

Revisiting the Syrian Crisis of 1957: A Critical Analysis of Enduring Implications¹

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Abstract

This paper revisits the Syrian crisis of 1957 to understand its enduring historical implications. It draws important conclusions for understanding the international and regional dynamics that shaped the Syrian crisis in the post-2012 period. Extant literature has not provided a comprehensive account of the 1957 Syrian crisis. Regarding contextual reasons and consequences of this crisis, some key questions have yet to be answered. Critical inquiring of the 1957 episodic context gives better insights for making sense of the international and regional imbroglio that surrounded the Syrian affairs since 2012. By analyzing Turkish foreign policy discourse in this historical episode, this article reveals enduring implications of the 1957 crisis that gradually paved the way for re-emergence of a deep dilemma between overt (international) intervention and covert (regional/local) interference into Syria in the post-2012 period.

Keywords: the 1957 Syrian crisis, the post-2012 period, US role, Turkish foreign policy, intervention, interference.

1. Introduction

This paper revisits the Syrian crisis of 1957 to understand its enduring historical implications. It draws important conclusions for understanding the international and regional dynamics that shaped the Syrian crisis in the post-2012 period. By looking at the extant scholarly literature, the author explores main analytical gaps left in between International Relations (IR) and Middle East Studies (MES). Historical and factual approach constituted the dominant mode of knowledge production in IR and MES. These fact-finding investigations primarily relied on (de)classified US and UK official documents. To a great extent, the historicist analyses see the crisis as real. They bring wealth of evidence that portrays the secret

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dimension of international and Middle Eastern politics. More particularly, they do reflect covert nature of US and UK foreign policy making at that time. Here, one could witness authors' enormous effort for pulling together key intelligence and diplomacy details and giving rigorous insight about what happened behind the closed doors (Jones, 2004; Lucas and Morey, 2000). However, the historical approach does not provide a parsimonious account of what did really make the crisis to emerge so vociferously and die down so silently, and quite smoothly? Due to heavy reliance on secret archival evidence, factualist writings on the 1957 Syrian crisis have failed to fully grasp the reality on the ground which had apparently unfolded in the open public spaces. At that time, what was made public could be as important as what was kept secret. In fact, the Syrian crisis of 1957 was made real in the public spheres. Thus, purely factual analyses might not offer conceptual perspective to make sense of why and how particular foreign policy actions were made possible through public discourses addressing the Syrian crisis in 1957.

This case has been relatively understudied by theory driven IR scholars including Stephen M. Walt. According to Walt's theoretically informed interpretation, the crisis was "largely artificial" (Walt, 1987: 70). Walt does not give sufficient evidence to support his claim. He is more concerned about making sense of Soviet-Syrian alliance (1955-58) as confirming the concept of external threat balancing. As this treatment clearly demonstrates, conceptual parsimony is bought at the expense of factual reality. Too much emphasis on theory generation and hypothesis testing might end up with loss of historical vision and factual focus.

Against the backdrop of historicism and conceptualism, this study seeks alternative modes of inquiry to close the fact-fiction gap in the Syrian crisis of 1957. It adopts a pragmatist philosophical stance for building new bridges between IR and MES. The author argues that the IR-MES divide could be better bridged should both sides focus more on the analyses of agents' discursive logics shaping the context of action. For this aim, scholars may refrain from treating IR theories as explanatory instruments. Instead, they might take a less traveled path and view IR theories constituting actors' communicative practices and hence their political judgements. As the critical analysis of Turkish foreign policy discourse in *Milliyet* and *Zafer* shows, the Syrian crisis of 1957 was made (un)real only by communicative practices in the public spheres.

2. Historical approach to the 1957 Syrian crisis: Re-filtering of factual controversies Scholars of diplomatic-intelligence history heavily rely on secret US-UK documents in order to establish a factual ground to explain reasons that made 1957 Syrian crisis real. Factual approach provides historical data as to how the crisis unfolded in the international environment of the early Cold War years. More or less, the evidence found in these resources help us to canvas the historical background.

At this point, one needs to inquire how these resources mapped out factual reasons that led to the outbreak of the crisis. In this regard, it has to be noted that hermeneutical differences emerged among the scholars of historical approach. First and foremost, they could not fully agree on the actual target of "Eisenhower Doctrine," which was outlined by the US President Dwight D. Eisenhower on 5 January 1957. For example, Stephen Blackwell (2000) portrays the Doctrine as a policy measure designed to counter penetration of Soviet power into the Middle East. By looking at British documents, however, Blackwell exposes other puzzles that predominantly emanate from different threat perceptions of the US and Britain. Historians still remain ambivalent about whether communism or Arab nationalism posed the bigger threat against Anglo-American interests. Associated with this factual controversy, one could ask another key question: What was the real position of Egyptian President Gamal Abd al-Nasser during the Syrian crisis, a Soviet protégée or a CIA confidante?

