

Syrian Civil War: Genesis, Actors, and Peace Initiatives

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Abstract:

The civil war in Syria has been going on for almost a decade, and though the intensity of the conflict has toned down, yet it still seems far from over. The conflict broke out as a violent attempt to oust President Bashar al-Assad. The regional rivals and allies of the Syrian regime funneled support either to the government or the rebels. Similarly, beyond the regional level, a global tug of war was also waged in Syria with the United States (US) backing the rebels while Russia supporting the Syrian regime. Purpose of this study is to give an in-depth analysis of the complex nature of the Syrian civil war and its link with the future of the Middle East. Overall, the study is descriptive and finds that the conflict leads to the emergence of cross-cutting alliances in the region which may create a volatile future for the region. Therefore, it suggests that the solution to the crises in Syria can be best achieved by mutual political consensus of all stakeholders rather than coercive methods.

Keywords: Syria, Russia, Iran, Turkey, civil war, conflict resolution, crises, rebels

INTRODUCTION

Conflict in Syria evolved from peaceful protests against the government in 2011 to a violent fission reaction of insurgency that consumed the whole country and drew in both regional and global players (Berti & Paris, 2014). Inspired by “Arab Spring” (uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya), unrest entered Syria in March 2011 bringing 40 years of political stability to an end and starting a civil war that continues to ravage the country. By September 2011, armed rebel militias were engaging the government forces in multiple cities across Syria (Schaller, 2016). Torn apart by civil war, fought upon by proxy, national and non-state actors, Syria became the battlefield of power politics between regional and global players. After nine long years, it can be said that Syria is on track of restoration (Dacrema, & Talbot, 2019) paying dire cost. A cost paid in human lives (around 400,000 casualties, 5 million refugees and another 6 million internally displaced) and destruction (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2020; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2019). Where there is war, destruction follows, and it treats the subjects indiscriminately. The civilian – and especially children – casualties have been horrific. In this context, either side of the war, whether it backed the rebels or the regime, violated human rights.

Syrian war also serves as a horrific example of policy disasters. The civil war in Syria is a multilayered complicated affair (Ford, 2019). On one hand, it is the war of government against anti-government rebels; on the other hand, it has a slight sectarian touch. Sunni sect's (about 74 percent of the Syrian population) war against President Assad's minority Alawite sect (about 11 percent of

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the Syrian population) (Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], 2020). While the Shiite regime gained support from Russia, Iran and Hezbollah, the rebel Sunni side is backed by Gulf countries (GCs) and Turkey, besides the United States (US) to some point (Panayiotides, 2020). The third layer entails a proxy war that features Russia and its allies on one side against the US and its allies on the other. Beyond casualties, the conflict provides ideal conditions for the outbreak of militancy, and the civil war in Syria has been no exception to this rule, therefore, the rise of the terrorist organization “Islamic State of Iraq and Syria” (ISIS) was facilitated by conflict in Syria (Kirmanj, 2014).

The order of this work initiates from a brief introduction and then explaining the de-escalation efforts for peace at different points in time at regional and international forums. The study then explains the stakeholders, their interests and role in the Syrian civil war in detail. Finally, it discusses the implications of crises on the future of both the Middle East and Syria.

Research Design and Methodology

The research is primarily qualitative. The primary and secondary sources employed for this study include; research articles, review articles, books, interviews and data provided by international organizations and watch dogs. The study covers multiple dimensions of the Syrian conflict comprehensively. The observations were assessed retrospectively and prospectively keeping both the international and local political and social dynamics in mind. The data was critically analyzed to draw conclusions on the future of stability in Syria.

EFFORTS FOR DE-ESCALATING CONFLICT IN SYRIA

There have been several de-escalation efforts to end the war in Syria. Though none of them could secure lasting peace, considerable progress has been made towards conflict resolution. Some of the peace initiatives are discussed as follows:

Arab League Initiative

The 22 members’ organization of Arab world took the initiative of curbing the growing violence in the early years of crisis, as shown in Table 1.

Years	2011, 2012
Participants	Arab League and the Syrian Government
Rounds	2
Result	Failed

Source: Authors’ own compilation

Syrian regime agreed to an initiative by Arab League (AL) in November 2011 that called for the government not to use force against protesters and removal of military logistics from cities along with the release of political prisoners. Soon after that, in December 2011 Syrian regime agreed to the observation of the implementation of the plan by a delegation of monitors from AL. This observer mission quickly met its fate without any progress (Kucukkeles, 2012). The credibility of the mission came under suspicions because of restricted capacity and limited access and logistics provided by the government. Hence, the mission was concluded on January 28th. Second effort to curb the growing conflict came through United Nations (UN) and AL (Akgun, et al., 2017). Former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan brokered a short and partial ceasefire in April of 2012. The

agreement was short-lived and had little impact on ground. Violence continued to grow and the team of UN monitors had to be withdrawn like their AL predecessors (Maulidya, 2020).

