

## The Role of Global Powers in the Prolongation of the Syrian Conflict

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**Abstract** *Since the people's uprising in 2011 against the authoritarian regime of Bashar Al Assad and its oppressive policies, Syria is entangled in a long spiral of violent conflict. Though several factors explain the violent nature of the conflict and its longevity. However, the geopolitical interests of the regional and global powers like Saudi Arabia vs. Iran and the US vs. Russia respectively, in this country has been the main determinant of this war. The intervention of the US and Russia in this war for their vested geopolitical interests has brought havoc and disaster to the country. By supporting opposite parties both these states have, instead of creating peace, prolonged the conflict for almost a decade. This paper tries to analyze the role of the global powers in the Syrian civil war, through the Power Transition Theory. No prospects of peace are visible in the near future as long as they try to balance one another's power or unless there emerges a clear dominant power.*

**Key Words:** Power Transition Theory, Arab Spring, Middle East, Civil War.

### Introduction

The nine-year-long conflict in Syria is the result of the Arab uprising in 2011 which is commonly referred to as the Arab Spring. The people in the Arab world stood against the tyrannical and despotic rulers, who were ruling these states for decades, demanding reforms in the socio-political structures and calling for greater individual freedoms. The roots of these protests and uprisings are deeply embedded in the socio-economic and politico-religious inequalities between the rulers and the ruled in these countries. However, the self-immolation of Muhammad Bu Azizi- a vendor in Tunisia- acted as a triggering point that sparked the outrage of the people which immediately turned into protests and spread like a wildfire in most of the Arab states. These protests turned more violent when met with the brute force of the governmental forces, consequently, forcing out these authoritarian rulers in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya.

Syria, which has been ruled by the Assad's family for almost five decades, is also engulfed by the wave of the Arab Spring. The Syrian conflict started in March 2011 as an anti-government protest against Bashar Al Assad's regime, demanding greater individual freedom, equal access to political institutions and economic resources, turned into an armed rebellion. Ever since the war continued unabated and brought many regional and international powers into the conflict due to the changing geopolitical dynamics of the region. The conflict has resulted in one of the worst humanitarian crises in human history after World War II, killing some 500,000 people and displacing up to 9 million Syrians internally or externally (Kabalan, 2019). The street protests turned into a violent conflict because of the repressive response of the government against

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the protesters. While the lack of freedom and economic woes drove resentment against the government, the brutal crackdown on protesters aroused public anger resulting in a long civil war in the country. Unlike in other countries, where the uprising of the public resulted in the deposition of the rulers, in Syria, the government has been successful so far in retaining its hold in the country.

The geostrategic interests of the great powers, especially those of the US and Russia, have brought havoc to the region. Their involvement in the Syrian conflict by supporting opposite parties to the conflict and vying for greater influence in the region in general and in Syria, in particular, has exacerbated the issue, consequently stretching out the war for almost a decade. This paper will try to answer the question that how the involvement of the global powers (USA, Russia, and to some extent China) has prolonged the civil war in Syria. By using the Power Transition Theory, it tries to analyze why the US and Russia are pitched against one another in the Syrian conflict.

## Literature Review

The interplay between international powers in the Middle East such as the US supporting the rebels and Russia supporting Assad's regime has been highlighted and analyzed by many scholars and experts in the field. As Rogers and Reeve had pointed out back in 2015 that international intervention has dramatically transformed Syrian uprising into a more complex war [\\_\(Rogers & Reeve, 2015\)\\_](#). What started as a street protest has developed into a full-scale civil war with the intervention of global powers, struggling for the geostrategic dynamics in the region. Russian involvement in the conflict, according to Rogers and Reeve, seeks tactical benefits for the Assad regime in an attempt to attain its strategic aims of resolving the Syrian conflict on pro-Russian terms thus expanding its area of influence (Rogers & Reeve, 2015). However, even with such strong support from Russia the Syrian government has been unsuccessful to bring an end to the nine- a year-long conflict that compels one to search for the reasons for the longevity of this war.

Emile Hokayem holds the contribution of external factors, both regional as well as international, to be responsible for the violent nature of the Syrian conflict. He views that the material support especially from the US and Russia to the opposing parties has not only intensified the conflict but also sustained [it \(Hokayem, 2012\)](#). Hokayem views that the Syrian rebels embarked upon this long conflict in the hope that they would also receive the same support from the United States as did Libya against Qaddafi [\\_\(Hokayem, 2012\)\\_](#), however, they failed to garner such support as many in the west are more fearful of the rise of Sunni radicals in the region. Berti and Paris validate this point in their essay "Beyond Sectarianism: Geopolitics, Fragmentation, and the Syrian Civil War" by referring to somewhat hesitant support of the west to the rebels. The West fears the rise of radicalism and polarization which are perceived as potential threats [\\_\(Berti & Paris, 2014\)](#). As a result, the opposition to Assad's regime is weak and is far beyond united to fight their way against the government forces effectively. On the other hand the rebels, upon receiving pieces of training from the US forces, have denied the government forces to achieve a breakthrough in the situation, consequently elongating the conflict. Despite their concerns, the western powers and especially the US strategic interplay in the country has been instrumental in stretching the conflict.

