

## **Syrian Imbroglio: A Complex Interaction of Local, Regional, and Extra-Regional Actors**

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### **Abstract**

*This study provides an overview of the complex nature of the functioning of the Syrian conflict concerning the involvement of various actors (state and non-state actors) at the national, regional, and extra-regional levels. The main goal of the study is to analyze and identify the various political actors involved in the conflict, their roles, and strategies based on the convergence and divergence of their strategic interests. The research follows a qualitative approach and uses document analysis as a technique to collect and further analyze the data. It turned out that the political actors involved in this conflict can be divided into three groups; status quo forces, anti-status quo forces, and non-aligned forces. Further, the role of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has become a distinctive subject of the conflict, because it fights almost with all other parties to the conflict, including the pro-Assad regime, as well as the forces against Assad. It is important to note that Israel which is one of the important players in regional geopolitics; initially expressed neutrality, but as the conflict unfolded it indulged in the conflict to counter the growing influence of Iran and the ISIS factor in the region. The study predicts that the complex functioning of the Syrian conflict involving various states and non-state actors will further complicate, and the violence is likely to continue shortly.*

**Keywords:** Civil War, Regional Actors, Local Actors, International Actors, Sunni, Shiite.

### **Introduction**

The Arab Spring in the Middle East has begun in Tunisia in December 2010 and has continued to manifest itself in varying dynamics of a very violent nature (Anderson, 2011), and in fact, the same patterns can be observed in current times. The masses across the region protested against the long-standing authoritarian regimes for various reasons, such as oppression by dictators, corrupt governments, fragile democracy, lack of accountability of ruling elite, curtailed civic space, unemployment, deteriorating economies, sectarian and ethnic divisions, limited availability of basic social services, etc (Hussain & Howard, 2013, Saidin, 2018, Idris, 2016, Aissa, 2012). The uprising in the region created social-political unrest in Middle Eastern countries especially in Egypt and then Libya, Jordan, Morocco, Bahrain, Syria (Pollack, 2011). The chaos impacted various socio-political structures across the borders (Gause, 2011). One of the most significant manifestations in this regard is a change of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East (Anderson, 2011), various governments were overthrown in the countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. Importantly, even the governments that survived during the spring couldn't avoid the mass protests in their respective countries. These vibrant demonstrators raised questions on the legitimacy of the governments as well (Hussain & Howard, 2013).

Significantly, almost all regimes responded forcefully to the protesters to protect their governments. The use of force by authorities transformed demonstrations into long, complex, and lethal conflicts (Heydemann, 2013). The situation became more dangerous with the outbreak of civil wars in Middle Eastern countries such as Syria, Iraq, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen (Bayat, 2013). The multi-faceted conflicts in the region led to severe economic deterioration and significantly, loss of precious human lives. Thousands of humans including children lost their lives during these conflicts and millions of others were forced to migrate to protect their lives. The political instability weakened the internal structures of the states in terms of their capacities to protect constitutional and territorial integrity. The power struggle among various stakeholders, intensive divisions based on socio-political

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ideologies risked the lives of hundreds and thousands of people. It is maintained that sharp divisions among masses based on insects, ethnicities, and political associations led to animosity and militarism on multiple levels from intra-state to inter-state (Aras & Yorulmazlar, 2017). This led to the worsened human security situation and further it worsened due to the emergence of a deadly phenomenon, i.e., ISIS (Oktav, Dal, & Kurşun, 2018).

Historically, the Middle Eastern region due to its geostrategic significance remained vital for extra-regional powers. The civil strife and insurgency in the Middle Eastern region provided a space for extra-regional powers to get involved in the regional geopolitics (Zulfqar, 2018). The great power involvement further complicated the nature of the conflict. In this regard, arguably the most important example for understanding the evolving complexity in the region is of Syrian crisis where the number of participants to the conflict exceeds ten including both the state and non-state actors. An important question that arises is how regional (state and non-state actors) and extra-regional influence the functioning of the Syrian conflict? Thus, this paper aims to explain the complexity of the Syrian crisis in terms of internal and external dynamics and will spell out the context where state and non-state actors are interacting at the local, regional and international levels.

This research paper uses a case study research design to gain in-depth, concrete, contextual and multi-faceted knowledge about the complex nature of the Syrian conflict. This study used the qualitative nature of data and focused on secondary sources for the collection of data. The document analysis technique is used for the collection and analysis of the data. Relevant data is drawn from the multiple documents on the Syrian conflict to understand the Syrian Imbroglio. The documents include books, research articles, newspaper articles, magazines, and media programs. The purpose of analyzing the documents is to learn about the actors (state and non-state actors), their roles, interests, and strategies at national, regional, and international levels.