Based on analysis of US archival documents, David W. Lesch (1999) points out that the US administration's "policy misconceptions and misapplications" have determined global parameters of the

crisis. In this regard, Lesch particularly highlights Nasser as playing a key regional role in the making of “American-Syrian crisis.” Here Lesch notes that Nasser’s PanArabist political clout in the region had gradually forced Washington to seek a modus vivendi with Cairo. Hence “Eisenhower Doctrine...[which was]...a policy designed to isolate and reduce the power of...al-Nasser” was reluctantly abandoned. Largely due to regional circumstances, Eisenhower turned to Nasser to resolve the bilateral crisis with Syria. As Lesch bluntly put, it was quiet “a telling irony” (Lesch, 1999: 128).

Historical reasons of this policy paradox can be unraveled by looking at key junctures that shaped the unfolding of 1957 Syrian crisis. The signing of technical-economic cooperation agreement between Soviet Union and Syria on 6 August was a threatening development for the (pro)Western countries that kept important interests in Syria and the Middle East. Undoubtedly, global stakes were higher for US and UK. They were not only concerned about widening of Soviet infiltration and communist penetration, but also the expanding of Nasser’s anti-imperialist influence over the region, which became more apparent after the Suez debacle. Both Washington and London were in dire need of a friendly regime in Syria. They clandestinely attempted to bring about a regime change in Damascus. But the Syrian intelligence revealed this secret plan. On 12 August, US diplomats were expelled from Syria. The due response of Washington came in two days. By then the crisis began to escalate. Later, in September and October, it turned into a Cold War type diplomatic duel and intelligence warfare among global actors, regional and local players.

2.1 Untold tales of the crisis: Re-casting the role of out-siders

After the failure in Suez, Britain’s strategic decline became more obvious. London was in search of a defensive strategy to safeguard its economic and military assets in Iraq and the region at large. In this regard, the safety of Kirkuk-Tripoli oil pipeline was important for British interests. Thus, London was far more concerned about curbing Nasser’s political influence and controlling implications of Arab nationalism over the region. In spite of the fact that US was less reliant on Middle Eastern oil, global stakes were much higher for the Americans that made them more “prone to overreaction” in their response to Soviet strategic moves (Pearson, 2007: 45-47, 51-52). According to US and British sources, the level of “communist control [over Syria] actually remained questionable...The potential for subversive activity...nevertheless remained a serious concern” for both London and Washington (Blackwell, 2000: 146-147). During the Syrian crisis of 1957, collective threat perceptions and shared security interests drove London and Washington towards much closer co-operation in both foreign policy planning and implementation. Even though both sides seemed to have reconciliation over policy objectives, they held disagreement over methods to be implemented for particular political purposes. On the regional front, both sides saw King Saud “as the best means of countering Nasser’s influence” and tied their hands to him. After the failure of the CIA plot in Syria, strengthening of intelligence collaboration became the major issue in defining and shaping Anglo-American diplomatic relations. In this very early stage, US made a critical move by dispatching Loy Henderson, a senior State Department official, to the region. As of 23 August, Henderson began to consult with regional governments in Istanbul. Even overt military intervention was to be discussed as an option on the table. It was made clear that Iraqi-Jordanian and/or Turkish military intervention into Syria would receive US backing under certain circumstances. Iraq and Jordan remained weak; while Turkey was constrained by Soviet threats and Arab nationalist opposition. But the possibility of military intervention and even the risk of global war could not be ruled out on 7 September 1957 (Blackwell, 2000: 139-149; Pearson, 2007: 49, 50).

Washington publicly announced its readiness to give military assistance to any of Syria's neighbours if they threatened by communist-inspired aggression. In response to this the Turkish government received from Moscow a scarcely veiled threat of Soviet troop mobilization on the country's borders if it intervened in Syria...By 12

September American military advisers...were 'look[ing] into the possibility of coordination between Iraqi and Turkish planning' (Blackwell, 2000: 149-150).

