

ANALYSIS OF FACTORS INVOLVED IN THE SYRIAN CRISIS INNATIONAL, REGIONAL AND TRANS-REGIONAL LEVELS

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Abstract

Contrary to all international efforts to end the suffering of war and conflict and building a secure world, the second decade of the third millennium has had deep erosional crises as in previous decades. The Syrian crisis is the most prominent symbol of international tension that has had a continuous flow from 2001 and has become deeper every day and provided a security swamp for the people. There are a lot of assumptions about the starting and sustaining causes of this crisis and each one has focused on a particular component. The main purpose of this research is finding out the roots of the Syrian crisis. This research assumes that the Syrian crisis has internal aspects and that's related to political, economic and cultural structures and deep gaps in Syria. Ethnic-religious gaps along with economic and financial pressures on the Syrian people with a one-party authoritarian system of ruling by the Assad family for decades have led to unrest and the interference of regional actors such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and trans-regional actors such as America, Russia and China has worsened the crisis. The factors involved in the Syrian crisis have led to death and homelessness of thousands of people in Syria and made them seek refuge in other countries.

Keywords: Syrian crisis, national, regional, trans-regional, ethnic gaps, Iran, America.

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Introduction

From 1991, there are signs of political riot, security crisis, natural and synthetic human tragic events as well as geopolitical and geostrategic changes and unique competitions in geo-economic areas. The collapse of the Soviet Union has led to crisis and chaos in regional environments. Syria is among the most important international units located in the Middle East and has a unique geostrategic and geopolitical situation. Unfortunately, a country that had a relatively peaceful atmosphere and its people had a normal life free of violence, has been gradually experiencing unrest since March 2011 which in addition to government and internal opposition, forced regional and trans-regional countries to react. Tied with political, economic, social and cultural problems of the Syrian regime and its infrastructure in the form of an inherent disease and ultimately unrest and uprising and its confluence with the intervention of foreign actors became a protracted crisis and attrition. The reasons of the crisis in Syria are related to a circle of events that despite the importance of its internal roots, its regional and particularly international roots are of great importance and the attrition of the crisis is due to the interference of international and regional powers in Syria's internal space that makes any plan to solve the crisis impossible. First, we analyze the strategic position of Syria. In the second section we explore why and how the Syrian crisis has started and finally the levels of the Syrian crisis will be analyzed.

1. Strategic and Geopolitical Position of Syria

Geopolitics is a key word used in international politics, strategic studies and military science. It is a combination of three elements: Geography, power and politics. The geopolitical issue is the interaction of these three elements (Hafeznia, 1379: 84-85). In order to make its importance and strategic role clear, it is necessary to study Syria in different historical periods. Due to geopolitical strategic importance, Syria has long been invaded by foreign powers and foreign colonizers such as France and Britain. Archaeologists nominate Syria as one of the origins of human civilization. The current Syria which in the past made up Sham with Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine, is the cradle of past prosperity. When the Islamic army defeated Sham, the culture of this new religion affected the civilization of the region. In the following centuries, Ottoman Turks conquered the land and perpetuated their pioneering policy and in addition to the protection of symbols and Islamic monuments, constructed new historical monuments. After the Second World

War and the collapse of Ottoman empire, Syria became a French protectorate. Syria has been a member of the United Nations since 1945 and ultimately after the departure of the last French soldier in 1946, regained its independence. With a population of over 22 million people and an area of about 185,180 square kilometers, Syria is the eighty-seventh country in the world in terms of vastness. Syria is located in West Asia as the center of communications of Asia, Africa and Europe. This country has 14 provinces(Ajorloo, 1390: 56).

2. Formation of the Syrian Crisis

Since 2010, the Middle East and North Africa have witnessed fundamental political and security changes in terms of defeating rulers and popular uprisings against rulers. The self-immolation of Mohammad Bouazizi, a young Tunisian sale, following an officer's action in seizing his cart, led to protests in Tunisia. The origin of the Syrian crisis was the military confrontation of fierce intelligence and security officers of Bashar al-Assad's regime with a number of students from lower-class families and the poor who wrote anti-government slogans on the walls of cities. A realistic look at developments in Syria and the crisis shows that Syrians inspired by other Arabic countries, protested against the rulers and called for fundamental changes including dismissing Bashar al-Assad. Lack of a professional police force, interference of the army and experienced security forces to control the crisis led to the killing and wounding civilians and spreading the bloody crisis to the whole territory of Syria as well as other safe lands(Malashenko,2013:13). The Syrian crisis can be reviewed and analyzed on three levels.

