

Geopolitics of Syrian Civil War and Changing Map of Middle East

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Abstract: Uprisings swept across the Arab world to oust their long serving leaders vying for change in political structure in late 2010 and early 2011 came to be known as Arab Spring. These effects also reached Syria, where the people lined up to overthrow their leader President Bashar Al Assad, whose family has been in power since 1970. Peaceful protests turned violent by crackdown of the protest through extreme means, ultimately lead to deadly civil war in the country. Arms resistance against the government became the only solution as situation turned ugly. Failure of state institutions became a breeding ground for terrorist groups particularly the rise of Islamic State. Foreign mercenaries began traveling to Syria to establish a Caliphate. Although, most of ISIS has been wiped out, still the war is going on and reached in its ninth year. It has caused 400000 plus deaths and around 10 million displaced internally and externally. Russian intervention lead to the defeat of rebel groups and the war is entering its final stage. Many foreign powers with their interests are involved in the conflict including US, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey and many others countries. Kurds the ethnic minority in the country has formed its own autonomous region.

Keywords: Arab Spring, ISIS, New cold war, Russia versus USA, South West Asia.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2011 a wave of uprisings arose across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). This wave of uprisings is generally referred as Arab Spring. People of MENA region have been looking for their social, political and economic reforms. Arab Spring as a wave of uprisings was ignited by self-immolation by Tunisian *Bouazizi* who set himself ablaze. This incident stimulated large scale protests in Tunisia and soon swept to the neighboring countries in the MENA region. Uprisings began from Tunisia and soon spread to countries like Libya, Egypt, Algeria etc. and then also entered in Syria, where it is the last and most prolonged amongst Arab Spring uprisings [1].

In the context of Syria, trouble began on March 18, 2011, when a group of school children painted anti-regime graffiti on the walls in the city of Dara'a. These children were arrested by the regime forces and were jailed and tortured. News spread like wildfire, when people heard this incident, leading to massive protests in the city where thousands joined and soon began to spread across other cities of Homs, Aleppo, Latakia, and suburbs of Damascus. The regime was terrified by such a massive scale of gathering. In the early days of protests, there were shootings into crowd of protestors and it was unclear, who pulled the trigger first. Casualties were on both sides, security forces as well as the protestors. Armed gunmen were found present into the group of protestors. The Syrian regime brutally responded the protestors by using excessive force, even by firing live rounds into the crowds. At the beginning ordinary citizens who came out in support of the protest wanted a change in land reforms, economic reforms and later, most important of all demanded for regime change, freedom and democracy. "God, Syria and Freedom" became the slogan for the protest [2]. From the 1970 onwards Syria has been ruled by Hafiz Al- Assad, father of current president Bashar Al Assad, until his son succeeded him in the year 2000. They are from the Alawite sect from Shia community, which forms a minority in the country and

many of top officials of the regime were also Alawites. In a country of 21 million, where 60 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim. Although President Assad and his Ba'ath party are secular with their policies and the people coexisting peacefully, since starting of their family rule.

On the outbreak of the uprising the ordinary citizens were really confused about what actually demands and grievances were all about. Nor did they want a violent revolution. A peaceful solution was what they hope for. The demand for the release of school children and soon followed by release of political prisoners. As protest intensified, demand for the stepping down of the President arrived. President Assad was reluctant and used all his might to stay in power. His responses to the protestors were harsh, ordering his men to fire live rounds to the unarmed protesters, use of airplanes, artillery etc. Assad army had short of armored vehicles so they had to rely on tanks to transport troops to hostile areas, this also created a negative image to the people and the world. Many troops and junior officers resisted the order and deflected to form the "Free Syrian Army". As the protestors became more violent, opposition to the regime grew larger as each day passed. External influences from the beginning were present, where the protestors were paid simply to chant anti-regime slogans. Protestors began to take up arms as peaceful solution was not insight. The casualties began to grow and the different armed opposition groups emerged having their own interests and the country plunged into complete civil war. As situation turned ugly from a peaceful protest to a full blown civil war, as result of this many have been displaced within their own country and 5.6 million Syrian are living as refugees in the neighboring countries [3].