### **The Role of Regional Actors in the Syrian Conflict**

#### **Saudi Arabia**

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is considered to be one of the major regional actors in the geopolitical affairs of the Middle East. More broadly, there are two blocs in the Middle East; one is headed by Saudi Arabia and the other by Iran. Both blocs are embroiled in an ongoing power struggle. In the context of the Syrian conflict, Saudi Arabia has tried with its Gulf allies to seize an opportunity to counter Iranian influence in the region. The real concern of Saudi Arabia is to deter Iran in regional politics. Another important aspect of Saudi's leap into the conflict is the phenomenon of ISIS. Its expansionist designs based on apocalyptic philosophy are regarded as a threat to regional stability and further, understood to be posing serious security threats to Saudi Arabia on internal and external levels. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is allied with various regional and extra-regional state actors, including the Gulf States, Turkey, the United States (US), and also with non-state Sunni actors, to achieve their multiple strategic goals. One of the primary concerns of the Saudi government is to topple the pro-Iranian Assad regime from Damascus. Secondly, to ensure that the Assad regime is not replaced by a democratic form of government, which is considered against the interest of authoritarian and dictatorial regimes of the Middle East including Saudi Arabia. Thirdly, to counter the lethal phenomenon of ISIS, not only in Syria but also elsewhere in the region as well.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is one of the main supporters of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and other non-state jihadist actors. It provided tremendous military and non-military support to achieve their strategic goals (Mahmood & Black, 2013). This complicates the overall situation in the Syrian conflict as on the one hand Saudi Arabia is allied with the forces that plan to overthrow the Syrian regime and desire to establish a democratic structure in the country, and on the other hand, it supports non-state jihadist actors who are against the democratic rule in Syria and further, intends to establish an Islamic system. In addition, Saudi Arabia is fighting ISIS financially and intangibly but simultaneously supporting Turkey which is fighting with Kurds and not concerned with ISIS (Oktav, Dal, & Kurşun, 2018). However, the US, an ally of Saudi Arabia, somewhat hesitantly supports opposition forces while considering the same non-state religious actors a threat for its future geopolitical interests in Syria in particular and the broader Middle Eastern region in general.

#### **Iran**

The Islamic Republic of Iran; with its theocratic heritage, is one of the staunchest supporters of the socialist secular-nationalist state in the Arab world. Indeed, the alliance between the two countries indicates a unique model to understand the regional geopolitics in the Middle East (Deeb, 2013).

Interestingly, the two countries have common strategic goals and share similar threat perceptions on various regional and international issues. To achieve common strategic goals, the two countries actively support each other. Even before the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, the alliance between Syria and Iran was largely evident on geopolitical issues such as Palestine and Lebanon. With strategic depth in the form of non-state actors such as Hamas and Hezbollah, Syria and Iran form tight bonds for Israel and other regional and extra-regional powers involved in the conflict. Historical analysis shows that the Syrian territory was a permanent power line to expand Iranian support for Hezbollah, which poses strong opposition to Israel's geostrategic influence in the region (Kinninmont & House, 2014).

It is noteworthy that the true essence of a strong alliance between the two states is evident in the context of the ongoing Syrian conflict. From the outset of the Syrian conflict, Iran has supported the Assad regime against opposition forces to maintain its strategic relationship with one of its most important allies in the Middle East (Edward, 2017). Iran deployed its forces on Syrian soil to protect the interests of the Assad regime and has also expanded its support by regularly sending cargo flights to Damascus. As the conflict progressed, many forces inside and outside the region joined the conflict to pursue their vested interests. It is important to note that Iran has had a hard time defending the status quo from all anti-status quo forces. In fact, at present, the existence of a friendly government in Damascus is in the best interests of the Iranian state to get sufficient powers to counter a strong opposition alliance led by Saudi Arabia in regional geopolitics (Deeb, 2013). Iran not only deployed its regular military personnel but also used its sphere of influence to persuade non-state Shiite actors and militias from across the regions such as the Middle East, South Asia, and other parts of the world to turn to Syria to help advance its strategic interests. More importantly, Iranian-influenced Hezbollah played a significant role in defending the Assad regime (Kinninmont & House, 2014). Along with working side by side with its regional proxies, Iran has forged a successful partnership with Russia in support of the Syrian regime. Iran and Russia share common geostrategic interests, and to a large extent, both states succeeded in achieving the same. The alliance between Iran, Russia, and Hezbollah significantly changed the dynamics of the Syrian conflict in favor of the Assad regime to ensure the status quo.

