

SYRIAN CRISIS: A REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL ISSUE

¹Laurene Thomas, ²Dr. Joshy M Paul

¹Pursuing Masters in International Studies, ²Assistant Professor

^{1,2}Department of International Studies and History, Christ (Deemed to be University), Karnataka, India

Abstract : The Arab spring protest that took place in 2011 as a result of aversion to the Assad government is what led to the Syrian Civil War. The civil war from the beginning has been a controversial topic that has led to discussions and debates between the key players and also the neighbouring countries. It is an event that has created havoc and has induced tremendous fear in the minds of the Syrian people and also the people of its neighbouring nations. This paper examines the war as a regional and international problem and also looks into the role of the external countries and their effects on the war. It further goes on to explaining about the aid that Israel has given to the refugees of the civil war. It also studies the relation that United States and Israel have during the course of the war. It is observed that International diplomatic efforts also have so far failed to secure a lasting cease-fire to the Syrian conflict.

Index terms – Syrian crisis, Humanitarian Aid, Civil war, US, Russia, Israel, Hezbollah, Turkey, International Relations

1. INTRODUCTION

The Syrian civil war that entered its eighth year is one of the centuries deadliest and has turned out to be a major regional security issue. The circumstance in Syria has also without a doubt become an international peace and security issue. The unrest in Syria began as part of the wider wave of the Arab spring protests in 2011 which grew out of the discontent for the Assad government and escalated to an armed conflict after the protests that were conducted for his removal was violently suppressed (syria: the story of the conflict, 2016). The war had erupted in order to remove Bashar al Assad and his regime which was the top priority for most of the western powers including US and Sunni-ruled countries in the Arab world. The roots of this conflict could be traced back to 1971 when Hafez-al-Assad who was an Alawite declared himself as the president of Syria. In 1973 he had implemented a new constitution according to which the president need not be a Muslim. This resulted in fierce demonstrations in Hama, Homs and Aleppo controlled by Muslim brotherhood and ulama which ended up being a national crisis. The agitators considered Assad as the enemy of Allah and called a jihad against his government. After his death in 2000 his son Bashar al- Assad was elected as the president of Syria. Bashar al-Assad had initially inspired a hope for democratic reforms but his critics say that he has failed to deliver the promised reforms. He perpetuates that no Moderate opposition has to exist to his rule and that all opposition forces are Jihadists that intent on destroying his secular leadership.

In correspondence to this prolonged conflict the moderate opposition forces have weakened and taking advantage of this the international terrorist groups have managed to take up initiative and started to attract human resources, weapons and finances from abroad in the name of Sunni-solidarity. The situation in Syria further worsens due to the direct and indirect involvement of foreign countries. The war has also resulted in a major humanitarian crisis which has worsened this year. The turmoil and violence have caused mass migration to destinations both within the region and beyond. The current crisis has escalated sharply and its impact is widening from neighbouring countries toward Europe. The Syrian crisis is the major cause for an increase in displacement and the extremely serious outcome of humanitarian situation in the region. Since the conflict shows no signs of declining in the near future, there is a constant increase in the number of Syrians fleeing their homes. More than 4.5 million people have fled Syria since the beginning of the war most of them being women and children. The neighbouring countries like Lebanon, Jordan and turkey are facing a huge problem in coping up with the largest refugee exodus whereas only about 10% of the refugees have sought safety in Europe. Further around 6.5 million people are internally displaced in Syria.

2. METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study primarily used primary sources like news reports of news websites like Reuters, CNN, BBC, and New York Times. Secondary sources like journals and periodicals were referred. Reports published by prestigious institutions were also used during the course of study.