United Nations Backed Geneva Talks

The international community organized numerous efforts to save the situation in Syria but all went in vain, as shown below in Table 2.

Years	2012, 2014, 2016, 2017
Participants	UN, U.S., Russia, China, UK, France
Rounds	4
Result	Failed

Source: Authors' own compilation

After little success in brokering peace between government and rebels in Syria, UN and AL turned to international powers for a political settlement. UN organized an international conference in June 2012 and agreed to the "Geneva Communiqué" (Siamkhum, 2017). There have been four rounds of Geneva talks from 2012 to 2017. Geneva Communiqué was an agreement including regional and international players as stakeholders to ensure resolution of the conflict in Syria. The US, GCs and Turkey supported the removal of the Assad regime; Russia was willing to find common grounds regarding Assad, while Iran, an ally of the Assad regime, was not invited. It provided the agenda for negotiations between government and rebel forces to constitute a transitional governing body for Syria. The presence of international powers i.e. the US and Russia were meant to guarantee resolution of conflict. Instead, a stalemate emerged between the two on the role of Bashar-al-Assad. Russia wanted to keep its ally president in the Middle East in the canvas while the US wanted an Assad-free-Syria. Eventually, the talks collapsed (Asseberg, Lacher, & Transfield, 2018).

By 2015, with the help of Russia and Iran, the Assad regime began consolidating its position and the odds were appeared to be in favour of the regime. Once again UN-supported talks broke down in 2017 when the Syrian regime declined to discuss the possibility of constitutional and presidential election reforms. UN special envoy Staffan de Mistura accused the regime of the failure of talks and said that progress will be difficult if the regime continues on its policy of "not willing to meet anyone who has a different opinion" (HRW, 2018).

Astana Talks

While international community put efforts to bring the stakeholders in the Syrian conflict to some sort of understanding, a major stakeholder on the ground i.e. Russia, launched its efforts to end the conflict in Syria, as shown in Table 3, below.

Years	2017-2019
Participants	Russia, Iran, Turkey, Rebel opposition
Rounds	13 (so far)
Result	Progressing

Source: Authors' own compilation

Launched in January 2017, Astana peace process aimed to bring an end to the conflict in Syria where Russia and Iran participated as allies of the Assad regime and Turkey represented the rebel opposition. Astana process was also a leap sidelining the US from the scenario. So far 13 rounds of talks have been organized under the Astana process and significant progress has been made. The progress at Astana process gradually outshined the UN-backed Geneva Communique (Congressional Research Service [CRS], 2019).

Astana process is probably the most important platform in the Syrian conflict that has seen progress towards its goals of reducing violence and bringing political stability to Syria. In 2017 Astana was able to impose a ceasefire between the government and the rebels and established de-escalation zones in four key rebel-held areas of conflict i.e. Idlib province, Northern Homs province, Eastern Ghouta, and Deraa. The time bought during ceasefire enabled the regime to reinforce its strength with the help of Russia and in 2018 regime was able to push rebels out of three of the four key areas except for Idlib (which it was able to take in 2019). The Astana process has been a success for the Russian camp. Two key objectives of the Syrian regime and its allies have been achieved in the process i.e. defeating the opposition militarily, and replacing regime change with constitutional reforms (Akgun, et al., 2017).

Sochi Talks

Sochi Talks was an effort to find common grounds in Syria, organized by Russia that involved Iran and Turkey as shown in Table 4 below. Sochi Talks brought the opposing stakeholder Russia and Turkey closer to resolve the conflict in Syria.

Year	2018
Participants	Russia, Iran, Turkey
Rounds	1
Result	Agreement but no progress

Source: Authors' own compilation

Using its improved relations with Turkey, Russia was able to host another effort for conflict resolution. In January 2018, Russia hosted the Syrian Congress of National Dialogue (SCND) in Sochi. This event brought together the participants of Astana process as well as parts of Turkey-backed rebel opposition (Baresh, 2019).

