

UNDERSTANDING COMPLEX NATURE OF THE SYRIAN CRISES

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Abstract

By taking the lead from the 'Arab Spring', starting from January 26, 2011, the Syrian people launched peaceful protests against the Bashar-ul-Asad regime's policies, but it quickly turned into a full-scale civil war, causing the death of over half a million people, pushing Syria back into 'Stone Age'. In the presence of external players, including America and Russia in opposite camps; the security state in Syria has become too complex. The US decision to pull out its troops from Syria has helped Assad significantly consolidate his grip over the country. Yet, a sense of durable peace in Syria is still off the map due to the interplay of multiple factors. In this research, Syria's civil war has been analysed as a case study through a combination of historical, descriptive and qualitative research methods.

Keywords: *Jasmine Revolution, Dictatorial Policies, Racism, Iron Fist, Syrian Crisis*

Introduction

Syria is part of a distinct regional security complex of West Asia. It has a rich history that starts around 2400 BC. Present-day Syria is only a small segment of the ancient Syrian state which was divided by the western powers in the post-Ottoman era. Present Syria is surrounded by Lebanon to the southwest, Turkey to the north, Iraq to the east, Jordan to the south, and Israel to the southwest. It is home to diverse ethnic and religious groups.¹ After becoming independent on April 15, 1946, Syria

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¹ "History of Syria, Historical Background," *Nations Online*, <https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/History/Syria-history.htm>, accessed January 10, 2019; Howard Hayes Scullard, "Home Geography & Travel Countries Of The World -Syria," *Search Britannica*, June 11, 2020, www.britannica.com>...>Countries of the World.; "Map of Syria and Middle

continued to face political unrest until November 1970 when Lieutenant General Hafiz-al-Assad, got hold of the country, after a bloodless military coup. He ruled Syria for 30 years with iron hands and died on June 10, 2000. He was replaced by his son Bashar-al-Assad.² Assad promised to introduce reforms in the country to redress the grievances of the people but did not follow it up. Instead, he took U-turn and followed his father's policies.³ As a corollary, restive population already motivated by 'Arab Spring', started popular uprising in January 2011.⁴

To appease the masses, Assad announced several plans including the lifting of the country's 48 years old state of emergency.⁵ Yet, in the absence of a well-thought-out strategy, he used brutal force to control the protestors and called them 'rebels'⁶ which forced them to take up arms. The 'rebels' instantly started to receive foreign help. Initially, America placed around 2,000 ground troops in the north and north-east of Syria to support Syrian Kurds.⁷ Under the cover of anti-Assad forces, jihadist groups like Islamic State/Islamic State of Iraq and Syria(IS/ISIS) also entered Syria and penetrated in the ranks of rebels. Due to this change, the US and its allies withheld their support to rebels, a step that helped Assad to regain the lost territory from IS.⁸

In December 2018, President Trump took an hasty decision to withdraw American troops from Syria by proclaiming that IS/ISIS was defeated in Syria.⁹ In reality, his claim was as "bad as Obama's dismissing

East," *Nations Online*, www.nationsonline.org/one-world/map/syria-map, accessed June 27, 2020.; "Geography of Syria," *Fanack*, <https://fanack.com/syria/geography/>, accessed June 27, 2020.

² "History of Syria, Historical background."

³ "Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad: Facing down Rebellion," *BBC News*, September 3, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/10338256>.

⁴ "Arab Spring: A Research & Study Guide," *Cornell University Library*, December 22, 2020, guides.library.cornell.edu/arab_spring/Syria.

⁵ CNN Editorial Research, "Syrian Civil War Fast Facts," *CNN World*, April 9, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2013/08/27/world/meast/syria-civil-war-fast-facts/index.html>.

⁶ "Syria: How it all began", *The World*, April 23, 2011, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2011-04-23/syria-how-it-all-began>, accessed June 27, 2020.

⁷ Mark Landler, Helene Cooper, and Eric Schmidt, "Trump Withdraws U.S. Forces from Syria, Declaring 'We Have Won Against ISIS'," *The New York Times*, December 19, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/19/us/politics/trump-syria-turkey-troop-withdrawal.html>.

⁸ "Political Map of Syria," *Nations Online*, <https://www.nationsonline.org/one-world/map/syria-map.htm>, accessed February 26, 2019.

