

THE IMPACT OF EXTERNAL MILITARY INTERVENTION ON SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

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Abstract: The Syrian Civil War entered its ninth year in 2019. The intractable conflict has been fueled and expanded by the world's largest military powers supporting their proxies inside Syria, notably the United States and Russia. Russian and American allies have also played pivotal roles; Iran notably took sides with Syria and Russia, while the United Kingdom, France, and large and small Sunni Muslim countries including Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Qatar, and others allied with Western interests against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his government. Others in the region play smaller, ancillary roles, such as Lebanon and Israel. Kurds inside and outside Syria have their own motives and desires for independence.

The initial uprising by Syrians who simply wanted to live under democratic rule was usurped by powers large and small, all intent on achieving their own goals and preserving and protecting their own interests. The result of these multiple outside powers has exacerbated the enormous suffering of the Syrian people far beyond what a civil war would have caused, including the death of over one half-million Syrians, many of them civilians, the decimation of cities and towns, the uprooting of millions of people which has created a refugee crisis that has impacted the entire world, the near elimination of the Christian population, the rise of terrorism, and multiple other impacts on the people and culture that will last for generations.

Keywords: Syria, war, belligerents, foreign, conflict, refugees, Alawite, al-Bashar.

I. INTRODUCTION

The ongoing Syrian Civil War, which began with peaceful protests in 2011, entered its ninth year in 2019. The intractable and bloody conflict has been fueled and expanded by the world's largest military powers supporting their proxies inside Syria. They include the United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and others in and outside the region. These external forces continue to prolong and complicate the conflict and its resolution to this day.

The impact of these outside actors cannot be overstated: they joined the fight as early as 2011, and in 2019 their continued contribution of arms, equipment, training, and troops continues to fuel the complex conflagration that has caused between 350,000 and 500,000 deaths [1], the foreign displacement of over 5 ½ million Syrians, another 6 million within Syrian borders, and the permanent disability of 1.5 million citizens, including over 86,000 who have lost arms or legs. In February, 2019, the UN estimated 13 million people in Syria require humanitarian assistance, 5.2 million of whom are in acute need.[2] Additionally, the intense military conflict destroyed much of the country's infrastructure, its ancient cities and artifacts, and all 6 of Syria's UNESCO World Heritage sites.

While the original uprising and the resulting sacrifices were made in the fight for democracy, the involvement of outside forces on both sides has morphed the rebels' initial goal into a global battle for regional control. This punitive war, one that has taken such a grievous toll on so many innocent people, is now a battleground for East vs West, Sunni vs. Shia, Kurds vs Turkey, Israel vs Iran, and on and on. The initial intention of altruist rebels who were backed by the West in their fight for democratic values has been swallowed up by an ideologic scrabble that has long defined the Middle East. Tragically, the war is not likely to end, but rather it is likely to expand as it tackles an ever-changing end game.

A number of efforts to reach diplomatic resolutions have failed or stalled indefinitely. Much of this failure is due to the enormously high number of outside parties involved, their multiple opposing goals, and their dogged personal agendas that will be impacted by whomever rules Syria. Indeed, one could argue that the struggle cannot be overstated, as its outcome will determine the geopolitical balance of the entire Middle East, which in turn greatly impacts the entire world.

The ongoing involvement of these outside powers may soon facilitate the resurgence of terrorist groups outside of Syria as they close in and destroy the last bastion of Islamic State terrorists, or ISIS.[2] The US, however, is the first super power to take steps toward extracting themselves from this conflict, which will certainly change the trajectory in some way, though exactly how remains unknown. US President Donald Trump announced the change in policy in December 2018, by suddenly announcing withdrawal of its 2000 troops citing—albeit prematurely—the defeat of ISIS in Syria. This unexpected declaration ran counter to multiple agreements the US had completed with its allies just weeks earlier, and brought a slew of condemnations from US allies, none of whom were prepared for the strongest military in the world to suddenly abandon the fight without completing its mission or providing them notice. US allies fighting in Syria, Kurdish allies supported by the US and engaged in the fight on the ground to defeat ISIS, as well as Israeli leaders who fear instant reprisals from its Iranian foes deeply embedded across the border in Syria all pleaded with US leadership to keep its troops in Syria after the US attains its stated mission of overtaking ISIS-occupied land.

