

## Syrian War: American Interests and Regional Dynamics

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**Abstract:** *The study aims to reflect the complex Syrian civil war that has now become a proxy war costing lives of thousand and displacing millions of civilians. The war was just another conflict of the Arab Spring Revolutions in 2010 but today, it has become a battlefield for many local, regional, and extra-regional powers. The qualitative study for this article is to find out varied information concerning all the active blocks including Pro-Assad, Anti-Assad, and Non-Aligned forces. The United States has shown substantial support to the rebellions who are already geared to topple Bashar-al-Assad's regime. The study reveals that the United States acquire several strategic interests in battling the Syrian conflict. This document tries to examine important foreign policies that shaped this modern-day war. The Superpower, United States of America has always been greatly concerned with the fate of Middle East for several decades, however, its intervention in Syria worsened the conflict beyond imaginations.*

**Key Words:** Syrian War, USA, ISIS Insurgency, Pro Assad Block, Anti-Assad Block, Non-Aligned

### Introduction

Ever since 2011, the Syrians have been facing a never-ending dispute leaving a devastated impact on the country. This conflict is by far, the most complicated and violent conflict in the contemporary World causing the highest number of civilian casualties. This war is an ongoing multi-sided conflict fought between the Ba'athist Bashar-al-Assad Regime along with its allies like Iran, Russia, and Hezbollah against the local, regional, and extra regional opposing forces like United States, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Jordan, Free Syrian Army and Syrian Democratic Forces.

The "ARAB SPRING" is a widely recognized uprising in the Middle East that started in Tunisia in December 2010 and continued to unfold its dimensions across different countries in the region. The masses in the region started protesting the long-established authoritarian regimes implementing unlawful dictatorial rule

with lack of accountability, corruption, less free society, economic instability and above all, religious and ethnic divides. The protests resulted in overthrowing many authoritarian governments like that of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen.

The demonstrations peacefully began in Syria with unarmed protestants who were brutally responded by President Bashar-al-Assad. The massive use of gun powder leading to numerous funerals next day, geared even more masses to come to the streets and ask the regime to step down. The regime than came even harder on the demonstrations to safeguard its government. Gradually, the democratic wave of demonstrations was converted into severe and prolonged conflict.

As the conflict intensified, Free Syrian Armies (FSA) began to escalate with a common interest of resisting the Syrian Army. The government increased the use of deadly weapons and barrel bombs in the cities like Aleppo. The

United Nations made efforts establish a communication channel between the government and the opposition forces by organizing negotiation meetings, but no solution was achieved. Again in 2015, the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution so support efforts to pursue a political solution to the conflict in Syria, but no positive shift was observed.

Today, A wide range of internal and external actors are battling against each other including the Western-backed opposing forces, Islamist groups like Al-Nusra Front and ISIS, and the Russian-Iranian backed Bashar-al-Assad's regime. External state-actors specially the United States of America and Russia, support the proxy warfare in the third world countries to benefit their own interest and to maintain the balance of power in the world such as Bosnia, Angola, Somalia as well as terror attacks in Iraq and Afghanistan. Despite the fact that two major powers are involved in this conflict, many regional powers have embroiled to for the sake of their national causes. The Syrian conflict, hence, is another strategic battlefield for the major powers as well as for many other regional powers, who, with their own agendas, are only making the conflict far more complicated.

## Literature Review

All the external actors including regional powers like Turkey, Iraq, Iran, KSA and extra-regional powers like Russia and USA have specific foreign policy interests in the region. United States wants to tear down the authoritarian system and Islamic Terrorism, Turkey wants to send back Syrian refugees, Iran desires a balance of power in the Region, Russia wants to promote communism and Syria is its only foothold in the middle Eastern region. For this reason, Syria is likely to remain an arena of strategic competition for years to come. However, its complicated ethnic and sectarian division will be going to need an external support in all these years to find stability.(Jeffrey Martini)