3. ROLE OF EXTERNAL COUNTRIES IN THE CRISIS

3.1 US

The United States is and has always been in support of the Syrian opposition group. They started off by supplying non-lethal aid that included food rations and pickup trucks and later began providing training, cash and intelligence to selected Syrian rebel commanders. The first move from US against the Assad government was the limited sanctions which were imposed on April 2011 which was followed by the executive orders of then president Barack Obama that targeted particularly Assad and also six

other senior officials (Wilson, 2011). President Obama had issued a written statement that said “the future of Syria was supposed to be determined by its people but Assad is standing in their way.” (Warrick, 2011) Obama also signed executive orders that froze all the assets of the Syrian government which was under US jurisdiction; he also banned the Americans from doing business with the Syrian government and also stopped imports of Syrian oil and petroleum products to the United States (Obama, 2011). In April 2013 Obama’s administration had assured to increase non-lethal aid to the rebels, the officials said that they had approved on providing lethal arms to the supreme military council but however it would not include anti-craft weapons which was mostly demanded by the armed opposition (Mark Mazzetti, 2013). Further US agreed that it would arm the rebels in Syria and also would consider Syria’s southern border with Jordan as a no-fly zone in order to allow a safe place to equip and train the rebels. In the following year there were videos that appeared as evidences to show the rebels of Syria using US made anti-tank rockets. In 2015 there were reports that said there were shipments of 994 tonnes of weapons and ammunition from Eastern Europe to the rebels in Syria. US has been providing large amount of weapons to the Syrian rebel groups which include anti-tank missiles, RPG-7s, AK-47s etc (Jeremy Binnie, 2016) Donald Trump’s administration in 2017 decided to stop the Central Intelligence Agency(CIA) program to equip and train anti-government rebels. The Foreign Ministry of Syria reaffirmed that it considered the presence of the US forces, or any other foreign military presence, in Syria without the approval of the Syrian government “an act of aggression and an attack on the sovereignty of the Syrian Arab Republic” and rejected the U.S.’ attempt to connect the US military presence in Syria with the settlement process (SANA, 2017). In late November 2017, the US government made it known that they intended to use the presence of US troops in northern Syria, deployed there in support of the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces(SDF), to pressure president Assad to make concessions at the talks in Geneva. There were several deliberate air and artillery strikes by the US-led coalition which resulted in killing 100 pro government fighters in eastern Syria. Later in April 2018 President Donald Trump had announced that the US, France and UK have decided to carry out a series of military attacks against the Syrian government of Bashar al Assad. The strikes came in the wake of the Douma chemical attack (Phil Stewart, 2018). US National Security Advisor John Bolton, on January 2019 said that the withdrawal of US troops from Syria depends on certain conditions, including the assurance that the remnants of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant(ISIL) forces are defeated and Kurds in northern Syria were safe from Turkish forces (Syria conflict: Bolton says US withdrawal is conditional, 2019). The US officials state that though they pull out their troops from Syria they will still continue the battle against ISIL and they also warned that there will be no reconstruction aid for the areas controlled by Bashar al-Assad until Iran and its proxies have left.