The main objective of Sochi talks was to set ground to establish the constitutional committee for constitutional reforms and bring the political crisis in Syria to an end without having removed the Assad regime. In the talks, it was agreed between former UN Special Envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura and Russia that a committee will be formed to rewrite the Syrian constitution. The suggested committee was supposed to have consisted of 150 members, out of whom 50 would be proposed by the Syrian regime, 50 by the opposition and 50 would be proposed by the UN. Sensing the nearing victory, Russia established a new series of talks in Sochi, asserting itself as a dominant player (Borshchevskaya & Cagaptay, 2019).

Sochi talks reflected Astana talks, only led by Russia. Turkey represented the opposition, Iran supported the Syrian regime and Russia brokered the talks. However, unlike Geneva talks, Assad's removal from power was not a precondition. Upon this, largely Syrian opposition fearing the overwhelming effect of allies of the Syrian regime refused to join the meeting. Sochi talks primarily focused on the future of Syria discussing the constitutional roadmap and charting out the demilitarized zones (Asseberg, Lacher, & Transfield, 2018).

The implications of Sochi talks are in the doldrums partly because the Regime failed to abide by the commitments and continued violating the buffer zones. On the other hand, regarding constitutional reforms committee, there has been no progress because each side wants to tilt the balance of committee in favour of government or opposition (Ford, 2019).

Four-Way Summit Istanbul

Turkey, an important stakeholder in the Syrian civil war, organized an effort to find understanding with Russia and European powers. Table 5 depicts the Four-Way Summit of Istanbul.

Table 5	Four-Way Summit Istanbul
Year	2018
Participants	Turkey, Russia, Britain, France
Rounds	1
Result	Nothing concrete

Source: Authors' own compilation

Four-Way Summit was held in October 2018 in Ankara with Turkey leading the effort for conflict resolution in Syria. Participants included Turkey, Russia, France, and Germany. Turkey's stress in this summit was on the political solution of the crisis in Syria while finding common grounds on last rebel stronghold Idlib, as well as establishing a 15-20 km wide safe zone along the Turkish-Syrian border ("Four-way summit on Syria," 2018). While France and Germany abided by the concerns of Turkey, Russia had its reservations. Still, the summit was followed by progress. However, later the objectives of the summit fell apart because the Syrian regime recaptured the province. Turkey was able to push its way to create a safe zone along its border with Syria.

Apart from these, there have been more than 20 attempts of negotiations for peace and/or ceasefire including efforts from Russia in early years of the war, Vienna process (2015), Riyadh conference (2015), Astana opposition conference (2015), September 2016 ceasefire deal, Idlib memorandum (2018), and Northern Syria Buffer Zone agreement (2019). However, no effort could bring long-lasting security in Syria. So far, Astana process has been the most consistent platform of progress on the Syrian conflict, and despite a slow pace, it is showing progress (CRS, 2019).

STAKEHOLDERS IN THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

A number of local, regional, and global actors are involved in the Syrian war, each driven by its regional or global interests. At times strange alliances emerged, as well as allies found themselves in the position of conflicting interests. Stakeholders in Syrian conflict are discussed hereunder:

The Syrian Regime

The Syrian regime went through a hard journey to survive. In the beginning, it appeared that the Assad regime would fall like Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. President Bashar al Assad refused to give in to the domestic uprising and international pressure and soon regional and global powers were on the doorstep of Syria, fueling the armed struggle against the government (Yaseen, Muzaffar, & Naeem, 2018). Till 2015, Assad government lost significant ground to rebel forces fighting under the umbrella of Free Syrian Army (FSA) (Güner & Koc, 2017). The year 2015 turned the tide in favour of the regime. At the darkest hour, the US led coalition stood ready to intervene and put an end to the Syrian regime, but the last-minute Russian intervention upon request of Bashar al-Assad prevented that from happening. The events that followed revealed that Russian intervention was the turning point in the Syrian war (Charap, Treyger, & Geist, 2019).

The Opposition Groups

Some of the groups operating against the Regime emerged as powerful forces while earning support from other countries (Cafarella & Casagrande, 2016). Even though they did not represent the opposition of Syria altogether, but they remained on the frontline in the war against the Assad regime. The bulk of Syrian rebel forces came from the Sunni Arab majority which appealed to the militants across the Muslim world (McLauchlin, 2018).

The absence of a central leadership has been the key weakness of rebel struggle. FSA, the largest rebel entity, failed to establish a formal military command. The Syrian National Coalition (SNA), largest opposition group, could not establish its control over armed struggle. The competition between government and rebels was equally intense. Control of territory, resources and leadership remained major problems to work together for rebel entities (Walther & Pedersen, 2020).

Though GCs backed the opposition, but the US capped the assistance provided to rebels out of fear that it would end up in the hands of extremists. The US became strictly selective and conscious in terms of offering assistance, which in result created more animosity in the rebel camp (Ford, 2019).