President Obama announced the use of chemical weapons as crossing the 'Redline' in 2011 after which the Assad Regime killed nearly 15000 civilians using Chemical Weapons

including children. At that time President Obama decided to consider a limited military intervention to prevent the regime from crossing the Redline again. Russia has been supporting Assad regime abundantly since the era of Hafiz-al-Assad. Due to this proxy war between the two major powers, United States continued to operate its notorious trick to weaken the enemy by employing sanctions. And today too, Syrian conflict is just deteriorating instead of settling. Back in 2011, the bloodshed of innocent lives could be solely blamed on the Assad Regime. But as the time passed, different groups appear to be the culprits of this bloodshed. These groups are covertly facilitated by internal, regional, and extra-regional powers. (Homs, [2020](#)) However, there are heated controversial arguments over US intervention in Syria. Many clashing opinions creating an international hype, that questions the legality of the interventions by US in the Syrian soil. By comparing the situation with ICJs ruling of the Nicaragua case, the intervention is perceived illegal as they offered the rebellions with the weaponry and funding to overthrow the elected Government. On the contrary, if we thoroughly study the United Nations Charter for Human Rights, the interventions are deemed legal as it is to protect the state citizens from human rights violation and eliminating terrorism. (Oluwaseyi Emmanuel Ogunnowo, [2020](#))

The regime of Syrian President Bashar al Assad clearly threatens American National Security like ISIS and Al- Qaeda does. Russia and Iran have stabilized the Assad's Regime to the point where it feels empowered to reject peace talks. Strategic vital areas are still under the influence United States and Its allies after waging a war against ISIS in North-Eastern Syria that is the 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the country and is energy and agriculture rich area. If the idea of United States disengagement from Syria starts implementing, the Assad's Regime will turn over the North-Eastern parts to itself to employ terror attacks and that is the prospect American Intelligence fears. (HOF, [2019](#))

In the wake of COVID-19 and drawdown of United States troops, attacks conducted by ISIS are increasing exponentially since the beginning

of 2020 and can move more freely, worsening the security gaps. This comeback of ISIS would not only threaten the United States interests but also would bring harm to countless Syrians in the region where ISIS is patrolling freely. It is critical for the United States government to make a comeback in Syria to support its allies on the ground. The role of ISIS in the Syrian Conflict has remained quite unique as it is fighting against all the internal and external powers. The conflict is giving itself different outlines with respect to changing times and interests of the powers involved. (Syed Imran Haider, [2020](#))

Despite of Trump's efforts to isolate itself from Middle East, it could not totally withdraw from Syria to fight war on terror peculiarly to protect Israel from Irani-Russian influence in the region. Furthermore, keeping a hold on oil rich Syrian region ensures financial resources to support its interests against terrorism and prevent the opposing forces from achieving any significant objectives. The United States and its regional allies are somehow boosted to topple Assad's regime after the alleged use of chemical weapons and barrel bombs in civilian sites by Assad in response to the western sanctions. But due to the divergence of regional backers, lack of political will from the United States and Assad's incapability to end the civil war, no solution of ending the crises is in sight. Although a federal solution may be viable (Kim Hua Tan, [2019](#)).

Many are arguing that a federal solution maybe the least bad option for Syria as the war has already displaced over 50% of the population and nearly 25% from it has fled outside the country as refugees. A federal solution may not be ideal however it is the only possible alternative to allow the war to drag on. (Ibrahim, [2017](#))

It is true that the United States wanted to overthrow Assad and replace him with a Sunni Government that would benefit its interests against the War on Terror. Yet, the United States now cannot expect to get rid of him entirely. Instead, it can expect him to come to negotiations. And so, Obama's administration focused on eliminating ISIS more than Assad's regime and the current administration is going

even farther by planning to disengage and break the words of support given to the allies (Crahan, [2020](#)).

The ethnic inequalities in the region were never the reason for the uprising in Syria as they were present since the very beginning. The reason that triggered the violence, was external and internal state actors, trying to benefit their interests including the extra-regional powers, like United States and Russia for dominating the country and non-state actors like ISIS exhibiting horrifying picture of Islamic terrorism and brutality. (Ranni, [2020](#))

The context of antagonistic confrontation between the United States of America and Iran provoked Iran to dispense the Syrian Regime with weapons, soldiers and information that helped them working with short, medium, and long-range missiles in Syrian cities for mass destruction. Iran also established ballistic missiles factories in the North-West of Syria in 2018 leaving the United States more outraged. (Khalaf, [2020](#)) Iran somehow made President Trump to take a U-turn from his promise of not entering to long-term Middle East wars. After Iran threatened United States Interests in the region by working on raising the efficiency of 'HEZBOLLAH' in respect of using missiles, United States sent a force of 2000 soldiers to face Iranian terrorism being spread throughout Syria. (Zelait, [2019](#)).

