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SYRIAN OPPOSITION FORCES – RISKS AND PROSPECTS FOR THE MIDDLE EAST REGION

Abstract

The article is devoted to the opposition wing involved in the Syrian civil war and the risks and prospects that the opposition forces pose to Syria and the Middle East region.

The paper discusses the origins of the Syrian civil war, the current architecture of the war, and the characteristics that distinguish Syria from other Arab states. The article evaluates the results of the Arab Spring in the Middle East and Syria in particular, based on the opinions of researchers and the author's personal opinions, and analyzes the policy changes of the current Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, after the Arab Spring. Moreover, the paper assesses the recent political history of Syria as a timeline between two dictators that led Syria to total destruction and to becoming a hub of terrorism.

The work describes extremist organizations operating in Syria, their tactics, and their strategy. Additionally, all the factors that contribute to the fragility of Syrian statehood are briefly reviewed. The paper also analyzes the goals and interests of each external actor involved in the conflict and the dangers their involvement in the war and/or support of internal opposition groups creates both locally and globally. The economic and humanitarian consequences of the Syrian civil war are presented at the end of the paper, and the impact of the event on the security environment of the region, including the Caucasus region, is assessed. It is worth noting that the work is focused on the political, economic, and social consequences of the conflict, which are particularly heavy and difficult to solve.

In the end, the paper reviews the perspectives of conflict resolution based on experts' and the author's personal opinions.

Keywords: Syria, Syrian civil war, Bashar al-Assad, terrorism, Syrian opposition forces.

The Middle East is an interesting region where the traditional theories of international relations do not work, and the understanding of any conflict is done with a delicate and, at the same time, complex approach. Over the past decades, the region has effectively become a buffer zone where many independent actors have created a security and political environment. It is also interesting that these actors are actively used by external forces, which are getting favor by the destabilization and internal disturbances of the Middle Eastern countries. In this regard, the most interesting example is Syria, where the interests of the United States of America, Russia, Turkey, and Iran intersect at the same time. In addition, several large terrorist organizations are operating in Syria, directly or indirectly involved in the conflict. The confrontation between the Islamic State and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham gives conflict a completely different prism, where security challenges, issues of political power, and the tendency of terrorist organizations to become local political forces are intermingled.

Syria is notable for its recent history, a timeline strung between two dictators with endless civil war and the beginning of the "Great Winter" called the Arab Spring. Paradoxically, in the conditions of the fight against terrorism declared by Bashar al-Assad, modern Syria has become a new center of terrorism, which the West worries the most about.

The current situation in Syria significantly influences the Middle East peace agenda. At least in the ten-year perspective, this is unlikely, although everyone agrees that a solution to the problem is necessary. The latter, first of all, begins with its correct understanding.

The political history of Syria remembers many turning events. The general political situation of the region was symmetrically reflected in the domestic environment of Syria, although it can be said that Syria provided a much more solid foundation for total dictatorship than, conventionally, Libya, Iran, or

Egypt. In the early 2000s, Western intervention in the region seemed to draw the future of all dictatorial regimes, but Syria has not been so fragile in repelling the onslaught of external forces and has firmly held on to what it inherited from Bashar al-Assad. Currently, the resilience of the Bashar al-Assad regime does not rely solely on external support. The face of the regime is also preserved by the influence of the military policy, through which the Syrian dictator, who died years ago, left his son, Bashar, a large, powerful, and institutionally formed elite unit in the form of the military. (Hinnebusch, 2002) It is interesting that before the rule of Hafez al-Assad, there were about twenty military coups in Syria¹, although, during the rule of Hafez, there was no attempt by the military to depose him. He succeeded and won the loyalty of the military, and it was this loyalty that saved Bashar al-Assad during the Syrian Civil War (Ziyāda 2019).

Although Bashar al-Assad fell to the Syrian presidency by accident in 2000 (Fisk 1994), he remains in power in Syria to this day, although he soon shattered the perception among Arab countries and Western leaders that the dictator's European-educated son would set the country on a path of reform and bring radical change to Syria's political elite (Hinnebusch 2019, 34-36). Over time, it became clear that son Assad was not on the trail of progress but, on the contrary, of a deeper dictatorship, and, in the end, he became a tyrant isolated from the civilized world, who organized genocide against his own citizens in order to maintain political power.

