The Political Economy of the Violence in Syria: An Impact-Based Analysis

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Abstract—The civil war that has engulfed the Syrian Arab Republic, since March 2011, is set to unleash a lasting effect on both the political and socio-economic trajectories of the country. The country’s political and economic challenges would be in dire need of outside-the-box curatives long after the violence activities are over. In other words, the political economy of Syria would encounter a set of unparalleled interconnected difficulties that cannot be unriddled by a simple prescription of traditional textbook economic policies. Even though the Syrian economy was able to weather the global economic recession in 2008, it is apparent that, if the country wants to pull through future economic shocks while upholding both political and social stability it desires, then it needs to overhaul its administrative and economic structures. The country’s economy was already in dire difficulties long before the conflict. The most important foreign exchange earner of the country was oil, but production was in sharp decline. In the 1990s, oil output almost doubled. However, in 2002, it fell from a peak of 677,000 barrels per day. Again, only 327,000 bpd were produced in 2011. The civil war has killed over a million Syrians and displaced more than 5.5 million citizens of the country. The country’s economy slumped by over 80 percent from 2010 to 2019. The extreme violence that dominated the scene in Syria has shifted attention away from the deep structural transformations affecting the country’s economy and governance structures. Now that violence has considerably subsided, these are becoming more visible. Much has been written about the ethnic and sectarian divisions in the conflict in Syria. However, very little attention is given to its political economy, which is very crucial in understanding the taproots of the ongoing war. The contraction of the economy of the country and the emergence of a war economy have seriously affected the composition and stratification of the political economy of Syria. This study seeks to examine the political economy of the Syrian civil war, including the exposition of the conditions of the Syrian economy before and during the war, the changing dynamics of the war, and the roles of external players.

Index Terms—syrian arab republic, middle east, arab spring, political economy, violence

I. INTRODUCTION

The upheaval that has engulfed the Syrian Arab Republic, since March 15, 2011, would have a long time effect on both the country’s economic developmental trajectory and the state-society relations. Apart from its horrendous loss of innocent lives, the ongoing conflict in Syria is causing a near-collapse of the country’s economic output. Even before the civil war finally comes to an end, Syria is already feeling the terrible consequences of the violence: oil and tax revenues have severely diminished, corruption is very pervasive, the rule of law is weak, property rights have been ignored while the country’s militias confiscate private property and extort businesses to varying degrees [1]. Faced with ongoing international sanctions and limited financial resources, the Assad regime is relying, partly, on Russian loans and Iranian financial support.

The government of President Bashar al-Assad controls western, southern, and central parts of the country, largely because of the military backing it enjoys from Iran and Russia [2]. Since the 1970 military coup d'état by Hafez al-Assad (the father of Bashar al-Assad), the Assad family has been at the helm of affairs of the country without a break [3]. In 2000, President Bashar al-Assad ascended the ‘throne’ after his father but has since failed to ease political repression and open up the socialist economy for diversification. A vicious crackdown of protesters in 2011 sparked a nationwide uprising against the regime. And by 2012, this had degenerated into a civil war fueled by sectarianism between the Alawite-dominated regime and the predominantly Sunni rebels. Backed by Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah, the Assad regime has largely defeated the fractured armed opposition. Over a million Syrians have lost their lives to the conflict and more than 5.5 million are displaced [4]. From 2010 to 2019, the country’s economy declined by over 80 percent [5].

President Bashar al-Assad is determined to reclaim all lost territories, even though his authority is often contested in the areas he controls, partly, because of his regime’s crackdown on dissent in the recaptured territories. Israeli targeted airstrikes have tactically deterred Iran. But the Persian country remains committed, strategically, to advance its interests in Syria, not only economically but also politically, culturally and militarily. Moscow doesn’t appear focus on transitioning its military success story into a political appendage that could end the civil war in Syria. On the other hand, Turkey sees the seemingly heightened military strength of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Syria as an existential threat and has launched a series of military interventions in the northeastern part of Syria aimed at dismantling the front of the SDF in the area. In the meantime, the humanitarian situation in areas recaptured by the regime remains dire and reconstruction work and stabilization process are yet to take shape. Large concentrations of detained fighters and displaced persons in camps across Syria, lack of services and good governance, and premature returns of refugees could incite new waves of protest and fighting. Of course, as indicated by Cristian Reynjers [6], the coronavirus ‘pandemic has added another layer of complexity to a situation that was already catastrophic’.

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The questions in the minds of many conflict analysts and academics are: how did we get here and where do we go from here? This study seeks to analyse the political economy of the civil war in Syria: expounding the statuses of the country’s political economy before, during and after the war, the changing dynamics of the war, and the roles of external players. On methodology, the discussion in this paper is a remote-based and broad-brush undertaking, drawing entirely on secondary sources such as books, scholarly articles, media analyses on the subject matter and existing public information.

II. SYRIA COUNTRY PROFILE

Once a prominent center of the Islamic Caliphate, the Syrian Arab Republic covers an area that has seen invasions and occupations for many decades – from Romans and Mongols to Crusaders and Turks. Syria, in its current form, is just a narrow portion of its ancient geographical landmass, an area located at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. The contemporary states of Lebanon, Israel, Syria, and Jordan were all created from that region by western powers in the early post-Ottoman era [7]. The Arab Republic of Syria is a country of deserts and high mountains, fertile plains, and home to diverse religious and ethnic groups, such as the Kurds, Assyrians, Armenians, Druze, Christians, Arab Sunnis, and Alawite Shia. The Arab Sunnis constitute the bulk of the Muslim population in the country [8]. Syria shares borders with the Republic of Turkey in the north, Israel and Lebanon in the west, in the south with Jordan, and in the east with Iraq (see Fig. 1). Indeed, it is said that Syria’s propinquity to some of the largest oil-rich nations in the world and its centrality in the region have made it a crucial economic factor in the Middle East.

