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# Searching a Political Solution for Syria

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## Abstract

Syria's sudden plunge into civil struggle is directly linked with United States' Middle East policy. The 2011 pull-out of American troops from the smouldering provinces of Iraq and the subsequent refusal of the US to take sides in the 'Arab Spring' have weakened the incumbent governments and produced too many unsuitable civil claimants to rule 'Arab Spring'-affected countries. The so-called US neutrality left a vacuum, which was filled by a swarm of Islamist extremists. The resultant internecine wars sparked by contending parties in Iraq, Syria and Yemen had taken these countries to the very verge of chaos. The outcome among other things included a revival of al-Qaeda, which was soon eclipsed by Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and an unending spiral of civil war in Syria, the major result of the anti-Western blowback. This article argues that the fight against extremist forces in Syria is doomed if there is absence of a strong, functional and acceptable government. Lasting peace under President Bashar al-Assad looks impossible but it is essential to have the core of Ba'athist regime in place in any transitional or post-transition mechanism. A new interpretation of political solution is required. Else, the state will collapse, which will only help the jihadists. Despite its limitations and challenges, federalisation of Syria and the establishment of a federal structure of the government, it seems, is the only viable solution.

## Keywords

Syria, Islamic State, Nusra Front, federalisation and political solution

## The Complex Theatre

Syria, once a cradle of civilisations and a kingdom of peace and prosperity, is now in the midst of protracted war and multidimensional militant struggle reducing Ibn Jubayr's 'paradise on earth' into a hellish outpost of Middle East (Wright & de Goeje, 1952, p. 272). Although a secular country, Syria is dominated by Muslims where the constitution requires the president to be a Muslim and where Sharia courts exist along

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with secular courts. As a dominant Islamic country with secular character, Syria has been at the forefront of ideological onslaught from contrasting Islamic parties and as a modern autocracy, it has been facing the ire of rival foreign governments. Since the onset of 'Arab Spring' in Syria, the US could not decide between conscious disengagement and qualified intervention. Similarly, Russian engagement could hardly produce a definite result. The clout of foreign intelligence agencies, the motives of military generals, the participation of extremist Islamic groups and the inflexibility of incumbent government make peace a distant dream in Syria.

With no cessation of hostility among warring parties and no political solution in sight since 5 years, Syrian quagmire presents extreme political, security and humanitarian-related consequences. In September 2016 at the sideline of G-20 Summit at Hangzhou, China, the US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov failed to find a solution on how to end the Syrian conflict. During the previous year until the Hangzhou meeting, both the leaders' 18 meetings defied a consensus action in Syria (Kerry, 2016). On 10 September 2016, both the foreign ministers claimed to clinch a breakthrough deal to bring a nationwide ceasefire effective from 12 September along with improved aid access and joint targeting of banned militant Islamist groups (Sanger & Barnard, 2016). While leading parties advocate for global effort to put an end to the conflict and the efficacy of the September ceasefire deal is still to be seen, fierce fighting is raging in Syria. Both US and Russia are pounding bombs on Islamic State as well as contrasting rival groups; Iran is offering its airbase for Russian air strikes; Turkey is hitting on Kurdish-aligned groups that US has backed in its fight against Islamic State (Daily Sabah, 2016); Nusra Front is chasing government forces; and the government of President Bashar al-Assad has intensified bombing raids against anti-government forces.

Diplomatic deals and ceasefire declarations mostly announced from foreign soils during the past 1 year had little effect on ground. Syrians are suffering unimaginably as the count of dead bodies is mounting every passing day. Of the total 21.9 million population (United Nations, 2016), 13.5 million people are directly affected by the civil war and in need of some help (UNHCR, 2015). A total of 8.5 million Syrians are internally displaced and another 5 million are living as refugees in neighbouring countries (UN Population Fund, 2016). The Syrian Center for Policy Research estimated deaths of 470,000 Syrians as a result of the war, while the UN stopped counting because of a lack of confidence in the data. Only a miniscule 7.7 million Syrians are still rooted in their homes and struggling for peace. The 16.2 million Syrians who are living in the country are vying for a peaceful solution to the raging conflict.

This article argues that sufferings of Syrians are not linked with any sect or ethnicity but spreading horizontally among all Syrians (Shakra, 2013, p. 46), and that Syria's multi-culture, multi-ethnic and multi-religious society is no deterrence for a durable peace. Rather, the instability, mayhem and civil war are results of years of socio-economic disparities, denial of political rights and intervention of a multitude of foreign forces. The Barack Obama administration and Western media portrayed Syria as a quagmire of religious groups fighting among themselves because of ancient hatred. The reality is Syrians lived peacefully with one another (Erllich, 2016, p. 20) where people largely ignored religious differences.