3.2 RUSSIA

Russia has been supporting the government of Syria since the beginning of the war. They have been providing political support through military aid and from 2015 onwards have started direct military involvement. The Russian leadership is against the demands of the Western powers and their Arab allies that Bashar al-Assad should not be allowed to be a participant in the Syrian settlement. Russia’s upper house of parliament had authorised the Russian president to use armed forces in Syria (Mamontov, 2015) Russia had acknowledged that Russian air and missile strikes targeted not only ISIL, but also rebel groups in the Army of Conquest coalition like al-Nusra Front, al-Qaeda’s Syrian branch, and even The Free Syrian Army(FSA) (syrian crisis: russian airstrikes strengthen IS, 2015). Russia also provided armament and air support to turkey and the Syrian democratic forces in their operations against ISIL in Syria. Russia from the early stages of the conflict has been taking sides and providing ammunition and weapons to the Syrian government. 10% of Russia’s global arms sales are to Syria, this has resulted in criticism by the Western countries as well as some of the Arab nations but the Russian government pay no heed to these criticisms by saying that the arms sale to Syria did not violate any standing arms embargoes (Galpin, 2012). Besides providing the refurbished MI-25 helicopter gunships, Russia was also said to have transferred to Syria the Buk-M2 air defence system, the Bastion coastal defence missile system, and Yak-130 combat jet trainer (Sayginer, 2012). Russian shipments of fuel have also assisted Assad and an unspecified number of military advisers are teaching Syrians how to use Russian weapons. Syrian officers and air defence personnel were trained in Russia (Grove, 2013). On 30 September 2015, Russia launched its first airstrikes against targets in Rastan, Talbiseh, and Zafaraniya in Homs province of Syria. The Assad government was reported to have used Russian-supplied MI-8 and Mi-17 helicopters to carry out barrel-bomb attacks in Homs. According to former senior American intelligence official Jeffrey White, Russia was most likely providing spare parts such as engines, transmissions and rotors (Michael R. Gordon, 2014). Russia enhanced its military presence in Syria by deploying 12 Su-25 ground attack aircrafts, 12 Su-24 interdictor aircraft, 6 medium bombers, 4 multirole combat aircraft and 15 helicopters (Blair, 2015). Russia has always been a major military backup for the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad.

3.3 IRAN

Iran and Syria has been close strategic allies due to which Iran has provided significant support to the Syrian government in the Syrian civil war. They have provided logistical, technical and financial support as well as training and also some combat groups. Iran looks upon the survival of the Syrian government as being crucial to its regional interests (Sherlock, 2014). Iranian security and intelligence services are advising and assisting the Syrian military in order to preserve Bashar al-Assad’s hold on power. Iran and Hezbollah provided important battlefield support for Assad, allowing it to make advances on the opposition (Jonathan Saul, 2014). In 2014, Iran stepped up its support for Syrian President Assad. It spends at least \$6 billion annually on maintaining Assad’s government. In the civil uprising phase of the Syrian civil war, Iran was said to be providing Syria with technical support based on Iran’s capabilities developed following the 2009–2010 Iranian election protests (Lake, 2015). The Iranian government was also assisting the Syrian government with riot control equipment and intelligence monitoring techniques. They have provided the Syrian government with technology to observe e-mail, cell phones and social media. It has developed these capabilities in the wake of the 2009 protests and spent millions of dollars establishing a “cyber army” to track down dissidents online. Iran’s

monitoring technology is believed to be among the most sophisticated in the world, perhaps only second to China. The economist in one of its reports said that Iran had, by February 2012, sent the Syrian government \$9 billion to help it withstand Western sanctions (syrian crisis: the long road to damascus, 2012). It has also shipped fuel to the country and sent two warships to a Syrian port in a display of power and support. Iran has also supplied the Syrian government with arms in 2011 despite a ban on weapons exports by the Islamic Republic. In September 2012, Western intelligence officials stated that Iran had sent 150 senior members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards to preserve the Assad government, and had also sent hundreds of tons of military equipment (among them guns, rockets, and shells) to the Assad government via an air corridor that Syria and Iran jointly established (Coughlin, 2012). These officials believed that the intensification of Iranian support had led to increased effectiveness against the Free Syrian Army by the Assad government. Iranian Revolutionary Guard soldiers, along with fellow Shiite forces from Hezbollah and members of Iran's Basij militia participated in the capture of Qusair from rebel force (Sherlock, 2014). In 2014, Iran increased its deployment of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps(IRGC) in Syria. Iran was also reported to have proposed to open a new Syrian front against Israel in the Golan Heights. Iran also stepped up support on the ground for Syrian President Assad, providing hundreds more military specialists to gather intelligence and train troops. This further backing from Tehran, along with deliveries of munitions and equipment from Moscow, is helping to keep Assad in power. In June 2017, Iran attacked militants' targets in the Deir Ezzor area in eastern Syria with ballistic missiles fired from western Iran (Irans revolutionary guard strikes syria for tehran attack, 2017). In May 2018, Iranian Quds forces based in Syria launched a 20 rockets attack on Israel. None of the rockets hit any targets and Israeli aircraft responded by extensively hitting both Syrian and Iranian military sites in Syria. Despite Iran's costly presence in Syria, public support for military involvement in Syria remains strong among the Iranians because of religious motivations and security concerns (Iran's involvement in Syria is costly. Here's why most Iranians still support it, 2017).

