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The Evolution of US-Syrian Relations: From Post-Independence Cooperation to Cold War Hostility and Modern-Day Confrontation (1946-2016)

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Abstract

The research aims to analyze the historical path and evolution of Syrian foreign policy and relations with United States. Syria gained independence from France in 1946 and pursued Pan-Arab policies and forming alliances with the Soviet Union and regional powers to counter Israel and Western influence. Relations between the US and Syria fluctuated over time due to Washington's dual objectives of securing oil and protecting Israel. While the US appeared to support for peace and reforms but in reality, it tried to destabilize and regime change in Syria as part of a broader strategy for the Greater Middle East. The analysis highlights the ambiguities in U.S. policy and Syria's tireless role in regional geopolitics.

Keywords: Syria, United States, Foreign Policy, Middle East, Pan-Arabism, Israel, Regime Change.

Introduction

Prior to World War I, Syria was part of Ottoman Empire and after the fall of this empire France and Britain agreed to divide the territories of Middle East with each other through Sykes-Picot Agreement. As per pre-determined terms and conditions Britain took control of Iraq and France established its hegemony over Syria and Lebanon. In 1920 Syria was renamed as Arab Kingdom of Syria but still mandated by France as per prior agreement. Syria and France did not enjoy good relationship from the very beginning of post-colonial era. At that time King Faisal was ruling over Syria under French mandate. France sent a small force to Damascus to occupy the city and forcing the King and his supporters to leave the place forcefully. The small contingent of irregular forces of France entered Damascus on 27 July 1920 and took control of the city without facing any meaningful resistance. This incident was viewed with displeasure by the King and his loyal subjects and strained the relationship of both countries.

Later on France also tried to divide Syria into four units i.e. Aleppo, Damascus and two states for Alawites and Druzes minorities. Syrian people thwarted this plan by considering it a divide and rule policy and strongly opposed the idea. In 1944 Syria gained independence after applying constitutional reforms and was also recognized by the international community as a sovereign state. After end of World War II in 1945 both Syria and Lebanon were invited in the founding conference for United Nations. On the other hand, France kept its forces in Both Syria and Lebanon but succumbed to pressure of United Nations on the request of both occupied countries. Ultimately France withdrew its forces from Syria in April 1946 and from Lebanon in December 1946. Both countries claimed full independence after complete withdrawal of French troops.

Syria is a small country in terms of area, economy and population but emerged as a geopolitical leader and played pivotal role in Middle Eastern politics owing to its strong

military, upright foreign policy and strategic location. It is surrounded by five countries, Iraq on southeast and east, Turkey at northern border; Lebanon on western side, Jordan is located in its south and Israel in southwest after occupying its Golan Heights region since 1967.

History of Geopolitical Importance of Syria

From the inception of Syria, it has deep rooted Pan Arabism and Pan Syrian Nationalist sentiments and it rejected all coalition plans which were advocated and lead by western countries while firmly adhering to its Pan Arab and Syrian nationalist ideology. Syria is the staunch and persistent follower of Pan-Arabism and even surrendered its sovereignty for union with Egypt in 1958 for the sake of promoting Arab unity and nationalism. This union was materialized to defend the Arab causes and solidify the struggle for emancipation of Palestine as the prime objective.

During later part of 1960s Damascus was considered to be the launching pad for freedom movement of Palestine and Ba'th party played conspicuous role in galvanizing this plan from 1966 to 1970. Syria also lost a part of its territory named as Golan Heights in 1967; the war was fought for the freedom of Palestine against Israel to show its Arab nationalism (Hinnebusch, 2012). Later on regaining the lost territory from Israel became the major objective of Syrian foreign policy.

The foreign policy was carefully enacted with a purpose to keep it Syria-centric for recovery of its occupied land as well as keeping the spirit of Arab unity and Palestinian cause alive and uncompromised. Syria also sought the support of other Arab states being one nation and declared Israel as common enemy of all Arab states on the basis of Pan Arabism. It also declared that Syria would remain in forefront in the war against Israel.

