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## UNITED NATIONS INVOLVEMENT IN THE SYRIAN CRISIS AND ITS IMPACTS ON EUROPEAN NATIONS

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### Abstract

*Syrian history in modern times has been a tumultuous one. In the pre-colonial times, Syria has been under the control of the Ottomans until Selim I wrested power from the Mamluks in 1516 A.D. Under the Ottoman Empire, religious pluralism was adopted with a degree of self-administration granted the religious communities (millets). To the surprise of many, religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence has been a rare remitting trend in Syria as highlighted by the modern day secularist Ba'athist regime. While historians are quick to point at sectarianism as a critical source of social division in Syria, others however, feel it is caused by oppression of the ethnic minorities, the Human Massacre, the Damascus spring effect, Economic reasons, the Arab spring effect as well as the ideological drift of the Ba'ath party. The above reasons notwithstanding, it is obvious that the goals, ambitions, aspirations, desires and fears of individual human beings differ within the society thereby resulting in the pursuit of incompatible interests that generate conflict and crisis, as evident in the case of Syria. The involvement of the United Nations could not really work as expected under its Charter. On the whole, European sanctions have had a clear impact on the Syrian economy, while the crisis itself exposed a reluctant European public opinion towards international military involvement.*

### Introduction

The speed and number of revolutions that swept the Arab world in recent times is historically unprecedented. Long considered a totalitarian stronghold, the greater Middle East is finally surprising the world, overturning the myths that the Arab national psyche eschews democratic representation and can be forever content with stagnation and autocracy.

Even as protests began to spread to the Syrian Arab Republic, President Bashar al-Assad and his administration clung desperately to the erroneous perception that Syrian exceptionalism,

grounded in Syria's unique historical experience, would insulate the regime from confrontation.

Championed by the Ba'ath party, Syria's historically strong socialist roots and resulting character of the state's social contract with its people helps to explain some of this complacency. On the other hand, the regime had been far from free of social unrest in the past; the spectre of harsh and swift repression still lingered persistently in the social consciousness. Also, given the melting pot of overlapping ethnicities and religions found in Syria – Alawites, Junnis, Shi-ites, Druze, Christians, Alevis, Yezidi, Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians, and more besides – a heightened level of community tension has long been the norm (Baker, 2012:39). With the Alawite minority dominating the ranks of both the administration and the internal security forces, and with several minorities disenfranchised, the threat of sectarian division has also lurked in the background as an ominous possible source of violent conflict.

At first, peaceful protests that began in January 2011 against the regime had since evolved into an outright insurgency, with violence and deadly force disastrously being established as the norm on both sides. Whilst the revolutions that have been sweeping the Arab world have well and truly engulf Syria, it still remains to be seen whether the lasting legacy in the country will be interpreted in the lense of Arab spring or Arab winter (Chaitanni, 2012:51).

This research paper seeks to examine the extent of United Nations involvement in the Syrian crisis and also assess its impacts on the continent of Europe in general.

### **Historical Background to the Syrian Crisis**

The history of Syria in modern times has been a tumultuous one. In the pre-modern era, Syria had long been under the control of the Ottomans, ever since Sultan Selim I wrested control of the region in 1516 from the Mamluks. Under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, religious pluralism was adopted, with a degree of self-administration eventually being granted to religious communities or '*millets*'. To the surprise of many outsiders, a tendency towards religious tolerance and co-existence has long been a rare remitting trend in Syria, reinforced by historical legacy and continued

throughout the rule of the modern-day secularist Ba'athist regime (Baxter, 2008:60).

After the Ottoman's slow decline and eventual collapse at the end of World War I, the British and the French partitioned the Arab lands between them in the Treaty of Sevres in 1920 (Shafie, 2003:18), in accordance with the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916. With the inception of the League of Nations, British and French territorial control came in the form of a League Mandate with the British being assigned administrative control over Iraq, Transjordan and Palestine, and France over Syria and Lebanon. Like so many borders drawn by Europeans during the colonial era, they did not perfectly reflect the ethnic and religious fault-lines in existence on the ground. The Kurdish peoples, for example, found themselves split between the new Turkish republic, Iraq and Syria. Similarly, the Yezidis found their traditional homelands straddled across the Iraqi-Syrian border. However, on the other hand, the French carved Lebanon from greater Syria to ensure that the Maronite Christians were in the majority in that country.