State institution began to crumble and the regime became a weaken state. Opposition groups such as Syrian Democratic Forces, the YPG (Yekeneyen Parastina Gel) Kurdish militias, Free Syrian Army and many factions began to emerge to fight against the state. In spite of all this, a ruthless terrorist organization known as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) emerged to fill the power vacuum left by failing State. Many foreign fighters who were attracted to the ideology of ISIS to form a Caliphate, began arriving in Syria to fight for Islamic State. Syrian Arab Republic quickly began to lose territory and ISIS was expanding at an alarming rate extending their territory to Syria and Iraq and made Raqqa their defacto capital (Fig. 4).

Foreign players with their own interest mainly US, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, began supporting the opposition groups and the American policy of regime change came into consideration to remove Basar Al Assad. Saudi Arabia and Qatar began to fund the rebel groups, which had ties to the terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda, ISIS. Sanctions started to come in place from USA and European Union. Airstrikes against the Assad forces began to carried out by the US-led coalition. Arming of rebel groups was put up by the Americans to fight the regime as well Islamic State. It was total failure from the American side and dropped the task of arming the rebels. Arms supplied to rebels soon falls into the hands of the terrorist groups [4].

On the other side of the line, fighting the war itself, is the Syrian Government, Russia, Iran, Hezbollah (from Lebanon), Shia militias and China. Assad had more foes than friends in this fight but he had strong and reliable friends from the soviet era. Syria has been receiving economic, military and political support from Russia, while Iran had to extend its influence over the Middle East for dominance in the region from their bitter rival Sunni Saudi Arabia. China also play its part politically in the UN by blocking sanctions. Hezbollah and many Shia militia fighters were fighting beside the regime. Russia has been supporting President Assad's government from the start of Civil War. Russia also has an important military base in Tartus and it is of geo-strategic importance and its supporting its ally in the region. When President Assad was seeing his downfall and loosing too much territory, Russia stepped up and started military intervention in 2015 September, providing Air support for Assad ground troops. It was the turning point of the war in favor of Assad government. Special forces, military advisers, military police, food aids, Weapons were supplied by Russia [5]. The Russian President Vladimir Putin was against any form of regime change, as it would bring instability and chaos in the country as it happened in the case of Libya and Iraq. The absence of power created a vacuum, which became a breeding ground for terrorist organizations. Many Syrians welcome the move taken by Russian military support in capturing back their territories, while Western nations along with USA accused the intervention of indiscriminately bombing civilian areas and rebel groups and not the Islamic State.

Present paper attempts to: to analyze the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, to figure out how this civil war affected the Middle East and world order on international level and to know the casualties of the civil war and whereabouts the displaced population both internally and externally.

II. OVERVIEW OF STUDY AREA

Syria is a country located in South West Asia and it lies between latitudes 32° and 38°N and longitudes 35° and 43°E (Fig. 1). The country's physiography includes fertile plains, high mountains and deserts. Its population was 21 million in 2010, which has been reduced to 18.3 million in 2017 [6]. It has an area of 185,180 sq. km. The main language is Arabic. Syria has a very diverse ethnic and religious population consisting of Kurds, Christians, Druze, Alawite Shias and Arab Sunnis, which forms the majority of the population. Damascus is the capital city and the largest city in Syria is Aleppo. Syria got its independence from France in 1946. From 1970 onwards, Syria has been ruled by the family of Assad. Hafez Al-Assad came to power through a military coup and his son Basar Al- Assad succeeded him after his death in 2000. The government is highly authoritarian in nature. Syria as a country was formerly known as the Levant (known in Arabic as Al-Sham), while the modern state encompasses the sites of several ancient kingdoms and empires, including the civilization of the 3rd millennium BC. Aleppo and the capital city Damascus are among the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world [7].