1-2- Internal level Analysis

In countries which have passed the process of political, social, economic and cultural development and have been able to remove ethnic, religious and linguistic gaps, internal crisis doesn't emerge, but in countries that are far away from this type of political system and are based on authoritarianism and their president, king or a minority party is the only power, risingsuch a crisis is probable. The process of state-building and nation-building in these countries is not usually successful. These governments are known as fragile states. In these countries ethnic, religious and sectarian gaps are noticeable and the distribution of economic and political advantages is not appropriate. This problem is inherent in the Middle East and has led to crisis in the heart of this region. Internal analysis of the Syrian crisis can be evaluated as follows:

1-1-2-Authoritarian System and Lack of Political Development

1-1-1-2- One-party System (The Concentration of Power on the Baath Party)

Since Hafez al-Assad (1973-2000 AD) and his son, Bashar al-Assad, (2000 up to now) took power in Damascus, Syria has had an authoritarian ruling system. The people in this country have never had the chance to elect their favorite representatives. Contrary to apparent claims, there is not such things as parliamentary elections and presidential election in Syria. The parties in Syria are divided into two categories: Pro-government parties such as the Baath party and other opposition parties such as the Democratic party and the Communist party. According to the constitution, opposition parties have no opportunities for political activities. Although Bashar al-Assad had promised to give freedom to all parties before he took the power, he prohibited competitive activities of all parties because of the interests of the Baath Party and the dangers that threatened the party's future. It should be noted that a good atmosphere established in Syria 46 years ago and continues so far (Jafari Valdani, 1388:90).

2-1-1-2- The Impossibility of the Emergence of Trade Unions, Organizations and Civil Society Activities

Since independence so far, there has been a repressive atmosphere in Syria because of its governing system and in order to prevent the formation of internal dissent groups. Therefore, there has been no possibility for the emergence and activities of civil society and foreign elites. This issue has led to a situation in which people don't believe in the regime (Naghizadeh, 1391: 154).

3-1-1-2-Lack of Freedom of the Press

After Baath Party came to power, there have been a lot of changes in the press, such that no activities were possible outside the scope of official government. Based on the type of political system and constitution of the country, media has no right to criticize the government. So that by 2001, regardless of pro-government newspapers, the media had no right for critical and journalistic activities in Syria. The pressure on the press-section of the country matched one of the pieces of the puzzle of the Syrian crisis. These media have applied all their efforts to delegitimize the regime of President Bashar al-Assad during the crisis. In this crisis, powerful

social networks such as Twitter, Facebook and Telegram along with satellite and television Mass media launched massive advertisements against the regime (Ajourloo, 1390: 55).

4-1-1-2- Lack of Free Competitive Elections

The most important feature of authoritarian and one-party states is expansion of power within their party and giving no opportunities to other parties in order to gain power through election. Formal elections are for touching public opinion at home and abroad. One of the causes of the unrest and uprising in Syria is the lack of accurate election systems and mechanisms. Therefore, most opponents were among those who were dissatisfied with the situation described above and immediately took up arms against security forces and tried to overthrow the ruling regime.