Whilst the League of Nations mandate prescribed an eventual transition to full autonomy, the French were not forthcoming in confirming the date that this transition period would end. Discontent with European rule, Sultan al-Atrash led a revolt against the French that took the better part of three years to put down. During this period, fighting broke out in the key cities of Damascus, Homs, and Hama, which - bar Damascus – seems strongly prescient of the current Arab spring uprisings.

With the outbreak of World War II and the fall of France, the French administration in Syria aligned their loyalties to the Nazi client state of Vichy France. Just over a year later in July 1941, the British and Free-French occupied Syria, with a coalition of Syria nationalist declaring independence that same year. However, it was not until 1944 that their independence gained broad international recognition. Between independence and the ascendancy of the Ba'ath party, Syria was dogged by continual instability and upheaval; during this period there was war with the new state of Israel, a contest of power between the civilian polity and the military that resulted at various times in military dictatorship, a short-lived union with Egypt, and multiple coups. Eventually, however, the

current regime under the Ba'ath party was installed during the '8 March' Revolution in 1963.

After Hafez's death in June 2000, his son Bashar al-Assad assumed the Presidency. Syria experienced protest from January 2011, and the intensity of the opposition to the Ba'athist regime increases steadily in the following months, with major rallies starting with the 'Day of Dignity' on 15 March, 2011 (Al-Jazeera website, 2012:11). Unfortunately, however, the United Nations Security Council remains deadlocked on a comprehensive resolution to the conflict due to differences in approach and policy between the Western Permanent Members on the one hand, and Russia and China on the other hand.

### **Causes of Syrian crisis in 2011**

#### **a) Sectarianism**

Historians are quick to point to sectarianism as a critical source of social division in Syria. Syria is far from being religiously homogenous, although there is an overwhelmingly large Sunni majority that accounts for over two thirds – about 70% - of the population. The ruling elite – including Bashar al-Assad himself – are drawn disproportionately from adherents to the Alawite sect, a branch of Shia Islam, which accounts for approximately 13% of the population. Most Alawites are concentrated in the North-West of the country, in the coastal strip North of Lebanon. The administrative class and, importantly, the security apparatus, are also strongly drawn from this Alawite sect. Other sizeable religious minorities are the Christians, at 9% of the population, and the Druze and mainstream Shia adherents at approximately 3% apiece (Izady, 2012:36).

Certainly, strong sectarian divisions do exist within Syria. The Muslim Brotherhood insurrection, which culminated in the catastrophic Hama Massacre, was Sunni-led sectarian insurgency, and the resulting 'bad-blood' between the remnants of this movement and the regime remains. As the Arab Spring had gained pace and favour in Syria, multiple sources have purported that Sunni protesters

have variously shouted or scrawled the slogan: 'Christians to Beirut, Alawites to the grave' (Arango, 2012:18).

#### **b) Ethnic Minorities**

The vast majority of the people in Syria are Arabs – approximately 90% - with the only other sizeable ethnic group being the Kurds, who comprise approximately 9% of the population (Roy, 2011:22). With an estimated 30 million Kurds worldwide, the Kurdish people are the largest national group in the world without their own state. The largest contiguous region is grouped together on the intersection of the Iraqi, Syrian, Turkish and Iranian borders, and is nominally known by some as 'Kurdistan'.

Since independence, Syria regimes have historically deprived the Kurds of the freedom enjoyed by the Arab majority. For example, in 1962, approximately 150,000 Kurds were deprived of Syrian citizenship in a 'special census', with many being registered as 'ajanib' ('foreigner') or as 'Maktumin' ('stateless') (Middle East/North Africa Report No. 108, 2011:46).

#### **c) The Hama Massacre**

The Ba'athist regime has engaged in repressive political and social measures too great in number to document in their entirety here. However, surely, the most brutal repression of dissent and human rights violation occurred during the reign of Hafez al-Assad with the massacre in Hama in 1982. The regime's annihilation of an estimated 20,000 lives cannot help but be an event that echoes through the consciousness of the nation, but of course, in Hama. During the Syrian crisis, Hama formed the centre of opposition struggle.