## Hypothesis

The involvement of the global powers i.e. USA and Russia have protracted the Syrian conflict.

## Research Question

1. How has the involvement of the US and Russia prolonged the civil war in Syria?
2. Why are the US and Russia pitched against one another in the Syrian conflict?

## Methodology

This research paper is mainly based on the qualitative research methodology using qualitative instruments

for collecting and analyzing data. The reason for using this method is that this paper endeavors to focus upon understanding the embedded meanings of the involvement and interests of the global powers in this war. The sources that have been consulted for the data collection are mainly comprised of books, research journals, and internet-based research.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The prolonged nature of the Syrian conflict owes its existence, to a greater extent, to the rivalry of the great powers in the region and the continuous shifts in their dynamics of power. As Friedman writes in the Atlantic that the never-ending war in Syria is not just the acts of violence between the warring parties rather it is about 'the confrontation between two largest military powers of the world' namely United States and Russia (Friedman, 2018). To find out answers to the questions mentioned above, this paper takes the help of Power Transition Theory that sketches international structure different from that of the realist school. "Power transition theory is a structural and dynamic approach to world politics" (Tammen, Kugler, & Lemke, *Power Transition Theory*, 2017). "Due to its focus on power, it is sometimes associated with realism, however, it is very different from that school.

After the end of the cold war, almost all approaches to international relations, which were mainly based on power, shifted to the backseat as they fail to predict the end of the cold war. However with the re-emergence of conflicts among great powers of the world and the 'shifts in the power positions' have once again brought theoretical approaches that focused on the role of power to the limelight (Rauch, 2018). Power Transition theory deals with the pattern of power relations that often changes in world politics. "It provides a probabilistic tool by which to measure structural changes that forecast how probable changes in cooperative or confrontational tactics will affect the likelihood of preserving peace or waging war" (Tammen, Kugler, & Lemke, *Foundations of Power Transition Theory*, 2017). It examines the relations among the states and their satisfaction or dissatisfaction towards the distribution of power in international politics.

Power transition theory that was propounded for the first time by A.F.K Organski in the 1950s claims that global or international system is composed of a hierarchical structure where a dominant state lies at the top maintaining order in the system. However, with the rise of new powers to the top the power position of the dominant states keeps on changing, giving way to others. Both power transition theory and political realism deal with the questions of war and peace, the role of power in the international system, and taking states as the main actors in the international arena. But, there is a great difference between the two at least in two respects. Firstly, realists claim that the international system is anarchic while Power Transition Theory (PTT) argues that it is hierarchical. Secondly, both talk about the configuration of the system to attain the highest peace possible. Realists rely upon the balance of power to ensure peace among the conflicting interests of the states. According to balance-of-power theorists, the dominance of a single state or a coalition of states is highly unstable because the dominant actor is likely to 'engage in aggressive behavior' (Paul, 2004) thus creating an environment for war.

On the other hand, the proponents of PTT argue that the balance of power does not guarantee peace rather it invites wars. Power Transitions proposes that peace prevails in a system where there is a great disparity in the power positions of states and that the presence of a dominant power regulates the relations among the states. As Organski puts it that the presence of a dominant state in the system increases chances for peace because the stronger rely less on war to achieve its objectives as it can do it without using force, while the weaker would be foolish to think of going to war with the stronger for attaining its interests (Organski, 1968). Hence the system that is ordered on a hierarchical structure having a dominant, major, and small powers would be more peaceful than the one where the dissatisfied major powers attain parity with the dominant state thus challenging the latter to change the status quo and power positions.

Douglas Lemke moved Power Transition theory from global to the regional level. In his book "Regions of War and Peace" he analyses that the same principles that hold global hierarchy are also applicable at the regional level defining the interactions of states [\(Lemke, 2002\)](#). Regions that have clear hierarchical order stay more stable than the ones which do not have such order or where there is power parity between the regional powers. The Middle Eastern region lacks such a hierarchy. The competing states such as Saudi Arabia and Iran and other major competitors are usually found in conflicts and confrontations, vying for preponderance and dominance in the region. Such conflicting zones provide a space to global powers as well who flex their muscles there to outdo each other in the power struggle and extend their areas of influence.