2-1-2- Financial and Economic Gaps and Discrimination

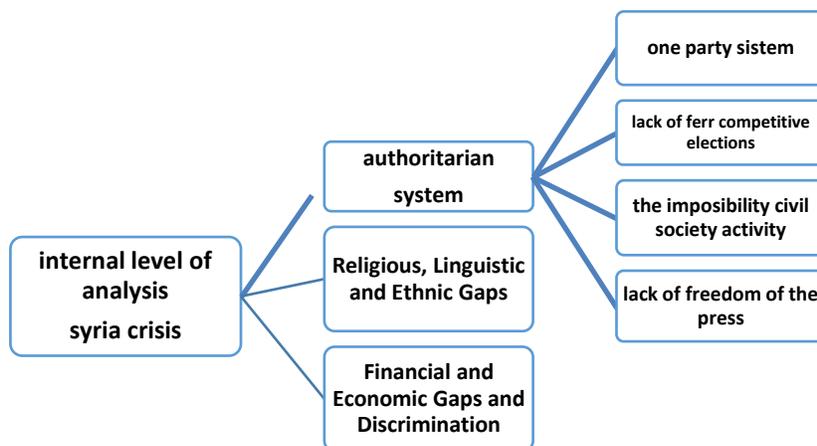
In Syria, the majority of people who participated in anti-government protests were among the lower classes with low or no income. On the other hand, the middle classes and the bourgeoisie supported Bashar Assad or adopted the neutrality policy. These people organized large demonstrations in support of Assad in Damascus and other cities and called for collision with opponents. If the same people were deprived of these benefits, they were also likely to join the ranks of the opposition. This claim is true, because the majority of anti-government protests occurred in marginal cities and in addition the whereabouts of protesters were located in the same areas. Among these cities Daraa, Idlib, Latakia and other major cities like Homs are notable in which most of the people are deprived of appropriate levels of economy. In cities like Damascus which is in the average level of economic prosperity, the government is strong and had no concerns in this regard and if there was unrest, it would be controlled and nipped in the bud by the security forces and military cooperation with people loyal to the throne of Bashar al-Assad.

3-1-2- Religious, Linguistic and Ethnic Gaps

In the current era, it is scarcely possible to find a country in which the population is composed of men and women alike in language, religion, customs and other features with no ideological differences. Syria is among the countries where there are many ethnic and religious groups. Therefore, this country is prone to severe and prolonged unrest which is almost impossible to solve. Politicians and the ruling elite considered the Syrian population crisis as a threat for

Assad's regime and with the outbreak of the crisis in 2011, all these predictions came true. In fact, the root cause of the crisis and demographics in Syria is the fact that the country is composed of different ethnic groups and in order to create a new political, social and economic order, the internal crisis should be resolved. Such uneven and human demographics in cultural, economic, social and religious areas leads to political and social tensions. Syria's population consists of religious groups and various ethnicities which creates a colorful society. Arabs make up 90/3% and Armenians make up the rest of the population of Syria. In addition, in terms of religion 65% of the Syrian population is Sunni, 12% Alawi, 10% Christian, 9% Sunni (Kurd) and the rest are Sunnis and Druze, Ismaili, Turkmen and Assyrians. Ethnic and religious gaps have threatened Syria's national unity. In such countries, sectarian clashes are probable. Syria's Sunni majority complain about the fact that Alevis always rule over them (Syria Green Book, 1387: 73-70). The chart below shows the analysis of internal Syrian crisis:

Figure 1-1, internal level of analysis



2-2- Regional Analysis Level

Grouping of regional states in Syrian crisis and sustainable competition and conflict between the so-called Axis of Resistance on the one hand and the conservative stream in the Middle East on the other hand and also the contrast of hegemony and counter-hegemony trends in the region are among the problems in Syria. Regional actors involved in the Syrian crisis can be divided into two categories:

1-2-2- The Conservative Group and Opponent of the Regime

1-1-2-2-Turkey

Turkey, as one of the neighboring countries of Syria, has had a unique role in developments in Syria before and during the crisis and the unrest in Syria. The fundamental point is the long border between the two countries in a way that only the land border between the two countries is 877 km(akhbari,1383: 4). Turkey considers axis of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon an obstacle to enforcement purposes and also the Ankara authorities believe that if Bashar al-Assad stays in power, the unity of Iran, Iraq and Syria will make it difficult for Turkey to have access to the Middle East. Turkish authorities believe that by changing the regime in Syria and the rise of a new government with the same approach, they can have a better access to the Middle East. For this reason,they have supported the rebels since the beginning of the Syrian crisis and left the door open to the entry of armed elements to Syria. Without doubt, the fall of Bashar al-Assad is the optimal policy of Turkey and undermining Iran's position as a regional rival and changing the balance of power is in favor of Turkey(Barzegar, 1392: 154).Turkey is trying to solve itsproblems with Syria such as long-running dispute over the province, "Hatay" and the Syrian regime's support of Kurds through the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad. Turkey has put some procedures on the agenda such as diplomatic pressure, psychological advertising, sponsorship, economic sanctions on Bashar al-Assad, logistical support from insurgents, opening up borders for the movement of terrorists with the aim of overthrowing president Bashar al-Assad.

