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# ALERT

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# SYRIA

## WEST ASIA: A NEW COLD WAR?

## AND INDIA'S OPTIONS





An ISO 9001:2015 Certified Magazine

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# HOT WAR IN SYRIA AND OPTIONS FOR INDIA

Given the regional balance of power, it is likely that the local and regional actors will not be interested in escalation of the hot war beyond Syria. But in the unlikely scenario, India's ability to maintain friendly relations with all regional adversaries namely Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel and Turkey and its ability to balance its relations between global powers namely the US, Russia and China will be severely tested. India will do well to work with all stakeholders and multinational organisations to prevent the Syrian conflict to become a regional conflict.

**T**he Civil War in Syria has ravaged the country, took the life of nearly 500,000 people and has forced more than five million Syrians to take

refuge in neighbouring countries while another seven million have been internally displaced. The war has been raging since 2011 with the active involvement of several local, regional and international actors. It has affected the

neighbourhood and threatens to escalate into a regional conflict. Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Israel—all bordering countries—have been varyingly affected. Iraq has gradually promised to regain peace and stability after the



military defeat of the Islamic State (ISIS). Lebanon and Jordan remain politically and militarily fragile but have not been completely drawn into the Syrian fire. On the other hand, the military and political involvement of Iran has provoked serious regional containment efforts led by Israel and Saudi Arabia. The involvement of the US and Russia has transformed the crisis into a global geopolitical hotspot, reviving the memories of the Cold War.

### **Multiple Complexities**

The war in Syria is more complex than normally understood. At the local level, it was a rebellion against the Bashar al-Assad regime to a large extent led by youth belonging to various

*In 2018, the Syria crisis has reached a new stage. With the defeat of the local opposition militants and the ISIS, Russia, Iran and Turkey have emerged as the leading actors*

ideological inclinations but at the core demanding a more open political system and better economic opportunities. The regime saw this as an externally induced conspiracy to topple it and used the security forces to crackdown on the protestors. By this time Sunni tribes in Dera'a and Muslim Brotherhood inspired

Islamists in Homs had joined the opposition against the regime and its alleged atrocities. They also met the same fate as the protestors in Damascus and Hama. It did not help that countries such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar and Jordan became involved in the crisis and extended financial aid and weapons to opposition groups and encouraged them to form organised resistance. Thus, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was formed in July 2011 but the group soon degenerated into a loose alliance of competing and ideologically opposing factions and could not withstand the onslaught of the Syrian military.

### **Rise of ISIS**

In the meanwhile, transnational Islamist groups including the Muslim Brotherhood supported by Turkey and Qatar, the Salafist militants supported by Saudi Arabia and to some extent, Jordan and terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda and ISIS found a fertile ground to establish bases in Syria. The ISIS was especially successful in breaching the security and take control of territories especially in eastern and south-eastern parts of the country but also a few populated pockets in the north, northwest and southwest. It is on the basis of these advances made in Syria that in June 2014 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the foundation of global Islamic Caliphate in Mosul. Nonetheless, by this time the Syrian regime finding it difficult to withstand the multiple onslaughts from the opposition militants had reached out to Iran and its proxies in



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the region. Tehran directly got involved in Syria on behalf of the regime with a strategic calculus of expanding its regional influence and strengthening a regional resistance to the US geopolitical domination in the Middle East. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) not only came to the rescue of the regime, it also brought Hezbollah combatants from Lebanon and formed, trained and armed Shia militia from within Syria and abroad to fight against the rebels and other transnational militants who were all branded as terrorists by the regime.

