Once Upon a Time...When a Revolution Evolved to a Civil War in Syria

Crystal M. Myers
St. John Fisher College

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Abstract

This paper gives an overview of how the conflict in Syria has evolved from a revolution into a sectarian civil war. Power is maintained by the ruling Assad family through promotion of the Alawite minority within the government and military. Methods of persecution on the Sunni majority by the Assad government are discussed as well as a policy of strategic expulsion of the Sunni enclave to Idlib, a city on the outskirts of Syria (bordering Turkey).

Keywords

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ABSTRACT

This paper gives an overview of how the conflict in Syria has evolved from a revolution into a sectarian civil war. Power is maintained by the ruling Assad family through promotion of the Alawite minority within the government and military. Methods of persecution of the Sunni majority by the Assad government are discussed as well as a policy of strategic expulsion of the Sunni enclave to Idlib, a city on the outskirts of Syria (bordering Turkey).

In Syria there is a story that has been told and retold, transforming into a prominent legend. It is the "once upon a time" of young boys who wanted freedom and dared to challenge Bashar al-Assad, their despotic president. This happened during a time period that would become known as the Arab Spring, a time when revolutions were bountiful, and dreams felt as if they could come true.

The first revolution of the Arab Spring started in Tunisia and resulted in the ejection of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. This initial successful revolution was observed in other Middle Eastern countries over social media outlets such as YouTube and Facebook. Tunisia's triumph gave hope to others in the Middle East, who were living in comparable autocratic governments and desired similar results. People next took to the streets in Egypt forcing President Hosni Mubarak out of office. Libya's leader Muammar Gaddafi was captured and killed. Similarly, in Yemen, President Ali Abdullah Saleh voluntarily left office. These revolutionary displays were seen as successes in that they resulted in leadership changes.

For Syria, it all started in Daraa, when a group of boys spray painted the now familiar revolutionary slogan: "The people want the fall of the regime," on the side of their school building. In some accounts there was an additional line, "it's your turn doctor," a direct jab at President Assad, who

is an ophthalmologist. The boys were apprehended and jailed, with protests beginning initially by their friends and family, demanding their release. Syrian Security forces are known to utilize torture in interrogations and so there was well-founded fear of the boy's safety within police custody. When they were finally released evidence of brutality spurred demands for reform. During these demonstrations the reaction of the government was severe, using militant force on its protesting civilians. Consequently, many Syrians were arrested, injured or killed. The initial call for reform evolved to a demand for President Bashar al-Assad to step down.

This is just a brief synopsis of how the Syrian revolution initially started. This paper itself will seek to explain how a revolution that started with humanitarian and democratic auspices eventually evolved into a sectarian civil war. In order to fully understand the ongoing conflict that is currently active, we need to first look at the demographics of Syria itself. Ted Galen Carpenter appropriately described this as, "a fragile ethno-religious tapestry that could easily unravel" (2013, p. 1). The various threads of Syria's tapestry are: Sunni a little less than sixty percent, Christians around thirteen percent, Alawites (a Shiite sect) about thirteen percent, Druze six percent and Sunni ethnic minorities such as Kurds and Armenians making up the rest (Carpenter, 2013).

The government power dynamic within Syria is like that of a monarchy, with the same family ruling the country over the past four decades. Most of the al-Assad family hold prominent positions within the Syrian governments. The Assad's fall into the religious category Alawite, a sect of Shiite Islam. Although a minority within the overall country demographic, this group holds majority power within the government and Syrian military, wielding the significant influence that comes with eighty percent holding high positions as military officers, and one hundred and forty thousand career soldiers, all hailing the religious identity of Alawite (Carpenter, 2013).

When it comes to government provision of goods and services the Assad family utilizes asabiya as a distribution factor. Asabiya (Arabic: عصبيّة) refers to the tribe/clan or in this case the Alawite community. This can be exemplified by the marked government investment in the northwestern governorate of Latakia, which has a seventy-five percent Alawite population (De Juan & Bank, 2015). This same mentality applies to the distribution of electricity, a resource that falls under jurisdiction of the government. The Ministry of Electricity decides what areas of Syria will or won't receive electricity, how much and for how long. Syria's grid is well known for having power shortages with regularly scheduled blackouts. However, these blackouts are not distributed equally. As a result of this dynamic the Ministry of Electricity has been identified on the EU sanctions list for using power as a means of repression (De Juan & Bank, 2015).