⁹ Katie Galimoto, "Trump Says ISIS Will Be 'Gone by Tonight'," *Politico*, March 20, 2019; Mark Landler, Helene Cooper, and Eric Schmidt, "Trump Withdraws U.S. Forces from Syria, Declaring 'We Have Won Against ISIS'."

them as the Junior Varsity or “J.V.” squad.”¹⁰ As stated by Seth G. Jones, despite the IS’s loss of territory in Iraq and Syria, a diffused Salafi-jihadist movement was far from defeated in Syria.¹¹ American security officials also opined that Trump’s statement “encourage(d) Daesh to stay in the fight and demoralise(d) our allies.”¹² The future of the Syrian public is yet undecided. Its main cities have been turned into rubbles. By March 2019, the armed conflict had left more than 500,000 people dead and half of its 22 million population has been uprooted and compelled to seek refuge elsewhere.¹³

The nature of the Syrian crisis and its solution is too complex. It involves around eleven regional states and two outside powers besides an unaccounted number of Jihadist groups. It is a kind of ‘low-intensity mini world war’ between the two blocs where Syria remains the battlefield. Moreover, the existence of Syrian, Turkish and Iraqi Kurds across the Syria-Turk border as the coalition is a danger for Turkish solidarity due to which Ankara continues to shuffle between the two blocs. An in-depth analysis of the Syrian crisis presents a bleak future but optimistically, a ‘stable political order’ in Syria and its surrounding regions can be restored through political means.

This article is aimed at exploring the complex nature of the Syrian crisis to suggest a possible way forward. The study tries to answer following questions: what circumstances characterize the Syrian crisis? What is the role of regional and extra-regional players in the crisis? And what implications do these characteristics have for the future of Syria? Thus, this paper intends to understand the complexity of the Syrian crisis regarding the internal and external dynamics in the context of the

¹⁰ Marc A. Thiessen, “The 10 Worst Things Trump Did In 2018,” *The Washington Post*, January 3, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-10-worst-things-trump-did-in-2018/2019/01/02/f4025456-0eb0-11e9-84fc-d58c33d6c8c7_story.html; Elizabeth Dent, “The UN-sustainability of ISIS Detentions in Syria,” *The Middle East Institute*, Policy Paper, March 2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/unsustainability-isis-detentions-syria>.

¹¹ Seth G. Jones, and Nicholas Harrington, “The Evolution of the Salafi-Jihadist Threat, Current and Future Challenges from the Islamic State, Al-Qaeda, and Other Groups,” *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, Nov, 2018, 46, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/evolution-salafi-jihadist-threat>

¹² Kim Sengupta, “Isis Emboldened by Trump Withdrawing US Troops from Syria, say Western Officials,” *The Independent*, January 7, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-isis-trump-us-troop-withdrawal-james-mattis-kevin-sweeney-brett-mcgurk-a8716111.html>

¹³ Matthew Weaver, “Syrian Refugees: More than 5m in Neighbouring Countries Now, says UN,” *The Guardian*, March 20, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/30/syrian-refugee-number-passes-5m-mark-un-reveals>; “Syrian President Bashar al-Assad: Facing down Rebellion.”

involvement of state and non-state actors on local, regional and international levels. It has been divided into four sections: First, Arab Spring, the beginning of the Syrian crises; second, Syrian crises, the analysis from the theoretical prism, third, understanding complex character of the Syrian crises; fourth, the impact of the US hasty decision to pull out from Syria, a net assessment; fifth, the regional conflicts with global outreach, an appraisal and finally, the suggested way forward.

Current Context of the Syrian Conflict

Since 2000, Bashar-al-Assad son of Hafiz-al-Assad, who was then the Colonel in the Syrian army succeeded him. Bashar promoted himself to the rank of field marshal and became head of the armed forces and secretary-general of the Baath Party. During July 2000, in the symbolic referendum, he was elected as an unopposed president.¹⁴ In the beginning, he was willing to introduce the desired reforms but was quickly trapped by the old guards. He maintained status-quo and continued to follow the dictatorial policies of his father.¹⁵ Due to the simmering effects of the last 30 years and his failure to introduce reforms, the Syrian public got sick of him hence, they started looking for a chance to revolt against the governing style of the Assad regime.

Arab Spring: the Beginning of the Syrian Crises

In Tunisia, on December 17, 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi, a fruit vendor set himself on fire in protest, after being publicly humiliated by a policewoman for not having a permit to sell the goods. Bouazizi's sacrificial act served as a catalyst, for the so-called 'Jasmine Revolution' in Tunisia. Tunisia's public reaction set off uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa that became known as 'Arab Spring'.¹⁶

While many states the Middle East and Africa contained the 'aftershocks' of this incident but the countries like Libya, Syria and Yemen were destroyed due to civil war. During this period, Jihadist groups were

¹⁴ "Syrian President Bashar al-Assad: Facing down Rebellion"; "Profile: Bashar-al-Assad," *Aljazeera*, April 17, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/4/17/profile-bashar-al-assad>.

¹⁵ "Why is There a War in Syria?" *BBC News*, February 25, 2019; "Assad Biography," *Aljazeera*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/4/17/profile-bashar-al-assad>; and "Syrian President Bashar al-Assad: Facing down Rebellion."

