Armed Conflict and Humanitarian Crisis in Syria

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ABSTRACT

Armed conflict – whether intra or inter-state – and given the frequency of its occurrence, appears to be one of the realities of the international system. Decades of civilisation seem to have done little or nothing to erase the inherent tendency of humans to resort to violent conflict in a bid to resolve certain issues. This inability, perhaps, reinforces the general belief that conflict is ubiquitous. In the Syrian case, gradual slide into civil war has been the reality since the 2011 uprising. This has been attributed to the Arab Spring. Of interest to this paper, however, is the ensuing humanitarian crisis which is an inevitable outcome of armed conflict. The paper argues that humanitarian crisis is an outcome of the Syrian warfare, given that no war can be prosecuted without recording some collateral damages. Data for the paper were drawn mostly from secondary sources and analysed qualitatively. The paper recommends, among other things, concerted effort by the international community in bringing an end to the conflict.

KEYWORDS: Armed conflict; Armed groups; Conflict; Humanitarian crisis; Violence.

INTRODUCTION

It is a popular belief that in human society, conflict is inevitable.In as much as conflict arises due to the pursuit, by different contending parties, of goals that are at variance, not every conflict involves the use of arms.Armed conflict has been defined as:

> a political conflict in which armed combat involves the armed forces of at least one state (or one or more armed factions seeking to gain control of all or part of the state), and in which at least 1,000 people have been killed by the fighting during the course of the conflict (Project Ploughshares Annual Armed Conflicts Report, 2006).

It is pertinent to note that by using the term, political conflict, there is an attempt to draw a line between political conflict and criminal violence. Unlike political conflict, criminal violence involves looting, theft, and vandalization – all aimed at the personal enrichment of the belligerents. This kind of conflict is not necessarily fuelled by political or military goals.

Drawing from the above definition, it becomes clear that armed conflict does not just mean any conflict that involves the use of arms, it is one in which the casualty figure – in terms of loss of human lives – has risen to a thousand deaths. As arbitrary as this conceptualization is, it does not take into account the loss of property and displacement of people.

According to Project Ploughshares Annual Armed Conflicts Report (2006), armed conflict is deemed to have ended if:

a. there has been a formal ceasefire or peace agreement and, following which, there are no longer combat deaths (or at least fewer than 25 per year); or

b. in the absence of a formal ceasefire, a conflict is deemed to have ended after two years of dormancy (in which fewer than 25 combat deaths per year have occurred).

In the same vein, under the auspices of international humanitarian law, two types of armed conflicts can be distinguished. These include: international armed conflicts (this involves two or more States that are in contention); and, non-international armed conflicts (between governmental forces and nongovernmental armed groups, or between such groups only). On the basis of this, the International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC] proposes two definitions:

(i) International armed conflicts exist whenever there is resort to armed force between two or more States.

(ii) Non-international armed conflicts are protracted armed confrontations occurring between governmental armed forces and the forces of one or more armed groups, or between such groups arising on the territory of a State [party to the Geneva Conventions]. The armed confrontation must reach a minimum level of intensity and the parties involved in the conflict must show a minimum of organisation (ICRC, 2008:5).

The ICRC, therefore, bases its definition on the nature of the belligerents involved, as well as the level of intensity of the conflict. This classification is necessary as failure to do so might generate grave implications for human rights (Duxbury, 2007).

The Syrian conflict falls within the purview of non-international armed conflict. It could be recalled that the conflict began in 2011. According to Manfreda (2017), decades of suppressed internal tensions gave birth to the Syrian civil war in 2011. Human Rights Watch (2016) reports that:

> ...as of October 2015, the death toll in the conflict reached more than 250,000 people including over 100,000 civilians. According to local groups, more than 640,000 people live under long-term siege in Syria. The conflict has led to a humanitarian crisis with an estimated 7.6 million internally displaced and 4.2 million refugees in neighbouring countries.

It is pertinent to understand that humanitarian crisis – often referred to as 'humanitarian disaster' – is defined as "a singular event or a series of events that are threatening in terms of health, safety or well-being of a community or a large group of people (Humanitarian Coalition, 2015). This may be as a result of internal or external conflict, and more often than not, interventions that span the local, national and international spheres are required to resolve it. Included in this category are epidemics, conflicts, famine, natural disasters, among others. In the case of Syria, the humanitarian crisis was caused by the conflict that erupted in 2011, and has lingered until 2018.

