

# IN THE FAILING IDEA OF DEMOCRACY, REVISITING THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN DIGNITY

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## **Abstract**

*Since the uprising in March 2011, Syrian people have been transformed from active protesters against the regime to desperate seekers of an asylum.*

*The study highlights how callers for democracy became claimants of basic human dignity from the international community and examined how the responsibility to protect (R2P) could not be as effective as it should be to the Syrian case.*

*This research work also focused on the unsuccessful examples of the other Arab fledgling democracies that had fallen prey to the same wave of revolt. More precisely, it concentrated on the Syrian crisis and how it turned to be a global battle field to provide an appropriate answer to the question about whether the R2P initiatives were to save Syrian people or to save the Syrian regime under the pretext of terrorism.*

*Overall, this study displays the changing meaning of human values and lists the various techniques adopted by the international community to protect the superpowers best interests as the Security Council decides about Syria's future.*

*The Syrian dilemma is far from being described as yet no clear end to people's suffering.*

**Keywords:** *human dignity, R2P, Syria, International Community.*

**JEL Classification:** [K 30, K 33, K37, K38]

## **1. Introduction**

The Arab uprisings wave protests reached Syria in March 2011. It spread out gradually to cover major Syrian cities and the countryside. No record has been found of the exact incident which triggered the Syrian people anger and had taken to the streets to protest against Assad's regime. Nevertheless, there were confrontations between security forces and parents of young men in the southern city of *Deraa*.

The heavy-handed response from the riot police forces resulted in worsening the situation and made President Bashar El Assad address his people

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on March 2011 to explain the country's unavoidable fate to fall prey to foreign pressures and its people to be affected by what happened in other Arab fellow countries.

The controversial conflict had no inkling of clear end. The Syrian uprising from the angle of local narratives and its global image interested researchers and experts in politics. The conflict shuffled the cards of global powers to reexamine their strategies towards armed conflicts. Mainly the first addresses of the Syrian President to his people through television when the country was engulfed in suspicion, fear, and death showed the ignorant regime to people's demands.

The Syrian government kept contact with the people through official TV channels and radio stations in addition to local newspapers, and sometimes used mosques to control and make people aware of the ongoing situation.

Foreign and US intervention found its way to Syria and things took a wrong turn with the mass murder and destruction of cities and towns. Coverage of the Arab uprising and the anticipation of Syria falling for the same fate grew tensions between the regime and the opposing factions.

The decisions made by the United Nations (UN) were different from those taken in the case of Libya. The uprising in Syria gained momentum from March 2011 to the end of the same year. The revolt made the President appear on different TV interviews with some of the well-known journalists, like the American anchor Barbara Walters, to answer everybody's questions including Syrians themselves.

The Syrian President's attempts to ease the tensions and the pace with which events evolved resulted in worsening the situation as the events in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region did not settle to what people asked for as all countries which suffered from the 2011 Arab Uprisings still affected by the consequences of those revolutions.

The political unrest and chaos that seeped the Arab World into the labyrinth of political freedom, democracy and change made the news channels eager to dig deeper to get more news from the affected MENA countries as political analysts and pundits over-discussed the events of the Arab uprisings.

## **2. From the Uprising to the Current Syrian Crisis**

The abortive pledges of most of the Arab post-colonial regimes, where many dictators who managed to maintain tight control on their nations by means of all sorts of savage sectarian incitement or repression of demonstrations for civil rights and civil liberties, did not turn away the Arab populations' attention from the possibility to achieve meaningful change through popular mobilization.

That was what exactly happened starting from 2011 when a series of uprisings swept some of the Arab countries. These upheavals were in fact remarkable, unique events in the Arab political history. The revolutionary fever that started in Tunisia in December 2010 led to call 2011 the year of Arab Uprisings.

The death of the founder of contemporary Syria, Hafez Assad, was a turning point in Syria's history. The man ruled Syria with an iron fist. His biggest achievements were to crush opposing factions and strengthen the *Baath* Party position to remain at the top of the political hierarchy.

