

Full Length Research

A Unabated Civil war in Syria

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This study intends to briefly review the causal linkages between the persistent Civil war in Syria and the possible factors for the high level of human insecurity and instability in the country that continued since 2011. Syria's descent into the civil war started in the spring of 2011, when large-scale protests against the state broke out. Since then the civil war in Syria continues unabated between the Syrian government and several rebel groups, with humanitarian needs and the vulnerability of people continuing to increase. The major factors for the unabated civil war in Syria have been: the rise of sectarianism, weakness of the Syrian state, external involvement in the Syrian civil war that includes international and regional players in the region.

Keywords: Syria, Civil war, Sectarianism, External intervention

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INTRODUCTION

Overview of the civil war in Syria

The Syrian conflict first emerged in the aftermath of the "Arab Spring" movement in March 2011, as brutal suppression of protests led to a kaleidoscopic armed revolt by dozens of rapidly evolving factions formed around ethnic, religious, regional, and political lines against the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (Tucker, 2015). Central Syria has continued to cause disputations between the Government of Syria (GoS) and various opposition armed groups, and neither party has prevailed over the other (Slim et al, 2015).

The opposition armed groups comprises more than a thousand independent units, many of which call themselves battalions and brigades, but these military terms do not imply the equivalent organization or strength. The independent units are grouped into larger entities on the basis of ideology and nominal loyalty to one or another of the major factions of the rebellion, but their numbers and their loyalties are fluid. Groups

coalesce and divide. Individual leaders may split off to form new groups. Rebel fighters transfer their loyalty from one group to another. The Free Syrian Army (FSA) is an umbrella group of fighting organizations nominally represented abroad by the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), which comprises the first generation of rebels, augmented, as the rebellion spread and the fighting intensified, by tens of thousands of defectors from the Syrian armed forces. Many of the defectors were Sunni conscripts who opposed Alawite domination and may have calculated that the regime would fall quickly (Michael, 2014).

The Islamic Front (formerly the Syrian Islamic Front) also comprises a number of organizations, including the Army of Islam, Ahrar al-Sham, Suqour al-Sham, Liwa al-Tawhid, Liwa al-Haq, Ansar al-Sham, and various other smaller brigades and battalions. These groups can be described as Salafist, that is, they believe in a literal interpretation of the Quran, reject Western political concepts that place man above God (e.g., democracy),

and support the strict imposition of Islamic law, or Sharia. They see the overthrow of Assad as leading to an Islamic state (Ibid).

Some of the armed actors that were successful in the first part of 2015, such as the People's Protection Unit (YPG), ISIL and the pro-Saudi/Qatari/Turkish AOG coalition in Idlib, have tried to consolidate their territorial gains and create buffer zones and outposts from which they launched raids against their direct rivals. These actors are fully aware that they cannot expand their control ad libitum and must cope with the limits imposed by geography and military strategies, as well as by sectarian, ethnic and socioeconomic factors. The ISIL attacks (May 2015) in the Palmyra region and ISIL's presence in the southern suburbs of Damascus, for instance, were not indicative that the jihadist group aims to establish permanent control in the capital or in the western side of Homs region (Slimetal, 2015).

The ongoing crisis continues to pose a constant threat and long term Challenge to the region as a whole and the international community. It has accelerated the decline of security and stability in the region through warfare, enforced migration and displacement of more than 3 million Syrian citizens, as well as destruction of infrastructure on a large scale (Kudors and Pabriks, 2016). Large numbers of people have been died and attracted multiple foreign groups, including both Sunni and Shi'a violent extremist groups, who view the disputed territory taken from the states of Syria and now Iraq as the primary staging ground for their vision of reshaping the Middle East and, in some cases, the entire world (Tucker ,2015). Currently, there is a lack of alternatives to the Assad regime in Syria due to the opposition's disunity and some radical forces may take an advantage of a power vacuum (Dockal, 2012).

The violence has escalated sharply and its impact is widening from neighboring countries towards other neighboring countries such as Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Iraq. Today, the Syrian crisis, which is one of the impacts of the violence, is the major cause for an increase in displacement and the resultant dire humanitarian situation in the region. Since the conflict shows no signs of abating in the near future, there is a constant increase in the number of Syrians vulnerable for different problems. However, a question on the inability of international community to abate the Syrian crisis and the possible causes for this civil war in relation to the crisis is still need to be answered.