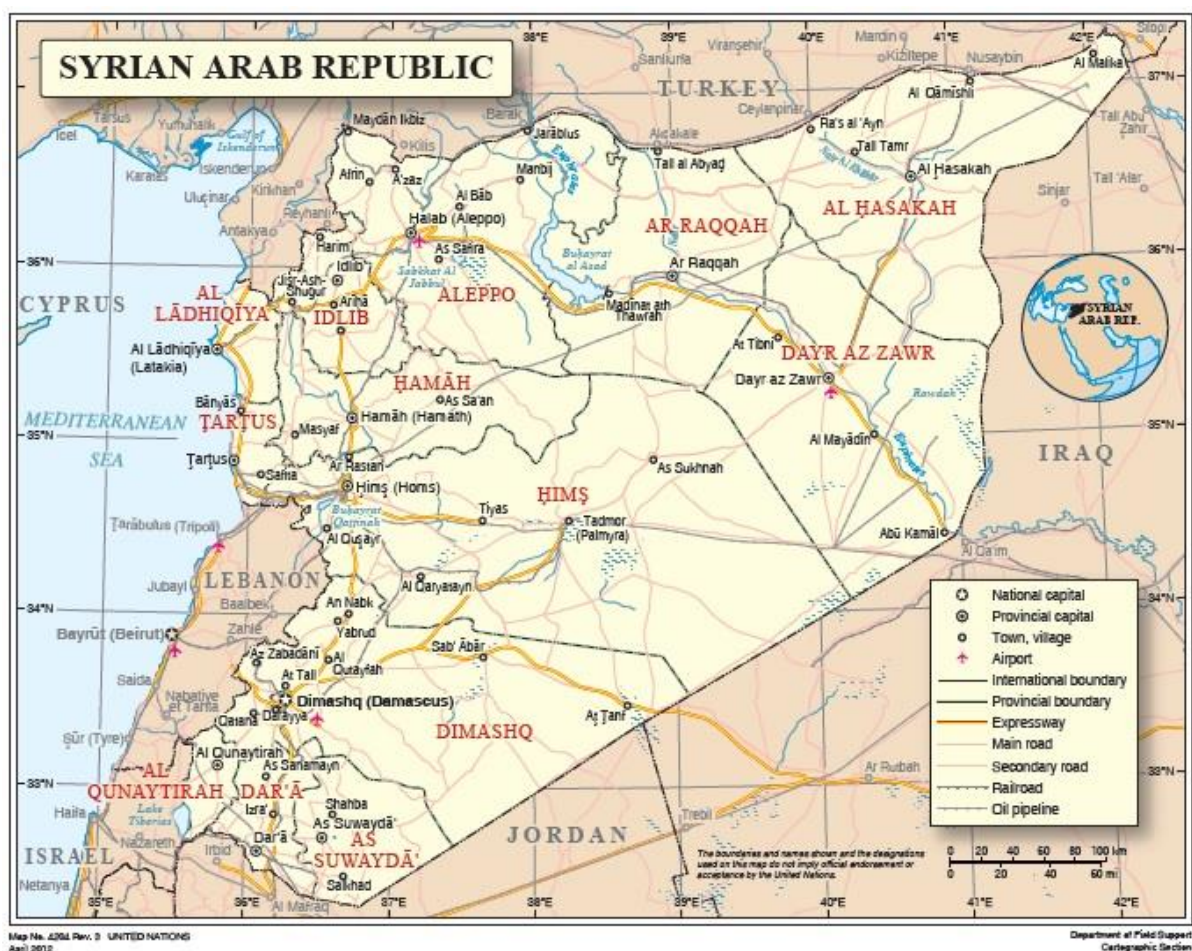


Fig 1: Map of Syria

Syria having a pro-Palestinian stand and its role in Lebanon through Hezbollah against Israel, and its closer ties with Iran and Russia were perceived against the Arabs and Western interests [8]. So, it was likely that the Arab Spring also reaching the Syrian lands and internal skirmishes becoming international conflict.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY & DATA ANALYSIS

Ongoing Syrian war has been taken as case for this research. The study is based on secondary sources that are collected from different online sources. To analyze the data representation techniques such as tables, pie chart, bar graph etc. have been used. Descriptive analysis is carried out to understand the causes and consequences of Syrian civil war.