### **Turkey**

Turkey is a major and important regional power involved in the Syrian conflict and indeed, playing a decisive role along with one or two other actors in the formulation of the future dynamics. Turkey, at the start of the conflict, was supporting the opposing forces to topple Assad's regime but with the unfolding of the conflict started to play at both sides to secure its strategic gains. Before the eruption of the crisis in 2011, Turkey and Syria were enjoying good relations with each other, more specifically in the mid-2000s (Okyay & Asli, 2017). The situation took a dramatic change when Turkey started to support the opposing forces to topple the Assad's regime. Turkey assisted in transferring the necessary military and non-military support to the rebels through its border. Turkey in alliance with the US operated against ISIS in the initial phase of the conflict. It assisted the US to conduct its military operations from the Turkish Air Base Incirlik that assisted Turkey to emerge as a significant stakeholder in the conflictual situation. Turkey too conducted airstrikes against the ISIS and Kurdish forces (Okyay & Asli, 2017).

The US along with Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) that includes the Kurdish forces successfully conducted a military operation against ISIS. However, the success of Kurdish forces in the northern part of Syria ranged alarms in neighboring Turkey. Interestingly, Turkey went out against the Kurdish forces; an ally of the US, which led to creating shear rifts among the two North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members. The success of Kurdish forces in Syria created fears in Istanbul as it was perceived that this development might act as an impetus in the construction of intensive nationalistic inspiration among the Kurdish community inhabited at the Turkish side of the border, which may invoke civil strife (Okyay & Asli, 2017). As part of the strategy of securing its territorial integrity, Turkey deployed its troops on the bordering region resulting in the division of communities, i.e., Turkish Kurds and Syrian Kurds. Moreover, to counter Kurdish forces, Turkey provided a strategic opportunity to ISIS to fight against Kurdish forces. In this regard, Turkey conducted military operations to counter the Kurdish forces and let ISIS attack it from the other side as well indicating the nature of the Syrian imbroglio.

### **Gulf States**

Under the leadership of Saudi Arabia and the US, the Gulf States and other allied regional countries are involved in enduring rivalry with Iran. Since, 1979 Islamic revolution, the Gulf States are under constant fear of Iranian expansionist designs. The Syrian regime is considered the only ally of Iran in the region. The conflict in Syria provided the Gulf States with an opportunity to eliminate the Damascus support for Iran, sending the latter in isolation in regional politics (Phillips, 2017). The Gulf States are supporting Anti-Assad forces including FSA in collaboration with the US and Saudi Arabia to overthrow the Assad regime as well as to counter ISIS (Blanchard et al., 2014).

Moreover, a few of the Gulf States are supporting the radical organization to get their strategic objectives in Syria (Hokayem & Emile, 2017). Their key ally, the US, has shared serious reservations on their support to an extremist organization like, 'Jabhat Fatah Al-Sham' (JFS) in the Syrian Crisis. This indicates the complexity of the Syrian crisis, where a mix of divergent forces in an alliance is found to be running for cross purposes. Interestingly, the US pressurized the Gulf States to counter these forces in their respective States that support JFS. It is pertinent to mention that Turkey and Russia are working with the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a combination of forces led by JFS for a possible settlement in Syria (Blanchard et al., 2014). HTS is declared as a terrorist organization by the US, adding more complexity to the conflict. Importantly, the Gulf States, an ally of the US much in line with Saudi Arabia, supports opposition forces to change the status quo in Syria but at the same time extend all-out support to extremist organizations which are considered as a security threat by the US.

### **Jordan**

Among, other Middle Eastern states, the case of Jordan is distinct from than rest of the states. Jordan a state hugely dependent for its economic and security needs on Saudi Arabia and the US was driven to become part of the anti-Assad alliance. Jordan was part of the consortium which was proposing Assad to draw. Jordan intelligently maintained its neutrality in this conflict and succeeded to minimize the impacts of the Syrian conflict on its economy and society. In addition to this, it got much economic assistance from the western world for accommodating almost one million refugees, which ultimately helped Jordan to get somewhat stability in deteriorating economic situation (Fabbe, Hazlett & Sinmazdemir, 2019). Moreover, it succeeded to avoid the brutal ISIS phenomenon in comparison to other neighboring states like Syria and Iraq. One of the significant successes of Jordan was the establishment of seize fire area in south-western Syria with the collaboration of the US and Russia (Blanchard et al., 2014).