While the US did capitulate somewhat by announcing they will leave a contingent of 400 troops in Syria indefinitely as “observers and monitors” [3], the departure of the bulk of US troops is likely to change the future of the conflict, though the particulars of those changes cannot be accurately predicted other than to swing the victory pendulum toward Syrian President al-Bashar. It is all but certain a policy change on Syria by the world’s largest super power will have a major impact and could trigger the beginning of other significant developments.

As of this writing in March of 2019, the US and its allies have destroyed the last vestiges of the ISIS stronghold in Syria. The complete takeover of ISIS-held territory in Syria is a major milestone, because the defeat of ISIS is the stated reason for US troops to be on the ground in Syria. As US leaders and others are keenly aware, ISIS fighters have largely fled back across the border into Iraq, and their ideology has not been destroyed, keeping them a virulent threat. As national security adviser John Bolton stated: “The president has been, I think, as clear as can be, when he talks about the defeat of the ISIS territorial caliphate,” Bolton said. “He has never said that the elimination of the territorial caliphate means the end of ISIS in total. We know that’s not the case.”[4]

The end of ISIS in Syria will remove one component of the war, as the calculus is about to change back to that of a civil war fueled by Russia, Turkey, Iran, Western powers, and several Gulf States. With the removal of ISIS’s last held territory, and the anticipated reduction of US troops to follow, the war will likely shift back to its initial divisions.

II. COUNTRY PROFILE AND OVERVIEW OF SYRIA

The country of Syria is roughly equivalent in size to the US state of North Dakota and is located in what is known as the “Levant” region in the Middle East. Bordered by Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Iraq, and Turkey, the population of approximately 20 million is made up of 90% Arabs, 9% Kurds, and a minority of Armenians, Circassians, and Turkomans. The number of Christians living in Syria has dropped precipitously in the past seven years, and with the continuing rise of Islamic fundamentalism, some believe it could drop to zero within the coming decade.[5]



Fig. 1. Map of Syria

The majority (74%) of Syrians are Sunni Muslims. A combination of Alawites (a religious group in the Middle East unique to Syria, roughly described as quasi-Muslim with some Christian beliefs), Christians, Druze, Jews, and Yazidis (another unique religious group) make up the balance of the population.

Arabic is the official language; English and French are widely understood. Syria has a high literacy rate due to compulsory education, though there is a discrepancy between literate males and females; nearly 90% of males are literate, compared to 74% of females.[6] Clearly the war has negatively impacted education for nine years, so the levels of education have dropped precipitously.

Syria is a self-proclaimed parliamentary republic. The genuineness of this fact is highly disputed among Syria's critics around the world, who consider Syria to be an authoritarian regime whose claims of democracy are patently false. Syrians do not have the right to change their government, an indicator the US State Department uses to assess the democratic veracity of a country. Bashar al-Assad, the current president, and Hafez al-Assad, Bashar's father and the previous leader, were confirmed by unopposed referenda—five times in the case of the senior al-Assad. The “Jasmine Revolution” and the subsequent “Arab Spring of 2011” rekindled a call for democracy among the Syrian populace, albeit much later than it occurred in many other nations in the Arab world.

In Syria, the “Arab Spring” movement should be observed in a different light than that of situations in Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, and Egypt. Each uprising was unique, and each produced vastly different outcomes. Syrians have suffered relentlessly for over eight years, and those rebels who opposed the dictatorial government are nearly defeated.

Massive, multi-city demonstrations that arose in Syria in March of 2011, as well as those which followed, revealed two important facts. First, pro-democracy sentiment and groups remain active in Syria; and second, protests against the al-Assad regime will never be tolerated as long as he remains in power.

