

## **Book Review: Julien Barnes-Dacey and Daniel Levy (Eds.), *The Regional Struggle for Syria*. London: European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 2013; Pgs.: 79; ISSN: 978-1-906538-86-6**

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### **Abstract**

In the Arab world Inter-Arab relation is characterized by power struggle between Pan-Arab nationalist military Officers and regional Monarchies. They poised themselves in Arab politics to change the political discourse prevailing in the Middle East. This Pan-Arab nationalism led to extensive interventions in the affairs of various states as it happened in Syria at present. The *European Council on Foreign Relations* (ECFR)—first Pan European think tank launched in October 2007, with the objective of conducting research and promoting informed debate across European effective and value based Foreign Policy—has prepared a very important booklet entitled as *The Regional Struggle for Syria*. This work is edited by Julian Barnes Decay and Daniel Levy, and provides insights in understanding the Syrian conflict and the role of regional and international players. This book is a collective contribution of different scholars and is divided in eight (8) chapters.

In the Introduction, “Hegemony and Sectarianism after Iraq”, the book deals with the sectarianism which prevailed after Iraq invasion by US in 2003. Here the author emphasises that the Syrian Civil war patronised by regional players who have strong weight on the ground. Among these countries, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar support rebels’, while as Iran, Iraq and Hezbollah movement support Assad regime. Other players who put right themselves are Jordan, Kurds and Israel to gain their interests too. In this conflict Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey are providing arms and human support collected from different countries all over the world which resulted in regional clashes and bomb explosions particularly in Turkey and Lebanon. This conflict adopted the regional communal rivalry because rebels depend on Sunni forces while as Assad heavily depend on Shia forces. This polarity happened due to hegemony of some regional states after ousting Saddam from Iraq and wishes to achieve its goal due to rebel backing with the thought “*must not lose*” basis (p.8; *italics mine*). Much imbalance is created when US turned blind eye to the region and paved way for rebels and the region became an epicentre of conflict and would engulf whole world as it happened in Paris Moreover Gulf States are contesting not only for broader regional gains (as Saudi monarchy support Salfi’s while Qatar and Turkey is playing Brotherhood Card) but also to overcome Iranian influence. However the resistance axis are more sound ideological though Hamas turned its back to Assad but rest are gripped very tightly with each other. World powers too poised themselves into rebel blocs (like US, EU support rebels through Gulf States) while as Russia support Iran backed Assad regime for regional gains. In such turbulent conditions two joint UN-Aran League envoys for Syria, Kofi Anan and Lakhdar Ibrahimi proposed a regional accord through Geneva I and II paid almost nothing for long lasting solution.

The first chapter, “The Gulf States: United against Iran and divided over Islamists”, deals with conflicting ideologies prevailing in the region. According to Hassan-Hassan, the Arab state, though appearing united against Iranian influence in the region to weaken the resistance axis, but inter Gulf State rivalry is clear among them to achieve regional superiority. Earlier these states tried to develop influence on Assad and motivate him politically but failed to achieve their divided objectives when Assad refused to bow down and used ruthless power to overcome rebellion by killing hundreds of protesters. These states later provided every kind of assistance to rebels like Qatar to groups ideologically close to Muslim Brotherhood while as Saudi’s more conservative Salfi groups even tried to pressure US to provide high grade weapons to rebels. Saudis particularly are pitching from 1979 to overcome Iranian influence in the region and for this Syrian conflict is better option. These regional forces, particularly Saudi Arabia, wish to overcome resistance axis influence by playing the tribal Sunni card from Iraq to Syria, via Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and Jordan who achieved the neutralized citizenship. They want to achieve the lost glory which for which Assad declared them as “*Half Men*” (p. 19) on their criticism to Hezbollah during Lebanon-Israel war. But the internal divide among the Gulf States have weaken their cause while as Assad through resistance Axis gained some ground.

Chapter Two, “Iran: Syria as the first line of defence”, by Jubin Goodarzi opens with the Iranian support to demonstrators by declaring them Islamists against the Gulf Monarchs but changed its tune when his friend befell prey to uprising. While understanding the regional lore on uprising Iran assured all-out support to Assad to keep his regime intact For Iran, Syria is only option to surmount Israeli threat by channelizing military equipment’s to Hezbollah via Assad regime and to maintain pressure over Israel.

