

GEOPOLITICAL INQUIRY INTO CLIMATE AND RESOURCE: WHY 'SYRIA' UNDERGOES SYRIAN WAR

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ABSTRACT

This paper is part of my M.Phil. Research on Geopolitics of shelterbelt Region: A case study of Syria, which discussed the geopolitics of the Syrian war. The geographical and political instability in Syria had begun in March 2011, influenced by Arab Spring, results into civil war. Multiple narratives put forwarded to explain the causes behind the war ranging from ideological, ethnic, and religious to sectarian. However, in particular, the climatic and environmental factors had been imperative engenders of the Syrian war. The climatic and environmental issues created constrain on limited resources in Syria, hence acted as catalyst in the war. The objective of the paper is to look into the relationship between climate, resources, and war; and how this complex relationship structured the Syrian war. For this purpose, the paper seeks to analyze the various causes of the Syrian war with more focus on the climatic and environmental issues. Along with it the paper will also try to analyze why Syrian civil war attracted multiple international powers which altered the geography of civil war nearly converted it into a new cold war.

Keywords: Syrian War, Civil War, Climate, Resources, Geopolitics, Climatic and Environmental.

Introduction

The present 'state-system' is a complex reality born out of the modernism consequently builds upon several social and economic parameters. This evolutionary process saw numerous struggles and war that has immensely contributed to the formation of present social and political life. Among the various parameters or factors, the part of natural resources and climatic factors is noteworthy. Many wars and contentions for territory bear a resemblance with struggle to capture natural resources and harness best use of climate for development.

On resources and their endowment, Krugman (1991), impressively projected the importance of resource and its control over trade relations and their influence on international relation. From the analysis of the West Asian wars, fought during 20th century, by Westing (1986 discussed in Acemoglu et al. 2011), it explicitly reveals that control over natural resources in many wars were a primary motivation. Similarly, the Chaco war in South America (1932–1935) was resulted from excessive avarice for oil between Paraguay and Bolivia (Acemoglu et al. 2011). The winter of 2010 brought a significant change to the history of West Asia. A series of protests and armed rebellions by locals began in the late 2010, against the despotism of the then governments almost in much of Arab world (Miller 2011). The phenomenon was later termed as Arab Spring.

The protest, like Arab spring, began in Syria during early months of 2011 against Assad government demanding democratic reforms, freedom, and end to corruption. The protests soon gathered masses soaring up demands for removal of Assad government. However, the despotic response of government towards the rallies led to massive demonstrations and armed uprisings involving numerous self-proclaimed factions (Halliday 2011). The subsequent uprisings and continuous clashes amongst the varying parties in Syria, it has consequently attracted the attention of numerous international actors also.

Different narratives are put forwarded to describe the causative factors behind the civil war. In order to understand the causes, it is important to look back into the history and geography of Syria, as both are pivotal determinants of war strategy and war outcome, either today or yesterday.

In support of historical underpinning of Syrian politics, Baltes(2016), argues that, the historical evolution of Syria including French- Britain colonial rule, Sykes-Picot agreement, and Syrian unification, can be a stepping stone in understanding the current crisis. Phillips (2015), on the other hand, supported the short-term structural socio-economic, cultural and political factors as the reason behind the war. While some experts had asserted, that the drought occurred between 2006 to 2010 in Syria had triggered by climate change (Bisaria 2015, discussed in Musarurwa and Kaye 2016). According to Baltes (2016), all of the factors mentioned above generated the atmosphere of the political instability, chaos, and distrust enabled favourable conditions for the war.

Intrigued with questions on possibility of involvement of environment factors as 'threat multiplier' to the Syrian war, the research is framing two **basic objectives** to answer this, the first one is to understand the extent to which climatic factors and resources contributed in the Syrian crisis and second it to put forward the possible major causes of the war.

Methodology of the Study

This study is qualitative researches, which utilises both historical and analytical methods and primarily based on both primary and secondary source of information.

The major primary sources of information will include the UNDP reports, UN reports, government reports, press-releases of Syria and its neighbouring countries or other countries of west Asia and other Eurasian countries, and UNHC reports.