Therefore, due to multifaceted reasons, rebels could not hold up against the alliance of Russia, Iran and Hezbollah with the Syrian regime. Government partly accuses the rebel movement of extremist elements given the instability created by rebels fighting. The regime has vowed to restore peace and stability (Akgun, et al., 2017).

Gulf Countries

Sunni majority of Muslim GCs stand at the opposite end of the Assad regime which is the only Arab ally of Iran in the region. In this context, the theatre of war in Syria reflected battle for influence between Iran and the GCs. Gulf countries are against Tehran's attempts to expand its influence in the Middle East; hence their measures are a counter move to Iran's approach. (Kirmanj, 2014).

From the sectarian and ideological point of view, the Syrian government led by the minority Shia Alawi sect strongly allied with Iran is not acceptable to GCs. Even though Syria's fierce anti-Israel stance was considered as a valuable asset by Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and other GCs for decades, but the inclusion of Iran and deep influence of US in the Middle East changed that. The multi-religious society of Syria proved to be volatile for unfiltered Saudi-Iran rivalry (Gause, 2020). Iran and KSA have been long engaged in proxy wars across the Middle East. In case of the Syrian

war, it is just one of such proxy battlegrounds (other battlegrounds include Lebanon, Yemen, and Iraq, where both countries are engaged in different capacities) (Beck, 2020).

Iran: Only Ally State of Assad Regime in the Region

Iran-Syria alliance might appear strange; as except a few similarities, there are stark differences between the two. Iran is strictly a theocratic state with an elected government while Syria is a secular Arab-nationalist state, with the dictatorial government. Still, this alliance is of the strongest and most enduring in the Middle East region (Wimmen, 2016).

Iran and Syria share numerous strategic concerns and stance on some key regional issues, above all the plight of the Palestinians at hands of Israel. Likewise, together with Hezbollah, Iran and Syria form a self-declared "Axis of Resistance," an organization that is meant to counter both Israeli and Western agendas in the region ("Military Situation in Syria," 2019).

Syria has been aiding Iranian designs of dominance in the Middle East (CRS, 2019). It has been a vassal for Iranian support to Hezbollah as the latter resists against Israel from Lebanon. That means Iran is in vital need of an overtly friendly government in Damascus to safeguard its strategic interests and effectively implement its policy designs in the region. On the diplomatic front, Iran is onboard with Russia and is part of "Astana Process" to establish de-escalation zones in Syria (Akgun, et al., 2017). The Syrian government has Tehran's backing against rebels from as early as 2012, in the form of extensive military aid as well as deploying Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and covert aid to Hezbollah to defend against rebels (Kucukkeles, 2012).

Survival of Assad regime ensures a formidable alliance in Iran's designs of regional dominance against Israel and KSA. On the other hand, Tehran needs a favourable government in Syria to keep Hezbollah close. Also, Syria is vital to Iran's goal in the long run to establish a land corridor from Iran to Lebanon passing through Iraq and Syria (Ford, 2019).

Turkey and its Security Concerns

Turkey's strategy towards the Syrian conflict was based on the removal of Assad regime and it is replacing with a Syrian Muslim Brotherhood-inspired government, to contain and undo the political and military spreads of Kurds from Syria (Köstem, 2020). However, Turkey shifted the focus of its energies towards the new approach. New Turkish approach is based on the creation of areas (which Turkey calls "Safe Zone") along the Turkish-Syrian border as a buffer zone to curb the activities of Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) (Ustun, 2020). Turkey is hosting almost 3.6 million refugees from Syria which it intends to house in the safe zone (Içduygu & Nimer, 2020). Turkey has long held the stance that Kurdish activism is the existential threats to Turkish national security and has launched three military operations against Kurds in Syria, the latest of which came in October 2019 (Köstem, 2020). It has greatly contributed to the creation of the opposition umbrella of the FSA (Asseberg, Lacher, & Transfield, 2018).

Kurds

Their numbers ranging between 25 and 35 million, Kurds inhabit a mountainous region straddling Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Iran and Armenia (Klein, 2020). In Syria, Kurds are the largest ethnic minority with considerable numbers. They constitute about seven percent to 10 percent of the Syrian

population; occupying mostly the northwestern part of Syria adjacent to the border of Turkey (Yadlin & Golov, 2013).