Moreover, international communities opinion towards Syrian crisis has become a salient topic as the length of the conflict in the countries extend. Taken all together, in this special issue dealing with Syrian crisis and its unabated civil war, I aim to approach the theme from variety of angles. In this regard, not only the political situation in the country is illustrated, but also the external actors who contributed for the intensification of the

conflict will be critically discussed. By doing so, I try to investigate the regional players, domestic factors and great powers influence that contributed to 'the unabated civil wars in Syria' will be critically analyzed.

Possible factors for the unabated civil war in Syria

The Rise of Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War

Syria's civil war is being fought between the government of President Bashar al-Assad and four major groups of factions: ISIS, Assad's supporters, Syrian Kurds, and some 40 or more factions of Arab Sunni rebels which range from "moderates" to supporters of Al Qaida (Cordesman, 2016). Several armed opposition groups operating in eastern Damascus have fired improvised rockets and artillery into government-controlled neighborhoods, indiscriminately killing civilians. Some armed groups have also besieged civilians from religious minority communities living in outlying pro-government villages and towns. In September 2014 ISIL launched a major military offensive against Kurdish controlled areas in Syria, besieging the border town of Kobane and targeting civilians (Adams, 2015).

These rebel groups tend to divide political power amongst the combatants based on their position on the battlefield. This shows the lack of coordination among actors producing unified political action, is distinct from social fragmentation, referring to the cleavages that divide a population. This inculcates the level of political disunity and the prevalence of sectarianism in the form of clannish, tribal, and ethnic and religious in-groups(Lynch, 2013) and the unrest has proved a magnet for militant Islamists, including al-Qaeda affiliates and Iranian-backed Hezbollah. Refugee outflows, the threat of weapons proliferation, and widening sectarian rifts have stoked fears that the civil war may engulf the wider region (Laub, 2013).

They have sustained their fight against the Assad regime and have secured strong defensive positions. In this military posture, the rebels ensure their survival against the regime but lack the ability to defeat it in decisive battles. Similar dynamics are now at play in Syria. Infighting among the armed opposition has raged in many areas that were wrested from the regime's control. For instance, they took the provincial capital of Raqqa in mid-March 2013. And, when the regime proved unable to take back the city, armed groups there turned on each other. Now, Kurdish militias are essentially at war with the extremist Islamic State. Yet on hotly contested central and southern fronts in the war, the pressure of high-stakes fighting against the regime has pushed some of the same opposition groups enmeshed in infighting elsewhere to be flexible and successfully cooperate to confront the threat. Thus, the longer

opposition forces carve out safe havens but lack the strength to rout the government, the more they will exacerbate the situation and unintended consequences will be happen (Lynch, 2013)

Moreover, the escalation of violence has accelerated radicalisation among the rebels, and the proportion of fighters with Salafist or jihadist leanings has risen accordingly. And foreign jihadis are increasingly infiltrating into Syria. While these are more likely to number hundreds than thousands for the moment, the trend gives cause for concern as it goes hand in hand with a growing confessionalisation of the conflict spurred both by the regime and by the rebels' external sponsors. The result is an increasingly entrenched perception of a Sunni uprising (supported by the Sunni Gulf monarchies and Turkey) against an Alawite regime, those considered its local supporters (Alawites and Christians) and its Shiite allies (Iran, Hezbollah, the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government). Alawites and Christians in particular have come under increasing pressure to take one side or the other and fled their homes in mixed areas fearing rising crime and acts of retribution and revenge especially as residential areas are increasingly hit by bombings (Asseburg and Wimmen, 2012). Therefore, the sectarian schism sustained by extremist actors on different sides and the prevalence of conflict dynamics in the state have been contributed to persistent civil war in the state and in the region. And, the country has incapable to overcome the drawbacks of this profound problem in Syria today.

Weakness of the Syrian state

The Assad regime has been substantially weakened in the course of the civil war. Its army, which numbered some 300,000 at the eruption of hostilities, has lost more than 50 percent of its soldiers as a result of desertions, injuries and deaths among the ranks during the fighting (Christopher, 2014) The Sunni-Alawite split has also contributed to who are willing to risk their lives for the regime. As the campaign dragged on and assumed the form of a war of attrition, exhaustion among supporters of the regime resulted in a rising level of absenteeism, and in turn, a need for a mandatory draft and an appeal for assistance from outside armies, militias, and mercenaries, which have also started to show signs of fatigue (Elizabeth, 2015).