The secondary sources include books, journals, articles, research papers from various research institutes and think-tanks and documents related to the geopolitics of West Asia especially Syria and Levant region and also of great power involved in this region

Geopolitics of Climate and Resource: An Analysis of Syrian War

Since beginning of the war, the report and newspaper analysis, most of the times were filled with rhetoric's on the beginning of the crisis, the crisis which was linked with the climatic variability and control of oil resource by various factions along with insensitivity of political administration toward citizen of the Syria.

The conjecture between resource and climatic factors on state and its politics have been part of various geopolitical theories. Geopolitical significance of climatic factors and resources on state politics are apparent from the origin of "geopolitics" as a subject of study. The early definition of R. Kjellen states it as the theory of 'geographical spatial phenomenon' (Kjellen 1916: 39). Thus in his words the geographical location of state is commanding element in maintaining security and attaining strategic goal (Halden 2007).

The most renowned geopolitical theories of Mackinder and Spykman focused on geographical- social factors for state growth. Mackinder, in his seminal paper titled "Geographical Pivot of History" argued that geographic element and natural resource were paramount determinant of power and foreign policies of certain country (Mackinder 1904). In context of climatic factors and its relationship with state politics he argued that, the great wars of history were the 'outcome, direct or indirect, of unequal growth of nation, due to unequal distribution of fertility and strategic opportunities (Mackinder 1919, discussed by Halden 2007, p.46). Fertility here is discussed in term of agriculture, which is highly climate dependent.

Spykman (1942, p.41) later modified previously cherished geopolitical thinking. In his view geography is nuanced to every geopolitical explanation and is an imperative factor in shaping foreign policies. According to Halden(2007, p.46), Spykman reiterated on importance of climatic factors as the imperative to foreign policies of state. He furthered that climatic factors impact two urgent aspects of state powers, the first one is functionality of military and second is nature of territorial base. These two factors influence the economic functions of state and international relations (Spykman 1945, p.5). After carefully studying the thoughts of Spykman and Mackinder, Halden (2007,p.46) asserted on the importance of climate and environmental parameters as important 'basic bloc' in most of the geopolitical theory.

Homer- Dixon maintains that, the disputes concerning environmental degradation and subsequent migration caused by inconsistency economy and resource scarcity are likely to cause ethnic clashes and civil war (Dalby 2002, p.47, discussed in Halden 2007, p.29). However, the amount to which climatic factors contributes to conflict or ethnic clashes remains a highly debated subject. Some author/ researchers favored the climatic insecurity as leading cause behind war while other negates this hypothesis.

One of the peculiar feature of Syrian environmental issues was *drought*, that occurred from 2006 to 2011. The pressure left by drought was felt in most sectors of economy but, it immensely exacerbated the agricultural crisis and depleted water resources (Fischetti 2015). The land in agricultural area, due to extreme drought condition and non-intervention, turned into fallow rendering it unusable for long period of time (Laub 2020). In support to it, Vonn Uexkull et al. (2016, discussed in Eklund and Thompson 2017) mentioned that, the droughts are not generally generate or connected to ethnic conflict or civil war but, droughts and climatic uncertainty can increase likelihood of sustenance of conflict in areas of Agricultural dependency.

The physical geography of Syria is one that has to be blame for drought. The mountain system of the country on western side specifically the mountain ranges of Anti Lebanon and the Jabala Nusayriyah stand as barrier hindering the wind from the Mediterranean Sea entering the interior of Syria. Thus climate of the western slope and coastal plain region tends to be a damper, moist and wet than drier and extreme temperature of that eastern slope and plateau (Technology international division 2011).

Agriculture is another feature requires immediate attention; it has been a remarkable component of Syrian economy since ancient times. But the erratic policies by state government, monopolization of farming resource and extensive farming practices generated non-conducive outcomes for agriculture (UNDP 2005).

Resource is another motivation for struggles over national power in Syria. The whole war involving ISIS¹ and SDF² revolves around the oil fields of Syria. Natural Oil remained the most contested resource between different parties in the war. The Oil resources and control of related infrastructure, crucial for Syrian economy, became bargaining chips for both ISIS and other factions helping them especially in early phases of war to attain some feet in civil war (Meliksetian 2018). The Islamic state have made millions out of oil resources by harvesting the outputs of oil and gases. However with the involvement of foreign powers the game changed. The ISIS had lost most of its seized oil fields to Assad forces which is supported by Russia and also to the Kurds. However, continued struggles among state government and its favoring International states using artillery and air strike against ISIS and other faction did helped the Syrian government recapturing of lost oil resource plants, but left sources of oil resources in a decapitated condition leaving less changes of rehabilitation (Meliksetian 2018).

