

The Geopolitics of the Struggle for Syria

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BASSEL F. SALLOUKH, SEP 23 2013

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, unleashed after the 2003 invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq by the United States. Riyadh considered Tehran’s dominant position in post-Saddam Iraq a threat to its security, to which the kingdom replied in classical realist balancing behaviour. A grand Saudi-Iranian contest over regional dominance was consequently unleashed in Iraq, Lebanon, as well as the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and to a lesser extent in Yemen and Bahrain[1]. Riyadh sought to contain Tehran’s new found strategic position and neutralise its efforts to extend its influence beyond the Iraqi theatre. Albeit often described by state officials and media pundits as a sectarian contest between Sunnis and Shi’a, this is in fact a very realist balance of power contest between two states and their proxies over regional supremacy. Riyadh’s use of sectarian discourse and sentiments early on in this contest does not detract from the primacy of geopolitics. Rather, sectarianism was deployed as an instrument of *Realpolitik* to rally support within the Gulf countries to the kingdom’s foreign policy vis-à-vis Iran[2].

The metamorphosis of the popular uprising in Syria from a peaceful demand for reforms to a largely regime-induced civil war created a new theatre for this aforementioned geopolitical contest. A onetime defensive realist actor preoccupied in the nibble footwork of the region’s geopolitical battles, Syria was transformed overnight into a battleground for at least three overlapping contests: (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; (3) and, finally, 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.

This overlapping battle has left Syria in political, economic, and societal ruins. Unsurprisingly, institutions built on the inertia of repression have collapsed, unable to sustain the stress of civil war. The country’s industrial heartland around Aleppo has been turned into a wasteland, making any future postwar recovery slow and painful. Most alarmingly, however, is the country’s rupture along sectarian, religious, and ethnic lines. Sunni-Alawi communal massacres, and religious and ethnic violence, shattered the fabric of society, making a future unitary Syrian state a distant prospect[3]. Similarly, battles between the transnational Salafi-*takfiri* Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham (Support Front for the Peoples of Greater Syria) and the country’s Kurdish minority in the northeast reanimated demands for regional autonomy. The peaceful protestors who braved the regime’s security forces demanding a more democratic polity now find themselves caught between the rock of the regime’s brutal response and the primeval ambitions of al-Qaeda-affiliated foreign and local Salafi-*takfiri* groups determined to take Syria back to an imagined yet sordid primeval past.

To be sure, Riyadh’s near obsession with regime change in Syria is shaped in part by the idiosyncratic predilections of Saudi decision-makers[4]. They have never forgiven Damascus for the alleged assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri on February 14th, 2005. Nor have they forgotten Bashar al-Assad’s presumptuous words after the 2006 war with Israel labelling Hizbullah’s detractors as ‘half-men’. Idiosyncrasies aside, however, Riyadh’s push for regime change in Syria is driven primarily by realist geopolitical calculations. Riyadh free-rode on the democratic aspirations of the Syrian peoples to undermine Iran’s regional influence. It wants to achieve this by

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toppling the regime of Iran's principal ally in the Arab world, replace it with one beholden to the kingdom, and, furthermore, use regime-change in Syria to recalibrate the sectarian balance of power in Iraq that is currently tipped in Iran's favor. Regime-change in Syria is bound to complicate Iran's access to the territory of an allied state bordering Israel, curtail substantially Tehran's ability to transfer weapons and military supplies to Hizbullah, and deny the latter its Damascus sanctuary used to procure military supplies and transport party cadres en route for training in Iran.

On its part, Tehran invested substantial political and material capital in the support of its beleaguered Syrian ally[5]. It shielded the regime politically at a time when the Arab League, led first by Qatar and then by Saudi Arabia, orchestrated a diplomatic campaign to ostracize Damascus and lobbied Washington to undertake a military strike aimed at crippling the regime after it was accused of using chemical weapons against rebel forces around Damascus. Tehran managed to keep the Syrian regime financially afloat, and supplied credit lines to maintain food imports. It has dispatched telecommunication experts and Revolutionary Guard commanders versed in the art of urban warfare to oversee the regime's war effort, and is rumored of training Shi'a volunteers from Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia to fight against all kinds of local and foreign opposition forces in Syria. Most importantly, however, is the military involvement of Hizbullah, Iran's geopolitical proxy, in the struggle for Syria. Hizbullah's control of the city of Qusayr near the Lebanese-Syrian borders proved a game-changer in the war, paving the way for the strategic battle for Homs city and interrupting rebel supply lines en route to the environs of Damascus.

The wanton deaths, massive refugee waves, and colossal destruction of Syria epitomize the destructive effects of the sectarianization of regional geopolitical battles and the use of the popular Arab uprisings for otherwise geopolitical ends. The Syrian peoples' once peaceful uprising is now lost in the fog of geopolitical and proxy battles. Sectarian animosities and modes of mobilization are filling up the vacuum created in the wake of collapsing state institutions, followed up by the usual massacres and ethnic cleansings committed in the name of otherwise very modern and historically constructed identities. All this jeopardizes the territorial integrity of a future postwar Syria. The country has become a playground for regional and international contests criss-crossed by all sorts of local and transnational al-Qaeda-affiliated Salafi-*takfiri* groups. Any viable postwar power-sharing arrangement for Syria will probably end up institutionalizing ethnic, sectarian, and religious identities in the context of a decentralized state, à la Iraq. Yet short of a grand bargain gathering the main regional and international actors involved in the region's geopolitical battles, Syria is bound to remain a site for more death and destruction, and its peoples' desire for a democratic and inclusive polity will remain elusive.

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[1] For a comprehensive account of this geopolitical contest see Bassel F. Salloukh, "The Arab Uprisings and the Geopolitics of the Middle East," *The International Spectator* 48, 2, (June 2013): 32-46.

[2] See F. Gregory Gause, III, *Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East*, Council on Foreign Relations Special Report No. 63, New York: Council on Foreign Relations, December 2011.

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[3] See Sam Dagher, "Syria's Alawite Force Turned Tide for Assad," *Wall Street Journal*, 26 August 2013, at:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887323997004578639903412487708.html>.

[4] See Adam Entous, Nour Malas, and Margaret Coker, "A Veteran Saudi Power Player Works To Build Support to Topple Assad," *Wall Street Journal*, 25 August 2013, at:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887323423804579024452583045962.html>; and Adam Shatz, "Working Together Separately," *London Review of Books Blog*, 3 September 2013, at: <http://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2013/09/03/adam-shatz/working-together-separately/>.

[5] See Farnaz Fassihi, Jay Solomon, and Sam Dagher, "Iranians Dial Up Presence in Syria," *Wall Street Journal*, 16 September 2013, at:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887323864604579067382861808984.html>.

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