In the wake of fighting, leaders on both sides used religion to rally their troops. Rebels relied on the Sunni Muslim majority, while President al-Assad appealed to minority groups, such as Alawites, Christians and Shia Muslims. The emergence and strengthening of Islamic State, also known as Da'esh, and al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra has further devastated the country making it an international hot spot of terrorist activities and human miseries. Since the 5-year multidimensional fight in Syria never made any one group or entity victorious, a well-thought-out political solution is not only essential but also the only option available to the warring parties.

The geography of the ancient land of Syria is endowed with arid plateau, Mediterranean agriculture, fertile plains, desert and high mountains. The country is home to a multitude of ethnic groups and followers of varied religious practices. Syria was under the Armenians, Greeks and Romans for long until 640 AD when the country came in contact with Islam. Rashidun Caliphate conquered Syria in 440 AD and the Umayyad Caliphate inaugurated Damascus as the capital of Islamic Caliphate in 661 AD (Hawting, 2002, p. 59). Nearly a century later, the Abbasids defeated the Umayyad and shifted the capital to Baghdad. Since then, the Syrian empire was under the rule of Egyptians, Crusaders, Ayubids, Mamluks and Nazeris until 1516 when Syria was overrun by the Ottoman Empire to incorporate the province with the empire (Watt, 1956, p. 35). When Ottomans, who were nomadic Muslim Turks, invaded Syria they did not disturb Syria's language, administration, business and religious minorities—Shia Muslims, Greek-Orthodox, Maronite, Armenians and Jews. In the contemporary time, contrary to what the Ottomans have done, the US and Arab countries are hell-bent to remove Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and impose outside control in the country.

Syria as an outpost of Ottoman Empire participated in World War I as an ally of Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire only to suffer defeat and surrender before the British and French Empires. During World War I, French diplomat Francois Georges-Picot and British diplomat Mark Sykes signed an agreement named Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 where they secretly agreed to divide the Ottoman Empire into respective zones of influence (Beloff, 1987, p. 260). A straight line starting from Jordan to Iran was drawn to divide the empire in between the two European powers. The British held control of Iraq, Palestine and Transjordan, while the French established their control on Syria, Lebanon, Alexandretta and southern Turkey. But the discovery of oil in Mosul in 1918 led to renegotiation of the agreement where British demanded their French counterparts to shift the border beyond Mosul. This artificial border became the final boundary of Syria that never changed. On 29 September 1923, French control on Syria was formalised by the League of Nations' mandate (League of Nations, 1922, p. 1013). When the French entered Syria, they faced strong resistance from the local communities (Barr, 2011, p. 57), a replication of what is happening in today's Syria.

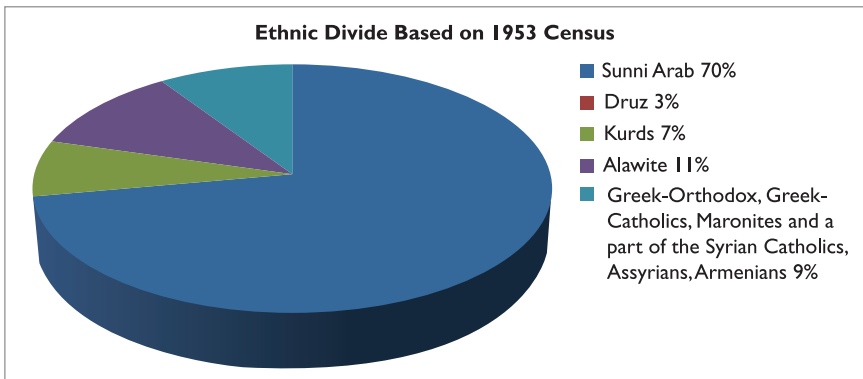
French mandate ended in 1943 and Syria became independent after 1946. Right from the independence until late 1960s, Syria continued to be a laboratory of instability and upheaval. On 1 February 1958, the country merged with Egypt only to be seceded on 28 September 1961 by a military coup by Syrian Ba'athist

supporters. In November 1970, Hafez al-Assad, a captain with the Syrian military, took over after a bloodless military overthrow. When Hafez al-Assad died in 2000, his son Bashar al-Assad took over his position and became the president of Syria.

Politicians, scholars and journalists live on the borrowed and unsubstantiated understanding that Syria is a complex home of diverse ethnic and religious groups. Few tried to ascertain the exact nature of diversity, if ever. Syrian census never included a column on 'religion' since 1960 and only twice, in 1943 and in 1953, tried to get an exact break-up about ethnic composition (Samman, 1978, p. 87). The 1960 census that enumerated the Syrian population according to their religious composition was conducted under United Arab Republic regime headed by Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser. Since 1963, the Ba'ath Party as part of secular tradition divided the population into three categories—Syrian citizens, Palestinian refugees and foreigners.