Chapter third, “Iraq: Sunni resurgence feeds Maliki’s fears”, deals with suspicion and threat of the Sunni insurgency to Maliki government in Iraq. This title feeds Maliki’s fears and pushes him to support Assad who

remained very painful for Iraq during last decade because most of the insurgents entered in to Iraq via Syria and Damascus kept intentionally blind eye towards them to disturb US forces in Iraq. The author considered Maliki support to Assad genuine in order to minimise the Sunni insurgent pressure or to get any strong hold in Iraq. This suspicion was also fed by the role of Gulf States in Iraq earlier and now in Syria as commented against them in a dinner party by Bagdad Ambassador by saying “the same people who conspired against Iraq are now conspiring against Syria” (p. 34). This statement infuriated Saudi foreign Minister and was barely calmed by Syrian Foreign Minister. In a TV interview Noori al Maliki directly condemned states like Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar for their involvement in destabilization of Syria and Iraq. However the author highlighted the double standard of Maliki govt. too, who one side believes in negotiation and on the other provides full support to Assad. For Baghdad support to Assad is compulsion because if Sunni rebels got hold over Iraq means the dispersed Insurgent groups in Iraq will get strength. Moreover Maliki govt. in Iraq has concern over the double standard of CIA which fights as counter terrorism forces in Baghdad and provide arms to the Syrian rebels. All these concern have created doubts in the Iraqi govt and the situation forced Maliki to take Assad side to balance the power in the region while as Sunni force are fighting to topple Assad and later Baghdad to reconstitute the Sunni hegemony in the regions.

Fourth Chapter highlights Israel’s concern over Syria. Israel is in shilly-shally position though cautious but couldn’t decide to actively participate or to remain only vigilant regarding any development in Syria. Under Assad regime its borders remain silent for many years though Assad fully backed the Hezbollah during Israel- Lebanon war. But for Israel, Syria is both decisive as well as uncertain due to the strategic importance and its close ties with Iran. Iran is the main Arms supplier to Hezbollah and Syria serves as the safe route for this cause. Israel’s is much worried about the fundamentalist takeover of the Syria and achievement of the high grade arms by Islamic fundamentalism. In Case Assad regime decline, he will necessarily supply high grade weapons to Hezbollah. In this regard Israel started lobbying with its allies at European foreign Ministers council (p. 43) and opposed to reinforce rebels with high grade weapon, such as man portable air defence system which later on may turn towards Israel. Moreover Israel is much worried about the delivery of S-300 missile system to Syria and threatened to strike in case its full delivery which is yet imprecise. In this dispute Israel’s major concern is Iran Syria relationship and wish that an anti-Iran and pro-West power may take over Syria which will prove helpful to dilute Hamas in to pro-Western alliance.

Fifth Chapter, “Jordan: Stability at all costs”, discusses Jordanian worries which created a psychological warfare in Jordan. Though Jordan maintained its stability tactfully and overcame threats and huge influx of refugees by restricting them from mixing with its citizens. It was pressurised by Gulf States to get involved in the conflict seriously and get involved potently. The author highlights the worries of the Jordan due to the overwhelming support to Jihadi groups by regional states but offers a defecto Prime Minister Raid Hijab (p. 52) as an option to overcome threats and to curtail the influence of jihadi groups over Syria. Being a close ally of Israel Jordan came on under heavy criticism of Muslim Brotherhood for its relation with Israel. Jordan is nervous about collapsed Syria as coercion to its existence and they may later spill over to Jordan. For this very purpose he worked for peaceful negotiations between Assad regime and opposition groups. For its survival Jordan kept live a very strong strategic Western card as source of relief and confidence.

