

Business Line

Anarchy and terror in Syria

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Given the complexities, Syria's struggle is likely to be prolonged and bloody.

The conflict over regime change in Syria is threatening to balkanise the country.

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The year-long battle between the Assad regime and the fragmented opposition seems headed for a new phase of international involvement. On one side, Russia, China and Iran oppose regime change. On the other, the US, the UK, France, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are for the change.

This confrontation is now sharpening, with more aggressive roles on both sides, threatening to balkanise Syria and turn it into a theatre of bloody conflict. An added element is the increasing role of al Qaeda elements seeking to inflict defeat on both the US and Russia, and gain a foothold in this war-torn country.

Impact on neighbours

The Syrian quagmire has an impact on neighbours such as Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Israel.

Turkey supports the pro-Islamic opposition, Syrian National Committee, has set up large refugee camps, but is cautious about the destabilisation of its eastern region with its Kurdish population.

Lebanon is polarised between Sunnis, Shias, Christians and Palestinians groups, with a delicate balance of power, each with its own priorities. It has a porous mountainous border conducive to easy smuggling of weapons and people.

Iraq has its own version of the Shia-Sunni divide, as well as its assertive Kurdish population in the North, and managing its relations with Iran, while still under the influence of the US.

Israel's main concern is the security situation on the Golan Heights. Under the two Assad regimes, a *modus vivendi* was in place, with relative peace on the Israeli-Syrian front, though Syria supported anti-Israeli armed operations in Lebanon.

Change or weakening of the Assad regime has both pluses and minuses for Israel, preoccupied with Iran's nuclearisation and aggressive support of Hamas and Hezbollah. Jordan controls an important transport route for Syria to the South and is the main front for Saudi and Qatari support to the Syrian opposition.

The complexities

Syria, through its long history, has been a crossroad of various civilisations. The country lies at the intersection of the silk and spice routes, making Damascus and Aleppo important and ancient trading centres. It has been the scene of conquests and regimes of pre-Islamic, Islamic, Crusader, and Ottoman periods, all of which have left their mark on the country.

A secret French-British plan divided the post-Ottoman areas, carving out Lebanon and the district of Antioch from present day Syria. The population has considerable diversity, including Christians, and fringe Shia Islamic sects such as Alawites and Druze. In the 11th century, an Ismaili sect called the Assassins came into being to carry out missions of organised and planned killing of political figures as part of state policy.

Given the complexities of Syria, the struggle for the country is likely to be prolonged and bloody. The opposition is still divided and has no unifying leader. The regime has strong military forces but its support is narrow-based, deriving from the Alawite minority (12 per cent), while increasingly dependent on Russia and China.

The use of military forces and heavy weapons against the opposition has led to large number of civilian casualties, refugees, and human rights abuses. A pro-regime Alawite-dominated armed militia, the Shabbiha, has been killing civilians opposed to the regime. The situation is far more difficult than Libya, where external military intervention could be decisive.

Arms support

In the situation of stalemate, the regime and the opposition have been seeking more weapons and military support from outside. Arms are being supplied from Russia, ostensibly being delivered as part of earlier contracts.

Russia has beefed up its presence around the coast, especially the deep water port of Tartous, and has supplied air Defence equipment to forestall any attempts by the West to set up no-fly zones. The opposition has been receiving heavier weapons from its external supporters.

The increasing violence has led the UN to suspend its observer mission, and the Annan plan has not worked. So far no foreign direct military intervention has taken place, due to apprehensions of getting bogged down in a long and intractable conflict.

The UN Security Council has been paralysed by divisions among the P-5, with the threat of Russian and Chinese veto blocking Western moves to put Syria under mandatory sanctions and change its regime. This further underlines the need for reforms in the UNSC, especially the abolition of the veto.

Beset by economic woes and the war in Afghanistan, the West is hesitant to embark on a military operation under NATO, as it did in Bosnia, though there are increasing calls for such an initiative.

The recent US move to involve Russia in a monitoring and stabilisation plan for Syria has failed. The almost daily reports of deaths of civilians, and the threats to the stability of Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan might impel the West to boost supplies of arms to the opposition.

A no-fly zone near the Turkish border and sanctuary for the opposition armed elements seems a possible prospect. The movement of Russian warships, arms, and personnel into Syria may result in a stronger response from the West.

A Turkish F-4 jet was shot down off the Syrian coast, and both countries are trying to contain the tensions from this incident.

The reported bomb blasts in Syria in recent weeks has been attributed to al Qaeda elements, including those crossing over from Iraq. The conflict situation will result in hard-line militant groups gaining strength over more peaceful ones.

It presents al Qaeda with a good opportunity to pursue its war against the West and Russia. The Syrian quagmire may well turn into a fiery crucible of terror if the international community goes down the road of confrontation rather than cooperation.

(The author is a former Ambassador of India. He has served in Syria.)

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