarian tendency is not appealing to the majority of either the pro-Arab Spring or the anti-Arab Spring groups.

As a final point, it is important to mention that the Alawite sect in Syria is mostly secular and that they represent only 12 percent of the population. The Shia sect in Syria is less than 1 percent. These statistics refute the presumption that the war inside Syria is a sectarian war. The alliance between the Syrian regime and the Shia states and Shia elements is primarily strategic and founded on mutual interests. On the other hand, it is doubtful that Iran's motivation was primarily religious. Its affinity with Russia, a communist and secular regime, is obviously built on mutual interest and political agenda and not on a religious ideology.

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[20] Mohamad Nagi, *The Fall of The Muslim Brotherhood*, (New Reporting, 2014) Amazon Digital Service, kindle version, loc 65.

THE REGIONAL CONFLICT OVER NATIONAL SECURITY

The Sunni states were enjoying relative national security until the escalation of the Syrian crisis The Sunni states can no longer ignore Iran's ambition to expand its hegemony in the Middle East. No doubt, Iran supports Assad in preserving its security and maintaining its sphere of influence in the Middle East. The importance of Iran lies in its geographic location and oil resources.

Iran is the second largest country in the Middle East. It is bordered by the Caspian Sea, Persian Gulf, and the Strait of Hormuz, all of which are crucial maritime pathways for the transport of crude oil. Iran's strategic location and its availability of natural resources pose a threat for the Gulf States and in turn, pose a problem for American interests in the region. In addition, Iran's pursuit of nuclear power complicates the situation and elevates the tension and stakes in the region.

Iran claims it needs nuclear power to generate enough electricity to cover their domestic power needs. However, political experts claim that Iran seeks to build a nuclear weapon to gain political power and national prestige. Iran may have true concerns for their national security since there is already a Sunni capability to deliver a nuclear bomb (Pakistan) and the nuclear arsenal of Israel in the region. The United States, the Sunni-dominated states, and Israel have concerns that Iran's acquisition of nuclear power will shift the balance of power in the Middle East solidly toward Iran.

Iran has provided political, economic, and military support to Assad. Fulton. Holliday and Wyer wrote,

> The Iranian security and intelligence services are advising and assisting the Syrian military in order to preserve Bashar al-Assad's hold on power. These efforts have evolved into an expeditionary training mission using Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Ground Forces, Quds Force, intelligence services, and law

enforcement forces. The deployment of IRGC Ground Forces to conflict abroad is a notable expansion of Iran's willingness and ability to project military force beyond its borders." [21]

The commander of the Iranian Republican Guard, General Mohamad Eskandari announced the formation of another militia group called the Syrian Hezb Allah, along the lines of the Lebanese Hezbollah. Eskandari said that Syria and Lebanon are Iran's front lines in the defense of its geopolitical strategy.[22] "The leader of the IRGC, Hussein Hamadani, who revealed last week during a ceremony to announce the establishment of the Syrian Hezbollah Party that the troops prepared to fight in Syria alongside the regime's army includes Sunni and Shia elements."[23]

Regardless of the Iranian objectives, whether it is to expand the Shia-axis or to preserve its own national security, Iran cannot avoid the consequences of its involvement in the war in Syria. Iran has suffered a political cost and confirmed the paranoia of the West, the Sunni states, and Israel through its aggressive support of Syria. It has also borne a large economic cost. Iran's military support for the Assad regime has been very expensive. It is costly at a time when Iran already has economic difficulties due to Western sanctions related to its nuclear ambitions and internal economic difficulties. The Iranian Republican Guard campaign to aid Syria financially and military has been a

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[21]Will Fulton, Joseph Holliday, and Sam Wyer, "Iranian Strategy in Syria," *Institution for the Study of War*, February 2014, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/IranianStrategyinSyria-1MAY.pdf.

[22] Omri Ceren, "Top Iranian Officials: Syrian Campaign an Extension of Iran's War with U.S.," *The Tower*, May 2014, http://www.thetower.org/0361oc-top-iranian-officials-syrian-campaign-an-extension-of-irans-war-with-u-s/.

[23] Middle East Monitor, "Revolutionary Guard commander confirm support for Assad," *MEMO*, May 2014, https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/news/middle-east/11547-revolutionary-guard-commander-confirms-support-for-assad.

burden to the Iranian economy. In May 2014, there were reports announcing that Iranian economic conditions were deteriorating because of the costly support to Syrian regime. [24]

While the Iranian' involvement in the Syrian crisis has been costly, it appears that Iran is already reaping the seeds sown during the last three years. "Rumors" about the Syrian regime granted 750,000 Syrian nationalities to Shiites groups and initiated economical investments in Syria. Rumors have circulated recently that Iran is sponsoring a plan to redraw Syria's demographic map, including the granting of Syrian nationality to 750,000 Shiites from throughout the Middle East. Allegedly, the Iranians have paid $2 billion into the Real Estate Bank of Syria to buy up land in southern Homs province. [25]

The only tangible proof of this mutual agreement by the Assad regime and Iran can be inferred when the pro-Assad burned the land registry office in Hama, aiming to destroy all property ownerships and "to facilitate the dispossession of Sunnis in the province, in that way changing its sectarian makeup." [26] While domestically, the pro-Assad regime believe the Assad's political sagacity succeeded in dragging Iran and Hezbollah to its sphere of influence, it is obvious that Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah are attempting to keep Syria under their sphere of influence and apply further hegemony in the region.

In summary, Iran has an intense geopolitical interest in Syria. Iran and their proxy Hezbollah have taken advantage of a hesitant and war-weary West and have filled the vacuum created by the diminished influence of the West in the region.

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[24] Ibid.

[25] Michael Young, "Is Iran Altering Syria's Sectarian Map?," *The Daily Star*, May 2014, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Opinion/Columnist/2013/Jul-18/224071-is-iran-altering-syrias-sectarian-map.ashx#axzz3FQcaRzwz.

[26] Ibid.

ISRAEL'S POSITION ON THE SYRIAN CRISIS

Although Israel is a regional power, it is considered the main ally to the United

States as they share similar interests. The thesis discusses the American position on the

crisis of Syria in section 5.1.4, the global stage. Nevertheless, this section discusses

Israel's direct concerns regarding the Syrian crisis, which are Iran's nuclear ambition and

the rising of Jihadist extremist groups in Syria.

While Israel does not endorse the current Syrian regime, it has enjoyed the

relative peace and stability provided by the Assad regime. At the earliest stage of the

Syrian crisis, the United States encouraged Israel was encouraging U.S. to intervene and

topple the Assad regime in an attempt to hinder Iran's hegemonic ambition in the region.

Later, this strategy took different trajectory. As Efraim Halevy stated: "Israel's most

significant strategic goal with respect to Syria has always been a stable peace, and that is

not something that the current civil war has changed."[27]

Israel is concerned primarily with Iran since the former president of Iran,

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2003–2013), publicly stated their dedication to the destruction

of Israel. Therefore, Iran's involvement in Syria is seen as more than support for a single

nation; their ambition to dominate and control the region is also recognized. Jean

Briomont stated some observers view on Israel's position on toppling the Assad regime:

> since Bashar al Assad has allowed Israel to occupy Syrian territory on the Golan
> Heights and has kept the border quiet (without explaining what else he could have
> done, given the relationship of forces), conclude that Israel has no interest in
> toppling him. But what matter is that Assad is allied with Hezbollah and with
> Iran. Israel hates Hezbollah for its successful resistance to Israeli occupation of

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[27] Efrain Halevy, "Israel's Man in Damascus," *Foreign Affairs*, January 2014,
http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139373/efraim-halevy/israels-man-in-damascus.

