

Full Length Research

THE GEO-POLITICS OF WAR IN SYRIA

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That the geographical location of a state plays a significant role in shaping its domestic and international politics is beyond every reasonable doubt. While some states are located at strategic trade routes, others are located in areas reputed for their abundant natural resources. In the case of Syria, the lingering civil war has generated different explanations on the possible causes. One of such explanations is that Syria is of geostrategic interest to the superpowers. The central objective of this paper, therefore, is to ascertain what these geo-strategic interests are. With the help of veto theory, the study argues that wielding veto power provides licence to the superpowers to pursue their national interests – even at the cost of prolonged civil war as is the case in Syria.

Keywords: Geopolitics; Conflict, Conflict Resolution, National Interest, Veto Power, War.

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INTRODUCTION

Wars – whether intra or inter-state – are ill wind incapable of blowing any good. They are triggered by contradictions between different actors. Contradictions arise due to incompatibility of goals. The history of many countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle-East, is replete with various cases of conflict. Most of these conflicts arise over contentious borders, ambition to control natural resources, demand for self-determination, and even religious differences (Njoku, 2012; Asobie, 2005). Anyu (2007:13) opines that certain fundamental factors which be taken into account in understanding the cause and course of wars include, but are not limited to:

The resources available in the area, the strategic nature of the area, the size of the disputed area, the magnitude of the antagonism of the claimants, the involvement of ethnic conflict in the disputed area, historic animosity between the disputants, the occurrence of recent violence in

the area, the number of inhabitants at risk, the number of people killed in the area, third party involvement and sometimes the religious differences in the disputed area (Anyu, 2007:13).

In the Syrian instance, a number of these factors is evident. There has long been animosity in that country between the minority ruling ethnic/religious group, and the majority groups. In external relations, the country has long had powerful antagonists in Turkey and Israel, as well as the United States. Thus, what started as a seemingly peaceful protest by dissatisfied Syrians in 2011 has gradually transformed into a lingering, full-blown and ferocious civil war, thanks to the critical role of external actors. In the opinion of Salloukh (2013:1), “the overlapping domestic, regional and international ‘struggle for Syria’ is yet another chapter in the grand geopolitical contest underway between Saudi Arabia and Iran and their respective allies...”. It becomes clear that starting

from its neighbours, external interests in Syria might have fed the war. Events of the Arab Spring in Syria may only have provided a convenient excuse and an opportunity – an excuse and opportunity these foreign entities found too good not to be fully exploited. This is the point of departure of this paper.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Tsebelis (2002) introduced the veto theory. He explained that a veto player is a political actor who is capable of truncating a choice that is being actively considered. This means that a veto player can single-handedly prevent a change from the prevailing situation of interest to it. This is especially so in situations in which all the players must arrive at a decision by consensus. Thus, Tsebelis noted that the fact that veto players have varying (national) interests makes the idea of consensus a rather strange term because harmonization of interests among actors is not the easiest of tasks. Deeper complications are most likely to be experienced if the differences have ideological roots.

The Veto Theory takes its point of departure from three specifically interdependent propositions. These propositions are that:

- Peace, universal or local, depended on the unanimity of those who have power to bring it about either by contributing more of their resources, or by actively involving themselves in the process of making peace;
- Those who have the power and the resources and contribute more to the effective and orderly functioning of the organisation should have a determining voice on what, where, how, and when their resources are going to be spent; and,
- Those who have the power and the resources to wage modern war will not agree to create an organisation with power to coerce any of the relatively equal power elites (Mac-Ogonor, 2000:82).

Specifically related to this paper is the first proposition which dwells on the need for agreement between actors powerful enough to broker peace. From this veto power, for instance, it can be argued that the fact that the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) are the ones that bear the bulk of funding of the UN, gives them room to make peace “where, how and when” they want it. In other words, veto power is used to first and foremost, pursue national interest and/or goals. This strand is notable because another side of the coin is that the need to pursue national interests supersedes every other finer sentiment

– like restoring peace to Syria and respecting the human rights of its citizens. This point will be explored subsequently.

IN THE BEGINNING

The current war in Syria, as stated earlier, is a result of non-violent demand by Syrians for reforms and greater accountability of their government. However, because of the country’s geopolitical nature within the region, the Syrian conflict has gradually metamorphosed into three distinct, but overlapping dimensions:

- (1) a domestic, regime-opposing battle that manifested itself in class, regional, and sectarian undertones;
- (2) a regional confrontation between Riyadh, Turkey, and the so-called moderate Arab states, on one hand, and Tehran and its regional proxies, especially Hizbullah, on the other; and,
- (3) an international confrontation between a US determined to contain and reverse Iran’s regional influence and an ascendant Russia bent on insulating itself from the threat of radical transnational Islamist groups, protecting its Syrian bridgehead in the Arab world, and demonstrating its newfound international stature (Salloukh, 2013:1).