This Study is primarily based on secondary data collection for which data is based on a number of numerous sources like published papers, organizations websites and reports, newspapers, BBC and Britannica. Most of the data collected through secondary sources has been analyzed and presented as follows:

A. Estimated Death Toll in Syrian Civil War

A British monitoring group, Syrian Observatory for Human Rights [9] has estimated that some 367965 Syrians have been killed so far since the start of civil war in March, 2011 to December, 2018. It gives a year wise death toll figures from 2011-2018 (Table 1).

Table 1: Estimated Death tolls in Syrian War

Year	Total deaths
2011	7841
2012	49294
2013	73447
2014	76021
2015	55219
2016	49742
2017	39000
2018	17401

Source: Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

The casualties on the start of civil war in 2011 were as low as 7841 and from 2012 onwards, it increased rapidly to 49294 deaths. The death toll peaked in 2014 at 76021 and from 2015 these are decreasing gradually year wise from 55219 to 49742 in 2016 and then to 39000 in 2017. Death toll has further declined to about 17401 by December, 2018 It is reflecting the relative completion of the war, which is now moving towards its end.

B. Syrian Refugee Crisis

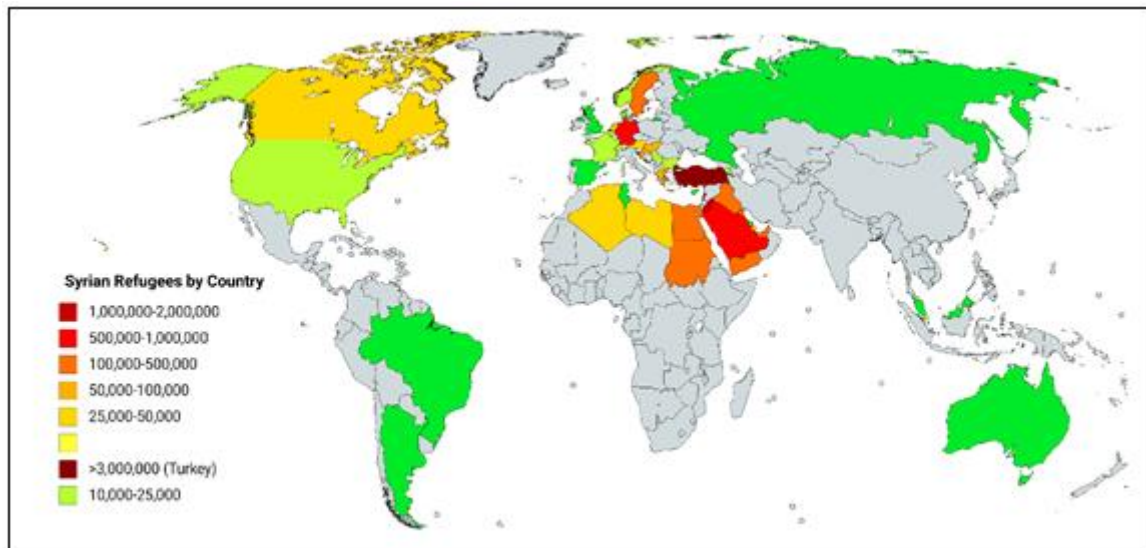
According to the UNHCR [10] there are 5,637,050 total registered Syrian Refugees till 12, Nov 2018, which are now living in different areas in Middle East and North Africa.