¹⁶ Joseph V. Micallef, "The Arab Spring: Six Years Later," *Huffington Post*, January 29, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-arab-spring-six-years_b_14461896.

able to establish their bases in the affected regions.¹⁷ The West failed to appreciate the possible fallout of the incident. Joseph V. Micallef concluded that “our efforts to encourage it only spawned chaos and civil war, and will have only served to destabilize the region even more.”¹⁸

Syrian Crises: An Analysis from the Theoretical Prism

The ‘relative gains’ as explained by the scholars from the ‘neorealist’ school of thought at times put the states at risk of losing opportunities in a globalized world. According to the neorealist ‘relative gain’ theory is single-minded in weighing the effects of action towards power balances. Since it is a zero-sum game, states have to compete to increase their own interests.¹⁹ An in-depth analysis of Russia and the US’ demeanour indicates that to protect their respective national interests in the regional context, both countries are involved in fighting ‘war of position’ in some form by applying ‘Structural Realism’ theory, coined by Kenneth Waltz. The ‘war of position’ is a form of war where great powers struggle over small third parties’ control.²⁰

Despite being seen as an inward-looking country, the US still wishes to maintain the status quo as a sole ‘superpower’. It would not give up the option of maximizing its power following Mearsheimer’s school of thought. Joe Biden, the president-elect has already hinted to restore America’s image in the world.²¹ Currently, in the global context, China and Russia are unable to contest the US hegemonic aspirations. Yet, it is believed that after staying in a shell for over twenty years, Russia under the dynamic leadership of Putin has re-emerged as a strong competitor, capable of opposing the US in the regional context if not globally. Moscow has already consolidated its hold in Eastern Europe and Syria by applying ‘offensive realism’ and compelled the US and its allies to adopt ‘defensive

¹⁷ “The Arab Spring: A Year of Revolution,” *NPR* December 17, 2011, <https://www.npr.org/2011/12/17/143897126/the-arab-spring-a-year-of-revolution>; Micallef, “The Arab Spring: Six Years Later.”

¹⁸ Micallef, “The Arab Spring: Six Years Later.”

¹⁹ Feina Cai, “Absolute and Relative Gains in a Real World,” *E-International Relations*, April 28, 2011, <https://www.e-ir.info/pdf/8447>

²⁰ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979), chapter 5.

²¹ Susan B. Glasser, “Biden will Restore America’s Moral Leadership,” *The New Yorker*, September 28, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/10/05/biden-will-restore-americas-moral-leadership>; Yashwant Raj “Biden to Return US to Paris Accord, Rescind Muslim Ban on Day One in Office,” *Hindustan Times*, January 17, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/biden-to-return-us-to-paris-accord-rescind-muslim-ban-on-day-one-in-office-101610863079929.html>.

realism'.²²

In the changed security scenarios in the contested region of the Middle East, America has accepted the dominant role of Russia. America seems constrained as it is already embroiled in containing China in the Asia-Pacific region. Moreover, the impact of Covid-19 on its economy and the latest wave of racism and the resultant unrest in America have put it on the back foot in dealing with global affairs. The vacuum is likely to be filled by Russia and China in their respective regions of interest. In the Middle East region, Turkey has also emerged as a strong competitor vis-à-vis Iran, Israel, and Saudi Arabia.

Though, the US would still like to maintain its influence in the region, but its initiatives in the recent past do not support that it would reduce Russia's influence over Syria.²³ The rivalry between Russia and the US has enabled Iran to exercise greater influence in the region and play a key role in re-shaping Syria's future. In this ongoing great game, Saudi Arabia and Palestine are the net losers. Riyadh is stuck-up in Yemen and continues to lose the grip over the regional affairs vis-à-vis that of Iran and Israel. Yet, it appears, the sole winner out of the Syrian crisis is none other than Israel.

Finally, at present, both China and Russia would avoid a direct conflict with the US and let it enjoy global clout. But despite their confines, they would not give up their claims over the contested regions like the South China Sea by China and Eastern Europe and Syria by Russia. They would resist the US if such a situation arose. Yet, Washington's displayed attitude towards Libya, North Korea and Syria and its 'inward' looking trends since the recent past does not suggest that a clash between these Great Powers is likely in the near future.

Understanding Complexity of the Syrian Crisis

"The Tunisians had already been freed. The Egyptians were on their way to be free. We thought it was our turn to be free too," Amer Matar, an organizer of the first major protest in Syria said.²⁴ "With a harsh crackdown, Assad's regime helped turn a protest movement into a civil war", said Raja Abdulrahim.²⁵ The peaceful marches were looking for

²² Brandon Valeriano, "The Tragedy of Offensive Realism: Testing Aggressive Power Politics Models," *Empirical and Theoretical Research in International Relations*, Volume 35, Issue 2, May 13 2009, 179.

²³ "Syrian President Bashar al-Assad: Facing down Rebellion."

²⁴ "Arab Uprising: Country by Country - Syria," *BBC News World*, December 16, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-12482309>.