Evidentiary facts of this statement are plentiful. Following the major demonstrations in the cities of Daraa, Latakia, Damascus, Zaidal, and Homs, President al-Assad repeatedly promised democratic reforms. However, his actions were diametrically opposed to his promises, as his government quickly embarked on a violent campaign against all dissenters. A special report published by the New York Times stated:

In Syria, Mr. Assad at first seemed to veer between offers of concessions and force. On April 16, he pledged to meet one of the demonstrators' main demands by lifting the emergency law. But just days later, he launched what became a withering crackdown: security forces fired on demonstrators across the country, killing dozens, the army sent tanks into Daraa and hundreds of government opponents were arrested or were reported to have disappeared. By May 31, human rights groups said that more than 1,000 had been killed and as many as 10,000 people were reported to be in custody or missing.[7]

III. POLITICAL DISSENT AND INTOLERANCE: A HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In order to further understand the situation in Syria, we examine the historical context surrounding the power of the al-Assad family and how it has led to the current crisis.

Since 1963, when the Ba'ath Party solidified its power, Syria has been ruled by authoritarian regimes. As noted, these were headed first by Hafez al-Assad, then by his son Bashar al-Assad. During Hafez al-Assad's reign, political dissent was consistently limited. However, the situation for political activists worsened following the 1976-1982 insurgency led by the Muslim Brotherhood. An ultraconservative, political, socio-religious group, the Muslim Brotherhood rejected the Ba'ath party with its secular ideology and administration. Members of the Brotherhood, which has its roots in Egypt, believed it could rise up and transform Syria into an Islamist state, guided by the motto, “*The Quran is our Constitution.*” This uprising was violently suppressed in February 1982, as the Syrian military demolished the Muslim Brotherhood's main stronghold in the city of Hama, destroying much of the city, and killing and injuring tens of thousands of civilians.[8]

This was a pre-cursor and indicator of what was to come when protests began during the *Arab spring*. The result of that uprising was an increased atmosphere of paranoia among Hafez al-Assad and his regime. In its draconian efforts to ensure that such an uprising would never be repeated by any opposition group, the Syrian This led to the commonplace practice of arbitrary arrest and detention, intimidation, torture, and extrajudicial killings.[9]

Following the death of Hafez al-Assad in 2000, many inside and outside Syria hoped that human rights abuses in the

country would end under the rule of his son. He said as much in a declaration to Parliament, in which Bashar al-Assad spoke of “the desperate need for constructive criticism, transparency, and democracy.”

Those words would prove hollow. According to Human Rights Watch:

Many Syrians believed the young president's promises in his inaugural speech, setting off a short-lived outpouring of discussion about the need for reform. But they paid a heavy price for their trust in Assad's words, because those who spoke out ended up in jail.[10]

In a startling report released by Human Rights Watch, Nadim Houry documents the prior decade in Syria as it related to the situation political dissenters faced in the country. Mr. Houry, a senior researcher for Human Rights Watch, specializes in Syrian country conditions. He noted that while many were optimistic at the time of Bashar al-Assad’s succession of his father, these hopes were quick to fade:

“Within a year of his ascent to power, Assad was filling Syria's prisons again with dissidents, journalists and human rights critics. Syria's security agencies, the feared Mukhabarat, started detaining people again, without arrest warrants, and torturing them with complete impunity. Promises by Assad for new laws that would broaden political and civil society participation did not materialize... What is clear from a review of his decade in power, however, is that he has no true commitment to broadening public freedoms for Syria's citizens, perhaps the most repressed in the entire Arab world. What initiatives he has taken have been limited at best; he removed a ban on independent publications, but the only two private newspapers allowed to cover political topics are owned by businessmen closely tied to his government.[11]

Indeed, conditions worsened dramatically in Syria since Bashar al-Assad came to power. Since the uprising to overthrow his government began, the president has made no improvement in protecting the rights of Syrian citizens. He spent the last decade following his father’s example by criminalizing any political opposition, both real and perceived. The ongoing massacres and physical and psychological torture of Syrian citizens deemed to be opponents of the regime that began in March of 2011 provide sufficient evidence of this fact.

The uprising that began that year resulted in al-Bashar’s horrific treatment of millions of his citizens, including kidnappings, arbitrary killings, bombings, and suspected (and many believe *proven*) use of chemical agents, for which the United States government retaliated. Kidnappings turned into an epidemic fueled by ransoms and political incentives.

