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Conflict in Syria

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1 Background

The conflict in Syria appears on the surface to be a battle between those loyal to President Bashar Al-Assad and those who oppose him. However, reducing the situation to a fight between the 'good' masses struggling for freedom against an 'evil' government is both simplistic and inaccurate. The uprising against him began in March 2011 in Deraa, when several demonstrators were killed by security forces while protesting against the arrest of some teenagers who had painted revolutionary slogans on a school wall. This spread to nationwide protests in May, demanding the President's resignation.

While in the initial stage the agitation began with a series of protest between peaceful demonstrators, civil right groups demanding democratic reforms, resulting in repression by the security services. It later escalated into a full blown conflict with bands of opposition fighters engaging in armed struggle against the security services and the regime for control over urban and rural districts all across the country.
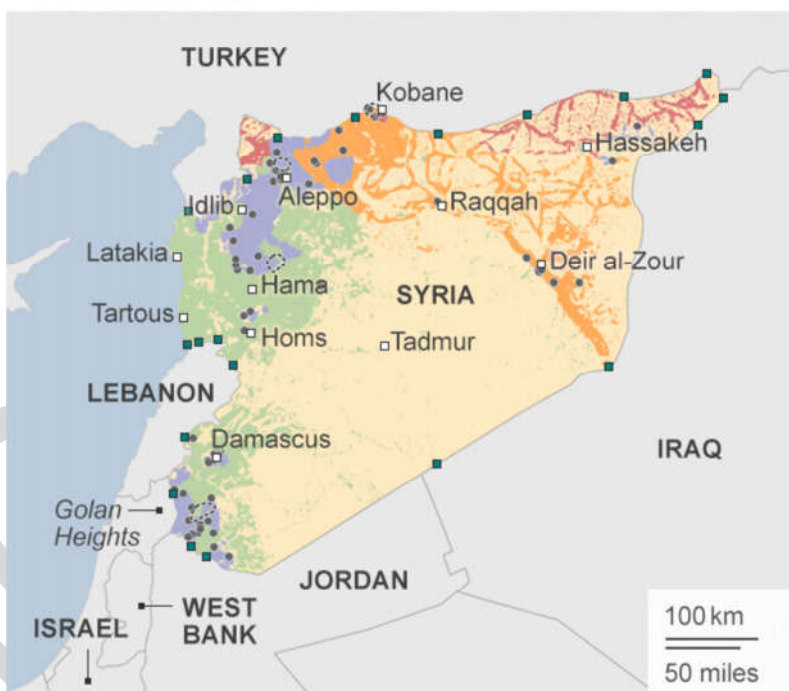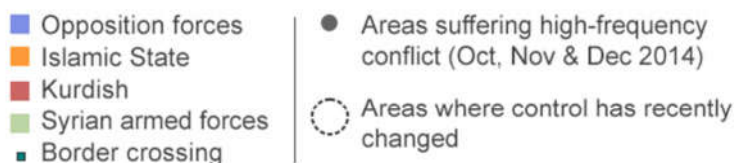
2 Why Syria is Important

Syria's geographical position at the heart of the Levant and its fiercely independent foreign policy make it a pivotal country in the eastern part of the Arab world. A close ally of Iran and Russia, Syria has been in conflict with Israel since the creation of the Jewish state in 1948, and has sponsored various Palestinian resistance groups. Part of Syria's territory, the Golan Heights, is under Israeli occupation.

Syria is also a religiously mixed society and the increasingly sectarian nature of violence in some areas of the country has contributed to the wider Sunni-Shiite tension in the Middle East. International community fears that the conflict could spill over the border to affect the neighboring Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey and Jordan, creating a regional disaster. For these reasons, global powers such as the US, European Union and Russia all play a role in the Syrian civil war.

3 Underlying Factors Responsible for the Uprising

- Syria was hit by an economic crisis in 1980 and it was clear that economic reforms were crucial to resolve the situation.
- While Bashar al Assad sought to resolve the crisis by initially adopting for a Chinese style market economy, it did not work out for Syria.
- The adoption of economic liberalisation marked a transition from the earlier socialist policy. The result of this was loss of subsidies for agricultural farmers in the rural areas, homelessness for many Syrians who had lived on state owned estates.