²⁵ Raja Abdul Rahim, "'Assad or We Burn the Country': How the Syrian Regime Prevailed," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 6, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/assad-or-we-burn-the-country-how-the-syrian-regime-prevailed-11551886374>.

reforms, then quickly turned into hatred, pitching the Sunni Muslim majority against the president's Shia Alawite sect.²⁶ The civil war also embroiled outside actors in the never-ending horror thus, making the security state in Syria far more complex.²⁷

Straightaway, Assad vowed to crush what he called 'terrorism' with an 'iron fist'. Assad's regime used brutal force against his opponents.²⁸In reaction, defectors from the Syrian army/civilians formed Free Syrian Army (FSA), backed by the US, its Gulf allies and Turkey to fight against the Assad regime, thus Syria slid into a civil war. In a short time, the rebels seized control of large parts of the country's north and east. However, as indicated earlier, with the entry of IS in ranks and files of the rebels, the US and its allies got panicked. They decided to withhold their support to rebels' on the plea that they were no more legitimate reps of Syrian people. This in turn, enabled Syrian forces to regain control over population centers in the South and West. Since 2016, support from Iran and Russia has decisively turned the war's tide in Assad's favor.²⁹The map below indicates the latest ground positions of various groups, fighting inside Syria.

Figure: 1



²⁶ "What's Happening in Syria?" *BBC News*, April 16, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-12482309>.

²⁷ "Syria's Civil War Explained from the Beginning," *Aljazeera*, April 14, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/4/14/syrias-war-explained-from-the-beginning>; "Profile: Bashar al-Assad."

²⁸ "Syrian President Bashar al-Assad: Facing down Rebellion.;" "The Arab Spring: A Year of Revolution.;" "Syria's Civil War Explained from the Beginning.;" Ian Black, "Assad Or We Burn the Country by Sam Dagher Review – Scoop-Filled History of Syria's Downfall," *The Guardians*, July 15, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jul/15/assad-or-we-burn-the-country-sam-dagher-review>.

²⁹ Syrian President Bashar al-Assad: Facing down Rebellion."

The map indicates that after nine years of war in Syria, there is no winner. Although Assad succeeded in stabilizing his regime, civil war continues. The country stands devastated and its renowned cities have been turned into rubbles. While the exact figures are not known, Syria's conflict has already left around half a million people dead and over one million injured.³⁰ Moreover, the resettlement of displaced people who live in prisoners- like environs within the country is yet another challenge. Their children continue to suffer badly on account of healthcare and education. The adjacent countries sharing refugees' burden are already under a lot of stress, they might collapse anytime. Above all, financially, the Assad regime cannot support the masses as Syria continues to remain under the US and European sanctions. Thus, the security situation inside Syria is far from satisfactory and even if peace is restored, resettlement of around half of Syria's 22 million populations would be a daunting task.³¹

There is still no hope that the Syrian people would get peace soon. Since 2014, the Geneva process duly backed by the UNSC held several rounds of talks but could not succeed due to the vested interests of the actors like Iran, Russia and Turkey. Astana, a lateral peace process to Geneva, arranged under Russian leadership during 2016 also failed to make any headway.³² Thus, in the absence of America from the scene, the advantage has already gone to the Assad regime that has already confirmed in clear terms that it will not succumb to rebels' pressure.

The Role of the Regional and Extra-Regional Players

America's Behavior Towards Syria

America and its regional allies played a key role in arming anti-Assad groups, what they considered 'moderate' rebels. Right from the start, virtually, the US did not involve itself deeply in the Syrian civil war yet, it continued to back the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition of Kurdish-Arab fighters dominated by the People's Protection Units (YPG). This group was readily available to fight against IS/ Assad regime.³³ In

³⁰ "Syrian Refugee Crisis: Facts, FAQs, and How to Help," *World Vision*, <https://www.worldvision.org/.../syrian-refugee-crisis-facts>, accessed February 26, 2019. ; "Why is There a War in Syria?"; and "Syria's Civil War Explained from the Beginning."

³¹ Aron Lund, "Briefing: Just How 'Smart' are Sanctions on Syria?" *The New Humanitarian*, April 25, 2019; "Syria: Sanctions against the Regime Extended by One Year," *European Council, Council of the European Union*, May 28, 2020, 1; Weaver, "Syrian Refugees: More than 5M in Neighbouring Countries Now."

³² "Between Astana and Geneva: The Outlook of Conflicting Agendas in the Syrian Crisis," *Aljazeera, Centre for Studies*, January 3, 2017.; "Why is There a War in Syria?"; and "Syria's Civil War Explained from the Beginning."

³³ Sirwan Kajjo, "Kurds in Syria: We Have Right to Respond to Turkish Attacks," *Voice of America*, October 31, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/kurds-in->

2013 and 2014, despite Russia's warnings, in response to the Assad regime's chemical attacks, the US launched a missile attack against the Syrian air force base and a chemical weapons site.³⁴

Washington's intimate support to anti-Assad forces was critical to defeating the Syrian forces. The US decided to withdraw its forces from Syria while keeping around 400 soldiers as part of 'residual force' to continue its mission and safeguard its interests in the region. However, despite criticism, Pentagon has denied providing the exact strength.³⁵ America's decision to shift its national security priorities from counterterrorism to state threats would encourage Salafi-jihadists to operate freely, "it would be a mistake to declare victory against terrorism too quickly," said Jones.³⁶

Russia's Critical Role in Defending the Assad Regime

Russia is a long-time trusted Syrian ally.³⁷ It entered the Syrian conflict in 2015, having 63,000 troops already present on the ground. Intense Russian air and missile strikes were decisive in the battles for the

syria-we-have-right-to...to...-/4637931.html, accessed March 4, 2019; Joe Gould, "What's the Next Step for ISIS? A Top US General Shares his Prediction with Lawmakers," *Defense News*, March 7, 2019, <https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2019/03/07/whats-the-next-step-for-isis-a-top-us-general-shares-his-prediction-with-lawmakers/>.