Following the escalation of the crisis, in the mid of July 2012, the government of Syria withdrew its forces from the Turkish border and somewhat allowed the Kurdish presence to fill the vacuum so that government could crush the rebel opposition and extremists elsewhere (Stepanova, 2018). This maneuver of Syrian government gave breathing space to Kurdish entities in the area. Hence, the administration and military control in northern Syria including Afrin, Kobani and Jazira (collectively called Rojava) was taken over by Kurdish nationalist Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is linked to Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) (Baresh, 2019). Thus, Turkey's national interests were challenged. Kurds from bordering areas of Iran, Iraq, and Turkey flew to join YPG, the PYD's militia to strengthen Kurdish political and military resolve. This emerging sense of cross-border pan-Kurdish nationalism hinted at the resurgence of violence in southeast Kurd-inhabited region of Turkey (UNHCR, 2019).

Following the swamp of ISIS across Syria from Iraq, YPG emerged as a force to be reckoned with and was able to not only resist but turned the tables on ISIS. Given the Kurdish PKK's efficiency to take on ISIS, when the international coalition led by the US came to contain ISIS it saw the Kurdish militia on the ground as a safe option (Saeed, 2020). Even though the PKK is designated as a terrorist organization by Turkey and the US, it has a significant contribution in the war against ISIS (Yadlin & Golov, 2013).

In March 2018, Turkey moved ahead with its resolve of dismantling the Kurdish strength in northwestern Syria (Akgun, et al., 2017). In the events that followed, Turkey launched three major military operations in Syrian territory to dismantle ISIS and Kurdish threat. In 2017, Turkey launched "Operation Euphrates Shield" and took control of areas between the Euphrates River to the east and Azaz to the west (rebel-held area). In 2018, Turkey launched another military operation named "Olive Branch" and took control of the Kurdish stronghold Afrin, while the US and Russia turned a blind eye since the on-ground threat of ISIS and the anti-government uprising was neutralized in Kurdish controlled region (Borshchevskaya & Cagaptay, 2019). It did not stop there, and Kurds were further let down by their primary supporter against ISIS i.e. the US. After the US withdrew its forces from Kurdish controlled area of Syrian-Turkish border, Turkey launched another military operation "Operation Spring Peace" in October 2019 to vacate the border region from Kurds to create the 30km "Safe Zone." Kurds had to withdraw from the region after taking heavy losses. However, Russia sustained the Turkish presence in its fold and let Turkey address its concern regarding the Kurdish controlled area (Pastore, 2018).

United States and its Vague Policy

The US has been the primary supporter and supplier of Syrian rebels since 2012. Even though aid aimed at overthrowing Assad frequently ended up in the hands of multiple extremist groups. The US policy in Syria during the Obama administration turned out to be counterproductive. Rather than weakening the Assad regime, it strengthened the hands of Islamic radicals such as ISIS (Philips, 2012).

The US led a coalition against ISIS with airstrikes and ground forces since 2014. It also provided air support and weapons to opposition groups in northern Syria even though Turkey, a NATO ally of

the US opposed it (Mazza–Hilway, 2019). Moreover, around 2,000 US Special Forces were deployed to fight alongside the US supported and anti-Assad regime Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The US has quite a make-and-break journey of alliances in Syria. Before the emergence of ISIS and Russian intervention, the US was in agreement with Turkey and actively supporting the rebel opposition and calling for the ousting of Assad regime (Akgun, et al., 2017). After the emergence of ISIS and Russian intervention, the focus of policymakers slightly shifted from Assad and rebels to ISIS (Yaseen, Muzaffar, & Naeem, 2019). In doing so, the US sided with Kurdish YPG which was a pro-Assad regime and Turkey had severe reservations on it. With Kurdish militia on the ground, the US-led coalition delivered mighty blows to the ISIS and associated radicals (Yaseen, Muzaffar, & Naeem, 2018). However, once the control of Kurds was established in northwestern Syria and ISIS was defeated, the US pulled its forces and left its once allies Kurds on the mercy of Turkey (HRW, 2018).

Washington stressed time and again that its foremost goal in Syria is the destruction of ISIS and other extremist groups. While it withdrew its forces from northern Syria and allowed Turkey the required space to launch a military operation in Syria to create safe zone corridor pushing Kurds back, it probably breathed life back into dying ISIS (CRS, 2019). Even though President Trump threatened Turkey with crippling economic sanctions, it managed to persuade the Turkish President Erdogan to stop the offense after a week. However, by then Kurds had taken heavy losses and expressed that ISIS might emerge again in the area after a power vacuum was created since the US withdrawal. The US policy towards the Assad regime has become vague, especially after Trump announced the withdrawal of US forces from Syria altogether (Yadlin & Golov, 2013).

