

Emerging Security Dynamics in Syria: Role of Foreign Powers:

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Introduction

Syria currently presents a complex diplomatic, security and political mosaic. A country-wide truce, effected on 30 December, 2016 by Russia, Turkey and Iran, has ceased the war in considerable areas of Syria and brought in a modicum of fragile peace.¹ This initiative has also been endorsed by both UN and USA. Though, the truce does not include areas controlled by Islamic State and Jabet Fateh al-Sham. Further talks between Syrian government forces and rebels groups took place in Astana, Kazakhstan, on 23 January 2017.² These negotiations precede Geneva III talks, likely to be held in mid-February. Turkey's Operation 'Euphrates Shield' has entered its fifth month.³ Militarily intervention in northern Syria on August 24, 2016, by Turkey purportedly is aimed at defeating and displacing ISIS from the Turkish border regions. Turkey along with Free Syrian Army (FSA) battled ISIS in Jarabulus and took its control and is currently waging a brutal war against it in al-Bab. But the equally important geopolitical rationale of Operation Euphrates Shield was to scuttle the vision of People's Protection Units (YPG) to make the three Kurdish cantons of Jazira, Kobane and Afrin geographically contiguous. Moreover, USA and Syrian Democratic Forces (SMF), a coalition of Kurdish and Arab forces, have launched operation 'Wrath of Euphrates' against ISIS in Raqqa in the east of Syria.⁴ Taking advantage of Syrian government's fight in the north and centre of Syria, ISIS

took back the control of Palmyra from Syrian government and has again indulged in an orgy of demolishing treasured historical monuments and destroying artifacts. The recapturing of all of Aleppo gave a severe military and psychological blow to rebels. Moreover, Syrian government forces with the help of Russian aerial support and Iranian supported militias on the ground have been able to wrest the last enclave of opposition forces in al-Waer in Homs from the rebels. Assad regime now controls all of Damascus and its suburbs with the exception of Easter Ghouta.

This paper attempts to understand these significant developments by evaluating the role of four main protagonists that have helped to bring in a country-wide truce in Syria (Russia, USA, Iran and Turkey). Revisiting the evolution of foreign policies of important regional and international actors vis-à-vis Syria could possibly go a long way in understanding these emerging security dynamics.

Turkey's Syrian Policy

Turkey and Syria had been in opposite camps during the Cold War. Besides this, Syria had claims over the southern Turkish province of Hatay and had demanded greater share of the waters of Euphrates River. It also supported Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), militant Kurdish group fighting in Turkey, both by providing sanctuary and supplying arms. Syria only relinquished its support for the group when Turkey threatened war in 1998.⁵ But the emergence of new leadership on both sides heralded a rapprochement and settling of long-standing issues. Turkish Workers and Development Party (AKP) under Erdogan and Bashir al-Assad reached an agreement on

Euphrates water in 2008 and Syrian government put the issue of Hatay province on the back burner. Turkey under Erdogan and Davutoglu had embarked on a policy of 'zero problems with neighbours' and a proactive foreign policy. Having overcome their enmity, bilateral trade and cultural interactions increased between Turkey and Syria. Thus, on the eve of the Syrian uprising, Turkey and Syria were enjoying cordial relations.

Turkey's Syrian policy has had many strands and has evolved according to the changing regional and international political and security dynamics. At the initial stage of the uprising, Turkey unsuccessfully tried to mediate between the government and opposition forces by making Assad regime to concede some of the demands of protestors and introduce a set of political reforms.⁶ When Assad government did not budge and used brute force to quash the uprising, Turkey severed its diplomatic ties with Syria and joined other regional countries calling for the removal of Assad regime. Free Syrian Army (FSA), a loose collection of Syrian army defectors and opposition forces, was founded in August 2011 in Turkey.⁷ A month later Syrian National Council was formed in Istanbul to give a semblance of unity within the opposition forces and to lend it global credence.⁸ Moreover, Turkey played conduit for arms and financial transfers to rebel and Jihadi groups.⁹ Istanbul supported calls for foreign military intervention in Syria ala Libya.