Apart from the strain on resources, the *land* in Syria was also degraded due to extensive overgrazing and deforestation that has led to severe degradation and desertification (UNDP 2005). The government came with few programs which did not yield any substantial result rather created agony and hopelessness in the masses. The drought added to fuel to fire by exacerbating the restricted resources e.g agriculture and water at shortage causing livestock death and elevated food prices, sickened people and children that drove Syrian villager to abandon their homes and cattle and migrate to cities and neighbouring countries. This condition helped in triggering the ongoing civil war that had killed thousands of people and destroyed the life in Syria (Fischetti 2015).

Political Instability and Ethnic Clashes: An Analysis of Syrian War

In the earlier section the discussion was on environmental issues but, here the piece will deal with administrative and governance issues in Syria. With this aim the focus will be on two intricate aspects of Syrian societal evolution, the *history and ethno sectarian divide*.

- **Colonial History and Modern Rule of Assad**

Many scholars had favored its colonial history and modern rule of Assad as the vital source of detestation among Syrian citizen. Under British rule in early decades of 20th century, Sykes- Picot agreement was signed between France and Britain, which separated the dying Ottoman Empire in too many spheres of influence (control) among the two. The division landed Syria as a colony of France (Visalli 2016). This agreement was intensely refuted by Syrian; there begin the series of protest and war for independence. Syria finally got independence after five years of long struggle in 1946 (Visalli 2016).

Even after the independence Syria had been in chaos and instability for almost 20 years³ as no ruler was able to provide stable government. Amid instability Syria got involved in numerous wars with its neighbours. From 1961 to 1976, Syria had experienced two coups (Bard 2008), and from one such coup of 1963, Hafez al Assad and his allies got into power and started ruling under emergency⁴.

¹ ISIS stands for Islamic state of Iraq and Syria.

² SDF stands for Syrian democratic forces.

³ Between 1946 to 1963.

⁴ The emergency in Syria lasted for almost 48 years, though was lifted by Bashar al Assad in 2011.

The long period emergency was quite conducive to regime, bestowed immense capacities upon government agencies to arrest, detain and interrogate and punish any person when deemed urgent or necessary (Farer 2013). The presidentship of Hafez al Assad began in 1971, following a bloodless coup, after military captured the Ba'ath party. The event brought a perpetual autocracy in Syria provided vantage point to one party system in the country. The President, after attaining power, divided the state apparatus among different ethnicities and consolidated the central power in his and his families hands (Mariwala 2017). He also favored his Alawite sect by giving them high government post and also the authority to control the state military and intelligence (Mariwala 2017) that had antagonized other communities especially Sunnis. The preferential treatment by Hafez government had bred discontent among locals, was capable enough in generating demands for reforms to bring forth a more inclusive form of governance (Mozes 2012). Syria saw innumerable kind of such protest though many time met with brutal suppression and further tightening of common rules.

In 2000, after the death of Hafez, Bashar al Assad replaced the office, like father like son. He applied the tactics and strategies, similar to his father, in every field of economy, such as the continuation of free- market policies that further deepen the decades old socio economic inequality. Like his father, Bashar al Assad also continued the kleptocratic form of governance by providing higher post in government offices to minorities with purpose to get support in times of crisis, hence when war started most of the minorities closed to regime remained loyal (Laub 2020). Hurley (2018) mentions that, besides government desolate attitude towards its locals desires, the country's youth were experiencing the high rate of unemployment, which got accentuated due to long period of drought. Such condition bred discontent among youth and poor especially in rural areas such as Dara'a, Raqqa, and Homs (Hurley 2018).