The vacuum left by the weakened Syrian regime was penetrated by a multitude of actors that seized control of large areas, established territorial prominently the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra (the Nusra Front), have proven to be the most effective rivals of the regime, as they have seized extensive areas from northern Syria, northern Iraq, and eastern Syria to parts of southern Syria. A multitude of other armed non-state actors have also emerged in Syria, including less radical Islamists

such as Ahrar ash -Sham and Jaysh al-Islam, and pragmatic opposition forces, led by the Free Syrian Army. Early in the summer 2014, some of the opposition groups operating throughout Syria succeeded in unifying their ranks, primarily balance of power in their favor. In contrast to the regime's shrinking army, forces consisting of both local Syrians and hundreds of foreign volunteers who cross the border each month. The thousands of Hezbollah, Iraqi, and Afghan fighters who joined the fight in support of the Assad regime have found it difficult to maintain the momentum (Eyal, 2015).

The gradual weakening of the Assad regime during the war has thus leads the empowerment of rebel groups to control some parts of the country and encourages them trying to defend themselves. Such moves trigger a cycle of escalation which the weak state is unable to contain the insurgents (Miller, 2007). And also, as the war continued, the Syrian state was increasingly incapable of controlling its periphery and a number of autonomous zones emerged in these areas, which also meant that the state was unable to control its borders (Lawson, 2014). Thus, the weakness of the Syrian state appears to have acted as permissive factor that allowed violence to play out, territories to be grabbed, and extremist forces to proliferate (Belhadj, 2015). Taken all together, resistance against the regime grew and by now it has turned into a multiparty civil war

External Involvement in the Syrian Civil War

Syria has been effectively divided into zones of influence. In the north and south, Jordan and Turkey, supported by Saudi Arabia and the United States, respectively, have created buffer zones near the borders. Similarly, Israel has protected the area of the Golan from any conflict-related spill over. Iran, Russia and Lebanese Hezbollah have provided protection to the corridor of Damascus-Hama and the coastal region, a stronghold of the clans that have been in power in Syria for half a century. Coalitions of Armed Opposition Groups (AOGs), supported by Saudi Arabia and, in some cases, led by the Al Nusra Front (ANF), have established a potentate in the Idlib region (Slim et al, 2015).

States, entities and individuals outside the Syrian Arab Republic have supported all sides, profoundly shaping their operational capabilities and performance. Paradoxically, the international and regional stakeholders that are ostensibly pushing for a peaceful solution to the war are the same that continue to feed the military escalation (UN, 2016). This foreign involvement is articulated in terms of political, military and operational support to parties involved in the ongoing conflict in Syria that began in March 2011. Most parties involved in the war in Syria receive various types of support from foreign countries and entities based outside Syria. In the

perspective of the remaining external conflict parties partaking in the country's civil war, Syria itself is of only subordinate significance. The Syrian civil war has long become a two-fold proxy war between the United States and Russia on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and Iran on the other (Rieger, 2017). Therefore this study intends to analyze the impact of external involvement to the Syrian civil war from the perspective of these international players and regional players those exacerbate the Syrian civil war.

International players: Russia and the USA

Above and beyond the internal power struggle, the conflict has acquired the character of a proxy war in which international, regional and subnational conflicts are fought out. The actors here treat the conflict as a zero-sum game, where success for one is automatically a defeat for the other. One bone of contention is the interpretation and enforcement of international norms, with the United States and other Western states backing the Syrian opposition while Russia and China support the Assad regime with trade and protection in the UN Security Council and, in the case of Russia, arms deliveries. Not least against the backdrop of their own attitude to prodemocracy movements and minorities, Moscow and Beijing resist the application of the principle of international responsibility to protect. In Russian-American relations there are also signs of rivalry over zones of influence echoing the patterns of the Cold War (Asseburg and Wimmen, 2012).