³⁴ "Syria's Civil War Explained from the Beginning."; "Why is There a War in Syria?"; Syrian President Bashar al-Assad: Facing Down Rebellion."; "What's Happening in Syria?"

³⁵ Jeff Seldin, "US Troop Levels in Syria 'Quite a Bit Lower' with Help on the Way," *Voice of America*, May 31, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/us-troop-levels-syria-quite-bit-lower-help-way>; Julian Borger, "Trump Administration Challenged to Reveal Troop Levels in War Zones," *The Guardian*, April 22, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/apr/22/us-troop-levels-afghanistan-iraq-syria-military-foi>. ; Dion Nissenbaum and Nancy A. Youssef, "U.S. Military Now Preparing to Leave as Many as 1,000 Troops in Syria," *Wall Street Journal*, March 17, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-military-now-preparing-to-leave-as-many-as-1-000-troops-in-syria->; Steven A. Cook, "400 American Troops Can't Do Anything," *Council of Foreign Relations*, March 13, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/article/400-american-troops-cant-do-anything>; Ryan Browne, "Top US General in Middle East Says Fight against ISIS 'Far From Over'," *CNN Politics*, March 7, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/03/07/politics/votel-isis-fight/index.html>.

³⁶ Jones, "The Evolution of the Salafi-Jihadist Threat."

³⁷ Macfarquhar, "Hafez al-Assad, Who Turned Syria into a Power in the Middle East."; "Syrian's Kurdish Fighters Ready to Help Set Up 'Safe Zone'."

besieged rebels' strongholds of eastern Aleppo in late 2016 and the Eastern Ghouta in early 2018.³⁸

Despite diverging interests, Russia and America did not confront each other directly rather, being common enemies, the two sides coordinated their efforts to root out IS from the region.³⁹ Yet, at the UNSC level, Russia and China repeatedly blocked the US-backed resolutions on Syria. Russia also opposed the creation of the 'No-fly zone' within Syria.⁴⁰ Turkey occasionally coordinated with Russia and Iran to stabilize the region's security situation, despite criticism from the US.⁴¹

Role of the Regional Actors in Growing Anarchy

The rebels fighting against the Assad regime were supported by Sunni-majority countries of the region, including Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. On the other side, Assad got support from Iran, Iraq and Lebanon-based Hezbollah.⁴² At one stage, the numbers of groups opposing the Assad regime since the conflict began were in hundreds, with an estimated 100,000 fighters.⁴³

Israel is one of the key players in the region that also remains engaged in the Syrian conflict. As highlighted earlier, the 'Arab Spring' benefited Israel the most as its opponents in the region have almost reached the verge of collapse. Occasionally, in coordination with the US, Israel also launched air attacks against intended targets inside Syria. Israel did not welcome the US decision to pull out its forces from Syria.⁴⁴

Turkey is another regional actor, directly involved in the conflict. It has enough military power to replace American forces in north-eastern Syria and ensure the Syrian people's stability. David Pollock explained that around 60,000 Kurdish-led SDF fought effectively alongside American forces against IS for four years thus, they must be protected.⁴⁵ Trump

³⁸ "Syrian President Bashar al-Assad: Facing Down Rebellion."; "Syria's Civil War Explained from the Beginning; and "Why is There a War in Syria?"

³⁹ Syrian President Bashar al-Assad: Facing Down Rebellion."; "Syria's Civil War Explained from the Beginning."

⁴⁰ "Syria's Kurdish Fighters Ready to Help Set Up 'Safe Zone'."

⁴¹ Vladimir Soldatkin and Andrew Osborn, "Kremlin, after Summit, says No Offensive Planned in Syria's Idlib," *Reuters*, February 14, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-turkey-iran-idUSKCN1Q31JC>; Saroj Kumar Rath, "A New Era of Chaos in Afghanistan," *Fountain Ink*, Volume 8, Issue 5, March 2019, <https://fountainink.in/essay/a-new-era-of-chaos-in-afghanistan>.

⁴² "Syria's Civil War Explained from the Beginning."

⁴³ "What's Happening in Syria?"

⁴⁴ Landler et al., "Trump Withdraws U.S. Forces from Syria."