- **Protest of March 2011: Sectarian Turn to Democratic Demands**

Despotism and autocratic response of present government to Syrian protestors, during early phase of protest in March 2011, had turned peaceful uprising into an armed struggle. The protest began to bring an end to ongoing decade old emergency, de restrict freedom of press and media, release of political leaders and solve socio-economic problem of the country (ICRP¹ 2013). According to Human Right Watch (2013), the Assad forces, with aim to resist a curb protest and armed struggles resorted to brutal attacks² and heavy artillery over demonstration sites including religious sites. Soon with passage of some months of protest, the bombarding started to residential areas by Assad forces, with aim to capture and kill rebels hiding there (Hof and Simon 2013). Later as the condition changes into civil war, the incarceration, torture and massacre became a new normal in Syria (Hof and Simon 2013). This prompted and provoked the Syrian locals to take arms against regime forces and self-proclaimed faction, first to protect themselves and later to fight against various factions³ involved in the war (Hof and Simon 2013).

From the beginning, only political and ideological agendas were attached to the conflict as it started with a local uprising in Dara'a, where people firstly stood for the local demands. However, as the conflict spread to other parts of the Syria including capital Damascus and Aleppo city, numerous coalitions of opposition forces emerged to fight with regime forces with the aim to fulfill their own agendas and limiting Assad's forces (Malantowicz 2013). The beginning of armed struggle among different factions in Syrian soon attracted and opened channel for Al-Qaeda and ISIS into Syrian war, the converting the struggle of natives to reforms into full civil war. Apart from their agendas, the aim of these nascent coalitions was to gain international support for fulfilling the objective of political transition from the autocratic Assad rule to a democratic state (Malantowicz 2013).

- **External Players in the War: Involvement of Neighbours and International State in the War**

The emergence of the coalitions from the different religious sects (either supporting one particular sector opposing it) was enough for Iran and Saudi Arabia to enter into Syrian internal affairs. In particular, the Iran has involved itself to support the Alawite Shia minority, and Saudi Arabia came to support majority Sunni (Gerges 2013).

¹ International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect

² The brutal response by Assad's regime military was also sectarian in nature (ICRP 2013), as they were targeting the Sunnis and other minorities as opposition was mostly composed of ethnicities other than Shia.

³ The violence in Syria merged not only along the different sectarian lines, for instance, Sunni majority are fighting against the Alawite dominant minority (Peterson 2002, discussed in Christia 2013) but also result to involvement of numerous self-proclaimed rebel groups (Christia 2013).

Iran and Saudi Arabia, due to two possible reasons, one is concentrated around their personal centuries-old hatred revolving around Shia and Sunni conflict and second is related to their geopolitical objectives (Perthes 2014, discussed in Hamrah 2014). The participation was enough to attach a sectarian tone to civil war as already, the country's majority Sunnis are fighting against president, who belongs to the Shia's Alawite sect (B.B.C 2016, 11 March).

Phillips (2015) had discussed about *who is supporting whom*, Sunnis are in the majority but, are sidelined in Assad's regime that dejected them, hence are mostly supporting Sunni rebel and jihadist groups, and the Alawite sect on the other side is supporting president and his forces (Challands 2018). The other Syrian, e.g. non-Sunni Arab such as Christians, Druze, and Shia are backing the regime under fear of discrimination under Sunni rule, the Kurds had remained neutrality struggling (and fighting for their own security with the help of USA) (Challands 2018).

Such sectarian cleavages and struggle against each other enabled paths for sectarian-based murders, sexualized violence, ethnic cleansings, and kidnappings (Phillips 2015). This sectarian hatred has been the reason for both population displacement and escalation of radicalized violence (BBC, 2013, 8 June, Tets 2013).

Spencer (2016), tried to provide reasoning on hostility among Alawite (Shia) and Sunni in Syria. He blamed the historical denouncing of Alawite as heretics¹ by Sunnis, followed a series of persecution of Alawite by Sunnis for centuries. Such scenario is explicit in ongoing war as most of Sunni jihadist fighters are fighting opposite to Assad² forces and its alliances (Berzins 2013). Such understanding of difference among two major sect answers that, the radicalization of violence resulted because of ancient frustration between Shia and Sunnis. President Bashar himself implicitly employed the religious sentiments to arouse nationalist feelings by labeling the war as a "holy war" involving patriots and traitors (Coleman et al. 2015, discussed in Prace 2016).