Russia's Intervention in Syrian Civil War

Russia's Foreign Policy objectives in the Middle East describes firstly about stabilizing the situation in the region through as co-sponsor of the Middle East Peace Process and restoring and strengthening its economic positions particularly in the energy sector. Furthermore developing its relations with Turkey, Egypt, Algeria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Libya and Pakistan "and other leading regional States in bilateral and multilateral formats. This makes the country to have upper hand in the Middle East Peace Process as one of the permanent members of the UN Security Council in finding a long term settlement. In this Concept the Russian policy makers give more attention to regional multilateral platforms like the Organization of the Islamic Conference and the League of Arab States (Tabrizi and Pantucci, 2016).

Since the uprising began in 2011, the Russian authorities have continued to support their allies on military, political, diplomatic and economic levels. Through the years covering of the civil war in Syria,

Russian media had vigorously pushed the narrative that foreign intervention or foreign meddling of any form was inappropriate and would only serve to deepen and prolong the conflict. Russia claimed to be primarily targeting ISIS and terrorist groups through the legal permission and interest of the Syrian government (Kudors and Pabriks, 2016).

Accordingly, Russia substantially reinforced its military aid, and Russian planes began carrying out airstrikes against rebel strongholds in an effort to help the Assad regime regain control over parts of western Syria and enable it to defend its strongholds in the coastal region. Russia implemented these measures in coordination with ground forces of the Assad regime, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, and Hezbollah within the framework of an international coalition, operating in parallel to the US-led coalition against the Islamic State and partly coordinating with the US, Israel, and Jordan. These Russian measures have challenged US policy, which does not view President Assad as part of the future Syrian order, as well as the interests of the West, the Gulf states, Turkey, and Israel in the Syrian arena (Udi, 2015)

Russia's direct military intervention in Syria that began in September 2015 achieved two things in Syria that could contributed to the emergence of a new diplomatic relation with the Assad regime and military landscape in the middle east (Pierini, 2016). Firstly, Russia rescued the Assad regime from the brink of collapse, but it appears that the rescue operation had a more general objective than just saving a friendly dictator: to use the Syrian crisis as a vehicle for challenging the assumed U.S. monopoly in the Middle East and achieving Russian diplomatic parity with the United States. Secondly, the drafting in early 2016 of a new Syrian constitution by Moscow is another achievement that has achieved by Russia's to weigh in on the world order, as is its offer to the United States of conducting joint operations against the Islamist group the Nusra Front (Al-Akhbar, 2016).

The current military support provided by Russia to Syria includes jets, bombers, helicopters and tanks, as well as pilots from the Russian Air Force, technical advisers and specialists, members of the Russian Special Forces and tank drivers. Russia was forced to send additional advisers to Syria due to its initial disappointment in the capacity of Syrian and Iranian forces, but it has so far refrained from officially sending ground troops. Since its direct military intervention, Russia has continued to maintain a central diplomatic role in the area (Tabrizi and Pantucci, 2016).

Although, respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of the states is related to Russia's mantra on the priority of international law and role of the UN Security Council, the country have several times violated these principles — for example when the Russia–US brokered deal for the destruction of the Syrian government's chemical weapons programme in 2013. Russia was

already providing training and equipment to the Syrian army before it intervened directly with military force on 30 September 2015 in support of the government, whose stability was highly precarious at the time. These actions indicate that Russia is ready to use sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference as concepts to protect itself against actions of other states that can be harmful for Russian national interest. But at the same time, Russia ignores these principles when it is beneficial for it, especially in regions that according to Russia's understanding are its sphere of interests (Tabrizi and Pantucci, 2016, Kudors and Pabriks, 2016).

Therefore, the covert mission and policy of Russia towards Syria is based on a national interest that rests on state capitalism, and that speaks to nationalist sentiment built on the rejection of Western exploitation. This patriotic nationalist position becomes evident through the lack of any ideologically derived principles driving Russia's position: state interests including national security are what drive current policy. This means that Russia can simultaneously suppress a separatist movement by armed force in one region and champion another separatist movement with armed force in another. In this sense, the Russian Federation has no fixed positions but only fixed interests, and even these interests can change (Bishara, 2015). Russia's motives for supporting Assad are complex and include honoring a long alliance, maintaining strategic position, and great-power pretensions. Russia opposes Western military intervention as a matter of principle. Its affinity toward Christian minorities and its hostility toward Muslim extremists are deeply ingrained (Michael, 2014). Thus, Russian intervention in Syria complicates the possibility of direct American action, and even the idea of an American-supported safe-haven or no-fly zone. The Russian presence reduces the options for the United States. Undoubtedly, this intervention came after close assessment of the likely American responses, with the expectation of a weak reaction (Michael and Jeffrey, 2015)