Fig. 1. Syria and Neighboring States

With an estimated population of 18 million [2] – [9], modern-day Syria attained its independence from France in 1946 [10]. The Syrian Arab Republic, perhaps due to its geographical location, has experienced some periods of Sturm und Drang instigated by the conflicting pursuits of the different ethnoreligious groups in the country. The country united with Nasser’s Egypt in 1958, but an army coup restored its independence before the Pan-Arab nationalist Baath (Renaissance) party took control in 1963. The military leaders, an Alawite majority, firmly established control of the affairs of the country. However, the civil unrest has since descended Syria into a ravaging armed conflict. The Baath regime saw an anti-Western policy abroad and an authoritarian rule at home, particularly under the late President – Hafez al-Assad – from 1970 to 2000 [11]. A civil war in neighboring Lebanon in the 1970s allowed it to extend its political and military influence in that country. The reputationally-wounded regime of President Assad harshly dealt with the opposition in the country. The 1982 suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood uprising in Hama was estimated to have killed tens of thousands.

Armed security forces, in 2011, tried to counter anti-regime street protests that were stirred up by the ‘Tunisian-originated’ Arab Spring. However, the protests rapidly metamorphosed into a full-blown conflict, with regional and international powers, as well as Islamic jihadist groups taking sides to advance their interests. Since then, Syria has become a battleground for world powers. In mid-2013, the emergence of the radical Islamic militia group (the Al-Nusra Front) led to regional and international support for the opposition. This paved the way for the regime and its allies such as the Iranian-backed Lebanese Hezbollah, Russia and Iran to launch a counter-offensive airstrike against the opposition. The Assad regime lost significant swaths of territory to the rebels, while the self-styled Islamic State fighters had also made significant gains on the ground both in neighboring Iraq and in Syria. Russia got involved in the conflict in 2015 claiming that it was there to fight terrorist groups (i.e. ISIS/ISIL), but the opposition, as well as its western allies, accused Moscow of...
hitting anti-regime fighters the hardest. Turkey also followed suit in 2016 when Ankara sent troops to augment Turkish-backed insurgents to repel Kurdish rebels whom Ankara considers a threat to its national security.

III. THE KEY ACTORS IN THE CONFLICT

The armed conflict in Syria has been going on for ten years now. Both the opposition and the regime regard themselves fighting in a battle that leaves no room for any form of compromise. In the same vein, supporters for all actors in the conflict treat it as “a zero-sum game” that comes with far-reaching implications for their strategic interests. Hence, each external influencer in the conflict is determined to forestall any consequence they deemed as unfavorable to their interests [12]. Their financial, diplomatic, and in most cases military support toughens the stands of the hardliners on both sides and helps fan the flames of the conflict.

It all started in Tunisia with “the self-immolation of a street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi after being harassed by municipal officials. Bouazizi’s life in the southern city of Sidi Bouzid was defined by economic struggle and political marginalization”. The event had catalyzed what came to be known in media circles as the ‘Jasmine Revolution’ and inspired a wider pro-democracy protest movement in the MENA region [13]. The protests facilitated the unexpected fall of some of the well-known autocratic leaders in the region, who had tyrannically reigned for ages. President Assad, however, was not in the mood to relinquish power easily when the annihilative wind of change reached the Syrian territory. The savage repression that greeted the peaceful anti-government protests pushed Syria into the conflict. What followed thenceforth can be best explicated by an African adage: “when the oven is hot, everyone bakes their bread in it.” All the opposition rebels, the Assad regime, the Islamic militants as well as their powerful foreign backers are all key contributors to the ongoing quagmire in Syria.

The complexity of the Syrian conflict has been compounded because of the meddling of some regional and international powers and Jihadist groups in the embroilment. Thus, it’s very essential “to first understand who is fighting who in Syria” before delving into the economic analysis. In this section of the paper, I will give a brief overview of some of the key actors in the civil war and why it is that they are involved in destroying the future of the country. The main actors of the civil unrest can be broadly classified into four groups: the regime, the opposition rebels, foreign powers and Islamic jihadists [14]. Though the scope of this paper would not allow for an elaborate discussion on each of the players, the goals and motives of some of these groups will be succinctly analyzed.

A. The Regime

The government of Bashar al-Assad is the official actor of the Syrian state battling it against several rebel groups with diverse interests and many other Syrian and foreign Islamic jihadists. The Syrian Army, with the support of its allied forces, has a military strength of nearly 300,000 soldiers [14]. The regime is primarily fighting against the largest anti-regime rebel alliance known as the “Army of Conquest”. Aside from these rebel groups, the government of Assad is also fighting against the dreaded ISIS which, in March 2016, was routed out of the Ancient City of Palmyra. The Syrian Kurds – whose main objective is to establish an independent Kurdistan (mostly in Syria, Turkey or Iraq) – are also in conflict with the regime. The mainstream army is also supported by about “200,000 irregular forces, mainly from the National Defence Forces. The regime also has the support of around 5000-8000 forces of the powerful Shia militia Hezbollah and fighters from Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan”.

B. The Opposition

The primary objective of the Syrian opposition is to overthrow the government of Assad. Thus, they can be classified as anti-government rebels (including the Syrian Kurds). The opposition consists of the “largest anti-regime alliance - ‘The Army of Conquest’, Islamist factions” and/or jihadists such as Ahrar al-Sham, Faylaq Alsham, Fateh al-Sham Front (an affiliate of Al-Qaeda) which, previously, was known as the Al-Nusra Front [14]. At the early stages of the war, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was the main group fighting against the regime. Membership of the group was largely officers defecting from the Syrian Armed Forces.

However, the group has been weakened because of internal power struggles. Though the primary objective of the Syrian opposition groups is to overthrow the Assad’s regime, each one of them differs on their vision for the country. The Fateh Al-Sham, for instance, aims to create an Islamic emirate in Syria. The Western world (headed by the US) and some member countries of the European Union support opposition forces who are deemed to be ‘moderate’. This categorization excludes the Al-Nusra group. These countries have publicly called for the democratization of Syria and for President Assad to step down. Other Middle Eastern countries such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar covertly or overtly support some opposition factions for varied reasons. In the case of Turkey, ‘democratic’ politics with the Kurds is one of the obvious reasons for its involvement in the conflict. Saudi Arabia and Qatar are driven, largely, by ‘sectarianism’ rather than political or economic goals. Both countries (Saudi Arabia and Qatar) work to remove the ‘Alawite (Shia) Regime’ and replace it with the ‘Sunni Opposition’ [14].