In other words, a supposedly civil (intra-state) war has spawned a regional (inter-state) war – and this latter is further clarified by the role of superpowers. On the basis of the above categorisation by Salloukh (2013), it is expedient to examine each of these external actors and what is about Syria that excites their interest and draws them into the bloody fray.

In as much as the table 1 is self-explanatory, it is pertinent to note that those opposed to the Syrian government outnumber those in its support. Inclusive in the opposition list are the United States, Britain, France, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar. Only Russia and Iran are in support of the government of Assad. Obviously, however, this very apparent numerical superiority has not been reflected in the gains and issues in the battle fronts by these contending powers. This in itself is quite interesting, but it will not detain us here. Suffice it only to note at this point that the interest each of these states in with Syria dwell mostly on the geostrategic. The next sub-section examines this point.

THE GEOSTRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF SYRIA

That Syria is of strategic importance to a number of international actors is beyond every reasonable doubt.

Table 1: External Actors in the Syrian War

Country	Backing:	Opposing:	Involvement
U.S.	The Free Syrian Army and moderate Syrian rebel groups.	Assad, ISIS, extremist groups, Jabhat al-Nusra.	Drones and plane strikes against ISIS; Trains and equips rebels.
Iran	Assad. Iran is the Syrian regime's strongest regional ally.	Opposes Sunni fighters and ISIS.	Military and financial aid; using Hezbollah as surrogate in supporting Assad since 2012.
Turkey	The U.S. coalition and rebel Syrian forces.	Assad and ISIS (alleged to have ties with the PKK opposition group in Turkey).	Allows U.S. to use Turkish air bases; supports Free Syrian Army; admits Syrian refugees.
Saudi Arabia	Syrian rebel groups.	Assad.	Supplies weapons and funds; joins U.S.-led air strikes in Syria against ISIS.
Qatar	Syrian rebel groups.	Assad's government.	Funds/trains Syrian rebels; member of U.S.-led coalition.
Britain	Syrian rebel groups.	ISIS, Islamist and Assad.	Member of the U.S.-led coalition.
France	Syrian rebel groups.	ISIS, Islamist and Assad.	Member of the U.S.-led coalition.
Russia	Assad's government.	Officially ISIS; alleged by the U.S. to have bombed other rebel groups.	Syria is a long-time ally of Russia; has a military base in Syria, and a long-time supplier of weapons to Assad's forces; conducts air strikes against rebels.

Adapted from: https://www.huffingtonpost.com/milad-jokar/war-in-syria-geopolitics-_b_2378683.html.

Proof of this is the number of external powers involved, in one way or the other, in the on-going war, either in support of the government, or of the opposition (see Table 1). In the words of Joker (2013:1), "from a realistic point of view, the conflict can be viewed as a broader struggle between mainly Russia and Western countries which attempt to advance their national interests. For the West these interests are isolating Iran and bolstering the strategic and economic alliance with Arab allies like Qatar, which invests in Europe and offers an alternative to Russian gas". Beyond isolating Iran, the Western allies are interested in maintaining the strategic and economic alliance with the Persian Gulf allies. They are mindful of the geopolitics of gas, and Russia's naval expansion. A brief explanation of how these factors outlined by Joker (2013) play definitive roles will suffice here.

The European Union and the United States have obviously been interested in the oil wealth of the Persian

Gulf as well as in the isolation of Iran, using it as the lever to achieve this opposition to the Iranian uranium enrichment programme. It is thus, in the geopolitical strategic interest of the West to, if it can, cripple these two allies. Remarkably, Syria is Iran's staunch ally. On its part, Iran supports Syria mainly because of its Shia link – since Iran is dominated by Shia Muslims. Furthermore, a pro-Tehran Damascus would improve the bargaining position of Iran as it sizes up with the West. As long as Tehran and Damascus are in alliance, the West cannot claim total control of the Persian Gulf. This alliance also counter-balances to some extent, Iraq's dominance in the region; dominance which the West desires to see maintained. It has been observed by Asseburg (2013:13) that:

Syria's revolt has developed into a civil war fueled by external actors' strategic – and at times

existential – interests and meddling. International, regional and subnational conflicts are being fought in Syria. Above all, it is the conflict over Iran's regional role that has stoked the civil war. From the perspective of Arab Gulf states, first and foremostly Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the Syria crisis has offered an opportunity to reverse Tehran's considerable growth in influence since the 2003 Iraq War and to strengthen their own positions. Some US and Israeli strategists have also seen the Syrian civil war as an opportunity to decisively weaken Iran, hoping that defeat in the Levant would force Tehran to give ground on other issues such as its nuclear programme. They also expect that the Lebanese Hezbollah will be weakened by regime change in Syria, which serves as its main transit route for arms supplies (Asseburg, 2013:13).

Actualisation of the above case scenario will be in the interest of all the external actors opposed to Tehran and Moscow.

Also, there is an economic angle, not only security, to these geostrategic considerations for the West. For example, France – a permanent member of the UN Security Council – has lucrative partnership with Qatar, which has invested massively in France and Germany. For instance, Qatar holds 17% of the shares of Volkswagen, 10% of Porsche, 9% of the Hochtief construction giant and even more recently 3% of Siemens (Joker, 2013). In the same vein, the United Kingdom is a beneficiary of Qatari investment as Qatar owns 20% of shares in the London Stock Exchange and supplies about 59.3% of liquefied natural gas to Britain. The idea here is that if Qatar wants a weakened Syria, it can, through its important economic connections with the UK, France and Germany, attempt to actualise it. These Western countries thus have an interest to see a Qatar that does not come under the influence of either Syria or Iran.

Further, there is the geopolitics of gas; it is a well-known fact that Europe's gas demand is high due to its long autumn and winter seasons which can be severe. Within the Persian Gulf, Iran and Qatar possess the largest gas fields. Iran's ability to extract gas is encumbered by the series of sanctions imposed on it, unlike Qatar. This makes Qatar a much-valued partner. The other major source of gas for Europe is Russia. But the West European countries are reluctant to rely too much on Russian supply, not least because Russia could easily literally turn off Europe's gas should push come to shove. This makes Qatari gas for Europe all the more desirable.

The pact signed by Iran, Iraq and Syria in June 2013, to construct gas pipeline from the Persian Gulf to the

Mediterranean Sea meant that Damascus opted to sign an agreement with Tehran, effectively blocking Qatar's plans to construct its own pipeline through Syria. If Assad's government were to be toppled and a friendly regime installed in Damascus, perhaps, Qatar would be able to realise this ambition. This would reduce Europe's dependence on the Russian giant, Gazprom, for its gas supplies. It also has the potential of reducing the cost. Seen from the figure 1, both the Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline route (supported by Russia), and the Qatar-Turkey pipeline route (backed by the US) all pass through Syria. This makes Syria a window to Europe.

Again, Russia is interested in Syria because for the past four decades, a Russian naval fleet has been operating out of Tartus. Through this station, trade with other European countries becomes easier and oil can easily flow from the Middle-East. According to the National Bank of Canada (2017:2), "Russia has strongly backed the Syrian government with air support and an estimated 10,000 troops". According to the briefing, Russia's support for Syria, in addition to the naval base, is premised on:

The terrorist threat posed to Russia itself. Syria is very close to Russia geographically. A mere 850 kilometres separate Sochi (in the westernmost part of Russia near the Black Sea) and Aleppo, roughly the distance between Paris and Berlin. It is estimated that some 9,000 fighters have left Russia and the former Soviet republics to join the Islamic State to directly intervene in the Syrian conflict in September 2015 over fears that, if Assad fell, ISIS and other terrorist groups would use Syria as a base from which to attack Russia and the former Soviet republics (National Bank of Canada, 2017:2).

The above scenario is understandable as the tendency of conflict in one state to spill over to its neighbours is always very high. For Russia, ISIS and other terrorist sects should be fenced out and kept as far away as possible. Russia has already been battling with what it terms 'terrorist group' in its Chechnya region. The last thing it wants is to have ISIS linking up with the Chechnyan rebels and increasing its (Russia's) security challenges at home.

THE DYNAMICS OF US – RUSSIA INTEREST IN SYRIA

Of all the superpowers exerting significant influence on the Syrian war, the United States and Russia stand out. This is because of their support for the two major factions in the conflict – the Syrian government and the opposition. Their support for opposing actors is a clear indication of the conflict of their interests in Syria.