### **Israel**

Israel has one of the powerful militaries in the region joined the Syrian conflict by expressing that the intensive role of its historical rival Iran together with the non-state actors like Hamas and Hezbollah is a threat to its security (Hanauer, 2016). The Israeli military has conducted airstrikes against key installations of Iran and Hezbollah that are established by the latter in Syria in support of the Assad regime. Israel also extended support to non-state actors, to safeguard the border region of the Golan Heights. The involvement of Israeli forces in the Syrian conflict is two folds. Firstly, it desires to counter the Iranian reach-out and influence in Syria. Secondly, it aims to eliminate Hezbollah from the Syrian territory, as the latter is considered a threat to Israel's national security (Hu, 2016). The war of 2006 between Israel and Hezbollah is sufficient empirical evidence in this regard. Over the years, Hezbollah increased its military capability in terms of weaponry and skills, posing a serious threat to the Israeli state. In this context, with the availability of the latest missile technology, the presence of Iran and Hezbollah in the Syrian territory endangered Israel's security (Hanauer, 2016). With another lens, Israel views the involvement of its rivals (Iran and Hezbollah) in the Syrian conflict as a strategic opportunity, as the same is weakening their position in multiple dimensions from soft to hard powers (Wimmen, Heiko, & Muriel Asseburg, 2012).

### **Iraq**

The real matter of concern for war-trodden Iraq is to get stability internally as well as externally. In the context of the Syrian conflict, Iraq has positioned itself as a neutral state (Phillips, 2017). One of the most serious concerns for the Iraqi government is the emergence of ISIS. As same has declared the abolition of the border between Iraq and Syria and announced the establishment of the caliphate system. The violent operations of ISIS created havoc in Iraq. In this regard, the elimination of ISIS became one of the primary targets of the Iraqi state. Along with the threat of the ISIS phenomenon,

there are a few other significant points that forced Iraq to avoid further deterioration of the situation on internal and external levels. It is considered that escalation of conflict can make Iraq more vulnerable to spillover effects. These include the burden of hosting refugees, an exacerbation of its sectarian problems, and an emboldening of Kurdish ambitions (Fabbe, Hazlett & Sınmazdemir, 2019).

Iraq also needs to maintain good relations with Iran. In this regard, due to geopolitical facts and regional demographic realities, to a certain extent, the pacification of Iran was the need of the time. Baghdad has balanced the situation by permitting the Iranians to use its airspace to deliver aid to the Syrian regime. Additionally, Baghdad was well aware of the division among its masses over the regional issues. On one hand, if it was allowing the Cargo flights for the provisioning of the aid then on the other it was looking for the elements among Iraq's Sunni-Arab community that are extending material and non-material support to the Anti-Assad regime forces. Ironically, Iraqi Sunni's are supporting opposition forces, while the Shiite groups are funneling support to Assad.

### **The Role of Local Actors in the Syrian Conflict**

#### **Syrian State**

Amid all chaos, the Assad's regime ensured its survival by employing offensive strategy against the opposition forces. It is pertinent to mention here that the Assad's regime use of chemical weapons made its allies somewhat reluctant in extending support to it (Vignal, 2017). Nevertheless, the regime's survival was made possible to a large extent due to all-out support from its allies that assisted Assad's regime on multiple fronts of war (Hokayem, 2014). Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah provided tremendous socio-political support to the Syrian state. Significantly, the support from the allies helped the Syrian government to maintain territorial integrity but as a repercussion, the phenomenon of dependency over its allies increased as well. The opposition forces, along with other violent groups such as Kurds and ISIS, seriously challenged the Syrian regime (Vignal, 2017). The complexity of the situation is greatly illustrated by the fact that the Kurds and ISIS are not only fighting with the Syrian government but also engaged in intense fighting with each other to achieve their respective goals. Above all, the Assad regime that follows the strategy involving intense surveillance, extensive violence, imprisonment, and effective propaganda, still retains the presidential authority (Vignal, 2017). The regime's survival is connected to a devastating socio-economic situation, killing the thousands of people (many are Syrian citizens), and forced migration of millions, making it one of the worst conflicts of the twenty-first century.