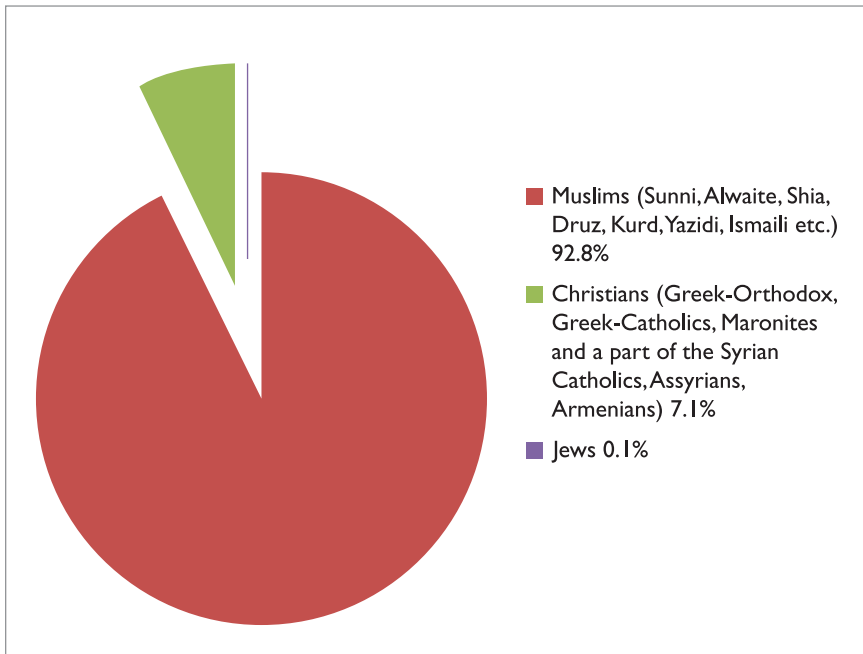
The 1953 census enumerated Syrians on ethnic lines and the report showed that Sunni Arabs made up 70 per cent, Druze 3 per cent, Kurds 7 per cent, Alawites 11 per cent and Greek-Orthodox, Greek-Catholics, Maronites and a part of the Syrian Catholics, Assyrians and Armenians comprised the remaining 9 per cent of the population (Vaumas, 1955, p. 74) (Figure 1). The Druze, also referred to as Muwahhidun, belong to an esoteric branch of Shia Islam that splintered from the Ismaili movement in Egypt during the Fatimid period in the eleventh century. The Yazidi population is a sub-sect within the Kurdish community. According to the 1960 census, Muslims comprised 92.8 per cent, Christians 7.1 per cent and Jews 0.1 per cent (Syrian Arab Republic, 1960, p. 15) (Figure 2). President Bashar al-Assad belongs to the minority Alawites community—a branch of Shia Islam—a major reason responsible for Sunni annoyance and the rise of militant Sunni organisations like al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic State. The name 'Alawite' originates from the first Shia Imam and Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law Ali ibn Abi Talib.

These figures, although seven decades old, are still counted as a reflection on the present composition of Syrian population and policy makers and analysts rely



**Figure 1.** The Ethnic Divide as Per Census of 1953

**Source:** Syria, Ministry of Planning, Directorate of Statistics, Census of Population, 1960, pp-13 & 165.



**Figure 2.** Syria's Religious Demography (based on 1960 census)

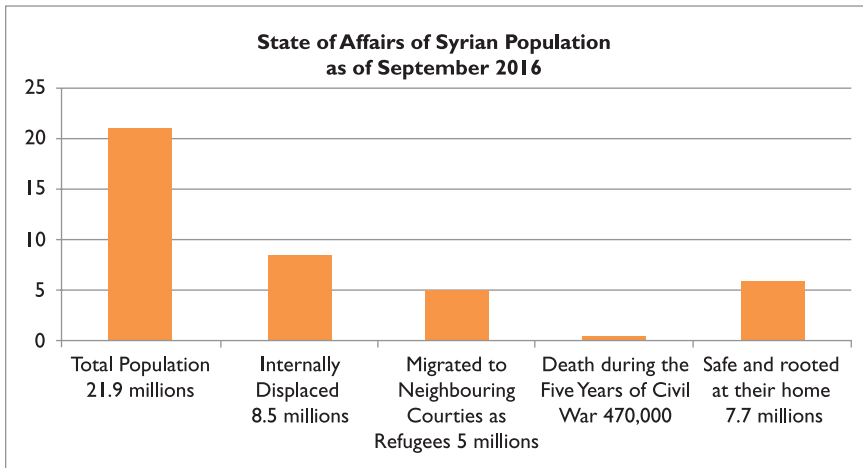
**Source:** Syria, Office of the Prime Minister, Central Bureau of Statistics, Population Census in the Syrian Arab Republic, 1970, p-1, 400, & 401.

on the proportionate growth percentage to arrive at the ethno-religious composition in the current times (Winckler, 2005, pp. 22–23) (Figure 3). Since 1960, four more censuses have been conducted in the years 1970, 1981, 1994 and 2004 (University of Minnesota, 2009). The ethnic–religious break-up as mentioned liberally in most existing literature is based either on consequential proportionate growth calculation or on data procured from Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) *The World Factbook*.