Despite waging war against Israel in 1973, Syria was unable to get back its territory. Thereafter it supported a proxy war in Lebanon with the thought of keeping Israel under pressure to bring it on dialogue table for resolution of Golan Heights issue. With the passage of time Syria became the lynchpin regarding Arab-Israeli peace process and conflict and regional and international powers also sought influence in Damascus. Over the period of time Assad concluded that notwithstanding there are shortcomings in negotiation with Israel, the diplomatic process is inevitable in recovering the Golan and may strike the iron wherever it is hot.

Assad was also cognizant of the fact that without using alternative options and pressure building tactics Israel could not be convinced to accept a deal favoring Arab world. He also focused on revamping its military paraphernalia and acquired state of art technology to avert any adventure from Israel. Alongside strengthening its military base Assad also employed proxy warfare against Israel making it aware of the urgency of the situation and to keep the balance of power in the Region (Hinnebusch, 2012).

Syrian geopolitical importance and strong sense of Arab nationalism exposed it to multifarious threats including direct wars with Israel since very beginning of its independence. To make its presence felt in international arena and to strike the regional balance, Syrian established coalition partnership with Soviet Union, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iran to acquire armaments, diplomatic support and protection from Israel which is enjoying unparalleled support and uninterrupted supply of weaponry from United States of America and western countries.

Syria in International Relations

After World War II both United States and Soviet Union emerged as two super powers and competed with each other in a bid to establish their supremacy on one another. During the cold war era both countries entered into pacts, treaties, partnerships and agreements with other countries and also prepared their blocks to keep the world under their influence. The Middle East was also no exception and being rich with oil this Region also attracted the attention of super powers for their strategic interests. During the cold war, Syria opted Soviet Union as an ally since USSR was against United States which was extending its support to Israel unconditionally. The friend of a foe is treated as an enemy and supporter of a friend is also considered as a well-wisher, same holds true for this relationship.

United States of America and Syria Relations

The foreign policy of United States revolves around two major interests which are conflicting in nature. Firstly, to procure oil from gulf countries at low prices while entering into agreements with Arab countries and secondly, to protect the sovereignty of Israel but this objective perturbs the Arab countries. United States tried to pursue both objectives simultaneously by mediating in the peace process between Arabs and Israel which enshrines vacation of occupied territories by Israel against assurances of future peaceful co-existence. Another aspect that was considered vital by United States during cold war was containment of Soviet influence over Middle East.

The United States-Syrian bilateral relationship oscillated quite abruptly and spun from mutually accommodative approach to direct confrontation and arm conflict. Despite all political and ideological differences, the basic US policy regarding broader Arab-Israeli conflict remained the same over the period of time.

Historically, American Protestant Missionaries arrived in Ottoman-governed Syria in 1820 after 15 years of which first American consulate was opened there in Aleppo. These missionaries were unable to convert a vast majority of local villagers to Christianity but earned goodwill and respect on humanitarian grounds for extending medical services to the underserved and impoverished people of Syria. The missionaries also raised voice for independence of Arab countries from Ottoman Empire while following the spirit of American Revolution.

The American President Woodrow Wilson presented Fourteen points which were aimed to protect fundamental rights, lives and equal opportunities of development and self-governing prosperity of all nationalities subjected to Turkish rule. Later on French mandate was approved by United States of America for establishing control over Syria through mandate system of League of Nations. Nonetheless, after World War II Syrian people became highly charged in favor of United States for strongly opposing France in its pursuit of re-establishing its Syrian mandate. This decision led to exit of all French officials from the Syrian soil and formal independence of Syria was declared in 1946 which was widely recognized by other countries. Syria was also privileged to become one of the original signatories of the UN Charter after coming into existence.

The first democratic government of Syria was overthrown by Syrian Army Chief of Staff Husni al-Zaim through a bloodless military coup that took place of 29 March 1949. This coup was supported covertly by United States and especially the newly formed Central Intelligence

Agency (CIA) (Massad, 2011). On 11 April 1949, the then Army Chief of Staff Husni al-Zaim became the President of Syria.