Another opposition group, with a markedly distinct objective for their involvement in the conflict, are the Kurds in Syria. The Kurds are said to be the largest ethnic group in the world without an independent state of their own. During the colonial demarcation of state boundaries, the Kurds were distributed among different nation-states. They are found “primarily along the borders of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran”. They have been, since the beginning of the twentieth century, struggling for an independent Kurdistan in these countries, but to no avail. With the ongoing instability in Syria, however, the ‘independent dream’ is being revived again. Thus, “the first goal of the Syrian Kurds is to occupy the Kurd areas during the civil war and negotiate for an autonomous Kurdish region within Syria after the war”. The establishment of a Kurdistan state in Syria that would encompass all the Kurds in neighboring countries such as Turkey, Iraq and Iran remains their long-term goal [14]. Through their ‘People’s Protection Unit’, the Kurds in Syria have been able to form a
semi-autonomous territory in northern and northeast Syria. America regards them as a useful collaborator of the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS in Syria. In short, “the opposition to the regime is massive and multi-faceted”.

C. Foreign Powers

The war in Syria has, arguably, been dragging for this far because of the involvement of some powerful regional and global players. These foreign powers are on the battlefield to advance their parochial national interests. Russia, for instance, remains resolute in ensuring that the Assad regime is not toppled. The jury is still out on whether Russian entry into this increasingly complex web has been a game-changer or not. Some analysts believe that Russia’s entry is indeed a game-changer. It has, for instance, with its unwavering support for President Bashar Al-Assad regime, from the initial days of the conflict, thwarted all attempts at yet another regime-change in the region. Since September 2015, Russia has been launching airstrikes against ISIS in Syria in the name of fighting terrorism [16]. However, many analysts believe that those strikes are mostly targeted at the rebels to help “Bashar Al-Assad to recapture areas in several provinces”. For Moscow, a diplomatic victory over America to influence future negotiations between the regime and the rebels is desired. Russia, together with China, has vetoed many United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions meant to allow for interventions in the Syrian conflict under Article 7 of the UN Charter. The motive of the Kremlin, most likely, is to strengthen its political influence in the MENA region through lasting relations with the regime in Syria. This is also aimed at asserting a multipolar international system that seeks to counter the unrestrained influence of global powers in the region, especially the United States.

Increasing the presence of the military basing in Syria while cementing its existing bilateral friendship with the Assad regime concerning the naval logistical facility within the Tartus and the Khmeimim airbase in Latakia province are still some of the major plans of Moscow. While those facilities are being expanded, President Putin had also directed Moscow’s defense and foreign officials to discuss or negotiate new terms for either existing or new deals with Damascus. This is meant to boost and/or protect the quality of Moscow’s military basing rights in Syria. Meanwhile, the exact details on most of the locations under consideration are yet to be made public. However, they appear to include both ports and ground-based facilities.

The unique demographic features of Syria coupled with its geophysical location largely makes it an important strategic location for both Russia and Iran to secure and uphold their interests in the Middle East. Moscow desires to secure unimpeded access to the Mediterranean port Tartus in Syria where the only naval installation outside of Russia is located. The Islamic Republic of Iran, on the other hand, considers Syria a direct and secured supply line to the Lebanon-based Shiite militant group, Hezbollah, and an avenue for Tehran to vigorously amplify its influence within the “Shiite Crescent” [17]. In contrast, the regime’s bitter relationship with the Gulf States and its well-established hostility with Israel have further complicated the geopolitics of the Middle East. Furthermore, the Assad regime’s assistance to Hezbollah on one hand, and its closeness to Iran and Russia on the other, have put Mr. Assad at odds with the western world.

Indeed, among all these regional actors in the Syrian conflict, the role being played by Iran deserves special focus as the Islamic Republic is intensely involved in the conflict from the onset and is one of the few strong regional allies of the Assad regime [18]. Syria and Iran have been the closest of allies since the Islamic Republic’s inception [19]. Thus, since the advent of the instability in Syria, Iranian assistance to President Assad government has been increasing steadily both in visibility and magnitude. Tehran, for instance, has helped the Syrian regime to circumvent regional and international sanctions, and extended credit lines and other payment facilities to the country’s ministries and facilities. Most significantly, the Persian nation has also made available an uninterrupted flow of military equipment to forces loyal to the Syrian regime through the main military and civilian airports in Damascus and helped recognize Syria’s battered conventional military airports for urban warfare [20]. Besides, Syria’s proximity to one of Iran’s ‘enemies’, Israel, also influences Teheran’s continuous support for the Syrian government.

In sharp contrast, Saudi Arabia, since the start of the civil unrest in Syria, is said to be helping the opposition forces to remove Bashar al-Assad from the presidency. The Kingdom’s enmity with the Syrian regime is largely fueled by several geopolitical and personal reasons. The Syrian regime, for instance, was accused of being behind the assassination of Mr. Rafik Hariri – the former Prime Minister of Lebanon – who was a close ally of the late King Abdullah. Strategically, moreover, the Saudi Kingdom aims at playing an influential role in the formation of a “new Syria” – a Syria that would not be “controlled” by the Islamic Republic of Iran [21]. The Kingdom is alleged to have been “providing military and financial assistance to several rebel groups, including those with extremist ideologies to oust President Assad”.

The United States, on the other hand, has been calling on President Assad to leave the scene for democracy to take root in Syria. The U.S. is, thus, “covertly supporting the rebels against the regime”. The primary focus, however, is to eliminate ISIS [14]. Since the beginning of the conflict, the narrative from the American side has been that given the incompatibility of Assad’s autocratic regime with the aspirations of many Syrians, the regime’s ties to Iran and some known terrorist groups, and the central location of Syria in the Middle East, the civil war may have a spillover effect beyond the borders of Syria. These concerns, according to some analysts, (mostly western think tanks) have become real in recent times. The war has brought forth the world’s unprecedented refugee crisis that has roiled politics in European countries, encumbered some of Syria’s neighbors, strained Turkish-American relations to the crisis level, provided a vector for Russia’s resurgence in the Middle East, led to direct hostilities between Iran and Israel and challenged international norms around weapons of mass destruction and the protection of civilians.

