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Anatomising Syrian crisis: Enumerating actors, motivations, and their strategies (2011-2019)

Muhammad Nadeem Mirza¹ | Hussain Abbass*¹⁻² | Irfan Hasnain Qaisrani³

1. School of Politics and International Relations, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan.
2. Department of International Relations, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Bahawalpur, Pakistan.
3. Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Bahria University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

* Correspondence Emails: hussainabbas@iub.edu.pk | hussainabbasleo@gmail.com

Abstract

Syrian crisis started as a domestic uprising against President Bashar-ul-Assad, and soon engulfed not only the neighbouring states, but also extra-regional great powers. This study tries to anatomise the crisis by addressing the nature of the actors lying at domestic, regional, and system levels, who have rendered the conflict its multifaceted nature. The main question this study addresses is: What are the actors and factors that have contributed to the complexity of the Syrian Civil War and why has this conflict degenerated into a prolonged violent engagement between different groups? While using the theoretical prism of contentious theory of civil war developed by Adrian Florea and in-depth qualitative case study as methodological tool, this study hypothesizes that grievances at the domestic level have resulted in the onset of the conflict in Syria, which was later exacerbated and prolonged by the rise of ISIS and strategic competition among the regional and system level powers. The study concludes that, though the crisis is not over yet, increasing interests and overtures by Saudi Arabia and the domestic growing Syrian animosity towards Iran has opened new avenues for regional and extra-regional involvement in the post-conflict reconstruction for effective governance, peace, and stability in Syria.

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1. Introduction

President Trump's decision to withdraw US forces from Syria (Landler *et al.*, 2018) drew intense criticism from not only the groups inside Syria who have been supported by the US but also by several members of the international community (Burns *et al.*, 2019). He decided to withdraw when the Syrian conflict – nation-wide uprisings that started in 2011 and soon turned into a violent civil war – was witnessing a descending trajectory. Because of the strategic mistakes committed by several systemic level actors, the crisis in Syria – though started as an intra-state conflict – escalated into a regional and even an international crisis. The number and nature of the actors in this conflict has continuously been on the rise, and by the time of the US announcement of the withdrawal Syrian crisis, they lie at the domestic, national, regional and system levels – thus making it one of the most complex conflicts in the recent geopolitical history of Middle East.

After several years of fierce battle, the Syrian Government led by President Assad has re-controlled major parts of Syria's territory and has declared victory over insurgents and opposition forces. In reality, where the majority of the areas have been neutralized from the insurgents, opposition groups and terrorists, a complete and holistic victory cannot be established. Assad regime is as vulnerable to the potential domestic and regional threats as it was during 2011 uprisings. Structural issues still haunt the stability and fear of re-ignition of the conflict is evident as the government is unable to resolve the domestic socio-economic, factional, religious, and sectarian issues. Furthermore, the regime is heavily dependent on international forces like Russia and regional forces like Iran and Hezbollah for control, stability, and security of its administered areas. It is vulnerable to external shocks like Iran-Israel conflict, Turkish involvement, transnational terrorism; US war against terrorism, financial constraints to reconstruction, and structural divisions within state and society. Complete end game is not structured; rather the unsettled affairs of the Syrian state have transformed it into a 'frozen conflict' (Tayyab *et al.*, 2020).

In the study of the civil wars, the main factors are usually analysed primarily by studying the interactions between state and non-state actors such as rebels, revolutionaries, militias, or unified armed opposition groups (Gleditsch & Salehyan, 2008: 58-76). Studies have identified that poorer, politically and economically unstable, totalitarian and nondemocratic states produce the characteristics for promotion of the civil wars (Sambanis, 2002: 215-243). 400,000 dead; 5.6 million refugees; and 6.2 million internally displaced people are the stark number related with the Syrian crisis. However, there is a dearth of any study which addresses the complexity of the Syrian conflict, in terms of not only its dynamics, but which also encompasses factors, actors and their objectives and strategies at different levels.

