

THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE SYRIAN CONFLICT FOR NIGERIA: AN ANYLYSIS

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Abstract

This paper examined the implications of the Syrian conflict for Nigeria. It aim to draw the attention of Nigeria leaders to the need to review governance practice in order to avert violent conflict in the country. The paper adopted the Frustration – Aggression theory with data obtained from secondary sources. On the strength of the correlation between the causal factors of the Syrian conflict and the prevailing conditions in Nigeria, the work deduced that there is the possibility of a violent eruption in the country where adequate steps are not taken. The study therefore, recommended a review of governance practices to promote inclusiveness, reconciliation, confidence guiding and transparency.

Introduction

It is an undeniable and persuasive argument that the international system, like all social systems, is largely confrontational and conflict-laden. Over time, this nature of the international system has spawned a plethora of violent eruptions in different parts of the world. During the Cold War period for instance, inter-state engagement was the dominant mode of conflict expression. However, post-cold war era has witnessed a transformation of this mode of conflict to an essentially intra-state

activity or civil wars, of which there has been a proliferation, which the global south is most pronounced.

However, war generally has implications for two systems, internal and international. In other words, internal wars affect the international system and the international system affects internal wars. This dynamic character of war is defined by the natural attention it attracts and the implications it generates. The present paper examines the international dimension of the Syrian Civil War, with particular focus on Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

For more than a decade now, the Syrian Arab Republic has been embroiled in an unprecedented wave of violent conflict which has left much of the country desolate. The development is triggered by feelings of alienation and frustration arising from crisis of governance encapsulated in despotism, repression, lack of opportunity, injustice etcetera, elements that are implicated in the governance practice in much of the Arab world. It is feared that the Syrian conflict is capable of a domino effect given the pervasiveness of its causal factors in many climes especially Africa, thereby making the continent vulnerable. In Nigeria, the prevailing climate is unpredictable as tension and agitations are at concert pitch. This work seeks to draw the attention of Nigerian leaders to the need to re-examine governance practice in order to avert a possible violent conflict in the country.

Objectives of this Paper

The broad aim is to examine the implications of the Syrian conflict for Nigeria, to this effect, the specific objectives includes:

- (i) to identify and evaluate the causes of the Syrian conflict;
- (ii) to draw a probable corollary between the causal factors of the Syrian conflict and the prevailing conditions in Nigeria; and
- (iii) to recommend ways to improve governance in Nigeria, and Africa in general

Significance of this Paper

This Paper has academic and policy relevance. Academically, it will broaden public and research knowledge on the causes and implications of the Syrian Civil war. In the area of policy, it will help governments

and policy makers to review their policies and actions to enable and promote conditions that enhance justice and equity.

Theoretical Framework

Several theories could be adopted to explain the civil war in Syria, specifically and violent social conflict, generally. These includes structural conflict theory, biological theories, human needs theory, psychological theories and Realist theory. However, this paper prefers the frustration-aggression theory as most suitable theoretical basis for this work. This decision is based on the observed inadequacies of the afore-mentioned theories. For instance, while the structural conflict theory focused only on material interest as the cause of violent conflict, the biological, psychological and realist theories emphasized the human nature as the source of violence. In other words, these theories maintain that aggression is a natural reaction or instinct. The human needs theory is similar to the frustration-Aggression theory.

The frustration-aggression theoretical position was initially developed in 1939 by John Dollard and his research associates. Over time, it has been expanded and modified by other scholars including Leonard Berkoiortz (1962), Aubrey Yats (1962), Davies (1962), and Anifowose (1982) (Faleti; 2017). The fundamental argument of this theory is that violent behavior or aggression is fuelled by a feeling of disappointment due to the inability to fulfil ones need, and the perception that someone is responsible, directly. In other words, the discrepancy between what people need and what they actually get could generate a tendency for the people to confront those they hold liable for frustrating their ambition. This is the foci of Ted Robert Gurr's relative deprivation thesis which presupposes that one's perception of being deprived of his desires could predispose him to anger and violence.

