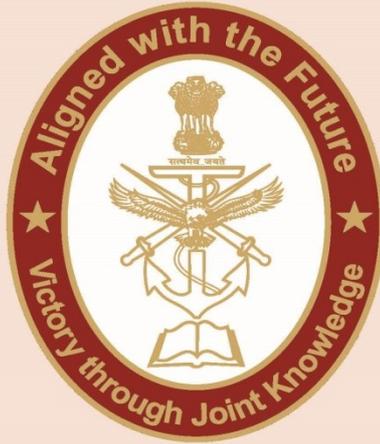


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SYRIAN CRISIS: AN ARENA OF PROXY WARS

By

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What meets the eye in the Syrian crisis is a power tussle between the established government and the Syrian rebels for control of the country based on societal divide. Behind this innocuous sectarian affliction, a common historical legacy within the Islamic world lies imprints of a political grand games being rolled out by the global powers as well as their regional allies. It also includes even uncanny mix of non-state actors with high coercive radical quotient trying to intrude into the disturbed political space. The Syria has become a theatre of proxy wars with shades of political grey zones with undefined boundaries playing out friends as well as foes at the same time at different levels in varied political contingencies.

The Syria happens to be the fulcrum of land and sea routes to the Asia, Europe, Africa and further west. It is, therefore, a political pivot for geo politics of oil and gas and its transportation within and outside the west Asian landscape. Hence, focus of local energy producers as well as its consumers from distant lands aspires to maximize their political leverages for their economic aspirations. The tendency to maximize the control over energy resources by the global players is the main cause of sectarian afflictions with political intransigence amongst the regional

players for their obvious economic vested interests. A review of the political dynamics would highlight the intricacies of the situation as it stands today.

At the top of the shack of the proxy wars is the US and Russian stakes in the Syrian pie. The main cognitive contention happens to be a US sponsored Qatar gas pipe line for her European allies through Syria as against Russian backed Iranian gas pipe line with underlying motive of acquiring high share in energy supplies in the region. The matter gets further clear when the Syrian route of energy supply is hyphenated with Russian oil pipe lines from North to the European countries. There are obvious competing interests of both US as well as Russia in this power game political matrix. At regional level, the stake holders happen to be the Saudi Arab and her Sunni affiliates vs Iran lead Shiite confederation giving sectarian colour to energy trade through shortest route to Europe in this sector.

Apropos, the US orchestrated a political schism in the Syrian society in order to oust the Shiite ruler who did not toe their dictates by supporting the Sunni majority to revolt through armed uprising, a continuum of the Arab spring. The Russia alongside Iran sided with the Syrian president as a response to this new situation wherein any compromise would have impacted Russian as well as Iranian economy. Moreover, in eventuality of US backed Syrian rebels succeeding in their mission, Russia would lose her naval base in Syria providing access to warm waters of Mediterranean Sea. Accordingly, when it became clear that the rebels are gaining ground in the mid 2015, the Russia chose to intervene militarily in Syria in September in a politically bold move.

This action brought Russia into centre stage and became a reference point besides US in the strategic matrix of Syrian panorama. While Russian action did dilute the US position, both of them agreed to fight against emerging threat of ISIS which was considered dangerous to world peace, impacting both US as well as Russian interests. Simultaneously, the efforts of reconciliation between the Syrian rebels and the government were initiated under their watch through UN mechanism so as to strike a compromise instead of intended regime change.

While pursuing above, the military brinkmanship continues at varied levels even today to strike a higher bargaining position by the

negotiating parties and their patrons. The Syrian reconciliation stands stranded due to intransigent positions adopted by both the parties. A silent proxy cold war continues, though at the face of it US as well as Russia are seemingly deeply concerned. However, with announcement of US withdrawal of 2000 odd US troops from Syria who are primarily involved with fight against ISIS, there seem to be a change in the scenario. Russia is apparently all set to occupy the strategic space being vacated by the US in the Syrian sector a much cherished desire since long.