The legacy he bequeathed to his son Bashar is that "the man at the helm had to have mastery over four pillars of political power-the *Alawite* community, the army, the security services, the *Baath* Party" (Ajami 2012: 8). So that the country could maintain stability, the security services were at the core of the regime to control dissidents and anti-regime schemes.

The *Alawite* community is the minority and a sect from *Shia* that dominated politics in the country since El Assad and his inner circles are descendants of that community.

The first decade of Bashar Assad in office at the beginning of the twenty-first century was eventful. But the beginning of the second decade mixed Bashar's political agenda.

The chaotic uprisings in the Arab countries which led to the overthrow of totalitarian regimes threatened Bashar's rule even though he was the least president expected to be ousted regarding his one decade in office. The real challenge of such type of rule is to be faced with public outrage and revolutions at some stage.

The case of Syria drew international attention more than did the Arab uprisings altogether.

The attention was not only from news networks, social media but also from foreign countries and international organizations.

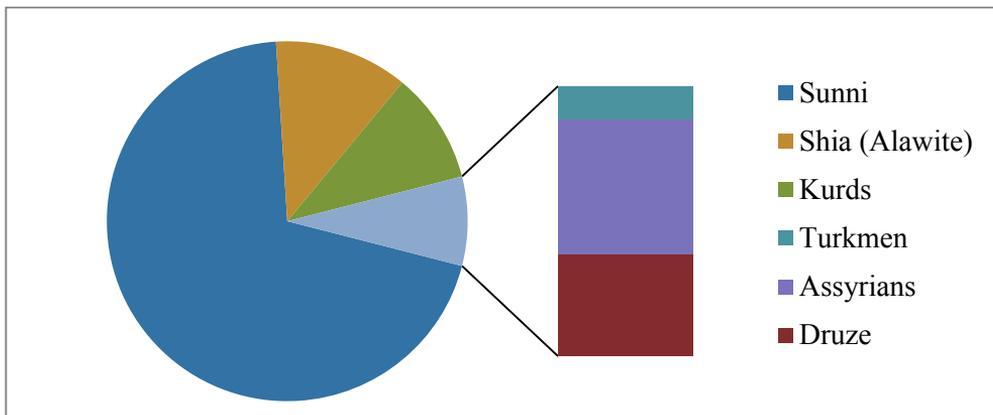
### **3. Foreign Intervention Run into Syria**

The diversity of the Syrian population and the ideological differences posed a threat to the future of Syria. From this point, foreign intervention found a hole to enter the country by stealth.

The reasons of foreign intervention then were:

#### *3.1. Ethnic and Religious Differences*

The majority of the country is Sunni Muslim and ruled by Shia (*Alawite*) minority. Other ethnic groups are considered minorities among which: Kurds, Turkmen, Assyrians and Druze (Kannike 2018). (Figure 01)



**Figure 01: Ethnic and Religious Groups in Syria**

At the beginning of the uprising in 2011, “In areas where there has been incitement to sectarian violence, the banners and slogans answer: ‘Sunni, Kurd or Alawite, we want national unity’ (*Sunni wa kurdi wa ‘alawiyya, badna wahdah wataniyyah*).” (173) and also “There are slogans that summarise it all: ‘We are neither Muslim Brothers nor foreign agents, we are all Syrians, Muslims and Alawites, Druze and Christians’ (*Nahna ma ‘anna ikhwân wa lâ aydî khariyya, nahna kullna suriyya, islam wa ‘alawiyya, durziyya wa masihiyya*) (Zénobie 2012: 174). But these sectarian divisions were turned quickly to divide the country and lost to define the country’s old unity.