It is easy to see that by supporting the opposition, the US probably feels it has an opportunity to douse the power of an authoritarian government, as well as to

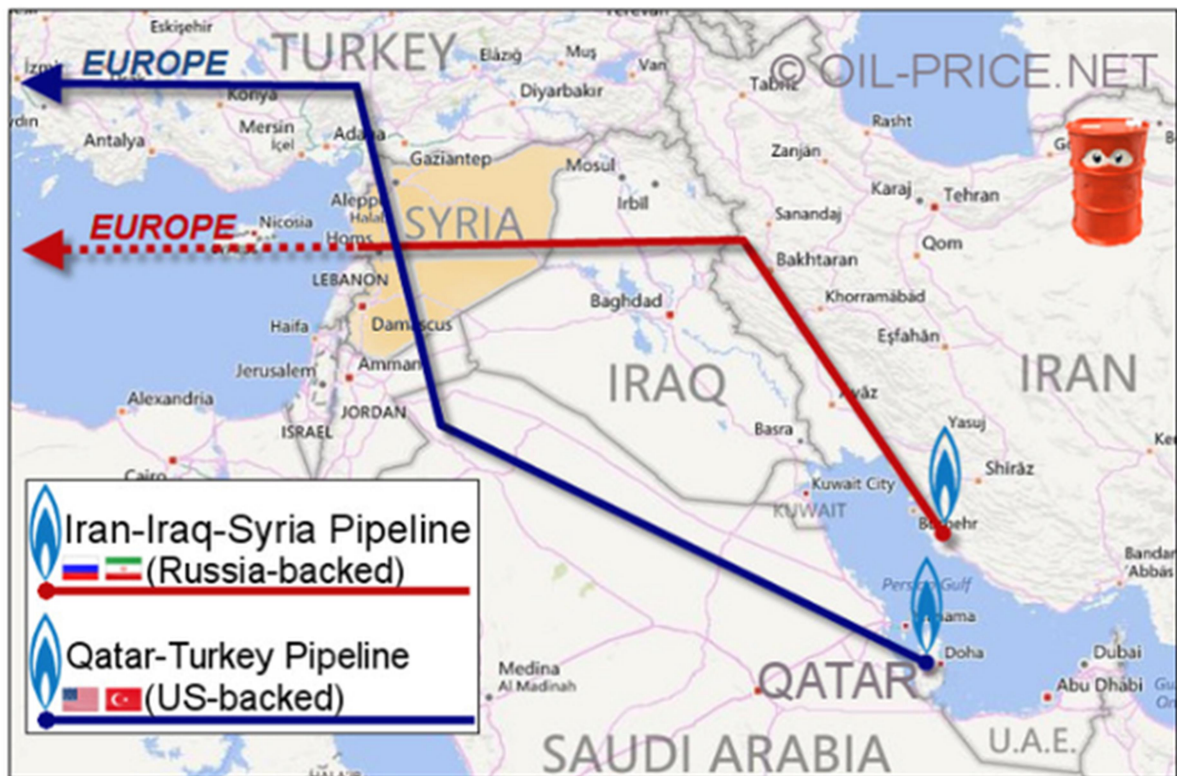


Figure 1: Pipeline Routes to Europe from the Middle East

Source: <https://qph.ec.quoracdn.net/main-qimg-6f120ddcc2e24438945cf1eb6589371>

protect the humanitarian interests of the Syrian civilians; at least, so it argues, carefully tucking away its strategic interests in seeming altruism. From a strategic angle, prevention of the ascendance of Iran to the status of a regional power in the Middle East is paramount. Considering the strong diplomatic ties between Syria and Iran and the anti-West stance both take, a weakened Syrian state will translate to the loss of a crucial ally for Iran. Furthermore, Israel's security is also of importance to Washington. It is a well-known fact that in the Middle East, Israel can justifiably claim to have only very few friends, but a good number of 'enemies'. On one hand, the US has been a staunch ally of Israel. Thus, it is expected that the involvement of the US in Syria must have some positive strategic implications for Israel.

On the other hand, it could be recalled that the military alliance between Russia and Syria spans more than four decades, with Russia intent on maintaining for itself, a position of strategic importance. With Iran, it seeks to counter-balance the US-Israeli alliance. Courtesy of the alliance, Russia supplies the Syrian government with military equipment with which it is able to contain and push back opposition. Obviously, a grateful Syria acting in concert with Iran will most likely ensure for Russia, that strategic presence in the Middle East that it very much

desires.