### **Obama Hesitation**

Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Jordan continued to extend financial and military support to various groups. The US, under Barack Obama Administration,

was wary of overt involvement in the Syrian Civil War after the disastrous campaign in Libya. When the Obama Administration did not militarily intervene on behalf of the opposition, after the Ghouta chemical attack in August 2013, which was seen as the US going back on the red-line it has set for Syria, it caused serious disappointment not only among the rebels but also in Riyadh, Ankara and Tel Aviv. The opposition and their regional benefactors recognised that the US will not overtly get involved in the war in Syria. As the local situation was degenerating into a murderous stalemate, the ISIS

and its franchises started to run over parts of Syria and committed inhuman atrocities on the populace resistant to its ideology. It was at this point that the Civil War in Syria transformed into a much larger conflict involving transnational terrorist groups, armed local militants supported by various regional powers, Shia militias supported by Iran, Kurdish Peshmerga fighters, the Syrian regime, Iran, Turkey and the US. Towards mid-2015, the regime had lost control of several major towns and cities and had seen several reverses despite the support received from Iran, Hezbollah and Shia militias. It

*India's geopolitical interests in the Middle East and its recent forays in the region make it vulnerable to a variety of dangers*

was fighting on multiple fronts and finding it difficult to sustain a war against various enemies on several fronts and sought the support of Russia.

**Russian Intervention**

In September 2015, Moscow decided to get actively involved in the Syrian theatre and started



*US forces in the town of Mabij, Syria*



an air campaign to disseminate the ISIS as well as the opposition militants. However, with the ISIS threatening to advance to other regional countries, all actively involved parties including the regime, Shia militias, Hezbollah, Kurdish Peshmerga and the FSA aided by their regional and international benefactors decided to focus on the fight against the ISIS with an objective to defeat it and expand their own territorial control and fight other enemies later. Nonetheless, the active involvement of Russia completely changed the nature of the war from a local and regional conflict to a global quest for geopolitical influence. Russia entered Syria on the back of its advances in the Caucuses. American reluctance to get directly involved provided it with an opportunity to return to the Middle East. While the ISIS was militarily defeated eventually, within a year of its involvement, Moscow was able to change the balance of power in the Syrian Civil War with the regime getting the much needed support and gaining an upper hand. The fall of Aleppo in December 2016 from the hands of the FSA and other militants demonstrated that Russia had succeeded in rescuing the regime.

### **Signs of Regional War**

In 2018, the Syria crisis has reached a new stage. With the defeat of the local opposition militants and the ISIS, Russia, Iran and Turkey have emerged as the leading actors who are trying to stabilise the situation while the US, Saudi Arabia, Jordan

and Qatar have been relegated into marginal players. However, the Trump Administration's two strikes inside Syria (April 2017 and April 2018) to underscore its commitments towards humanitarian intervention and prevent use of chemical weapons on civilians and Israel's forays into Damascus to counter the growing Iranian military presence has again threatened to escalate the conflict into a regional war. The situation has been exasperated due to the decision of the US to withdraw

from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on 8 May and the immediate reaction of Iran to target Israeli military installation in Golan Heights. Israel responded by sending a barrage of missiles towards Damascus and this has led to increased fears of a regional conflict involving Iran and Israel. Thus, the war in Syria has reached the threshold of engulfing the whole region which will have wider security and geopolitical implications not only for the neighbouring countries but for the whole world.

### **India's Vulnerabilities**

India's geopolitical interests in the Middle East and its recent forays in the region makes it vulnerable to a variety of dangers. Firstly, any regional conflict will suddenly lead to rise in oil prices, and India, which imports nearly 60 per cent

of its crude oil from the region, will be badly affected. India's energy security will also be impacted and can lead to serious inflation and chaos in the domestic market. Secondly, the large number of Indian expatriates living in the region will be vulnerable and if the Gulf countries are affected, New Delhi will have to act swiftly to rescue its citizens. Thirdly, India's trade and commercial investments, both in and from the region, will be badly affected.

## *The involvement of the US and Russia has transformed the crisis into a global geopolitical hotspot, reviving the memories of the Cold War*

In this context, what are the options for India? India has so far relied on its time-tested policy of keeping away from a direct involvement in outside conflicts. It has been urging regional actors to practice restraint and use the option of negotiations to resolve problem. However, the regional dynamics is such that the regional actors are not ready to get into negotiations. Given the regional balance of power, it is likely that the local and regional actors will not be interested in escalation of the hot war beyond Syria. But in the unlikely scenario, India's ability to maintain friendly relations with all regional adversaries namely Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel and Turkey and its ability to balance its relations between global powers namely the US, Russia and China will be severely tested. India will do well to work with all stakeholders and multinational organisations to prevent the Syrian conflict to become a regional conflict. 