Table 2: Total Registered Syrian Refugees

Location	Refugee Population	Percentage
Turkey	3,594,232	63.8
Lebanon	952,562	16.9
Jordan	673,414	11.9
Iraq	251,793	4.5
Egypt	131,504	2.3
Other	33,545	0.6

Sources: UNHCR

There are 3,594,232 (63.8 percent) Syrian refugees in Turkey, followed by 952,562 (16.9 percent) in Lebanon, 673,414 (11.9 percent) in Jordan, 251,793 (4.5 percent) in Iraq, 131,504 (2.3 percent) in Egypt and Other North African countries received 33,545 (less than 1 percent) refugees. A larger picture of Syrian refugee crisis over the world is depicted by Bucci [11]. Spread of refugees from Syrian crisis is not only limited to Middle East or MENA region, rather it has reached Europe, Americas and Australasia. Plight of these refugees as well as their economic and political repercussions are required to be analyzed in details.



Source: <https://syrianwardaily.com/2018/04/17/map-of-syrian-refugees-by-country/>

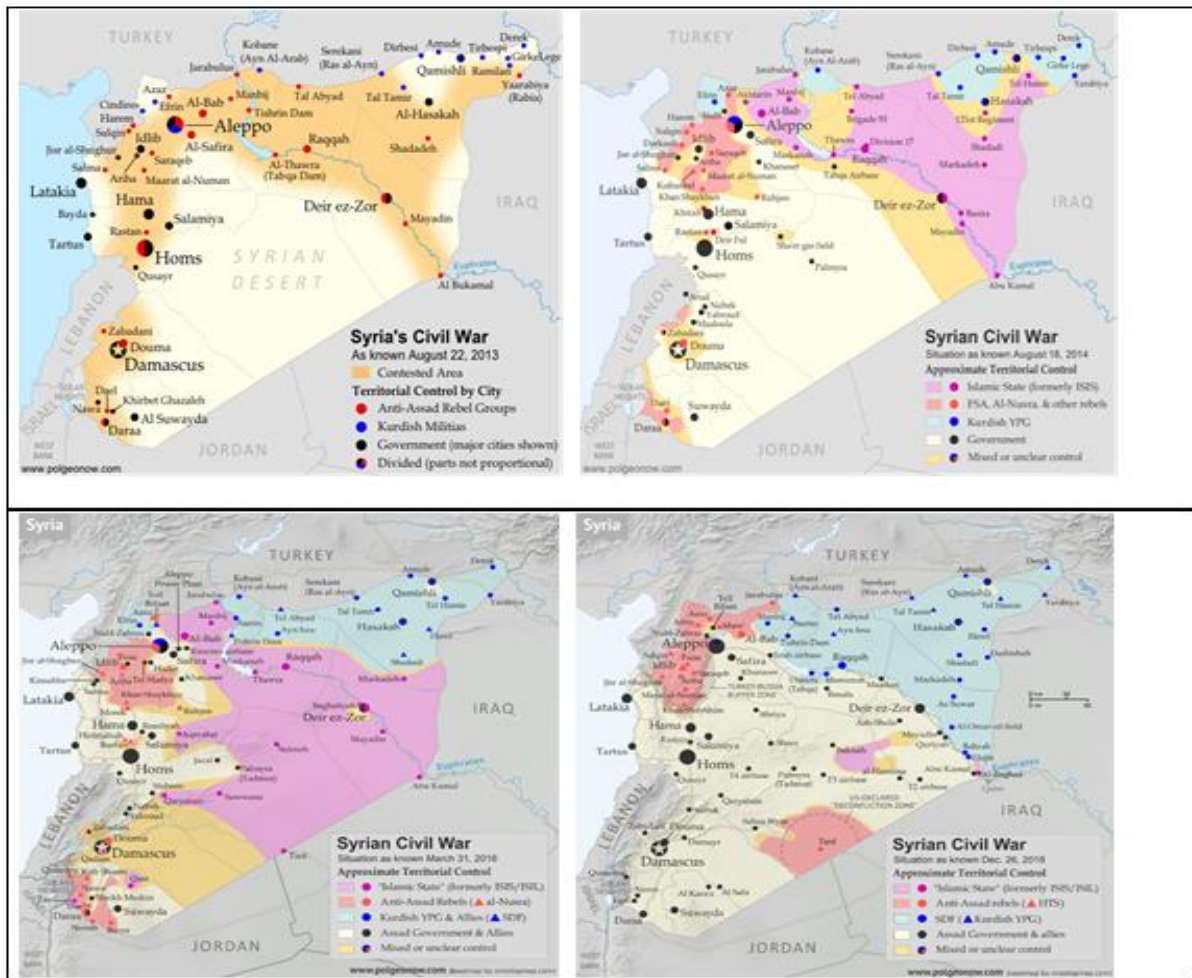
Fig. 2 Syrian Refugees by Countries

C. Syrian Civil War

The ongoing Syrian civil war is in its ninth year. The fighting between the Syrian and the opposition groups has devastated the country in ruins which has cost the lives of more than 400,000 Syrians and 6.1 million Syrians are displaced within Syria. UN [12] called the “worst refugee crisis after WW2” and it is reported that there are 5,633,696 total registered refugees in the neighboring countries, which are now living in Turkey, Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan. A report by World Bank, [13] states that the war related losses cost at about \$226 Billion from the start of civil war till now. The UN’s economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (2018) estimated the cost of Syria’s reconstruction at \$ 388 Billion [14].

The mess in the Syria is the result of problems mounting one after another. The lack of freedom and absence of democracy and authoritarian nature of ruling, the economic stagnation of the state gave a huge pressure on the people and decreasing oil prices affecting the state economy. The regime cared little less and did nothing to relieve its people, except for the few cronies profiting from the system. The Drought of 2006 forced many Syrians to migrate into urban areas creating more burdens to the country. And there is a big