



No End in Sight for Syria

How did we get here, and where can we go?

by Animesh Roul



THE SYRIAN civil war has so far witnessed genocide, ethnic cleansing, sectarian schisms, and crimes against humanity. According to data available in March 2017, an estimated 400,000 Syrians have been killed and more than 10 million people have either fled the country or been displaced. What started in the city of Daara in March 2011—a popular demonstration against the incumbent Bashar al-Assad regime, a subsequent government crackdown, and the military siege of the city—has snowballed into a protracted civil war that has overwhelmed the country with large-scale divisions and destruction. There is no end in sight to this complicated conflict, which has surreptitiously engulfed neighbouring Gulf nations and engaged the great powers of the world. Trump and Putin may be cozying up, but their guns are aimed at each other in Syria.

The civil war has been fought primarily between the Syrian government forces, along with allies, and forces opposing the Assad regime, but there exists a plethora of players whose military allegiances are often more opportunistic than ideological. They include the Assad regime, Kurdish forces, Daesh (Islamic State or ISIS), Jaish al Fateh (a jihadi alliance

affiliated with Al-Qaeda), and a conglomeration of moderate rebel groups such as the Free Syrian Army, along with regional and global players such as the U.S., Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran.

From the beginning, the United States has remained steadfast in its efforts to counter the Assad regime's atrocities against civilians and other humanitarian emergencies in the country, especially the use of banned chemical weapons in Ghouta and Khan Sheikhoun. Against this, the Assad regime's request for military and economic support to hold on to power materialised with help from its international allies, Russia and Iran. Russia's September 2015 intervention in the guise of helping the Syrian regime against ISIS and other

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militant factions initiated a new dimension to the conflict, which many have seen as part of a new cold war. Indeed, the Syrian crisis witnessed a further decline in already strained U.S.-Russia ties.

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Russia's clout with the Syrian government came into the open when Russian President Vladimir Putin convinced Assad to renounce his chemical stockpile and coaxed him to join the Chemical Weapons Convention. Putin's support for Assad was unconditional when the U.N. attempted to adopt resolutions that blamed Syrian government forces for human rights abuses and atrocities against its people. In late September 2015, Russia's Federation Council granted Putin permission to deploy Russian armed forces in Syria, initiating airstrikes against Daesh targets. Despite Syria's international isolation, Russia continues to extend military support in the name of fighting jihadists. Humanitarian aid, like food and medical supplies from Russia, ensure that Assad's government and its supporters continue to weather international criticism and the crisis.

Moscow's help in the destruction of rebel-held Aleppo is well documented. Although both Washington and Moscow want to eliminate Daesh, Russia's objectives were largely to extend military support to Assad's forces, targeting any anti-regime rebels, thus

securing Assad's position at the country's helm, which is in sharp contrast to America's objectives.

Russia has taken a more active, to not say meddling, role in the Middle Eastern affair by enhancing its bilateral ties with Syria and Iran. On many occa-

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sions, the U.S. and Russia have come face to face over Syria. While Russia along with Iran focused on helping Assad in repelling his rebellions at home, the U.S. has remained critical of the Assad regime for its anti-civilian campaigns. Many have seen the conflict as a new proxy war between the U.S. and Russia.

The United States and Russia share one common goal: to exterminate jihadist forces in both Syria and neighbouring Iraq. However, Russia is playing a vital role in the conflict by siding with Assad at home and in U.N. forums, vetoing every effort made by the international community against the regime. For this reason,

Russia is blamed for playing a double game as both mediator for diplomatic solutions and as Assad's de facto ally in the war. The country seems to have clear ambitions to counter the U.S.'s position as sole world superpower, and its successes—not least its visible ability to influence Assad's decisions where American threats had failed—are a sharp testament to America's declining international stature.

During the six years of the Syrian Civil War, direct U.S. involvement has remained largely focused on defeating Daesh, as well as helping anti-Assad rebels. In late April 2016, the Obama administration authorised the deployment of over a hundred U.S. troops to help train anti-Daesh fighters and anti-Assad Kurdish rebels. Although vehemently critical of Assad's human rights record and calling for Assad to be removed



Bashar al-Assad and Vladimir Putin



U.S. Navy Destroyers launching strikes against Syria

from power, the U.S.-led coalition has focused primarily on annihilating Daesh, opting for attempts to find diplomatic solutions to the civil war rather than military intervention. Unlike in Iraq, where the American coalition has many partners against Daesh, in Syria, U.S. agencies are still trying to woo diverse groups, including Syrian Kurds, Sunni Arabs, and Christian fighters, under the umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which are largely focused on toppling the Assad regime.

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From the beginning, in a clear retreat from the overt interventionism of his predecessor, President Obama's administration refrained from entangling itself in the Syrian Civil War, but it imposed sanctions on the Assad regime in the initial days of the war and issued intermittent condemnation of

Assad's alleged atrocities against his citizens. America has insisted that the regime step down to provide for a smooth, democratic transition in the country. Without direct military engagement or a single shot fired by the U.S. against Syrian interests, the sanctions have been considered a 'humanitarian and diplomatic war' against the Syrian regime.

Under the Trump administration, America appears prepared to extend more direct support to the Kurdish YPG as they seek to liberate Daesh-held areas. The new administration is also considering enhancing its troop deployment. While still wary of direct action in the conflict, the Trump administration is taking steps to get further involved in Syria's multifaceted war. The chemical attacks in Khan Sheikhoun in April 2017 may have compelled the new American administration to shift from a covert Syria strategy to a more robust engagement that openly confronts Russian interests. In August 2013, the Ghouta chemical weapon incident generated powerful anti-Assad sentiments in international forums; only Russian intervention at the U.N. stopped the U.S. and its allies from acting against the Assad regime. The failure to act against Assad, even after he had crossed

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what had been described as a “red line”, weakened the U.S.’s standing. However, the new, devastating nerve gas attack in early April sparked renewed international outrage against Assad and his regime’s widespread use of chemical weapons.

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In retaliation for the Khan Sheikhoun chemical weapons attack, U.S. warships in the Mediterranean fired over 60 Tomahawk cruise missiles at the government-controlled Shayrat airfield in the Homs province of Syria, targeting the base from which the chemical attack had been launched. Syria, along with its allies, called this a violation of international law and an act of aggression. In mid-May this year, U.S. strikes against a convoy of suspected Assad regime forces and Iranian proxies in the al-Tanf area of southeastern Syria was again considered a violation of Syria’s sovereignty. On June 18, the U.S. resolve to stay out of Syrian quagmire seemed to be ending as the U.S. military shot down a Syrian warplane near the city of Tabqah in northern Syria. The U.S. claimed that this was defensive fire, as

the ill-fated Syrian warplane was targeting the U.S.-backed, anti-Daesh Syrian Democratic Forces. This incident adds a new dimension to U.S. involvement in Syria. There is unlikely to be a direct confrontation with Russia, but the two nations have already suspended the hotline arrangement dating back to the Cold War, and Moscow has already warned that it will treat any U.S. combat aircraft flying in Syrian airspace as an aggressor against Bashar al-Assad’s regime and Russia’s interests.

Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev’s comments about a ‘new Cold War’ in February last year at the Munich Security Conference in Germany seem prophetic. Despite Trump and Putin’s apparent comradery, tensions in Syria are taking relations in another direction. While many observers are praising Putin for reinvigorating Moscow’s outreach in the Middle East, his actual motives could be deeper, designed to challenge the post-Cold-War unipolar world by assuming a more influential role in key regions. ■

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2011 street protests in Damascus, Syria