Lack of appreciation of actual ground realities coupled with faulty projection of ethnic distribution of population and vested interests of involved parties cast an aspersion on any future peaceful political settlement. The latest peace manoeuvre by the US and Russia could easily be hijacked if leading powers and al-Assad regime refuse to accept the sensitivities, preferences and choices of the Syrian population. Peaceful accommodation of all communities, which was the core of Syrian ethos, through a federalised Syria is a highly recommended method for a political solution.

## Syria's 'Arab Spring' Jinx

During the winter of 2010, the Arab world, which had been under the rule of autocrats, kings, princes and military rulers, witnessed a democratic uprising. The



**Figure 3.** Mapping Syrian Population

**Sources:** Overview, Crisis in Syria, United Nations Population Fund, 2016, <https://www.unfpa.org/emergencies/crisis-syria>, accessed on 1 September 2016; Syrian Center for Policy Research, Syria, *Confronting Fragmentation: Impact of Syrian Crisis Report*, 2015, p-61.

rebellion originated in Tunisia and spread with surprising swiftness to other parts of Arab world including Syria to become famous as ‘Arab Spring’.

Before the beginning of the ‘Syrian Arab Spring’ in January 2011, President Bashar al-Assad termed the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt acts of ‘desperation’ on the part of the Arab population. He classified the struggle as ‘desperation about economic ills as well as the failure of the regional peace process’ and discounted the possibility of a similar uprising in Syria because he thought that his regime was ‘closely linked to the beliefs of the people’ (al-Assad, 2011). Two months later, Syria was under the grip of a revolution as unrest triggered nationwide protests demanding President Assad’s resignation.

Although ‘Arab Spring’ dislodged powerful military dictators such as Muammar Gaddafi, Hosni Mubarak, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Ali Abdullah Saleh, the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad steadfastly refused to step down from power. The resultant protests quickly turned violent, which eventually enveloped Syria in a civil war. Within no time, the Syrians became impatient and in July 2011, seven defecting Syrian officers formed the Free Syrian Army (FSA) composed of defected Syrian Armed Forces officers and soldiers aiming to bring Assad government down with united opposition forces (World Tribune, 2011). In August 2011, a coalition of anti-government groups was formed in Turkey under the name of Syrian National Council and by November 2011, the FSA launched its first armed assaults on military installations.

Syria slid into civil struggle where instead of home-grown revolutionaries fighting for democracy, militant groups and foreign governments spread their tentacles to advance their regional interests. Fierce fighting started in Syria turning it into a proxy theatre of US and Russia where Iran and Saudi Arabia also applied their prowess against each other (Barnard & Shoumali, 2015). Russia and Iran



offered armed support to the Bashar al-Assad-led Ba'athist government. Other backers of Assad are Lebanese Hezbollah Party and Syria-based Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine–General Command (PELF-GC).

The US, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey have been supporting Sunni opposition groups of Syria represented by Syrian National Coalition. In 2012, the Obama administration created a 'rat line', a back channel highway into Syria, through which weapons and ammunition from Libya could reach the Syrian opposition including affiliates of al-Qaeda via southern Turkey (Department of Defense, 2012, p. 289). In the same year, a secret agreement was reached between President Barack Obama and Turkish President Tayyip Erdoğan. The US and Britain employed their respective external intelligence agencies CIA and MI6 to channelise funds from Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar and arms from Muammar Gaddafi's arsenals into Syria. The operation was carried out under the supervision of CIA Director David Petraeus (Hersh, 2014). France, UK and other Western countries have been providing support to anti-Assad groups not designated by them as terrorists from the early stages of civil conflict in Syria. The Government of Syrian Kurdistan was receiving support from Iraqi Kurdistan and other Western powers. The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which was receiving secret support from US and its allies, has subsequently received support from wealthy donors and non-state groups (Symopoulos, 2015).

Aggrieved Syrians could not capitalise the positive energy generated by the 'Arab Spring' to usher in democracy, rather they were thrown into an unintentional and unwanted spiral of violence spearheaded by all involved parties. In August 2013, in a bizarre turn of the events, President Assad with an aim to control the rebellion fired a devastating chemical gas sarin outside Damascus leaving 1,500 dead (Editors, 2013, p. 1). A stunned and astonished President Obama wanted to intervene immediately but the British and US intelligence cautioned the president at the last minute that such intervention would lead to devastating chemical warfare. The strike was postponed as the Congress prepared for hearings, and subsequently cancelled when Obama accepted Assad's offer to relinquish his chemical arsenal in a deal brokered by Russia (Hersh, 2014).