ethnic and religious divide in the country the ruling Alawite minority (section of Shia) and the majority Sunni Muslims and who can forget the Kurds, the largest stateless ethnic group resisting for its statehood and wish to form an independent state, and some minority Christians and Druze’s as other minorities in Syria. The present boundary of Syria was drawn by the former European colonizers, France and Britain signing a secret pact known as Sykes- Picot agreement in 1916 during WW1 to divide the dying Ottoman Empire colonies between them for their own interest [15]. A boundary line was drawn on the map and in reality a line drawn in the sands without even considering heterogeneous composition of the people living there. As it is said, past is the key to the present, this also made a huge impact on Syria to this day.

Fig. 3 depicts the extension and spatial spread of Syrian war through 2013, 2014, 2016 and 2018 maps. It clearly indicates the diffusion of war and conflict along the big ethnic population strongholds. By 2013, most areas surrounding Damascus, Homs, Aleppo and left of River Euphrates were contested and were getting swayed by anti-Assad rebels and Kurdish militia. 2014 witnessed the rise of Islamic State (ISIS) in the Euphrates and areas East of it. The North Eastern border areas were captured by Kurdish YPG groups. By now, Homs came under Government forces, but Aleppo being contested between Government, anti-Assad and Kurdish forces. By the year 2016, Islamic State was on its climax and based on Raqqa swayed over majority of area in between Western strong hold of Government, and Kurdish in the North Eastern margins. End of 2018 has also witnessed the end of Islamic State, except around Sukanah. Kurdish YPG and SDF allies have taken over the Euphrates and areas East of it.



Source: www.polgeonow.com

Fig. 3: Spatial Spread of Syrian War; 2013, 2014, 2016 and 2018

By now, Basar Al Assad and his Government forces have full control of all the areas except, areas east of Euphrates under Kurdish forces. Small strip along Turkish border in North West is under control of Turkish based Syrian rebels and Turkish forces. Area surrounding Idlib is still under Jihadist and Syrian rebels. Small area along Al Tanf, which is also having US Military base, is under Syrian rebels (Fig. 4).