Ten years on, the Syrian civil war has not been meaningfully contained, nor has the United States been sheltered from its effects. Thus, apart from the issue of oil interest, the U.S. has a lot to worry about as far as the conflict in Syria is concerned. Some member countries of the
European Union (i.e. France, Germany, and - now former member on EU – the U.K.) are also, simultaneously, supporting the opposition in the battle to defeat ISIS. However, Qatar and Saudi Arabia are funding the opposition due to sectarian reasons. The main reason is “for the formation of a Sunni government in Syria. Iran, on the other hand, seeks to protect Assad by providing financial and military support. Iran’s motives are the preservation of the Shia regime in Syria as well as bolstering of its role in the Arab World. However, Turkey’s position on Syria is the most complex and paradoxical”.

There is also an economic dimension to the U.S. involvement in the Syrian conflict. To determine the economic reasons for Americans’ involvement in Syria would require an unending complex analysis. Russia has been supplying most of the gas to Europe for a long time. However, in recent years (perhaps because of the blockade), Qatar also plans to set up a pipeline through Syria to bring gas into Europe. President Assad refused to permit Qatar to build the pipeline giving that it is a strong Russian ally. Iran also has plans to build a similar pipeline to Europe to sell its gas to the continent. This has Russian approval because Russia is allied to Iran, and their gas supply is less than Qatar’s, so they wouldn’t be as big a competitor. The U.S. is allied with Qatar where it has a military base [22]. It wants the pipeline to come from Qatar so its allies can compete with Russia in the European gas market. All this has led to the proxy war in Syria. The West wants to remove Assad (though the public rhetoric has been that they don’t want regime change in Syria) and replace him with a leader who will allow the Qatar pipeline rather than Iran’s.

Another big issue that shifts foreign actors’ attention to Syria is the control of its natural resources such as gas and oil. When compared to other oil-producing nations in the Middle East, Syria cannot be classified as a major oil producer. The country can only account for the global output of less than 1%. Nonetheless, the “black gold” has been a vital foreign exchange earner for the country [23]. In 2018, for instance, Syria had an estimated 2.5 billion barrels of oil reserves, compared with Saudi Arabia’s 297 billion, Iran’s 155 billion and Iraq’s 147 billion barrels. Once closed to a billion-dollar foreign exchange earner for the country, oil accounted for over 25% of Syria’s economic output. However, after almost a decade of armed conflict in the country, the oil and gas fields are now being fought over by the rival factions who are supported by their proxy foreign powers. It is an undeniable fact that all the foreign states that are involved in the Syrian conflict, directly or indirectly, have their eyes fixed on the oil fields. Before the U.S. finally pull out of Syria, this is what the outgoing President, Donald Trump, had to say to the American press:

I just spoke to President Erdogan of Turkey we’re doing very [very] well with Turkey there’s a ceasefire or he paused or whatever you want to call it there was some sniper fire this morning there was mortar fire this morning that was eliminated quickly and they’re back to the full pause we have Isis totally under guard turkey is also guarding separately they’re watching over everything so you have the Kurds who were dealing with and are very happy about the way things are going I must say the Kurds and you also have the Turks watching just secondarily watching where we have ISIS under control we’ve taken control of the oil in the Middle East the oil that we’re talking about the oil that everybody was worried about we have the US has control of that and there are no shots being fired.

Thus, it is quite clear that the natural resources in Syria (however negligible it might be) have been one of the major driving factors for America’s involvement in the civil war in Syria.

D. The Islamic State

Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or just Islamic State (IS), is a Sunni jihadist group with a particularly violent ideology that calls itself a caliphate and claims religious authority over all Muslims. It was inspired by al Qaida but later was publicly expelled from the group. Its main objective is to expand its proclaimed ‘caliphate’ in Iraq and Syria [14]. The militant group is batting with both the government and the other opposition rebels. Indeed, it fights against everyone else in Syria. The Assad regime had a fierce encounter with the group before on many occasions and had managed to expel it from the ancient city of Palmrya in March 2016 [24].

Indeed, as I have already pointed out, one of the United States’ primary focus in Syria was to eradicate ISIS and all its affiliates [25]. In March 2019, the United States, backed by the Arab forces and the YPG, captured the city of Baghuz in eastern Syria – the last territorial stronghold of ISIS in the Middle East. Several months later, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the de facto leader of the group, killed himself after the U.S. special operations trapped him in a dead-end tunnel. The death of al-Baghdadi (a self-proclaimed caliph) is a major loss to the militant group. “Although many of the group's fighters have said in interviews over the years that they were not fighting for any individual but the larger cause (an Islamic state-building project), it is undeniable that Baghdadi held a kind of elusive charisma for the organization”. The group has already named Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi as al-Baghdadi’s replacement, suggesting to the world that ISIS didn’t die with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi [26].

E. Jabhat Fateh al-Sham

The al-Nusra Front, Syria-based jihadist group, in a bid to cut ties with al-Qaeda, had a change of name in July 2016 – from al-Nusra Front to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. This public severing of ties with al-Qaeda, however, may not be as real as the group had portrayed. Most analysts believe that it could be a grand strategy for the group to secure recognition in the political process in Syria, where it is locking horns with forces loyal to Bashar al-Assad. The Fateh al-Sham, as compared to ISIS, is seen as one of the most lethal Islamist jihadists in Syria. This group “has a two-pronged strategy: to help other rebels in overthrowing Assad and to build an Islamic Emirate in Syria” [14].