### 3.2. *Lack of Freedom*

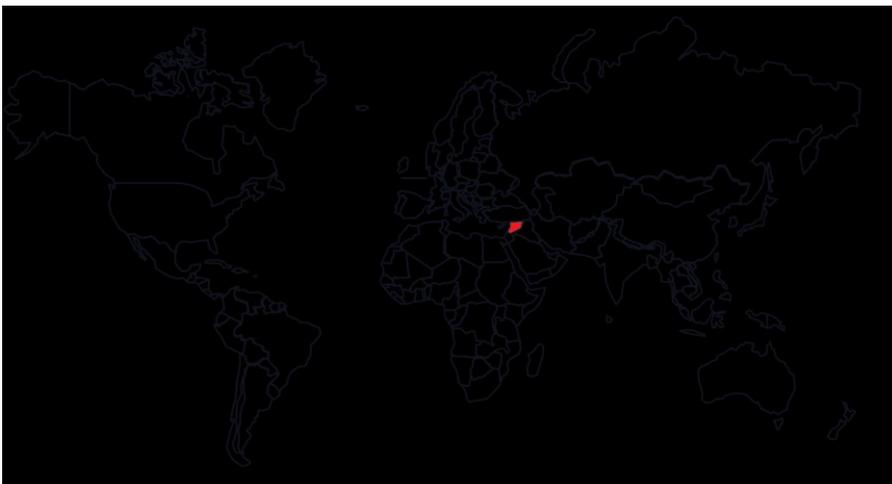
The country has known the rule of Assad’s family since 1970. Syrians considered the Assad dynasty an autocracy par excellence. The death of the founder of contemporary Syria in 2000 was a shift in the country’s political history. “At the time, Bashar was too young, so the age requirement for the presidency was lowered from 40 to 34” (Phillips 2010: 68). After the young El Assad took office, he maintained his father’s policies so Hinnebusch (2012) wonders about the real reasons that took Syrians to the streets regarding their long-suffering under such tyrannical political system: “If the grievances were there, they had previously inspired lethargy, so what had changed? The intimate linkage of the Arab states in a single ‘public space’ magnified the ‘demonstration effect’ of the Arab Spring that had started in Tunisia”.

He also adds that “from self-aggrandizing ruling families to the impoverishment of the masses and violations of dignity by security forces unconstrained by law, all resonating regionally, amplified by satellite TV” (107). People in Syria were inspired by the events in fellow Arab states and once the barrier of fear was broken, their situation has evolved from the start of

the uprising to recent times and no steps would be taken back to make their conditions better.

### 3.3. *Location*

Syria's geopolitical position (Figure 02) gives it great importance especially among its neighboring countries; the foreign intervention in most of the cases was for those great powers best interests. "Syria has no strategic minerals and produces relatively little oil. It has no important seaports or military bases. But it has something any real-estate agent would envy: Location" (Erlich 2014: 120).



**Figure 02: The Position of Syria in the World**

The above reasons for the external and global interference in Syria made the country prone to sectarian divisions especially with the country turning to a battle field under the pretext of fighting terrorism. "Facing Assad's army and intelligence services, Lebanon's Hezbollah, Iraq's Shia Islamist militias and their grand patron, Iran's Revolutionary Guards, Syria's initially peaceful protesters quickly became disenchanted, disillusioned and disenfranchised..." (Chanchal 2015: 346).

The Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS) had gained territory that enabled its fighters to be considered a threat not only to the regime forces but also to innocent civilians.

## **4. The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and the Syrian Case**

The concept of the responsibility to protect as defined by the United Nations (UN) "... embodies a political commitment to end the worst forms of violence and persecution. It seeks to narrow the gap between Member States'

pre-existing obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law and the reality faced by populations at risk of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.” (United Nations) Since the adoption of the R2P in 2005, its first application in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) was in Libya in 2011.

After alleged evidence and media reports were found about human rights violations and systematic assaults on civilians, R2P was highly praised by its supporters for the victory over Gaddafi’s forces and the preservation of the lives of thousands of Libyans.