This study tries to dissect the Syrian conflict and addresses following questions: What are the actors and factors that have contributed to the complexity of the Syrian Civil War? Why has this conflict degenerated into a prolonged violent engagement between different groups? The study posits that power competition among various actors has intensified and prolonged the course of the civil war in Syria. The sub-hypothesis that is also analysed in this study is that grievances at domestic level have resulted in the onset of the conflict in Syria, which was later exacerbated and prolonged by the strategic competition among the regional and system level powers. The study details the origin and background of the conflict, followed by the identification of actors lying at domestic, regional, and system level, while also highlighting their affiliations, motivations, and strategies that they employed to achieve the respective

objectives. In the conclusion it is tried to chart out the future peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts that are been taken by the actors involved.

2. Theoretical approach

The study is conducted using contentious theory of civil war – developed by Adrian Florea. The theory elaborates that the ‘civil wars are commonly produced by the combination of one structural condition – a state crisis of authority and/or legitimacy – and the interdependent effect of two mechanisms –radicalization and militarization’ (Florea, 2017). Several scholars have tried to explain the anomalous behaviour of actors involved in the civil war – why do they involve in hostilities while remaining cognizant of the fact that death, destruction, and mayhem are the consequences of their actions. Structural and normative issues are usually pointed as the main causes of the onset of civil wars. Poverty, extremism, regime legitimacy, form of the government, resource curse, militarization, ethno-national identity crises, conflicting interests of regional and extra-regional powers, and ambitious designs of the leaders are often termed as few of the factors that force actors to take up the arms. Chances of civil war or internal conflicts increase if the perceptions of incentives for the belligerents outweighs the costs (Collier & Hoeffler, 1998).

The civil war in Syria has largely been explored by the scholars but finding a study that enumerate the actors lying at the four levels of analysis i.e., domestic, state, regional, and system is very rare. Contentious theory of civil war elucidates that how the civil war in Syria transpired and why did actors, despite knowing that their actions will result in ruining the cities and will cause immense destruction, continued the fight. It explored the underlying causes of the Syrian civil war as are enunciated by the theory and embarks upon explaining the motivations, which according to them outweigh the costs, and strategies they employed to pursue the objectives.

3. Research methodology

The study is conducted using in-depth qualitative case study methods, where the objectives remains to identify the domestic, regional, and extra-regional actors, their motivations, and strategies. Use of the in-depth case study method (Bennett & Elman, 2007) helps identify the nuances attached with the phenomena under discussion. Case study is the most used research design in International Relations because of the brevity and clarity it creates for the readers, and systemic guidelines using which researchers conduct it (Bennett & Elman, 2007). Selection of the case, enumerating the constituent elements, designing a framework to analyse the behaviour of those elements, and how their interacting with other, and which type of interactions are producing what type of outcomes, and then studying the specific outcomes are few of the steps in the conduct of the case study research design. Mostly qualitative secondary data, such a research articles, books, and other published material is used for the conduct of study. The scope of the study is limited from 2011-2019.

4. Origin and escalation: Factors in the conflict

Syrian conflict has proved to be a thorn in the legacy of the Obama administration. Some scholars have even opined that the Obama Doctrine was based on the concept of “leading from behind,” which has tarnished the ‘image’ of the United States in the international community (Miniter, 2012). On the other hand, the same crisis has given Putin’s Russia a chance to re-