The Syrian conflict is an outstanding example of the rivalry of the great powers. Owing to the lack of regional hierarchical power structure and the diminishing role of the United States as a dominant actor at the global level, other actors like Russia and China are creeping in, filling the vacuum created by the US. Resurging Russia as a dissatisfied major power, wanting to change the status quo and tilt the power towards itself, has been challenging the US in the Middle East since the Arab uprising in 2011. It openly came to support Assad's regime alongside Iran as against the US which has been supporting the rebels to overthrow the regime. The rivalry between these two global competitors dates back to the Cold War era where they were in a constant struggle to get an upper hand over one another and attain the top position in the global hierarchy. Their struggle ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 and the USA emerged as a sole superpower (Dominant Actor) at the world stage. The resurgence of Russia in recent years has upset the global hierarchy by challenging the US in different parts of the world. According to the PTT analysis, Russia's efforts to balance US power has resulted in bigger conflicts rather than establishing peace in the world. By supporting opposite parties in the Syrian conflict both these states have brought disaster to the country. Instead of creating peace, they prolonged the conflict for almost a decade. No prospects of peace are visible shortly as long as they try to balance one another's power or unless there emerges a clear dominant power.

As the Power Transition Theory propounds, due to the absence of a clear hierarchical power structure in the Middle East, the region is entangled in a long spiral of intrinsic as well as extrinsic wars and conflicts. The latest civil war in Syria is a practical manifestation of PTT. Regional powers like Saudi Arabia, Iran, and their respective allies and proxies enjoy parity in their powers and military capabilities, hence a dominant player is missing in the region. Their involvement in the Syrian civil war, by supporting opposing parties to the war in the name of sectarianism, is not going to bear fruit for any party as they can effectively counter one another. As a result, the war continues unabated till date.

The conflicting situation between the regional powers in Syria also provides a better battleground for Russia and the US. The global dominance of the US is waning, while Russia is poised to take its place at least militarily. Looking through the lens of PTT, the latter is the dissatisfied emerging player on the world stage which is trying to change the status-quo and attain the dominant position of the former. The lust for power dominance has brought these two global rivals to flex their muscles in the Syrian war by supporting opposing forces. Consequently, due to the interventionist policies of regional as well as global powers for attaining the top position in the power hierarchies, the civil war in Syria perpetuated for almost a decade and continues.

## **Discussion/ Analysis**

The Syrian civil war emerged as a result of an anti-government protest against Bashar Al Assad's regime, demanding reforms in the socio-economic and political structures of the country, soon turned into a violent conflict. The divide between Sunnis and Alawites in Syria and the ever-changing geopolitical dynamics in the region have invited many international and regional players into the conflict which resulted in protracting

the conflict in Syria. The continuous atrocities within the country reflect a grim picture of the power politics of the big powers.

From the above discussion it can be inferred that as the conflict deepens, both the government and the opposition forces or the 'pro and anti-regime forces' getting deeply dependent upon the aid and support of the regional and global powers. Due to the greater involvement of these external players, Syria has become a battlefield for the geopolitical and religious rivalries of the great powers (Laub, 2019). Increased number of deaths and desertion in the army has weakened the regime's ability to fight the rebels on its own and hence ended up heavily relying on Russia and Iran for economic and military support. Both Iran and Russia have their geopolitical interests in the region to pursue, owing to which they readily rush to help Assad's regime, thus getting an opportunity to attain their objectives.

Iran and Syria have been allies for a very long time. By supporting Assad's regime Iran is set to strengthen its position against its two main regional rivals: Saudi Arabia and Israel. With the former, it has competing interests for political and religious hegemony in the region that has been discussed in the preceding section in detail. While the latter is considered as an illegitimate occupier of Muslim land, Palestine, that has strained the relations between the two since the Iranian revolution of 1979. According to *Deutsche Welle* or DW (a German state-owned public international broadcaster), Iran's alliance with Syria and Assad is very important as it sends military hardware to Hezbollah (a Shia militant organization based in Lebanon which fights against Israeli forces for the liberation of Palestine) through Syria. It also aims to connect with Lebanon through a land corridor that will pass through Iraq and Syria (Syria Conflict: What do the US, Russia, Turkey and Iran want?, 2019). For these reasons Iran has been injecting millions of dollars into Syria in terms of military and economic aid, owing to which Assad has been able to retain his power in the country in the face of fierce resistance from different rebel factions.

However, on the other hand, Israel has an existential (perceived) threat from Iran. The latter's growing influence in the neighboring countries of Israel poses a potential danger of conflict between the two and hence can result in more violent conflicts across the region. There is no clear hierarchy of power in the Middle East where a dominant state can regulate the behaviors and actions of other states. Hence, this region is comprised of potential rivals and is more prone to bloody conflicts.