What prompted this dramatic policy shift on the part of Turkey? Multiple factors explain this turnabout in Turkish Syrian policy. Despite cordial diplomatic relations, increasing bilateral trade and personal ties between the leaders of two states, Erdogan

dispensation found them wanting to enable Turkey to have any substantive political leverage over Syria.

After stepping into power, AKP had introduced some radical domestic policies in Turkey, challenging and defying the Kemalist secularism and forging a political alliance with Gulenist movement to undermine the power of military and bureaucracy. Then there was the high-profile trial of military officers charged with the accusations that they planned assassinations and bomb attacks to stir up unrest and pave the way for a military coup.¹⁰

Moreover, Turkey under the leadership of Davtoglu, former Turkish Foreign Minister, pursued a more proactive foreign policy, sometimes even leading Turkey on a collision course with its traditional allies. Considering Turkey as a model for the Middle East, Turkey projected its power outside of its borders by championing different Muslim and Islamist causes in the region. Turkey supported Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.¹¹ It sent a fleet of ships, Freedom Flotilla, to defy brutal Israeli siege of Gaza and adopted a more vocal stance against Israeli war crimes in Occupied Territories.¹² Thus, Turkey saw in Syrian uprising an opportunity to project its power, the prospect of a greater regional clout outweighing the risks of taking sides in neighboring country's civil war. Risks that would haunt Turkey in subsequent years in the form of terrorist attacks on its soil. Regionally and internationally, Turkey faced greater isolation. Turkish support of Muslim Brotherhood alienated both Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The downing of Russian fighter jet by Turkish F-16 led to Russian sanctions, severing of diplomatic ties and put a stop to Russian tourists, a major source of revenue for Turkey.

Policy divergences with US on the issues of military intervention and no-fly zone in northern Syria brought the relationship between two NATO allies under considerable strain. Turkey decried American aerial and arms support to Peoples Protection Unit (YPG), which it declared part of Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), and thus a terrorist group.¹³ Though, Turkey did later join American-led military coalition of 'Operation Inherent Resolve' against Islamic State (IS), and provided US with its Incirlik military base in Southeast Turkey, but the relationship is far from normal and definitely not cordial.

In recent months certain important developments hint at significant shifts in Turkish policy. On August 26, 2016, Turkey launched 'Operation Euphrates Shield' in northern Syria to attack Islamic State positions in Azaz patch, defeating it in Jarabulus and is now battling it with Free Syrian Army (FSA) in al-Bab in the east of Aleppo.¹⁴ Political analysts conjecture Turkish military intervention was done with the consent of Russia. This assertion is given further credence by Russian aerial support to Turkish ground troops in al-Bab giving fight to IS militants.¹⁵ More importantly, Turkey along with Iran and Russia effected a country-wide truce in Syria. It was a radical shift in Turkish Syrian policy, which had been the removal of Assad regime by supporting the armed opposition.

Russia's Syrian Policy

In the first half of the 2015, Syrian rebel forces seemed to be resurgent. They took control of the provincial capital of Idlib in north-western Syria, also threatening coastal city of Latakia, home to Russian base and a stronghold of Assad. Elsewhere,

opposition fighters made dramatic advances in southern cities of Quneitra and Deraa, also gaining Syrian government's military base there. Given these important battlefield triumphs, Institute for the Study of War (ISW) predicted that 'the dynamic stalemate that defined the Syrian civil war since 2013 may be broken in this time frame.'¹⁶