As described above, the real Russia's policy towards the Assad regime is not saving or defending the state from collapse; rather, it is a means of self-assertion and becoming a global superpower in the Arab world. In other words, the mere fact of Russia's military presence in Syria means that the regime is no longer master of its own purpose and no longer even a player on the country's sustainable peace and stability. Russia's actions, therefore, put Moscow into hostilities not just with Islamist armed groups, but with all the Syrian opposition. Furthermore, Syrian civilians have been targeted by Russian-made arms since the beginning of the conflict (Bishara, 2015).

The USA's Intervention in Syrian Civil War

The USA can be an arbiter of the conflict by intervening with Sunni, which would please Turkey and the Gulf states along with Sunni populations in Syria, Jordan, Palestine, and Egypt — each for different reasons. Shifting alliances in the context of the current multiparty civil war with ample external backing, coupled with the rapid changes in control over territory already have lead and will continue to lead to repeated instances of violent exclusionary policies, since non-core groups that are perceived as enemy-backed, or collaborating with the enemy, are going to be targeted by the respective sides of the conflict (Mylonas, 2012).

In December 2014, the US Congress approved funding for a long term program to arm and trains thousands of moderate Syrian opposition the conditions for promoting a political settlement for the crisis in Syria. Although the US effort to reduce Islamic State activity has not translated into explicit cooperation with the Assad regime and its supporters, the progress in the struggle against the Islamic State has created tension between the United States and some of the opposition forces in Syria. The opposition forces maintain that the key to any solution to the Syrian crisis lies in American involvement and increased pressure on the Assad regime (Christopher et al, 2015).

The basic USA's regional interest is to prevent proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, though the concern has focused more on nuclear weapons than on chemical or biological weapons. While an Israel airstrike obliterated Syria's reported embryonic experiment in nuclear research in September 2007, Syria retains deliverable chemical weapons, and the United States has warned them several times about both moving or using them. In June 2013, the United States claimed it had proof of Syrian chemical weapons use against anti-regime forces, and in August, the regime renewed its chemical attacks. While the Obama administration stated that Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons would cross a "red line," the initial response to the June attack was an announcement that the United States would offer some lethal military equipment to rebel forces (Benjamin, 2013). Accordingly, the United States initially deployed Patriot missiles to reduce the threat of the Assad regime in the region. This was followed by two train-and-equip programs for Syrian rebels (Pierini, 2016).

The Obama administration slowly increased aid to what it considered the more moderate groups, in the hopes of enabling them to oust the Assad government before extremist groups did. If the extremist rebels gained control over Syria, administration officials worried, they would inherit chemical weapons and advanced conventional weapons that could be used against Israeli or U.S. targets. A victory by the moderate rebels, on the other hand, would improve the prospects for the Middle

East peace process and weaken Iran's ability to support Hezbollah and Hamas (Moyar, ND).

Nearing the end of his mandate, United States President Barack Obama appears to have decided to limit the scope of the American intervention in the Middle East to addressing the threats represented by ISIL, ANF and other jihadists and anti-Western armed groups operating in Iraq and Syria. The major United States initiative was the creation of the International Coalition against ISIL in Iraq (8 August 2014) and Syria (23 September 2014). These actions were practically endorsed by UNSCRs 2170 (15 August 2014) and 2178 (24 September 2014). Iran and Russia have officially complained about the creation of a United States-led international coalition, but gave the initiative a *de facto* blessing in the common interest of defeating terrorism (Slimetal, 2015).

According to some critics, Washington has been inconsistent because "the Syrian question is directly linked to the growth of the Islamic State ...it is the Sunni-dominated uprising against Assad that has galvanized jihadi forces, bringing more recruits to al Qaeda-like groups, including the Islamic State, and further destabilizing the whole region. And so regional partners want the Syrian question to be addressed at its roots, and they are unlikely to devote themselves to solving the Islamic State problem unless the United States acknowledges their primary concern (Omar, 2015)."