F. Hezbollah

Hezbollah is a political party and a Shia Islamist militant group based in Lebanon. Since 2013, the group has openly operated alongside their Syrian and Iraqi counterparts across the border. Hezbollah is defending the Syrian regime based on sectarian reasons. It has successfully helped the regime take control over many areas that hitherto were held by rebel groups. Thus, “the Islamic Jihadists do have a huge stake in
the war”. In short, all these stakeholders have created, in the words of Thomas Hobbes, ‘a war of all against all,’ in Syria. Global powers are using the Syrian territory as a ‘battlefield’ to engage in their proxy fights against each other, with the locals ending up ensnared in this protracted and violent struggle that is doing little to serve their interests [27] – [28]. An African proverb helps capture this scenario metaphorically: “when elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers”, meaning that the weak get hurt in conflicts between the powerful. The only things left for the Syrian citizens are misery, death, hunger and hopelessness. This brings us to the political-economic consequences of the instability in the country.

IV. SYRIAN ECONOMY BEFORE THE CONFLICT

The Arab Republic of Syria, at independence in 1946, had a relatively well-structured industrial and agricultural base [29]. However, in the 1960s, after the Baath Party took over the political affairs of the country, Syria’s development trajectory and economic orientation took a radical transformation. The nationalization of foreign investments and major industries coupled with government-sponsored land reforms confirmed the economic policy direction of the socialist country. The high oil prices in the 1970s also triggered a shift from the traditional agrarian economy to one that would be dominated by the industrial, commercial and the service sectors. In the 1980s, however, a series of economic crises forced the country to move from prosperity to austerity [30]. Even though the state instituted some immediate measures “to respond to the burgeoning crisis, the pressing economic problems required a radically-restructured economic policy to improve performance”.

The Syrian economy, unlike that of most states in the MENA region, is relatively diversified allowing it not to depend solely on the country’s oil. Economic development, however, “has been hampered by internal and external factors and has not kept pace with the country’s population growth. Historical problems affecting economic growth in Syria include a preoccupation with the Israeli threat and an obsession with internal order; massive defense and security spending has taken precedence over economic reform” [31]. Also, “the overstaffed and inefficient public sector of the predominantly statist economic system had drained the economy by soaking up government expenditures and foreign exchange”. Some moderate reforms were starting to yield some positive results. New laws on investment and property rights had widened the investment map of the private sector by expanding the list of goods and services that the private sector could invest in. This had allowed the private sector to compete with state institutions in some areas of the economy, such as the pharmaceutical and textile industries as well as the manufacturing sector. However, the state continued to control some strategic and sensitive industries like the production and refining of oil, air transport, generation and distribution of power and pricing of some key agricultural products as well as water distribution.

According to a World Bank estimations, “the total GDP for 2003 was US$21.5 billion, up from US$19.9 billion in 2002. The World Bank measured Syria’s GDP growth at 2.5 per cent in 2003, down from 3.2 per cent in 2002. A U.S. government estimate of Syria’s GDP growth was 3.5 per cent in 2001 and 4.5 per cent in 2002. GDP per capita was estimated to be US$1,165 in 2003”. The agricultural sector, throughout history, accounted for the biggest share of the country’s gross domestic product (GDP). The sector had, however, been displaced by other sectors such as the manufacturing and mining as well as the services sectors. In 2003, for instance, while the industry and services sectors accounted for 29.4 and 42.1 per cents of the GDP respectively, the agricultural sector could only account for 28.5 per cent. In 2004, state revenues and expenditures were estimated at US $6.1 billion and US $7.4 billion respectively, with capital expenditures accounting for US$3.6 billion. In that same year, public sector debt had a combining weight of 89 per cent of the GDP, with an estimated 1.5 per cent of consumer price inflation rate.

As the country worked to achieve self-sufficiency in food production, halt rural-urban migration and increase export earnings, agriculture was the highest priority sector in its economic development plans. The sector employed about 30 per cent of the labor force and generated over 25 per cent of the national income. Still, in 2003, the agricultural sector accounted for 28.5 per cent of the country’s GDP, with a nominal output of 25 per cent in 2002. Out of this, livestock alone accounted for 16 per cent, while over 40 per cent was attributed to the grains and fruits sub-sectors [31]. One of the crucial factors that instigated the success of the agricultural sector was the land tenure system adopted by the country. Land tenure system “refers to the bundle of rights and responsibilities under which land is held, used, transferred and succeeded.” Most Syrian farmland is privately owned allowing large swaths of the land in rural areas to be used for agricultural-related activities. Close to 28 per cent of all arable land in Syria is cultivated, and about 21 per cent of that is under irrigation. Most of the irrigated lands have been deemed “strategic”. This designation allows for a significant government policy intervention regarding marketing, subsidies and price controls. “Strategic” goods like sugar beets, barley and wheat “must be sold to state marketing boards at fixed prices, often above world prices in order to support farmers, but at a significant cost to the state budget” [32]. Indeed, wheat was the most widely grown arable crop, but cotton was the most important cash crop. Before Syria developed its oil and gas sectors, cotton has been the largest single export crop for the country. This, notwithstanding, “the total area planted with cotton has declined because of an increasing problem of water shortage coupled with old and inefficient irrigation techniques”. Lack of adequate storage facilities was one of the major problems confronting the sector, which resulted in some of the grains being underutilized.

Phosphates were some of the major exploited minerals in Syria. However, in the early 1990s, the production of phosphates had dropped sharply due to a fall in prices and global demand, but since 2001, output again had experienced an upward adjustment to over 2 million tons [33]. The country also produced other precious minerals such as gravel, marble, stone, gypsum, sands and salt. These were, however, not meant for export. In 2003, mining, construction, manufacturing, and petroleum constituted the major components of the industrial sector. The sector accounted for 29.4 per cent of the country’s GDP and was able to absorb
about 30 per cent of the country’s workforce. Until the 1990s, when some radical economic reforms allowed for private-sector participation, Syria’s manufacturing sector was highly dominated by the state [32]. In recent years, the country has “seen the entry of several Gulf construction companies, which has led to a leap in both size and quality of projects” in the country. Investment of such nature was likely “to come at the expense of agriculture and industry, a prospect that bodes ill for the long-term health of the Syrian economy”. Table I shows the performance of agriculture, industry and services from 2005 to 2011 just on the eve of the start of the civil war in Syria [34].