Similarly, at the global level, with the declining hegemony of the US at the world stage, other power centers, like Russia and China, are emerging and challenging the status quo. These emerging powers are dissatisfied with the existing power structure where the US has been overwhelmingly enjoying preponderance since the end of the Cold War. These states, particularly, Russia have been flexing its muscles in the Middle East to challenge and replace the US dominancy in the region, hence aiming at power transition in the international political arena. With this aim in mind, Russia has been pro-active in providing support to Assad's regime, be it economic, military, or diplomatic support. It has vetoed measures in the UN Security Council that aimed at punishing Assad's administration, criticizing the measures of intervention as illegal by justifying their claim that such interventionist policies in Libya achieved nothing but chaos, disorder, and violence (Syria Conflict: What do the US, Russia, Turkey and Iran want?, 2019). Besides that, Russia's support has been instrumental in the conflict by deploying its air force in Syria, thus strengthening Assad's regime.

On the other hand, to counter the rivals and maintain their hegemony in the region, the roles and objectives of Saudi Arabia and the US cannot be overshadowed. An agreement among Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey back in 2015 led to the formation of the 'Army of Conquest', which was comprised of many opposing and extremist groups in Syria, against the regime. The religious schisms between Saudi Arabia and Iran and their struggle for regional dominancy have pitted both these states against one another. Their support to opposite parties in the conflicts in the Middle East is a reflection of their attempts to outdo one another in this race for dominancy.

Similarly, the apparent aim of the US in Syria was to defeat ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). However, its underlying strategic objectives are the protection of the state of Israel, ensuring the unhindered flow of oil from the region, maintaining its hegemony, and minimizing chances for Iran and its allied organization, like Hezbollah, to maintain a permanent presence in Syria thus endangering the security of Israel. The US covertly provided training and arms to the rebels to fight against the forces of the regime (Laub, 2019). Such a state of affairs reflects the power struggle between the existing and the emerging powers. The power politics of these states within Syria have not only worsened the tragedies of the Syrian people but also extended the war for almost a decade.

## Findings

- Owing to the lack of regional hierarchical structure in the Middle East, this region is mostly engulfed in wars and conflicts.
- Iran's growing influence and its permanent presence in Syria presents a potential threat to the regional security of the Middle East. Iran is seen by Israel as an existential threat to its very existence. Its growing influence in Syria can provoke Israel that can lead both these states towards another conflict which would bring more chaos and violence to the war-ridden Middle East.
- The US's power is diminishing in the region not because of its power over-stretching but because of the emergence of a challenger (Russia) which has challenged its dominancy and hence a power transition is taking place.
- Besides global power politics, Sectarian division between Sunnis and Alawites (Shia) has been one of the most significant causes of protraction of the Syrian civil war which is mostly overshadowed in the literature.

## Conclusion

The conflict in Syria is the result of the wave of freedom and democratization that swept throughout the Middle East back in 2011. Many strong and authoritarian regimes in the region crumbled as they failed to sustain public pressure. The events that occurred in the neighborhood of Syria inspired the Syrian population who also took to the streets, demanding an end to the decades-long authoritarian rule of Assad's family and calling for more political freedom, equal access to economic resources and an end to the corruption of the elites that had deformed the very foundations of the state's institutions. However, unlike in other Middle Eastern states (Libya, Egypt, and Tunisia, etc.), the people in Syria have been unsuccessful to overthrow Assad's regime so far and the protests quickly turned into a long civil war that persists as of today.

Several explanations were presented by the analysts and experts to explain and analyze the Syrian civil war. However, the power politics of regional and global powers have been at the forefront of all these issues that transformed the street protests into a long spiral of violent conflict. The sectarian fault lines within Syria invited regional powers like Saudi Arabia and Iran to exploit the situation and extend their influence in the region by supporting the rebels and the regime respectively. While the decline of the US hegemony in the region and the world at large has provided an opportunity for other players like Russia to replace the US, thus announcing its resurgence by flexing its muscles in this war. By supporting Assad's regime Russia has seriously made a dent in the US hegemony and influence in the Middle East.

The resurgence of Russia in recent years has upset the global hierarchy by challenging the US in different parts of the world. By analyzing the situation through the Power Transition Theory it can easily be comprehended that Russia's efforts to balance US power have resulted in bigger conflicts rather than establishing peace in the world. Supporting opposite parties in the Syrian conflict both these states have brought havoc and disaster to the country. Instead of creating peace, they prolonged the conflict for almost a decade. No prospects of peace are visible soon as long as they try to balance one another's power or unless there emerges a clear dominant power.

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