And yet, what changed Assad? It is a fact that his longing for the building of democracy did not last long and a wave of discontent towards him started slowly, which was caused by improper and degrading treatment of prisoners in prisons, persecution on religious and political grounds, attempts to control the media, harassment of opponents, etc. Gradually, it became clear that the "new" Syria was no different from the old regime, and it seemed that even under a progressive ruler, it could not escape the constant chaos and destabilization. No one knows if Assad really wanted to change at that time or if he was only disguising himself, but we can assume that the legacy left by his father, I mean the system, was so strong that it would not be easy to change it. In fact, all types of security services in the country were geared from the beginning to protect the dictator's mandate at all costs.

Along with the "successes" achieved in domestic politics, Bashar al-Assad, like his father, soon confirmed his loyalty to the Kremlin (Gachechiladze 2019) and chose Russia and Iran as allies. But, despite all this, the Western world saw the crisis created and rapidly progressing in Syria only after the Arab Spring.

The Arab Spring has become a de facto judgment for the Assad regime, which, unfortunately, has not yet been carried out, but one thing is clear: it was this wave of mass protests that exposed the real face of the regime's creator and showed the world that behind the seemingly progressive, European-educated politician, there is a real "beast"², which reveals the twisted forms of his father's cruelty. The facade of Bashar al-Assad's propensity for progress soon became clear, which instilled distrust and hostility towards him in the West and, on the contrary, confidence and a desire for alliances in totalitarian regimes.

In fact, the Arab Spring brought Islamic forces onto the political scene in Syria and beyond. The steps taken during Assad's rule made it impossible for the dictator to put up a decent resistance. The most important thing that is needed to overthrow the government is the defection of the close circle, and this did not happen in Syria because the father and son Assads gave the utmost importance to the appointment of Alawites in the security and defense agencies and brought the argument of protection of the oppressed minority to the forefront (Dam 2017, 60-61). Another interesting issue is the topic of Arab nationalism, which is also a good manipulation tool for the Assad regime. Until now, Syrian and Palestinian flags are raised together in many government offices in Damascus, which on the one hand, draws attention to religious sentiment, and on the other, puts another important actor in the region, Israel, behind the image of the enemy. In a logical chain, we go from Israel to the United States of America, and Assad's goal is to use all possible circumstances to show that the West and America desire to destabilize Syria and that Assad protects the Alawites, protects the Arabs, and protects his own state.

The architecture of the Syrian civil war is a complex, multifaceted, and a rather difficult phenomenon to understand. In reality, it is a war where there are no permanent enemies and allies, and you may be supporting your enemy against another common enemy, and vice versa, fighting an ally with the argument of a more pragmatic goal. In the Syrian civil war, the pro-government forces of the

¹ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseih/2020/08/10/hafez-al-assads-legacy-and-the-syrian-civil-war/>.

² That's what Trump called Bashar al-Assad.

President of the Syrian Arab Republic, Bashar al-Assad, and various domestic and foreign actors, who are also in conflict with each other, are fighting each other.

Officially, the Syrian civil war began in March 2011, when the wave of the Arab Spring touched the Assad regime, and the discontent of the citizens moved to a critical phase. After calls for the overthrow of the regime became widespread, President Assad tried to take all necessary measures to maintain power. Over time, the mosaic of Syrian opposition forces has changed little, but the core forces have remained constant. Currently opposing the Assad regime are Sunni opposition rebel groups, Salafi jihadist groups such as the Al-Nusra Front and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the mixed Kurdish-Arab Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

The UN officially confirmed the civil war in Syria for the first time on June 12, 2012. In the second half of 2012, the conflict moved to the major cities of Syria, Aleppo, and Damascus, and acquired many different perspectives. At that time, groups that had not clearly demonstrated their strength before became active, and most importantly, Islamic forces appeared in the conflict arena: Ahrar al-Sham, Jaish al-Islam, and the Islamic Front. The activation of Islamic forces created a new prism, which added pragmatic arguments and legitimacy to Assad's defensive resistance. This resulted in the interest of the United States of America, whose direct task is to prevent the spread of terrorism and protect European and Atlantic security.