| TABLE I: PERFORMANCE OF AGRICULTURE, INDUSTRY AND SERVICES FROM 2005 TO 2011 |
|---------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Origin of GDP (% in real change) | 2005   | 2006   | 2007   | 2008   | 2009   | 2010   | 2011   |
| Agriculture                     | 7.8    | 10.2   | -13.5  | -8.7   | 5.4    | 2.2    | 2.8    |
| Industry                        | -3     | 0.6    | 3.8    | 5.5    | -0.9   | 5.3    | 5.0    |
| Services                        | 13.3   | 3.4    | 16.6   | 8.3    | 3.8    | 3.9    | 4.2    |

In 2001, in the area of energy, the Syrian Arab Republic reportedly “produced 23.3 billion kWh of electricity and consumed 21.6 billion kWh”. Syria’s total installed electric generating capacity, as of January 2002, amounted to 7.6 GW, making oil and natural gas serve as the country’s primary sources of energy supply, with only 1.5 GW from hydroelectric power. The capacity of electric supply was an important national priority for the country, and the regime had hoped “to add 3,000 MW of power generating capacity by 2010 at a probable cost of US$2 billion”. However, the progress of work had been stalled due to a shortage of capital [33]. Existing power generating plants were experiencing unprecedented nation-wide maintenance, with four new plants being added to augment the national capacity. The power sector, even before the civil war, was experiencing serious distribution challenges “with transmission losses estimated as high as 25 per cent of total generated capacity as a result of poor quality wires and transformer stations”. Thus, before the current upheavals in the country, there was a real commitment on the part of the Syrian government to complete an ongoing project meant to upgrade the power transmission network.

The first commercial oil field began production in 1968. However, the country did not begin exporting oil until the mid-1980s. Even though Syria is not counted among major oil exporters in the Middle East, the “black gold” plays a pivotal role in the country’s economic growth [35]. The “exact oil output levels are difficult to obtain, but according to one U.S. government estimate, Syria produced 522,700 barrels per day (bbl/d) in 2004 and consumed 265,000 bbl/d in 2001”. The sector encountered several difficulties, “such as a decline in output and production resulting from technological problems and a depletion of oil reserves”. National “reserves reportedly peaked at 590,000 bbl/d in 1996” but had “fallen to 535,000 bbl/d in 2003 or a total of 2.4 billion barrels in 2004”. Given that older oil fields had hit passed their maturity levels, production of oil was expected to maintain a downward slope. Meanwhile, the country’s fuel consumption level was on the rise. That meant that, within a decade or so, Syria would have become a net importer of oil to supplement the local production. To deal with the challenge, the government had stepped up efforts of oil exploration in the country. Other options (e.g. the switching of plants from oil-powered to natural gas-powered) were being considered. “Proven natural gas reserves, approximately three-quarters of which were owned by the Syrian Petroleum Company, were estimated at 240.7 billion cubic meters in 2004. The main difficulty for the natural gas industry was logistics”. In 2001, Syria reportedly produced and consumed 5.8 million cubic meters of natural gas. Several projects were underway to increase natural gas production, including an onshore pipeline network connecting Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.

Although some sectors were affected in recent years “as a result of integration with European and Gulf markets, Syria avoided the worst effects of the 2008 global economic crisis”. Some of the worst-hit sectors included industry, services and manufacturing. However, tourism, which was one of the growing sources of revenue for the economy, “picked up in volume despite world decreases in that sector, keeping the Syrian economic heart beating” [36]. Through the end of 2010, the country “seemed relatively stable both politically and economically as other countries in the region experienced turbulence in either or both areas”. Despite this relatively optimistic outlook, sustainable economic development still eluded the country. In 2010, various reports on existing economic opportunities for Syria were cautiously optimistic. Syria’s real GDP growth, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit, “was expected to rise to 3.9 per cent in 2010 and then 4.2 per cent in 2011, after experiencing a dip in 2009”. The inflationary rate was estimated to reach “6.2 per cent in 2010-11, as global commodity prices increase and the long-awaited value-added tax (VAT) goes into effect”. Deficits on the country current-account were expected to contract to about 1.3 per cent of GDP because of an increase in revenues from the tourism sector (see Table II).
V. MEASURING THE PRESENT ECONOMIC SITUATION IN SYRIA

The spring of 2011 heralded new waves of political and economic trajectories in the Middle East. The Arab Spring was a series of pro-democracy uprisings that enveloped several Muslim countries, including Tunisia, Morocco, Syria, Libya, Egypt and Bahrain [37]. That ultimately resulted in regime changes in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. However, if the end goal of the Arab Spring was to increase democratic participation and economic freedom, then not all of the protests could be deemed successful. At least, the burgeoning civil war in Syria is a living example. One might not be far from right to say that two interrelated policy failures were at the center of events in the Middle East: one political, one economic. Politically, the failure to develop pluralistic and open systems had left few avenues for citizen participation in civic and political life or representation in government. To the extent that this had occurred despite major accomplishments in health and education over the past decades, is one reason for the unfolding instability in most parts of the region. Economically, governments in the region failed to generate inclusive, fair, and equitable growth. As a result, some of the economic benefits (such as public sector employment guarantees and generous welfare benefits) to which citizens grew accustomed had become unaffordable and excluded many young people and other new entrants into the labor force.

Thus, from the outset of the Arab Spring, there was “a wave of optimism” spreading throughout the MENA region. As stated earlier, the protests saw some authoritarian regimes overthrown [38]. However, what was first seen as a wind of positive change in the region, turned into unexpected chaotic developments in some states. One of them is the civil war in Syria. Many economists have highlighted at least four channels through which the Syrian economy is being affected by the ongoing conflict [39]. The first of the four is human capital. One of the most important economic resources for any country is the human resource. In these contexts, the figures are exceedingly high for Syria. The violence has seriously eroded the human capital in the country such that it may never be able to recover from the human losses, injuries and displacements long after the war.