The same could be said for the distribution of land. Salwa Ismail conducted research on urban space within Syria, particularly within the Damascus area and outlying suburbs. He discovered an intentionality by the regime to fracture the societal identity of Syrians along sectarian lines (2013). Neighborhoods were established demographically with Alawi quarters placed in various locations as military extensions, working for and under the regime. A case study of this situation looks at the Barzeh quarter and its neighbor Ish al-Warwar. These two groups have lived in cooperation and have even been referred to as Barzawi, a conglomerate of the two names (Salwa 2013). Conflict between the two emerged when the Ish al-Warwar Alawi residents began to suppress revolutionary demonstrations against the Assad government being conducted by the Barzeh Sunni residents. The reason behind this was that Ish al-Warwar residents had been told the Sunni Barzawis were planning to attack them and take their land (Salwa 2013).

It is believed that throughout the conflict this strategy has been used by the regime to create alienation between the various sects. An interview with Salway Ismail, a Barzeh resident confirmed this: "the 'Ish people are oppressed like us, and they are treated as slaves, but they defend the regime because they are made to fear their 'extremist' Sunni neighbors" (Salwa 2013).

Salwa Ismail (2013) concludes,

> Relations with the regime and the demographic composition of quarters are the main variables at play in the differentiated responses to the Uprising observed in Damascus and elsewhere. In this complex urban configuration are found conflicts over title to land and position in relation to government, conflicts inflected with sectarian meanings. These divisions are well illustrated by the case of the Barzeh quarter on the northern edge of Damascus and its relationship with the neighboring community of 'Ish al-Warwar (p. 883).

Another provision of public service that has become a strategic method of the Assad government is the supplying of food or lack thereof, to specific targeted areas. Jose Ciro Martinez and Brent Eng summarize this strategy. "The provision of bread to regime-controlled areas has gone hand in hand with target efforts to deprive rebel groups of the essential foodstuff." It is common knowledge that many of the rebels are Sunni. The main method utilized to achieve this end is the bombing of bakeries. Over a three-week period in August 2012, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported at least ten aerial attacks by the government on bakeries in Aleppo (Martinez & Eng, 2017).

A more blunt way to look at this strategy is as a "starve or surrender" ultimatum. Amnesty International has issued a report condemning the Assad regime's methods of: "systematically preventing crucial food and medicine supplies from entering civilian areas while mounting bombing campaigns, amount to war crimes," violating international law (Shaheen, 2017). The aforementioned report found that the government had restricted UN and other humanitarian aid from entering rebel areas, while at the same time carrying out airstrikes on hospitals, markets, mosques and schools, rendering vital public services unviable (Shaheen, 2017).

Regional outside players only exacerbate the already tense sectarian lines within Syria. Assad has gained support of traditional Shiite-led governments, sometimes referred to as the "shiite axis" in the Middle East: Iraq (Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki), Iran (Supreme leader Ali Khamenei/President Hassan Rouhani), and the Hezbollah, a Shiite militia from Lebanon (Fuller 2007). On the opposing Sunni side there are the Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia (King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud) and to some extent Egypt (President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi)

and Jordan (King Abdullah II). While Turkey (President Recep Tayyip Erdogan) also tends to side in this arena, Turkey has at other times, has maintained neutrality between the two divisions (Fuller 2007).

International actors also play a role in this conflict, with Russia (President Vladimir Putin) siding with Assad, due to "long standing economic and strategic ties" that stem from the Cold War era (Carpenter, 2013, p. 9). It also can't be overlooked that Russia's only military installation in the Mediterranean region exists in the Syrian port of Tartous (Carpenter, 2013). China (President Xi Jinping) sides with Assad for economic reasons. In 2011 Syrian exports to China totaled over 2.4 billion, and China has a vested interest in Syria's oil industry (Carpenter, 2013).