Lebanon, and sees Iran as the only potential challenge to Israeli military supremacy in the region.[28]

Iran's nuclear ambitions further irritate Israel. Benjamin Netanyahu, the current Prime Minister of Israel said: "it (Israel) must dismantle the Iranian ability to either produce or launch a nuclear weapon."[29]

As Israel fears of radical elements taking control of Syria and of Iran's influence have expand to include taking control of the whole of Syria, Israel prefers the current situation over having Syria be controlled by either Iran or an extremist group. In the *New York Times*, Jodi Rudoren noted,

> That the Israelis have argued, quietly, that the best outcome for Syria's civil war, at least for the moment, is no outcome. For Jerusalem, the status quo, horrific as it may be from a humanitarian perspective, seems preferable to either a victory by Mr. Assad's government and his Iranian backers or a strengthening of rebel groups, increasingly dominated by Sunni jihadis.[30]

According to Laura Lee, this political strategy is

> A playoff situation in which you need both teams to lose, but at least you don't want one to win — we'll settle for a tie,' said Alon Pinkas, a former Israeli consul general in New York. 'Let them both bleed, hemorrhage to death: that's the strategic thinking here. As long as this lingers, there's no real threat from Syria.'[31]

On the other hand, the Assad regime continues denying that the revolution is the maker of Syrian indigenous and of portraying the revolution as a Western conspiracy made primarily by the United States and Israel to weaken Syria. The Assad government

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[28] Jean Briomont, "Syria: Who Wants War, Who Wants Peace?" *Global Research*, January 2014, http://www.globalresearch.ca/syria-who-wants-war-who-wants-peace/5353861.

[29] Shiryn Ghermezian, "Netanyahu: Permanent Agreement With Iran Must Remove Ability to Produce or Launch Nuclear Weapons." *The Algemeiner*, February 2014, http://www.algemeiner.com/2014/02/23/netanyahu-permanent-agreement-with-iran-must-remove-ability-to-produce-or-launch-nuclear-weapons/.

[30] Jodi Rudoern, "Israel Backs Limited Strike Against Syria," *New York Times*, February 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/06/world/middleeast/israel-backs-limited-strike-against-syria.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0syria.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

[31] Lara Lee, "Syria: Accidental Diplomacy in the Devils' Playground," *MECA*, May 2014, https://www.mecaforpeace.org/news/syria-accidental-diplomacy-devils-playground.

stated that there is not a Syrian revolution; rather it is just groups of gangs, mercenaries, and extremists executing barbaric raids against the Syrians. Assad accused the opposition party outside of Syria of betraying the national interests and cooperating to achieve this Western conspiracy. In his fourth speech since the crisis, Assad insisted on the ""foreign conspiracies" supported by Arab states for the crisis in his country."[32]

THE APPEARANCE OF MUSLIM EXTREMIST ORGANIZATIONS ON THE SYRIAN STAGE: JAN AND ISIS

The last and the most destabilizing regional actors on the Syrian stage are the extremist groups, especially the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS).

The FSA led by General Salim Idriss and its many battalions of rebels were the main Syrian fighters on the ground. The FSA possesses the characteristics of Islamic militant fighters, although they are not hard-core Muslims, and this has helped them gain the trust of anti-Assad groups to include secular elements. The FSA has consistently maintained that they seek a democratic and secular state for Syria, open to all Syrians. Unfortunately, their inability to lead a disparate coalition of groups effectively has limited their success in battle against the pro-Assad forces. Additionally, they have had very little military and political support from the West. The result has been minimal success on the battlefield and widespread chaos and confusion throughout the country.

This chaos then became the perfect environment for the entry of extremist jihadists known to include Jubhat Al-Nusra (JAN or Al-Nusra) and ISIS. These organizations took advantage of the FSA's desperate need for support. The Syrian

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[32] Ian Black, "Syrian president Assad blames 'foreign conspiracies' for crisis," *The Guardian,* December 2013, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jan/10/syrian-president-assad-foreign-conspiracies.

revolutionaries were willing to tolerate the lesser of the two evils. At the time, they

believed they could deal with the radical Islamic elements later.

Unfortunately, these extremist jihadist groups have played a significant role in

weakening the position of the anti-regime revolutionaries. Their support of the Syrian

fighters turned into a nightmare. In some instances, the extremists groups fought the FSA,

pushed them aside in some liberated places in Syria, and then imposed their outdated

ideology there. In an interview, Joseph Daher, member of the Revolutionary Left Current

in Syria, with Turkish comrades of the DSIP stated:

> Some jihadist forces, such as Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS, have concentrated on
> trying to reach hegemony in some liberated areas attacking activists and FSA
> battalions, rather to fight against the regime, while many jihadists pouring into
> Syria from countries like Iraq and Lebanon are not flocking to the front lines.
> Instead they are concentrating their efforts on consolidating control in the
> northern, rebel-held areas of the country. Many Jabhat al Nusra fighters left in the
> middle of ongoing rebel operations in Homs, Hama and Idlib to head for Raqqa
> province once the provincial capital fell in March 2013. During the battle for
> Qusayr in late May, Jabhat al Nusra units were noticeably absent. In early June,
> rebel reinforcements rallied to take the town of Talbiseh, north of Homs city,
> while Jabhat al Nusra fighters preferred to stay in the liberated areas to fill the
> vacuum that the Free Syrian Army affiliates had left behind.[33]

ISIS wants the Arab world to follow the model of a feudal society dominated by

regional fiefdoms as it was during the Middle Ages. In its early stage , the extremist

group's agenda appeared to take control of a post-Assad Syria. This increased anxiety

among all of society in Syria, whether they are pro- or anti-Assad. Their narrow

mindedness is not appealing to the majority of Syrians who are hoping for a modern

democratic state with radical-free ideology: "Numerous campaigns and demonstrations

have taken place against the authoritarian practices of ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra in the

city. There were solidarity gatherings demanding the liberation of kidnapped activists

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[33] Word Press, "Assad and ISIS, they're both the same," *Syria Freedom Forever*, February 2014,
http://syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com/2014/01/14/assad-and-isis-theyre-both-the-same/.

held in Islamist-held prisons."[34] It was expected that ISIS would support the Syrian FSA

and to contribute to the trajectory of the Arab Spring. Instead, they hijacked the

revolutionaries' desperate need for support, imposing similar— to the regime—fascist

ideology and taking over the FSA progress on the ground.

Not only has this tactic undermined the FSA's battlefield strategies; it has made

the West suspicious of the opposition. The West and their Allies are even more reluctant

to provide support to the FSA for fear the support will wind up in the hands of the

extremists.

ISIS's agenda proved a different trajectory. The development on the ground,

where ISIS has never aimed a bullet against the Assad regime, raises questions. There is

debate about the possibility that ISIS extremist elements are mercenaries organized and

funded by the Syrian regime to create trouble and chaos among the opposition fighters.