The Arabian Oil Company (ARAMCO) disclosed its plan to construct the Trans-Arabian Pipe Line (TAPLINE) from Saudi Arabia to the Mediterranean in 1945. For this purpose, ARAMCO was able to get rights of way from Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Lebanon with the help of United States. However, Syrian parliament refused to give rights of way and this lucrative project was only opposed by Syria. The predominant policy objective of United States in Syria became materialization of Trans-Arabia Pipeline but its passage at that time was hindered by its democratically elected government. The rights of ways for TAPLINE project was granted by the new President Husni al-Zaim on 16 May immediately after the coup. This approval was followed by a ban on Communist Party and incarceration of hundreds of left-wing activists (Little, 2003).

The United States of America vehemently supported Israel since the administration of President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1950s. On the other hand, it was also accepted by United States especially after Arab Israel war of 1973 that some grievances of Syria against Israel are genuine in nature and needed to be redressed. On the contrary when Israel attacked the Syrian troops deployed in Lebanon in 1982, the President of United States Ronald Reagan arbitrated in favor of Israel although it was an aggressor and assassinator. This decision bred more hatred and animosity against Israel and United States of America in Middle East Region. When United States was backing all legitimate and illegitimate actions of Israel in Middle East it was imperative for Syria to incline towards Soviet Union to safeguard its interests and sovereignty. The provision of arms by Soviet Union lead to some successes of Syria in 1973 war against Israel and later on helped in maintaining the power equilibrium in the Region. The Soviet alignment with Syria curbed the Israel's freedom of actions against Syria and limited the use of military might in the Middle East. Considering United States as mainstay of Israel, Syrian President Assad was somewhat successful in exploiting the US fears of Middle Eastern instability and forcing US in restraining Israel especially during clashes in Lebanon which were contained from converting into full scale escalation. The Lebanese-Israeli accord took place in May, 1983 and President Reagan supported this treaty and attributed this success to his vibrant efforts to restore the Israeli –Arab peace process. Later on Syria started proxies and supported non state actors in Lebanon to counter policies of United State and to sabotage peace process facilitated by West. Syria was also held accountable for carrying out attacks on American Marine barracks in Beirut due to presence of its affiliates in Lebanon. Despite the fact that connivance of Syria in conducting Beirut attacks was never established after in-depth investigation, America still firmly believe that Syria was having prior information of the event and nodded positively to perpetrators.

The hostility of relationship between Syria and United States reached near climax in December 1983 when a deadly war was about to broke between them. The fighter jets flew from United States carrier plane on December 04, 1983 and bombarded Syrian anti-aircraft installations in Lebanon's Biqa valley. United States also sustained loss of two aircrafts which were shot down by Syrian army. United States battle ships also attacked on Syrian position on December 13 and 14, 1983. Militarily, these attacks were not having any major significance but these clashes represent first ever direct Syrian-American armed conflict and prove the

Syrian apprehension about American regional interventions as gunboat policy which is highly detrimental in nature.

United States-Syrian relations improved abruptly in June 1985 after positive role played by Syrian government in negotiating with the hijackers of Trans World Airline's flight 847 on behalf of United States. The then President Reagan lauded (but in calculated language) the Syrian efforts rendered for safe release of hostages. Some critics presented otherwise scenario, they believed that the way Syrian officials influenced the behavior of hijackers there existed some clandestine relationship between them.

Syria had been repeatedly blamed for carrying out terrorists' attacks on the people and installation of United States, Israel, and Western Europe in both Middle East and other places. These charges were not backed by verifiable proofs and found short on facts therefore Syrian involvement in these attacks was never proven.