2-1-2-2-Saudi Arabia

As a powerful country in Middle East, Saudi Arabiaconsidered the Syrian crisis a fertile ground for disturbing the regional balance of power. In recent years, the balance of power changed in favor of Saudi Arabia's competitors,Iran and Turkey, and the competition between these three countries for regional hegemony. That is why Riyadh sought an opportunity such as the Syrian crisis to manage the crises to restore the balance of power in its own favor. Iran and Saudi Arabia have long had historical compete with each other in order to take the power across the region. What deepens this competition is that the contradictions between the two countries is ideological and geopolitical. Saudi security officials believe that Iran is a trans-regional country and Syria guarantees Iran's border security(PoustinchiPazanan, 1392: 9).In this regard, relying on petrodollars, they provideda variety of political, economic, logistics and advertising supportsfor

the opposition to fight the regime. Due to the attrition of the Syrian crisis, Saudi Arabia has used the permanent nature of its foreign policy and that is the conservative political. Although Saudi Arabia is known for having a prudent foreign policy and acting behind the scenes, it changed its policy in Syrian crisis in order to overthrow Assad's regime and to inhibit the Arabic revolutions.

3-1-2-2-Israel

Israel is another country involved in the crisis which emphasizes on undermining the ruling regime in Syria more than other parties. The reality is that the political crisis in Syria that has lasted more than five years and continues, has severely weakened Syria's political system. Instability and civil war-like conditions in the country has undermined the country's national capacity and led to costly and poorly pressures against Syria. Therefore, a weak Syria is an opportunity for Israel. The powerful Syria threatens Israel because of its border with Israel and also because of its proximity to the capital of Israel. But the weakness of the government not only rules out Israel's threat from the north, but also makes it incapable of mobilizing and equipping anti-Israel stems. Following the crisis in Syria, Hamas, an anti-Israeli political and military establishment, had left Syria. The weak Syria is not able to support Hezbollah and other non-governmental groups to promote anti-Israel. The second reason in establishing that the current situation in Syria is in Israel's interest is that Syria is unable to take the initiative in connection with the anti-Israeli actors like Hamas and Hezbollah. The third reason is that weakening Syria undermines Iran's regional influence whose core regional foreign policy is anti-Israel. Since the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, according to the characteristics of the regime, Syria's situation has become a security dilemma for Israel. Although in recent years Syria, led by Bashar al-Assad, has not threatened Israel, because of its alliance with Iran, it has always been a potential threat to Israel. According to Israeli officials, there are four governments named Sunni, Kurdish, Alawite and Druze in Syria that are separated by artificially international borders. The map below indicates this issue.

Map 1-1, Israel's plan to break Syria



www.voltairenet.org

4-1-2-2-Qatar

Due to its geographical extent, Qatar is recognized as a micro power in the field of international relations and shouldn't have serious and significant impact on the main issues in the Middle East, but in real-world the situations are different. Syria has had a significant role in recent issues in the Arab world among which the Syrian crisis is notable. In order to achieve its goals in Syria, Qatar has used an important triangle and money, media and military means are three sides of the triangle. Backed by America and the Western countries for the actions it carries out, Qatar has adopted an active and interventionist foreign policy in the region. Qatar plays an important role in the Syrian crisis and used political solutions in order to achieve its objectives and after failing to convince Assad to step down from power, was trying to provide the necessary ground for military intervention in Syria by relations with West. Leaving aside the political solutions to resolve the crisis in Syria through the Arab League, the Emir of Qatar helped to arm the Syrian opposition. Advertising media such as Al Jazeera are other tools used by Qatar to implement its objectives in regional events.

5-1-2-2- Jordan

Among the above mentioned actors, a country must be remembered which has tried a lot to depose Syrian President Bashar al-Assad from power is afraid of being targeted by terrorist groups. According to statistics and documents, from 2008 some bases were set up in Jordan for training extremist forces to invade Syria by informing the country's intelligence agencies. Bases in which training recruited militias from all over the world doesn't match any international law. Jordan's president was one of the people who personally ordered the full support of terrorist groups both before the start of the crisis in support of troop training bases on its territory and at

the onset of the crisis. It's important to note that Jordan's fear of "Shiite Crescent" has had several impacts in adopting an aggressive stance. The following map shows Jordan's geographical location and its proximity to Syria.