The radicalization of war and brutal attacks on various sects also prompted citizens from other countries to join coalitions e.g. many Shia from Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan have joined the war supporting the Assad's regime (Bakker and Singleton 2016, in Guttryet al. 2016). The emergence and involvement of ISIS, an Islamist Jihadist group, into war added new dimensions to it. The radicalized propagandas and terrorist attacks by the attracted foreign powers directly into war (B.B.C 2016, 11 March). The chemical attack of 2013³, terrorist attacks by ISIS worldwide and mass exodus of Syrian refugees to Europe gained attention of USA and Russia.

The association of USA⁴ and Russia⁵ into civil war, portrayed the ongoing rift between USA and Russia, resembling cold war as both parties in this conflict have used method, tactic, and strategies similar to cold war and supporting different sides. According to AbuKhalil (2014), the involvement of superpowers and other powers in war made Syria a field of proxy wars as they instigated the perpetuation of disruption in Syria to fulfill their objective of strengthening the existing influence over the WANA region. Before this war the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq after 9/11 had been a huge catalyst for sharpening the fault line between different countries in West Asia. With the spilling of battle along borders, the crisis eventually attracted its neighbors Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, and Turkey into war; and with their involvement in the Syria had also become battle field among neighbours. Israel, Lebanon and Jordan had entered into war a little late directly before that they had not played any significant role in the Syrian war. Most of these neighboring states aligned themselves with one or other regional and superpower for their personal objectives (Manfreda 2015).

Conclusion

In the preceding pages an attempt has been made to present, in some detail, the scene behind the Syrian crisis that metamorphosed the peaceful protests into civil war. Initially, the focal point of this piece is to identify in what ways the climatic factors and resources assisted in arousing the conditions necessary for development of war like situation in Syria. A careful examination into the conditions,

¹ Heretic is "a person who differs in opinion from established religious dogma" basically "one who differs in opinion from an accepted belief or doctrine" (Merriam-Webster, 20 May 2020).

² Assad family belongs to Alawite sect of Shia community.

³ It was the worst lethal chemical attack after the Iraq-Iran war in 1988, when Saddam Hussain's regime struck on the Kurdish town Halabja (Borger 2013), that killed around 5,000 and thousands were injured.

⁴ With the involvement of major powers the civil war became international war as these powers are fighting with rebel groups, supporting different sides in war and also trying to contain each other's influence in the Syria. Their alignment with factional oppositional groups.

⁵ The rise of the refugee crisis and increase in terrorist attacks, both are the important factors that played significant roles in direct involvement by the US and Russia.

preceding and during the course, of the war projects the imperativeness of social and political conditions for understanding the causes behind the war. Though the war started in the late months of 2011 but the war like conditions were prevalent all over Syria since the early months of 2011. The climate and resources, though, paved the path for inceptive discontent among Syrian against its ruler. The noteworthy amongst the climatic factors had been prolonged period of dry spell which last for many years caused strain on remnant water sources and disrupted the agriculture, especially in rural region. The strain on the available limited resources, rising unemployment, consequent migration (rural to urban) and non-intervention by national government to reduce the risen situation was sufficient enough to arouse the muffled voices.

Nonetheless, the key take way from above analysis is that though the emphasis was put onto the climatic factors as the major causes of war by some authors but a different class of author do emerge, finally, who negated the importance of climatic factors as the causes behind the war. However, the strain on the limited resources and unproductive climatic effect do somehow induces the ongoing decade old ethnic and sectarian conflict accentuating the step brotherly behavior of ruling class against other minorities.

The history and social cleavage has been one of the imperative element of the ongoing civil war. This social (ethnic) cleavage dragged the locals into war and divided them into factions. The emergence of conflict involving factions, based on ethnicity, attracted the neighbouring nations into it. Finally the terrorist turn of the war, with the birth of ISIS gave impetus to foreign players to join war with geopolitical objectives, either to end war or to ascertain their power in the WANA region.

Hence, the summary points that, both the climatic factors and resources are emerged as threat multiplier by deepening the already strain resources into further crisis. But the major causes of war can be defined as the historical enmity and socio- economic deprivation of local in the hands of ruling parties.

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