Additionally, by infusing extremists into the opposition, Syria could promote its

propaganda and justify its harsh and brutal crackdown as a war on terrorism and a

necessary strike against extremists.

Kyle Orton noted how the Assad regime released violent Jihadists right at the

beginning of the uprising: "The regime … deliberately released militant prisoners to

strengthen jihadist ranks at the expense of moderate rebel forces. The aim was to

persuade the West that the uprising was sponsored by Islamist militants including al-

Qaeda as a way of stopping Western support for it."[35]

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[34] Ibid.

[35] Kyle Orton, "The Assad Regime's Collusion with ISIS and al-Qaeda: Assessing The Evidence, Part 1," *The Syrian Intifada*, April 2014, http://kyleorton1991.wordpress.com/2014/03/24/assessing-the-evidence-of-collusion-between-the-assad-regime-and-the-wahhabi-jihadists-part-1/.

A senior Lebanese Member of Parliament commented on the Assad strategy of releasing extremist jihadist from the Syrian prisons: "If the Assad regime let these people out of prison, they must have had a use for them — even an unwitting one."[36]

Some observers wonder why Assad only struck the FSA and never aimed a bullet at the ISIS group. Videos on YouTube document ISIS convoys traveling into Syria through the desert, a perfect environment for Assad to attack those extremists without causing civilian casualty. Yet they enter Syria unmolested. Ammar Abdullhamid noted:

> Indeed, it is no mystery by now that Assad's security apparatuses have striven tooth and nail to encourage the Islamization of the Syrian Revolution and have, in fact, facilitated Al-Qaeda's arrival onto the scene, knowing that its activities and ideology will be more problematic to the opposition than to them and will undermine the secular and peaceful character of the early protest movement. [37]

On a separate incident, the Assad regime did not oppose ISIS while they were in control of part of Al- Raqa despite the horrifying attacks made on the civilian population. However, once the FSA seized control of this territory from ISIS, Assad unleashed an intense bombardment on Al-Atareb, causing severe casualties among the FSA fighters and the civilians.

In summary, the Assad regime is trying to swing the pendulum to its favor by marketing its propaganda about fighting the armed terrorist extremists. Unfortunately, several international media promoted a propaganda that the civil war in Syria is between the Assad regime and terrorist groups, demolishing any foundation to the Syrian indigenous role as revolutionaries. It is a propaganda made to justify the international communities' reluctant response in supporting the opposition party.

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[36] Martin Chulov, "Massacre of the children as Syrian forces hit rebels," *The Guardian*, December 2013, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/may/26/syria-houla-military-assault-children.
[37] Ammar Abdulhamid, "Al-Qaeda Resurgent," *Amarji*, November 2013, http://ammarabdulhamid.com/2013/11/11/al-qaeda-resurgent/.

DOES ISIS REPRESENT A SUNNI INTREST OR IT IS AN INDEPENDENT
ORGANIZATION?

Despite several accusations to the contrary, the Sunni-dominated states that
support the opposition in Syria deny that they provide any support to ISIS. These
announcements on behalf of the anti-Assad allies prove that ISIS is getting support from
a source other than the Sunni axis.

As mentioned earlier, ISIS offered no help to the opposition party and instead it
fought the FSA, controlled Sunni cities, and killed important elements of the Sunni
opposition party. Intentionally or not, it appears as if ISIS serves Assad's interest only.

On June 10, 2014, an ISIS militia of around 800 elements took over Al-Mosul (a
Sunni city-state). The Iraqi army and the security institutions, controlled by the Shia sect,
left al-Mosul without aiming a bullet towards ISIS. An outstanding question is why ISIS
is attacking only Sunni cities and threatening only Sunni states?

These developments can be analyzed in one of two interpretation: as an agreement
between the Shia axis and ISIS to split the region among them where ISIS takes over the
Sunni-dominated cities; or by a military tactic where the Shia alliance (Al-Maliki in Iraq
and Assad in Syria) allows ISIS to enter Sunni-dominant cities so that later, the Iraqi
government will attack these Sunni cities claiming a war against terrorist groups. In fact,
Assad already has implemented this military strategy. In an interview with Iraqi families
fleeing Al-Mosul, they expressed their worries not only from the outdated-brutal ideology
of the ISIS but also from a potential response from the al-Maliki government to include a
military attack on their city of Al-Mosel.

Ahmad Al-Jarba is the president of the Syrian National Coalition and a former political prisoner in Syria. In his last meeting with American officials, he assured that the opposition should be considered an independent party against both the dictatorship ideology of the Assad regime and the outdated barbarian ideology of the ISIS. Al-Jarba also insisted the extremist groups are not aligned with the opposition and are considered as independent actors and a dangerous group in Syrian crisis.

The assumption that ISIS, by any means, supports the opposition party or serves an interest of any Sunni state is not valid. A YouTube video shows an ISIS element threatening Turkey if it does not stop supporting the FSA.[38] Another video shows ISIS elements threatening Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey and announcing that their turn is next.[39] The videos support the argument that ISIS is an independent party that has its own agenda and interests in Syria. ISIS is fighting against only Sunni elements and extending its hegemony to Sunni cities.

Observers are trying to determine the true intentions of ISIS in Syria. The recent conflict between ISIS and JAN may shed light on their main agenda in the region. Although both groups are considered Muslim-fundamentalist groups, they are fighting one another. The conflict between these two extremist organizations may reveal their purpose for fighting in Syria. These two groups have been fighting one another in northern Syria, primarily around the Dair-Alzor and Dara'aD areas that are rich with oil and natural gas. This fact refutes their claims of supporting the revolutionaries against the regime and their religious agenda as radicals and proves that they hijacked the Syrian

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[38] May 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=56IJuqwSGaA.
[39] May, 2014 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=birfUIi-4k4.

revolution to impose their dominance over these natural resources, helping to provide long-term financial support for their organizations.

The three years of war have drained the power of the anti-and pro-Assad groups. This in turn has enabled militia groups successfully to find a good environment to foster their organizations and to achieve their agendas. Assad is no longer fully able to control his political decisions anymore. Iran and Huzeb Allah are now taking control over the political trajectory in Syria. The same applies to the FSA political trajectory. After liberating some Syrian territories, the FSA could not enjoy its victory neither continue its fight to liberate the rest of Syria. The extremist groups hijacked the FSA's victory and derailed it to its personal gain, demolishing the Arab Spring dream of building a modern democratic society. The FSA has had its agenda diverted by unfulfilled promises and its focus clouded by chaos. It is losing the hearts and minds of the public who may have once supported the movement. The pro-Arab Spring is tired of the conflict, exhausted by the chaos, and overwhelmed by the sacrifice they have endured.

In early June 2004, ISIS posted a video on YouTube announcing the organization will not fight against any of the Iranian fractions or its interest in the region. This is another indication that Iran is trying to take control of the situation and is making deals with these extremist groups operating in Syria. In an article in FP, Michael Weiss wrote: "American talking heads say that Iran is the key to defeating ISIS. But those in the know say the two "enemies" are actually secret allies."[40] There may be an effort to find a mutual agenda between these two brokers. The United States should be concerned that Iran, which is already taking control of the Assad regime and possibly ailing with

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[40]Michael Weiss, "Trust Iran only as Far as You Can Throw It," *Foreign Policy*, June 2014, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/06/23/iran_is_funding_isis_syria_iraq_proxy_war.

extremist party, will increase its potential threat to the United States in the region, as both sides represent an anti-Western ideology. These two political brokers have also turned their followers into brainwashed machineries so it will be easy to derail them against any enemy, including the United States and its allies like the Gulf States and Israel.