Israel and Iran rivalry is second major overt proxy affliction of west Asian region, wherein the Syrian landscape has been in the cross fire and is being impacted in a major way. It is well known that the Iranian leadership has been openly threatening Israel to obliterate their existence since Islamic revolution. On other hand, the Israel has been nurtured politically and militarily by the US to take care of their interests in the West Asia. The Saudi Arab and Iran are regional big players and rivals due to Shia- Sunni sectarian divide

The Iran with her nuclear capability potential is seen as a threat to both Israel as well as Sunni dispensation under leadership of Saudi Arab. The Iran was pressurized into signing a nuclear deal in August 2015 under stewardship of president Obama to restrict their capabilities to peaceful purposes. However, the president Trump has pulled out of the deal with apparent objective of total rolling back of the nuclear ambitions of the Iran. The first reaction of Iran to US pull out from the nuclear deal was to fire rockets on Israeli positions on the Golan Heights, thereby indicating no change in their anti Israel intentions. The Israel also retaliated by firing on Iranian positions in Syria. Later, Israel carried out air attacks on Iranian contingent stationed in the heart of Syrian capital Damascus in December 2018. Therefore, the Syrian theatre is being used for proxy war between Israel and Iran.

Besides above, the Saudi Arab and Israel both are on the same page when it comes to rivalry with Iran with their common thread being allies of the US. In that, the historical religious ante against Jewish encroachment of Islamic lands seem to be taking a back seat in the face of political realism proving the Chanakyan theory "your enemy's enemy is your friend". Apropos, there appears to be a growing political convergence between Saudi Arab and Israel in recent times. The sectarian rivalry between Saudi Arab and Shiite Iran and Syrian ruling

class has manifested in Saudi Arab support to Sunni Syrian rebel forces. In that, Saudi Arab is also seen to be supporting the Israeli military overtures against Syria and Iran combined.

Interestingly, when it comes to fighting with the ISIS rebels, a priority concern of the US as well as Russia, it is the Iran and Syrian government forces which have been in the fore front alongside Kurds, Turkey and Iraq. Whereas, the Saudi Arab is known to be supporting the Al Nusra a Sunni non state affiliate who is known to have complicity with the ISIS bandwagon. Therefore, there is fair share of duplicity and multi level complicity amongst the stake holders confronting the ISIS in the Syrian landscape. While all seem to be on same page under dual leadership of the US and Russia, there have been contentious rivalry issues amongst them on the side lines at multiple levels.

The Russia and Turkey have political differences as Russia happens to support the Kurdish rebels within Turkey and also the Syrian government forces against whom the Turkey was known to provide logistics bases to the Sunni Syrian rebels. Syria alongside Russia has been launching land and air attacks on the Sunni rebels under patronage of Turkey. Besides above, there have been differences on issues regarding energy supply, trade, employment of Turkish nationals with the Russia. The matter came to such a stage soon after Russian intervention in Syria that Turkey chose to shoot down a Russian combat air craft over their air space.

Recently, the Turkish president is known to have assured the US president that he would take care of remnants of ISIS, if any, once the US troops are out from the Syrian theatre. However, it has brought forth their reservations towards the Kurdish dispensation who are known to be supporting the separatist movement in the south eastern Turkey. Whereas, the Kurdish fighters have US patronage as they have contributed towards fight against the ISIS in a major way. Therefore, there is a quasi proxy conflict situation between the Kurds and Turkish polity and at the same time their interests has to be accommodated. How would Turkey handle the Kurdish dilemma is a matter of speculation.

Besides above major players, there are numerous sub regional inter and intra group conflicts going on including the non-state actors operating in sub conventional grey zones with obvious tacit support of

their patrons in the back drop of Syrian crisis. All this has a heady mix of extra regional, regional, ethnic, and sectarian divide with economic opportunism central to the political milieu leading to cognitive confrontation issues.

In that, Russia is likely to be a beneficiary with their military foot prints in the Syrian landscape alongside their political synergy with Shiite confederation lead by Iran with advantage of reckonable nuclear calculus. The US on their part seem to be patronizing economically dominant Sunni dispensation lead by Saudi Arab alongside military capabilities of nuclear Israel as their proxy. The US obviously intends to continue her sway over the politico-economic affairs even after their draw down from the Asian landscape. They seem to be working towards this aim.

The changing dynamics of geo politics of oil and gas is the basic reason of the ongoing proxy wars in the Syrian theatre. As a result there is a political chaos in the region with seemingly no solution in sight. In fact it is likely to get more complicated with stated intentions of the US to move out of the Syrian theatre leaving a strategic space and concomitant political vacuum. It would lead to an obvious political unpredictability in the Syrian theatre and its periphery further prompting proxy confrontations of differing shades. Reconciliation amongst the Syrian society seems to be the only hope for much needed political positive synergies in the region. Let that happen at the earliest in overall good of the West Asia.

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