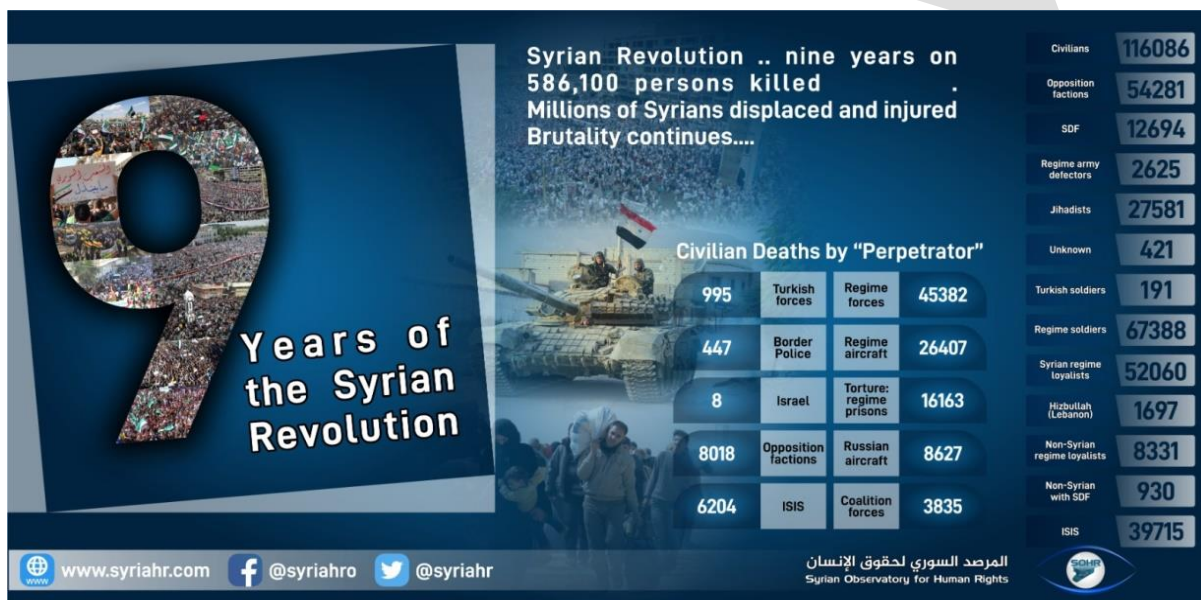
assert itself in the international system. Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Jordan, Israel, and Saudi Arabia have also been involved in the conflict because of their geographical proximity. The number of the non-state actors also increased with the passage of time. The question remains what has actually happened since 2011 because of which this conflict has been transformed from a domestic issue to an internationalized crisis. Congruence and divergence of interests of the actors involved in this conflict and the strategies they pursued have incremented its complexity, resulting in the grave consequences for the lives of millions of individuals. Like the complexity of the conflict, its origin is also multifaceted involving a variety of issues. On counting, conflict has historical, regime-specific, socio-economic, geopolitical, strategic, and sectarian roots. Besides these, the involvement of the regional and international players and the presence and activities of the non-state actors can be traced as the factors involved in the setting of the conflict as a civil war. However, many of the causes of this civil war are historical in nature and are linked to the issues of governance.

The origin of the crisis can be traced to the death of President Hafiz-al-Assad. It was considered that with his death, the new government would open the state and society. Political participation, civic rights, and freedoms were envisioned. But his successor Bashar-al-Assad could not come up to the expectations, resulting into relative deprivation. Ted Gurr notes that when gap between government's performance and peoples' expectation increases, relative deprivation increases (Gurr, 2010). Overtly his regime gave a quite progressive look, but with the consolidation of his power, that look soon vanished away. Although he was successful in bringing about few structural changes in the political and social sectors – that is why he was regarded as a 'benevolent dictator' – yet those reforms were implemented with force, ultimately causing unrest in the society and aggravating the fragile situation that led to the civil war (Bérzins, 2013). Besides the historical factors, the other structural and geographical factors have also been at the centre of the conflict. Geographically, it is bordered by Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Palestine/Israel; while on the other side by Turkey. Hence, it is situated at the strategic fault-line between the Arab and Non-Arab world and has long been regarded as a place for the launching pad of Arab nationalism to other parts. Another important geo-strategic issue is Kurdistan. Kurds and their aspirations are linked mainly with three countries: Iraq, Turkey, and Syria. Kurdistan issue, their resistance movement and their struggle for self-determination have clear destabilizing security repercussions on Syria (Mahmood *et al.*, 2020).

The structural factors of Assad Regime are much graver that contributed in the Syrian crisis. The state's political and social structure has the sources of friction in it. Assad's regime is regarded as rigid in its security outlook and it remained powerful enough to control the masses. His regime is considered to be under the heavy influence of minority groups particularly that of Alawites which operated through manipulation by the intelligence agencies, strong military, and corruption (Tan & Perudin, 2019). It was believed that Alawites were the instrumental factor behind the regime consolidation and practice of power and repression in the country (Demir & Rijnoveann, 2013). Assad regime remained under the influence of a secular minority and therefore the Islamists stood against the regime. The Islamist groups formed the important segment of the opposition that led the events into the civil war in Syria. On the other hand, socio-economic cleavages in the Syrian society further aggravated the situation and led to relative deprivation and frustration in the society and ultimately the civil war. As a result of the Arab Spring and an inspiration by the success stories of change of governments in Tunisia and Egypt, people started demanding the same change in Syria. Initially the demonstrators were peaceful and non-violent, but the voices for freedom, civic and political rights were quite strong and charged with the inspiration (Khan *et al.*, 2020).

