



## Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

# SYRIAN CRISIS: TOO MANY PLAYERS

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### **The War in Syria: A Civil War?**

When war started in Syria about four years ago, the term used was: '*Civil War*'. It was a misnomer in a way, because historically in almost all *Civil Wars* there have been only two parties to a conflict--the government and its machinery on one side, and the protesters or the revolutionaries on the other. In case of Syria too, to begin with there were two sides: one, the government headed by President Bashar al-Assad, and the other--protesters seeking liberty and freedom, people who believed in the success of the *Arab Spring*. Soon many interest groups joined in. Today, on the ground there are about half a dozen recognisable sides at war. A large number of fighters cannot be clearly identified--they are the small groups, which bear allegiance to none and fight under no flag; and those that have vested interests and are working behind the scenes. In December 2013, there were believed to be as many as 1,000 armed opposition groups in Syria, commanding an estimated 100,000 fighters.<sup>1</sup>

These groups change sides occasionally; merge at times and disappear on other occasions. It is difficult to judge who is fighting whom. Each of those sides has foreign supporters who strongly disagree with each other on issues of *righteousness*. It is unclear who exactly are they fighting for or against. All the stakeholders involved in the conflict--within Syria, and outside Syria--are pursuing their interests relentlessly while the ordinary Syrians are fleeing the conflict zone. Until the end of October 2015, an estimated 12 million had fled their homes; four million had taken refuge in different countries, mostly in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan.<sup>2</sup> A large number had flooded Europe.

According to Martha Crenshaw, a senior fellow at Stanford's Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, keeping track of the various groups is one of the unique challenges of understanding what is happening in Syria.<sup>3</sup>

### **Why so Many Parties are Interested in Syria?**

*Arab Spring* swept several countries before it came to Syria. But foreign intervention

as seen in Syria, was not so evident in those countries—so many countries did not pool in resources (read military might) to replace a government. Simply put, there are many stakeholders of the outcome of this conflict: Russia, the US, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, half of Europe, the Hezbollah and many others. The stakes are high perhaps because Syria has not signed any peace agreement with Israel and it still contends the Golan Heights. It has a strong 3, 20, 000 well trained and equipped army and has a strategic alliance with Iran. Besides, it has granted a permanent naval base to Russia in Tartus. Winning the war in Syria for the US and its allies could imply: leverage for resolution of the Arab-Israel conflict; isolation of Iran; weakening of the Hezbollah; and above all, containment of Russia.<sup>4</sup>

### Alignments and Re-alignments

Mutating alignments make it difficult to understand the tangled war in Syria. Perhaps the first shots that led to the present conflict were fired in March 2011 by the Syrian Security personnel when they found it difficult to control the *peaceful* pro-democracy demonstrations which grew out of the larger *Arab Spring* movement. In July that year, the protesters started responding violently to the alleged oppression by the Security Forces. They pelted stones at the security forces and looted and damaged property. As per the government sources they even fired and hurled petrol bombs at the security forces killing some of them. As the

demonstrations gained momentum, some of the Syrian Army troops defected and joined the protesters and were recognised as the *Free Syrian Army (FSA)*. The modest uprising thus morphed into a bloody war.

The so called *Civil War* had two immediate effects: One, people started leaving the war zone for havens within the country and abroad, and two, the extremists from Syria and from around the region started joining the rebels. In a gesture meant to convey his reconciliatory approach, Assad released some political prisoners. Among the prisoners were a good number of *Jihadists* who joined one group or the other in the conflict.

In January 2012, al-Qaeda formed the *Jabhat al-Nusra*—its new branch in Syria. Syrian *Kurdish* groups in the north, who had sought autonomy for long, also found an opportune moment to intensify their armed struggle against the government. At that juncture, Iran came to Assad's rescue. By the end of 2012 Iran not only started sending daily cargo flights but also hundreds of officers on the ground. Beyond merely reciprocating the support that Syria gave to Iran during the Iran-Iraq War, Iran wanted to support one of its very few allies in the region, nay the world.

Some Arab states started supporting the rebels monetarily and with weapons, to counter Iran's influence. This support came across the Turkish border. In an escalated response, Iran

got in the Hezbollah--a Lebanese Shia group backed by Iran--to fight alongside Assad. The Gulf states led by Saudi Arabia responded by sending even more money and weapons to the rebels. This time round, the assistance came through Jordan--another opponent of Assad. By 2013, clearer fault-lines could be seen in the Middle East: between the Sunni powers on one side supporting the rebels, and Shias on the other, supporting Assad.