#### **Trans-border Hezbollah Group**

Hezbollah is regarded as one of the most powerful non-state actors, who with the assistance of Iran strengthened the Assad regime against opposition forces (Deeb, 2013). Hezbollah is, for the most part, a Shiite movement that was once very popular in the Arab world due to its armed struggle against Israel, but its involvement in the Syrian conflict led to a drop in the same popularity. It actively supports Iran and Syria and is considered as a party in the Sunni-Shiite conflict. The alliance between Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah was very obvious even before the start of the Syrian conflict, as Syria served as a gateway to pass Iranian weapons to Hezbollah for further employment against Israel (Hu, 2016). To continue the alliance with Iran and to get vital support, Hezbollah provided its all-out support to the Assad regime against the Sunni forces (Corstange & York, 2018). It would be justified to say that supporting Hezbollah in alliance with Iran and Russia has fortified the Syrian regime. Hezbollah defeated the Sunni opposition forces, particularly in the southwestern border near Lebanon. Additionally, it was also used to control territories cleared by Russian forces. Currently, Hezbollah has a strong presence in Syria and is fighting side by side with Iran and Russia against opposition forces. Nevertheless, the future existence of the non-state actor in the country depends on the will of Iran and Russia, in the context of the potential peace-building options (Deeb, 2013).

#### **Other Pro-Assad Regime Non-State Actors**

Based on ideological confluence, the Shiite non-state actors united from across the regions are involved in the Syrian conflict since 2011. They are actively fighting against the Sunni forces (state and non-state actors) with the massive support of Iran and Hezbollah (Zalayyat, 2019). Importantly, the Shiite militias are considered a vital asset for Assad's forces and played an important role in outperforming the opposition forces. One of the main goals of the Shiite militias was to protect the holy sites in the area, and in doing so provided much-needed support to the Assad regime (Ibid). These foreign Shiite fighters largely mitigated the heavy losses inflicted upon Assad's forces in the battle against US-backed Sunni forces across Syrian territory.

### **Anti-Status Quo / Opposition Groups**

Forces opposed to the Assad regime constitute a complex mixture of domestic, regional, and extra-regional state and non-state actors. In general, the opposition forces are a mixture of local Sunni forces and regional powers along with the vital support of the Western allies. The opposition, on the one hand, is made up of liberal forces that want a pluralistic Syria, and on other hand, extremist religious groups are part of the alliance that is striving for a nationalistic fundamentalist religious form of government. Interestingly, the diverse nature of opposition forces is supported by the US along with its Western allies, whether fighting against the Assad regime or the ISIS. The involvement of non-state actors backed by different regional and extra-regional countries makes the Syrian conflict even more crucial. The non-state actors who oppose the Assad regime are distinct in their kind and objectives. Few of them not only reject the Assad regime but at the same time are not in favor of democratic forces (Oktav & Kursun, 2018). Instead, they want their way of government rooted in the basic principles of their version of Islam. This makes them different from al-Qaeda and ISIS. They do not have an expansionist design and instead are satisfied with the nationalistic system by restraining themselves to Syrian state's territory (Oktav, Dal, & Kurşun, 2018). These groups include Jaish al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham that hold a huge number of fighters together with ample amount of weaponry and funding making them one of the lethal non-state actors in the conflict. These groups are supported by the Gulf States like Saudi Arabia and Qatar together with Turkey (Phillips, 2017) & (Aktürk, 2017). Along with these States, these groups are found to be involved in an alliance with JFS, formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra an affiliate of al-Qaeda. Nevertheless, at times, they not only fight each other but also SDF, ISIS, and the Kurdish forces.

In July 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra became JFS, when Abu Muhammad al-Julani, parted its ways from al-Qaeda (Khan, 2020). The JFS is majorly comprised of the Syrian fighters and claimed to not having any transnational ambitions. The change in strategic designs of avoiding transnational ambitions by JFS resembles the Taliban's approach in Afghanistan in the 1990s. The JFS is comprised of experienced fighters who were formerly involved in Iraq war against the US (Khan, 2020). The US and JFS has also a complex relationship. Sometimes, the US has targeted JFS and at other times, both rivals fight together under the SDF against the Pro-Assad regime forces. The strongholds of JFS are in the northern part of Syria in the province of Idlib, between Aleppo and Latakia, near the Turkish borders (Khan, 2020). The JFS inflicted considerable loss to ISIS in the 2013 conflict that resulted in the lessening of ISIS reach out in the northern part of Syria. The reason for the fight was indeed the declaration of the Islamic Caliphate by ISIS and its annexation of al-Nusra (Khan, 2020).

