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ALERT

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SYRIA

WEST ASIA: A NEW COLD WAR?

AND INDIA'S OPTIONS





DSA IS AS MUCH YOURS, AS IT IS OURS!



Even as Palestinian refugees demand their right to return to native lands, and are massacred in the process, the Syrian crisis remains the focal point of events in West Asia. It almost seems that the crisis has been deliberately dragged on for so long so as to suit the interests of certain countries. In the process, thousands of innocents have lost their lives, priceless assets lost, antiquities stolen or damaged beyond repair—a country seemingly at war with itself. But all is not as it appears to the casual observer, for there are wheels within wheels at play.

What began as legitimate airing of grievances against an authoritarian regime was quickly hijacked by various interested parties that began to fish in the troubled waters. And troubled waters there was plenty. Decades of brutal Ba'athist rule had hardened people to an unimaginable level. They were subjugated, and even the appearance of young Bashir al-Asad didn't herald the dawn that was once promised. Destiny didn't deliver to the people of Syria as they'd hoped and prayed for. So some brave souls began to scrawl graffiti, raise

slogans and pelt stones. When the Syrian security apparatus responded with a heavy hand, matters began to get out of hand.

This is when the external players began to step in, and upped their activities. Whether it was a Qatari television channel or neighbouring Turkey, and Israel, interference in Syrian matters reached a crescendo rather soon. As a result of which the Syrian state lost sovereignty over large swathes of land, to rebel groups and to transnational players. A beleaguered Syria turned to its allies, Iran and its ideological partner, the Lebanese group Hizbullah. And, subsequently Russia, with its airpower, naval and ground assets. While those like the Kurdish militias appeared to aid the state even as they controlled territory of their own.

The appearance of Kurdish power got Turkey even more involved, and their shooting down a Russian fighter aircraft and subsequent land operations created a most piquant situation. With a blatantly sectarian posture, Turkey can rightly be accused of creating more problems than helping solve the biggest issue, clearing aside the dreaded Islamic State.

Daesh, as it is called in Arabic, had occupied large swathes of land in Syria and Iraq, declared it a caliphate, and began committing the worst atrocities. And it attracted volunteers from all over the world.

Russian support to Syrian forces helped turn the tide in remarkable ways. In coordination with various like-minded groups, the countryside was freed from Daesh and other such millenarian forces. Even as Turkey played a double game it was the consistency of Russian policy that changed equations on the ground. Which is why the recent aimless American missile strikes make for a worrisome development. When the immediate target has to be to clear Syria of all Daesh type forces, any diversion will only help such groups. Even though United States has Special Forces on the ground, and achieving good results, other actions must also be concomitant with strategic objectives. Otherwise, this turf war over Syria may well set off another Cold War between Russia and the United States.

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WEST ASIAN SPECTRES

What came to be perceived as an Arab Spring germinating in Tunisia has been hijacked by external powers to cause mayhem in the West Asia-Middle East salient. India, which geographically appears to be situated at a safe distance from this volatile epicenter, has had a long history of cultural, trade and political interactions with the imploding nation-States of this region. It is, thus, seeing the ghosts that could also visit us. Europe has already felt the backlash in the form of terrorist attacks. So, distance is no longer a barricade against disasters and communications and insidious messaging that can brainwash a fertile imagination and lead to undeclared wars.

Thus, Syria is not the first of this kind of deliberate disruption of vulnerable nations. India has had to bear a series of insurgencies since its creation in 1947. That it has managed to retain its territorial integrity is, by itself, a miracle. Perhaps the worst national disaster, the Khalistan Sikh uprising, intended to replicate the “two-nation theory” was used to artificially bifurcate Pakistan from the Indian polity. It was effectively crushed with a series of counter-insurgency operations. But there are signs of attempts to revive it once again and accentuate the dangers that are lurking in Jammu and Kashmir.

Tunisia and Syria have shown how huge conflagrations have small beginnings. Tunisia, by an act of self-immolation by a man, goaded into taking the fatal step by corrupt officials. That spark has by no means abated and Syria showed that mishandling graffiti on the wall could have serious consequences. Moreover, civil conflicts have been sparked by perceived atrocities on weaker sections of society.

Indian civil society is a skein of diverse colours, each increasingly vying for either a more equitable portion of the national pie or a dignified place in the sun. This diversity is being sought to be exploited by anti-national elements for political or electoral gains and the uprising of the Dalits’ sparked by a Supreme Court ruling that is perceived to undo the legal underpinning of an affirmative action intended to prevent atrocities is a sign of things to come.

Governments at the Centre as well as in the States need to be more alert to apparently small provocations like warnings scribbled on selected residences and physical attacks on the basis of caste and religion. Internally displaced persons or a large influx of unaccounted-for foreigners can be extremely disruptive, severely damaging the gains the economy and development may have nurtured.

This edition of DSA has been dedicated on the situation of Syria and on the geostrategic options for India. Our distinguished subject experts have tried to depict the whole situation for you, dear reader, to update you on the nightmare in Syria and its consequences for the rest of the world, including India.

Happy reading!



Pawan Agrawal



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**SYRIAN CONFLICT, ARAB SUMMIT
AND INDIA'S OPTIONS**

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IT COULD HAPPEN IN INDIA TOO

PAWAN AGRAWAL

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