The crux of this paper, therefore, is to critically assess the impact of the armed conflict in Syria on humanitarian crisis within the State.

REMOTE AND IMMEDIATE CAUSES OF THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

As Nwaorgu (2014) rightly pointed out, things do not just happen; they are caused. This is especially true in the Syrian case.A number of these causative factors are discussed hereunder:

Political Repression and Self-perpetuation in Power

Ciezadlo (2013) provides a historical guide to the current crisis in Syria. He explains that there is interplay between the forces of class, religion, politics and ethnicity. In the late 1970s Sunni Islamists, led by Baath's old rival, the Muslim Brotherhood, unleashed a campaign of suicide bombings and assassinations that killed several hundred officers and civil servants. Many of their targets were Alawites, the Muslim minority to which the Assads belong. Historically, Syria's Alawites were among the poorest of the poor. But during the country's decades as a colony of France, many of them found a path out of poverty through the military. Alawites continued to use armed service to rise in influence after Syria won independence.

He explained that in June 1980, as the power struggle between Baath and Brotherhood took on an increasingly sectarian tone, Hafez narrowly escaped an assassination attempt. His military responded by unleashing its full wrath on the Brotherhood, crushing its Islamist uprising through torture, mass executions, commando raids, and assault on Hama, a three-week siege that killed tens of thousands of people, the vast majority of them civilians. Hafez liked to call himself "a peasant and the son of a peasant," but the Assads came to position themselves as a cosmopolitan bulwark against the primitive forces of militant Islam – a modern, enlightened clan ruling a backward people, gently but firmly, for their own good. This is partly the root of the carnage and human rights abuses in Syria.

Furthermore, he explains Bashar got his chance to prove himself in January 1994, when Hafez crashed his Mercedes Benz on his way to the Damascus airport and died. Bashar was called in from London, where he was doing a residency in ophthalmology, to begin a residency in dictatorship. He planned to succeed where his father had failed. His Syria would be modern and technocratic, a new model for the Middle East. But the gestures were mostly symbolic. In January 2001, a group of Syrian activists, intellectuals, and professionals, encouraged by the apparent opening of their country's political culture, issued a declaration known as the "Statement of 1,000". They called for an end to martial law and emergency rule and the release of all remaining political prisoners. They also demanded democratic, multiparty elections, under the supervision of an independent judiciary and even formed new political parties.

The Assad regime struck back immediately, beginning a campaign of harassment and intimidation that would last for the next ten years. A number of the citizens responsible for the Statement of 1,000 were arrested. By early 2002, the government had forced the Lcimplighter out of print and thrown leaders of the groups in jail. Despite his early pretensions at democracy, Assad was not interested in surrendering even an inch of his power.

It should be noted that impunity played a major role in the Syrian conflict. According to Fares (2014), the governing of Syria has been much of a family affair. This is so because Hafez al-Assad (the father of the current Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad) during his rule in 1970 to 2000, established a legal framework intended to guarantee the perpetuation of power in al-Assad's family. In 1973, Article 8 was inserted into the Syrian Constitution. This Article conferred on the President, monopoly of power as 'the leader of state and society' (Fares, 2014). Following the death of Hafez al-Assad on June 10, 2000, the Constitution was amended by the Parliament. The amendment lowered the minimum age for a president from 40 to 34. This was to allow Bashar to succeed his father, Hafez. In the subsequent presidential election in 2000, Bashar al-Assad won his first seven-year tenure with 99.7% of votes cast (Fares, 2014). The tenure was renewed in 2007 and 2014 with landslide victories.

In order to stop the March 2011 uprising against the government, President al-Assad set up a committee to amend the constitution. The committee erased Article 8 without eliminating the other frameworks which legitimized the al-Assad family's perpetual grasp of power. However, Articles 111 and 150 gives the President the right to make whatever amendment he deems fit in the Constitution, as well as to dissolve the parliament should it reject the President's amendments. In the words of Fares (2014:1), "Syria's new constitutional framework is designed to keep Assad in place until 2028 and to let his family retain power forever". One way of ensuring this is Article 85 of the constitution which stipulates that no candidacy for the office of president shall be accepted unless the applicant has the support of at least 35 members of parliament. It should be noted that the ruling Baath Party (created by Hafez al-Assad) has been in control of the parliament since the early 1970s.