Sixth Chapter, “Kurd: Between Qandil and Erbil”, deliberates upon challenges and opportunities which Kurds come across. The author presented a picture of uncertainty between the varying intra Kurd factions led by Jalal Talabani and Masoud Barzani. Jalal Talaba heads Patriotic Union of Kurdistan while as Masoud Barzani lead Kurdish Democratic Party. As a wave of uncertainty is prevailing in the Syria, many Syrian Kurds fell prey to some groups who instead to achieve a united goal some are contesting within their ranks supported by Turkey and Iran as earlier they were supported by Syrian against Turkey. Among these factions PKK believes on militant activities while as Barzani lead factions believe in peaceful and gradual solutions (P.56). Syrian Kurds believe in Kurdistan nationalist message espoused by the PKK being of Syrian origin. Though both the groups organized peace talks but they failed to achieve and will deepen polarization and differences among them. Though PKK have control over 5 towns but have to face 16 group alliance of Kurdish National Council. It is concluded that peace talks between Turkey and PKK are last option for Kurd national struggle to achieve autonomous status in Syria.

Chapter Seven, “Lebanon: Resilience meets its Stiffest Test”, discusses the fate of Lebanon which is tied with Syrian conflict because, sectarian players (both Shia and Sunni blocs) have mend themselves in the crisis. Though government officially denounced support to any faction but offline the situation is completely different. The Sunni dominant population known as “*March 14*” a coalition put all its support to rebels. The Shia dominated *March 18* coalition fully backed the Assad regime and considering their fate totally dependent on Assad regime. The Hezbollah Chief Hassan Nasrullah one’s said “If we do not go there to fight them, they will come here (p. 62). Hezbollah earlier tried to maintain a distance from the Syrian conflict but Hariri and his allies openly support to rebels and the arms flow through them declared an open enmity with Hezbollah to confront it. This sectarian division has intensified the crisis and the situation will achieve a dangerous move if Syrian conflict prolonged. The major cause of this deepening the gulf between them is support of Gulf States to Sunni opposition groups. This sectarian bipolarity and influx of refugees (counts 20% of total Population) created financial challenges to

the state. Sunni clergy is vehemently opposing Assad regime including Hezbollah Though Sunni opposition's fighting capability is not so good to challenges to Hezbollah but will create sectarian fears in Lebanon particularly due bomb blasts which occurred in Hezbollah's strong hold.

In the Eighth Chapter, "Turkey: Goodbye to zero problems with neighbours", the author emphasized on the relation of Turkey with its neighbours. The title itself seems that Turkey earlier tried to maintain good relation with neighbours at Zero problem design, but it changed after Arab Awakening. Earlier Turkey maintained its relation with Syria on priority levels and maintained close relation on all fronts especially on combined Military drills and free trade. After Arab uprising which engulfed Syria too, Turkey tried to persuade Assad to go for all out reforms to curtail public resentment to resolve crisis instead of using power. When Assad decline its proposals Turkey shifted to a policy of regime and its policy of zero problem with neighbours came to end. Turkey openly came to help the rebels particularly Free Syrian Army and maintain the headquarters in the south east of the country. Turkey later proposed many options which got no acceptance at international level like No Fly Zone in Syria, regional Quartet (Egypt, Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia) and failed to achieve its objectives. This regional and sectarian bias resulted within the country resentment as Alivites developed strong ties with Damascus and assured full support to Assad. This conflict caught in the middle and resulted in cold war at home and at international level as Turkey wishes Assad to go for ever whereas international players incline Assad role too in Syria. This conflict gave major setback to Turkish regional policy as it was having capacity to play a big brothers role and may have negotiate instead of favouritism. So in such turbulent conditions Turkey need to rethink over regional policy and manage all the challenges judiciously and address them earlier the best.

The Arab uprisings of 2011-2012 have deepened the divisions of the new Arab cold war, including along Sunni-Shi'a lines. And like the earlier cold war, the contemporary one features competing approaches to intervention in the affairs of other Arab states. Today's Arab cold war features only state-state rivalries, but not sectarian rivalry. This conflict must be viewed in political terms as a proxy war between Saudi and Iranian led blocs as compare to struggle between Sunni and Shi'a alliance in the region. The battle lines outside Syria are already drawn, with the US, Britain and France in conflict with Russia and China, while regional non-Arab powers Turkey and Iran similarly back opposite sides.