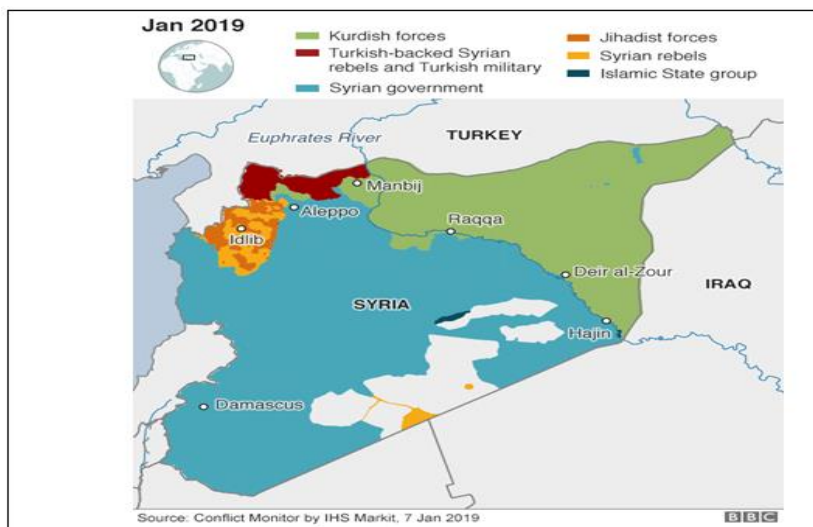
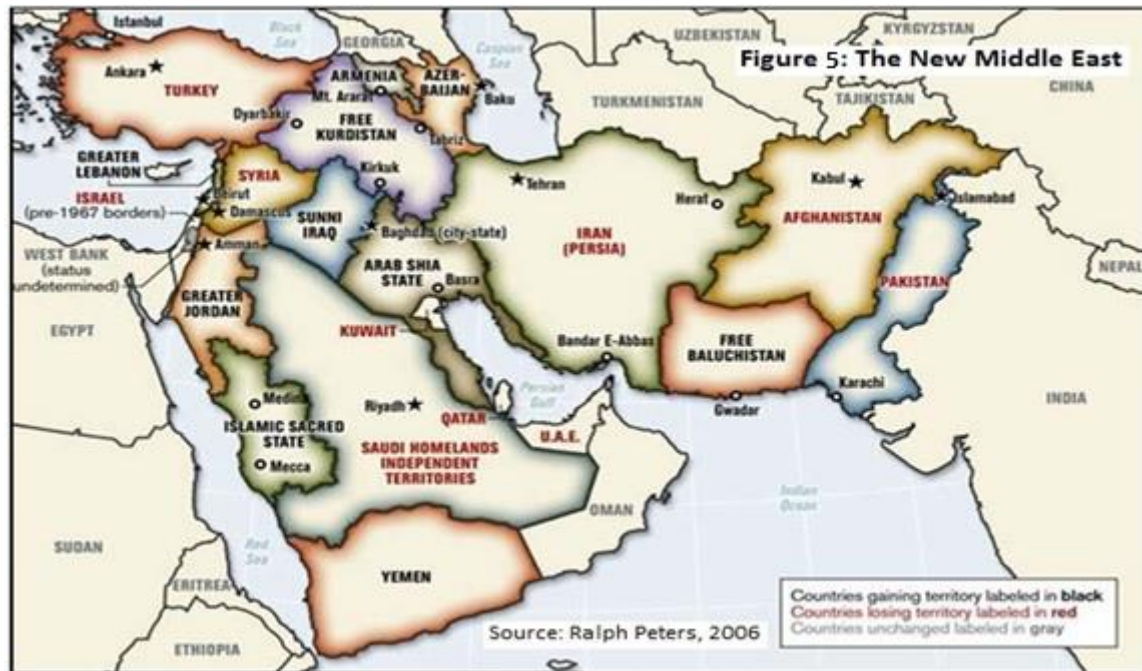