These uprisings paved the way for the right-wing religious groups and parties to become part of the protests and to acquire influence in the domestic and regional politics. Opposition groups started a campaign to depose Assad Regime. Two groups were important in this regard: first National Coordination Committee (NCC), a secular group; and second Syrian National Council (SNC) supported by various trans-national religious groups and right-wing parties. It was alleged that the religious groups initially operating against Assad Regime were supported by some Arab countries – like Saudi Arabia and Qatar – and were also having support from the region and beyond (Demir & Rijnoveann, 2013). On the other hand, Iran and its allied groups came to the rescue of Assad Regime. In the later stage great powers also intervened, thus further complicating the nature and scope of the war. All these factors transformed the Syrian conflict into a multi-layered prolonged war, which generated a human catastrophe. According to the Syrian Human Rights Observatory, overall death toll in Syria has crossed 586,100 deaths (as of March 2020) (HRW, 2018). The division of the death toll of the Syrian Civil War is shown in the table Number 01 below.

Figure 1: Syrian war death toll breakdown



Source: Syrian observatory for human rights (SOHR, 2020).

5. Dynamics of the conflicts: Actors and their motivations

While peering at the dynamics and actors involved in the Syrian crisis, it becomes evident that initially the conflict erupted between the protestors and the Assad regime. Protestors demanded change in Syria –in the government and regime. In response, President Assad promised to bring some reforms, but did not accept the option of change in regime. The support of Russia and Iran further strengthened his resolve to cling to power and to pacify or suppress the resistance by any means. It further paved the way for the involvement of regional and international players in the conflict. All this set the stage for a widespread rebellion and counter-rebellion response resulting in a civil war. The United States, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia along-with most of the Arab states supported opposition forces. In this regard “National Syrian Council was established and settled in Turkey to manage the political aspects, while Free Syrian Army (FSA) was organized as its military wing to fight against the Syrian Armed Forces” (Demir & Rijnoveann, 2013: 59).

The grievances, contradictions and tensions at domestic, regional and system level led to the complexity of the Syrian Civil war in its nature and scope (Sharif, 2019). This study tries to address the actors from 2011-2019 lying in three layers: First layer consists of the domestic actors, which is also the most complex layer of the conflict. It involved a variety of actors with varying degrees of motivations and interests, and with different capacities and roles. The second layer of the conflict consisted of regional states pursuing their relative objectives. They pursue different strategies to attain their interests. At the third level, international players have engaged in the conflict in support of their regional client states as well as for their relative greater international competition. Table 2 provides the overall categorization of actors involved in the conflict and their objectives.

Table-2: Actors and their objectives in Syrian civil war

Types of Actors	Description of Actors	Objectives
Domestic Actors	Pro-Regime Groups	To assist the regime and its army to fight against the rebels
	Anti-Regime Groups	To adopt any measure to topple the Assad Regime
	Extremist/ Religious Groups	Want overwhelming victory and calls for a Muslim state governed by Sharia Law
	Ethnic Groups	To control their majority areas and eyes on self-rule or autonomy
Regional Actors	Saudi-Arabia	Wants an end to Assad Regime, but through a nationalist victory instead by Islamists like Muslim Brotherhood or Islamic Front
	Iran	Iran does not want to lose its strategic ally and a second line of defence, hence wants to ensure survival of Assad Regime
	Turkey	Turkey remains committed to the downfall of the Assad Regime. Though it does not want to sever its relation with Iran.
	Iraq	To resist and contain any spill over of Syrian Civil War in Iraq, while also continuing to support the Assad regime.
International Actors	United States	Initially wanted to end Assad Regime in response to the uprisings but now it then shifted its objectives to resist the victory of the extremist elements, to avoid the spill over effects of the civil war and any harming move to its interests in the Middle East.
	Russia	Russia clearly wants to see the Assad Regime intact. It wants to preserve access to its naval base in Tartus, Syria. To protect Assad regime from any UN Security Council sanctions.
	United Nations	The United Nations wants to end the conflict. Establish peace through multilateral measures.