No tangible evidence was found to support the reports of media that Gaddafi’s forces are killing people. “...at a time when the militarized nature of the rebellion had transformed an uprising into a civil war. It was in this climate that the UN Security Council debated the resolutions <sup>1</sup> on Libya.” (Campbell 2014: 38)

The question here is whether Syria did not fit the R2P principles or whether it is too complicated to just simply intervene militarily. For the reasons mentioned above and how they helped attract foreign intervention can facilitate the understanding why Syria was an exception to R2P.

At first, “the most determined opponents of “responsibility to protect” were the great powers - Russian and China in particular - who feared that the new doctrine might one day be used against them.” but later things took a different turn since the application in Libya and “the so-called BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India and China) abstained. But Russia and China didn't veto the action, because they have finally figured out that the new principle will never be used against them.” (Dyer 2011).

Syria failed to protect its people and thus the responsibility to protect (R2P) should have been applied to the calamities in the country. As the “R2P remains an evolving concept very much, neither the panacea that some had hoped for nor the hollow promise that others resigned themselves to expect” (Albright 2013: 9).

Syrians aspired for concrete results over the UN involvement to reach mediation between the conflicting sides within the country. Syrians expected help but nothing was done to realize any agreement. The US pointed to Syria as a hotbed of violence and called for a solution that might interfere to oust President Assad as was the case with Gaddafi.

Syria is not standing alone, knowing that Russia is its closest ally. Adherence to R2P principles places an even greater burden on policymakers to be certain that the information they are basing their interventionist decisions on

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<sup>1</sup> The UN Security Council Resolutions on Libya were:  
Resolution 1970 was passed on February 26, 2011.  
Resolution 1973 was passed on March 17, 2011.

is valid. Social media can have the advantage of spreading information about human rights violations that would have never made it to the public eye in a pre-Internet era, when regimes could exercise much more control over the flow of information. (Lynch et al. 2014: 29)

In the previous passage Lynch mentions a very important point which is media that influenced powerful parties to take the decision to intervene in Libya.

The discussion of the Syrian matter was away far from the immediate response to the Libyan case as the Western media played a major role in tarnishing Gaddafi's image: "the Western media demonized the Libyan leader to the point where there was a general belief in the West that Gaddafi regime was on the verge of committing genocide against its citizens" (Campbell 2014: 39).

The fear of rushing a decision to take action in Syria postponed any serious talks or international decisions to be taken and this was because the Syrian revolt had taken much attention from the media more than any of the prior Arab uprisings for it joined at first utterly disparate factions domestically as did assemble superpowers on the negotiation table internationally. "Despite the fact that Syria is a clear-cut candidate for the application of the R2P, the international community has essentially abandoned Syrians to die at the hands of their government." (Ziadeh 2013: 128).

All the attempts were to no avail and Syrians were left to their fate and caught in the crossfire as victims of the stalemate.

### **5. The Divisions over Syria and UN Dereliction**

The beginning of the Syrian conflict gave the impression that it would follow the other Arab uprisings path by ousting Bashar El Assad like was his counterparts in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. Unfortunately it contradicted all followers and commentators expectations. At this moment, Syria entered its 8<sup>th</sup> year of unrest and yet no demise to Syria's people ordeals.

The divisions within the country's factions starting with the Assad regime and other rebel groups flooded the international scene and made the country split into disparate parts and the only losing party is the people themselves.

The allies of the conflicting sides in Syria are in the country for their own best interests.

The Russian-Syrian relationship is far from being analyzed in this paper but the history between the two countries made them close enough for Russia to take side with Syria. "In 1986, Syria became the largest noncommunist buyer of Soviet weapons, and the Syrian leaders considered Moscow to be their "only dependable global ally" who did not force them to compromise their own vital interests." (Kreutz 2007: 16) At that time El Assad Senior was the president and after the Cold War the relationship knew ups and downs until the beginning of

both Putin and El Assad Junior in office in 2000 that reflected the two presidents personal relationship.