Due to fear of Arab nationalist backlash, Iraq remained unenthusiastic about Turkish intervention into Syria. Thus, Anglo-American diplomacy sought other options. By October 1957, they attempted to resolve the issue through inter-Arab diplomacy, with King Saud taking the lead. Nonetheless, Nasser dealt a serious blow to Saud on 13 October by landing relatively limited, largely symbolic, contingent of Egyptian troops on the Syrian coast of Latakia. Cairo's intervening maneuver posed a serious concern for Ankara. Turkey increasingly found itself in an uncertain situation and heightened defensive security measures on the Syrian border. In reaction to a number of minor border incidents, Damascus attempted to raise the issue to the international level by appealing to the United Nations on 16 October. Surprisingly enough, Khrushchev's unexpected move on 29 October brought the Turkish-Syrian crisis to a halt. While at the Independence Day reception in the Turkish Embassy, Khrushchev played down Soviet regional aspirations. In the following days, Syria withdrew its complaint about Turkey's activities from the UN (Blackwell, 2000: 150, 151).

As one could see, wealth of factual evidence has been provided by historical approach as to out-siding of the crisis by global and regional actors. But factual narratives failed to bring about a comprehensive account of the Soviet mind-set in driving the crisis towards a particular direction. Thus, historical approach has yet to fully capture reasons and consequences of the 1957 Syrian crisis for global actors, including Soviet Union. As far as regional actors are concerned, the fact that the Turkish position was portrayed by heavily relying on Anglo-American archives still constitutes one of the major predicaments of historical endeavors (Sever, 1998). One way to overcome this impediment could be to look at Turkish newspaper archives (Sönmez, 2009; Baş, 2012). Critical analysis of Turkish foreign policy public discourse might offer a complementary narrative and help to illuminate factual controversies still plaguing historical enquiry into the 1957 Syrian crisis.

2.2 Unveiled stories of the crisis: Re-locating the impact of in-siders

Since the fall of anti-communist Adib al-Shishakli dictatorship in February 1954, (pro)Western countries were in search of a friendly political figure and a stable government in Syria. Shukri alQuwatli, who had been the president since 1955, seemed neutral to left-wing pan-Arab groups.

Chief among them was the Ba'th (Arab Socialist Resurrection) Party, which dominated both the Parliament and the new Cabinet formed in early January 1957. Ba'thist foreign minister Salah Bitar espoused that Syrian government would remain loyal to the ideals of Arab nationalism and socialist liberation, but would not fall onto the trap of international communism and Soviet imperialism (Pearson, 2007: 46, 47, 50).

In spite of this, Ba'th cadres were in close collaboration with the Syrian Communist Party led by Halit Bektaş. It came as no surprise when leftist forces in Syria were alleged to instigate a military coup against King Hussein of Jordan in April 1957. Three months later, Damascus began to campaign against Amman with the accusations of plotting a military coup in Syria (Baş, 2012: 93-96).

Wilbur Crane Eveland, former CIA agent stationed in Syria, had been in contact with Shishakli (Pearson, 2007: 48). Shishakli was known for his opposition to pro-British Hashemite monarchies, namely Iraq and Jordan. Thus, MI6 seemed to opt for Michel Ilyan (Scott and Morey, 2000: 112, 113). The August plot was exposed by the Syrian counter-intelligence services, the so-called *Deuxième Bureau*, led by Abdul Hamid Sarraj. On 12 August, CIA's networks in Syria were dismantled for at least the third time. This incident

came as “the final blow to the US position” in Damascus. Within four days, the allegedly pro-communist Colonel Afif al-Bizri was assigned as the Chief of Staff for the Syrian Army (Pearson, 2007: 49, 51).

In fact, local players of the Syrian power politics game were mainly Ba’thists and Communists. The ideological line between these factions seemed to be relatively thin. Historical approach is yet to unveil the impact of this thin ideological line in siding and moving the crisis towards a specific direction.

3. Theoretical approach to 1957 Syrian crisis: Re-construction of conceptual flaws Theoretically informed analyses of 1957 Syrian crisis have been relatively rare. It has to be reiterated that realists saw the crisis as “largely artificial” (Walt, 1987: 70). By looking at realist interpretation of the events, one could understand that the crisis was escalated to a certain extent through interference policies of Moscow and Washington and but did not turn into a military intervention of either the Soviet Union or the US. As Walt points out, the consequences were more costly for the US. Due to “the disparities between Washington’s Cold War images and the other actors’ largely regional concerns,” Cairo and Damascus got “closer than ever, and closer to Moscow” (Walt, 1987: 71).

Here Walt does not problematize why did the crisis bring more costly historical consequences for the US and its allies? By extension, one could also ask two thought-provoking questions: Why did Washington (and its allies) opt for interference rather than intervention?