The tension between the United States and Russia escalated to the point of a possible military clash between them – in Europe as a result of the crisis in Syria, despite the joint struggle against the Islamic State in the region. Both the United States and Russia want to avoid putting boots on the ground, and both have elected to depend mainly on local allies whose reliability and effectiveness are not guaranteed. Despite intensive diplomatic efforts and occasional understandings, agreements are highly temporary, and in an environment powers escalates, with a greater possibility of a military clash between them than what has been seen for a generation (Yadlin, ND). And, considering the continuous involvement of regional and global players in the Syrian civil war, a conflict settlement seems only plausible based on a reconciliation of interests among external conflict actors, predominantly the United States and Russia (Rieger, 2017).

While, it is now unclear what policy the United States will pursue in Syria under a Trump administration – arrangements, succeed in reaching understandings with Russia about Syria's future, increase cooperation with Russia against the Islamic State, or pursue an even more extreme isolationist and noninvolvement policy than the Obama administration is its policy toward Russia. This is because the current USA president, Donald Trump, certainly does not share these high-minded ideas, and yet, his policy is seems anti-intervention is tingenera land pro-Russian in particular. Thus, he may reach some kind

of outstanding bargain with Putinon Syria.

Regional players: Saudi and Iran

The transformation underway in the Arab world since 2011 would likely continue in their dysfunctionality and even disintegration (Syria, Yemen, and Libya, countries that led the radical strategy against Israel have been weakened and thus now lend priority to the existential threats against them, at the expense the Muslim Brotherhood, and the secular groups) are likely to continue and hamper recovery in the Arab world. Fundamental economic, demographic, and social problems, including a shortage of water and low energy prices, high unemployment, and rampant despair among the younger generation would impeded the Arab world's ability to recover from the prolonged crisis (Yadlin, ND).

Civil wars with many local and external players would likely continue, and would affect negatively on the stability of countries in the region and in Europe (due to the stream of refugees). Saudi Arabia persists in the proactivism that has characterized its policy since the accession of King Salman, and his son, Minister of Defense Muhammad bin Salman, continues to play a major role in the country's leadership. The new Saudi leadership believes that it faces an existential struggle against the Shiite axis led by Iran, and with unprecedented assertiveness, Riyadh is trying to lead an axis of Sunni countries against Iran. Long willing to tap the Shiite axis, it is now also embarking on direct military intervention. This began in Bahrain, and is particularly prominent in Yemen, where Saudi Arabia continues its campaign against the Houthi rebels, mostly through air strikes. Most of the Gulf States support Saudi Arabia's efforts, particularly the United Arab Emirates, which has also sent ground troops into Yemen (Ibid).

Arab governments, including Gulf States and Jordan, have provided arms and financial and diplomatic support to the opposition. At the United States' urged, both Saudi Arabia and Qatar agreed to halt support to extremist groups, funneling arms through the Supreme Military Council instead. Sudan, vying for influence and profits, has supplied some of the military equipment paid for by Arab donor states despite its close ties with Iran and China (Laub, 2013).

Starting in 2011, Saudi-Iranian relations deteriorated further. In the turmoil caused by the so-called Arab Spring, both states saw opportunities to increase their regional influence and roll back that of the other. Iran vocally supported the anti-government protests against the pro-Saudi regime in Bahrain and improved relations with Saudi Arabia's ally Egypt during Mohammed Mursi's presidency. In the summer of 2011, Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, saw the evolving situation in Syria as an opportunity to strike a painful blow to Iran's influence in

the Arab world (Rieger, 2017).

Saudi Arabia

In the beginning, the Saudi leadership had attempted to de-escalate the incipient Syrian civil war by appealing to President al-Assad to end the violence and address the demands of his people. However, by August 2011, with the Free Syrian Army having meanwhile taken control over considerable parts of the Syrian territory and the regime's violence having further escalated, the Saudi leadership publicly called for the al-Assad regime to step down. Subsequently, Saudi Arabia began to grant oppositional groups material support. The escalation of violence by an Alawite-dominated regime allied with Shiite Iran against a majority Sunni population had put domestic pressure on the Saudi leadership to take sides on behalf of the Syrian opposition so as to remove the Assad regime from power the only Arab regime closely allied with Iran (Rieger, 2017).