There was a breakthrough during April, 1986 when a Jordanian citizen namely Nizar Hindawi was captured in London while trying to implant a bomb in an Israeli Airline plane. In his confessionary statement he confirmed that he was imparted training besides providing tactical and logistical support, explosive material and financial aid by Intelligence officers of Syria. The British agencies collected the evidences in light of confession made by Hindawi and authenticated the role of Syria in this attempted bombing case. It was stated by Vice President of United States George Bush in May 1986 that Syrian involvement has been proved in international terrorist acts. Sanctions were imposed by United States on Syria in November 1986 as a retaliation against its incessant involvement in international terrorism activities. While announcing sanctions White House also mentioned that Syria is in a position to play a pivotal role in changing the dimension of an importation region of the world but this role cannot be performed while promoting terrorism as a cornerstone of its foreign policy. In this way United States explained the reason for imposing sanctions over Syria.

After disintegration of Soviet Union, the cold war era ended and Syria being part of ex-Soviet bloc felt the need to establish some sort of relationship with United States to neutralize the potential threats from its declared enemy, Israel. As a way forward Syria became part of coalition forces against Iraq in 1990 and also involved in Madrid peace process while anticipating that United States would acknowledge the positive role of Arab countries in Gulf war and would negotiate the peace deal acceptable to both Arabs and Israel. This settle will pave the way for recovery of Golan Heights from occupation of Israel. On the other hand, United States was unable to resolve the matter while succumbing to strong pressure of Zionist lobby and instead supported Israel in pursuant of its illegitimate expansionary designs and colonial approach being followed by it in sheer violation of Geneva Convention. Considering the circumstances and ground realities a fair deal between Arabs and Israel sounds like a wishful thinking that can only be attained while compromising on one aspect or another.

The three major drawbacks and prices United States is paying for not improving relationship with Syria and not deputing an Ambassador over there are.

1. It faced the music in Iraq for not extending its military support and neglected the importance of border management.
2. United States did not share intelligence reports with Syria regarding Al Qaida and ISIS and kept Syria aloof of its growing influence and expansionary motives.

3. Syria has attained the status of focal point for regional politics and diplomacy but America has no one there to represent American interests and play game as per changing circumstances.

The warmth of US-Syrian relationship suddenly disappeared with the formation of Bush government dominated by neo-cons who adopted hawkish approach towards Arab countries including Syria. The policy paradigm was changed abruptly since the new US administration was deeply influenced by the rightist party "Likud" of Israel which supported the strategy of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon focusing on colonialism in a bid to establish Greater Israel. The Arab-Israel peace process was shattered due to policy change and strained relationship with Arab countries means limited oil access which may jeopardise the interest of both America and Israel. The neo-cons proposed to change the dynamics of the Middle East by engaging America's highly capable military.

After 9/11 the neo-cons came into a position to efface any country which refuses to fight against terrorism as per terms and conditions set by United States. Syria was in tight corner after receiving a depressingly long list from America demanding closure of press offices of Islamic Jihad and Hamas located in Damascus since these organizations were responsible for suicide bombing in Israel. Syria was reluctant to abide by the instructions received from US since these groups were regarded as highly revered for their contributions in the battle field against Israel and their significance as deterrence and second line of defense against any military action could not be overruled.

Syria condemned the actions of Al-Qaida and supported United States in fight against this banned outfits however, it also advocated its policy stand of supporting Hezbollah and other pro-Syrian groups struggling to liberate the occupied territory of Syria and Lebanon from Israel. This situation was unacceptable to neo-cons and they reacted by isolating Syria diplomatically, imposing economic sanctions and also hurling threats to topple the Syria regime with military action.

In 2003, United States invaded Iraq but Syria could not overtly oppose this attack but come stealth initiatives were undertaken which were also halted after receiving US threats of dire consequences. It was alleged by United States that Syria was engaged in pre-war supply of arms and ammunition to Iraq and considered this act as illegitimate. Syria also encouraged the volunteers to move across Iraqi border and resist the American/British forces but never admitted this action officially.