⁴⁵ David Pollock, "How the United States Can Still Keep Faith with Its Best Allies in Syria," *The Washington Institute*, January 3, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-united-states->

called the Kurds "incredible fighters" and "great people."⁴⁶ Mike Pompeo admitted the possibility of a conflict between Turkey and SDF and stressed that this group should be protected against the Turk onslaught. Despite America's reservations, Turkey has already created a 'safe zone' along the Syria-Turk border by defeating the SDF.⁴⁷

Iran is yet another regional actor, closely associated with the Assad regime. It has actively participated in Syria in support of the Assad regime, directly and through its well-trained Hezbollah. As stated by Gen. Joseph Votel, "the Iranian regime is seeking to dominate countries in the Middle East."⁴⁸ In Iran's opposition, Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies armed and financed the rebels who were later marginalized. Having failed to facilitate regime change, their primary aim is to limit Iran's influence in post-conflict Syria.⁴⁹ Currently, Saudi Kingdom is involved in re-establishing its diplomatic relations with the Assad regime

Taking advantage of the security situation, IS/ISIL also entered Syria in 2013. It joined the rebellion against Assad forces, where it found a safe-haven and easy access to weapons. After capturing large parts of Iraq, it got hold of a vast territory in the north and along the Turkish border. As earlier explained, the presence of ISIL in Syria alongside rebels was a big shock for the US and its allies. Since 2014, they have withheld their military support to rebels and in the process, helped the Assad regime to regain control over a vast area.⁵⁰ However, it is significant to highlight that the number of Salafi-jihadist groups present in the region is at the highest recorded level since 1980.⁵¹ Presently, they are scattered but they have the resilience to come back as a united force. Even now, they are holding on to Idlib-the north-western province of Syria.⁵²

can-still-keep-faith-its-best-allies-syria; Dent, "The UN-sustainability of ISIS Detentions in Syria."

⁴⁶ Kylie Atwood, "Trump Tells Worried Ally 'I Love the Kurds' in Hotel Meeting," *CNN*, January 29, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/01/29/politics/trump-kurds-hotel-meeting/index.html>.

⁴⁷ Todman, "Settling Kurdish Self-Determination in Northeast Syria." ;Fahim, Dadouch and Khattab, "Turkey Launches Offensive against U.S.-allied Kurdish Forces in Northern Syria."; and "Turkey-Syria Border: All the Latest Updates."

⁴⁸ "US General: Iranian Regime Seeks to Dominate Countries of the Region," *Arab News*, March 7, 2019, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1463106/middle-east>.

⁴⁹ Todman, "Settling Kurdish Self-Determination in Northeast Syria,;" and "Why is There a War in Syria?"

⁵⁰ "What's Happening in Syria?";Macfarquhar, "Hafez al-Assad, Who Turned Syria into a Power in the Middle East.;" "Profile: Bashar al-Assad."

⁵¹ Seth G Jones, "The Evolution of the Salafi-Jihadist Threat,"46.

⁵² "Why is There a War in Syria?"; Seth G Jones, "The Evolution of the Salafi-Jihadist Threat."

Impact of the US Hasty Decision to Pull-Out from Syria

On December 19, 2018, President Trump stunned his allies by announcing American troops' withdrawal from Syria after claiming victory against ISIS and plunged the country's future into uncertainty.⁵³ As a damage control measure, national security adviser, John R. Bolton, rolled back Trump's decision to withdraw from Syria rapidly. He said for a smooth withdrawal, "American forces may have to stay in Syria for months or even years."⁵⁴

Trump's claim aside, it is believed that still there are significant threats of violence in Syria. A study conducted by Seth Jones reveals that "despite nearly two decades of the US-led war against terrorism, there are nearly four times as many Sunni Islamic militants today as there were on September 11, 2001." Attack data composed by CSIS indicates that due to the presence of a large number of fighters inside Syria, there are still high levels of violence and security concerns in Syria and Iraq from Salafi-jihadist groups.⁵⁵

For his impulsive decision, Trump was brought under tremendous pressure by various American civil society segments, including retired/serving Generals and bureaucrats/ politicians. As a result, he was compelled to make changes in his decision to make it flexible.⁵⁶ Although, in his revised verdict, he gave four months of cushion time for withdrawal of American troops but practically, there is a logjam. As pointed out earlier, even the exact number of American troops present in Syria are being kept secret by the Pentagon.

Trump's decision has also undermined the security state inside Syria which has direct consequences for humanitarian support provision. Furthermore, since the financial support from the world to tackle with the Syrian crisis is receding every year, it would be impossible for countries

⁵³ "U.S. General Warns of Islamic State Resurgence as 'Caliphate' Collapse Nears and Survivors Flee," *The Japan Times*, March 8, 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/tag/isis/>

⁵⁴ David E. Sanger, "Bolton Puts Conditions on Syria Withdrawal, Suggesting a Delay of Months or Years," *The New York Times*, January 06, 2019; Turkish President Snubs Bolton over Comments That Turkey Must Protect Kurds."

⁵⁵ Seth G Jones, "The Evolution of the Salafi-Jihadist Threat."; "Quick facts: What You Need to Know About the Syria Crisis," *Mercy Crops*, www.mercycorps.org/...syria/quick-facts-what-you-need-know-about-syria-c..., accessed January 10, 2019.