Russia: Stood with Syria and Iran and Brought Turkey to the Fold

Russia's role in Syrian-crisis is actively instrumental. Russia steadily vetoed resolutions that sought joint military action against the Assad regime to avoid the repetition of intervention in Libya (of 2011). President Assad is the key ally of Russia in Middle East and fall of Assad regime would mean Russia losing its foothold in the region, as well as Tartus, Russia's only port in the Mediterranean (Mühlberger, 2017).

Russian protection of the Assad regime is not primarily due to any significant economic or military ties. As part of the bigger picture, Syria is one of the two key allies of Russia in the region. Removal of the Assad regime at hands of pro-US powers would mean that Russia loses half of its key strategic alliance in the region (Khan & Khan, 2018). On the other hand, twofold enemies of Assad gave Russia the space to go on an all-out assault. Rise of ISIS and Islamic rebels provided ample ground for radical insurgency and Russia intervened timely to protect the balance of power in favour of the Assad regime (M, 2014).

Russia's military intervention has earned it a significant reputation and revived its lost prestige in the global political and military arena since the demise of the Soviet Union (USSR). Russia is now recognized as a great power and an inevitable geopolitical interlocutor for the rest of the world. Moscow has been an ardent supporter of the Assad regime (Akgun, et al., 2017). It backed the Syrian government by providing troops, with air support and firepower on ground, along with diplomatic backing at the UN as well as in international peace talks (Yaseen, Muzaffar, & Naeem, 2019) with airstrikes against "terrorist" holds. The conflict between Moscow and Washington arose

when the former stated it is targeting ISIS and other terrorist outfits, while Washington contested that Russian forces are targeting the non-ISIS rebel forces (Mühlberger, 2017).

Apparently Moscow is certain to keep the Assad regime, the closest ally Russia has in the Middle East, in power to secure and enhance its military influence in the region. Russia has a strategically vital military airbase in Latakia, and a naval base in the port city of Tartus (Borshchevskaya & Cagaptay, 2019). Policymakers in Russia support an exclusive peace deal for Syria with broad consensus that takes moderate factions onboard and allows Assad to remain in power. Moreover, Russia has hinted to support a limited autonomy proposal. For instance, Kurds have significant numbers and have been a force to be reckoned with in war against ISIS. Hence, to save Syria from another civil war, limited autonomy in certain regions can be discussed (Weiss & Ng, 2019).

To show its commitment to the cause in Syria, besides supporting the Geneva negotiations, in January 2017 Russia sponsored talks between the representatives of the Syrian regime and the opposition in the capital city of Kazakhstan, Astana. Iran and Turkey were also given a seat at the table. The talks namely "The Astana Process," aimed to create "de-confliction zones" to curb violence and make way for the political process (Stepanova, 2018).

Israel: Concerns and Engagement in the Conflict

Even though it is not involved in the war in Syria, Israel has grave concerns regarding the future of post-war Syria. Israel launched airstrikes on Syrian territory against Hezbollah which it considered a major security threat. Likewise, Israel targeted suspected logistics that it believed were provided to Hezbollah from Iran. Israel occupied the Syrian Golan Heights since the Arab-Israel war of 1973 and refused to return the area to Syria since then. Being a neighbour of Syria, Israel is sensitive to curb the violence from reaching Israel. Though Israel is not playing a greater role in Syrian war, still it backs a rather smaller proxy (mainly Druze) along the border of Golan Heights to create a buffer zone between the Syrian war zone and Israel (Baresh, 2019).

Among the primary strategic objectives of Israel from Syrian war, key objective was to prevent Iran from establishing a stable political and military presence close to Israel, be it Syria or Lebanon. Meanwhile, Hezbollah has been the primary military support of Assad regime and since then it has secured greater influence in war-torn Syria. Israel intends to prevent Hezbollah from gaining control of the Syria-Lebanon territory as Kurdish YPG had in northwestern Syria. A Hezbollah-Iran alliance would be critical in that scenario and Israel has been vigilant to dismantle any such initiative preemptively (Akgun, et al., 2017).

Worries of Israel have piled since the Russia-Iran alliance prevailed in saving the Assad regime, but policymakers in Tel Aviv have limited options. The victory of Moscow and Tehran means Iran's support for Hezbollah will only be strengthened and Israel cannot get rid of Hezbollah in the north any time soon. Israel might have rooted for the defeat of Iran in Syrian theatre of war but as a matter of fact, the fall of Assad regime and the defeat of Iran in this war would not have done the trick for Israel either (Philips, 2012). For instance, Iran is a Shiite Muslim country and its only supporter in the Arab world is Syria, which is ruled by the Shiite minority. Removal of the Assad regime would mean the government will be in the hands of the Sunni majority that might have defeated Iran, but it would have been an equal threat for Israel.

