

SUNNI-SHIAH CONFLICT POST ARABIC SPRING: SEARCHING THE POLITICAL MOTIVES BEHIND THE WAR ON SUSTAINABLE WAR IN SYRIA

Rachik Samer
University of Sharjah, UAE
Email: rachik1@gmail.com

Abstract

The Syrian War is one of a long-standing conflict that has lasted for eight years. The difficulty of finding a peaceful spot is the cause of the conflict eradication efforts in the country. This study aims to explore the motives behind the war in Syria using the Historical approach. The results of the study and analysis found that Syria as a secular state, separating between state and religious life, besides that Syria is also a peaceful ethnoreligious state before the war-damaged the joints of life there. Bashar al Assad as Syrian president embraced the Shia teachings of the Awali sect which is a minority sect in Syria, his appointment as well as his father were supported by most of the military figures who were Sunni schools. The above explanation clearly shows that the differences in schools between Sunnis and Shiites in Syria are not the main cause of a long war. Deeper, the results of the analysis show that there are various conflicting groups in the country, namely the Syrian Government, the Syrian Democratic Forces (Rojava, SDF, QFD), the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS), Jabhat al-Nusra, and the Syrian Opposition. Difficult resolution of conflicts that occur is not only caused by the many internal warring groups that have their own goals and interests, but this is also made worse by the involvement of other countries such as Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel, Turkey, America, Britain and France that carry a variety of motives and interests, this is what makes it difficult to create a consensus that leads to peace in Syria.

Keywords: Conflict, group, Sunni, Shia, Interest

A. INTRODUCTION

Syria, or better known by its official name as the Syrian Arab Republic, is a country located in the West Asian region. Syria or Syria borders Lebanon and the Mediterranean Sea to the west, on the north side borders Turkey and borders South Jordan and Israel to the east. The Syrian population is approximately 18.27 million people and consists of about 74 percent of Muslims, 14 percent of Muslim sects and 10 percent adheres to Christianity (Burge, 2010: 31). Syria is a fairly large country, if you glance at a world map, it can be estimated that its size is approximately twenty times wider than that of Lebanon. However, of the total area only 28 percent of the area can be used as agricultural fields. Syria as a modern country, was only established in 1946 after the second world war. After its independence, Syria was led by a group of military elites so that in the course of his administration it was somewhat less smooth, due to the frequent coups that occurred among military authorities due to the usurpation of power (Kinsal, 2014: 108). The peak of political intrigue by the military

occurred in 1973 which was marked by the appointment of Hafezh al-Assad as the new president. This period later became a turning point for the stabilization of the Syrian government, but the strength of Hafez's position continued to get opposition which gave birth to several revolts as a long implication of the changes.

The problem of the conflict that occurred in Syria is generally described as a conflict of religious motives, involving between two major groups of sectarianism namely the Shi'a-sunni. However, the author will first try to analyze in depth about the background of the leadership and the people who are making a revolutionary effort so that a prolonged conflict occurs. In addition, in general, a country's sovereignty can also be intervened indirectly or structured if other countries have a great interest in the country both in economic and political terms. Therefore, the background of the leadership of the Syrian State, the factors that caused the rebellion, as well as the conflict resolution process that occurred will be examined in depth using the historical approach using historical methods that consists of heuristics, criticism, interpretation and historiography.

B. DISCUSSION

Hafezh Al Assad, Ba'ats Party, Shia Awali and Sunni

Assad was born on October 6, 1930 to a family that adheres to the Alawiyah sect which is one of the Shi'ite sects in Syria. He is a member of the air force who is also a founding member of the Ba'ats Party in Syria. This party is also referred to as Al-Hizb al-Ba'ath al'Arabi al-Isyitiraki or the Socialist Arab Awakening Party which adheres to nationalism and socialism (Winanda, 2015: 1). Looking back at the history of the Ba'ats, this party was born and was founded by a Christian named Michel Aflaq and Salahuddin Bitar who are followers of Sunni Islam. This party adheres to secularism or the separation of religious life and the state or government.

Assad is a person who is not biased and takes sides with one of the religions in Syria. He was also a person who opposed the ideology of communism and the existence of the Pan-Syrian movement that wanted the unification of the whole area which is wider than modern Syria, Levente in French or Ash-Sham in Arabic. This was explained by Petrick Seale in his book *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* that: "The Ba'ths struggle of those years against Pan-Syrians, Communists, and the whole of the right with the Muslim brothers in the van, gave him his political education and informed his attitudes to movements with forty years later were still present on the Syrian scene "(Seale, 1990: 37).