⁵⁶ Eric Schmitt and Maggie Haberman, "Trump to Allow Months for Troop Withdrawal in Syria, Officials Say," *The New York Times*, December 31, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/31/us/politics/trump-troop-withdrawal-syria-months.html>; Mark Landler, "Trump Withdraws U.S. Forces from Syria."; Gould, "What's the Next Step for ISIS?"; "US General: Iranian Regime Seeks to Dominate Countries of the Region," *Arab News*; "U.S. General Warns of Islamic State Resurgence," *The Japan Times*.

like Jordan and Lebanon to feed around 1.6 million Syrian refugees that continue to grow exponentially.⁵⁷ Thus, there is a real possibility of more death and miseries awaiting the Syrian people in the absence of American support.⁵⁸

A hasty US withdrawal decision has put Russia in driving seat as the key power broker in Syria. In the absence of American troops, Kurdish-Arabs' survival would be at stake because they would face two front threats. As pointed out earlier, SDF has already given up its control over 20 miles' areas along the Turk-Syria border. The possibility of American endeavor to get limited autonomy for Kurdish-Arabs from the Assad regime with an international guarantee has become quite low.⁵⁹

The above argument aside, some scholars view that SDF would not give up self-determination drive so easily because it still maintains a strong force of around 60,000 soldiers yet, it would impede the campaign against IS/ISIL and will set the stage for a new bloody, long-term struggle for self-determination.⁶⁰ An American withdrawal would also increase the probability of terrorist groups re-establishing their sanctuaries in the region due to ineffective governing institutions in fragile states like Syria and contribute towards protracted instability in the region. Essentially, it would be a setback for the American policy to deal with IS/ISIS. In the absence of its boots on the ground, SDF would be unable to deal with around 10,000 IS/ISIS members.⁶¹

Finally, the US decision would compromise its strategic interests in the region and beyond. In the absence of its direct pressure, Assad would

⁵⁷ Anthony H. Cordesman, "Looking beyond Syria and ISIS: America's Real Strategic Needs in the Middle East," *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, February 28, 2019; Weaver, "Syrian Refugees: More Than 5M in Neighbouring Countries Now."

⁵⁸ Weaver, "Syrian Refugees: More Than 5M in Neighbouring Countries Now."; Cordesman, "Iraq, Iran, the Gulf, Turkey, and the Future."

⁵⁹ Mona Yacoubian, "A Month After U.S. Withdrawal, What is the State of Play in Syria?" *United States Institute of Peace*, November 7, 2019, www.usip.org/publications/2019/11/month-after..., accessed July 3, 2020, 1,2,3; Todman, "Settling Kurdish Self-Determination in Northeast Syria."; Miriam Berger, "Here's What We Know about the ISIS Prisons Controlled by the Syrian Kurds," *The Washington Post*, October 14, 2019, www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/10/12/insi...

⁶⁰ Todman, "Settling Kurdish Self-Determination in Northeast Syria."; Youssefand Lubold, "The Number is at Least Double Previous Estimates."; Dent, "The UN-sustainability of ISIS Detentions in Syria," 1.

⁶¹ Seth G Jones, "The Evolution of the Salafi-Jihadist Threat," 48; Berger, "Here's What We Know about the ISIS Prisons Controlled by the Syrian Kurds."; Yacoubian, "A Month After U.S. Withdrawal, What is the State of Play in Syria?" 5; Nancy A.Youssef and Gordon Lubold, "The Number Is At Least Double Previous Estimates and An Obstacle to Trump Administration Plans to Withdraw U.S. Forces from Syria," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 5, 2019, 1.

come hard through repression against his opponents, which might inevitably encourage other Sunni groups to create some kind of organized resistance, thus putting Syria back in a state of Syria 'vicious cycle'. The causes for unrest in Syria are likely to be far worse in the future than they were in 2011.⁶² Hence, the legacy that America would leave in Syria is not going to be cleaned soon.

The Regional Conflicts with Global Impact: An Appraisal

Since the 1980s, to protect its interests globally, America has been selectively fighting the menace of terrorism. The US policy to fight this menace has been driven by punitive measures which only created more enemies against it. It is believed that none of the leading world players inclusive of China, Russia and the US has been able to address the core causes of the problems and devise a policy of reconciliation while dealing with terrorism matters.

Since the start of the 21st century, America has been unable to define its strategic goals correctly. First, it destroyed Iraq without looking for an end game. In the backdrop of 9/11, it reacted impulsively and declared a worldwide 'war on terror', without a clearly defined purpose. Countries like Pakistan were even compelled to join the US in the war against terrorism.⁶³

By destroying Iraq during 2003, the US has since fought a series of wars against terrorism in Iraq and Syria. Elsewhere in the region, America alongside its allies also committed a blunder to oust Qaddafi and helped trigger an unending low-level civil war in Libya. Its decision to withdraw from Syria has already encouraged Russia and its allies to become major actors in Syria and far stronger hostile competitors in the region.⁶⁴

American strategy to punish Iran through sanctions and political isolation has failed. It is opined that after defeating Saddam Hussain, rather than protecting its strategic interest in Iraq, the US created favourable environments for Iran to assert its influence in the region. With tacit support from China and Russia, the current strategic/security environment provides sufficient leverage to Iran over its regional rivals.⁶⁵ Thus, in the recent past, Iran could see into America's eyes by threatening

⁶² Goldberg, "Don't Call the Israeli-Palestinian Dispute the 'Middle East Conflict'."; Cordesman, "Looking Beyond Syria and ISIS."; Youssef and Lubold, "The Number is at Least Double Previous Estimates."

