



## Political Impasse in Syria and Ascendency of President Assad

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Since its inception, there were three factors which had made the Syrian uprising acquire the form that it did: its militarization, its sectarianization and finally the way the country became a battle ground for proxies of regional and global powers.<sup>1</sup>

President Assad's government at the regional level has supported from Iran, Lebanon's Hezbollah and has also significant support of Iraq. Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey extend support to the anti-Assad rebel forces.<sup>2</sup> One of the earliest resistances against Mr. Assad came from a faction of his army which formed a group called 'Free Syrian Army' and it was later joined by the ISIS and its other offshoots like *Jabhat Fatah-al-Sham*. President Assad has military and diplomatic support from Russia while the US is arming anti-Assad forces and has conducted occasional air strike against the government for the use of chemical weapons. It also gives the training and supports to some Kurdish groups. The latest entrant into the Syrian quagmire is the state of Israel which while outside the region not confronting the government of Assad directly but it is opposed to any strategic and military entrenchment of Iran or Hezbollah in Syria.

This year marks the seventh anniversary of the war in Syria and sixth anniversary of United Nations-led peace talks. Peace initiatives have failed to achieve progress. All past predictions about President Bashar Assad's early exit from power appear to have been profoundly misplaced. Today he seems to have consolidated himself across the country. Today one can see many banners in Syrian towns which read, "Welcome to victorious Syria and "Assad has triumphed".<sup>3</sup> President Assad has reestablished control over most of the territories which his army had lost to the rebel forces in 2015 after the rise of the ISIS. The only territory that lies

beyond the control of Assad's forces is the town of Idlib in the north and after hectic diplomacy; a military attack has been averted at least temporarily.

### **Assad survives under shadow of external intervention and failed peace process:**

What tipped the scale in favor of President Assad was the involvement of Iran and Russia.<sup>4</sup> Mr. Ali Akbar Velayati, advisor to the spiritual leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, very vividly remarked in an interview in 2017 that "Without us, Bashar would not have survived"<sup>5</sup>. In early 2018, Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah in a separate interview claimed that, "They (Assad and his regime) remained intact because there was someone to look after them."<sup>6</sup>

The fading role of Saudi Arabia, inaction of the western powers and reluctance on the part of US to intervene and its exclusive focus on the ISIS and Kurdish blocks also helped Assad. The growing rifts and ideological divisions among the rebel forces served as a major political asset for Assad. The mentors of the proxies were not united and viewed each other as rivals as much as allies. Assad's diplomatic success was to cast all the opposition forces as terrorists.

In the span of last six-seven years a series of tangible initiatives have been taken by different actors to resolve issues but without any outcome. The first major initiative came in the form of UN and Arab League Peace Plan submitted to the UNSC<sup>7</sup> which became the basis for the Geneva and Astana peace talks.

Eight rounds of Geneva talks-beginning in 2012-achieved little and surprisingly its only success has been to make the regime and the opposition sit together in the last round in November 2017. There were numerous factors which hindered the progress of the Geneva talks but the most prominent was turning the final goal of the negotiation into a precondition-removal of President Assad-by the opposition forces. The adherence to this traditional objective by the opposition has evidently failed to read the changing diplomatic and strategic realities on the ground. The rise of ISIS became a factor operating in President Assad's favor. It helped him to change the narrative and also alter the course of the war.

Alongside the eight rounds of the Geneva peace talks, , the Astana Peace Process saw ten rounds of negotiations in the last one and a half year . The only success it achieved was the declaration of four de-escalation zones (Idlib, Homs, Eastern and Darra). The de-escalation agreement has however also achieved only partial success.

### **Changing External and Internal Dynamics also Contributed to Assad's Success:**

Turkey was the first nation to ask President Assad to step down but the fear of Kurdish nationalism as a formidable force on its border with Syria is now nuancing their policy The US focus on ISIS has limited the scope of dialogue over Assad's future and has also generated new commitments by the US to support anti-Turkey Kurdish forces, accentuating the animosity between two NATO allies: US and Turkey.

The current standoff between Russia and Turkey over Idlib is likely to add a new element to the existing strategic and diplomatic alliances in Syria. Though the operation in Idlib has been put off for time being, but any military action in future would create new exodus from Syria into Turkey which is already under immense pressure.

Not only the role of Saudi Arabia has faded in recent past but the role of Iran too has changed considerably. It is no longer providing arms or training but remains part of Astana peace process. Israel has repeatedly expressed its concerns over the growing influence of Iran on the Israel-Syria border and from time to time has launched air strikes against its military bases in Syria. There are reports that an Iran-backed militia, Al-Nujaba has threatened to launch an operation to liberate the Israel-held Golan Height. Jordan, another victim in regional chaos desires an early stability on its border with Syria in order to revive its trade but Israel sees it as contrary to its strategic interest because it is likely to pave further strategic inroad for Iran.

The recent meeting between the Kurdish representatives and the government of President Assad has added a new flux to the Syrian crisis.<sup>8</sup>. Both sides have a history of animosity but throughout the civil war, Assad's forces refrained from direct confrontation with the Kurds as the government saw them as formidable forces against friend-turned-foe Turkey. Moreover military wing of Kurds fought along with the US against the ISIS which made them a natural ally of President Assad. Further many members of the rebel forces have reportedly rejoined the Assad's army and surrendered their weapons to the central authority.<sup>9</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

The civil war in Syria and the subsequent peace process had first sought a time-bound exit for President Assad but gradually with the rise of the ISIS and other rouge elements, old demands were replaced by a set of other demands such as fighting terrorism and identifying de-escalations zones and temporary ceasefire. The absence of a blueprint and shifting of focus from one issue to another by the mediators and stakeholders also became a source of political strength for President Assad. One has also observed that how earlier agenda of democratic reform, federal representation and writing new constitution has lost its track and no longer is a serious component of the negotiation.

Given the flux and shifting priorities in the political sphere of Syria, it seems that President Assad will have a hard time to regain the control over whole of the country in the absence of legitimate political institutions and other mechanisms. What might further delay a comprehensive peace in the country is the existence of intense factionalism among the opposition groups and conflicting interest of external actors.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

## **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> A long view of the Middle East, Cairo Review Interview , <https://cdn.thecairoreview.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/cr30-gelvin.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Aljazeera <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/syria-civil-war-explained-160505084119966.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.apnews.com/7481f350bfd4507a1a3e2b65de7bdc7>

<sup>4</sup> Eyal Zisser, Why has Bashar Won the War in Syria? Strategic Assessment, Vol. 21, no 2, July 2018

<sup>5</sup> Reuters, “From Aleppo, Top Iranian Official Hails Tehran’s Growth as Regional Power,” Haaretz, November 8, 2017. <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/top-iranian-official-hails-tehran-s-growth-as-regional-power-1.5464066> ( Accessed on December 22, 2017)

<sup>6</sup> Eyal Zisser, Why has Bashar Won the War in Syria? Strategic Assessment, Vol. 21, no 2, July 2018 ,

<sup>7</sup> Syria Diplomatic Talks: A Timeline, Aljazeera , <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/09/syria-diplomatic-talks-timeline-170915083153934.html>

<sup>8</sup> The Hindu Editorial, August 10, 2018, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/towards-wars-end/article2456636.ece> ( Accessed on August 5, 2018 )

<sup>9</sup> Under Assad’s Grip: Uneasy Existence with Syria ex-rebels, Associate press news , <https://apnews.com/f358a6c4ad5e40c7b41a04ca9fb10101> July 19, 2108 ( accessed on August 10, 2018 )