The regional powers are fighting for their own agendas. Iran seems to have the upper hand with more control over the reality of the situation on the ground. They have a willing proxy in Hezbollah who is willing to fight on the ground. In addition, they have a partner in Syria who needs tangible support that includes funding, weapons, and fighters. The Sunni-dominated anti-Assad groups are providing support to the Syrian opposition but without the full backing of the United States and its European allies, the tide of the battle cannot be expected to change very soon in favor of the FSA.

On the other hand, if the United States and the West recognized ISIS as a terrorist organization, both the Assad regime and anti-Assad forces have condemned ISIS, so how did ISIS troops enter and spread in the thousands all over Syria and more recently, in Iraq? Furthermore, why does the United States administration promise to provide political and military support to overcome the Assad regime per pending approval statues? Both situations weaken the opposition party and create a vacuum for regional and extremist interference. Not to mention, the United States has prevented the Syria's Friends Community from providing any political and military aid to revolutionaries. Is the United States foreign policy aware of the consequences of the vacuum being creating on the Syrian stage? Did the United States foreign policy hijack the Syrian stage and derail ISIS towards different trajectory away from the American

homeland? Or it is a new foreign policy approach that staged Syria to be the graveyard for these terrorist groups?

At this stage, the United States needs to consider two main points:

1. A war in Syria will drain ISIS power but it will empower another state in the region like Iran.

2. The absence of the International community will increase the chaos and create a vacuum on the Syrian stage. This will turn Syria into a training camp for terrorist groups who are mainly anti-Western radicals. There is a potential that they will initiate a terrorist attack on the Western ground at anytime.

Kofi Annan addressed the Syrian crisis stating:

As each of us ban look to Syria and see the price its citizens are paying to achieve a measure of freedom and dignity, we as a global community should learn the hard-won lessons of the past, and seek to prevent injustices and inequities from taking root before they lead to crisis and conflict. A culture of prevention can be far more effective than a slogan. We know that the three pillars of security, development, rule of law and human rights are indispensable in and of themselves, and need each other to ensure that one is not threatened by weakness of the other.[41]

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[41] Kofi Annan, *A Life in War and Peace*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), 370.

CHAPTER V

THE GLOBAL DIMENSION OF THE of THE STRIAN CRISIS

SYRIA IS THE STAGE OF THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY'S COLD WAR

The current global environment is reminiscent of the Cold War period during the

1981- 1992 The Syrian crisis is one of the world's most controversial events. The region

is divided into two political rivals causing chaos. Did Russia, Iran, and Syria form a new

geopolitical axis ally against the United States? Furthermore, did Syria become the stage

for the new geopolitical conflict?

The new Cold War is the emerging source of conflict and tension in the world

today. The last years have witnessed an intensive opposition to American global

preeminence by Russia, China, and Iran. The support of Russia for the brutal Syrian

regime with cooperation with Iran and China raises a question mark regarding Russia's

intentions. "Despite the collapse of the Cold War structures in East West relations, realist

theories would still remain valid to explain the feelings of insecurity of states and their

responses to changes in a distribution of powers in the International system."[1]

It is important to gather data from post World War II and the Cold War and

evaluate them in different scenarios to interpret the foreign policy of the superpowers.

Understanding historical foreign policies provides a point of reference for interpreting

different states' positions and helps predict future policies. The combination of the

various states policies and strategies shaped international politics and provides a

conceptual framework for the future of Syria.

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[1] Mohammed Nuruzzaman,"Beyond the Realist Theories: 'Neo-conservative Realism' and the American Invasion of Iraq," Canadian Political Science Association, June 2014, http://www.cpsa-acsp.ca/papers-2005/Nuruzzaman.pdf.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War in the late eighties and early nineties was the beginning of a new era of international order where the United States became the unipolar superpower that dominated the international system order. The joy of victory did not last too long. The new world order was the stage of transformation towards pluralism. The world witnessed structural shifts at all levels. The dominance of the United States and the West, as manifested in the "new world order" is being challenged today.

The new Russian geopolitical agenda, the Iranian expansionism and nuclear ambition, the growing economy of China and its ever-expanding interests in Asia, the religious elements that formed the terrorist organizations, and the ethnic conflicts in regions of interests are all considered challenges to United States' and the West's national security. In *The End of the Cold War*, Michael Hogan wrote, "Above all, there will be a return to the more traditional pattern of shifting blends of cooperation and competition among all nations, including former Cold War allies as well as former adversaries."[2] "In short, the world will resume a pattern of political relationships free of bipolar superpower and coalition rivalry."[3]

This section focuses on the global powers' interest in the Middle East region during the twenty first century, in particular, after the beginning of the Arab Spring. During this time, many Arabic countries became an integral part of the global national security interest and security.

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[2] Michael Hogan, *The End of the Cold War. Its Meaning and Implications*, (U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 135.
    [3] Ibid.

RUSSIA

The Russian Republic lost its superpower status following the dissolution of the

Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1991. Nevertheless, Russia retained a massive

military-industrial complex to include large stockpiles of nuclear weapons, estimated

around 20,000, and production facilities.[4] Russia also retained a permanent membership

in the UN Security Council and a sphere of influence across different parts of the world,

including some Arabic countries and Iran.

Russia is trying to maintain its legacy and regain its former influence as a major

world power, especially after it has felt the West in general, and the United States in

particular, trying to undermine its interest in the world. Russia has seen its influence

wane, especially after the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and more recent political

interference in Libya: "In Libya last year, however, Moscow was stung by NATO's

military intervention under a U.N. mandate it believed had been stretched beyond the

limits it had agreed to."[5] Russia will not allow the Libyan scenario to happen again on

Syria's platform. Russia believes that the purpose of the United States to topple Bashar

Al-Assad is to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons and fragmenting

organizations like Hezbollah in Lebanon is an extension of the American agenda to

remain the unipolar leader in the region.

Russian-American Rivalry

The Cold War was once an ideological struggle between two supreme powers,

and the collapse of the Soviet Union reduced the influence of the communist ideology but

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[4] Nation Master, "County vs. country: Russia and United States Compared: Military Stats," *Nation Master*, April 2014, http://www.nationmaster.com/country-info/compare/Russia/United-States/Military.

[5] Douglas Hamilton, "Russia-America tussle Over Syria evokes Cold War," *Reuters*, December 2013, http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/13/us-syria-coldwar-israel-idUSBRE85C10W20120613.

not all Russia political influence around the globe. In other words, the collapse of the Soviet Union did not diminish its power. Russia continues to pursue its interests and protect its sphere of influence.

The global superpowers' previous experiences in Vietnam and Afghanistan had already shown that their capacity for intervention around the world was problematic at best. Both the Soviet Union and the United States faced potentially serious internal economic difficulties. At the same time, the superpowers will not risk a nuclear or direct-armed confrontation between each other. Nonetheless, the absence of a threat of war between the global superpowers does not demonstrate that the Cold War hostilities are over. The most powerful nations in the world still struggle without military confrontation through proxy wars. Actors from the Third World will play the struggle for hegemony in the Middle Eastern region through proxy wars and recently, Syria was the platform for this struggle.