5.1. Domestic actors: Affiliations, motivations, and strategies

Syria is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-cultural society. Its population consists of Sunni Arabs, Alawites, Christians, Druze, Kurds, Armenians, and others. Sunni Arabs are majority. Alawites are Shi'ite offshoot and are in minority but are politically highly influential. Assad regime is regarded as a 'coalition of minority groups.' Because of this very fact, majority groups have always strived for greater share in the regime and its political and administrative

structure. Recent uprising is regarded as a reaction to the domination and oppression of the minority over the majority groups. The majority group is trying to overthrow the ‘coalition of the minorities’ (Carpenter, 2013). Existence of the Sunni domination in the Free Syrian Army (FSA), and Syrian National Council (SNC) is a clear sign that the conflict had taken a majority/minority nature (Carpenter, 2013).

5.1.1. Assad regime

Assad regime is the most important, most organized, and powerful player in the war. Main goal of the Assad regime is to defeat the rebellion and opposition and secondly to establish and regain influence over entire Syrian territory through any possible means - political, diplomatic, and military. Deployment of Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and paramilitary forces, their crackdown on the protestors, the countermoves and resistance from the opposition caused the militarization of the conflict. To tackle the anticipated security challenges, Assad regime obtained necessary diplomatic, strategic, and military support from domestic, regional, and international actors.

Assad Regime has managed to fracture the opposition groups and has succeeded in military conquests at various strategic areas. It has managed to convince Russia and Iran to intervene directly into the civil war. By 2018, Syrian forces successfully captured most of the territory in Southern Syria. Iran’s tactical and strategic support, and Russia’s sale of light and heavy military equipment and weapons are crucial in the overall defence and expansion of the regime’s control (Lister & Mccants, 2014).

Syrian Arab Army backed by the National Defence Force (NDF) – a paramilitary organisation – along-with the pro-regime domestic and foreign militias and fighters are regarded as the backbone of the strategy to defeat the rebels and insurgents. Besides some initial setback, the regime regained strength necessary to tackle the situation. With the fall of Aleppo to Syrian forces in 2016, the morale of the Assad Regime touched to its new heights since the onset of the war. By 2018, it expanded its successes and regained lost influence and inflicted defeat to rebels; domestic or foreign and their allies.

5.1.2. Pro-regime groups and militias

From around April 2011 to 2012, SAA experienced defection from its own ranks, losing almost half of its active personnel (O’Farrell & Roche, 2016). To tackle the situation, it along-with the help of external factors – such as Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Hezbollah – trained and equipped para-military forces and merged the local militia groups into NDF. Since then, NDF has proven to be an important part of the Syrian forces. It plays the role of seizing the ground and also coordinates with SAA in its offensives. It is also used to secure the occupied areas (Lister & Mccants, 2014).

The help accorded to the Assad regime by Lebanon’s Hezbollah has also proven to be a decisive factor especially since mid-2012. Hezbollah’s experiences and its emphasis on the urban warfare training has contributed immensely in SAA’s actions. SAA is also helped by several Shia militias which had their roots in the Iraq war “such as Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Kataib Hezbollah, the Promised Day Brigades, and the Badr Organization” (Lister & Mccants, 2014). Most of these organisations have not only expanded in their strength, influence, but also in the sources of funding and the manpower (Lister & Mccants, 2014).

5.1.3. Anti-regime opposition and rebel groups

Opposition to the regime began in 2011 with the clear objective of removing President Bashar-al-Assad from power and bringing structural reforms in the social and political system of Syria. The crackdown against the protestors and their resistance resulted in death and destruction, which further militarized the conflict. There are various dynamics of the opposition and rebel groups' formation, organization, affiliation, objectives, and strategies. O'Farrell and Roche (2016) note three broader trends in the rebel movement in Syria:

- Hard-line religious groups not only took the prominent position in the movement, but also replaced – often violently – the nationalist elements who actually started the resistance movement.
- The regime initially faltered and saw huge setbacks at the hands of the rebels. But by mid-2012 and early 2013 it strengthened itself, especially with the financial, military, and most importantly diplomatic and political support from regional and international actors. Since then, the rebel movement has also seen internal fracture, and by 2015-16 approximately six 'theatres' of war emerged each having its own dynamics and inter-/intra group structure.
- Rebel forces were able to attract international attention and get the material as well as diplomatic support from internal as well as external actors such as the United States and other Western states.