Meanwhile, ISIS appeared in June 2014, defied the US dictates and threatened vast swathes of Iraq and Syria. The US understood its folly and in August 2014, American warplanes began bombing Islamic militant targets including ISIS outside the Kurdish city of Irbil (Roberts & Akerman, 2014). In September 2014, the United States and its allies (Bahrain, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) launched airstrikes against Sunni militants in Syria from the air and sea on the ISIS' de facto capital Raqqa. Unlike Iraq, whose airspace is controlled by the United States, Syria has its own aerial defence system, so American planes have had to rely sometimes on jamming the country's defences when crossing into Syria. The strikes in Syria occurred without the approval of President Bashar al-Assad of Syria, whose government, unlike Iraq, did not ask the US for help against the Sunni militant group (Cooper & Schmitt, 2014). France augmented its airstrikes against Islamic State in Syria after the 26 November 2015 Paris attacks.



Syria is an important outpost of Russia since the 1970s when Bashar al-Assad's father Hafez Assad cemented Russo-Syrian ties and leased the Tartus Port facility in 1971 as part of a multi-billion-dollar debt write-off. Russia watched the unfolding of 'Arab Spring in Syria' with horror as its ally Bashar al-Assad was threatened and waited for an appropriate opportunity to support its old ally. A year after US intervention in September 2015, Russia entered the Syrian theatre to strike ISIS and against all anti-Assad forces in Syria. The US and its allies, especially Turkey, criticised Russian action but Russia steadfastly stroked on all anti-Assad groups. Nearly 7,000 armed groups have been formed during the civil conflict against Assad but Russia's participation offered a devastating blow to the anti-Assad campaigners. Russia's strikes stabilised President Assad giving him an upper hand at the negotiations towards a political solution to the conflict in Geneva in 2016 (Cooper, 2016). Russian President Vladimir Putin's unexpected open military plunge into the Syrian battlefield changed the course of the war.

Iran was supporting the Syrian regime even before Russia's entry into the battlefield. Iran's support to the Syrian government is baffling especially when the former is a Shia religious country, while the latter is Alawite secular nation. But since both subscribe to the same string of Shiaism, their coming together is not entirely blasphemous. At the outset, Iran limited its engagement by providing technical and financial support through its Quds Force, which is responsible for extraterritorial operations. Once arch-rivals, US and Saudi Arabia step up their direct support against Assad, in late 2012, Iran augmented its backing in favour of Assad, mobilised 100,000 fighters and helped creating the National Defence Forces, a Syrian paramilitary organisation assisting the regular army (Saless, 2015). With the deterioration of the Syrian battlefield, in 2013 Iran emboldened its participation and sent its Law Enforcement Force and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Ground Forces to help Assad to face the foreign-backed rebels, militants and the coalition's aerial strikes. Iran facilitated the inflow of Iraqi Shia groups like the one led by Katai'b Al-Imam Ali, Afghan Shia troop like Fatemiyon Brigade and Pakistani Shia Company like the Zaynabiyun Brigade into the Syrian theatres. All these groups are operating under the direct command of IRGC and receiving salaries directly from the Iranian government (Tabrizi & Pantucci, 2016, pp. 5–6). Until August 2016, the total number of IRGC and Iranian paramilitary personnel operating in Syria was estimated at 10,000. Iran also coordinated its diplomatic action and ground reaction with Russia.

In March 2016, President Putin ordered withdrawal of Russian forces from Syria announcing that Kremlin has achieved nearly all its objectives in the war-torn country. Although a portion of the Russian military left Syria, Kremlin made clear that it was keeping its new airbase in the coastal Mediterranean province of Latakia, in addition to the naval refuelling station it has kept in Tartus since Soviet times (MacFarquhar & Barnard, 2016). Other supporters of Assad like Hezbollah of Lebanon are staying the course.

## Searching a Solution: The Peace Process

Willingly or unwillingly, Syria at present is hosting Russian Special Forces, US Special Forces (BBC, 2016), Iranian troops and Lebanese Hezbollah (Gibbons-Neff, 2016). The country is also infested with scores of armed groups, numerous

foreign-funded militant organisations, al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra Front, Islamic State and a plethora of sectarian groups. All these stakeholders have contrasting purposes making Syria the most dangerous place on the earth.