In the new era of engagement, the global superpowers are trying to achieve their objectives without direct confrontation with their long-term adversaries, a similar strategy that applied during the Cold War where "By late 1980, military burdens and internal policies greatly diminished the power of the Soviet Union. The U.S. achieved its objectives without firing a bullet at its adversary."[6] A direct offensive/defensive war method is not the United States foreign policy norm anymore.

While the United States foreign policy towards Syria lacked a consistent and firm approach, Russia took advantage of this situation and asserted itself deeply in Syria's political scene. As a consequence, the world is witnessing Russia as a stronger and a

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[6] Alternative Insight, "Failures of U.S. Foreign Policy," *Alternative Insight*, February 2014, http://www.alternativeinsight.com/Foreign_Policy_Failures.html.

more influential actor with affirmative objectives. Without a doubt, Russia once again has

a noticeable influence in the region and its mutual interests with Iran empower their

ambition of hegemony in the region. This has raised political concerns in the West,

possibly giving evidence of a new era by a multi-centric world.

The proxy war took its place in Syria with Russia and Iran as supporters of the

Assad regime while the United States announced that the Assad regime had lost its

legitimacy and called for President Assad to step down. The United States promised to

provide support to the opposition party in cooperation with its primary regional allies:

Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. To date, the support has been anemic; limited mostly to

nonlethal gears,[7] and has done little to stem the losses the Syrians have suffered.

In some ways, Russia's action of supporting the Assad regime is an attempt to

create a renewed bipolar political dynamic. Once Russia reestablishes itself as a global

power alongside or in contrast to the West, the Cold War remains the dominant

geopolitical logic for Russian action. These small and medium scale wars provide Russia

with the opportunities to exploit this dynamic.

The geopolitical approach taken by Russia aims to expand or at least maintain its

sphere of influence that shrank considerably after its post-Cold War defeat. The Syrian

crisis is the perfect platform for Russia to promote its geopolitical interest. Russia's

actions embroiled the Syrian regime into a proxy war. Some argue the Syrian regime has

lost not only legitimacy but has also lost control of the political decision-making process.

Russia derailed the Syrian regime domestic policies to benefit its strategy. Regardless,

without Russia's support, President Assad might not still be in power.

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[7] Ernesto Londofio and Greg Miller, "CIA begins weapons delivery to Syrian Rebels," *The Washington Post*, December 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cia-begins-weapons-delivery-to-syrian-rebels/2013/09/11/9fcf2ed8-1b0c-11e3-a628-7e6dde8f889d_story.html.

Russia's Approach To The Syrian Crisis

Russia's President Putin has implemented an aggressive foreign policy in the region, while the United States has been reluctant, plodding, and inconsistent in its response to the Syrian crisis. Syria is essential to Russia's control of the geopolitical map in the Middle East, as it is a vital market for Russian goods and investments:

> Russia has around a total of just over $19 Billion dollars worth of investments in Syria and like most other countries or business in this position it has a natural interest in looking after its investments.... another economic interest that ties Russia with Syria is its arms industry .... As of 2012 Russia has annual arms exports worth $10 Billion Dollars... place Russia 2nd in the world's top arms exporter.[8]

Syria is a strategic naval base in the Mediterranean. Tartus provides Russia's naval fleet with fuel and a launching point to other nearby areas of strategic interest, "Therefore, not only does it represent Russia's only global expansion it also allows Russia to maintain a strategic foothold in the Mediterranean."[9]

Recent events demonstrated mixed signals from Russia and Iran concerning bilateral ties. On the world stage, Russia appears to balance its ties carefully with Iran and the West. Russia must weigh the economic benefits it enjoys with Iran with the political benefits and corresponding economic reward it may gain from cooperating with the West. When it comes to the Middle East, however, all evidence points to the fact that Russia and Iran cooperate and have the common interest of keeping the United States and its allies at bay and in undermining the American political leverage in the region.

While it is true that from time to time, Russia has called on Iran's regime to abide with the signatory Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and to cooperate with the

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[8] James Steels, "Why Russia Supports Syria," *Small Wars Journal*, April 2014, http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/why-russia-supports-syria.
[9] Ibid.

International Atomic Energy Agency, it did not support effective sanctions or forceful measures to deal with the problem. Russia has walked a fine line by giving the West the appearance of cooperation while undermining the intent of the West. Georg Simpson noted how Gennady Yevstafyev, a senior adviser at the Center for Policy Studies in Russia, has gone so far as to contend: "Washington closed its eyes to the creation of nuclear weapons by its strategic partner, Pakistan. But now it is threatening a war on its ex-strategic partner Iran for the same crime."[10]

The American ideology distances itself from reality. The current administration recommends a diplomatic approach to the Syrian crisis instead of military one. The United States consistently promises but does not deliver tangible support to the anti-Assad group. The most puzzling aspect of the America inaction is why the United States refuses to impose a no-fly zone in Syria that would stop air strikes, helicopter attacks, and indiscriminate bombings of civilians with barrel bombs. It is apparent that the lack of action by the United States has signaled weakness, and Russia and the other pro-Assad factions have seized the opportunity to fill this vacuum. In some respects, the sequence of events in Syria clearly demonstrates that the United States' leadership and influence in the region has waned and that other powers are rapidly asserting themselves.

We can no longer deny a Cold War of sorts is back with its old actors struggling over the Middle East and Persian region. The old rival actors are tussling for hegemony. Observers question if Russia will find the right allies. Does supporting Assad's party in aligning with Iran help Russia achieve its agenda against the American will?

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[10] George L. Simpson, "Russian and Chinese Support for Tehran." *Middle East Forum*, December 2013, http://www.meforum.org/2690/russian-chinese-support-for-iran#_ftn5.

The United States and Russia could play a crucial role in helping solving the Syrian crisis. Unfortunately, Russia does not show any interest in pushing for Assad's ouster and changing the status quo. All efforts made through peace talks and Geneva conferences did nothing to ameliorate the crisis. While Russia agreed on the necessity of political transition in Syria, it disagrees with the United States on the technical process of this political transition.

There is uncertainty in Russian position on Syria's issue. One can understand the uncertainty of the Russian position in regards to the Syrian crisis in that the Assad regime is the only remaining Arab ally for Russia and losing it to its rivals, the United States will influence the strategic balance between the two superpowers in the region. As John Bolton wrote in *the Wall Street Journal*,

> While the evidence about Russia's strategic objectives may not be conclusive, the direction is ominous. And as long as America operates on the assumption that the U.S. has common interests with Russia in Syria, Lebanon, Iran or the Middle East generally, we will see Moscow's influence rise and ours decline.[11]

The crisis in Syria could have resolved itself internally had the global powers not interfered or had they at least approached the problem with less self-interest. Whether by design or not, it is clear now that this is no longer an internal Syrian matter. This conflict represents more than the struggles of a subjugated population that seeks basic freedoms and civil rights. It is no longer about an autocracy that resists losing its control over its people. It is a symbolic fight between the powerful who have different and contrasting ideologies and interests:

> The stakes in Syria are enormous. The terrorists of Hezbollah are fighting to keep their Shi'ite allies in Damascus. The Iranians are fighting to keep a vital strategic ally in place to funnel arms and money to terrorists throughout the region. The

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[11] John Bolton, "Russia Outmaneuvers Obama Over Syria," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 2014, http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887324798904578527060289564332.