This experience later made him a person who could maintain power as a president for approximately 29 years. The lack of desire to unite the old Syrian countries into the Syrian state has caused him not only to get support from within his country but also to get support and legitimacy from neighboring countries which are the former Ash-Syam region. In addition, his tendency to not side with any religion becomes a value for the strong foundation that was built by Assad.

The alawi or alawiya sect is a sect of one of the Shi'a sects adopted by Assad, however, as has been stated before it does not affect Assad's political leanings because the sect is a sect that almost implements some of the rituals or beliefs contained in every religion and creed in Syria. The alawi sect adhered by Assad does not follow the jurisprudence of Ja'fari which is adhered to by the Shi'ah in general, but follows the Hanafi and Maliki fiqh although in its application this sect does not require its group members to practice any Sharia, even the Shias themselves refuse to recognize the alawi sect as wrong. one Shiite school (Ahlul Bait Indonesia, 2012: 98). One proof of the non-functioning of the Shari'a found in the Alawi sect is the inclusion of dance and music in religious rituals and the permission to drink alcohol (Lebor, 2010: 295) which is contrary to Islamic law. When looking at the political background and religion or sect adhered to by Assad, there is no compelling reason to justify that there are two directions of political currents namely Sunni-Shia in the Syrian government. Especially the application of secularism in government where there is a wide gap that separates religious life and government life. However, even though Assad does not have a political bias towards one religion, it does not dispel the suspicions carried out by most Sunni groups. Matthew Gordon in his book *Hafez Al-Assad: World Leader Past & Present* explains that Many Sunnis Accused Assad and the other members of the committee of discrimination and nepotism (Gordon, 1989, 57). But the suspicion did not last long, the attitude of the nepotism did not prove to be marked by his appointment as president supported by most of the military who were Sunni schools.

Bashar al-Assad: Becoming President

Bashar was born in Damascus on September 11, 1965, he had a background in medical science which he obtained at the University of Damascus in 1988. Similar to his father Hafezh, he held the beliefs of the alawi Shiite sect. The Ba'ats Party, through Abd Al-Halim Khaddam who had a very large influence in Syria, especially on government policies and presidential elections, appointed or declared Bashar al-Assad as President after his father died in June 2000. To make Bashar become president, Khaddam made a new rule that allows the appointment of Bashar as president. Eyal Ziser in his *Syrian Commanding book: Bashar Al-Asad and the First*

Years in Power explained that after the death of Hafez Al Asa'd Khaddam was appointed as a temporary replacement, with his capacity he then issued a presidential decree allowing Bashar Al-Assad to become a president.

The rules or derkret of the president referred to in smoothing the appointment of Bashar as president is to work towards changing the age threshold of a Syrian president. This was explained by Volker Perthes in his book Syria under Bashar al-Asad: Modernization and the Limits of Change that after the death of Hafez Al-Assad was announced, a few hours after Khaddam and the entire parliament consisting mostly of military elements and the Ba'ats party as the majority make a draft of the Syrian president's age threshold. The discussion did not take long and resulted in a change in the president's age threshold, which was a maximum of 40 years to 34 years. After the requirements as a president were fulfilled, a presidential election referendum was held which won Bashar al-Assad as president with a total vote of 97.3%. This event then marked a major change in politics in the Syrian state. Shortly after being appointed president, Bashar moved quickly to fasten and strengthen the net of power by embracing the military given his insufficient position because he did not have the background, although it cannot be denied that his father's authority still kept him respected. In addition, he also embraced all elite groups to strengthen his position in the reign of Syria.

Sunni-Shiite conflict: a factor in the direction of Syrian upheaval

The emergence of people who classify themselves as both Sunni and Shi'a is a long history of Islamic civilization. The beginning of the disagreement was born after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 AD. This disagreement arose regarding the selection of people who were fit to carry on the position of Caliph. The Muslim camp was then divided into two main groups namely those who supported the appointment of Abu. Bakar As Siddiq (sunni) and those who support the appointment of Ali ibn Abu Talib (Shiite). Apart from what has been explained above, these differences become even more pronounced when there is a disagreement about matters of a religious nature that are related to religious rituals, hadith, fiqh and so forth. In fact, when examined in depth, Syria is an ethnoreligious state and is a secular state that separates religious and governmental practices. Although led by Bashar al-Assad who adheres to the Shi'ite Alawi sect, the life of the Syrian people is harmony between all religions in the country. The conflict that occurred in Syria is a very complex event that must be described in depth and comprehensively. According to Prof. Glen E Robinson conflict that occurs in Syria is a conflict caused by the

dominance of a minority in a poor country and fails without tolerance (Robinson, 2012: 334)