In addition to the human casualties with its associated economic problems, the consequences of warfare are enormous. The Syrian GDP has suffered a dramatic decline since the start of the conflict in 2011. The Syrian Centre for Policy Research postulates that “the costs of lost physical capital amount to 230 per cent of the pre-war GDP”. The infrastructure of the country is highly damaged, and bilateral trade with the neighboring countries have significantly been affected. In some cases, the distraction is related to important national assets such as production facilities associated with the extraction of oil and water supply. Thirdly, beyond these obvious negative developments, there is a hidden phenomenon adding to the economic costs of the war. The non-physical key economic organizations and institutions that hitherto were very instrumental to the growth of the Syrian economy have also been severely weakened [40]. Over the years, relevant financial and economic-oriented institutions such as revenue authorities, important ministries, banks among others have also suffered painful deteriorations in their performance “because the normal rapid flow of communication between them and their financial partners has become seriously” affected by the ongoing conflict. Hence, there is a significant decrease in foreign direct investment due to the limited performance of those financial institutions.

Lastly but not least, the overall sustainability of the country (political, economic and social) is being threatened as a result of the unending conflict. And those changes in the physical, economic and social landscape in Syria are also having a significant toll on some of its neighbors such as Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan among others [41]. Indeed, a very important recurring phenomenon regarding the instability in Syrian is the flow of refugees to these neighboring countries which has significant adverse effects “on the general economic development and the security environment” of those countries [42]. Large numbers of refugees have arrived in these relatively small and economically vulnerable countries (such as Lebanon and Jordan) only because of their proximity to the conflict zone. Drawing on the preamble to the 1951 Convention, which emphasizes international cooperation, analysts have identified two obligations concerning refugees: (1) asylum, which is the responsibility of the state that hosts the refugee; and (2) burden-sharing, which reflects the obligation of other states toward those countries in which refugees have settled [43]. The burden-sharing obligation is a clear statement that the welfare of refugees has all the characteristics of a global public good. However, in most cases, the burden-sharing obligation is neglected leading to struggling economies in the host countries. A typical case scenario is Turkey which has done so much for Syrian refugees but with little or no formal

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**TABLE II: SYRIAN ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE FROM 2005 TO 2011**

| Main Economic Indicators | 2005   | 2006   | 2007   | 2008   | 2009   | 2010   | 2011   |
|--------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Nominal GDP (US $ m)     | 28,210 | 32,780 | 40,376 | 49,193 | 49,442 | 56,180 | 63,072 |
| Real GDP growth (%)      | 6.2    | 5.0    | 5.7    | 4.3    | 3.0    | 3.9    | 4.2    |
| Consumer price inflation (avg. %) | 7.2    | 10     | 3.9    | 15.7   | 2.6    | 7.1    | 6.2    |
| Current-account bal. (US $ m) | 295    | 890    | 459    | -687   | -1,269 | -1,139 | -972   |
| External debt (US $ m)   | 6,508  | 6,502  | 6,732  | 6,899  | 6,992  | 7,206  | 7,389  |
| Population (millions)    | 19.1   | 19.8   | 20.5   | 21.2   | 21.9   | 22.5   | 23.1   |
| GDP per head (US $ at PPP) | 3,999  | 4,191  | 4,398  | 4,524  | 4,574  | 4,701  | 4,816  |
| Unemployment (avg. %)    | 8.0    | 8.3    | 8.4    | 8.6    | 9.2    | 9.7    | 9.4    |

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Within Syria itself, the “number of displaced seeking housing has created a huge housing demand while the damage to the existing stock has reduced housing supply”. For instance, “housing damage across Aleppo, Idlib and Hama is significant. Up to February 2017, around 28 per cent of the housing units had been damaged (7 per cent destroyed and 21 per cent partially damaged)”. Total damages across the three cities (i.e. Hama, Aleppo and Idlib) “are estimated to range between US$4.509 million and US$5.511 million” [44]. At present, over 13.5 million Syrians require humanitarian assistance, including 4.6 million displaced people trapped in besieged and hard-to-reach areas. That has generated lots of safety concerns and limited education services leading to an estimated 44 per cent student drop out in enrolment between 2011 and 2015 [45].

The ‘Water Supply and Sanitation’ (WASH) sector has also witnessed the undesirable consequences of the conflict in Syria. Of a total of 327 WASH assets in some major cities across Syria, around 60 per cent (predominantly water towers) have suffered some form of damage [46]. The nearly 10-year-long crisis has crippled almost every economic and social sector in the country such as transportation, health, electricity, energy and urban institutions and service provision, among others [47]. Again, “there is evidence of significant damage to the health system. In terms of physical damage to infrastructure, more than half of all hospitals in some major cities have experienced some form of damage (destroyed or partially damaged) as of February 2017”. Total damages to health facilities across Syria “are estimated to range between US$255 million and US$312 million” [48].

Clearly, “the sheer amount of destruction to physical assets within the country will pose a major obstacle to reconstruction and revitalization of the economy”. Seven per cent of the housing stock, as of 2017, was destroyed, 20% of the housing stock was partially damaged, while “5.6 million people fled Syria, with 6 million people are internally displaced”. The UN estimated that there has been $3.2 billion in damage to infrastructure in the agricultural sector. These losses include irrigation systems, processing and storage facilities, and agricultural machinery. A UN study noted that “25% of households lack access to seeds, 50% lack access to fertilizers, and livestock ownership has plummeted by roughly 50%”. Electricity transmission networks, roads and Gas pipelines, are badly damaged. Indeed, it is markedly difficult to accurately measure the actual costs of the war since access to Syria is still highly restricted. Overall, as of 2017, the instability in Syria was estimated to have caused the country cumulative losses in GDP of $226 billion.

The existence of conflict, such as the one in Syria, makes the measurement of economic activity quite problematic. Thus, many assumptions have to be made in the absence of reliable data. Consequently, “any estimate of the cost of the Syrian conflict has to be treated as a point estimate with a very wide error band”. The size of this error band will depend on the sensitivity of some of the assumptions to the point estimate. This means that everything being said is viewed as an estimate and not conclusive.