Russians have a major trading partner in Assad, and a deep-pocketed customer for Russian arms. Keeping Assad in power plays to Russia's vanity that it is still a global superpower that rivals the US.[12]

THE UNITED STATES' APPROCH TO THE SYRIAN CRISIS

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and its communist ideology, the United States found itself responsible to maintain stability and world order. It was obvious that authoritarian systems provide this global stability regardless of how these authoritarian regimes manage stability inside their states. With the arrival of the Arab Spring wave, the Cold War rivals were in a stand by position over the region. The Cold War was not cold everywhere; it was extremely bloody in Syria. While the United States and Russia were working their calculations to determine what is in their best interest, Syria experienced hundreds of thousands deaths and more than eight million fled from the regime's brutality. As of May 2014, the *Huffington Post* updated the death toll in Syria as climbing past 160,000:[13] "The grim tally, however, only presents one facet of the tremendous suffering that Syrians have endured since the revolt against President Bashar Assad erupted in March 2011. The crisis has also uprooted some 6.5 million people from their homes, forced 2.7 million to flee the country, laid waste to cities and towns alike."[14]

The United States Approach to the Syrian Crisis: Realism, Liberalism, or Isolationism?

Classifying the United States approach in addressing the Syrian crisis is debatable. Did the United States employ a realist approach to deter rising states, such as Iran, Russia, and China, all of whom are supports of the Syrian regime? Did the United

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[12] Chicago Tribune, "The Case for arms to Syria," *The Nation,* December 2013, http://www.nationmultimedia.com/opinion/The-case-for-arms-to-Syria-30209461.html.

[13] Barbara Surk, "Death Toll In Syria's War Tops 160,000," *The Huffington Post,* May 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/19/syria-war-death-toll_n_5353021.html.

[14] Ibid.

States take a liberalist approach by using diplomatic efforts over using military force in the region? Or do the actions of the United States align more with the isolationist framework in that it preferred to not get involved in a third war because it was weary from two previous wars and its economy was in a fragile state?

Realism

The United States administration opted not to use military force. Putin reestablished Russia as a peer competitor to the United States. The United States had the opportunity to use offensive realism to contain Russian hegemonic expansion and chose not to. The United States also decided not to use its military hegemonic position in international relations. Therefore, offensive realism as a strategic method in the Syrian crisis was not an option.

On the contrary, the United States chose to use the realist approach of soft power and deterrence to halt the rising hegemony, Russia and its allies, Iran and the Assad regime. At one point, the United States imposed economic sanctions and froze assets:

> The new measures froze the assets of seven Russian individuals and 17 companies associated with them, and prohibited any U.S. dealings with them. All were identified as closely linked to Russian President Vladimir Putin. The administration also announced new restrictions on Russia's import of U.S. goods deemed to contribute to its "military capabilities."[15]

However, this was neither sufficient to deter Russia's power nor was it adequate to stop the deteriorating situation in Syria. In order for the sanctions to have an impact, they must be upheld for the long term to drain the adversary's resources. On the other hand, the inaction of the Americans on the Syrian stage could be intended to deter Iran

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[15] Karen DeYoung and Michael Brindaum, "U.S. impose new sanction on Russia," *The Washington Post.* April 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-imposes-new-sanctions-on-russia/2014/04/28/974c579e-ced6-11e3-b812-0c92213941f4_story.html.

and Russia both politically and military, thus limiting their ability to become the regional hegemony.

The United States use of deterrence became more evident in its foreign policy. President Obama stated that military and political aide would be given to equalize the Assad regime's military power. However, the aide was never given and remains pending. Furthermore, aide to equalize the Assad regime is an ineffective approach to resolving the crisis, in that it would increase the lifetime of the Syrian war rather than ending it. When Senator Rand Paul addressed Obama's administration Foreign Policy toward Syria, he stated: "When I've had private conversations with the administration, that's what I hear. They're not for victory for either side. They're for equalizing the battle and having stalemate. But I see it in personal perspective. I have three sons. I don't see sending one of my sons to war or your son to war to fight for stalemate."[16]

The deterrence method of drawing a red line on the use of chemical weapons can be seen from two dimensions. First, the Obama administration's red line on chemical weapons was interrupted as a green light to the Assad regime to use any other military means in cracking on the anti-Assad regime (civilians and revolutionaries). Corker, the top Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committees, accused President Obama of "leading the U.S. with an "air of permissiveness""[17] Corker said. "... The wisest thing that Assad did really was to kill 1,200 people with chemical weapons. Because, in

[16] Wolf Blitze, "Paul Rand Obama For "Equalization The Battle And Having A Stalemate" in Syria," *Real Clear Politics*, Secember 2013, http://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2013/08/31/rand_paul_obama_for_equalizing_the_battle_and_having_a_stalemate_in_syria.html.

[17] "Bob Corker: Assad was 'Wise' To Kill 1,200 With Chemical weapons And 'Embarrass' The U.S.," *Huffington Post*, April 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/04/20/bob-corker-ukraine_n_5182516.html.

essence, we said, 'Don't embarrass us anymore that way. You can go ahead and kill another 60,000 people with barrel bombs and by other means, but don't embarrass us.'"[18]

Second, after the Assad regime did not abide by the United States' directives and used chemical weapons against Syrian citizens in August 2013, the American administration limited its response to stripping the Assad regime of its chemical weapon. This incident shows that once the United States decides that its priority is to strip the chemical weapons from the Syrian regime or the potential new government, its assertiveness can be effective. Ultimately, the Assad regime surrendered its chemical weapons without any resistance.

The other approaches that align with realist premises of deterrence were using different means to expand the lifetime of the war in Syria. The United States administration has refused to impose a fly-free zone, a strategy that could limit the Syrian regime brutality against his people, therefore limiting the ferocity of the war. On the other hand, the administration did not fulfill its promises of arming the revolutionaries and currently limits its support only to noncombat military equipment and rhetoric speeches condemning the regime action.

The chaotic situation in Syria has resulted in the opposition party not trusting the American foreign policy. It questioned whether or not the United States was serious in its attempt to spread democracy in the region or uphold its role as a hegemony by draining the political and economic power of the rising countries in proxy wars in an attempt to control a vital geographical location in the region.

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[18] Ibid.

If the United States chose the realist approach of using hard power, it would do the following:

1. Cooperate with Ahmad Jarba, the President of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces who is the public face of the opposition outside of Syria.

2. Establish and enforce a no-fly zone in Syria to prevent further air raids on civilian and opposition forces.

3. Provide military support, to include weapons

4. Work on gaining meaningful stability in the region. The use of hard power will benefit the United States in that Syria would become under the United States sphere of influence, and Syria would serve as a vital geopolitical importance to the United States' foreign policy. In addition, there will be a chance for further stability in the region by bringing the new Syria in a peace treaty with Israel similar to the peaceful relations between Jordan and Qatar with Israel.

If the United States did not use offensive realism in tackling the Syrian crisis, did it use it just as a theory to explain the Assad-regime brutality and to justify it?

Realism theory explains the security dilemma between the rival superpowers and/or the security dilemma between one superpower and cooperation between smaller/weaker states. Did pro-Assad's well-educated people and elite adopt realism theory to justify the regime's behavior?