3.4 HEZBOLLAH

Hezbollah has been substantial from the beginning of the Syrian civil war and has been an active support and troop deployment from 2012. Hezbollah by 2014 turned out to be a steady support to the Syrian ba'athist government and had deployed several fighters in Syria and also lost up to 1500 of their fighters in combat by 2015 (Britel, 2015). They have been very active in preventing the rebels from penetrating into Lebanon from Syria. Hezbollah has long been an ally of the Ba'ath government of Syria, led by the Al-Assad family. Geneive Abdo opined that Hezbollah's support for al-Assad in the Syrian war has "transformed" it from a group with "support among the Sunni for defeating Israel in a battle in 2006" into a "strictly Shia paramilitary force" (Abdo, 2013). The US in 2012 had sanctioned Hezbollah for its alleged role in the war. The general secretary had denied that Hezbollah was fighting for the ba'athist government in one of his speeches but according to the Lebanese daily star newspaper Nasrallah in the same speech that said that Hezbollah fighters helped the Ba'athist government "retain control of some 23 strategically located villages [in Syria] inhabited by Shiites of Lebanese citizenship". Nasrallah said that Hezbollah fighters have died in Syria doing their "jihadist duties" (Hirst, 2012). Hezbollah fighters in 2012 had crossed the border from Lebanon and took over eight villages in the Al-Qusayr District of Syria and in 2013; Syrian opposition groups claimed that Hezbollah, backed by the Syrian military, attacked three neighbouring Sunni villages controlled by the Free Syrian Army (FSA). On May 25, 2013, Nasrallah announced that Hezbollah is fighting in the Syrian Civil War against Islamic extremists and "pledged that his group will not allow Syrian militants to control areas that border Lebanon". He also confirmed that Hezbollah was fighting in the strategic Syrian town of Al-Qusayr on the same side as Assad's forces. Hezbollah participated in the Siege of Deir ez-Zur in 2016, according to pro-government sources (Aboufadel, 2016). In 2017, Hezbollah played a major role in the pro-government Central Syria campaign. In June 2018, Israeli and Syrian opposition media reported that a senior Hezbollah field officer executed 23 Syrian soldiers from the 9th Armoured Division after they refused to cross a bridge which is exposed to the fire of the rebels, and was nicknamed the "Death Bridge", near the town of Hirbat Ghazala, north of the city of Daraa. Hezbollah's role has become critical in defeating Syrian rebels in behalf of the Syrian government and has grown stronger in the region (Bassam, 2017).

3.5 TURKEY

Turkey which had a relatively friendly relationship with Syria over the decade prior to the start of the Syrian civil unrest in the spring of 2011, condemned the Syrian president Bashar al-Assad over the violent crackdown on protests in 2011 and later that year joined a number of other countries demanding his resignation (Burch, 2011). In the beginning of the Syrian war Turkey trained defectors of the Syrian Army on its territory, and in July 2011, a group of them announced the birth of the Free Syrian Army, under the supervision of Turkish intelligence. Turkey also began sheltering the Free Syrian Army, offering the group a safe zone and a base of operations. Together with Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Turkey has also provided the rebels with arms and other military equipment. Tensions between Syria and Turkey significantly worsened after Syrian forces shot down a Turkish fighter jet in June 2012, and there were border clashes that erupted in 2012 (Mackey, 2012). The Turkish armed forces in 2016 started a direct military intervention into Syria pursuing as targets both ISIL and the Kurdish-aligned forces in Syria. Turkey had also provided refuge for Syrian dissidents. Turkey has become increasingly hostile to the Assad government's policies and has encouraged reconciliation among dissident factions. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had been trying to "cultivate a favourable relationship with whatever government would take the place of Assad (Ankara, 2016). Few of the opposition fighters in Syria began being armed and trained by the Turkish national intelligence organisation. Turkey has been accused of supporting or colluding with ISIL, especially by Syrian Kurds. The Syrian Kurds and turkey's main Kurdish party Halkların Demokratik Partisi(HDP) also accused turkey of allowing ISIL soldiers to cross its border and attack the Kurdish town of Kobani. They also claimed that Islamic State snipers were hiding among grain depots on the Turkish side of the border and firing on the town. Also