Syrian President Bashar opposed the efforts of United States to obliterate the Muslim and Arab character of Iraq. The anti-American sentiments were on a higher side in Syria and thousands of volunteers arrived over there from whole Arab world. A majority of their volunteers were hailing from Northern Syria and they were having old and deep-rooted relationship with the Iraqi people residing at other side of border. Similarly, some volunteer groups in Syria were offshoots of those who were already engaged in fighting against the invading army. After fall of Saddamist regime, Syria also provided shelter to Iraqi officials leaving Iraq. The sequence of events increased the animosity of neo-cons and with the passage of time the peril of military clash between the invading forces and Syria was increasing. Syrian Trade Centre in Baghdad was bombed by United States and the Iraqi pipeline to Syria was also shut down to smother the cash flows between two countries.

After conquest of Iraq, Syrian regime faced a highly critical and alarming situation as it was squeezed between America in the East and Israel sitting on Western border. Under immense pressure Syria needed to play sagaciously with very little options left with itself. At that time United States Secretary of State Colin Powell forwarded a list to Syria, demanding collaboration with occupation forces in Iraq, withdrawal of Syrian army from Lebanon, ban on Hizbollah, and expelling Palestinian militant groups from Syria. Considering the strategic depth in the presence of militant factions, central role played in Middle Eastern politics and burning desire for Arab nationalism, Syrian government was struck in an intricate, gloomy and desperate situation. These demands were utterly unacceptable to Syria and could only be accomplished under immense external pressure and as last resort.

Syria at first place did not accept the US-installed Iraqi Governing Council and also tried to convince other Arab countries follow its trend but in futility. After exposing to different kinds of pressure it did so but only half-heartedly. Later on the pressure tactics were not maintained steadily and United States failed to bring Syria fully in line with its policy to alleviate Iraq.

It is also worth mentioning that before start of war some Iraqi assets were shifted to Syria through banking channel. Syrian government resisted to transfer these assets to US backed occupied regime and demanded placement of a legitimate government for shifting the reserves. United States cited the Central Bank of Syria as a primary money laundering concern with the aim to put a lid on its international transactions.

However, after approval of UNSC resolution 1483 which allowed the invaders to legitimately control the revenue earned through sale of Iraq's oil, the Iraqi assets were returned by Syria. Actually Syria did not want to be entirely disassociated from all allies of United Nations Security Council in the wake of imminent American threat.

When the Iraq war ended, an agreement took place between Syria and Iraq under which Syrian businessmen were allowed to reinvigorate their trade terms with Iraq against provision of electricity to the inhabitants of Northern Iraq. The Syrian-American relationship remained highly volatile and strained during the period 2003 to earlier 2009. In 2004 economic sanctions were imposed on Syria under the Syrian Accountability Act, which embargoed the re-export and export of US products to Syria. In August 2008, more sanctions were applied on Syria which debarred US persons for dealing in the petroleum sector of Syria, import of Syrian petroleum products was also prohibited besides curbing the export of US services to Syria (US Department of state, 2014).

The major points of contention afflicting the US relationship with Syria include:

1. The refusal of Syria to expel the remains of Saddam Hussein regime responsible for carrying out attacks in Iraq.
2. Failure of Syrian government to beef up security measures at border points which were being used by militants to infiltrate into Iraq.
3. Dismal human rights history.
4. Intention to develop or procure weapons of mass destruction (WMD).
5. Meddling with the affairs of Lebanon.
6. Providing asylum to the leadership of Palestinian Jihadi groups in Damascus.

During 2009, the Syrian policy was redesigned by United States in line with the changing dynamic of the region and country alike. The new policy focused on reduction of regional

tensions, discover of areas of mutual interests, promotion of peace and stability in Middle East.

In 2011, spillover effects of Arab Spring were also felt in Syria and brought along symptoms of nascent subversion in the Syria. The rallies of protestors were dispersed while unleashing all sorts of brutality over them. The government of United States responded to the situation and some additional sanctions were introduced as a punitive action against the miscreants involved in human right violations or supporting the Assad Regime. On the other hand, United States also nurtured the opposition groups involved in civil war by way of providing weapons, training, financial supports and moral assistance.