Table-3: Classification of armed groups of Syrian civil war from 2011-19 (Top Ten Selected)

Islamist and Jihadist Groups	Foreign Pro-Regime Groups	Moderate, Secular & Socialist Armed Groups	Ethnic Rebel Groups	Government/Regime Forces
Al-Nusra Front	Badr Organization	Fatah al-Intifada	The East Kurdistan Islamic Front	The Syrian Arab Army
The Islamic Front	The Ba'ath Brigade	The Popular Front	The Kurdish Islamic Front	The National Defence Force
Al-Jabbah Al-Islamiyya Al Suriyyah	The National Army	The Arab Nationalist Guard	The Kurdish Union Party	The Military Intelligence Directorate
Harkat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyyah	Kata'ib Hezbollah	The Muslim Brotherhood of Syria	Kurdish Armed Group	Syrian Arab Navy
Jaish al-Islam	Hezbollah	Ghuraba al-Sham	The Popular Protection Unit	Syrian Arab Air force
Al-Tauhid Bargaid	Jaish al-Muwahhideen	Jaish al-Sham	The Asaish	Jaish al-Sha'bi (People's Army)
Liwa al-Haq	The Hauthis	Hazzm Movement	Jabhat al-Akrad	Shabiha
The Syrian Islamic Liberation Front	Faylak Wa'ad al Sadiq	The Northern Storm Brigade	Assyrian Armed Groups	
Ajnad al-Sham Islamic Union	Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq	The Ahrar Souriyah Brigade	The Syrian Union Party	
Jaish al-Islam	Liwa Abu al-Fazal al-Abbas	Mavros Krinos	The Syrian Military Council	

5.1.4. Regional actors: Motivations and strategies

The geostrategic position of Syria has made it a state whose political alignment may help shift the delicate balance of power in the region. Resultantly most of the regional entities have intervened not only covertly, but often overtly to help the relevant groups through military, financial, political, diplomatic, and even in advisory roles. Syrian crisis, which was started as a conflict between domestic groups, soon turned into a proxy war where different regional states vied for the control and influence.

Iran has been supporting the Assad government through military training, manpower, planning and coordination, intelligence, and financial help. It is interesting to note that since the start of the Arab Spring, Iran has supported the popular uprisings against the secular governments as is evident from its stance on the movements in Libya, Egypt, and Tunisia. Iran labelled such movements as ‘Islamic awakening’ (Mahmood *et al.*, 2020). However, when it came to the Syrian crisis, this movement was characterised by Iran as a terrorist movement, supported by foreign elements, and against the legitimate government of President Bashar-al-Assad. Iran considered the support of Alawite-dominated Syrian government as crucial to its own geo-strategic and geopolitical objectives (Worth, 2012; Zehraa *et al.*, 2018). Iran’s role in the Syrian conflict increased with the passage of time, which further militarised the conflict. It also brought several other regional non-state actors such as Hezbollah and some militias from Iraq. It is even alleged that Iran has recruited the Shi’ite population from Afghanistan, India and Pakistan, and have sent them to fight against the rebel elements in Syria (Rasmussen & Nader, 2016; Zikriya *et al.*, 2019). Iran has helped establish and strengthen certain rebel groups supporting the Assad regime – such as Mehdi Army – and used them to suppress other armed rebel groups (Panetta, 2012).

Other regional players who have been involved in the Syrian conflict are some of the Gulf States whose influence have immensely affected dynamics of the Syrian crisis. They have provided financial as well as military support to some of the rebel groups (Rogin, 2014). Their ultimate objective since the onset of the conflict in 2011 has remained clear i.e., Syrian government has lost legitimacy both at the domestic as well as international levels and must be removed. President Assad and his supporters need to step down from the government and should let the people decide the new structure of the government. Saudi Arabia remained on the front of this group of states.