in addition to this the Kurds accused turkey of using the US-led coalition against IS as a cover to attack the Kurdish Partiya Karkeren Kurdistane (PKK) in both turkey and Iraq and now against the Yekineyen Parastina Gel (YPG) in northern Syria. Turkey has been further criticised for allowing individuals from outside the region to enter its territory and join ISIL in Syria (Tattersall, 2014). They are also accused of becoming a transit country for Islamist fighters and have been regarded as the "Gateway to jihad." The Turkish state intelligence agency Milli Istihbarat Teskilati (MIT) was also accused of having helped in delivering arms to parts of Syria under the Islamist insurgent control.

4. ISRAEL AID TO SYRIAN CRISIS

Israel's role in the Syrian crisis is of political, military and humanitarian nature. While the official position of Israel is neutral in the conflict but they oppose the involvement of Iran in the crisis. Israel has been providing humanitarian aid to the Syrian war victims from 2013 which is a result or an effort that is taken as part of Operation Good Neighbour which was launched by the Israeli military. The Israeli military began Operation Good Neighbour, which was presented by them as a multi-faceted humanitarian relief operation to prevent starvation of Syrians who live along the border and provide basic or advanced medical treatment. The aid consists of medical care, water, electricity, education or food and is given to Syrians near the ceasefire line between Israel and Syria, often escorted across by Israeli soldiers. Over 200,000 Syrians have received such aid, and more than 4,000 of them have been treated in Israeli hospitals since 2013. Many of the treated victims are civilian, and were often children. According to a report published in 29th June 2018 the Israeli military has been delivering aid to the Syrian refugees who are fleeing from the country's southwest but will not allow these civilians enter the Golan heights to take refuge (Sanchez, 2018). Israel has never acknowledged refugees since the beginning of the civil war but has provided aid to the civilians near its borders and also provided some support for the Syrian rebel groups in the south. The Israeli defence forces (IDF) said they delivered 13 tons of food, 15 tons of baby food, 3 pallets of medical equipment and medicine and also 30 tons of clothing to the Syrian refugees (Sanchez, 2018). The military has said that several thousands of Syrian civilians fleeing the hostilities are living in poor conditions in the camps near the Israeli border often lacking access to water, electricity, sources of food, or other basic necessities. Israel was widely considered as an enemy by the people of Syria although the perceptions have become more mixed by the supporters of the opposition as Israel has fought against the Assad regime and delivered aid. Around 5000 Syrian civilians have made it into Israel to receive medical treatment and have returned back to Syria after receiving treatment (Sanchez, 2018). For several years now, as part of its "Operation Good Neighbour," the IDF has been providing humanitarian, life-saving aid to Syrian civilians caught in the crossfire of the civil war that has been intense in the country, while at the same time avoiding interfering in the conflict. While the IDF sent humanitarian aid, it made it clear it will not allow fleeing Syrians to enter Israel. "The IDF will continue maintaining Israel's security interests," the army said in a statement. Israel has been providing aid to south-western Syria since 2013, including treating chronically ill children who have no access to hospitals, facilitating the construction of clinics in Syria, and supplying hundreds of tons of food, medicine, and clothing to war-ravaged villages across the border. Israel also worked with international aid organizations to open a clinic along the border in 2017. Since its opening last year, the clinic has treated some 6,000 Syrian patients. The IDF also facilitated the construction of two clinics within Syria, which are run by locals and NGO workers. This includes logistical coordination and sending over building materials and medical equipment. The quantity of clothes, baby formula, medical supplies, diesel fuel, and generators being transferred to Syrians has also significantly increased in time. Israel has also sent hundreds of tons of flour, oil, sugar, salt, canned beans, and dry goods, as well as several cars and mules. Most of the aid was donated by NGOs over the years but some were also provided by the Israeli government directly (Bybelezer, 2018).