US Motives in the Syrian Crisis

The Wiki Leaks unearthed one of its cables dating back to December 2006 that divulged the central motives of United States to destabilize the Syrian government even 5 years before the onset of Arab Spring in Syria. This cable was sent by the then Charge D'affaires of US embassy in Damascus to United States. Different strategic and tactics that can be employed in attaining the objective of toppling Assad government were also explained in the cable. The cable in contained the weaknesses of Assad that can be exploited to destabilize his regime. These shortcomings were loopholes in economic reforms, rampant corruption and mismanagement in public sector entities, ethnic and sectarian composition of population, Kurdish desire for an autonomous territory, the growing influence of hard-core militant factions in the garb of so called jihad and limited ability of the Syrian government to apprehend them. The cable also conveyed a thorough assessment of situation and the proposed plan of action that can be adopted by the government of United States in sending the signals and statements whenever opportunities was available (Naiman, 2015).

The United States was eager to destabilize the government of Assad and to achieve this all available means were being explored as cited in the cable sent in December 2006 but the adversities and aftershocks of this action were never deliberated. A dual faced approach was adopted by United States which was entirely different from reality and not synchronized with policy statements. Publically, the United States advocated for social and economic sector reforms in Syria but in isolation it was also seeking opportunities like corruption ingrained in bureaucracy and armed forces to thwart implementation of reforms program. Similarly, the United States was overtly striving for elimination of Islamic terrorist groups and waging a war to wipe out terrorism but simultaneously it also wanted to augment the presence of militant factions in Syria that can be used for promoting militancy in Syria and to remove Assad from helms of affairs (Naiman, 2015).

The new Middle East Plan was conceived by the United States and Israel with a bearing in mind to use Lebanon as an epicenter for modifying the policies of Middle Eastern countries and thereafter releasing the forces of constructive chaos. The constructive chaos attributes to a condition which may ignite warfare, erupt civil disobedience and pave the way for extreme violence that may engulf the whole Middle East and weaken the militaries of entire region. This widespread anarchy will in turn be used by Israel, United States and Britain to realign the geographical distribution of Middle East by making a new map for the region in accordance with their geopolitical, strategical and economic objectives.

This plan is a testimony to hand and glove relationship between the United States and Israel and also viewed as a pristine military roadmap in the Middle East that was strategized at the

time of creation of Jewish state. The New Middle East plan is being implemented slowly but consistently by creating an environment of mistrust amongst regional countries, promoting militancy and instability and unleashing terrorism from Afghanistan to Iran and Persian Gulf, Iraq to Syria and Lebanon to Palestine for establishing hegemony over the entire region with the help of a robust military might (Nazemroava, 2016).

Lieutenant-Colonel Ralph Peters prepared a map for New Middle East which is exhibited as under:



Source: <http://www.globalresearch.ca/plans-for-redrawing-the-middle-east-the-project-for-a-new-middle-east/3882>

The Armed Forces Journal published this map in June 2006 and being ex-officer of United States War Academy, Peters was entrusted with this assignment. The speech of the United States Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice on the New Middle East was also considered to be a turning point for regional peace and stability. Israel also attacked on Lebanon in a bid to initiate implementation of this plan and the way United States fervently supported it without justifiable grounds also endorses the existence of such proposal (Nazemroava, 2016).

The whole stage has been set to efface the Assad regime and to abolish the strong ideological and political bonding amongst Hezbollah, Syria and Iran just to safeguard the vested interests of Israel. Syrian crisis was the brainchild of Israel, United States of America and western allies and the whole game was orchestrated 5 years before the Arab Spring.

Conclusion:

The Syria-US relations show that differences in geopolitical interests, ideological clashes and furtive strategies have shaped Middle Eastern dynamics. Syria struggled to protect itself from Israel and also tried to secure its oil. On the other hand, the US wanted to carry out regime change in Syria and to install puppet government create crisis in Syria. These crises were a part of US-Israeli strategy to reshape the regional structure and influence global politics.

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