The Kurdish party in Syria named as Democratic Union Party (PYD) is working for getting the autonomy of Rojava (Wimmen, Heiko, & Muriel Asseburg, 2012). The YPG is a militant wing of the PYD. Turkey is suspicious about the objectives of Rojava's autonomy as the PYD has close links with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which is involved in violent activities in Turkey over the last few years. Interestingly, the US, an ally of Turkey considers the YPG as a vital asset and also provided with the opportunity to lead the SDF including the Arab militias in the fight against ISIS. The intensive support to YPG has created differences among the US and Turkey (Aktürk, 2017). The primary target of the YPG in the Syrian conflict is ISIS and during the fight recaptured the bordering cities of Kobane and Tal Abyad in 2015(Khan, 2020).

The SDF is a US-backed combination of various opposition rebel groups including the Kurds, Arab militias, and the Turkish-backed FSA (Carpenter, 2013). It is working for the creation of a democratic system in Syria by replacing the current form of government led by Assad. In fact, along with this, the alliance with the support of the US and its allies is also involved in fighting against ISIS (Carpenter, 2013).

### **Free Syrian Army**

The use of force by the Assad's regime against peaceful protesters led to a schism within the Syrian government army, and as a result one of its faction split from the state-run mechanism and emerged as a loosely organized force reckoned as the FSA. As the civil war intensified, the FSA faced setbacks against the Assad regime but remained an important part of the conflict (O'Bagy, 2013). Nevertheless, with the support of allies (the US along with Western allies and the Gulf states), the FSA is considered to be a significant opposition force that has inflicted severe damage to the Assad's regime (Mahmood & Black, 2013). It successfully pushed back ISIS, which the US and other regional and international powers view as a major threat.

Importantly, the FSA is highly dependent on military support from allies to conduct operations. A critical analysis suggests that the strategy adopted by the opposition forces made the conflict more complicated. In this regard, the FSA in alliance with the US mainly fought the forces loyal to Assad and ISIS but at the same time in partnership with the Turkish forces, the FSA has effectively confronted the Kurds, who is a major ally of the US against the ISIS (Mahmood& Black, 2013).

### **The Distinct Phenomenon of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria**

ISIS is one of the most lethal non-state actors fighting in Syria in general and the Middle East in particular. It is considered as one of the most threatening and deadly outcomes of the recent past (Hashim, 2014). The ISIS leadership announced the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate, comprising of the areas of Iraq and Syria expressing its expansionist ideology (Carpenter, 2013). The affectivity of the most violent terrorist entity rests in its lethally ideological indoctrination, well-trained fighting fleet, and huge financial resources. The ISIS phenomenon is unique in the Syrian context, in which almost all regional and extra-regional actors are fighting against it. The fighters of ISIS involved in the Syrian conflict mostly belong to other parts of the world. With its huge resources and skilled fighters, together with brutal *modus operandi*, ISIS achieved significant successes in Syria as well as in neighboring Iraq during 2014 (Wimmen, Heiko, & Muriel Asseburg, 2012). Since then, all actors involved in the conflict are fighting the deadly ISIS to shrink its huge reach-out. Due to the military operation against ISIS, the latter lost majority of the captured territory during the years of 2015-16. Nevertheless, despite these successes against ISIS, it is still considered a serious threat to regional and global stability. The reason attributed to the phenomenon is that ISIS successfully executed its violent tactics not only in the Middle Eastern region but also across the globe and to be more specific in Europe (Carpenter, 2013).

ISIS is fighting in multiple directions and against almost all the actors involved in the conflict. It is going all-out against the Assad regime as well as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) a coalition supported by the US and its western allies. Additionally, Saudi Arabia along with its regional allies is fighting with ISIS too. In Syria, apart from all these opposing forces, ISIS established its strong footholds in the northern and eastern parts of the country, in the bordering region of Turkey and Iraq. Nevertheless, ISIS countered hard resistance from the SDF led by the Kurds in the northern part of the country (Aktürk, 2017). The Kurdish forces inflicted significant material loss to ISIS which is very much evident in the province of Kobani located at the Syrian-Turkey border (Carpenter, 2013). It is pertinent to mention here that the case of Turkey versus ISIS is a unique example of the complex functioning of the Syrian conflict. During the early phase of the conflict, Turkey operated against ISIS (Aktürk, 2017). As the conflict unfolded and the Kurdish forces gained significant success against ISIS, this resulted in the establishment of Kurdish forces Peoples Protection Unit (YPG) strong foot-holdings in northern Syria. Turkey, an ally of the US against the Assad regime, started operating against the YPG on one hand and left ISIS to fight the Kurdish forces that resulted in the weakening of the YPG position. This Turkish approach created clear rifts among the Turkish and the US, as the latter was of the view that this act of Turkey is assisting in the establishment of ISIS in the northern part of the country. Nevertheless, it is not only Turkey but the US as well as the Assad's regime that has used various tactics to give strategic room to ISIS in securing their respective gains against their adversaries in the region (Aktürk, 2017).