Dictated by its perceived self-interests to confront Iranian influence in the Middle East, Riyadh has supported the majority Sunnis to topple the Assad government, a close strategic ally of Tehran. The Shiite – Sunni divide has had its repercussions on Saudi policy towards Syria as well. Saudi Arabia is a leading Sunni power and sees itself as the defender of the Sunnis everywhere, while Iran has emerged as the leading Shiite power in the Muslim world. It is in Syria where these two Muslim states championing the two rival sects of Islamic religion stood face to face to each other. Guided by its Sunni cult of Wahhabism, a strict version of Islam that brands the Shiites as non-believers or the rejectionists of true Islamic beliefs, Riyadh has firmly upheld the cause of the Sunnis financially, militarily and by sending Saudi Salafist fighters to Syria (Nuruzzaman, 2014).

Saudi Arabia has until recently sent significant resources to the armed opposition preferentially to Jabhat al-Nusra and other Salafist groups. Consequently Jabhat al-Nusra has become the best-armed force among the opposition groups. It has been at the tip of the spear in operations in Eastern Syria, Aleppo, and Damascus. Its combat proficiency and relatively greater access to materiel and funding have led other opposition groups to tolerate its participation in military operations across the country. This cooperation has been transactional and not always entirely voluntary, since the bulk of the armed opposition rejects al Qaeda's global jihadist view and much of the Salafist ideology as well (Kagan, 2013).

Iran

Iran has supported Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad since the first civil uprisings of March 2011, when the

Syrian leader faced down protesters with bombs and bullets. Iran has regarded its involvement as a key test of its ability and, crucially, political utility. In the early stages of the conflict, Iran has provided technical and financial support to the Syrian regime, mainly delivered via the Quds Force. In late 2012, the force played a crucial role in creating the National Defence Forces (NDF), a Syrian paramilitary organization assisting the regular army and mustering some 100,000 fighters from various religious sects. Its funding is allegedly supervised by Iran. Between 2011 and early 2013, as conditions on the ground deteriorated, Iran sent members of its Law Enforcement Force and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Ground Forces to advise Assad and to provide training and logistical support to the Syrian army (Tabrizi and Pantucci, 2016).

This kind of support has been provided to Syrian's regime because of the country's strategic importance to Iran's interests in the Middle East and has long been Iran's closest state ally. The Assad regime has provided crucial access to Iranian proxies, including Lebanese Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, allowing Iran to move people, weapons, and money to these groups through Syrian territory. Iran has provided support to Syria's chemical weapons programs, including the deployment of Iranian scientists, the supply of equipment and precursor chemicals, and technical training. Syria has been Iran's strategic partner in deterring Israel from attacking Iran's proxies or its nuclear program. Iran's strategy in Syria aims to keep President Bashar al Assad in power as long as possible while setting conditions to ensure Tehran's ability to use Syrian territory and assets to pursue its regional interests. Iran has conducted an extensive, expensive, and integrated effort to achieve these objectives (Fulton et al, 2013).

On the other side, Iran regards the power struggle in Damascus (like the international sanctions against the Islamic Republic) as an element of a U.S.- and Israeli driven policy of isolation that ultimately seeks regime change in Tehran. The Iranian leadership sees itself at the forefront of a strategic/ideological conflict about nothing less than liberating the region from U.S. and Israeli hegemony. Iran therefore supports the Syrian regime with military advisers, financial transfers and energy supplies, while the rebels receive political and logistical support from Western actors like France, the United States and Turkey, and financial and military aid from the Gulf States (Asseburg and Wimmen, 2012).

Iran's position is also linked to fears of the establishment of Kurdish independence in northern Syria. While Iran does not consider the Kurds a terrorist group, it does not consider them an ally either, given their views on the future prospects of the Assad regime. In this regard, it sees the Kurdish group in Syria as 'a useful force in the fight against Daesh which, however, does not have the same long-term interests in Syria'. In March,

Iran joined Turkey in rejecting the local Kurdish administration's declaration of a federal structure in northern Syria, stating: 'They want to divide Syria.' Iran's stance on the Kurds in Syria and a possible federal post-conflict Syria seems to be the main point of disagreement with Russia, particularly since March. Moscow has been described as 'more pro-Kurdish, without consideration for the consequences', while Tehran worries that greater autonomy for Syrian Kurds might trigger the establishment of independent Kurdish states in Turkey, Iraq and, ultimately, Iran (Tabrizi and Pantucci, 2016).