#### **d) The Damascus Spring Effect**

After Bashar al-Assad's ascension to the Presidency, there was a brief window - from approximately June 2000 until September 2001 – in which political repression was relaxed. During this 'spring', the formation of 'muntadats' or

'political discussion groups', was encouraged; the infamous Mezze political prison was closed; and the 'manifesto of the 99' was released, a pro-democracy declaration by 99 prominent intellectuals and civil society leaders.

Whilst this 'relaxation' did not unleash an uncontrollable deluge of criticism of the regime, it did create a small space in which it could be publicly and legitimately discussed. Arguably, once opened, shutting off this avenue of criticism did more to build critical pressure and resentment against the regime.

Alternatively, to the regime's benefit, the Damascus spring did 'smoke out' some of the vocal critics for identification or imprisonment by the regime, which could have blunted the eventual impetus of the Arab spring.

#### e) **Economic Reasons**

The average Syrian citizen is not remotely wealthy, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation Standards. The World Bank classifies it as a lower middle income country with an average gross national income of approximately USD2,800. Unemployment is high at over 8% and GDP per capita growth is at 3.3% - seemingly solid by developed country standards, but strictly below-par when starting from a low, developing-country base. Whilst the most recent data puts Syria's income distribution as only modestly unequal, there is a 'widespread perception that the state had been hijacked by a small circle of individuals chiefly focused on self-enrichment'. Bashar al-Assad had implemented a modest agenda of economic reforms. However, the reforms have –or at least, were perceived to have – predominantly benefitted the rich.

As elsewhere in the Arab world, the youths have been strongly represented in Syria's Arab spring movement. Whilst the youth are often at the vanguard of combative social movements often merely a function of having less assets and dependents at risk - Syria is characterized as possessing the unpredictability of an overeducated, underemployed and

bulging youth population. As at the time of the Syrian crisis, more youths were unemployed.

#### f) **The Arab Spring Effect**

The great success of the Arab Spring in other countries – particularly in Tunisia and Egypt, where the dictatorial regimes were replaced by pro-democratic elements – cannot and should not be underestimated as one of the causes of Syrian crisis of 2011. The people protesting in these countries were speaking the same language, and facing a highly similar social, political and economic malaise presided over by a seemingly self-serving or indifferent autocrat. Unsurprisingly, with cultural ties throughout the Arab world being so deep-seated, when some of these movements met success, it greatly encouraged the rest to push for reforms even more fervently.

When the Tunisian regime was toppled and President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali ousted, a spark of hope was ignited throughout the Arab world. Once President Mubarak too was removed from office in Egypt – the most populous Arab state – those sparks became flames. It is said that success breeds success; undeniably the successes of the Arab spring inspired yet more Arabs to combat the despotism of their governments.

#### g) **The Ideological Drift of the Ba'ath Party**

One of the outstanding causes for the Arab spring in Syria is that the Ba'ath party, over time, eroded the broad social base it originally championed and relied upon to support its position in power, namely, regional Syria. Ever since the 'regionalists' gained dominance over the Syrian branch of the Ba'ath party, they advocated socialist measures that protected but also enfranchised the regional periphery – the land-based peasantry and regional petit bourgeoisie – in favour over the city-based elite. Agrarian reform was carried out on a broad scale and also entrenched in Article 16 of the Constitution, with land distributed from landlords to the peasantry. This buttressed their ongoing

support, as did genuine attempts by the regional administrators to address the real needs of the people.

However, Bashar al-Assad's Presidency marked the beginning of a slow but nonetheless seismic shift back in favour of the city-based elites. Bashar himself, a product of cosmopolitanism, his world centered on the administrative hub of Damascus, is not a natural champion of the traditional Ba'athist roots. However, the result of all these translated to Syrian government's 'waging of war against their original social constituency'.

In general, the political and social causes for the Arab spring in Syria are many and varied, and deeply rooted in the country's unique historical context.