### **US and Russia Enter the Fray, Re-ignite Big Power Rivalry**

Until April 2013, the US seemed to be following the *wait-and-watch* policy. But then, horrified by Assad's atrocities President Barack Obama signed a secret order authorising the training and equipping of Syrian rebels.

This effort of nurturing proxy force to fight Islamic State ran into troubled waters--the first batch of trained rebels was ambushed by the Al Nusra Front. The next group *bartered* safe passage from the militants for six pickup trucks with mounted machine guns and ammunition.<sup>5</sup> It is believed that some of these trained rebels have changed sides. Simultaneously, the US urged the Arab Gulf states (in vain) to stop funding extremists.

In September 2013, Assad was accused of using chemical weapons against civilians in the town of Ghouta, killing 300 people.<sup>6</sup> The compulsions of its domestic and foreign policies forced the US to respond to Assad's supposed use

of chemical weapons with targeted military strikes. Russia too proposed that Syria surrender control over its chemical weapons to the International Community--for eventual dismantling--to avoid a US military strike. The US, expecting positive action from Syria, suspended military action, albeit provisionally. Later, the US extended "non-lethal aid" to the Free Syrian Army. There have also been reports--denied by the US--that it has been training the FSA in neighbouring Jordan.<sup>7</sup>

Russia too commenced airstrikes against the ISIS in Syria, in September 2015.<sup>8</sup> But the West and Syrian opposition alleged that Russia was targeting the anti-Assad rebels instead. In a show of solidarity with France, Russia intensified its strikes against the ISIS after the Paris massacre. The allegation that Russia was striking the Syrian opposition grew louder.

Meanwhile Turkey shot down a Russian SU-24 Fighter jet on a strike mission against ISIS in northern Syria alleging that aircraft had strayed into Turkish airspace.<sup>9</sup> Allegations and counter-allegations apart, this added a new dimension to the conflict: a simmering confrontation between the NATO and Russia. Needless to say that the conflict has turned into great-power rivalry--the US against Assad and Russia backing the latter.

### **Enter ISIS!**

The turning point to the conflict came when in February 2014 an al-Qaeda affiliate,

based mostly in Iraq, broke away from the group over internal disagreements. The new group called itself the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and declared its aim of establishing a Caliphate by carving a state out of Syria and Iraq. The group seized territories in Iraq and Syria. Its actions somewhat galvanised the world against it. In July 2014, the US trained Syrian rebels to fight the ISIS. The US now opposes ISIS as well as Assad. ISIS, on the other hand, has been fighting almost *everybody*--the rebels and the Kurds--to fulfil its objective. Deposing Assad is not necessarily *the* aim of the ISIS; presently it seems to be more focussed on creating the Caliphate.

### **Much in the Fray**

Kurds numbering nearly 2,00,000 mainly from the semi-autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan have been struggling for autonomy and are fighting the ISIS for their own survival. The US and its allies are committed to training and arming the Peshmerga, the military forces of the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan.

People's Protection Units (abbreviated YPG) with a large number of female fighters on their rolls, are the Kurdish militias affiliated with the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Democratic Union Party in Syria. YPG have been fighting for Kurdish autonomy and have become a major opponent of the ISIS. While they cooperate with Syrian opposition fighters against ISIS, they avoid engaging Syrian government forces, who control several non-

Kurdish enclaves in the Kurdish territory. The US State Department treats the YPG as a terrorist organisation but in Syria, the US and the YPG are fighting a common enemy.

### **Lack of Cohesiveness**

Qatar has funded and given military aid to several rebel groups. But it differs with Saudi Arabia over which groups to support. Although Qatar denies extending support to Al Qaeda, regional diplomats and analysts contend that it has links with Syrian factions that coordinate with Al Qaeda's affiliates. It is also believed that Qatar, through its contacts and intermediaries, had organised the release of foreign hostages from the Al Nusra Front. One of the US command centres, which coordinates airstrikes against Syria is located in Qatar.<sup>10</sup>

Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Arab states have been supporting a number of rebel groups fighting the Syrian government, which they consider as a proxy of Shiite Iran. Saudi Arabia and its allies have also provided combat aircraft and other support to the US-led coalition fighting Islamic State, which has been targeting the Saudi royal family and its control over the holy sites of Mecca and Medina.<sup>11</sup>

Turkey likewise, has been supporting armed fighters in Syria for long: last year (2014), documents revealed that Turkey assisted al-Qaeda organisations in their takeover of the predominantly Armenian town of Kessab.<sup>12</sup> In August, Turkey began bombing Kurdish groups

in Iraq and Turkey. The US support to the Kurds against Syria is well known. This raises questions about who enjoys the support of the US in the fight between Turkish forces and the Kurds. The Kurds are in confusion about the US stand.