- In 2010 about 30% of Syria was living under poverty. The socio- economic condition of Syria was abysmal and marked by poverty, illiteracy, unemployment especially in the rural areas before the uprising in 2011.
- The arrest of fifteen school children for writing the slogan "the people want the fall of the regime" triggered the protests in Syria in the back drop of the Arab spring. In March 2005, 2011 a large demonstration took place in Syria demanding democratic reforms and release of political prisoners which eventually resulted in a nationwide protest with the larger demand of the fall of the political regime of Bashar al Assad.
- The President Bashar al Assad responded by mobilizing his coercive apparatus and repressing the protestors. The Syrian army resorted to large scale military attacks resulting in burning of cities, civilian deaths.
- A segment of the military defected to form the Free Syria Army, the established armed forces against the regime. Violence escalated and groups of rebel brigades were formed to fight government forces for control of cities and towns by 2012.
- A National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (NCSROF) replaced the Syrian National Council in 2012 and elected Ahmad Muazz al Khatib, representative of the Muslim Brothers as the president.
- The indoctrination of ethno-sectarian aspects further deteriorated the situation in Syria with rebel groups pitching the Sunni majority against the President's Shia Alawite sect drawing in the support of external actors. In this third phase the entry of foreign jihadist forces and groups like Islamic state has further worsened situation in Syria.

4 The Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS)

- The Islamic state is an extremist group that grew out of the al Qaeda region in Iraq following the Iraq war.
- The organisation is led by Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. ISIS claims to have fighters from UK, France, and Germany, other European countries as well as the US, Arab world and the Caucasus.
- With the onset of the civil war in Syria, a group of rebel fighters was sent to Syria in August 2010 by al Baghdadi. Later in 2013, it declared the formation of the 'Islamic State of Iraq and Al Sham'.
- The ISIS follows strict adherence to Islamic law and have their own interpretation of Islam.
- The decisions and actions of ISIS seeks to adhere to and follow the prophecy and example of Prophet Muhammad in minute details and has declared itself to be a worldwide caliphate.
- They follow violent means to spread their idea of purifying the world of 'apostates' or defectors from the teaching of true Islam.
- They have actively used the social media and sought to circulate their ideology, objective and messages through extremely violent and disturbing videos of torture, arrest, execution etc.
- Every day there are news reports of new recruits old and young and across all genders travelling across countries joining the ISIS out of their free will and believe in the espousal of the ideology of the ISIS.

The ISIS has been actively operating in Syria and by March 2013, the rebel groups were able to take the city of Raqqa, one of Syria's heavily tribal dominated regions. With further escalation of the conflict, tribal militias comprising of Syrian army defectors were formed in different parts of the Syrian Steppe which comprises 55% of the region. By January 2014, it capitalised on the growing tensions between the Sunnis and the Shia led government by taking control of the city of Fallujah a predominantly Sunni city. The dominance of the tribal regions and also the oil rich regions have strengthened their dominance and sphere of influence in these regions resulting in massive violence and war crimes.

5   Implications of the War

- There has been loss of lives of more than 200,000 lives in the four years long prolonged civil war in Syria.
- A UN commission has reported violation of human rights and evidence of massive war crimes like torture, rape, murder and enforced disappearances.
- Apart from violence and other forms of repressive measures, the UN has also reported use of chemical weapons by the government to attack and crack down rebel groups.
- Almost 4 million people have fled Syria most of them being women and children. Around 7.6 million Syrians have been displaced.

5.1   Regional Implications

- Iran has supported the regime of Assad because the defeat of the Assad regime would mean a weak Iran surrounded by Arab adversaries, the US military basis and a resurgent Turkey.
- Israel extended support to the anti Assad rebels. Tel Aviv's ultimate objective was not the immediate removal of Assad but a prolonged civil war that would eventually cut into the vitality of the government as well as the rebel fighters.
- Likewise Qatar and Saudi Arabia have supported the rebel groups where Qatar's role lies in promoting its regional and global leadership profile and development of an alliance of Sunni Muslim forces across the Middle East and North Africa. Saudi Arabia views itself as the defender of Sunnis everywhere, supported the Sunni factions to confront Iranian influence in the region.
- Turkey remained neutral for a long time. However with the recent encroachment into the territories with Kurdish minorities in Turkey it has supported the anti government forces and criticised the Assad regime.
- While the Western countries supported the demands of the anti government rebel groups excluding the jihadist forces, the Russian government supported the Assad regime.
- The Syrian civil war has affected the regional politics of the region and has turned the country into a battle ground for terrorism and extremism which has to be countered politically and strategically for peace and stability in the long run.

5.2   Implications for International Security and World Politics

- While international security has mostly been defined in terms of direct threat posed by states to each other and direct military warfare has been the norm, these developments in Syria has had a profound impact on the idea of international security itself.
- For a long time there was a hesitancy to declare the situation in Syria as a condition of civil war.
- With the presence of non state actors like such different rebel groups and the conflict witnessing rigorous use of violence from the state and the rebel groups the international actors for a long time resorted to simple use of threats. The Responsibility to Protect was vetoed by Russia and China in the United Nations.
- Syria represents a case in context where the forms and nature of warfare has evolved with the presence of non state actors as strong central actors.
- The involvement of regional actors fuelling the conflict further complicates the situation and the prospect for international involvement
- The definition of security and war therefore will have to be redefined to address such problems and the presence of such forces where the solution is not just direct military involvement alone. It is a blend of diplomacy, political and military strategies which will have to be developed to find solutions to such complex problems.