5.1.5. International actors: Motivations and strategies

The system level actors who have been affecting the Syrian conflicts are the United States, Russia, and the proponents of global Jihad. The United States’ objective in Syria remained regime change. In the beginning of the crisis, the US was quite cautious about interfering in the Syria. It was indirectly involved in the conflict by supporting opposition groups and militias (Humud & Blanchard, 2020). For the purpose it provided training, military, and financial assistance to some of the rebel groups. But the lack of the ‘strategic will’ and the clear policy towards the Syrian crisis led to several political drawbacks for the US. It was even reported that the weapons it had provided to the rebels were found to be used by the ISIS fighters in Syria and Iraq (Cohen, 2015).

Putin’s Russia, initially, provided only political and diplomatic support to the Assad regime, but soon its military contingents arrived in Syria thus limiting the freedom of action of the

United States (Abrams, 2015). Since its intervention in the war in 2015, it has mobilized its military, political and diplomatic resources to safeguard Assad regime. With Russian intervention in the war Assad regime and pro-Assad forces regained control of many parts of the country (Humud & Blanchard, 2020).

Since the first use of the chemical weapons in the war, there had been an understanding that the Syrian forces would not use these weapons again. However, as the reports of a fresh chemical attack started emerging out of Syria on April 04, 2017, the Trump administration responded quickly by nominating Assad regime as responsible for the attack and launched its missiles at Al-Shayrat Airfield in Homs province (Gordon *et al.*, 2017). It was the direct US involvement in the crisis. This attack also warned other pro-regime actors of future complexity and intensity of the war. Assad regime and its allies, especially Russia, considered it as an attack on the sovereignty of Syria. Russia even compared the attack to the 2003 invasion of Iraq (Chappell, 2017).

Another dimension of the attack is interesting that although the US avoided attacking directly the Russian forces in Syria, yet at Al-Shayrat Russia has established its presence since 2015 and the loss of Syrian aircrafts and that of logistics is considered as the collective loss of Russia and Syria. Such direct attack on the Syrian airfield and on Russian influence has created a new wave of intensity in the conflict. Although there exists a viable channel of communication between Russia and US, yet such an attack could have resulted in killing of Russians and thus worsening the situation. Russian hard stance on this issue and the US commitment to pursue such moves whenever they deem necessary narrowed down the possibility of political settlement of Syrian conflict. Geostrategic, geopolitical, and geo-economic prioritisation of the great powers has not only expanded the scope of the conflict, but also resulting in multiplying the number of casualties.

Emergence of ISIS had presented one of the most serious threats to the stability of the region. This threat surpassed all the levels and existed at domestic, state, regional, and even at the system levels. With the emergence of the crisis in Syria, Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) viewed it as an opportunity to carve out their own state. Its declared caliph Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi started expanding his influence. Al-Qaeda and Al-Nusra rejected any merger with ISIS and remained as separate entities. But ISIS gained more allegiance, followings, and support than its competitor entities in the region. It established a vast area of influence in Syria and Iraq. Its main aim or goal was to establish an Islamic Caliphate. For this purpose, it ordered '*Fatwas*' and asked the Muslims of the region to give '*Baiah*' to the caliph and to perform *Jihad* as a religious duty to establish and consolidate the Caliphate.

In the beginning, ISIS was successful in establishing its area of control in larger parts of Syria and Iraq including several strategic towns, yet due to the military operations and aerial strikes of the international and regional actors they retreated. On one hand, Assad government and pro-Assad forces recaptured various areas from ISIS, while on the other Kurd forces recaptured areas controlled by ISIS. Russian intervention and the US aerial strikes against ISIS have played a major role in this regard. Defeat of ISIS and killing of Abubakar Baghdadi by the American forces (Trump, 2019) has created another problem for the international community. Its fighters, who have escaped killing or capture, have gone back underground and re-emerged in different parts of the world. Existence of ISIS elements in Afghanistan confirmed the fear that they have the capacity to expand, even after their tactical defeat in Syria and Iraq (Mirza *et al.*, 2020).