Except China, all other permanent UN Security Council members are bombing the ISIS in Syria but there is no visible victory on the ground. The players involved have different objectives. For example, Saudi Arabia and Turkey want to remove Assad from his position and restrict the growth of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, but are happy to see ISIS striking Shia Iran. The US, France and UK have been battling in Syria with complex purposes and contrasting aims. On the one hand, these powers are training and arming opposition forces against Assad, and on the other hand, they are joining hands with Assad to target ISIS, the very terrorist group they created in 2012 to dislodge Assad. Russia is openly targeting anti-Assad forces no matter who is opposing the Syrian ruler.

Washington was under pressure from allies like Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar to dislodge Assad. But Obama understood the cost of removing a ruler from experience in Iraq and Libya. The spectre of post-Assad chaos is real. Therefore, Obama wanted to build an opposition that could fight both the Syrian army and the jihadists. This plan never worked. All parties involved in Syria understood the fact that a prolonged war would only bring Pyrrhic victory and a political solution should be immediately explored.

Since the onset of civil conflict in Syria, many initiatives have been undertaken to establish order and find peaceful solution. The earliest initiative was in June 2012 spearheaded by UN Peace Envoy to Syria Kofi Annan, which became famous as 'Geneva I Conference on Syria' (Annan, 2012). All five permanent members of UNSC agreed that there should be a 'transitional government body comprised of present Syrian government and of the opposition with full executive powers' (BBC, 2012). Despite such agreement, the peace process was doomed at the outset because US was hell-bent on the removal of President Assad in such a transitional government, while Russia was committed to protect his post. The initiative failed terribly because the entire exercise was ill-conceived and far from ground realities.

Owing to his failure at Geneva, Kofi Annan resigned and Lakhdar Brahimi replaced him in August 2012. Brahimi expedited peace talks after the sarin attack on Damascus. The UNSC unanimously adopted Resolution 2118 in September 2013 seeking the removal of all chemical stockpiles from Syria. Soon, 'Geneva II' peace process was held in January–February 2014 where the ghost of 'Geneva I' haunted participants and Brahimi tasted failure (Wright & de Goeje, 2014). Following his predecessor's footsteps, Brahimi resigned and Italian–Swedish diplomat Staffan De Mistura became the new envoy for Syria in July 2014.

The stalemate continued until October 2015 when foreign ministers from 20 countries and international organisations took part in the International Syria Support Group (ISSG)-sponsored 'Vienna Peace Talks for Syria', co-chaired by US and Russia. Curiously, Iran participated in the peace negotiations for the first time (Department of State, 2016) but no Syrian representative was invited to participate. The participants announced grandiose political settlement and a grand peace plan where they reiterated 'Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition;

a political process leading to credible, inclusive, non-sectarian governance, followed by a new constitution and elections to be administered under UN supervision' (European Union, 2015). Participants pledged for a nationwide ceasefire in Syria and negotiations under the UN could start from January 2016 (United Nations, 2015). A High Negotiation Committee was formed at Riyadh in December 2015 and the UNSC passed Resolution 2254 in December 2015 endorsing the principles of Vienna. However, the absence of warring parties at the peace table was palpable and fierce fighting continued with ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra Front and other Western countries-backed armed groups pitted against Assad and allies. The US–Russia discord continued and Vienna proved futile.

Talks again resumed in February 2016 when Staffan de Mistura invited the Saudi Arabia-backed coalition of 34 groups, the High Negotiation Committee and some other moderate members supported by Russia. Implacable hatred among participants and strong differences led to the abrupt discontinuation of the talks (Cumming-Bruce & Sengupta, 2016). Subsequently, the 'Geneva III' talks held on 12 February 2016 and ISSG-sponsored foreign ministers' talks held at Munich in February 2016 resulted in a deal setting the 'Terms for a Cessation of Hostilities in Syria'. Although the cessation of hostilities commenced on 27 February 2016, terrorist groups such as ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra and other armed terrorist organisations, as designated by the UNSC, were not party to this peace plan (Department of State, 2016). As a result, fierce fighting continued on ground and there was no cessation of hostility in Syria.

When world leaders were talking about cessation of hostility, Assad announced that on 13 April 2016 elections would be held for the 250 parliamentary seats in Syria. In the election, President Assad's Ba'ath Party won 200 seats, while the opposition inside and outside the country boycotted the elections (Davison & Bassam, 2016). Except Russia and Iran, the rest of the world disapproved the elections and called them a false legitimacy stunt by Assad.

The cessation of hostilities turned out to be a joke (Fox News, 2016) and the work of US–Russian monitoring group proved ineffective and opaque. The truce excludes Islamic State and al-Qaida-linked Nusra Front that allowed Russian air support to Syrian government forces who recaptured Palmyra from ISIS in April 2016. The peace process is hostage to great powers' hostilities and conflicting interests of Syrian parties. While Mistura was briefing the UNSC about the fragile peace, the opposition group represented by High Negotiations Committee pulled out of the formal talks in protest against the intensified fighting and the slow response to aid deliveries.