In essence, violent reaction is not a natural tendency but an expression of the feelings of frustration and disappointment against the perceived source of denial of one's legitimate desires. It is instructive on this note, and as shall be seen in this discourse that, the Arab spring, generally and the Syrian Civil war in particular, resulted from a profound sense of popular discontentment and disillusionment fostered by the governments which provoked a sustained feeling of alienation, disaffection and frustration amongst the civil populace.

Operational Definition of Terms

Arab Spring – A reference to the series of uprisings that swept many of the countries in the Middle East and North Africa in 2011. (Kaufman: 2018)

Syrian conflict – The multi-faceted civil war that has raged in the Syrian Arab Republic since 2011.

Brief History of Syria

The Syrian Arab Republic is a country in the Middle East, along the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Historically, it has seen many invasions and occupations from the Romans and the Mongols, to the Crusaders and Turks. Modern Syria gained independence from France in 1946 (<https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki>). Since then, the State has endured intense political instability due largely to the conflicting interest of its elites (<https://history.state.gov/countries>). In fact, during the period 1945 – 1961, Syria suffered from such a weak international position and was the perpetual victim of predatory efforts of countries such as Iraq and Egypt. For instance, in 1958, Syria took the unprecedented step of voluntarily giving up sovereignty and having the country effectively annexed to Egypt as United Arab Republic.

The Union was however, terminated in 1961
(<https://history.state.gov/countries>).

The Arab Socialist Resurrection (Baath) Party, which assumed power in 1963 could not stem the tide of elite factionalism and rivalry, until the then Defence Minister, Lt Gen Hafez al-Assad, took control in 1970. He consolidated power, imposed order and brought the turmoil to an end, making Syria an active and powerful force in the Middle East.

However, Hafez-al-Assad ran a highly despotic government. He dominated Syria's public life to such an extent that political debate in that country consisted of little more than the contending ideas in Assad's head. His prejudices determined policy. He died in 2000, and his son, Bashir al-Assad, the current President promptly succeeded him. (<https://history /state.gov/countries>).

The Syrian Civil War

For eleven years running, Syria has been engulfed in an orgy of violent conflict that has left much of the State desolate and spawned a contagion of security challenges. The conflict began on March 15, 2011 as

prodemocracy protests after the arrest and torture of some teenagers who painted revolutionary slogan on a school wall. After security forces opened fire on demonstrators, killing several, more took to the streets. The unrest triggered nation-wide protest demanding President Assad's resignation. The government's continued use of force hardened the protester's resolve. With the escalation of violence and death of 16,000 people in July 2012, the international community acknowledged that Syria had reached a state of civil war (BBC, 15 July 2012, Retrieved 2016). The Syrian Civil War had begun. With further escalation of violence, the opposition eventually began to take up arms, first to defend themselves and later to expel security forces from their local areas. Over time the conflict became more than just a battle between those for or against President Assad. It acquired sectarian overtones, pitching the country's Shia Alawite sect and drawing in regional and world powers. The rise of the Jihadist group, Islamic State (IS) added a further dangerous dimension.

At the moment, much of the opposition has been crushed or crumbled. But despite the ceasefire which came into effect on 5 March, 2020, the war is far from over as the resistance from the opposition strong hold in Idib, North West Syria is still very formidable (voa news.com.Syria fact sheet-relief web.int). The war has been described as not only one of the bloodiest but also one of the most complex (<https://www.worldvision.org>). It is also considered as the largest human-made human catastrophe since World War II, on a scale so unfathomable that the United Nations (UN) officially abandoned trying to count the death toll in January 2014 (<https://www.theguardian.com>world>).

In the course of the war, over 600,000 people are estimated to have been killed, over 7 million internally displaced in Syria and over 6 million registered refugees. So far in 2021, more than 13 million people are in dire need of humanitarian aid (Syrian civil war.en.m.wikipedia.org). Indeed, the Syrian conflict is said to be marked by unparalleled suffering and need (<https://relief web.int>report>).