Fig. 4: Syrian Civil War in 2019

D. New Middle East

US Secretary of state Condoleezza Rice used the term ‘The New Middle East’ in 2006 [16], as this project was planned long ago to create further new states in Middle East. The American policies to divide the Middle East on the basis of their interest and on the ethnic lines is depicted in a map prepared by Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Peters (Fig. 5). The main motive was to serve the purpose over getting the resources, influences and interests. The policy of “Divide and Conquer” comes to mind and predict that Middle East would be a better place after division is just a cover up.



As per the New Middle East map (Fig. 5) there is a visible division of Iraq into three different states: Sunni Iraq; Shia Arab state; and Free Kurdistan. State of new Independent Kurdistan might be a reality, the Kurds have been the largest stateless ethnicity in the Middle East, and their population is spread across four different countries of Turkey, Iran, Syria and Iraq. They are claimed to be the most ancient people in the region, even older than the Persians and Arabs and their population count is estimated at 30 million. In Iraq and Syria, they have their own autonomous regions and their own army in Iraq known as the Peshmarga, which have been very successful in fighting against Islamic State and also an ally of the US which they armed and trained them in fighting against Islamic State. Kurds have been persecuted and executed by Saddam Hussein and suffered in the hands of many foreign powers. Saddam even launched an attack by chemical weapons to the Kurds, for which he was trialed after he was captured, and then hanged for his war crimes.

At present the war has turned the tide into Assad’s favor after the Russian military’s intervention in September 2015, when Assad was about to fall. The insurgents are only left in the Idlib Province of north western Syria which is the last major stronghold of the rebels. Many rebel groups are fighting over another for dominance. The most dominant amongst these groups, is the Islamist extremist group Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) which has approximately, 10-12000 fighters, formerly known as Al-Nusra, a branch of Syria’s Al Qaeda. They are both recognized by US and Russia as terrorist groups. Assad forces have completely surrounded the province and are prepared for an all-out offensive attack. Turkey has informed the Syrian government not to attack, as it will cause an exodus of refugees in their territory. As of now, Turkey is hosting 3.5 million Syrian refugees in makeshift camps near the Syrian border and the border gates have been closed, which is the only possible escape route for civilians, if fighting continues. An offensive attack on Idlib will cause a human catastrophe on 3 million people living over there. On 17 September, 2018 the Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan held a meeting in Sochi to create a de-militarized zone at about 15-20 km deep into the province, where it will create a buffer zone between the Assad forces and rebels and the rebels must leave their heavy weapons like Artillery from the zone. President Assad has offered reconciliation for the rebels and they are not amused by that and willing to fightback. Future will tell whether this New Middle East map would be a reality through the end of this Syrian civil war or some other war may be coming into. One can only pray for a peaceful solution to the Middle Eastern and Syrian problem.

IV. SUMMING UP

Starting with the Arab Spring, Syrian War has evolved into one of the largest conflict and exodus Humanity has witnessed since Second World War. Not only remaining an internal conflict for changing regime, it emerged as a sort of new Cold War, as Russia and USA were face to face with each other. Initially, USA was having an upper hand as creation of Islamic State was also helping in destabilizing Assad's regime in Syria. But, fortunately, Russian entry in Syrian War changed the whole scenario. Not, only ISIS was wiped out from Syria, USA was also to move out and settle with no gains there.

Unfortunately, most of Syria has been destroyed in this play of International Powers, and it may take many decades for the Syrian State to come out of this trauma. Millions of people have died and millions become refugees in neighboring and far countries. For the time being, regime of Basar Al Assad has been protected by Russian and Iranian interventions, but what lies in the future for the Kurdish people, Turkey's equation in changing context, and Iranian role in the greater Middle East, needed to be observed and analyzed in detail.

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