It appears that while ISIS is a common enemy, most parties to the conflict have other enemies too--the differences and infighting among the forces opposed to Assad is in the open. Cohesiveness among the warring sides, in the US-led coalition in particular, is conspicuously missing.

### ***Behind-the-Scenes Players***

At the recently held G-20 Summit at Antalya, President Vladimir Putin told journalists that the terrorists (ISIS) were being financed from 40 countries, including some G20 member states. He stressed that those countries were buying oil from ISIS. He gave examples based on data on the financing of Islamic State units by private individuals.<sup>13</sup> This establishes the tangled nature of the crisis, as each stakeholder looks for a slice of the pie.

### **Scope for More Players?**

The Syrian conflict (along with the fight against ISIS) has become a tangled affair. President Assad's continuance in power is the main bone of contention between Russia and the US. Russia contends that the Islamic State can be defeated only with the support of the Assad

government. The US views Assad as *the source* of Syria's problems.

Notwithstanding, the difference in opinion, last month there was agreement among Russia, the US, and European and Middle Eastern countries on a two-year timeline leading to Syrian national elections but the most contentious issue of Assad's future was kept aside. They are now scheduled to meet in New York on December 18. In the prevailing atmosphere of uncertainty, the talks are more likely to revolve around mustering the Syrian opposition groups than resolving the issue in the first attempt.

Meanwhile, the other countries of the region--Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey--are involved in talks to work out a regional strategy including a plan for formal talks between the government and opposition. In the prevailing precarious situation a ceasefire will depend on which groups fighting Assad will be called for negotiations.<sup>14</sup>

Considering the motives and the stiff stances of the parties involved, it is less likely that something worthwhile would emerge from the forthcoming meeting(s). Under the circumstances a peaceful solution appears to be the proverbial pie in the sky. None of the BRICS countries seems to have an axe to grind in the outcome of the Syrian conflict. Can they be the new players? Can mediation by these new players give peace a chance in Syria?

***(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])***

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>“Guide to the Syrian Rebels”,BBC News, December 13, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24403003> accessed on December 8, 2015.

<sup>2</sup>“What you need to know: Crisis in Syria, refugees, and the impact on children”, *World Vision*, November 3, 2015, <http://www.worldvision.org/news-stories-videos/syria-war-refugee-crisis>, accessed December 3, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Katie Zavadski, “A Guide to the Many Groups Fighting in Iraq and Syria”, New York, October 17, 2015, <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2014/10/guide-groups-fighting-iraq-and-syria.html#>, accessed December 8, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Ali Mansour “Analyses of the Syrian crisis and the role of parties involved”, *Geopolitics*, September 10, 2013, <http://www.geopolitica.ru/en/article/analyses-syrian-crisis-and-role-parties-involved#.VmANLIQxHeQ> accessed December 3, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Alexandra Zavis, “Who’s Who in Syria: A Look at 8 Key Players in the War”, *LA Times*, October 3, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-syria-players-syria-war-20151002-htlstory.html> accessed December 5, 2015.

<sup>6</sup>“Syria profile – Timeline”,*BBC News*, October 4, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14703995>, accessed December 6, 2015.

<sup>7</sup>“Covert help for Syria's rebels in Jordan”, *BBC News*, April 26, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22285555>, accessed December 6, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. (Syria Profile).

<sup>9</sup> *Al Jazeera News*, 2100 h IST, November 24, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. n.5.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. n.5.

<sup>12</sup> Patrick Higgins, “The War on Syria: The Major Political Players, Humanitarian Crisis”, *Centre for Research on Globalization*, August 27, 2015, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-war-on-syria-the-major-political-players-humanitarian-crisis/5473168>, accessed December 5, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Maria Tsvetkova and Lidia Kelly “Russia Says it has Proof Turkey Involved in Islamic State Oil Trade”,*Reuters*,December 2, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-turkey-idUSKBN0TL19S20151202#vJ1Cyfh1vKWEXVCy.97>, accessed December 7, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Lesley Wroughton “Kerry says aiming for New York Syria meeting on December 18”,*Reuters*, December 8, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-talks->, accessed on December 8, 2015.