

Article Review

Political and Security Developments in the Syrian Crisis

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Abstract: When peaceful protests first began in Syria—particularly in the city of Daraa, the cradle of the Syrian revolution—during the wave of the Arab Spring, security analysts predicted that Syria would witness one of the most complex political and security developments in the region. Initially, the revolution was peaceful; however, after three years, it shifted toward armed resistance due to the involvement of various actors in the Syrian uprising. As a result, the Syrian revolution became significantly more violent compared to other Arab Spring uprisings, taking on sectarian and ethnic dimensions. The increasing violence led to the use of military aircraft, barrel bombs, and other weapons against protesters. In response, opposition groups also resorted to arms, fueled by regional and international support for the Syrian opposition. Consequently, the Syrian conflict evolved into a regional confrontation involving multiple states in the Middle East.

Furthermore, the crisis was exacerbated by the entry of extremist groups from outside Syria, including the spread of al-Qaeda and factions of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/ISIS). What began as a political uprising demanding democratic transition and the removal of Bashar al-Assad ultimately transformed into a security, sectarian, and identity-based conflict. Thirteen years later, on January 8, 2024, the opposition forces managed to enter Damascus with the assistance of regional actors, most notably Turkey, which shares a strategic border with Syria.

Keywords: Syrian crisis, Syria, security developments, Arab Spring revolutions, Turkey.

Political and Security Developments in the Syrian Crisis

The Syrian crisis represents one of the most significant security developments in the Middle East due to its far-reaching implications both within Syria and across neighboring regional states. What began as a peaceful uprising quickly escalated into an armed conflict, marked by the rise of extremist militant groups and the involvement of regional and international actors. The conflict intensified until the fall of the Syrian regime at the hands of opposition forces supported by external powers.

In analyzing these developments, the researcher draws upon several studies that have addressed the Syrian issue since its onset. One such study by Mohsen Nasr Esfahani and Hossein Massoudnia examines both the Syrian crisis and the revolution itself. According to these researchers, the Syrian revolution marked the beginning of the spread of extremist Salafist ideology, which is characterized by radical beliefs and the rejection of opposing views. They argue that Syria's social structure facilitated the spread of such extremist ideologies, primarily due to the previous regime's failure to manage the country's ethnic and sectarian diversity effectively. This mismanagement contributed to the emergence

of sectarian and ethnic loyalties at the expense of a unifying national identity, ultimately accelerating the proliferation of extremist groups during the Syrian crisis.¹

The persistence of Bashar al-Assad in clinging to power contributed significantly to the widespread emergence of extremist groups, accompanied by escalating violence and hatred directed toward minority communities. This, in turn, led to the rise of hate speech and acts of violence particularly targeting minority groups such as the Alawites, especially following Assad's removal from power at the end of 2024. Moreover, the support provided by certain regional states to armed factions in Syria served multiple strategic objectives, including weakening Iran's influence within Syria, undermining the Syrian state itself, and dismantling the so-called "Axis of Resistance." Following Assad's departure, Iran's role in Syria was considerably diminished, along with a noticeable decline in the influence of the Axis of Resistance, which had maintained a dominant presence in the Syrian political and security landscape for decades. This shift also contributed to the weakening of Hezbollah's role in the region.

As a result, Syria experienced a significant political and security transformation after 2024, marked by a departure from the previous political ideology and the emergence of a new approach. This study concludes that the transformation of the Syrian revolution into an armed struggle, rather than a peaceful democratic transition of power, played a critical role in the rise of al-Qaeda and other extremist militant groups. Such developments pose serious challenges to national unity, social cohesion, and the integrity of the Syrian national fabric in the post-conflict period.

Sectarianism was one of the defining characteristics of the Syrian government and a major source of discontent among large segments of the population. For example, although the Alawites constitute less than fifteen percent of the Syrian population, they formed the backbone of the regimes of both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad. Approximately 90² percent of senior positions in the military and security sectors were held by members of the Alawite community. Beyond socio-political factors, economic conditions also played a critical role in fueling widespread dissatisfaction, particularly during Bashar al-Assad's rule. His economic reforms effectively marginalized Arab Sunni workers and farmers, further alienating them from the regime. These reforms contributed to perceptions among Arab Sunnis that they were being deliberately targeted, exacerbating social tensions within Syria's diverse society.