“Putin doubts that the United States and the international community can deliver stability to Syria, so he continues to stand by the flailing regime as the only means of avoiding the collapse of the state altogether.” (Hill 2013). This was true when Obama was the president and still true with Trump being the President.

For that reason, all the eight UNSC draft resolutions about Syria were not fulfilled. Russia has vetoed eight Western-backed resolutions on Syria, while China vetoed six resolutions. The chronology of the resolutions is traced back from October 2011 after eight months of the uprising to April 2017 after seven years of the uprising that developed to a crisis, Russia and China did not allow any action against the Syrian regime. The draft resolutions<sup>2</sup> are as follows:

1. S/2011/612 4 October 2011. China and Russia
2. S/2012/77 4 February 2012. China and Russia
3. S/2012/538 19 July 2012. China and Russia
4. S/2014/348 22 May 2014. China and Russia
5. S/2016/846 8 October 2016. Russia
6. S/2016/1026 5 December 2016. China and Russia
7. S/2017/172 28 February 2017. China and Russia
8. S/2017/315 12 April 2017. Russia
9. S/2017/884 24 October 2017. Russia
10. S/2017/962 16 November 2017. Russia
11. S/2017/970 17 November 2017. Russia

For Russia it is understandable to veto the resolutions, Russia stood alone five times to stop action against the Syrian regime without the Chinese support. For sure one veto from a permanent member in the Security Council is sufficiently enough to stop any military intervention either by Russia or China. The five last draft resolutions S/2017/172, S/2017/315, S/2017/884, S/2017/962 and S/2017/970 were to condemn the use of Chemical weapons in the Syrian war.

For China is quite another story, as Swaine concludes:

“...even if China’s leaders had adopted a more receptive stance toward certain types of intervention by the international community in the affairs of sovereign states over the past decade or so, the Syrian and Libyan crises have arguably strengthened their resistance to any Western-led effort to choose sides and place coercive pressure on governments embroiled in domestic conflict, even when ostensibly done for humanitarian reasons.” (2012: 9)

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<sup>2</sup> All the eight draft resolutions are available on the United Nations official website and for quick visit check the following: <http://research.un.org/en/docs/sc/quick>

For Beijing what happened in Libya for humanitarian reasons after news reports added fuel to the fire, the scenario cannot be replicated not for Syria or any other state whatsoever.

The US raised eye-brows in dealing with the region's unrest as Springborg wrote:

The reaction has been primarily verbal and indirect. Washington has deliberately shunned a visible leadership role. While it may be "leading from behind" in that it has sought to coordinate moves from within NATO, the United Nations (UN) and the world financial institutions that coordination has not resulted in unified, effective actions by the United States and its allies (2012: 35).

This was true when Obama was the president. "Barack Obama's policy towards the Arab uprisings attracted a good deal of criticism.

The perennial clash in US foreign policy between the national interest and democratic values intensified during the crisis" (Dalacoura 2012: 77) With Trump the US responses toughened in the face of growing terror and chaos. The U.S carried the first military action in April 2017. "Donald J. Trump has always taken pride in his readiness to act on instinct, whether in real estate or reality television.

On Thursday, an emotional President Trump took the greatest risk of his young presidency, ordering a retaliatory missile strike on Syria for its latest chemical weapons attack" (Lander 2017). The U.S reaction came too little too late to really solve the Syrian crisis and end people's hardship.

## **6. Fleeing Masses and Refugees Crises**

Syria's geopolitical position -as shown in the map above- and how it is centered among its neighboring countries stresses the importance of the country itself. As it has been a link between Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Israel and the Golan Heights from one side and Palestinians and their camps from the other side and those two are considered the most sensitive to the Syrian case in addition to Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Turkey.

As it was mentioned above about foreign intervention, the country was split into different regions, so people were caught in the crossfire and chose to flee the country.