Looking back on the historical side, Alawi is a sect that has long been in the Syrian region which at that time was under the rule of the Ottoman Turks. At this time start living in remote mountainous areas to keep away from discrimination. In its history, Awali had experienced a number of massacres, namely in 1317 AD with a death toll of 20,000 people and a massacre that occurred in 1516 with 10,000 casualties (Pipes, 1989: 435). This event is a dark history that ever happened between two major groups namely Sunni and Shia especially those who adhere to the Alawi sect. The brother conflict that occurred in Syria was originally an ongoing conflict caused by pressure or domination by the government and the ruling elite. The pressure was then responded by demonstration actions carried out by the community in order to demand the freedom of the community to take part in the economic and political fields. The beginning of this conflict never carried any religious attributes. In March 2011 there were demonstrations by people claiming to be pro-democracy groups in Deraa in the aftermath of a series of events known as the Arab Spring. Arab Spring itself according to Carlo Panara and Garry Wilson in his book *The Arab Spring: New Patterns for Democracy and International Law* is defined as a series of protests in the Arab world which took place in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen and several other regions (Panara, 2013: ix).

The protests were then responded in a confrontational manner to the demonstrators which resulted in riots in Syria. Other groups have sprung up which are then responded to in a more aggressive manner. The conflict that occurred between the opposition and the government then spread when there were religious issues under the two sides that caused a sense of cynicism towards the Shiite alawi sect that led the Syrian state. According to Dr. Taufik Ramadhan Al-Buthi, that the Shiites have existed for a long time in Syria and are a minority, Sunnis also coexist with various sects in Syria (Indonesian Ulema Council, 2017: 27). Based on this information it can be concluded that the harmonization over the centuries between Sunni and Shia was damaged by the provocateurs who brought religious attributes in the struggle for power.

The reports about the Syrian conflict involving Sunni and Shi'a if observed are only faraming done by the media and are actually not quite right. That is because the warring groups in Syria have not only occurred between groups that claim to be Sunni and Shia, but also have involved diverse organizations, as well as the existence of different perspectives on the system of government that should be implemented. There are several groups that are fighting over territories that have continued up to now, namely groups from the Syrian Government, Syrian Democratic Forces (Rojava,

SDF, QFD), Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS), Jabhat al-Nusra, and the Syrian Opposition. This is what makes the conflict resolution in Syria very difficult to reach a bright spot, because it involves many groups and very complex problems, especially with the involvement of other countries. Looking at the harmonization of religion and sect in Syria, it is very difficult to conclude that the cause of civil conflict is the differences in the religious outlook of each group given the war that occurred involving many organizations and interests in it. However, apart from the main cause of the conflict in Syria, the number of victims recorded at this event was 470,000 people, but in the United Nations records the victims of this event were as many as 400,000 people. In addition to the loss of life, hundreds of Syrians decided to leave their country to seek asylum abroad. The war also caused Syria's economic condition to plummet and a decline in population, recorded for more than a period of seven years, from 2010-2017 the number of population decreased by approximately three million people.

Difficulties Stepping in the Way of Peace

The difficulty of creating peace in Syria as explained previously is caused by many factors, one of the main factors causing the difficulty of reaching an agreement caused by the problems faced not only involving one party but involving many groups and interests that took part in the war. The many parties involved as a result of the principle of interest in the Syrian state have led to the sharpening of the gap between Syria and peace. This condition was then exacerbated by the number of other countries taking part in utilizing the chaos that occurred in that country. Moritz Peper from Salford University revealed that one of the countries that had a large share in the ongoing conflict in Syria was the Russian state, its intervention being caused by economic, political and defense motives. For Russia, Syria is the main bastion which limits and prevents radical Islamists from entering and carrying out its actions in the Russian state. Therefore it is not surprising that Russia then decided to interfere in Syria's internal affairs on the pretext that the country was an old friend of Syria considering that in that country the socialist party (Paratai Ba'ats) was large and growing.