### **The Role of Extra-Regional Actors in the Syrian Conflict**

#### **The US**

The US remained a key extra-regional actor in the politics of the Middle East. Assad's regime and its allies perceive the US played an active role in the Syrian conflict right from the start of the crisis. The US's direct involvement in Syria started due to two main reasons (Blanchard et al., 2014). Firstly, the accused use of chemical weapons by Assad's regime against the innocent civilians to maximize its reach out and secondly, the expanding lethal nature of ISIS. The US has along with its allies is involved in confronting ISIS. The US was initially concerned with the use of chemical weapons by the Assad's regime and intervened in the conflict with a claim to protect human rights in Syria. Nevertheless, the declaration of the Islamic caliphate by ISIS was considered a major security threat not only in Washington but also in other important capitals of the world (Oktav, Dal, & Kurşun, 2018). The US efforts became more concentrated on halting the expansion of ISIS in the region and beyond (O'Bagy, 2013). The US is supporting the opposition forces within Syria to counter ISIS

(Blanchard et al., 2014). Even, the US is supporting the Kurdish forces in the northern part of Syria to counter the influence of Turkey, an ally of the US and also a part of NATO. Additionally, the US is supporting the opposition forces functioning under the coalition of SDF and other Arab non-state actors (Blanchard et al., 2014). In this context, the US has positioned a total of 2,000 troops in Syria to fight against ISIS in particular, alongside the Syrian opposition forces (Blanchard et al., 2014).

There can be many objectives of the US involvement in the Middle East. However, one of the most important aims is to counter the ever-increasing influence of Russia as well as Iran in the region. The US involvement in the conflict needs to be looked at concerning the Russian revisionist approach. Indeed, Russia is backing the Assad's regime not only inside Syria but also at the forum of the United Nations Security Council by utilizing veto power against any possible action to counter the Assad regime. More interestingly, the US also has a reservation concerning Gulf States including Saudi Arabia and Turkey for their support to terrorist outfits like JFS and ISIS in the perusal of their respective goals (Blanchard et al., 2014). This very pattern of interaction among the allies concerning their convergence and divergence of objectives indicates the complex functioning of the Syrian conflict.

### **Russia**

After the end of the Cold War, the role of Russia remained invisible in the global political system. However, in recent times, Russia emerged in international politics as a resurgent power. This phenomenon is much evidence concerning various events in the international system in contemporary times. The Syrian conflict is the most appropriate example where Russia emerged as one of the most important forces in regional politics. Russia not only supported the Syrian state's armed forces on the battlefield but also provided diplomatic support in the United Nations Security Council by taking requisite steps to avert any resolution aimed at undermining Assad's government (Kozhanov, 2016). Russia's active involvement in the Syrian conflict inflicted a major impact on regional and international politics and in fact, the world began to recognize Russia, as one of the major powers in the international system (Kinninmont & House, 2014).

Nevertheless, there are numerous factors behind massive Russian support for the Assad regime (Kozhanov, 2016). First, the Russian government's support for the Syrian government served its objective of establishing the legitimacy of Russia's state with rest to the functioning of its governance structure. This is much evident in the context of Russian successful policy implementation towards the Assad regime to ensure its survival in chaotic times. Second, Russia's active role in the Syrian conflict helped it to regain its position as a great power in the global political system (Kozhanov, 2016). Russian resurgence triggered alarms in power corridors of the world, and more specifically, in the US (Kinninmont & House, 2014). Conspicuously, the rift between the US and Russia is much evident in the Syrian battlefield where divisions between the great powers could be observed, even in the case of fighting against a common enemy like ISIS. Third, Russia considers the establishment of an extremist religious regime in Syria against its interest (Kozhanov, 2016). Indeed, the link between various non-state actors involved in conducting terrorism is a source of concern for Russian internal and external security. Fourth, the secular socialist system in Syria is seen as a symbol of the Russian style of government, and it also shares the ideological legacy with the Soviet era. Fifth, active participation in the Syrian conflict secured its reach out in the Middle East region (Kozhanov, 2016).