The Tunisian Precedence

In December, 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian national, set himself ablaze in protest against the Tunisian government. Among the reasons cited for this self-immolation was the harsh existential condition in Tunisia. What is termed 'the Tunisian Precedence' here is generally referred to as the 'Arab Spring'. It has to do with a wave of demonstrations which started in 2011, aimed at forcing despotic regimes out of power. The uprisings were in demand of justice, freedom and equality. Successes recorded by this revolutionary move include the ouster of the Tunisian, Egyptian, Libyan and Yemeni dictatorial regimes. The fall of these regimes must have persuaded Syrians to believe that their despotic regime can equally be brought to its knees. Unlike the other affected Arab States, the Syrian government is yet to be toppled, more than seven years after.

State Violence

The Tunisian precedence led to peaceful protests in parts of Syria in 2011. The government apparatus was deployed to ruthlessly quell the protests. Although Syrians had gotten used to state violence like arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial killings, assassinations, disappearances and general repression,Manfreda (2017), is of the view that the ruthless way the government machinery descended on the peaceful protesters spurred thousands of Syrians to take part in the uprising.

Armed Non-State Actors

It is pertinent to note that one of the major factors fuelling the Syrian conflict is the presence of various armed groups.A report by the BBC (December 13, 2013) indicated that there are as many asone thousand (1,000) armed opposition groups in Syria. The report further disclosed that these armed groups have an estimated 100,000 fighters. Given that a large number of these armed groups are regarded as 'minor players', the key actors can be categorised into five (5) sections (BBC, 2013). Included here arethe Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army, the Islamist Front, the Jihadist Groups, the Kurdish Groups, and the Independent Groups.

    a. ***The Supreme Military Council (SMC) of the Free Syrian Army***

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This is a more moderate and stronger alternative to the jihadist rebel groups in Syria. The SMC includes many affiliates and brigades such as Martyrs of Syria Brigades and AhrarSouriya (Free Men of Syria) Brigade, as an alliance to fight for its agenda.

b. The Islamic Front

Forming the Islamic Front was the outcome of collaboration between seven rebel Islamist armed groups – HarakatAhrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya, Jaysh al-Islam, SuqouralSham, Liwa al-Tawhid, Liwa al-Haqq, Ansar al-Sham and the Kurdish Islamic Front – declared that they were forming the largest rebel alliance yet in the 33-month conflict, with an estimated 45,000 fighters. They said the new Islamic Front was an "independent political, military and social formation" that aimed to "topple the Assad regime completely and build an Islamic State". They outlined a new command structure, with key roles shared between the seven groups, and said they would work towards a "gradual merger" (BBC, 2013).

c. The Jihadist Groups

Many jihadist groups formed and managed to recruit large numbers of fighters, both locals and foreigners. The jihadist groups in the Syrian civil war contain some extremist and radical Islamic groups, like The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), also known as (DAESH) in Arabic, Al-Nusra (Support) Front, and *Jaysh al-Muhajirinwa al-Ansar* (Army of the Emigrants and Helpers).

d. The Kurdish Groups

The Kurds are one component of Syrian society, and they have played a major role in this conflict. They have tried to protect their areas that are located in North-Eastern Syria. The major forces of the Kurds are The Popular Protection Units (YPG) and The Democratic Unity Party (PYD). "The PYD has tried to keep the Kurds out of the conflict and consolidate its territorial gains. However, there has been occasional fighting with government troops, and since November 2012 also deadly clashes between the YPG and rebel fighters – particularly those from Islamist and jihadist brigades" (BBC, December 13, 2013).

e. The Independent Groups

They range between conservative Islamist to some moderate Islamist and nationalist fighters, such as the independent groups including *Ahfad al-Rasoul* (Grandsons of the Prophet)

Brigades, Yarmouk Martyrs' Brigade, and *Kataib al-Wihda al-Wataniya* (The National Unity Brigades).

Any State embroiled in conflict and having this high number of opposition groups is likely to find effective and timely resolution of the imbroglio a herculean task.

The above, and a number of other factors, helped to fuel the conflict in Syria so much so that at the moment, it has been classified as a civil war.

HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN SYRIA

On the 15th of March, 2011, a day tagged "the day of rage" by activists; hundreds of Syrians staged protests in the cities of Damascus and Aleppo. They called for democratic reforms, greater civil liberties, and freedom for political prisoners after 40 years of brutal rule by the Assad family. On the 18th of March, 2011, however, security forces opened fire on a protest in Daraa. Four people were killed in what activists say was the first deaths of the uprising. Demonstrations spread, as does the crackdown by Assad's forces.

The ensuing armed conflict in Syria, as is to be expected, has had adverse effects on the citizens and the government. For instance, Human Rights Watch (2017) quotes the Syrian Center for Policy Research, an independent Syrian research organization, as disclosing that:

> The death toll from the conflict as of February 2016 was 470,000. The spread and intensification of fighting has led to a dire humanitarian crisis, with 6.1 million internally displaced people and 4.8 million seeking refuge abroad, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. By mid-2016, an estimated 1 million people were living in besieged areas and denied life-saving assistance and humanitarian aid.

Continuing, the report indicated that "more than 117,000 have been detained or disappeared since 2011, the vast majority by government forces, including 4,557 between January and June 2016, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights. Torture and ill-treatment are rampant in detention facilities; thousands have died in detention".

Not only that, it has been revealed that "the Islamic State in Syria (ISIS), and the former Al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra, which changed its name to *JabhatFath al-Sham*, were responsible for systematic and widespread violations, including targeting civilians with artillery, kidnappings, and executions. Non-state armed groups opposing the government also carried out serious abuses including indiscriminate attacks against civilians, using child soldiers, kidnapping, unlawfully blocking humanitarian aid, and torture" (Human Rights Watch, 2017). One implication of this is that the humanitarian crisis in Syria is fuelled by both state and non-state actors.

In March, 2013, the number of UN-registered Syrian refugees topped 1 million, half of them children. This figure arrived at over 5 million as at March, 2017 (UNHCR, 2017). In terms of internal displacement, the United Nations Security Council estimates that 12 million Syrians have been displaced since the crisis started (Aljazeera, April 14, 2018). The condition of Syrian civilians is so horrible that:

> The humanitarian crisis caused by the war in Syria has expanded far beyond Syrian borders. The first migrants to flee the violence in Syria were 5,000 refugees who crossed into Lebanon in March 2011. Today, over five million Syrians are registered as refugees: if hostilities continue, Syrians may soon take over the status of the world's largest refugee population from Palestinians. In addition to the exodus of the Syrians, there is about a quarter of a million Iraqi refugees. Unlike the refugee situation in parts of East Africa, 91% of Syrian refugees do not live in camps; instead, they occupy urban, semi-urban and rural parts of their host countries. Approximately a quarter of Syrian refugees are between the ages of 18-59, and gender parity is nearly equivalent with 51.5% male refugees and 48.5% female (UNHCR, 2017).

The above scenario is best imagined than experienced. The mass exodus of Syrians, expectedly, strains the economy of their neighbours like Turkey and Lebanon, and heightens the level of insecurity in the region. Not only that, it is one that demands urgent response from the international community.

THE RESPONSE OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

The response of the international community to the Syrian conflict can be classified into two – support for the government's continued existence and support for the rebels to dissolve the government. The ideal place to start off the examination of the responses of the international community is Syria's neighbours.

According to Laub and Masters (2013), Syria's membership of the Arab League was suspended and economic sanctions imposed on Damascus in November, 2011. The League also called for the resignation of President Assad. On its own, Ankara broke diplomatic ties with Damascus in October, 2012. Turkey has also been consistent in supplying arms to the opposition. Lebanon too, is not left out. Saudi Arabia and Qatar have long ago – at the instance of the United States, halted arms supply to the extremist state actors. The US and the European Union, among others, have also imposed sanctions on Syria. These sanctions, however, are yet to trigger an end to the conflict.