According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, by September 2013, civilians represented 88% of the 101,513 deaths in Syria. Each year since they have continued to monitor and report civilian death counts as well as and total death counts. Today, they report over 500,000 dead. The civilian count provided for 2018 was 6395.[12]

The New York Times reportedly documented each incident where the Syrian government violently repressed demonstrators during the opening months of the conflict. Other international reporting agencies, too, kept a close watch on the turmoil in Syria. For example, BBC World News reported a series of events that had resulted in the deaths of hundreds in the town of Jisr al-Shughour. Beginning on June 6-7, 2011:

“Residents of the Syrian town of Jisr al-Shughour are said to be fleeing ahead of an expected military assault, after the government said 120 security forces personnel had been killed there...The government says it will act "with force" to combat "armed gangs" that it blames for the recent killings. Activists say the cause of the deaths is unclear and may involve a mutiny. They insist that the uprising against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad is peaceful. Following the alleged deaths among the security forces, residents of Jisr al-Shughour posted messages on Facebook saying they feared a slaughter. They called on people to block roads into the town with burning tyres, rocks and tree trunks. Syrian army tanks and troop carriers backed by helicopters were reported to be on the move.”[13]

Despite the attempts of locals to block the siege on Jisr al-Shughour and neighboring villages, the Syrian army embarked on a deadly campaign in the region, forcing many inhabitants to flee to Turkey. According to a report issued by BBC World News, the Syrian army, using tanks and helicopters, began to attack villages near the Turkish border, using a “scorched earth” policy. Under this strategy, the army not only sought out suspected protestors, but also took to burning down houses, businesses, and cropland as residents desperately attempted to flee the region. According to BBC’s account of the situation in and around Jisr al-Shughour:

"Refugees and activists still inside Syria said troops and tanks were cutting off and attacking villages to the east and north of Jisr al-Shughour, leaving a trail of devastation in their wake. "The situation is tragic," one man who said he had fled Jisr al-Shughour told BBC Arabic. "The army and thugs terrorized the people and frightened the civilians. At the moment there is looting. "When they find deserted homes, they knock down the doors or gates, enter the houses and steal what they find. If they can't steal it, they burn it." [14]

IV. IMPACTS OF MULTIPLE BELLIGERENTS

While there are many, many grey areas, the external countries who have played a role in Syria's civil war fall into two main camps: those who support the Syrian government, and those who support the rebels. Russia and Iran clearly back al-Assad and the Syrian government; while Turkey, the United States, the United Kingdom, and France support so-called moderate rebels. This is just one area where the pictures blurs.

Russia had military bases in Syria prior to the uprising, so they had an early vested interest in supporting government forces who had granted them permission for land. However, they did not enter the conflict directly during its first four years. Then, in 2015, Russia began bombing what it termed *terrorist* bases in Syria. These were essentially all rebel areas. For the past four years, Russia has been an active player, and they have had a dramatic influence in turning the tide toward Syria's victory.

Iran has also helped Syrian forces win battles and likely the war. They have deployed troops and money, the latter of which is estimated to be in the billions of dollars. [15] Indirectly, Iran has funded its fellow Shia militia members from Lebanon (Hezbollah), Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yemen to fight alongside and in support of al-Assad's Syrian troops.

On the opposite side of the struggle, US, UK, and France and others supported those it considered to be moderate rebels, but this was never a full-throated form of support because they were not willing to support extremist rebels, whom they consider jihadists. Those jihadists eventually have become dominant among the rebels, making it difficult for Western forces to take clear sides. Saudi Arabia and Qatar also entered the fight with arms and financial backing for the rebels, often ignoring the line between jihadists and other rebels. This action was taken to thwart Iran's influence.

Turkey took an active early role in supporting the rebels, but it has its own agenda of using those rebels to contain Kurdish groups in Turkey. Similarly, Israel has also played a defensive role not unlike Turkey. Fearing the encroachment of Iran-backed fighters now deeply embedded in Syria, which borders Israel, Israel has launched several pro-active air strikes in an effort to take out Iran-provided weapons.

Finally, Syrian Kurds are a major player active in the war, and they hold an entirely different perspective. Syrian Kurds want to self-govern, yet they have not taken up arms or battled with al-Assad's government forces as of yet. Thus far, they have been active in destroying the ISIS caliphate, backed by US support including training, money, and arms.