Maps2-1, borders Jordan and Syria



(www.mashregnews.ir)

2-2-2- Pro-Regime Countries

1-2-2- 2-Islamic Republic of Iran

Iran is the most serious supporter of Bashar al-Assad. Damascus has long been Tehran's strategic ally and the two countries have had bilateral relations for three decades. Syria and Libya were the only countries which took Iran's side during the Iran-Iraq war and provided substantial military support for the country and with the beginning of a new millennium expanded their relations and signed variety of commercial, economic, military and cultural contracts together (Saghafi Ameri, 1390: 9). Syrian crisis threatens Iran's regional security as well as other regional and international actors. According to the fact that Syria is Iran's only strategic ally among the Arabic countries and has high alignment with Iran's anti-West policy, its crisis has a direct impact on Iran's security and national interests. So that undermining the power of Iran's regional ally, reduces Iran's regional influence and power. Challenges and potential threats to the Syrian crisis is potentially in Iran's regional security environment and the exacerbating and perpetuating conflict-of each of these threats in the near future has the potential to become a national security crisis. Logic dictates that the Iranian government with regard to the vision of regional security threats, be realistic in decision-making about its regional foreign policy and does not let Syria's geopolitical crisis become a national security issue.

2-2-2-2- Hezbollah in Lebanon

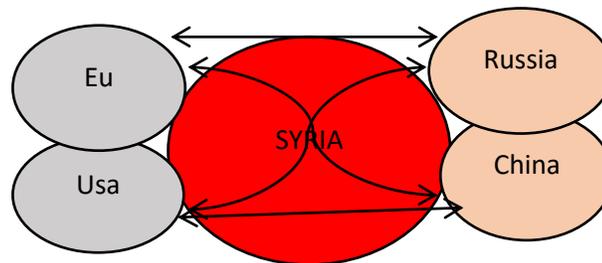
From the beginning of the crisis in Syria, Lebanon's Hezbollah stood against domestic terrorism policies and its regional supporters particularly the Zionist regime in line with the policy of the

Islamic Republic of Iran to fulfill the long-term strategies outlined by the axis of resistance. This policy includes declarative stance and actions such as sending trained units who are familiar with the region to Damascus. Thus, Lebanon's Hezbollah, knows it its legitimate right to take part in the Syrian crisis due to Syria's special support of the axis of Islamic resistance. Because in addition to the historical background of the Syrian government's support of Hezbollah, the Lebanese borders including Baalbek and Bekaa are threatened and attacked and therefore dealing with the Syrian crisis is self-defense.

3-2- Trans-Regional Analysis

The third level of the analysis and intervention of the Syrian crisis refers to the role of trans-regional actors. In fact, the position of trans-regional powers is a very important issue in the Syrian crisis.

Figure 2-1, the role of trans powers in Syria



1-3-2- European – American Axis

1-1-3-2- United States of America

United States of America is the most important trans-regional opposition of Syria. With the start of the Syrian crisis, America tried to delegitimize the regime's image to the public by criticizing Bashar al-Assad's regime and in no way believed in Bashar al-Assad. In addition, from USA's point of view, Bashar al-Assad is the main ally of Iran in the region, supporter of Lebanon's Hezbollah in the war with its ally in the Middle East, Israel, one of the main obstacles to Arab-Israeli peace and the main power in the axis of resistance and a supporter of Palestinian Islamic groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad (Jashua, 2011:140). As a world superpower, America was hesitant during the first year of the Syrian crisis due to factors such as Iran, Russia and China's support from Bashar al-Assad's regime, the presidential election in America being ahead, lack of cohesion in the opposition and concern about the rise of extremist groups in which case the security of America and the foundations of the Zionist regime would be in danger, but

indirectly supported the opposition until it leads to US's favorable scenario and that's the removal of Bashar al-Assad and replacing him with a pro-West regime which is in line with Western models(beshrati,1392: 32).At the end of Geneva conference in Switzerland, Hillary Clinton, announced that they are preparing the situation for Bashar al-Assad's dismissal and did not give any credit to the persistence of his cooperation. Before and after chemical attacks in Syria, Washington along with regional and trans-regional allies tried to pass a UN Security Council in favor of military intervention in Syria, but faced with a Russian and China's backlash to veto draft multi-exposure. America has called Russia and China's veto a shameful act(Küçükkeleş,2012:13).