Siding with the opposition or merely against Assad is the United States and its other western allies. The US has taken a stance to uphold the "responsibility to protect doctrine" which states,

> When a regime brutalizes its population in a systematic way the international community not only has a right but also an obligation to intervene to protect vulnerable civilians and if necessary, depose an offending regime (Carpenter, 2013, p. 10).

This becomes an ideological issue when the other two international actors (Russia and China) are adhering to the Westphalian system, an opposite doctrine that focuses on prohibiting any external meddling in a country's internal affairs (Carpenter, 2013).

The international divide is especially exemplified by interactions occurring at the global level in United Nations Security Council (UNSC) debates. The Syrian conflict tends to be framed in terms of

"human rights violations and a call for outside intervention," by the three Western permanent members. However, for Russia and China it is framed as "a complex struggle amenable to noninterventionist solutions" (Medzihorsky, Popovic & Jenne, 2017). This ideological divide in UN policy becomes the focus of international rhetoric overshadowing the actual sectarian divide that is occurring on the ground.

This sectarian divide has become so ingrained in a war that has now lasted seven years that even resolutions propose a tripartite arrangement in which Syria is effectively split between ethnic groups. Azeem Ibrahim proposes that Assad retain the Damascus-Aleppo corridor, that the Kurds get their own northeast region and that the remaining go to the opposition (2017). This would effectively make divided Shiite, Kurdish and Sunni enclaves.

While Syria has not formally been divided the country has in some ways already evolved into this layout. The Syrian government has brokered "reconciliation" deals, which usually occur after an opposition area has been besieged to the point of complacency with the humanitarian issue becoming the extreme of a choice between the deal or death. Through "reconciliation" the regime along with its allies offer the opposition, their families and civilians "safe passage to rebel-controlled Idlib or Jarabulus, in return for ceding the besieged area to government forces" (Spyer, 2017).

This has become such common practice within Syria that there is a Reconciliation Affairs Minister, Ali Haidar, who claims over one hundred towns/villages have brokered such deals with the regime, accounting for the displacement of over three million Syrians internally to Idlib/Jarabulus (Spyer, 2017). In fact, a reconciliation deal was just reached in Beit Sahem-Babila-Yilda (on May 2, 2018) for fifty buses and six ambulances to remove seventeen thousand people. The report by Syrian media is not a citable nor a reliable source, however the wording explicitly confirms the research in this paper as it directly states, "the people of the towns are to open a new page with the Syrian regime and coexistence with the Shiite militias in the area."

As the Syrian regime continues to work with its allies to regain control of key areas and to remove the residents, it has become clear that the demographic is changing. On April 2nd, 2018, law number ten issued by the Syrian regime states,

> This law authorizes the formation of new local administrative units (governorates, cities, and towns) tasked with registering property ownership within their area of jurisdiction. Private property owners are then given thirty days to register and provide proof of ownership. Failure to do so will result in the property's confiscation by the state without compensation. (Al-Shami, 2018).

This law would likely target those opposition communities in which civilians were displaced in "reconciliation deals," effectively making their displacement permanent.

The statement made by Jonathan Spyer that "Syria has ceased to exist" argues that the country has reached a stalemate in which neither the Syrian regime nor the opposition rebels can likely succeed in victory. Instead there has been a shift towards "arrangements acknowledging the fragmentation of the country" (2017). These fragments are along the ethno-religious divides with which this paper began.

The future of the ongoing Syrian conflict is unclear and there are many actors all with their own agendas manipulating the pieces. What is clear is that the political and religious divide, which has yielded a struggle for power, has caused a high number of casualties. These casualties can be measured by the number of Syrians displaced from their homes within Syria, as well as the number of Syrians who have fled to refugee camps or other countries to seek asylum. Additionally, there has been a high number of casualties in life from both sides with regime fighters and rebels alike being killed. Even more disheartening is the large number of civilian deaths, people who have become caught in the crossfires of the struggle for power.

It is also notable to mention the sheer amount of infrastructure and property damage that has occurred. No matter what the result is of this conflict, there will be a lot that needs to be rebuilt. This rebuilding process will inevitably involve more than just structural repairs but also the reimagining of what the identity of Syria as a country will be moving forward.

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