Strategic planning against ISIS and Iranian 'terrorism' has made United States to keep not only Several hundred military troops in Syria to protect the Kurdish SDF but also provides funding and training assistance to the Iraqi army to keep an eye on Iranian advancements in the region. Air and naval assets have been positioned and CIA intelligence operatives are also stationed both in Iraq and Syria. The end point to this war hence is difficult to realize if United States holds to its commitments to pushback Iran from Syria. This will only worsen the crises situation. (Abhyankar)

President Trump could declare victory over ISIS in Syria and withdraw its troops but a decision to fight off Iran has become an important foreign policy objective for the United States as

Iran is playing a strategic role in the soil of Syria to expand its own military and enhancing Hezbollah's influence. (Behraves, [2020](#))

It can be observed that the United States has been always determined to accomplish the three objectives in its foreign policy for Middle East: *Coercion, Disruption, and Transformation*. However, in the Syrian conflict, *coercion* was seen in the threatening statements of Obama and declaring a 'Redline'. Backing up the rebel forces like FSA by training, funding and weaponry as well as providing its own intelligence are the models of *disruption*. And if the United States succeeds in removing Assad from power and replace him with a US puppet, it will be the accomplishment of the third goal, *transformation*. (Hughes, [2020](#))

Russia's and United States' incapability to cooperate and the use of proxies in already complicated conflict has not only cost the lives of thousands, but also it provided a gateway for many irregular actors like ISIS. Yet, eliminating ISIS would be the only issue that both the major powers including regional actors would agree on. United States is greatly jeopardized by the spread of extremist ideologies in the west. ISIS's only ultimatum is to establish a Caliphate across Iraq and Syria and other Muslim majority countries later. This is an obvious threat to both the United States and Russia's economic as well as geographic interests. For this reason, both the powers are now considering to combat Islamic State together. (Hauer, [2017](#))

The outcome of the Syrian conflict in both the cases will leave major scars in the Syrian society. Their identity would be totally squandered. Removal of Assad regime will bring western influence and allow Israel to expand its borders. On the contrary, If Assad were to stay in power, it will allow Russia to gain a permanent military foothold in the region allowing the 'Post' Cold-War to grow even complicated. (Lucas, [2014](#)) Syrian society will most likely end up devastated like that of Lebanon. Even after the war is over, different ethnic and sectarian groups will continue to fight against each other and strive for territories. Long term repercussions of war are

difficult to visualize but we can assume it would be no different to that of Afghanistan (Safak Oguz, [2018](#)).

### Research Question

Why is Syria an arena of strategic competition for major powers like America and Russia?

### United States role in Syrian war

In the beginning of the conflict, Assad crossed the 'redline' declared by President Obama after which United States decided to hold a limited military intervention in the Syrian region causing a massive bloodshed in the civilian areas of Syria. Today too, if Assad or any external actor considers the use of chemical weapons, it will directly affect Syria as it will be operated in its land. United States involvement not only benefits itself for eliminating ISIS but also to hold control of massive oil and energy resources. The increasing United States involvement means to hold a dominant influence causing the Syrian rebels and civilians with a feel of complex for not being able to do anything without US support.

ISIS's key objective is to take control of the area and establish a Caliphate. ISIS insurgency means mass destruction of civilian sites and extremist ideologies causing the Syrian land to be a homeland for terrorism and spreading Islamophobia vibes throughout the world. Disengagement seemed a good idea after declaring victory over ISIS in the northern Syria, but it gave ISIS an opportunity to conduct increased attacks in the region. And the liberated Areas were again being targeted by the Islamic State. There has been an increasing Islamic State attacks in the North Eastern parts of Syria where United States declared victory against it. ISIS presence in Syria threatens Israel, a key American ally in the region for which the United States is making ways to expand its borders as it did with Palestine. Eventually, if United States succeeds in allowing Israel to expand its borders, Syria will no more be a country in world maps like that of Palestine.

After increasing Iranian influence and support to the Syrian army, United States

considers breaking its commitment and set troops not in the region Again. As United States key agenda is to defeat the Communist Russia on every level and in every aspect. Iran is solely

backed by Russia and Assad Regime is solely fully supported by Iran whether economically, or militarily. One way or the other, Syria and its identity is endangered.