Causes of the Syrian Civil War

The Syrian civil war has both immediate and root causes. We shall examine them in a chronological sequence.

The Remote Causes

As could be inferred from the foregoing, the Syrian civil war is a logical consequence of the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring was the catalyst that unearthed the contagion of grievances that had plagued the Syrian society. In this connection, the Syrian civil war is the outburst of a preg-nated situation of abysmal discontent which had been perpetuated by the government. Some of the contending ills in this regard include, amongst others, despotism, nepotism, human rights abuse, poverty, unemployment, and insecurity. We examine some of them below;

Despotism

Syria has for long operated a unitary dominant party semi presidential Baathist republic under an authoritarian military dictatorship ([https://en.m.wikipedia.org>wiki](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki)). Since 1970 when Hafez al-Assad took over power, the country has been dominated by the Assad family. Hafez ran an authoritarian and repressive regime with power concentrated in his hand. For thirty years, his regime was characterized by cult of personality. He banned any opposition political party and any opposing candidate in any elections. The Baath party owned and controlled much of the media. Criticism of the President and his family was banned. He engaged in massive violation of human rights, including frequent execution of citizens and political prisoners. He maintained a gang network – Shabila, an armed militia group composed of the Alawites, used to silence critics. No few than fifteen separate security agencies reported to him personally. From 1963 to 2011, Syria was under emergency rule with public gathering of more than five persons banned (wikipedia). In 1982, Hafez al-Assad ordered a military crackdown on the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood in Hama, which killed between 10,000 to 40,000 people ([https://history/state.gov>countries](https://history.state.gov/countries)).

Nepotism

Syria is home to complex ethnic and religions diversity. Sunni Muslims constitute approximately 74% of the population. Other Muslim sects including the Shia (Alawite), various Christian groups including orthodox and Armenia, ethnic, Kurds, Turks, Circassia, Assyrians and Jews are in Syria (<https://countrystudies.us/Syria/67.htm>). However, since 1963, Syria has been ruled by the Alawite, whose members include the Assad’s family. The Alawite form the buck of Syria’s key

military units, intelligence services and ultra-loyalists. They used their privileged position to corner majority of cabinets, and governmental positions. The concentration of power in the hands of the Assad's family and Alawites had triggered protesters among the Sunni dominated rural areas, towns and cities. In 1982, Hafez al-Assad sent troops to crush a Sunni political uprising (Syria: the story of the conflict.www.bbc.com).

Lack of Democratic Reforms and Human Rights Abuse

The emergence of Bashir al-Assad as Syria's President in 2000, elicited intense inspiration and confidence in the reformation of Syria. This was because Bashir was seen as a potential reformer by both domestic and international community. This hope for democratic change was largely frustrated as Bashir al-Assad failed to implement any improvement. After a brief period of relaxation and openness from July, 2000 – January, 2001 popularly known as 'Damascus Spring', Bashir no longer tolerated dissent and democratic reforms became slow (<https://history.state.gov/countries>). Infact, human rights report before the 2011 uprising indicated that he had failed to substantially improve the state of human rights since coming to power. Infringement on human rights was deliberate as rights of expression, association and assembly were strictly controlled (Blackian: 2016), the state engaged in torture and made general mockery of its own laws.

Economic Policies

Neo-liberal economic policies initiated by Hafez al-Assad and accelerated by President Bashir deteriorated, rather than improve the living conditions of the people, as it benefited only a privileged minority of the citizens. In addition, the economy came under severe bureaucratic jurisdiction with private farms giving way to state controlled cooperative societies. The state also took over what was generally deemed strategic industries (<https://www.worldvision>).

Drought

From 2007 to 2010, Syria experienced unprecedented drought which resulted in wide spread crop failure, increased food prices and mass migration to the urban centres. In fact, it is estimated that 1.5 million people migrated to the urban areas, a development that exacerbated poverty and social unrest in the country (<https://aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/Syria-civil-war-explained>).