Guided by their strategic interests, big powers are refusing to acknowledge the essentiality of genuine participation of President Assad in peace talks and the incorporation of opposition groups as well as militant organisations in any peace negotiations. As long as the guns of militants never get silent and unless outside forces stop meddling in the affairs of Syria, peaceful settlement will remain a distant dream. The participation of all stakeholders in political process can only be achieved through federalisation of Syria. The September 2016 peace overtures will again prove ineffective if devolution of power is not done and participation of all groups in the affairs of Syria is not ensured.

## Federalisation of Syria

Giant multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies across the world, such as US, Canada, India, Russia and Brazil, with myriad aspirations of citizens resorted to federal form of governance. Countries such as Pakistan, Malaysia, Germany and Sudan with one dominant religion and numerous sub-religious groups also preferred federal structure of government. Although 'scholars of federalism find it impossible to agree on a common definition' (Michael, 2006, p. 259), this form of government has been serving well in countries with varied and contrasting aspirations. There are numerous overlapping definitions of federalism and the seminal attempt at defining federalism was made by Kenneth Wheare in his 1946 work *Federal Government* where he said it is 'the method of dividing powers so that the general and regional governments are each, within a sphere, co-ordinate and independent' (Wheare, 1946, p. 11). James Madison described it as several states forming 'distinct and independent portions of the supremacy' in relation to the general government (Madison, Hamilton & Jay, 1788, p. 258).

Syria, an outpost of multitudes of ethnic communities, is at the vortex of great change and full of democratic aspirations especially since the onset of 'Arab Spring'. Its citizens comprised of Arab Sunni, non-Arab Sunni, Shia, Alawites, Kurds, Yazidis, Druze and a miniscule number of Christians. Unlike in the past, it is now impossible for one group or a sect to asphyxiate or dominate the new-found aspirations of other sects. Providing representation and greater participation in the affairs of state to all communities is desirable and essential. Therefore, it is argued that a peaceful political solution of Syrian conflict revolves around federalisation of Syria.

Federalisation of Syria possesses the potential to resolve a great portion of the current turmoil. The present political-administrative structure is too one-ruler centric and not suitable for Syria as the provincial heads—the governors—are at the mercy of the president. Under federalisation, the governorates may allow various ethnic groups to acquire better representation with far better share/division of power. Regional, sectional or exclusive social aspirations can be better expressed through their provincial governments. Provincial representation may reduce sectarian friction with the federal government and federalisation would act as a gel when dealing with federal government. This provision offers a novel solution to the raging conflict and is worth applying in Syria.

Then, why have the UN envoys or any other thinking people not yet suggested such a plan? Probably there are few issues which are preventing the policy makers to try this route. The first factor is that external actors are not guided by the genuine welfare of Syria but by their own strategic goals. Assad is comfortable with his authoritarian role and therefore not interested to devolve a portion of his power. The other practical stumbling block in the way of federalisation debate is Syria's limitation to produce a strong unified group or a capable leader. Syria needs strong leadership and Assad is not acceptable to all. In the present circumstances, it is difficult to produce even one good leader, while under federalisation system, 14 good leaders are required for the 14 governorates. The next problem is the destruction of civil institutions and absence of a governing apparatus. Patience

and perseverance are required to evolve a system. Syria is not prepared with administrative back-up to support a federation. Under federation, the provinces possess equal power so there is fear that they may prepare themselves for cessation because of the powerlessness of the federal government. Therefore, a strong central government is a prerequisite for federalisation.

Limitation of contemporary Syria apart, the model of federalisation is worth trying. The decentralisation of power would be a great incentive for the myriad groups of ethnic fighters to come under their leader to rule their respective provinces. This method may succeed if the global push is provided and if the problems affiliated with law and order are addressed in a gradual manner.

This article does not advocate for the continuation of Assad as president but ousting Assad is not a solution and will make things worse, inviting ethnic cleansing of Alawite area. More than the ethnic cleansing, the Ba'ath Party is the only organised party with a pan-Syria presence. No other party possessed such outreach in Syria. In addition, Assad is a strong force to reckon to arrest chaos. If Assad is removed, with his tremendous control on Ba'ath cadres, he will organise his forces to destabilise any other government. If he is killed, the Ba'ath Party will disintegrate and do the same as what Saddam Hussein's army had done in Iraq after the death of Saddam. President Obama had already admitted that US intervention in Libya and killing of its ruler Muammar Gaddafi was his 'worst mistake'. Repetition of a similar mistake would not be a wise step. Therefore, the international community must deal with Syria with due maturity and patience. Convincing Assad to include opposition in a transitional government, uniting the opposition, defeating the terrorist groups and pressing for federalisation of Syria are steps the global community must adopt.