In the course of the Cold War with the then United Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR), the USA used its alliance with the likes of Iran (under the Shah), Egypt and Saudi Arabia to a great advantage in shaping the Middle East according to its interests. The USA supported any government that kept the Western companies in control of their oil, regardless of what kind of regime it was – fundamentalist theocracy, or an absolutist monarchy. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was enthroned as the Shah of Iran on September 16, 1941, and in the 1980's, Saddam Hussein, a great ally of the US then, received financial, intelligence and military aid (Byrne, 2013; Friedman, 1993; Timmerman, 1991). Meanwhile a Saudi jihadist was picked by the CIA and turned into a freedom fighter against the Soviets in Afghanistan and putting an end to fundamentalist Wahabist extremists in power. Invariably, it also put an end to the secular modernisation of Afghanistan. The key was to keep them away from the then USSR and keep their oil under the control of the West. Unsurprisingly, Israel sided with the USA and became the local representative of its interests. The Soviet Union worked against the US interests by supporting the nationalistic pan-Arabic parties like the Ba'ath Party in Syria. When the Shah – who was

enthroned by the US in Iran in 1941 was overthrown – Russia quickly became quite influential in Iran. This prompted the US to support those opposed to the Shah. In this category were mostly Iraqi and Saudi Sunnis.

Syria refused to recognize Israel as a sovereign country and to accept its right to existence. Egypt reacted more realistically by grudgingly recognising Israel with which it signed a peace pact. Syria, however, remained under the Soviets, which had military bases in the region. Because Syria allows Russia to use its port of Tartus, the USSR is able from that port to project its power in the Mediterranean Sea, and beyond.

With the effective disintegration of the USSR in December, 1991, Iraq turned into an enemy of the US, while Saudi Arabia became extremely rich and got a foothold in the US politics by donating money and investing in their companies (Pollack, 2002).

The objective of the US geopolitics in the Middle East the 21st century appears to be to leave the region dominated by its main allies – Israel and Saudi Arabia – and the subordination of the other states to these two, essentially.

In all, it is interesting to surmise the interests of the US (based on the foregoing discussion) in Syria as follows:

- a. to curb the influence of Russia at the Middle East region;
- b. denying Russia access to the Mediterranean Sea;
- c. to depose an anti-West government in Damascus;
- d. to further weaken an enemy of Israel;
- e. to back Saudi Arabia, an ally, against Iran;
- f. to weaken Iran; and,
- g. to facilitate access to gas for Europe.

Moreover, the interests of Russia in Syria appear to be:

- a. offer support to a staunch ally – Assad;
- b. retain its naval port at Tartus;
- c. prevent the US/Europe from having too strong a strategic position in the Middle East;
- d. assert itself as a major power in the Middle East; and,
- e. ensure continued dependence of Europe on Gazprom's gas supply.

CONCLUSION

Our discussion of the geopolitics of war in Syria makes it clear that the superpowers (the US and Russia, with their allies) are interested in Syria for one strategic reason or another. The major actors in this instance include the United States, Russia, France and Britain. Of significance in this interest is oil and especially gas supply for Europe

while on its part, Russian interest dwells on historic ties as well as its own internal security considerations. Each side, in sum, wants to drastically minimize the influence and military reach into the Middle East. The humanitarian issues, horrendous as they are, came a distant second to the interest of either Russia or the US. It should also be stated that when weighed against idealistic pursuits like human rights protection, these geostrategic interests weigh very heavily with the external actors. This is one of the reasons why finding a solution to the war in Syria, especially while relying on the external powers, cannot be the easiest of tasks. The major powers involved counter each other's influence with their veto power in the UN Security Council. Thus, by their action and inaction, these major powers impose on the Syrian people, a terrible weight of terror. These external actors seem oblivious of the fact that a war-torn Syria constitutes problem to not just its immediate neighbours, but also to the international community at large.

With the UNSC as the arena of the veto-wielding antagonists in Syria, the possibility of ending the Syrian war soon or bringing relief to the terror borne by the civilian population seems rather bleak. The other centres of international power and influence that could have played major roles to bring relief – the Arab League, the UN General Assembly and the European Union – are all compromised in one way or another. This is because their members have been involved on one side or the other in the war, as is evident above. Sadly, it seems, from our analysis here, that only a decisive military victory by one side or the other will end the shooting war. This will bring only so-called cold comfort because that will not guarantee the respect for human rights and the introduction of democracy in Syria – the very situation that created the internal excuse for the intervention of the external actors.

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