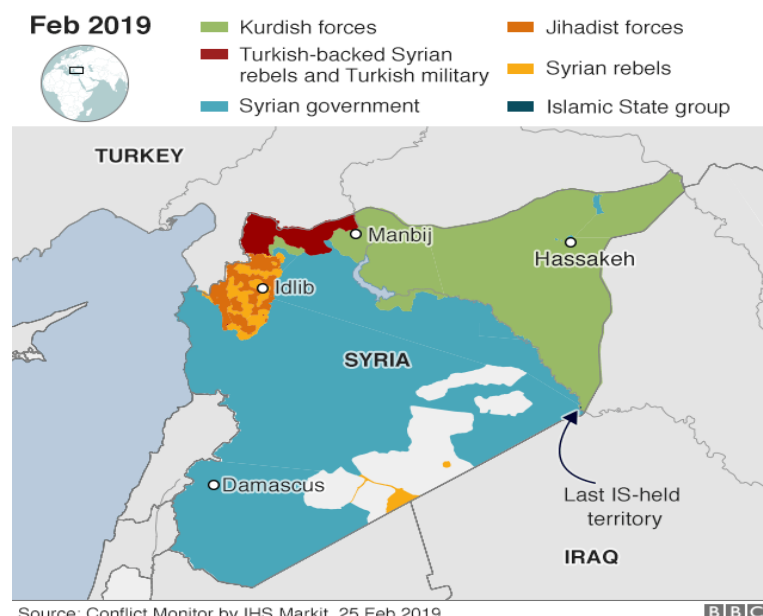


Fig. N Map of Syria

Today the ever-changing map of *who-controls-what-territory* in Syria is slightly less complex compared with earlier years, though that doesn't imply an end to the war anytime soon. Government forces do have control back of the country's largest cities, but as the map indicates, Syrian Kurdish forces, known as the SDF, control a large territory east of the Euphrates River, and they eventually want to self-govern. For many years now, the US has backed the SDF in addition to backing the moderate rebels. However, the sudden withdrawal of US troops has made both groups more vulnerable and has the potential to embolden Syria further.

V. CONCLUSION

Even before the US announced its hasty withdrawal from Syria late last year, most government leaders and pundits had given up hope of any American victory in Syria. The US has long considered the improbability of changing the political or military balance in that country, given it has long been allied of Russia and Iran. Once Russia entered the battle in 2015, the fight was determined. In fact, it seems nearly all the countries embroiled in this bloody conflict have known or nearly known the trajectory and even the outcome. According to Aaron David Miller, a prominent Middle East expert at the Carnegie Endowment for Middle East Peace: [16]

To achieve their ends, Russia and Iran have been more willing to devote resources toward keeping Assad afloat than the U.S. has been prepared to either remove him from power or stand behind the assorted elements in Syria who've tried and so far, failed to overthrow him. There are valid reasons for U.S. reticence, but Americans should let go of the idea that we were ever trying very hard to win.

With the US disengagement, the war will continue the march to its natural conclusion. Bashar al-Assad is likely to reclaim control over nearly all of Syria, if not all. His authoritarian and brutal habits of leadership will continue, and the loss of lives will be for naught. Kurds are likely to face a continued uphill battle to establish an autonomous enclave in Syria. Iran will eventually withdraw its financial support, but it may well leave behind its proxy soldiers in the form of Hezbollah and other Iranian militias. Their new strength in fighting capabilities, arms, and organization will spell new troubles for Israel. With Iranian-backed militants bordering Israel from two neighboring countries, Lebanon and Syria, in place, trained, and itching for a new fight with long-time enemy Israel, any future peace will be precarious and fragile.

Another indicator that the outcome of the war is already determined is the fact that regional Arab countries such as United Arab Emirates [17] reopened their embassy in Damascus after a seven-year closure, and Jordan appointed a new Charge d'affaires at their embassy there. [18] Notably, the entire Gulf Cooperation Council, which originally pulled support from Syria, have all but indicated a thawing in their position toward Jordan, and all are expected to reestablish diplomatic ties soon.

While the fighting continues on the ground, the end game looks to be determined. Western allies will retreat, Arab states will reconnect, Israel will strengthen its resolve and its fortresses, and the Kurds will return to their age-old battle for independence. Syrians will someday return to their precarious lives under the dictatorial thumb of Bashir al Assad.

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