It was in this backdrop that Russia and Syria signed an agreement on 26 August, 2015 that granted Russian air force use of Khmeimim base for an indefinite period. A month later, Russia dispatched its Black Sea Fleet to east Mediterranean and sent 28 planes along with 200 personnel. Russian military intervention, after more than a year, has tipped the balance of war in Assad's favor. It has not only put a halt on the rebel advancement, but also reversed their long-held military gains. Syrian government forces captured on 25 August, 2016 the rebel stronghold of Daraya, after a four-year siege. Daraya had been a potent symbol of political resistance.¹⁷ Now nearly all of Damascus and its suburbs are under government control with the exception of eastern Ghouta.¹⁸ In central Syria, the last stronghold of rebel forces in al-Waer in Homs was wrested back by Syrian government.¹⁹ Rebel forces surrendered the city with the conditions that government lifts the siege, stop aerial bombardment and give rebels a safe passage to the city of Idlib. But the biggest military and psychological blow to the opposition groups was the recapturing of the all of Aleppo. Aleppo, the second largest city of Syria and an industrial hub, had been divided into government and rebel forces since 2012. On 22 December, government forces finally made the rebel forces holed up in a small enclave in eastern Aleppo, to surrender it and evacuate the city, ceding the army and militias full control of the ancient city.

Though, Russia had extended diplomatic succor to Assad regime in UN Security Council and Geneva Talks and provided it with military hardware that included Yakhont anti-ship cruise missiles, SA-17 surface-to-air missiles, MiG helicopters and small arms. But what prompted Russia to commit Russian forces and militarily intervene in Syria? A plurality of factors, both domestic and international, responsible for Russia's plunge in the quicksand of Syrian civil war. Besides its primary purpose of protecting its ally in Syria, the only country in Middle East hosting a Russian base, there were geo-strategic rationales. Beginning with the orchestration of military invasion and occupation of Crimean peninsula in 2014, Russia under Putin began to challenge and break out of US-dominated post-Cold War order. Military intervention was aimed to have Russia recognized as a global power on an equal footing with US, not subordinate to it. Moreover, following Russian invasion of Crimea, it has faced sanctions and diplomatic isolation. One of the geo-strategic goals could possibly be to force West to reengage Russia on Syrian crisis. Obama did meet with Putin at the sidelines of UN General Assembly meeting in September 2015.

After the 2008 Georgia war, Russia had introduced important military reforms and investment. The deployment of multi-role SU-30 SM fighter aircraft which have significant air-to-air capabilities along with Pantsir-II air defense systems and guided cruise missiles, clearly had an 'element of force demonstration and combat experience.'²⁰

Domestically, Russia genuinely felt the Russian Islamists fighting in Syrian would subsequently pose a security threat to

the people of Russian. In addition, the aggressive foreign policy increased Putin's domestic popularity amid sanctions, diplomatic isolation and declining economy.

Iran's Syrian Policy

Unlike Russia, Iran's involvement in the initial years of the Syrian war was much deeper. It deployed a small number of Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) advisers at the beginning of the militarization of Syrian uprising. But following military setbacks, attrition and defections, the regime forces lost ground in Aleppo, Hama and Damascus countryside. The expanding war and burgeoning military defections reduced Syrian military strength from 325,000 in 2011 to an estimated 178,000 in 2013, which weakened the capability of Syrian armed forces. Losses suffered by the Syrian military created space for substantial Iranian intervention. Hezbollah entered the fray,²¹ so did private Shia militias from Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The main role of the IRGC under Qassim Sulemani and al-Quds Force was to provide pro-government militias with specialized equipment, military training and technical assistance. Qassim Sulemani led the efforts to found National Defense Forces (NDF), organizing Popular Committees and militias, which would be known as 'militification of Syrian forces or 'Shabiha Phenomenon'.²²

However, Iran is said to have deepened its footprints on the heels of Russian military intervention. IRGC contingents in Syria, according to one estimate, increased from 700 military advisers to approximately 3,000.²³ To compensate for the

dwindling regime troops and the diversion of Iraqi Shia militias to their own country where IS' juggernaut was gobbling up swaths of Iraqi territory, greater number of Shia Iranian fighters arrived in Syria. The expanding role of Iranian fighters can be gauged by looking at the statistics of casualties. From October 2015, one month after Russian intervention, till February 2016, 160 Iranian fighters were killed and more than 300 were wounded, twice the figure of Iranian who had dies since 2011.²⁴ The role of Iranian ground fighters along with Russian aerial support was instrumental in turning the war against rebel forces. They managed to break through rebel line north of Aleppo, severing their supply routes to Turkey, a huge blow to opposition forces.