In addition to the Russian state which has an interest in the Syrian state, a strategic position makes the Iranian state must support the Syrian government in dealing with the uprising, this is because Syria is a connecting bridge between Iran and Lebanon. If Syria then falls into the hands of Isis and Sunni extremists, the bridge will no longer be traversed by Iran, this is what will later be predicted to cause chaos due to the difficulty of Iran supplying weapons to Lebanon. In addition, the Syrian

leader, Bashar al-Assad, who has a Shia Islamic foundation, strengthens Iran to further engage in Syria's internal affairs. Not only that, the ideological and political interests also required Turkey to take part in the war that took place in Syria to prevent Kurdish control of northern Syria from being very close to Turkey. These concerns stem from the prediction of a strengthening of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKP), if the area is controlled by Kurdish rebels. Although in practice the Kurds and Turks have the same school of thought, namely Sunni, but this does not prevent war between the two groups. Therefore the conflict that has been rumored to only involve the Sunni and Shia groups is only one factor among the many causes of the prolonged war in Syria. Even large countries such as Saudi Arabia then also took part in the war, the involvement of this country is an effort to prevent the spread of Shi'a in the Middle East region by Iran. As was discussed earlier that sanya, Sunni and Shia began to split after the death of the prophet Muhammad in the 7th century AD. The wide gap between Sunni and Shi'a is due to differences in religious traditions that exist in the great school. Israel which is a Jewish state did not stay silent and decided to take part in the war that took place in Syria due to the interests to prevent the influence of Hezbollah to strengthen in Syria which threatens Israeli sovereignty.

The many interests both economic, political, and defense from other countries caused America as well as a Super Power country to take part on the grounds of having an interest in eradicating ISIS, as well as Germany and France which have the same reason. Even if we take a close look at taking part in other countries such as America and others, it is more fitting to say that it has a very large economic motive in the country of Syria, considering that the country is one of the largest oil producing countries in the world. The description above shows the immense involvement and elements of other countries' interests in the Syrian war which subsequently made it difficult for Syria to reach consensus in peace.

C. CONCLUSION

The Syrian conflict is a prolonged conflict involving many organizations, groups, interests and countries. When viewed from the motive for the conflict there is nothing that indicates that the beginning of the conflict was religiously motivated or the relationship between Sunni and Shia was relaxed. Although Hafez and Bashar embraced the Shi'a faith as their Islamic school, or the Awali Shiite sect, it did not affect the political pattern of the two figures very much considering that the sect is a minority in Syria. In addition, the two figures in his appointment as a president were supported by military groups who were predominantly Sunni. Syria is also a peaceful ethnoreligious country before the great war that killed tens of thousands of people.

The above explanation clearly indicates that the issue of war against the background of conflict between Sunni and Shia groups is only one of the factors causing the great war in the country. Many other factors that cause a prolonged war in the Syrian state are among others caused by economic, political, ideological, and also defense interests. The number of other countries involved in Syria's internal affairs is the main cause of the difficulty in unraveling the conflict and creating national and international consensus.

D. REFERENCES

1. Ahlul Bait Indonesia. 2012. White Book. Shia School: According to the Muktabar Scholars. Jakarta: Central Board of Management.
2. Burge, Garry. M. 2010. Whose Palestine Owned? Semarang: BPK Gunung Mulia.
3. Gordon, Matthew. 1989. Hafez Al-Assad: Past & Present World Leader. New York: Chelsea House Publisher.
4. Kinsal Masni Handanyani. 2014. Settlement of Syria's Internal Conflicts Under International Law. Manado: Sam Ratulangi University. Lex Et Societatis Journal Vol. II / No. 3 / April / 2014.
5. Lebor, Adam. 2010. Muslim wrestling in the West: Between Identity and Integration. Jakarta: Mizan.
6. Indonesian Ulema Council. 2017. Mimbar Ulama Magazine: Islam Wasathiyah Spirit of MUI Movement. Jakarta: MUI Information and Communication Commission.
7. Panara, Carlo, Gary Wilson. The Arab Spring: New Patterns for Democracy and International Law. Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.
8. Phipes, Deniel. 1989. The Beginning Capture of Power in Syria. Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 25 No. 4 (October 1989).
9. Robinson, Robert E. 2012. Syria's Long Civil War. Philadelphia: Journal of Current History.
10. Seale, Petrick. 1990. Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East. America: University of California Press.
11. Winanda, Vergie. 2015. History of the Development of the Baath Party in Iraq during Saddam Hussein's Leadership in 1979-2003. Yogyakarta: Yogyakarta State University. Journal of Minutes of Vol. 1 / No. 3/2016.
12. Ziser, Eyal. 2007. Syria Commanding: Bashar Al-Asad and the First Years in Power. Losndon: I. B. Tauris.