⁶³ "War on Terrorism," *Global Policy Forum*, www.globalpolicy.org/war-on-terrorism.html, accessed March 10, 2019.

⁶⁴ Cordesman, "Looking Beyond Syria and ISIS."; Middle East Bureau, "Middle East Scenario in 2019," *NDT New Delhi Times*, January 14, 2018.

⁶⁵ Seth G. Jones, "War by Proxy: Iran's Growing Footprint in the Middle East," *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, March 11, 2019.

to block the smooth flow of petroleum out of the Gulf, directly impacting the sustained global economy and the US trade.⁶⁶

Concerning the settlement of the Palestinian issue, it was expected that Trump might be able to agree with Israel. Still, his peace plan based on a strategy of 'outside-in' rather than an 'inside-out', has no chance to succeed.⁶⁷ Instead, America has already pleased Israel by recognizing its authority over the long-disputed Golan Heights and shifting its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.⁶⁸ Above all, Washington has successfully managed to bring some Gulf states close to Israel including the United Arab Emirates.⁶⁹ Thus, Israel remains the sole winner in the region as the balance of power has undoubtedly been shifted in its favor vis-à-vis that of Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Currently, because of its cold relations with its European allies, the US is already struggling to persuade them to stay in alliance in their war against IS/ISIS.⁷⁰ However, there is a likelihood that President Joe Biden would review the US's existing policies and might succeed in reviving America's relations with Europe and Iran.

An in-depth analysis of the regional and international security scenarios proves that global peace is at stake. The regional coalitions are failing and the global organs like the UNSC have become hostage to its five permanent members. The so-called sole superpower has already hinted to pull back from global responsibilities under 'America first' policy and the impact of Covid-19 has stamped over its planned strategy.

Conclusion

Currently, the Syrian people are in deep water. Although, an in-depth analysis of the Syrian crisis, presents a gloomy picture and is quite tricky to carve the right course from the 'fog of war', but it is sincerely believed that 'where there is a will, there is a way'. To protect humanity in Syria, Russia and the US duly supported by their allies need to adopt a sincere approach to dig out a viable political solution to the issue at hand.

Because of the complex nature of the problem, it might take longer to carve an acceptable plan. We should not leave Syrian people high and

⁶⁶ Anthony H. Cordesman, "Iraq, Iran, the Gulf, Turkey, and the Future."

⁶⁷ Goldberg, "Don't Call the Israeli-Palestinian Dispute the 'Middle East Conflict'."

⁶⁸ Mark Landler and Edward Wong, "In Golan Heights, Trump Bolsters Israel's Netanyahu but Risks Roiling Middle East," *The New York Times*, March 21, 2019.

⁶⁹ "Israel Signs Historic Deal with UAE That Will 'Suspend' West Bank Annexation," *The Guardian*, August 13, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/13/...>, accessed January 18, 2021, 1.

⁷⁰ Nancy A. Youssef and Dion Nissenbaum, "U.S. Gives European Allies Friday Target to Sign on to Syria Proposal," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 7, 2019.

dry. The solution to the Syrian crisis is political and it is humanity that needs to be supported. We should neither abandon the Syrian public nor those developing countries like Jordan and Lebanon which are hosting a large number of Syrian refugees. These countries deserve sustained economic support to enable them to carry on their duties of helping the refugees till their resettlement. Although IS/ISIS terrorists stand largely defeated in Syria, it could still lead to failure if America turns its back on the allies who have helped in winning that battle. It would be a mistake to declare victory over terrorism so quickly. Hence, the US must avoid snatching such a defeat from the jaws of its victory over the IS by keeping its due attention and the required resources intact.

Trump's hasty decision to pull-out from Syria has already destabilized his allies. Right now, SDF which is exposed to the threat of an assault from multiple directions needs to be protected. The US must stabilize Syria's security situation to gain time for working out a well-thought-out plan to restore long-awaited peace in Syria. A stable regional environment is critical to move the peace process forward. Russia has emerged as the key power broker in the region. It can play a critical role in improving the regional environment by helping Kurds get 'limited autonomy' while persuading the US to help reintegrate Northeast Syria into Assad's control. It would prevent Turkey from seizing another large portion of Syrian territory and avoid a further costly military campaign.

Finally, a poor and neglected Syria would continue to cause long-term security problems for the entire world. Thus, the end game in Syria depends on the behaviour and the level of economic support that the US and its close allies are likely to commit for reconstruction and resettlement of Internally Displaced Persons and the refugees settled elsewhere.