As discussed above, actors in Syrian civil war have the capability to sustain the civil war and exacerbate the situation. This is accompanied by foreign funding which is increased access to arms for rebel groups and an influx of foreign fighters and then enhanced the capabilities of a growing number of radical Islamist armed groups, such as al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIL. This shows the civil war includes multiple players such as multiple rebel groups and government backed armed forces as well as external states those exacerbate the civil war and bring their own agenda beyond trying to help one side win the conflict. In this regard, when civil war contain more players, it is harder to find a negotiated settlement that all of these actors prefer to continue conflict because the set of agreements that all actors prefer to conflict is smaller, it is harder to assess the relative balance of power across all players, and each individual actor has a capacity to exacerbate the situation.

For instance, since Russia intervened in the Syrian Civil War; government forces have fought back from their lowest point in May 2015 and begun a series of successful offensive operations around the rebel stronghold of Aleppo. This offensive strategy has been highly successful for the government due in large part to Russian air strikes. In the opposite side, anti-government armed groups have failed to sustain the offensive momentum that allowed them to make significant gains in the first months of 2015. Apart from the minor advance in northern Hamah, they have been pushed back into a defensive posture in most of the other contested areas, subsequently losing several strategic positions. This was happened because of the capacity of the rebels to confront multiple opponents simultaneously on different front lines has decreased in recent months, partly owing to the intensified airstrikes against their command centres, logistical networks and lines of communications. Disagreements among certain groups with regard to the political process have also affected their operational cohesion (Hartberg, 2015). However, they never give up ending the civil war because they have the capability to sustain the civil war by receiving external support from different states. In this regard, both the government and various rebel groups receive support from external states. It is likely that some of these states bring independent

preferences to the conflict and represent additional players in the situation. As such, the civil war not abated and it is difficult for the government, the rebels themselves, and the international community to determine the fate of the country to settle the war and achieve peace and stability in the state.

CONCLUSION

The Syrian crisis is not only an indigenous phenomenon but it is also a hostage to external power politics among different regional and international players. External supporters of both the regime and opposition see the conflict in Syria having far-reaching, in some cases even existential implications for their own strategic positions and long-term political objectives at the expense of the regions peace and stability. With the experience since 2011, international players and regional players in the area focus on balancing each other in order to exclude one another from an area or at least prevent the emergence of the rival as a hegemon in a place where they have important interests. The rise of sectarianism in the civil war and the weakness of the Syrian state to control the destructive role of this disunited rebel groups are also a driving factor for the major distortions of the political system. And, it could turn into the domination of terrorist groups in the Middle East in general and in Syria in particular with extremely high tendencies. Furthermore, as already mentioned, such an intervention may incense Russia, USA, Saudi Arabia and Iran and possibly other countries. This is because the relations within the international community are already fragile and possible foreign operation in Syria may further endure the unstable status quo. And significant military successes for one side are likely to lead almost automatically to an intensification of the crisis. Taken all together, it seems impossible to abate the civil war to mitigate the vulnerability of the people and instability in the region, as long as these profound problems exist in the state.

Therefore, for the civil war to end in negotiated settlement, all the actors (both regional and international) that have the ability to continue the conflict have to agree to actually stop involving in the civil war. The international community's also should continue their effort to prevent the conflict through continuous discussion with rebel groups and the Syrian government to create conducive environment for political settlement and to end the civil war. This requires working with international players, regional players, Arab League, United Nations and other organizations. In such a way the indispensable role is to be played in supporting Syria's transition from sectarian family rule to something better, and in mitigating the radicalizing influence of regime violence and growing jihadist prominence. This may need also providing different training, equipment—possibly including

humanitarian aid—and other forms of support to deny the maximum extent of possible assistance flowing from outside Syria into the hands of jihadists. Moreover, the Syrian government should work with the Syrian Opposition groups, the Supreme Military Council, local committees and respect politicians and technocrats those contributed for religious tolerance, citizens equality and the rule of law. This will help them to develop the spirit of national unity and to solve their differences peacefully and end the civil war.

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