The years 2014-2015 were characterized by the dominance of American influence in the region, however, along with the activation of America, Russia also became active, which tried to pursue its interests with the open support of the pro-government forces and the president himself, Bashar al-Assad. Gradually, the conflict took the form of a proxy war since Turkey actively appeared in the region along with America and Russia, which had much more reasons to get involved in the conflict than the United States and Russia due to the security of the Idlib province, although, in addition to the security challenge, Turkey also put its territorial interests at the forefront and repeatedly tried to occupy the northern part of Syria (Brumberg 2020).

After 2019, the situation has not changed significantly. The Assad regime is gradually expanding its spheres of influence, and the opposition forces are trying to resist in guerilla ways. If it were not for foreign support, the degree of resistance would be much lower, but on the other hand, external actors make conflict resolution even more difficult and create additional security challenges not only for their own countries but also for other countries in the region.

To this day, the Syrian government is fighting the terrorist groups that have changed their names and faces, for which Syria has become like a greenhouse. As interest in the Western region declines, proxy forces are more assertive in pursuing their own goals and creating new perspectives for the conflict. (Dam 2017, 71-73). The Syrian opposition wing has formed into a complex organism, which is trying to achieve different goals commonly, although all these goals have one great mission, the overthrow of the Alawite dictator Bashar al-Assad's regime. The opposition wing in Syria is much larger and more diverse in strength and importance than just opposing the Assad regime. In fact, the Syrian opposition wing unites a healthy opposition without actors who are involved in the conflict to achieve their own pragmatic goals, terrorist and extremist groups whose activities create additional threats to the region and the whole world, and minorities who are fighting to protect their rights and preserve their identity against the Assad regime (Douwes 2013).

For example, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, same as the Levant Liberation Organization (HTS), is currently the most important and powerful opposition actor in the Idlib region, the main stronghold of the armed opposition. The main goal of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham is to establish Islamic rule in Syria by overthrowing the Assad regime and expelling the Iranian militia from Syria.

For this purpose, Al-Jolani formulated a multi-pronged strategy consisting of several stages. The first phase involved the expulsion of Iranian militias from Syrian cities controlled by HTS. The second stage is the implementation of a full-scale campaign against the Islamic State and its allies in Syria. And the third stage is "consolidation", that is, the protection of northern Syria from further loss of territories.

In addition to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, one of the most powerful and large-scale terrorist groups in world history, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant called ISIL, ISIS and Daesh, which was originally formed from the Iraqi wing of al-Qaeda and small Sunni insurgent groups operating in Iraq, operate in Syria (Levitt 2021). The Islamic State is a group designated as a terrorist organization by the United Nations that aims to establish a global Islamic caliphate and encourage violent conflict between non-Muslims and Muslims.

In contrast to HTS, the Islamic State is characterized by much greater brutality, including against civilians. In Syria and Iraq, since the establishment of the “caliphate”, ISIL has killed hundreds of civilians, organized public executions, and beheaded dozens of innocent people.

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which is a multi-ethnic force led by the Kurds, operates independently of the government and opposition forces in the political arena of Syria. It unites Kurds, Arabs, and other ethnic minorities.

As of 2020, the Syrian Democratic Forces in northeastern Syria controlled most of the Raqqah and Hasakah regions northeast of the Euphrates and even parts of Aleppo provinces (Phillips 2016). The Kurdish People’s Protection Units are responsible for protecting the external borders with Turkey and the rest of Syria. The human resources of the Syrian Democratic Forces include about 60,000 fighters.

Along with all this, Syria gradually became the arena of a complex series of conflicts involving many domestic and international actors, which still shape the security environment of Syria and the region.

The balance of power is regulated by complex alliances and ever-changing allies-enemies, although in this complex reality, all actors are fighting for their own pragmatic goals, which are different in each case.

Iran: Iran has been a close ally of the Assad regime since the 1979 Islamist revolution. Supporting Syria by Iran was expressed not only through diplomatic messages but also by sending arms, several billion dollars in financial aid, facilitating the organization of Iraqi oil shipments, training the Syrian militia, mobilizing foreign Shiite fighters to Syria, and sending the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to fight alongside the Syrian army units in support of the Assad regime (Brumberg 2018).

