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# Business Line

## Syria, an ever-boiling cauldron

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*Those stirring the pot are extremist groups and a host of countries, with the UN being utterly ineffective.*

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The intractable, 19-month-long conflict in Syria has so far caused around 36,000 deaths while some half million refugees have fled into neighbouring countries. In addition, there are some 1.5 million internally displaced persons.

The country's historic cities have been damaged by bombs and artillery shelling. Dark days lie ahead with the risk of extremist elements and external players increasing their role in the conflict situation, making it even more intractable.

UN Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi, a seasoned Algerian senior diplomat, had tried in vain to broker a temporary truce during the Eid Al Adha festival, as important to Muslims as Christmas is to Christians. But despite initial hopes, the truce collapsed into conflict.

Peacemaking can only start when the parties realise that they cannot achieve their objectives by continued conflict, are weakened to the point of mutual exhaustion, and have more to lose by continued conflict.

Clearly this stage has not yet been reached, and peacemakers will have to wait longer. Meanwhile, the humanitarian tragedy intensifies, and the task of post-conflict rebuilding and reconstruction grows bigger.

### Fragmented opposition

The Syrian opposition remains fragmented and disunited. The Turkish based Syrian National Council (SNC), the Free Syrian Army (FSA), and the Damascus-based National Coordination Committee (NCC) have not developed the degree of coordination, let alone unity and shared goals that are essential for bringing about a change in regime.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton reflected Western frustration when she called for "rebuilding" the Syrian opposition. Behind this cry was the apprehension that extremist elements, such as Al Qaeda, could take advantage of the disunity and increase their foothold in Syria.

The best hope for unifying the opposition remains the Syrian National Council, the most inclusive and democratic of all the groups. The recent SNC meeting at Doha sought to achieve this, but with limited success.

Efforts should continue to improve coordination between the SNC and the FSA and bring the NCC into this structure. This will require patient work by Western and Arab governments, and will open the way for a diplomatic solution to the conflict at the right time. Calibrated political and economic support, including armed capability and logistics, can help this process.

The UN remains deadlocked and unable to advance beyond the platitude that a solution has to be found peacefully through a Syrian-led effort.

But external intervention is already a reality, with Iran providing massive critical support to the regime, including military equipment, military advisers, and training to build up the repressive private Shabbiha militia into a regular armed force. Iranian intervention in Syria and support to the regime started well before the present conflict began.

### Drawing external players

The Syrian conflict today has drawn in external players, as would any prolonged conflict. The border with Turkey has become a zone of tension with refugees crossing over. Turkey-Syrian tensions are high with military build-up on the border.

However, Russian pressure and US lack of support have restrained Turkey. But its restraint has limits and it is now seeking NATO support for setting up Patriot missiles on its border as a prelude to a no fly zone. After Obama's re-election, the US strategy for the conflict is likely to be more active but short of military intervention.

Lebanon has witnessed the assassination of its intelligence chief, who had rolled up a pro-Syrian network in that

country. Jordan has been affected by refugee influx and pressures to open a front for the opposition. Israel is nervous about leakage of Syrian stocks of chemical weapons into the hands of Hezbollah and Hamas.

Israel has already reacted to Syrian shelling and aircraft movements on the Golan heights, which is supposed to be demilitarised. For Iran, Syria remains a key strategic base from which to threaten Israel with drones and missiles, in case of hostilities that seem just over the horizon.

Syria is now experiencing what happened for so many years in Lebanon where Syria sought to gain a dominant role in its troubled waters. Al Qaeda and extremist groups can exploit a prolonged conflict and weakening of state authority to build their base.

The experience of Lebanon shows the dangers of a prolonged conflict and disintegration of a country into warlord-controlled zones, making it possible for terrorists, organised crime, and drug lords to flourish. The desperation of the Syrian regime is apparent in its use of warplanes to bomb its own cities, an action that makes little military sense.

## India's role

Stung by criticism of its role, China recently put forward a tentative plan for a piecemeal ceasefire, to be put in place over designated areas and zones. It is not clear whether this approach will convince the warring parties and their supporters.

Such a Balkanised approach may work but only if all sides see advantages from it. Otherwise, a ceasefire, however limited in time and space, will simply become a breather for the parties to rearm and regroup for a fresh round of fighting.

What about India's role? It would be prudent for India to engage appropriately with the principal parties in the Syrian conflict (apart from the Syrian government with whom India is already engaged), such as the SNC, the FSA, the NCC. Engaging with them with a focus on humanitarian assistance can yield dividends in the long run.

India's role in the Security Council will come to an end in another two months. These months are likely to be difficult with prospects of a sharp rise in tensions in the region, arising from the Syrian conflict and Iran's pursuit of a nuclear weapon option.

The covert conflict between Iran-Israel /US could escalate and spread, causing major disruptions in global energy supplies and economic instability. India needs to prepare for this eventuality.

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

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