Besides military support, Iran helped Syria in the realm of media, cyber warfare and policing. But more importantly Iran economically buoyed Syria which had suffered immensely under a combination of sanctions, war, declining trade and dwindling resources. Syria needed money to finance its expensive war and provide services to his citizens. Iran's loans also provided Syria with necessary urgently needed finances.²⁵

Iran's support for Assad regime emanates from two main factors. Geopolitically, Syria gave and maintained Iran's access to Lebanon, and thus to Hezbollah. Ali Akbar Velayati, adviser to Iranian Supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei, succinctly enunciated this, "Syria is the golden ring of chain of resistance against the Zionist regime."²⁶ Secondly, Iran saw its alliance with Assad regime in terms of the regional balance of power. Iran saw Assad as a bulwark against Sunni Muslim forces, supported by Saudi Arabia and Gulf countries. In addition, Iran had indirectly benefited from the debacle of American invasion of Iraq and the

resultant post-war regional security structure. If the Gulf countries saw in the Syrian chaos an opportunity to undermine greater Iranian influence, then the latter saw Syrian government as crucial to this security structure.

America's Syrian Policy

Among the international players in respect to situation in Syria, American posture has been the most complex and ambivalent. Its political rhetoric and public statements have not matched up with its policies. Its aggressive tone and setting up of 'red lines' only produced reluctant support, passivity and diplomatic prevarication.

At the initial stage of Syrian uprising, Obama released a powerful statement in support of the opposition forces, "We have consistently said that President Assad must lead a democratic transition or get out of the way. For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside."²⁷ America extended diplomatic support to Syrian National Council (SNC), a Syrian opposition coalition formed in Turkey in August 2011. Addressing the members of this group, Hillary Clinton, US Secretary of State, said, "United States views the Syrian National Council (SNC) as a lead and legitimate representative seeking a peaceful transition."²⁸

But as Syrian uprising took a violent turn and Assad regime increasingly relied on military force to crush the protestors, the Council on Foreign Relations issued the Policy Innovation Memorandum No. 9. Briefly discussing the escalating levels of violence and concern for a full-blown civil war, it outlined three goals of US policy in Syria: end of violence, bringing down the

Assad regime and laying the bases for a stable democratic system with protection for minorities. More importantly, it insinuated greater military assistance and talked of no-fly zones. "United States should not discourage other governments from assisting the rebels if they wish to do so.....If violence and refugee flows escalate greatly, United States will need to discuss no-fly zones or safe havens along Syria's borders with Syria's neighbors and its NATO allies."²⁹

This policy document coupled with American recognition of Free Syrian Army and the US Treasury Department waiver to Syria Support Group (SSG), a Washington-based non-governmental organization of Syrian expatriates, authorizing it to provide logistical and financial support to the armed Syrian resistance,³⁰ combined to encourage both domestic opposition forces and anti-Assad regional countries to expect greater American military support and even intervention. But American military assistance was at best tepid and certainly not sufficient enough to tilt the military balance in rebels' favor.

Likewise, the crossing of Obama's 'red lines' on chemical weapons was reciprocated with diplomatic prevarication. On December 2012, President Obama had announced, "I want to make it clear to Assad and those under his command. The world is watching. The use of chemical weapons is and would be totally unacceptable. And if you make the tragic mistake of using these weapons, there will be consequences and you will be held accountable."³¹ But the Syrian government did use chemical weapons on 21 August, 2013 in Eastern Ghouta.³² American response is worth narrating. On 26 August, US military sent four warships to be deployed in eastern Meditterrean.³³ This seemingly militaristic course of action was halted when David

Cameron's motion to military intervention in Syria was defeated by 285 votes to 272 in British Parliament. On 30 August Obama decided to also seek Congressional approval for military strikes in Syria and the voting date was set for 9 September, giving Obama some more time for deliberation.³⁴ Rather than using the available time for refining war plans, delay in Congressional vote was taken as a signal for finding an alternative to military intervention. On 8 September, Kerry issued a very important statement, "If Assad wanted to stop the bombing, he could turn over his chemical weapons to the international community...."³⁵ Within hours Russia was urging Syria to accept the offer. Syria agreed to sign the Chemical Weapons Convention and United Nations Security Council (UNSC) passed resolution 2118, calling Syria to comply with disarmament treaty under the aegis of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).