What would be consequences for Washington (and its allies) if the intervention option was taken? These intriguing questions are sufficient to re-construct the flaws within Waltian conceptual analysis of 1957 Syrian crisis. They are also relevant for understanding historical reasons of the currently ongoing international crisis coupled with the civil war in Syria.

Unlike Walt’s parsimonious realist hypothesis of external threat balancing, Reem AbouEl-Fadl (2013) brought about a political-economy picture that is rather complex by its very conceptual nature. Based on her research on Turkish resources (like official documents and leading newspapers), she argues that Turkey took a utilitarian position to exploit the 1957 Syrian crisis for mainly economic reasons. At this point, Abou-El-Fadl attempts to locate the crisis within the larger nation/state-building project orchestrated by Prime Minister Adnan Menderes. In this account, Democrat Party (DP) government had been pursuing four purposes in areas of national development: economic development based on American liberalism, cultural development based on American values, religious development based on American-type secularism, and ideological development based on American anti-communism (Abou-El-Fadl, 2013: 42, 51).

As one could realize, this analysis is theoretically (ontologically, epistemologically and methodologically) flawed since it indefinitely mixes neo-utilitarian precepts with constructivist concepts. In spite, she uses this broadly tailored theoretical framework for making apparently much stronger, but empirically less accurate claims about Turkey’s Syria policy in 1957. This is mainly due to the fact that Abou-El-Fadl takes a pick-and-choose approach in finding evidence to support her argument. Therefore, there is a further need for systematic treatment of public discourse and critical analysis of discursive evidence for an alternative understanding of Turkey’s position in the case of 1957 Syrian crisis.

4. Critical-discursive approach to 1957 Syrian crisis: Re-visiting Turkey’s position As a theoretical outlook constructivism is conducive and attuned to bridge building efforts between IR and MES (Teti, 2007; Anderson, 1999). This paper furthers this assertion by arguing that critical constructivism (Weldes, 1998) and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough and Fairclough, 2012) provide a pragmatist perspective (Jackson, 2009) to bridge the perennial divide between theoretically-driven IR and historically-oriented MES.

Through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) scholars can inquire actors’ political judgement that is logic of action reflected in communicative practices (Kornprobst, 2011). The critical focus on discursive practices

would help to reach an analytical synthesis between two pragmatist meta-theoretical positions: Bourdieu's theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1990; 1998; 2003) and Habermasian theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1984; 1989; 1998). By taking a critical-discursive research methodology one can better assess what states had made of the 1957 Syrian crisis? How they viewed and responded to the crisis discursively in an environment of public propaganda and political deception?

With these questions in mind, Turkey's making of the Syrian crisis was inquired in two leading newspapers of the time. By looking at news and opinion columns of *Milliyet* and *Zafer* published in August-October 1957, "core themes" (Kienzle, 2013) of Turkish foreign policy discourse were explored. These main thematic frames were "communism," "Soviet influence," "US role," "regional-local actors," "situation in Syria," "Turkish domestic politics," and "Turkey's foreign policy options (intervention-interference)."

Critical analysis of discursive data suggests that foreign policy issues seemed to receive almost bipartisan treatment at that point in time. One can see that the Syrian crisis was perceived as part of the pro-Western democratic struggle against the pro-Soviet communist influence in both relatively neutral *Milliyet* and staunchly pro-government *Zafer*. Within this black and white portrayal, only scant attention was paid to political implications of Arab nationalism. In fact, it was Arab nationalist opposition that prevented Turkish foreign policy makers from taking a more active role during the crisis.

Menderes government was essentially driven by domestic political concerns, particularly the impending of early Parliamentary elections in October. The election campaign of DP was largely covered by *Zafer*. It was mainly based on defusing political allegations, if not fabrications, of the opposition regarding domestic economic crisis. The Cyprus question was mentioned only on rare occasions. The situation in Syria got almost no reference. This discursive evidence indicates that the crisis in Syria did not constitute a critical concern for the Turkish government.

In most of their campaign speeches, President Celâl Bayar and Prime Minister Adnan Menderes talked about Turkey's economic development since DP assumed governance in 1950. The positive political framing of Turkish economy in 1957 has been in line with the OECD data disseminated by the Statistical Institution of Turkey (*Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu-TUIK*, 2015). This demonstrates that Ankara was not in dire need of economic assistance in 1957 and had no solid reason to exploit the Syrian crisis for utilitarian purposes.

Even though Turkish foreign policy elite reacted with resentment and agony, they deliberately chose to stay out of the Syrian crisis. Thus, they could not devise effective policy measures. At that time, Menderes government could not make any gains by staying out of the crisis. Turkey's non-interventionist, if not hands-off, stance in the 1957 crisis gradually turned into a neutral and then status quo position in the following years. Hence, Turkey inadvertently helped to create and perpetuate pro-Soviet Ba'athist (socialist-nationalist) authoritarian rule in Syria.