By the end of 2011, Thousands of refugees fled across the borders to neighboring countries such as Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, and Iraq. It is also important to note that people were displaced from area to area within the country to avoid spots of confrontations between the regime forces and the rebels. Refugees at that stage of the conflict lost hope of a peaceful solution. (AlJazeera 2018)

The Syrian government could do nothing for those refugees. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 5,627,781 Syrian refugee are scattered here and there in the last update on 29 March 2018

(UNHCR 2018). As shown in the table below (Figure 03), Syrians fled to the neighboring countries and even spread to Egypt and North Africa. The location of the country made it easy for people to leave the country.

In the neighboring countries there were camps that have taken in refugees in and the dwellers grew in numbers over the years. The camps supervised by UN agencies for humanitarian aid. The camps are over-crowded and it is difficult to control them. “Reports of crime, prostitution, violence, and health epidemics are common in most camps.

Like favelas or urban slums, they are often treated as incubators of social unrest, terrorism, and illicit markets”. (Beehner 2015: 157). Privacy is no longer a demand neither people’s basic dignity.

Location name	Source	Data date	Population
Turkey	Government of Turkey, UNHCR	29 Mar 2018	63.4% 3,567,130
Lebanon	UNHCR	28 Feb 2018	17.6% 991,917
Jordan	UNHCR	13 Mar 2018	11.7% 659,063
Iraq	UNHCR	28 Feb 2018	4.4% 248,092
Egypt	UNHCR	28 Feb 2018	2.3% 128,034
Other (North Africa)	UNHCR	15 Mar 2018	0.6% 33,545

**Figure 03: Total Persons of Concern by Country of Asylum**

Source: [https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria#\\_ga=2.15232625.638639568.1522879239-1704964963.1522879239](https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria#_ga=2.15232625.638639568.1522879239-1704964963.1522879239)

The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights Article I<sup>3</sup> says that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” The article is not fulfilled in the case of Syrian people. First their human dignity was lost the minute they left their country and for those who stayed either lost their lives or living in constant fear and suspicion.

The situation of Syrian people outside Syria was referred to as “The Syrian Refugee Crisis” these people reached as far as Latin America. “It is clear that Europe seems to be much more restrictive with refugee rights when compared to Latin America.

This restrictive nature is not conducive to the current Syrian Refugee Crisis, as their policies have a better chance of exacerbating the problem.” (Calica 2017: 132). So the refugees in above of losing their dignity were labeled as a crisis for other countries.

<sup>3</sup> The Human Rights Declaration is available at: [un.org](http://un.org).

## Conclusion

The situation in Syria is complicated and all attempts to end people's suffering are not successful as they should be. The UN humanitarian intervention is what made people overcome the hardships they have been through even these aids are not the only demand of Syrians from the international community.

The UNSC vetoes stood in the way of any concrete decision to end the Syrian Crisis peacefully. Since 2011, the international community reluctantly dealt with the Syrian crisis and left it in the shade until the conflict developed to a civil war and later to an international battle field.

Syria has become a ground where regional and global confrontations are as intense as the war took a wrong turn in which Syrians fled in masses and the country left to rubbles under the regime and its allies. In this globalized world where the rule of law has not been effective to end the Syrian crisis. Syria's geopolitical position puts it in the middle of global affairs and it is a mere unusual war for key players to stress their importance and how each and every player works to consolidate its existence and effectiveness in this multilateral world.

The crisis in Syria needs more analysis and interpretations to finally come up with a solution to humanity before individuals' grab for power – Bashar El Assad and his *Alawite* inner circle- or any other state' interests in the country. The real question of Arab countries' future is not whether determined protesters will just succeed to get their demands fulfilled, but whether, in the affected countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen people will finally experience democracy.

Media played an important role either at the beginning of the Arab uprising or in the coverage of the following developments in the affected countries. At first, the media gave an embellished picture of the success of people's revolutions in ousting dictatorial regimes and championed the fact that democracy can be achieved in the Arab world.

But later and especially in Yemen and Syria, the coverage stresses the loss of human dignity in the age of conflict that makes the world rethink the definition of their standards in order to live in at least a harmonious and violence-free world.

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