In support of the above claims as factors responsible for the Arab spring in Syria, Otoabasi Akpan in his analysis of "Conflict as Peace and Peace as Security" in his treatise: **The Niger Delta Question and the Peace Plan** noted thus:

*Issues leading to conflicts and crises are ever present in human relations. This is so because of several compelling factors ... The goals, ambitions, aspirations, desires and fears of individual human beings differ within the same society thereby resulting in the pursuit of incompatible interests that generate conflict and crisis (Akpan, 2011:xxi).*

Although he also observed that conflict is inevitable and inexorable in the affairs of men, he advised that societies should always put in place mechanisms to resolve conflicts before they are transformed into crisis and violence (Akpan, 2011:xxi). In assessing the Syrian society by 2011, mechanisms of conflict resolution were rather impotent to quell the violence that erupted.

### **The Extent of United Nations Involvement in the Syrian Crisis**

The purposes of the United Nations are indicated in its preamble and are laid down in clearer terms in Article 1 of the Charter. The preamble shows that the Charter of the United Nations is born of the experiences of a devastating war and that it holds out hope of a lasting peace, based on the recognition of fundamental human rights. The purposes of the United Nations as laid down in Article 1 of the Charter, among others, include the maintenance of international peace and security (Basu, 2013:26).

Despite the fact that the United Nations was established in 1945 for the purposes of maintenance of peace and security in the world, the frequency of wars – big and small since then – testifies to the oft-repeated assertion that the United Nations security system has not worked as expected under the Charter (Basu, 2013:304).

The United Nations General Assembly had been active in finding a peaceful resolution of the crisis. For instance, as an example of its works, it passed Resolution 11266 on the 3 August, 2012 expressing grave concern at the escalation of violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, in particular the continued widespread and systematic gross violations of human rights and the continued use of heavy weapons by the Syrian authorities against Syrian population, and the failure of the government of Syrian Republic to protect its population.

In the area of human rights, the United Nations brought together a great team to implement a strong Human Rights Council Resolution. The independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic investigated all alleged violations of international human rights law since March 2011, with a view of ensuring that perpetrators of violations including those that may constitute crimes against humanity, are held accountable.

In the area of humanitarian aid, the United Nations assisted the conflict victims by working with a number of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) transiting through the Turkish border and the Red Cross. The humanitarian figures as reported by the United Nations humanitarian agency stated that 6.8 million persons were in need of humanitarian aid out of which 4 million persons were directly in need of food. Also, women and children were grouped to make up three-quarters of the refugee population.

On the aspect of disarmament, the confirmation of the use of chemical weapons on civilian population came as an electroshock for the United Nations Security Council which signed the Resolution 2118 for the elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons. Twenty inspectors of the organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons were mandated as experts by the United Nations to destroy over one thousand tons of chemical weapons scattered 45 sites before June 2014. They officially started their mission on the

1st of October, 2013 and operate under the neutrality of the United Nations.

### Syrian Crisis, UN Involvement and Its Impact on Europe

European Nations through European Union members have prioritized their objectives vis-à-vis Syria through attempts to convince Assad government to negotiate with the opposition in order to ensure a peaceful and democratic transition and also desist from violence against civilians. These were approached through sanctions. European sanctions have had a clear impact on the Syrian economy. In September, 2011, the European Union placed sanctions on the Syrian oil industry (European countries previously accounted for 90% of Syrian oil exports). Energy firms such as Shell withdrew from the Syrian market and the costs of oil and gas within Syria have leapt.

On the other hand, the Syrian crisis has shown a reluctant European public opinion towards international military involvement. European public opinion had advocated for European leadership of the world system through non-military policies.

### Conclusion

While the UN per se cannot stop the conflict unilaterally, the various bodies of the UN are providing the methodology, framework and body of evidence to enable its member states to do so. The UN tried to bring together parties and actors to address the humanitarian and development impact of the conflict; promote spaces for a peaceful resolution; and to secure justice for those abused and killed unlawfully in the conflict.

The existence of chemical weapons in countries like Syria highlights the value of the United Nations' work to rid the world of such terrible indiscriminate weapons.

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