VI. THE POLITICO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF THE VIOLENCE ON THE MIDDLE EAST

The effects of the violence in Syria will have a profound politico-economic change in the Middle East region. In a World Bank working paper, released recently, an attempt was made “to quantify both the direct and indirect economic effects of this war on the countries in the greater Levant area Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt”. The effect, as we have already demonstrated above, “comes directly from the decline in the size and skills of Syria’s labor force due to loss of lives and refugee outflows, infrastructure destruction, the trade embargo on Syria, cost-of-doing-business increases, and a decline in productivity”. The indirect consequence, on the other hand, “captures the opportunity cost of foregone trade integration initiatives aimed at improving trade logistics and liberalizing trade in services in the region” [49]. The study also indicates that, as a result of the war, the economies of Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt (measured in 2007 prices) have cumulatively lost close to US$35 billion in output. In other words, the cumulative economic size of these economies, measured by their Gross Domestic Product, could have been US$35 billion larger had the war not occurred”. In effect:

[] These aggregate costs of war are equal to the size of Syria’s GDP in 2007. These losses have been unevenly distributed. Those countries most affected by the war, Syria and Iraq, have borne the brunt of the direct economic costs of it, as well as of losing out on what could have been much more formal economic integration: Syria and Iraq have seen per capita income in constant terms declining by 23 per cent and 28 per cent relative to the levels that could have been achieved if war hadn’t broken out. The costs directly attributed to war, though, are substantial at a 14 per cent and 16 per cent reduction in per capita GDP for Syria and Iraq, respectively. The trade embargo on Syria has been a major factor behind the direct costs, followed by the decline in the size and skills of its labor force due to the loss of life and exodus of refugees, the destruction of infrastructure and the increase in the cost of doing business in conflict zones.

According to the report, there are other nations in the Middle East that “have incurred average per capita income losses but not GDP declines due to the direct effects of the war”. The inflows of Syrian refugees into Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon, for instance, “have boosted consumption, investment and labor supply, and therefore the size of these refugee-receiving economies”. However, the aggregate incomes, in all cases, “have increased less than the size of the population, so the war has hurt the standards of living there, with per capita average incomes declining by 11 per cent in Lebanon and 1.5 per cent in Turkey, Egypt, and Jordan relative to levels that could have achieved had the war been avoided” [50]. Therefore, the direct costs for these three countries are less than the opportunity costs of the foregone trade integration. Almost every sector of the Syrian economy has been negatively affected, “but property-ownership has been particularly badly hit as demand for land has declined steeply, reflecting the drop in demand because of the huge numbers of refugees leaving the country”.

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VII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The warring actors in the Syrian civil war have been openly receiving the backing of some external powers. Apart from the internal power struggle, the conflict has also exhibited all the characteristics of a proxy war where regional, subnational and international actors wrestle for influence in the Middle East. Each of the actors treats every stage of the battle as a “zero-sum game”, where a victory for one side would spell a lasting doom for the rest. A critical bone of contention, among others, is the inability of the international community to agree on how to enforce international norms regarding civil conflicts like the one in Syria. While the Kremlin and Beijing keep protecting the Syrian government in the Security Council, Washington and its allies are arming some of the opposition groups to tumble the regime. Moscow and Beijing resist the application of the principle of international responsibility to protect, apparently, due to their domestic crackdowns on minorities and pro-democracy movements. In American-Russian relations, we see the usual signs of rivalry over the control of the Middle East that reverberate most of the known patterns of the Cold War era.

However, above everything said regarding the power contest, it is the struggle over what role Iran should play in the region that continues to stoke the fire of the war in Syria. For Saudi Arabia and Qatar, as well as the rest of the GCC countries, the Syrian crisis offers a slim margin of opportunity for them to trim down Iran’s growing influence since the war in Iraq in 2003. The conflict in Syria is also undermining an existing strategic relationship between Hamas and Iran. Hamas has already resisted the pressure from Tehran to pick at the opposition in the conflict and moved its headquarters from Damascus to Doha – the capital of Qatar. Analysts see this as a setback for Tehran’s aspirations for regional leadership, in which the “liberation of Jerusalem and Palestine” would take the center stage. On the part of Israel, there has been some level of effective self-restraint, chiefly, due to domestic fears over spillover effects of the war, destabilization of its border with Syria, or Syria turning into a safe haven for al-Qaeda. Some U.S. and Israeli strategists, however, also see the Syrian civil war as an opportunity to decisively cripple or weaken Iran [51]. They also expect that the Lebanese Hezbollah would be weakened by regime change in Syria, which serves as its most important transit route for arms supplies. Whichever angle one chooses to look at the diplomatic situation in Syria, the one undeniable fact is that Syria has become a battlefield for international “Game of Thrones”.

Ten years into the war in Syria, the situation is tangled in an even more confusing complex web of interests, which are not, in any shape or form, controlled by one actor. Political ideologies, historical grievances, economics interests, sectarianism, ethnicity, and humanitarian concerns will all factor into the ultimate resolution of the conflict, however the shape that might adopt. However, of these numerous dimensions, the economic one is consistently being neglected by diplomats and analysts alike. The instability in Syria is staggering. Certain actors have economic incentives to keep it from ending quickly. If those incentives are not addressed, peacemakers and those who are eventually charged with heading the country’s post-war reconstruction will have a little or no success story to tell. There is no doubt that the ten-year conflict in Syria has changed the country’s economic trajectory for the worst. While the economy is likely to recover as the violence has considerably declined (perhaps, because of Covid-19), any form of recovery will exhibit uneven characteristics. Overall, the poverty level in the country is, more likely than not, to be long-lasting, especially for those displaced by the unparalleled destruction caused by the violence. The international community would be required to continue supplying redevelopment aid for years (or even decades) to come. If there is any involvement of the international community in reconstruction efforts, then surely, there should be an unprecedented push for economic liberalization as an engine of reconstruction. After all, the fuel that ignites the flames of the war from its root in Tunisia was the struggle for economic liberalization and not sectarian differences.

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