The Immediate Causes

The Syrian civil war has a historical origin seeded in the “Arab Spring”. The occasioned uprisings swept many of the countries in the Middle East and North Africa in 2011 (Kaufman: 2018). The uprising began as non-violent protest in Tunisia in 2010 and quickly took hold in many Arab states including Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, with differential outcome. It resulted in the overthrow of dictators and holding of elections in Tunisia and Egypt, and a transitional government in Yemen. In Libya and Syria, governments’ violent repression against protesters sparked violent agitations, leading to the bloody overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi with the support of the North Atlantic treaty organization (NATO), and an agonizing civil war in Syria (Goldstein and Pevehouse: 2014).

Many factors contributed to the Arab Spring including; High unemployment and poverty rates, popular disenchantment of the people with their countries’ perchance for autocracy and authoritarianism as well as exposure to social media which helped to mobilize protesters and provided solution to collective action problem (Dickovick and Eastwood: 2013).

Thus, the Arab Spring was rooted in a common set of conditions – despotic regimes, flagrant inequities, corruption, lack of representative institutions, nepotism and poor living conditions of the people (Telhani: 2011).

Nevertheless, the immediate cause of the Arab Spring was the self-immolation of a street vendor, Mohammed Boazizi in Tunisia in December 2010, as a protest against his humiliation, injustice and lack of opportunity, when a police woman insulted him and toppled his produce cart, yet he was rebuffed by the municipal authorities when he took his complaint there. The symbolic tactic of self-immolation galvanized protesters against the government of Ben Ali which fell by Mid-January 2011. The protest spontaneously spread to other Arab States (Dickovick and Eastwood: 2013).

The Arab Spring reached Syria on 15th March 2011, when pro-democracy protest began in the Southern city of Deraa, occasioned by the arrest and torture of some teenagers who painted revolutionary slogans. The incident provoked a groundswell of non-violent demonstrations with Syrians demanding democratic reforms, release of political prisoners, freedom, abolition of emergency law and an end to

corruption, from the regime of President Bashir al-Assad. Assad's response with widespread and progressively more brutal force of arms however, failed to crush the nascent uprising. On the contrary, state violence led not only to the protest movements' spread but also, overtime, to its militarization, leading inexorably to a civil war by the summer of 2012.

Implications for Nigeria

The paper shall address this from three perspectives, namely: Causes, Impact and Policy direction.

Causes

Against the background of the causal factor in the Syrian conflict as highlighted above, there is strong evidence that the prevailing Nigerian situation is not at variance. For instance, tension has risen to unprecedented height in the country, fault lines and differences stretched to the limits while separatist agitations are at concert pitch. In fact, it is generally argued that discounting the civil war period, Nigeria has not been so divided as it is now (Daily sun, Monday, February 8, 2021 p.28).

While the problems of the country are neither recent in origin nor division and tension, some reasons may account for the prevailing aggravated tension. They are summarized below;

Insecurity

Boko Haram and ISWA insurgency, the activities of bandits, herdsmen and IPOB's militancy, have aggravated conflict, tension and instability in the country, not only along ethnic and religious fault lines, but also between north south divide. However, more implicated in this national dilemma, is the activities of some criminal herdsmen believed to be of Fulani extraction. From different forests, they launch attacks on innocent citizens, destroy farms, kill and maim people, rape and kidnap some for ransom. This happens mostly in the north- central and southern part of the country (Daily sun, Monday, February 18, 2021 p.11).

Currently, Nigeria is the third country most impacted by terrorism, according to global terrorism index 2020, after Afghanistan and India. This is due to the violent activities of Boko Haram, believed to be Nigeria's deadliest terror group and Fulani herdsmen extremists (Vanguard, Monday, February 22, 2021 p.28).