### **European Countries**

Germany is another extra-regional actor that accommodated a huge number of Syrian migrants. It has a considerable stake in the wholesome scenario (Pierini, 2016). Indeed, Germany along with allies including the US and other European partners consider the change of status quo in Syria as part of their strategy for long-term peace. Moreover, Germany considers ISIS as lethal to regional and global stability and is working along with its partners to eradicate it from the Syrian territory (Pierini, 2016). It is pertinent to mention here that Germany is one of the major contributors concerning the extension of humanitarian support in the shape of assistance and aid to the Syrian refugees (Fabbe, Hazlett & Sinmazdemir, 2019).

Moreover, France like the US had expressed serious reservations against the accused use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime and supported to change the Assad regime. Nevertheless, in 2017, the French President declared that it will not condition the resignation of the Assad regime for any kind of peace-building strategy (Ibrahim, 2017). France along with the US has significantly



backed the SDF to fight ISIS, specifically after the Paris terrorist attack in November 2015 (Pierini, 2016). French military forces are deployed in Syria alongside the US and are participating in the operations against ISIS.

### **Way Out**

The "Arab Spring" has significantly changed the social, economic, and political dynamics of the countries in the Middle East in particular and the international geopolitical system in general. The Syrian conflict has further exaggerated this situation. This is perhaps the most complicated conflict of the twenty-first century. A close assessment of the situation validates the famous quote of Henry Kissinger that in international politics, only the interest matters and there are no permanent friends and enemies. The conflict is very dynamic and is changing its patterns at different points of time, such as alliances between various state and non-state actors involved in the conflict. For the sake of convenience in analysis, actors can be divided into three main categories; pro-status quo forces, anti-status quo forces, and non-aligned forces. However, a comprehensive analysis of the entire scenario points to the complexity of the performance of the Syrian conflict. Indeed, there are many regional and extra-regional actors involved in the conflict pursuing their strategic objectives. The Turkish strategy is the most appropriate example, as being an ally of the US; the former conducted military operations to counter the Kurdish forces and let ISIS attack it from the other side as well. Non-state actors who are said to be in a broader coalition are participating in the hostility. However, the role of ISIS also remained unique in that it fights all the actors involved in the Syrian conflict. Thus, different actors intervening at different levels sometimes support each other at one issue and oppose another issue. The full and broader picture of the Syrian conflict indicates an extremely complex situation, and with the participation of many powerful regional and extra-regional actors, conflict resolution has become more difficult and indecisive. The study predicts that the Syrian imbroglio will further complicate and the violence is likely to continue shortly. The only actor who can unilaterally control the damage and bring an end to the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Syria is Bashar-al- Assad; who has been used as a tool by local, regional and international actors. If he withdraws and agrees on a power-sharing mechanism with the local leadership, the regional and international spoilers will find no and/or less space to manipulate the situation for their respective competing strategic interests. International actors have vested interests in all international conflicts, which may not necessarily be beneficial for the conflict-ridden host state.

### **Conclusion**

The Syrian crisis, with all its catastrophic consequences, has been growing over the years, and it has been 10 years since its beginning in 2011. Despite contested control over most of the territories, President Bashar al-Assad is still fighting a bitter struggle; with the help of its allies, including state and non-state actors, to ensure the status quo. On the other hand, anti-Assad forces are also active from national to regional and international levels to achieve their geopolitical and geostrategic interests. In this regard, the local non-state actors in Syria in alliance with anti-status quo forces are constantly involved in their strategies to overthrow the Assad regime. In the ongoing conflict, regional and extra-regional state actors have entered into complex partnerships with national and regional non-state actors, making it one of the deadliest conflicts in the world today. For ease of analysis and to help the reader understand the complex nature of the Syrian conflict, this article divides the parties involved into three groups; the first group is those who support the Assad regime to stay in power to achieve their common interests - the second group seeks to change the status quo by overthrowing the Assad government for its own strategic goals - and the third group which can be categorized as non-aligned pursues its own socio-economic goals. The pro-Assad group supports the maintenance of the status quo, and the interests of this group coincide with the Assad regime. It is a well-established Pro-Shiite bloc, with Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia being key players. The second group is a coalition of opposition forces, generally recognized as a "pro-Sunni bloc", and the main actors in the club are Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the small states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Libya, Jordan, and the US together with their allies of NATO. The main actors in the third group are ISIS and Israel, whose interests do not coincide with the first two groups. The interests of all participants within these groups converge and diverge at certain points in time and space, which further determines the nature of their alliances and interactions. In this context, the interconnection of internal and external players concerning their participation in the Syrian crisis forms the complexity of the geopolitical scenario in the Middle East.

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