In terms of support to ease the humanitarian crisis, Syria, presently, is considered the world's biggest humanitarian crisis. Billions of dollars in international aid are needed to support people caught up in the conflict (UNHCR, 2017).At the Supporting Syria Conference, leaders from countries around the world, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the private sector and civil society came together to:

- Raise significant new funding to meet the immediate and longer-term needs of those affected by the crisis;
- Provide access to education for all refugee and host community children by the end of the 2016-17 school year;
- Create job opportunities for refugees and host communities in neighbouring countries;
- Apply international pressure to stop obstruction and abuse, to respect humanitarian law;
- Give people inside Syria safer healthcare, safer education, and support for the most vulnerable, especially girls and women; and,
- Begin the international community's work to rebuild Syria, once the conflict ends

The Supporting Syria and the Region Conference brought together world leaders from around the globe to rise to the challenge of raising the money needed to help millions of people

whose lives have been torn apart by the devastating civil war.The United Kingdom, Germany, Kuwait, Norway, and the United Nations co-hosted the conference in London on February 4, 2016, to raise significant new funding to meet the immediate and longer-term needs of those affected (*https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/global-response*).The conference raised over US$ 12 billion in pledges – $6 billion for 2016 and a further $6.1 billion for 2017-20 to enable partners to plan ahead.The 2016 UN inter-agency appeals for the Syria crisis are an estimated US$7.73 billion. An additional US$1.2 billion in funding is required by affected regional governments as part of national response plans.

Prior to the above move, Amnesty International in December, 2014, released a report tagged 'Syria: Left out in the Cold: Syrian Refugees Abandoned by the International Community'. In this report, Amnesty International lamented the failure of world leaders to protect the most vulnerable Syrian refugees. Amnesty International lamented that:

> The Gulf States – which include some of the world's wealthiest countries – have not offered to take a single refugee from Syria so far. Russia and China have similarly failed to pledge a single resettlement place. Excluding Germany, the rest of the European Union (EU) has pledged to resettle a paltry 0.17 per cent of refugees in the main host countries. The shortfall in the number of resettlement places for refugees offered by the international community is truly shocking. Nearly 380,000 people have been identified as in need of resettlement by the UN refugee agency, yet just a tiny fraction of these people have been offered sanctuary abroad. The World Food Programme announcement earlier this week that is(sic) has been forced to suspend food aid to 1.7 million refugees due to a funding crisis underscores the abysmal response of the international community. The complete absence of resettlement pledges from the Gulf is particularly shameful. Linguistic and religious ties should place the Gulf States at the forefront of those offering safe shelter to refugees fleeing persecution and war crimes in Syria.

That the above bleak scenario has improved is a positive sign. However, its lateness betrays the fact that the plight of Syrian civilians might not be considered as important as is often

proclaimed. At the moment, the refugee crisis in Syria and its neighbours is yet to abet as the number will likely be on the increase for as long as the conflict rages on.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusively, while resort to armed conflict is hardly an ideal way to resolve disputes, it is nonetheless employed rather too frequently. It brings in its wake, massive destabilization, destruction and significant loss of life and property. The Syrian case is no exception to the rule. The most pathetic aspect is the casual attitude of the international community to the plight of Syrian civilians. This plight is even more complex going by the fact that the civilians are preyed on two sides by both state actors and non-state actors like ISIS. ISIS, it does appear, still terrorize residents of areas still under its control. These residents thrive under strict Islamist rule. They face indiscriminate executions and life is generally characterized by fear and insecurity.

The Syrian crisis is more complicated because of the number of non-state actors involved inthe conflict. The fact that the opposition is not united under one common front and one general umbrella, perhaps, is a factor that has been playing into the hands of the government. Indeed, the government is widely believed to be against its own people. The assumption is that under the guise of crushing opposition fighters, government forces tend to attack civilians too. This heightens the humanitarian crisis in the State.

The international community also, is torn between those supporting the government, and those supporting opposition fighters. The implication here is that in trying to protect the civilians and resolve the conflict, there is no unanimity of purpose. This makes it extremely difficult to chart a blueprint on how best to resolve the lingering conflict. Indeed, there is no justifiable way that the humanitarian crisis would be resolved except the conflict is ended once and for all. Those caught in the middle, as could be expected, are the civilians.

It is, therefore, pertinent that the international community should arrive at a common front in order to restore peace to Syria. This will not be achieved by backing either the government or the opposition, but by bringing all the belligerents to the negotiation table. It is also

imperative for the opposition to merge under a common front. This will facilitate mediation by the international community. As for Syrian neighbours, efforts at assisting refugees are commendable, but a lot still needs to be done.

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