Unemployment

Unemployment rose to 33.3% in the first of 2021. According to the Nigeria Bureau of statistics, (NBS) 26 million Nigerians are unemployed. The same applies to poverty. In 2018, 79 million Nigerians were said to live in extreme poverty, the highest population of the poor in sub-Saharan Africa. In 2019, over 94 million Nigerians were claimed to live below poverty line (Daily sun, Tuesday, October 8, 2019, The Punch Thursday, October 8, 2020).

The high rate of unemployment as well as pervasive poverty portray lack of opportunity for many, especially youth in the country, and could be an explanation for youth restiveness, as evidenced in the ENDSARS protests of October, 2020.

Corruption

The corruption perception index showed that the malaise deepened in the country. By the end of 2019, corruption perception index (CPI) for Nigeria was 146 and further rose to 149 in 2020. The national Bureau of statistics (NBS) 2019 study affirmed the deepening corruption (Daily sun, February 24, 2021 p.13). Corruption is a major source of conflict because it could account for mass poverty, unemployment, infrastructure deficit among other ills in the country.

Nepotism

Evidence shows unprecedented display of nepotistic tendencies by the Buhari administration. This is glaring in the abuse of the Federal character principle in the implementation of Governments' policies, and the general subordination of the Nigerian State to the domination of the Fulani oligarchy. This ethnocentrism has created a feeling of repression and alienation in a majority of Nigerians.

Impact of the Prevailing Situation

Analysis of the prevailing condition in Nigeria as highlighted above, betrays the possibility of a violent conflict in the country. The same climate of bad governance was the major implication in the Syrian conflict, particularly and the Arab Spring, in general.

Implications for Policy Direction

A far greater implication of the Syrian conflict for Nigeria, is in the area of policy orientation. The pervasive violence in the country, the

tension, agitations and antagonism as well as the partial disposition of the President, are ominous signs potent enough to instigate a violent revolution. But it can be prevented. To this effect, the following recommendations are made to enable policies that promote inclusiveness and confidence building.

Cohesive national leadership

The President should build consensus among Nigerians by re-orienting his policy disposition. His abuse of Federal character principle, nepotistic appointment and obvious support for the Fulani herdsmen should be stopped. Recently, the Nigerian Senate resolved and has asked the Presidency to declare the bandits as terrorists (Nigeria Television Authority (NTA) News, 9pm, 29 September, 2021). This position of the Senate has been supported by the Governor of Kaduna State, Nasir El-rufai, who aligns with the declaration of bandits as insurgents and terrorists (East-West Reporters, October 21, 2021). The President should act on this very urgently. Similarly, the President should also declare as a terrorist group, the herdsmen. This is to evaluate the government respond adequately to the threat posed by those insurgent groups.

Restructuring

The Nigerian project should be revalued for maximum socio-economic development, national integration and an assured future for the citizens. The existing pseudo – federal system which promotes mediocracy, inequities and underdevelopment should, therefore, be reviewed in order to promote harmonious co-existence of the component parts of the Nigerian State. Negotiating the corporate advancement and harmonious existence of the country and her citizens should be prioritized by the government as fundamental to national integration and socio-economic development.

Stem the tide of insecurity

The Nigerian government should show adequate commitment and political will to fighting insecurity. On this score, the military component must be adequately, fairly and genuinely applied where necessary, no matter who is involved. In the same vein, genuine grievances should be passionately addressed. Apart from insurgency, banditry, herdsmen extremism and separatist agitations, issues of value

added tax (VAT), and revenue sharing between the tiers of government generally, unemployment, poverty, corruption etcetera, have to be generally and genuinely addressed because they are triggers of conflict and insecurity.

Conclusion

This work has examined the implications of the Syrian conflict for Nigeria. This is considered from the standpoints of causes, impact and policy orientation. While it is considered that the prevailing conditions in Nigeria were the same diametrically responsible for the implosion in Syria, it is also submitted that violent revolution in the mold of the Syrian civil war can be averted where adequate and credible steps are taken to achieve genuine consensus and reconciliation of the component interests in the country.

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