Historically, sectarianism was relatively weak in major Syrian cities such as Damascus and Aleppo. However, with the onset of the Arab Spring, sectarian divisions deepened, and historical grievances—such as the events of Hama—resurfaced in ways that did not benefit the regime. These cumulative factors led to widespread instability and significant transformations within Syria, culminating in the collapse of Syrian sovereignty and the eventual downfall of the Assad regime. Thus, the ongoing changes in Syria do not reflect a peaceful democratic transition; rather, they reveal the resurfacing of deep sectarian and ethnic divisions. These developments present serious challenges to Syria's unity and pose significant questions about the future structure and identity of the Syrian state.

During this period, due to various geopolitical and geostrategic factors, the Syrian crisis quickly evolved beyond a domestic conflict and became a regional—if not global—issue. Multiple international and regional actors sought to advance their own interests in Syria, further complicating the already volatile situation on the ground.

A clear example of the impact of regional and international actors on the deterioration of Syria's security landscape can be seen in the influx of thousands of Wahhabi fighters from around the world into Syria³. This was accompanied by material and military support provided by certain regional states,

¹ Esfahani, M. N., & Masoudnia, H. (2017). *An Analysis of the Syrian Social Structure and the Role of the Middle East in the Formation and Expansion of Salafism in Syria*. Scientific Quarterly of Research Journal, Center for Islamic Revolution Studies and Research, Vol. 14, No. 28, Spring.

² Niakouei, A. (2013). *A Study of the Crises in Iraq and Syria in Light of Security Theories*. Quarterly Journal of Global Political Research, Vol. 3, No. 2, University of Guilan, Iran.

³ Bahmash, H. (2012). *Opposing Actors in the Syrian Crisis*. Scientific Journal of Foreign Relations, Strategic Studies Center, Tehran, Vol. 4.

all of which contributed to the escalation of political instability and the reshaping of both Syria's security dynamics and regional alliances.

One notable study addressing this issue is titled "*Opposition Actors in the Syrian Crisis – 2013*" by a researcher at the Center for Strategic Research at the University of Tehran. The study highlights the existence of both regional and international opposition to Bashar al-Assad's regime. Among the international opponents was the United States, which represented the broader global opposition. On the regional level, countries such as Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar were identified as key actors demanding Assad's removal. Each of these states pursued distinct strategic goals within Syria, further intensifying the crisis.

The United States has long pursued strategic objectives in the Middle East, and it viewed Bashar al-Assad as a major obstacle to its regional agenda. Among the core American interests in the region are securing the flow of energy and oil to the West, promoting the concept of peace in the Middle East (particularly as it relates to Israel), combating terrorism, protecting human rights, spreading democratic values, and countering regimes that oppose U.S. interests. In this context, Syria—under the Assad regime—was seen as a hostile actor. The Assad government opposed the U.S. vision for regional peace and consistently challenged American influence. Most notably, it rejected the strategic principle of ensuring Israel's security, resisted U.S.-led counterterrorism efforts, and was seen as a barrier to the spread of democratic norms and human rights. Furthermore, Syria's alignment with the so-called Axis of Resistance positioned it in direct opposition to American objectives in the region. Given these conflicts, the United States considered Syria to be a primary target for political and strategic transformation.

In response to this perceived threat, Iran entered the Syrian conflict as a key ally of the Assad regime. Tehran interpreted the U.S. goals in the Middle East—particularly democratization and regime change—as threats to its own security and influence. As a result, Iran became actively involved in defending Bashar al-Assad, viewing his survival as critical to maintaining the Axis of Resistance and countering American interventionism in the region.