Assad regime, even though a bitter critic of Israel, avoided an open conflict with Israel. The same cannot be predicted if Assad is replaced by a Sunni Syrian regime ("Europe and right-wing," 2019). At best Israel can hope that Syria restores to its pre-war stability, which is the safest option, but considering the toil of war, it will take some time before the government can restore its control to the situation prior to 2011. On the other hand, Russia, Iran and Hezbollah who provided the primary backing to save Syria, will be there to help Syria restore its stability. This could mean a joint control of some parts of Syrian territory. In this case, Israel will have to map its options because Russia is in position to allow concessions to Iran after the later supported vigilantly despite crippling sanctions. Alliance of Iran and Hezbollah will be able to flex itself in this situation (Hanauer, 2016).

MANIFOLD EFFECTS OF SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

Effects of war in Syria have been multifaceted on different fronts. Precisely, the politics of the Middle East before and after the Syrian crisis are two completely different things. A lot has changed on canvas of global politics and much has become vivid on the regional struggle for power. One thing that emerged from the Syrian war was the formation of alliances that will continue to affect the politics of the Middle East for years to come, alliances that entailed international powers, regional players, and non-state actors. International powers include Russia and the US; regional players include Turkey, Iran, Israel, United Arab Emirates (UAE), KSA, and the Syrian government (Philips, 2012). Non-state actors that make the bulk of civil war include Hezbollah, the Kurdish militia, FSA and other rebel entities, and ISIS. The strongest alliance that emerged among these was Russia-Syria-Iran-Hezbollah that prevailed over the rivals GCs, Turkey and the US. By now, Turkey is cooperating with the Russian camp.

The legacy of Syrian war gave birth to critical impressions like the failure of US-led coalition to support the anti-Assad rebels will haunt the policymakers in US-camp for a long time (Asseberg, Lacher, & Transfield, 2018). This question will also set the course of action for the Middle East.

At the global level, Russia emerged victorious on diplomatic and military grounds. From offering the removal of Assad in 2012 talks to saving the regime and defeating the rebels altogether, Russia has made its mark against U.S. dominance. The success of Russia can partly be blamed over the reserved US policy and lack of unity in anti-Assad forces but largely Russia managed to prevail with its allies Iran, and Hezbollah and even managed to persuade Turkey to side with its efforts to bring peace to Syria (Köstem, 2020).

At the regional level, the war for influence has greatly fallen in the favour of Iran after Russia-Syria-Iran-Hezbollah alliance prevailed. Iran had a longstanding regional rivalry with KSA and other GCs, besides Israel and they have been taking countermeasures to curb the Iranian influence in the region. However, the Syrian war theatre, with the help of Russia played out in favour of Iran. It is now up to the policymakers in GCs and Israel will have to devise countermeasures to contain the influence of Iran in a post-war Syria (Dacrema, 2019).

The arguments presented above indicate that the rival camp of the US and its allies have won the ground in Syria. Although this victory does not refer to peace in Syria rather indicates that there are new stakeholders in the politics of the Middle East. Syria-Russia-Iran alliance has prevailed and the prime target of saving the Assad regime has been achieved. Moreover, the Syrian regime

continues to gain ground and there is little room left for the rebel opposition. It is clear that the dominance of the US and its allies over the politics of the Middle East has been challenged and defeated in the Syrian theatre of war.

Future of Syria: Conflict Resolution

Some possibilities can be considered regarding the future of Syria and conflict resolution. The approaches to peace include the regime perspective, opposition perspective, and a third way that enables a middle way to address the concerns of all parties involved in the conflict. Where the government's priority is to demilitarize the society, opposition aims at political reforms. Hence the approach towards the future of Syria from both sides is inspired by the priorities (Dacrema, 2019).

Going by the point of view of the Syrian regime, it refuses to cooperate with any proposal that includes power-sharing. In 2012 Russia proposed a minus-Assad proposal that was rejected by opposition camp because at that time the Assad regime was on brink of removal. Since 2015 when the regime started winning, it has removed all concessions from the table. Even though the regime allowed Kurds to administer the northwestern territory while ISIS and rebel opposition controlled most of the areas in peak years, President Assad vowed to "take back every inch" of Syrian territory (Ivanescu & Dunford, 2020). This serves as a hint to what the regime has in mind for the future of Syria. However, to restore the power structure to pre-war situation the regime will have to crush its way to victory and this guarantees the continuation of violence. Syrian regime with the help of Russia was able to take on the rebels but not without severe allegations of war crimes and civilian casualties. Because Russia is not going to stay forever in Syria, the violence is likely to erupt as soon as the vacuum is created. Hence, this approach of the Syrian regime towards peace is risky (Maïla & Euvé, 2020).