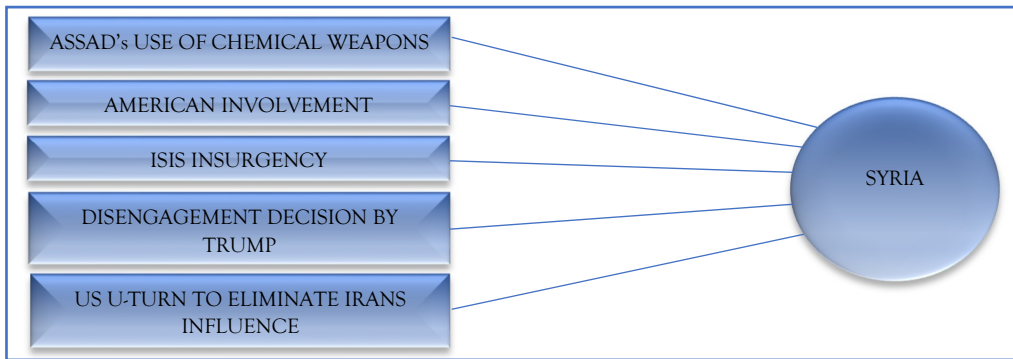


Figure 1

### Analysis

The lethal crisis in Syria that escalated over years, is combating its 9<sup>th</sup> year ever since it started in 2011. President Bashar-al-Assad apart from claiming the control of major territories, is still having a tough time alongside its allies against Anti-Assad block to secure his forced government over Syria. On the contrary, regional, and extra regional Anti-Assad forces are also active to achieve their foreign policy objectives with respect to the Syrian Civil War. The opposition forces are viciously engaged in the war to topple the Assad's Regime.

For a better understanding for who is combatting whom, the various stake holders are divided into three main blocks.

1. *Pro Assad Block: Iran, Russia, and Hezbollah*
2. *Anti-Assad Block: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Libya, Jordan, United States and its NATO alliances.*
3. *Non-Aligned: Islamic State of Iraq and Al Sham*

### Pro-Assad Block

This block is a combination of the Syrian Regime, Shiite locals, Iran, and Russia.

### Syrian Regime

Besides all the chaos, the Syrian government i.e., Assad's regime has managed to outlive by employing its extremist and violent ideologies with the support of its allies. Amidst having all the political, economic, and military support from Iran, Hezbollah and Russia, the sensation of dependency on its allies has somewhat increased. In future if the Assad's regime manages to control the entire Syria, it would not afford to say a 'NO' to either of its allies, Iran, or Russia.

### Iran

Both Iran and the Syrian government share some common goals and dangers in the Middle East and international political affairs. Iran and Syrian regime has a major enemy, Israel, against which, both the Shi'ite governments form a strong challenge in the form of Hamas and Hezbollah. Hence, Syria remains one of the most strategic goal for Iran to shape a transmission line for expanding and aiding Hezbollah against Israeli Military.

### Russia

After years, Russia is actively seen on international proxy wars to regain its dominance. The Syrian conflict is one of the most suitable opportunities for Russia to have a permanent foothold in the Middle Eastern region for fulfilling multiple aspirations, foremost, to fight

this proxy war against the United States of America and expand Communist ideologies in the Arab World. The World has once again started to recognize Russia with respect to its active part in the Syrian conflict.

### Hezbollah

Another powerful support in strengthening the Assad's regime is 'Hezbollah'. The Shi'ite movement of Hezbollah was once very popular when it came on all front to fight against Israel. But in the Syrian Civil War, Iran and Hezbollah have identified this war as a Shia-Sunni conflict that eventually lessened its positive influence from the Muslim World.

### Anti-Assad block

A complicated mixture of local, regional, and extra-regional allies makes the Anti-Assad Block. The opposition forces are majorly supported by the United States of America and its NATO allies not only against the Assad's regime, but also the Islamic State.

### Syrian Rebels

In the very beginning, peaceful protests were violently answered by the Assad's regime that gave rise to the Free Syrian Army. It was supported by the United States of America after Assad crossed the 'Redline' declared by Obama with the use of chemical weapons. FSA has undoubtedly yielded major damages to the Syrian regime yet it has also fought the Kurds alongside Turkish forces.

### Turkey

Turkey is one of the most important regional powers involved in the Syrian conflict. Its main threat is the rise of Kurdish forces who is a major ally of the United States. Turkey has fought against both the Assad's regime and the ISIS alongside United States but its fight against the Kurds has somewhat escalated rifts between the United States and itself.