5. US AND ISRAEL RELATION DURING THE CRISIS

The United States support for Israel from the beginning has been in the form of foreign aid. Since 1985 United States has provided nearly \$3 billion in grants annually to Israel and since the Second World War Israel has spent most of these funds purchasing US goods and services. After the crisis began US has provided \$3.1 billion to Israel as foreign military aid and Israel has also benefited from about \$8 billion of loan guarantees but after president Barack Obama took office there has been strains in the relationship (sharp, 2018). In 2010 Israel had announced that they would go on to build new homes that were already under construction in the eastern Jerusalem neighbourhood. This incident was declared as a serious row between the two allies and according to secretary of state Hillary Clinton this move by Israel was deeply negative for the US-Israel relations. This strain and tensions among the two countries had sustained for a while. Later on the relationship between the two countries were restored. US aid to Israel was in the form of military assistance. Apart from this military and financial assistance US has also provided economic assistance and political support to Israel and Israel though being militarily powerful have been dependant on the US for its economic and military strength. United States and Israel had deep military and intelligence ties between them. Israel have largely contributed to the national interest of United States through joint training and exercises as well as exchanges on military policy, US has benefited in areas of Counter-terrorism cooperation, tactical intelligence and experience in urban warfare. The largest ever US-Israel joint exercise took place in 2012. According to US foreign policy experts Robert Blackwell and Walter Slocombe, the US-Israel special relationship is not only on the grounds of shared values and morality but is also because of the benefits derived from the bilateral security coordination. US homeland security and military agencies have turned to Israeli technology to solve few of their most troublesome technical problems. The Israeli technology promoted American interests and Israel had shared with the US military the technology doctrine and its experience regarding the aerial systems for both intelligence collections and combat. US also had abroad and multifaceted relation with Israel which is the most sophisticated and experienced partner of US in the realm of missile defence cooperation. Israel's integrated multi-layered command and control network has helped the US military to defend against the Iranian missile threats. Israel has been a full partner in intelligence operation which is

a benefit to both US and Israel. This intimate relationship between both the countries have reinforced overall US intelligence efforts by providing Washington an access to Israel's unique set of capabilities for collection and assessments on key countries and issues in the region.

The US-Israel relationship is an important asset to US national interests. US security, strategy, and policy communities should more critically engage on the strategic aspects of the US-Israel relationship and should see how to further develop the bilateral ties. These measures will make sure that US-Israel relations are seen not only as a diplomatic vehicle to express deep-rooted values and fulfil America's moral responsibility, but also as an important means to advance US national interests.

6. CONCLUSION

The Syrian crisis has been a much discussed regional and international issue. The war has caused a lot of havoc and tensions in Syria and also among its neighbouring countries and allies and still continues to do so. It has caused a large amount of casualties and damages in Syria. International diplomatic efforts have so far failed to secure a lasting cease-fire to the Syrian conflict, even to lay the basis for a negotiated political settlement, and as a result, the region and its people are likely to face the prospect of greater instability and suffering. The Syrian conflict has the potential to change the regional balance of power significantly with all players nervously looking at the gains and losses to their regional status and strength and responding accordingly.

The Syrian conflict has turned out to be more than a civil war for years. It has turned to be a battlefield for regional players, War on terror and also intra-Syrian conflicts. It has also been influenced and impacted by several foreign actors which caused the war to become worse. The civil war has been and continues to be a dangerous and serious issue that has caused fear in the minds of the Syrian people.

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