It is believed that with the ever-growing interest in Syria, Iran is trying to have a permanent presence in the neighboring state and, in this way, to influence Israel, which has been perceived as Iran’s enemy for decades. In the report of the Council of Europe, we read that Iran’s strategy in Syria involves the creation of a model similar to Lebanon and Iraq, where the political environment will be controlled by powerful non-state actors. At the same time, Iran maintains positive relations with Russia, and these two states are trying to protect the Assad regime based on the principle of an alliance, which is the main prerequisite for achieving pragmatic goals for both states (Bar 2006, 415).

USA: The main point of the USA’s interest in the region is the fight against terrorism. After September 11, 2001, the Middle East region became an accumulated threat of terrorism for the United States of America, which required immediate neutralization, although it has been almost a quarter of a century that the world has not achieved this goal, and has put the region in a much more difficult political, economic and security situation. In 2014, on the initiative of the United States of America, a global coalition against Daesh was created, which united 81 states. Since September 2014, the coalition has been conducting military operations against Daesh in Syria.

Turkey: Turkey has been involved in the Syrian conflict since 2011 and supports opposition forces that aim to topple the Assad regime. These opposition forces include the Free Syrian Army and other Islamist groups. However, it is interesting to note that over time, Turkey has changed its interest in the conflict and moved from fighting against the Assad regime to pursuing its pragmatic interests and fighting against Russia and Iran (Bar 2006, 417). In fact, Syria has become a space of intersection of the interests of Turkey, Iran, and Russia and a proxy conflict area. Additionally, Turkey has had to accept up to 4 million Syrian refugees, more than any other country.

Additionally, Turkey’s main interest in the Syrian conflict is the aspiration of the Kurdish people living in Syria to establish an autonomous republic of Kurdistan in the territory of northern Syria near the Turkish border. Since 2016, Turkey has been actively involved in the territorial defense of northern Syria (McKernan 2018).

Russia: Russia became militarily involved in the Syrian conflict in September 2015 and participated in airstrikes carried out by the Syrian government on territories held by Daesh. Russia’s involvement caused the vector of success in the war to shift to Assad’s side (Bar 2006, 417-418).

Russia is mainly responsible for air control over Syria. Russia still maintains a significant military presence in Syria and continues to carry out airstrikes against the opposition.

Israel: Israel has been involved in a formal war against Syria since 1948. Israel still occupies the Syrian Golan Heights, which it annexed in 1981, although the UN did not recognize this move. On March 25, 2019, the President of the United States of America, Donald Trump, recognized the Golan Heights as a part of Israel, which is why Syrian officials, with an aggressive statement, explained that they would protect their territories at all costs.

It is clear that the concentration of Iranian forces or Iranian-backed pro-government forces on Syrian territory, especially near the Golan Heights, is a direct threat to Israel's security environment. The permanent presence of Iranian forces on the territory of Syria near the Israeli border means the creation of new "terror fronts" for Israel.

Be that as it may, the fact is that the Syrian civil war, which began in 2011, has become the longest conflict of the 21st century, in front of which the international community has turned out to be completely powerless. The constant destabilization created a favorable ground for the strengthening of religious fundamentalism (Abdo 2016). Sectarian division of the population, faulty economy, internal religious conflicts, the problem of the legitimacy of the regime, and the pressure of the wave of changes in the region have become the main challenges for the country's security environment (Makdisi 2000). An additional problem was the attraction of funds, weapons, and other resources by international terrorist organizations under the argument of Sunni solidarity, which ultimately turned Syria into an incubator for terrorism. Internal turmoil was soon compounded by the interest of foreign actors, and we ended up with a conflict in which everyone was fighting against everyone.

Before Russia got involved in the conflict, the united opposition was achieving some successes, and the foundations of the Assad regime were beginning to shake, but after Russia became active, the conflict entered a deadlock and froze at one stage. There is no way out. Every day brings destruction, chaos, and casualties. Neither side is ready to go to real negotiations³ and the prospect of resolving the conflict is becoming even more unlikely.