2-1-3-2- European Union

Due to its strategic and geo-strategic position, Syria has long been the focus of the British and French colonialists. It has continued to the present day and the two countries have interests in Iraq and Syria.Syria was under French mandate for along time and gained its independence in April 1946(imamzadeh,1392:15).Although European countries had disagreements with each other in the Syrian crisis, they took the policy of pressure and threats against Bashar al-Assad. Calling ambassadors of Italy, England, Germany, Holland and France from Syria, adoption of sanctions and penalties by France and EU against Syria, meeting Syrian rebels and holding the Syrian opposition meeting in Paris are the best examples of EU's soft war against Syria and the practical manifestation of this view comes true with political, economic and military sanctions support against the ruling regime in Syria. In this sense, Europe Union has imposed numerous sanctions against Syria from March 2011 to the present the most important of which are:

- The freezing of assets and a travel ban on senior members of the Syrian government, including President Bashar Assad and his family;
- Imposing arms sanctions;
- Food and Drug sanctions;
- A ban on Syrian oil imports and exports;

2-3-2- Russia-China Axis

1-3-2-2- Russia

Russia and China make up the second axis of trans-regional powers. Beijing and Damascus have long been Syria's ally and have had massive sales of arms and heavy military contracts as well as economic, commercial, cultural and satellite relations with Syria. China and Russia have supported Bashar al-Assad against America and EU and in addition to restoring the balance of power, would reinstate Assad's regime. The most important example in this regard is that they vetoed a UN Security Council resolution against Syria. Russia's policy towards the Arab world should be evaluated due to the country's specific interests and values within the framework of competition with America in relation to issues such as expansion of American discipline in the Middle East and missile defense shield in Europe and NATO expansion in Turkey (Barzegar, 1392: 271). Russia's total presence in Syria can be interpreted as the country's efforts to restore its position in the Middle East, fear of losing the few benefits in Syria and participation in determining the future arrangements for the region.

2-3-2-2- China

Compared with the crisis in Libya and other Middle East crises, the different behavior of China in the Syrian crisis can be analyzed by referring to the country's geopolitical interests in the region. According to its special place in the geopolitics of the Middle East, Syria has behaved like a balance maker actor in engaging with Iran in recent decades. In other words, an alliance between Iran and Syria can be analyzed as an important barrier to the hegemonic latest security order in the Middle East and completing dominance of America and its allies in the region which is of the interests of China. Chinese believed that the violation of human rights should be prevented and the only solution is through peaceful means and military intervention is not useful and only makes the situation worse. In this regard, "Wang Yi," China's foreign minister, stated in "Geneva 2" in Montero Switzerland: "Syrians should strive to achieve a solution. The only solution is to solve the Syrian crisis with a peaceful solution. All parties should seek peaceful solutions to solve the crisis in Syria. The Syrian crisis has no military solution and should be determined within the framework of the transition process in the country. In addition, the stability of Syria is the foundation of stability in the Middle East." (Xing, 2012: 34).

Conclusion

The Syrian crisis is one of the ongoing crises which have occurred in recent years has killed hundreds of thousands of people and made many people seek refuge. In this regard, the first issue that comes to mind is the analysis of the causes of start and continuity of the crisis. As shown in this article, several factors are involved in this crisis. According to studies, this crisis has an internal root and is related to political, economic and cultural issues. Items such as religious-ethnic gaps, financial pressures on the Syrian people along with authoritarian rule by the Assad family for decades have provided plenty of energy to the emergence of crisis. In the next stage, the root of the crisis is because of regional actors such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and trans-regional actors such as America, Russia and China which have supported rebels and government according to their interests in the Middle East. The Syrian crisis is the symbol of the role-playing of big powers with regional actors. The above-mentioned issues, have prepared an atmosphere in which not only the central government, but also the opposition and the rebels, based on costs, don't forget their interests and as a result almost all equations in local, regional and trans-regional levels remind the Syrian crisis.

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