American decision not to intervene militarily in Syria against the Assad regime emanates from multiple factors. The disastrous consequences of military intervention in Iraq and Libya had made some sections of American policy makers realize that regime change through force could have all sorts of negative repercussions. Moreover, one of the important planks of Obama's foreign policy during the election campaign was the gradual withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan and Iraq. Despite American support of no-fly zone in Libya, there was little appetite to commit American troops in Syria, which had a much larger population than Libya and strong regional allies were ready to defend the regime. Then, there was the fragmentation of Syrian opposition forces and the increasing role of Jihadi and Salafi groups in the ranks of rebel groups. The so-called moderate faction was immediately overshadowed by groups like Ahrar al-Sham and Jabat Fathal -Sham. If Assad was

a hideous monster, then the alternative was no paragon and their hatred of what America represented and symbolized was an open secret.

Conclusion

As of now, military balance in Syria weighs in favor of Assad regime largely due to external support by its allies. A country-wide truce has stopped war in considerable parts of Syria and major rebel groups will likely participate in the Geneva III talks, due to take place in mid-February. Good indications, no doubt, these are in the war-ravaged Syria, but war is far from over. Eastern Syria is still in control of ISIS. Everyone seems to be fighting it. Turkey is waging war against ISIS in al-Bab, in the north of Aleppo, but opposes American cooperation with the troops of People's Protection Units (YPG) battling ISIS in Raqqa. Turkey fears that the greater role of YPG will embolden its parent organization, Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) in Turkey, declared a terrorist organization by both Turkey and USA. But Syrian Kurds seem to be the only viable option for American war against ISIS in Levant. Secular in outlook and well-trained and militarily disciplined, as they demonstrated in Sinjar, Iraq, where thousands of Yazidis were on the verge of extermination by ISIS. Syrian government forces along with Shia militias and Russian aerial support are trying to break the siege of government-controlled Deir al-Zor from ISIS. How will America reconcile its support for YPG without further jeopardizing relations with its NATO ally is a moot point. Moreover, it is important to see whether the new administration in America will perpetuate the policy of ambivalence of its predecessor or chart a new course which could possibly involve joint military strikes with Russia against ISIS. It is also important to ask, will

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Russia force Assad to find a negotiated settlement and if it fails, support the latter in 'reclaiming' all of Syria from the opposition forces? How will Geneva III talks pave a way for a resolution of war in Syria, when previous such attempts by international powers failed? An altered military matrix could be both a temptation to adopt a more aggressive approach aimed at crushing completely the opposition forces and an incentive to find a peaceful solution on one's own terms. Time will tell.

Iran's role was pivotal in shifting the war in Assad's favor and it largely has succeeded in achieving its strategic goals, but it has come with a cost both for Iran and its Hezbollah ally. The credibility Iran and Hezbollah had enjoyed in the Middle East region for standing up to imperial forces (read America) and regional hegemon (read Israel) stands battered. Its support to a brutal dictator in crushing the rebel forces is an indictment to its rhetoric of championing the cause of oppressed. Moreover, this war has furthered the dangerous sectarianization of Middle East along religious lines.

In the ultimate analysis, it has been half a decade of hell for Syrians. Syria is more divided in religious and ethnic terms than ever before. Approximately half a million have died and many million are either internally displaced or refugees in other countries. The people, who stood up against Assad regime without succumbing to sectarianism, are marginalized but only hope for sustainable coexistence in Syria.

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End Notes

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