The situation in Syria affects not only its neighborhood but a much wider geopolitical area. It is obvious that any predictions related to Syria are baseless and often comical, and everything happens in force majeure. Terrorist organizations wisely take advantage of the conflict between the government and the opposition and try to establish effective control over several regions. What is interesting here is the tendency of terrorist organizations to become local political forces, which we saw exactly one year ago in the example of the Afghan Taliban.

The Syrian civil war has returned official Moscow's thirst for old glory and influence. In reality, Russia is trying to prove that it is still a force to be reckoned with in international relations by gaining a control mechanism in the Middle East. After the Russian adventure in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and its consequences, activation in Syria is even more expected, but only if Russia has the resources to do so after the long Ukrainian war.

Although the great powers, including Turkey and Russia, are involved in the so-called Syrian civil war with proxy forces, if necessary, they use direct and open attacks too, which takes the conflict to a much different and dangerous dimension. In fact, Syria is a battlefield where almost all states in the region are trying to demonstrate their strength. The United States of America observes the process from afar and only starts an active response when the threat level of terrorism increases. The withdrawal of the main military contingent of the United States of America from Syria was followed by the formation of a nihilistic attitude on the part of the European countries, which is naturally used by Russia, Iran, and even Turkey (Batiashvili 2017).

The Syrian civil war makes it difficult for any force to operate in the region since the various opposing groups have, in fact, a kind of network of their interests that cannot be ignored. The environment of constant tension in the region makes it easy to escalate even without grounds and puts both Syria and its neighboring countries at great risk at any moment.

Although several countries we are interested in are directly or indirectly involved in the Syrian civil war, the Caucasus region is directly affected by any intersection of interests between Russia and Turkey. Syria is neither geographically nor geopolitically far from us. We felt this with particular intensity when on November 24, 2015, Turkey shot down a Russian fighter jet and the point of political tension shifted to the Caucasus-Black Sea region. Such a case can be repeated many more times. Therefore, the opinion of any expert, who believes that the current events in Europe and America should be more interesting for Georgia than the conflicts in the Middle East, is wrong.

Regardless of the outcome of the Syrian civil war, which naturally cannot happen in the short term, the subsequent arrangement of the country will be much more difficult to organize than the current conflict management. The main reason for this is, first of all, ethnic and religious differences.

As long as there is no prospect of a resolution to the conflict, there is a humanitarian crisis in Syria, which poses an additional threat to the security environment of the region and Turkey in particular.

³ There are talks, but no negotiations.

However, if we take into account the fact that the refugees who moved to Turkey from Idlib province are fighting for asylum in Europe, European countries are not untouched by this conflict either.

The Syrian conflict causes destabilization in the neighboring states as well, for which the reawakening of Daesh will be an additional problem. Religious groups are constantly trying to use religious sentiments to achieve their own pragmatic goals, especially by bribing and recruiting young people. Georgia is also facing this problem. The reality of this challenge was confirmed by a special operation carried out on December 22, 2017, in one of the residential buildings on Gabriel Salosi Street in Tbilisi, during which the Georgian special forces eliminated three members of a small armed group, namely Akhmed Chatayev, one of the field commanders of the Islamic State, and his two accomplice – Ibrahim Adashev and Aslanbeg Soltahmadov. A few days later, on December 26, 2017, the young Temirlan Machalikashvili was seriously wounded and later died as a result of a special operation conducted by the counter-terrorist department in Pankisi valley, densely populated by ethnic Azerbaijanis. According to the version of the investigation, Machalikashvili also cooperated with Chataev's group and was holding a hand grenade at the time of his arrest. These examples make it clear how much of a threat emanates from extremist groups in the Middle East region, including in Syria, and how much of a challenge each country's security system faces.

In addition, it is interesting to see what scenario will develop after the West achieves its strategic goal and finally defeats the extremist organizations operating in Syria. Where will Daesh and HTS fighters go, and will they and their families be resocialized?!

Ultimately, it is clear that the Syrian civil war presents multiple risks and opportunities for both parties directly involved in it and actors interested in the conflict. Eliminating these threats and risks is possible only by consolidating forces and acting around one interest, which in itself contradicts the rules of the game of international politics and is only a utopian prospect.

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