The uni-political Ba'ath party (superpower) is concerned about the potential and conceptual threat of the Arab spring. The Assad regime launched an offensive attack against the rising actor (the revolution) to maintain stability. If this is the case, the Assad

regime's use of political offensive method is justified. From the realist perspective, Assad's actions are rational and are not attributable to him being a "bloodthirsty dictator."

The sporadic opposition groups, civilians, and rebels cooperated with external states and organizations, including extremist groups against the hegemonic Assad regime. This political wave was considered a potential threat to the Assad regime and to the country's security and stability. The revolutionary (riser) is not welcome on the political stage and is not allowed to gain power of its own. The Assad regime maximizes its power using defensive and offensive means to limit the primary rising actor: the revolutionaries.

Liberalism

The three years of bloody civil war was most likely because of the reluctant foreign policy of the United States. The United States, for the most part, has pursued a cautious approach in Syria. In August 2014, "the Obama administration said it would move ahead with plans to arm Syrian rebels. A brief proposal in August to engage in targeted military strikes was not pursued in favor of a diplomatic approach."[19]

The American speeches are filled with rhetoric and can be considered ideological pretension; however, they are not enough to save a deteriorating situation in Syria. It seems the current administration privately recommends a diplomatic approach to the Syrian crisis instead of a military one. Yet publicly, President Obama continually announces that his administration is discussing the options of arming the FSA. These statements give hope to the opposition party that there is a possibility of getting military support from the United States.

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[19] Ibid.

The most questionable policy is why the United States refused to impose a fly-free zone in Syria. This policy would save the lives of the civilians who are dying by the hundreds daily from barrel bombs shelled by airstrikes. Essentially, liberalism did not work on the Syrian stage within two dimensions. The early stage of the Syrian crisis proved that the Assad regime does not respond to a diplomatic approach; the Assad regime responds with brutal means to the Syrian peaceful demonstration, which can be characterized as a diplomatic wave for political reformation. Second, the liberal approach was also ineffective with the international communities' and the United States' diplomatic call on Assad to step down.

For Russia, Syria represents a perfect geopolitical strategy to launch a defensive attack against the hegemonic United States. However, United States' liberalism did not sound the right solution to the Russian defensive approach. The rhetoric speeches condemning Russia's geopolitical ambition and the economic sanction barely caused any damage to Russia.

Kenneth Waltz believes that bipolar systems provide greater international stability than the multi-polar system. The uni-polar system proves to be the best to provide such stability. For Waltz, "two powers dominate the system the chances of miscalculation and misadventure are lower. There are fewer fingers on the trigger."[20] Unfortunately, Russia's geopolitical ambition and its attempt to retrieve its legacy as a global superpower will cause other rising actors, such as China and Iran, to participate in the global scene. The inclusion of all actors results in a multi-polar system that may create a global chaos. The

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[20] Robert Jakson and Georg Sørensen, *Introduction to International Relations Theories and Approaches*, (U.K.: Oxford University, 2013) 82.

United States should consider this potential outcome and rethink its foreign policies to avoid a global chaos.

The environment in Syria is plagued with anarchy due to the absence of a sound legal system, a fair governing society, and minimal involvement of super powers. The lack of commitment has caused a mistrust between all parties involved in the Syrian crisis. In other words, a peaceful future for Syria has been hijacked by chaotic suspension from all participants.

Isolationism

Isolationist foreign policy allows other nations to take the lead in resolving international matters. Currently, United States' ideology distances itself from reality. Some observers analyze the unassertive response of the United States to the crisis as an attempt for the country to move toward isolationism. The remarkable expansion of the Russian power has accentuated the decline of the American involvement in the region.

The United States is drifting back to isolationism. Does Obama's administration revolve around some isolationist elements? Would the United States be able to maintain its long-life foreign policy strategy, the balance of power, with the isolationism approach? Americans are deeply weary about getting involved in wars and sending troops overseas. It weighs its direct national interests very closely. The American involvement in crucial international political issues is very limited in cases like Syria and Crimea.

Does the United States change its trajectory of alienating the Sunni states and seek a Shia actor instead? Al-Qaeda originated in Saudi Arabia and most of its contributors are of Saudi nationality. Does this fact draw a new way to rethinking their

alienating with their enemy and considering Iran as an alternative alien in the current chaos?

Is there a continuing shift in the political equation planning to transfer the dominant power in the region from Sunni dominant states to Shia dominant states? The invasion of Iraq did not end the Iranian/Iraqi war only, it offered Iraq to Iran on a silver platter and put Syria and Lebanon on the same trajectory. Is there a new Iran/contra deal run on the Syrian stage aiming to dilute Iran aggressive tone against Israel?

If the United States is rethinking its foreign policy and intending to ally with Shia dominant states, it should be aware that the extremist ideology is an inclusive concept and not an exclusive one.

AL-MUJAHEDEEN: EXTREMIST TERRORIST OR FUNDAMENTALIST?

Al-Mujahedeen/Jihad are Arabic words that have become very familiar terms in the English language. Westerns typically use the term Al-Mujahedeen to refer to the terrorist Mujahedeen (Taliban and Al-Qaeda). It is important to note that the extremist mindset is not exclusive to these groups. Extremism has two approaches. There is an extremist believer and an extremist practitioner. Extremist believers are not necessarily a threat because although they have an Islamic ideology of expiatory to other religions, they will not take any action against them. Extremist believers are aware that different ideologies do not deprive one of his/her humanity nature. On the other hand, extremist practitioners can be most dangerous and inhumane. This group is willing to commit suicide for their cause and believe in after-death rewards, a promised heaven filled with Hour Al-ain (pretty women).

My position is that the Al-Mujahedeen ideology is not exclusive to the well-known groups Taliban and al-Qaida. ISIS followers proved their adaptation to the extremist practitioners' ideology. Al-Mujahedeen also applies to any Muslim fighter groups, including Iranian fighters like Hezbollah. All the Iranian fighters on the Syrian ground are derailed by extremist practitioners' ideology. The United States has to consider that Al-Mujahedeen is not exclusive to Sunni Mujahedeen but applies to Shia Mujahedeen as well.

Vaxen Crabtree differentiates between the extremist believer and extremist practitioners and describes them as terrorist and fundamentalist: "Terrorism and fundamentalism are not synonymous. There are many fundamentalist groups that are completely free from any hints of terrorism; and there are many acts of terrorism that are more likely sourced from insanity than personal religiosity."[21] Crabtree also noted that terrorist acts should not be contributed to certain religious ideology: "Often, a group's religious identity is not truly the main impetus behind acts of illegal violence. So be warned not to confuse all religious violence with terrorism."[22]

It is critical that the United States recognize that possible extremist groups from the Shia sector can emerge. In fact, the United States considers Hezbollah a terrorist organization founded on anti-Western ideology. A fact the United States should be highly concerned of in case it intends to steer its foreign policy trajectory towards allying with Shia-dominant countries instead of the current Sunni-dominant one. The United States should take the necessary steps to contain the expansion of extremist Mujahedeen, the

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[21] Vexen Crabtree, "The Causes of Fundamentalism, Intolerance and Extremism in World Religion, and Some Solutions," *Human Religion*, January 2014, http://www.humanreligions.info/fundamentalism.html.
[22] Ibid.

current Sunni one, and the new emerging one, the Shia'at, that are already playing an important role in Syria.