Another main interest of Turkey in the civil war is the issue of Syrian refugees in Turkey. It hosts around 3.66 million registered Syrian

refugees and is a home to largest number of Syrian refugees with an aid of \$8,000,000,000.

### Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has always remained an important participant in the geo-political affairs in the Middle East. Its primary concerns in the Syrian conflict are to topple the Iranian backed Assad's regime and to make sure Syria does not fall in the hands of a democratic government that would threaten the authoritarian regimes of the Middle East. Saudi Arabia is keen to counter Iranian influence entirely off the Arab World.

### United States of America

The United States remained a crucial extra-regional actor in the affairs of Middle East for its economic as well as political interests. Since the very beginning of the conflict, the United States has been indirectly overshadowing the region by providing non-lethal aid to the rebellions. However, the direct US-involvement took place after the alleged use of chemical weapons by the Assad's regime and active ISIS insurgencies. These events gave the United States, a reason to directly jump into the Syrian conflict. It is true that all the regional and extra regional actors in this conflict are battling for their desired aims and objectives, yet, the United States is the only actor having most reasons to topple Assad's regime and ISIS. Both the regime and ISIS are a massive threat to the United States security and its interests in the region.

Against Islamic State, the United States has been leading a coalition of 60 countries since 2014. During Trump's presidency, the foreign policy entirely shifted towards eliminating ISIS instead of overthrowing the Syrian government. But in 2017, the United States conducted airstrikes on Syrian airbases in response to Assad's chemical attacks near Damascus. On 19<sup>th</sup> Dec 2018, Trump declared victory against ISIS in Syria and unilateral withdrawal of troops from Syria.

A little involvement in the conflict started questioning the United States commitments to support the allies in this conflict. Furthermore, ISIS started patrolling and attacking the liberated

areas again. Today the United States sent more than 500 troops to Syria to guard the North East oil fields from ISIS alongside Syrian Democratic Forces. The United States cannot afford to withdraw its troops from Syria unless the war is over, or else, Israel, a key American ally would be greatly threatened by ISIS and Hezbollah. Besides eliminating ISIS, United States wishes to establish a pro-Sunni government in Syria that would help the United States to fight against Iran's Hezbollah and it would also benefit the United States with respect to economic benefits. Overthrowing Assad will also be a triumph against Russia in this post-Cold War.

## Non-aligned

### Islamic State (IS)

One of the most lethal non-state actors fighting in Syria is the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham. It is considered the most deadly and extremist group active in the region to spread its ideologies for establishing a caliphate and erase Israel from the Arab world. Islamic State is the only big threat to the national and international western security. Interestingly, in the Syrian conflict, the Islamic State is combating all the pro and anti-Assad powers. Eliminating ISIS would be the only objective upon which even the United States and Russia, Iran and Saudi Arabia would join hands. ISIS currently has strong footholds on the regions bordering Turkey and Iraq. In December 2018, United States targeted the IS leader Abu Bakar al Baghdadi in an airstrike in the province of Idlib after which the United States claimed victory. However, it is obvious that the group is defeated

but not eliminated hence it is still posing a terrible threat to the local and regional stability.

## Conclusion

The use of proxy warfare has always been a popular strategy to achieve goals and gain influence in the desired region. In the Syrian conflict, different countries, with their agendas are trying to prolong the war. All the active parties in this conflict are trying to benefit their own selves by fostering hatred between Syria's religious groups, pitching the Sunni majority against the Shi'a minority. By doing so, they have dimmed the hopes for peace the innocent lives still pray for. Whether Assad stays in power or is replaced by a US-puppet government, either way, Syria would have been devastated and it would take thrice as long than the war years to gain stability and to unify different ethnic groups. The recent defeat of ISIS and the Turkey's additional unrestricted confrontations against the Kurds has given the conflict a new turn. Iran is greatly influencing the Syrian region with an on-ground hold. However, the US sanctions on Iran has now made Iranian citizens to question the countries influencing strategies in Syria. United States supported the United Nations peace talks for Syria held in Geneva in 2012 but those talks have already failed to reach a ceasefire. Now, President Assad is unwilling to come to the negotiable tables with the opposition parties, yet the rebels still insist that he must step down. Since all the parties are not ready bargain, it seems like the war will not come to an end anytime soon. So, no solution to this conflict is in sight till now.

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