Here one can construct a retrospective counter-factual in order to understand historical losses of Turkey and US in this critical episode. Had Ankara and Washington persistently pursued policy of international intervention rather than reluctantly opting for interference, they might not lose Damascus in 1957. Since then the Soviets (Russians) gained the upper hand in Syrian affairs. The historical costs of the 1957 crisis were to be faced by Turkey almost fifty five years later. Once again, Turkey and US could not determine and implement effective foreign policy resolving the persistent crisis in Syria. Not surprisingly, the deep foreign policy dilemma between intervention and interference has reemerged in February 2012.

5. Conclusion: Enduring historical implications of 1957 Syrian crisis

In fact, official engagement with any opposition groups has been an anathema for Turkish foreign policy making. That is to say, the post-2012 Syria policy has presented a rare case for scholars of Turkish foreign

policy. In order to understand Turkey's foreign policy predicaments in this case, one needs to revisit enduring historical implications of 1957 Syrian crisis. Alongside its Western allies (US and UK), Turkey could not address the Syrian crisis of 1957 in due course. Even though Ankara realized negative impact of Soviet influence in Damascus, Turkish government has not clearly opted for overt international intervention into Syria. It was evident that Turkey would pay the heavy price, since covert Western interference has been unlikely to bring about a friendly regime in Damascus.

By the end of 1957, Soviets have gained the upper hand to dominate Syrian affairs for more than half of a century. At least for four decades, Turkey remained as a distant neighbor to Syria. Furthermore, Turkey's annexation of Hatay in 1939 was used as a pretext for Ba'thist indoctrination feeding anti-Turkish feelings among Syrian people. By the end of Cold War, the dyadic antagonisms did not fade away. Quite the contrary, Ankara and Damascus began to dispute over transboundary water allocations in the Euphrates-Tigris basin. In addition to the water issue, PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) terrorism further exacerbated the bilateral relations during the 1990s.

In 1998, Turkey gave an ultimatum to the Syrian regime to urgently terminate their sheltering of PKK activities. After the signing of Adana Accords on 20 October 1998, two sides began to build confidence particularly in the security field. This initial rapprochement grew gradually, as Bashar al-Asad assumed power after Hafiz al-Asad's death in 2000. The coming to power of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – AKP) in 2002 has brought considerable change in Turkey's foreign policy vision towards Syria (Tür, 2010). AKP government utilized soft power tools to improve better relations with the Ba'th regime. Businessmen would take the lead in shaping the dyadic context of Turkish-Syrian cooperation. AKP government envisioned to transform the Ba'th regime through economic and financial engagement, trade interactions and public diplomacy activities. Even though Turkey's public diplomacy appealed to discursive frames such as cultural affinity, religious kinship and social solidarity, Ankara lacked institutional and instrumental capacity to construct deep political influence over Damascus. Turkey's weakly designed soft power strategy could not bear fruit as it was tested against the Soviet-type authoritarian rule in Syria. When the Syrian uprising unfolded in March 2011, it would be naïve to expect from the Ba'th regime to seriously deliberate on Turkish government's call for substantial political reform. Hence, Ankara turned back to square one after almost a ten year honeymoon with Damascus (Aras, 2012).

On 4 February 2012, Russia (and China) prevented the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) from taking a decision to endorse international military intervention into Syria. The second double veto constituted a critical turning point for the resolution of Syrian crisis. Since then intervention option has waned and Turkey began to tilt towards interference. This became more visible particularly after the first "Friends of Syria Group (FSG)" meeting in Tunis on 24 February 2012. After this meeting, Syrian National Council (SNC) was regarded as a legitimate representative of Syrian people.

By joining the Tunis meeting, Turkey has officially engaged with the Syrian opposition and helped them to act as a political alternative to the Ba'th regime. Turkey opened its doors to thousands of Syrian refugees fleeing from Ba'th repression. Composed of defected military personnel, Free Syrian Army (FSA) found shelter in Turkey. With these moves, Ankara sided with Washington and interfered into the Syrian civil war. By opting towards interference, Turkey once again invited risks of confrontation with Russia, the primary protector of Ba'th regime. Put in another way, Turkey and the US opted for interference rather than intervention in both 1957 and 2012 Syrian crises. By doing so, they failed to contain historical growth of Russian influence in Syrian affairs. In sum, these policy failures left enduring international implications for the coming decades.

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