There are FSA, National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces and Syrian Democratic Forces operating as opposition forces in Syria. The efficacy and visibility of these groups are subdued by the violent acts of Islamic State and Nusra Front. The inability of Syrian opposition to face either Assad or terrorist groups has forced big powers to intervene militarily making it more unstable and rendering the opposition forces non-existent. It is essential to unite the opposition in the fight against Islamic State and Nusra Front for the time being, instead of seeking to agree on a new Syrian central government. National defence is a matter of federal government in any way, and if they cannot unite to fight against ISIS and Nusra Front, there will be no hope to build a federalised peaceful Syria either.

Most of the Syrian groups, including opposition parties, are playing in the hands of foreign forces. They do not take decisions but implement the decisions of their backers such as US, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, Russia and Iran. Most of them draw their sustenance from foreign governments and act as per their funder's wishes. Besides, the US and Saudi Arabia are playing a double game where they are supporting the IS and Nusra Front as well as Syrian parties to serve narrow purposes. The conflicting strategic objectives of the involved parties convert Syria into an intriguing battlefield where welfare of the state is ignored by all. Under such circumstances, it is difficult to get them together to fight against the ISIS and Nusra Front.

It is essential on the part of the UN to convince major world powers to refrain from Syrian affairs as far as possible. The UN must try to expose the funding of foreign countries to their favourite groups and the consequences of such funding. Unless outside interference ceases, Syria cannot stand of its own. Once the supply line is cut off, the groups may come either to the UN or to the home government. Only then, it is possible to fight the ISIS and Nusra Front. Major world powers have now realised that funding of armed groups to achieve strategic objectives has yielded no result. It is time to stop funding to unscrupulous and ineffective armed groups. Assad would be under tremendous pressure if Syrians start fighting of their own without the aid of foreign governments. In fact, the US and its allies lost a great chance to remove Assad by intervening too early in the Syrian theatre. The wave of 'Arab Spring' was too difficult for Assad to withstand in 2011 but the intervention of US and its allies disturbed the progression. Renewing a fresh struggle for democracy is not easy but the only available option for Syrians and outsiders.

Finally, federalisation debate may soothe many ailing hearts and such an arrangement would threaten none. If federalisation is ushered in Syria, it will be a win-win situation for all.

## Conclusion

Extensive research about Afghan struggle of 1979–1989, a prototype of present-day Syria, proved that it is difficult to change a regime if there are two equally strong foreign governments supporting opposing forces (Rath, 2014, p. 188). During the Afghan War, Russia was supporting the Afghan regime, while the US was funding the opposition forces. The stalemate continued and the US never succeeded in Afghanistan in dislodging the government. The US claimed victory only when Russia departed the battlefield without letting the US to change the regime (Rashid, 2009).

In Libya, Egypt and Tunisia, there was no outside counterforce to oppose the US and any other powers clandestinely opposing the rulers. Therefore, change of regime was easy in these three 'Arab Spring'-afflicted states. Syria presented a tough challenge to the US and its allies because Iran and Russia openly opposed the action of US and its allies. When the fight ran into a long course, the involved parties became tired and occasionally started invoking peace talks and peaceful resolution of the conflict. Such peace overtures never produced results and strife continued in Syria. If the UN and other involved powers are really serious about Syrian peace, they must understand the agonies of Syrian citizens, the opposition parties and the ground realities of governance. Interference in the Syrian affairs by outsiders is a naked brutality of great powers against a helpless tiny state. It is like the olden days when powerful empires used to attack weak states. When history will be written about Syria, historians will be amazed with the sheer moral bankruptcy of great powers of modern age and they will find difficulty in explaining the merit of intervention by outsiders. Rather than surgically removing a ruler without placing a workable alternative, the US and allies must consider options



outside their strategic goals. Russia is chary of losing Syria as a military outpost which is one of the prime reasons of obstruction in the way of a peaceful solution. The federalisation debate may not be entirely indigestible to the Russian strategy in Syria.

Syrians are the worst sufferers and what astonishes the Syrians is they do not have a voice at any forum. To add distress to miseries, the Assad government as well as the opposition lack purpose and determination. They are full of selfish motives and Assad cannot control everything of his own. It is pointless for Assad to seek foreign support to deal with home-grown terror groups. If Assad seeks help from his allies to fight with terror groups, then that would set stage for an international proxy fight in Syria. Assad's reliance on outsiders to protect his position and to fight terror groups has been making Syria far more vulnerable to future mayhem and continuation of civil war than anything else.

The US and Russia met at Hangzhou and Geneva in September 2016 to debate about Syrian peace. They have agreed for a ceasefire and building of durable peace amidst continued disagreement on the fate of Assad. The two leading powers can talk about devolution of powers and federalisation of Syria as it would not hurt either of them and such a step could open new vistas for a political solution.

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