6. Conclusion and future of peace building and reconstruction in Syria

Before the Arab Spring, though there were structural cleavages in the Syrian society and grievances existed against Assad regime, yet there was no such situation of the civil war. Arab Spring became the immediate cause of the crisis in Syria that led to the present catastrophic situation. Inspired by the regime change in Tunisia and Egypt, people in Syria had started demanding the same change in their homeland. President Assad had regarded it as a conspiracy against his government. Assad's resolve to cling to power and to suppress the uprisings with force militarised the conflict.

The developments in the conflict, related atrocities, deaths, destruction and its likely impact and spill over to the other parts of the region paved the way for regional and international players to intervene. Involvement of a variety of actors with varying degrees of interests, objectives, affiliations, and strategies made the nature and scope of the conflict multi-layered and complex. Conflict at three levels of analysis i.e., domestic level between the Assad government and the rebels, regional level between Iran and Arab states, and international level between Russia and the United States have not only complicated the situation on ground, but have also contributed to widening the intensity and scope of the conflict. The interactions, contradictions and excesses created from the policies of various states and non-state actors involved in the Syrian civil war had made it a battleground for the proxy competition between regional and international players. It has become a catastrophe that has claimed hundreds of thousands lives.

Eight years of conflict in Syria has portrayed that ending the war and peace building has become a complex task and is beyond the reach of any single actor or group involved in the conflict. Peace building in Syria is meant to create a state that is capable of providing safety, security, and ensuring opportunity to all the public for their well-being, and can avoid any future insurgency, terrorism and devastation of life and properties of the general masses. Achieving order and stability, establishing a new system of governance, and bringing development and prosperity is a daunting task that needs concentrated efforts from the domestic, regional, and global actors beyond their relative self-interests.

On one hand, complex web of actors, their affiliations and interests have made the solution complicated enough to be attained. On the other hand, victory of Assad regime, which is occupied with its survival and its authoritarian control of the state institutions, is the hurdle for the comprehensive reconstruction and peace building in Syria. Regime has adopted various coercive punitive measures against the opposition groups, insurgents, and their affiliates that has furthered mistrust between the actors involved. These punitive measures will further marginalize other groups from the process of reconstruction, peace building and development that will be a hanging sword over the fragile peace that has been established in Syria.

Furthermore, the real challenge remained that the objectives of major powers and regional actors regarding stabilization and state-building diverge based on their political will and the changing politico-military context (Brown, 2018). There is also contention on the comprehensive governance framework for the future of governance in Syria (Brown, 2018) and also on the commitment towards the peace building and reconstruction plan among the actors. Western powers are not enthusiastic, if not uninterested, about the comprehensive peace building plan, and the regional powers are incapable and short of resources to further broker a reconstruction and development plan. The cost of war is huge as the World Bank estimated

around \$388 billions and Syrian Government as \$400 billion (Associated Press, 2018). Syria has eyed on bilateral, multilateral, and private-sector support and has wished the participation of the international institutions and great powers to contribute in substantial amounts. However, major powers i.e., the United States, Germany, France, and other European countries have avoided committing huge sums for the UN approved plan for peacebuilding and reconstruction in Syria (Shatz, 2019).

Russia has no 'will' to allocate significant resources to support the massive reconstruction bill. China has the resources and can be a potential candidate for the reconstruction projects, but its assistance programs are linked with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and it seems cautious in investing in war zones and troubled regions. Furthermore, its foreign assistance is based on loans and not on grants and investments (Shatz, 2019). Gulf states have not participated in the reconstruction plan. Major stakeholder from the Gulf countries, Saudi Arabia has committed only \$100 million in 2018 and that amount too was for the stabilization efforts (Shatz, 2019). Syria, at present, is a state that is waiting for the foreign investment. Any state which would invest there now will win the hearts of the people – something that is necessary to achieve the long-term national interest. Saudi Arabia may increase its investment, while the United States under Biden administration may re-think the US strategy vis-à-vis Syria and announce a post-conflict reconstruction plan. Iran will surely try to reap the hard-earned fruits of its investment that it had made in Syria, yet it really needs to work on the management of its image in Syria, which has deteriorated since last 5 years. Whoever, invests in Syria, would help rebuild the infrastructure and ensure that the state may not fall again to the crisis because militant groups, though have gone dormant, may rise again and pose a challenge to the already precarious stability in the state.

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