In reality, Turkey, alongside Saudi Arabia, has constituted a central axis in the conflict opposing the Syrian regime. Saudi Arabia has sought to expand its regional role while countering Iran's geopolitical and ideological influence. Similarly, Turkey has aimed to broaden its presence in the Middle East and to reassert its historical legacy in the region. On the global level, Turkey initially aspired to join the European Union. However, those ambitions were ultimately frustrated due to political and human rights concerns—most notably, issues surrounding the Armenian genocide of 1915 during World War I, the Kurdish question, and the Cyprus dispute involving Greece. Following the collapse of its EU accession hopes, Turkey redirected its strategic focus toward the Middle East, leveraging what it refers to as its "strategic depth."

Under the leadership of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Turkey embraced the concept of "neo-Ottomanism," reimagining its historical role in the region. With this ideological shift, Turkey pursued deeper engagement with Arab states, viewing itself as a natural leader in the region due to its vast geography, strategic positioning, and historical rule over much of the Arab world for over five centuries. This outlook encouraged Turkey to take an active role in crisis management, economic cooperation, and the use of soft power to influence regional dynamics.

Turkey has sought to establish itself as a key mediator and power broker in Middle Eastern affairs, using its economic ties and cultural affinity to exert influence. Meanwhile, Israel's strategic interest in Syria's transformation is primarily aimed at weakening the Axis of Resistance and Hezbollah by severing their military and logistical supply lines to Lebanon via Syria. A regime change in Syria, unfavorable to the Axis of Resistance, would serve to diminish Iran's long-standing influence—dating back to the Iranian Revolution and the alliance forged during the eight-year Iran-Iraq war with Hafez al-Assad.

The fall of Bashar al-Assad would thus represent a strategic victory for Israel, significantly undermining Hezbollah and shifting the regional balance of power in Israel's favor, consistent with the

game theory approach to international relations. In parallel, the rivalry between the United States and its Western allies on one side, and Russia and China on the other, has added another layer of complexity to the Syrian crisis, transforming it into a multifaceted geopolitical confrontation.

Conclusion

Peace and security have always been among the most critical issues in the field of international relations. The Syrian crisis, in particular, has drawn the attention of researchers, with significant focus on regional actors and the profound political transformations that have taken place within Syria. The internal divisions within Syrian society have also played a crucial role, as the country suffers from a weak sense of national identity, compounded by complex and multilayered sectarian, tribal, and religious divisions—factors that have significantly contributed to insecurity and instability.

Under Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian regime operated within a framework of multi-layered authoritarian governance, dominated by a small elite—primarily from the Alawite sect. Despite their minority status, the Alawites held a disproportionately powerful position in the political and military apparatus. This exclusivist approach to governance excluded any real vision of a comprehensive, inclusive national state that could integrate Syria's ethnic, sectarian, and cultural diversity. As a result, Syria experienced deep political instability, the rise of armed opposition groups, and the direct intervention of regional and global powers. These developments ultimately turned Syria into a battleground for regional rivalries and international power struggles, with the Syrian people paying the highest price.

Factors such as weak social cohesion, the absence of equitable power distribution, entrenched authoritarianism, and the targeting of specific sectarian groups, combined with a history of painful experiences and a persistent sense of existential threat, all contributed to the emergence of the Syrian crisis. Violent ideologies further inflamed the situation, enabling Syria to become an arena for geopolitical contestation.

From the perspective of various scholars, Syria became a site of regional score-settling, drawing in multiple international and regional actors. The United States intervened in Syria to pursue its longstanding strategic goals, while Israel sought to weaken the Axis of Resistance in order to ensure its national security. Turkey, having been denied accession to the European Union, reoriented its focus toward the Middle East, seeking to expand its influence by managing and intervening in regional crises. In parallel, some regional countries provided support to extremist groups, contributing to the widespread proliferation of organizations such as al-Qaeda, with direct assistance from external actors. All of these dynamics accelerated the collapse of the Assad regime and ushered in a period of rapid political transformation in Syria, culminating in the fall of Bashar al-Assad's government in 2024.

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