On the other hand, rebel opposition is rigidly repellent to the idea of Assad regime remaining in power. Despite that, the opposition camp is internally divided because there some groups based on political and sectarian affiliation and all want different things. The secular opposition wants Assad out of power and the democratic transition, while radical Sunni opposition wants the Islamic system of ruling. Most of the opposition is united on the removal of President Assad while some are ready to accept concessions (Walther & Pedersen, 2020). By now, it is clear that opposition cannot force the ousting of the Assad regime, but it can adhere to violence in long run given the deep sectarian and political rift in population. Going by the way of opposition, peace seems unlikely because the regime is winning, and the opposition is running out of support and bargaining position. Instead of demanding the removal of the Assad regime, the opposition should discuss the concessions it can get which is the realistic possibility (Philips, 2012).

Over the years, several proposals have been brought forward from stakeholders to end the conflict in Syria but in vain. The efforts for peace on the other hand have brought one thing to clarity that at least a new constitution is the common ground for all parties involved. In this respect, decentralization is being seen as a potential solution for ending the war. Even though the solution of decentralization has been outwardly rejected by both Assad regime and the opponents (each side wants complete control), but in current circumstances, it seems like a more viable approach towards ending the violence ("Military situation in Syria," 2019).

Syria with all its diversity of population was indeed prospering and peaceful under the cartelized regime, but this multiethnic and multi-sectarian diversity of population fueled the conflict as well. Hence, in a post-war scenario, diversity needs to be considered a sensitive issue. In this case, decentralization is probably the best, and if not best, it is the lesser evil way towards peace in Syria. There are Kurds who control significant territory in northwest Syria, there is the Sunni majority who makes the bulk of Syria's population, there is rebel opposition who wants Assad out, and there is the regime who wants to restore itself to the pre-war position. The war is drawing near its end, but the violence continues to grow in this bitter clash of interests. Hence the best solution for peace in Syria is in some sort of decentralization (Mühlberger, 2017).

As Damascus continues to reclaim its territory and dissident groups are splintering into further factions. The question arises that what will happen now? How can Syria be reconstructed that the alienated masses can be brought back into the fold? What is the path to development from now onwards? The answer to these questions might lie in decentralization. Though, unacceptable to most of the factions and not favoured in the Middle East, federalism can be the remedy to current social and economic fissures within the Syrian society. For instance, Kurds have earned a name for themselves in the middle of this crisis (Akgun, et al., 2017). The people of Syria have also lost their lives and possessions in the wake of this catastrophic war, and they would want to rebuild their lives. The regime has also survived, and it would also need the confidence to stay in power. Therefore, decentralization is the middle-ground where the stakeholders can come to an agreement. Devolution of power, on Indian, Russian or European model would restore the confidence in the people and give the regime its desired legitimacy (Ford, 2019).

Meanwhile, Turkey and Iran must realize that a peaceful neighbour is beneficial to them as compared to an instable one. The reclaiming of international borders might be difficult because of Turkey's hard approach. But with international intervention and quiet diplomacy, peace and order can be restored to Syria. Bottom-line being, Bashar has won himself the seat of Damascus, amidst the chaos from the inside and outside. But to keep this mantle of power, he must undertake such steps which neither he nor his predecessors did (Baresh, 2019).

CONCLUSION

War in Syria changed the regional and global realities manifold. The Assad regime survived the severity of opposition and made an even stronger come-back with the help of its allies. Outcomes of war are marked with the high death toll, humanitarian crisis, the refugee crisis, and a devastated economy. Statistics of war indicate that people are the ultimate victims. History tells that where war ends, the crisis begins. Even if the war in Syria ends today, it will be long before the country restores to its previous prosperity. However, in current circumstances, it appears that sooner or later the Regime will take control of Syria. The seemingly ending war will turn into spur of violence if a political solution of war is not reached. Likewise, Syria must not become the hub of exporting militancy in the volatile Middle East region. There will be questions of war crimes, rehabilitation of refugees, reconstruction, future of Kurds, future of political opposition, and the sectarian rift in the Syrian population. There is no military solution to these questions; only a political solution can resolve the post-war crisis. Hence, to avoid further drifting into violence all stakeholders must decide to reinstate peace and demilitarize the society.

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