The Obama administration could not achieve its wish list using diplomatic effort. The Syrian crisis has lasted for a long time, and the United States are acting as a reluctant police. Obama's slow response opened the door for a new system order. The current situation on the ground demonstrates how Russia seized the opportunity that the West ignored. American influence is diminishing, and there is a greater force on the make.

The challenges are enormous, and the cognitive bias towards diplomatic strategies has prevailed in the military involvement. An invasion to overthrow a regime, halt the hegemonic expansion of a riser, or deter a nuclear program is not justified anymore.

At this point, the majority of Syrians are yearning for reconciliation. The mistrust between all approaches makes the task of reconciliation hard to achieve. The opposition party was accused of not being able to produce a real political discourse that reflects who they are, what they stand for, and how they want their country to be in the future. When the objective is to alter the state sovereignty from a dictatorship that has lasted for decades to a democratic system, it is bound to be a long, slow, painful process. In some ways, Syria is experiencing a sociopolitical shock. It is converting from a regional norm of oppression to new norms of morals and human rights. Arguably, it can be deemed true that the revolution was hijacked and semi-destroyed. But the taste of freedom reached the Syrian citizens' palates and it is hard to take it back.

While Syrians should negotiate the domestic framework and address the crisis by elements of compromising and cooperation, commitment is the key role in this crisis to returning to stability. Unfortunately, anarchy and the absence of the legal environment

that protects this commitment caused the mistrust between both groups. The prisoner dilemma explains why both sides could not avoid the war. War was a preference. Neither party wanted to be the loser. The strategy of cooperation is not secure for both parties, as the element of cheating is always a potential. As a result, a sociopolitical approach can be the only strategy to contain the crisis.

Most Syrians are aware that the longer it takes for resolution, the messier it will become. A progressive democratic Syria can be achieved only with multilateral mechanism and sociopolitical methods to contain the crisis. The pro-Assad regime and anti- Assad regimes need a sociopolitical revolution to confront all foreign (regional and global) interference. It is necessary to work together to build a new Syria. A coherent agenda with tolerant and pluralistic vision should be developed. Although it is not an easy option, I believe it is the only option.

Every once in a while, society witnesses a new semi-military organization or a new group taking a role on the Syrian stage; one can only hope that one of these actors will be a sociopolitical organization that stands against the expansion of external hegemony. Syria needs an organization that does not allow the hijacking of the Syrian soil and derailing the Syrian people against each other. It is time to derail all the regional and global interest away from the Syrian stage.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

THE FUTURE OF SYRIA

The pro-Arab Spring is new and naive to the democratic ideology, which makes it an easy target for regional and global interests. The unsustainable complicated situation will remain the status quo until an acceptable agenda balances the domestic framework with the regional/global geopolitical dimensions.

Unfortunately, the three years of conflict does not show visible progress in converting Syria to a democratic state and in annihilating the Arabic Spring. Syria is the stage for indigenous, regional, and global players. The indigenous players were hijacked and have been given roles based on other's interests. The Arab Spring ideology is relatively young. The notion of democracy, citizenship, human rights, and obedience to laws is a new concept in Syria. The infant stage of these concepts is possibly the cause of Syria's current chaotic environment and its inability to produce a solid political discourse that reflects revised Syrian values.

The Arab Spring hope for victory was demolished by a harsh reality of the unjust system. The Arab Spring stream in Syria was not like the ones Tunisia and Egypt where the conflict was between two rival parties: secular versus religious. In Syria, the conflict is between unequal rivals, between a long-standing deeply rooted dictatorship ideology with well-militarized supporters versus an infant wave calls for democratic state. It is unrealistic to expect an expedient quintessential political system in a country that lost its freedom for decades.

People were drawn to the authoritarian regime because of the romantic allure of nationalism accompanied with a state of fear of the dictatorship oppressive system. Time is needed to gain a spiritual survivor before the high expectation of a pro-Assad reformation agenda or an anti-Assad democracy agenda can be expected.

Many countries' evolution to democracy provides sufficient historical evidence that achieving a stable democratic state can take decades. At times, democratization is a long arduous process. Similar to other countries, it is highly likely that implementing a stable democracy in Syria will also take an extended period of time.

It is a hegemony in its entire meaning. The Syrian crisis reflects regional and global self-interest. The Syrian crisis is a global conflict between two superpowers over their spheres of influence. It is also a regional conflict between two rival religious ideologies. On a smaller scale, different groups within Syria are derailed by various domestic, regional, and global agendas, where identity belonging, state of fears, religious faith, or just the element of loyalty play a crucial role in escalating the Syrian crisis.

Before negotiating the post-Assad regime, the opposition actors need to determine how to facilitate this transition, identify the recourses willing to support the democratic project, agree on a legitimate government structure, and most importantly, create a strategy to eliminate all extremist elements and foreign interests that enabled the Arab Spring wave.

The opposition party is a marginal player. Setting a deadline for all influential actors is critical to the success of a new Syria. The new approach of the opposition party has to examine the seriousness of the actors involved on the Syrian stage and their willingness to stop the bloodshed.

Although it looks difficult, a compromise would be the only solution to stop the brutality of the regime and to avoid more massacres among the Syrian citizens. Syria needs to be an independent factor and have its own agenda separate from the regional and international actors investing in the country for their own benefits. The international community should hold Russia and Iran accountable for consistently undermining the diplomatic efforts of the UN's attempts to halt the Assad regime's brutality on his own people. Russia and Iran are stirring a wider conflict in the region.

On the other hand, the United States should be more assertive in tackling the international order. It has to show more lucidity in its attention of promoting democracy. The conflict in Syria is becoming a regional and global proxy battle. Different regional and global interests are confronting each other on the Syria's platform through proxy parties. The only hope to solving the Syrian crisis is a compromise between the government of Syria and the opposition party, where the priority should be to stop the civil war and explore different options that will serve the interests of all Syrians.

As a summary, I believe the Syrian elite should be aware of the upcoming challenges. The job of the activists and the well-educated elite is to turn their attention toward a more realistic objective, a sustainable and achievable goal, instead of the current fragile and ill-formed ones. Efficient compromises with an empirical strategy need to be developed to create a national unity with an objective to halt the violence.

Both parties have to consider the slogan "Syria for all" while shaping a new systematic progression that is inclusive rather than exclusive. The Syrians should convert to Mandela spirituality to solve the civil war: "Nelson Mandela the genius had confidence in himself, a vision for the future and an open mind. Hence he appointed a white ruler,

who belonged to the political party that ordered his imprisonment for all those difficult years, as his deputy. Giving a message of idea of tolerance and coexistence must defeat exclusivity and hegemony"[1]

A Syrian ideology that does not place a great importance of culture and religious loyalty should be adopted. The Syrian ideology should include nationalism that is structured around democracy and human ethics. It is a complex task of finding promising vision on how to restore security. Syrian natives and its partners and alliances should all prove how serious they are in their promises and in their willingness to implement a practical plan to save Syria from this tragic situation.

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[1] Hussein Shobokshi, "Mandela and the Arab Spring," *Asharq Al-Awsat*, May 2014, http://www.aawsat.net/2012/11/article55239910.

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