



THE ESCALATING CRISIS IN SYRIA

By
Arhama Siddiq
Research Fellow

Edited by
Najam Rafique

May 2, 2018

(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



On April 14, in a move likely to only contribute to an already volatile situation, the United States and its British and French allies conducted airstrikes on three targets outside Damascus and Homs in Syria as a rejoinder to an alleged chemical attack by the Syrian government on Douma, the last rebel-held town in the Eastern Ghouta region of Syria. The aim of the airstrikes was to destroy the Syrian government's chemical weapons facilities.

The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) is currently inspecting the deaths of dozens of people in the enclave outside of the Syrian capital. The mission was delayed by a week before it could get to sites it deemed of interest. Western powers have accused Russia and Syria of using obstructionist tactics to delay the investigation process and of interfering with evidence that may have pointed to government involvement. This has been categorically denied by the accused parties.

Soon after the attack, President Trump declared, "Mission accomplished!"¹ in a tweet and warned the government of Bashar al-Assad not to use chemical weapons again. "If the Syrian regime uses this poisonous gas again, the United States is locked and loaded,"² Nikki Haley, the US ambassador

¹ Donald J. Trump, "A Perfectly Executed Strike Last Night. Thank You to France and the United Kingdom for Their Wisdom and the Power of Their Fine Military. Could Not Have Had a Better Result. Mission Accomplished!" *Twitter*, April 14, 2018.

² Andrew Buncombe New York, "Syria Air Strikes: US Is 'locked and Loaded' If Poison Gas Is Used Again, Donald Trump Says," *The Independent*, April 14, 2018.

to the United Nations, told the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). However, this was merely an illusionary victory by President Trump. Nothing of significance came out of it.

Meanwhile, Assad is re-taking territory from the rebels. The Syrian government plans to recover an opposition-held pocket north of Homs city soon after it completes surrender deals with armed groups around the capital Damascus. It has already taken back much of Eastern Ghouta and is carrying out air strikes in Homs, Idlib and Hama provinces. The situation in rebel-held Idlib is "catastrophic"³ with tens of thousands of displaced Syrians from Eastern Ghouta and elsewhere seeking sanctuary there. The Syrian Observatory for Human rights has devastating day-to-day figures for the people being killed in the regime strikes.

The war in Syria has changed dramatically over the last seven years, rapidly transforming into much more than a battle between those who are simply for and against President Assad. Several countries and groups are involved- each with its own agenda, thus making the situation extremely convoluted.

Russia, Assad's staunch ally, has often blocked international action on Syria by vetoing proposals in the UNSC. Moscow is attributed to have changed the course of the war in Assad's favor when it began a military intervention in 2015. Russia's S-300 advanced air defense system has become almost a catchphrase for strategic advantage sought by both Iran and Syria, to counter Israel's power. Recently, the Kremlin is thought to be planning to give Syria its own S-300 batteries as well, provoking Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman to state: "One thing should be clear, if someone fires on our planes, we will destroy them."⁴

Assad's other key ally is Iran and hence this brings in the escalating shadow war between Iran and Israel. In the early hours of April 9, Israeli fighter jets bombed the Tiyas air force base in central Syria, killing at least seven military personnel. Israel wasn't targeting Syria's chemical weapons program. It was instead going after a very different enemy as signified by the dead troops who were not Syrian but in fact Iranian.⁵ It was far from the first time Israel had hit Iran and its various allied groups in Syria. Iran has made both Israeli and American officials apprehensive by gradually increasing its military presence across Israel's northern border with Syria in recent years, and Israel has acted to what it perceives as a looming threat several times.

³ The New Arab & Agencies, "Syria Blocks Aid after Retaking Eastern Ghouta, as Donors Pledge Another \$4.4bn," *Alaraby*, April 25, 2018.

⁴ Haaretz and Reuters, "We May Hit Russian Systems in Syria, Israel Says after Threats of 'catastrophic Consequences'," *Haaretz.com*, April 26, 2018.

⁵ Scott Lucas, "Israel Again Attacks Regime Airbase and Iranian Personnel in Central Syria," *EA WorldView*, April 09, 2018.

Adding to the conflict list is another battle. Syria is home to a significant number of Kurds. Turkey fears that the Kurds want to establish a separate state and has been bombing Syrian cities under Kurdish control. Its incursion into Afrin is just the start of this. Recently, President Erdogan has shown a willingness to adjust his position according to the situation at hand. Though his top priority remains blocking Kurdish autonomy, his antipathy toward Assad remains. That makes him a difficult partner for Putin, as well as a harsh adversary for the Kurds and hence in Syria's complex war one of the most complicated players.

Bringing up the rear is Saudi Arabia and its stale mate with Qatar. The Kingdom has said that Qatari troops should replace or pay for US soldiers in Northern Syria or the US could pull its support for Doha altogether.⁶ Even Iraq has stepped up its involvement in the battle against the Islamic State militant group (ISIS) by supporting its neighbor Syria. On April 26 Iraq sent F-16s to launch a surprise attack on a suspected ISIS stronghold in eastern Syria.⁷

This means that today, many wars, proxy wars or in Saudi Arabia's case 'redemption battles' are being fought inside Syria. The Syrian government is still at war with the rebels. Israel is at war with Iranian-backed forces. And the United States and apparently Iraq now as well are trying to kill off the Islamic State which has been starting to claw back lost territory. And the Turks at this point have eyes only for the Kurds.

The conflict in Syria, which has drawn in regional players, erupted in 2011 when the regime of Bashar al Assad cracked down on pro-democracy protests that were part of the regional Arab uprisings. Since then, the country has been torn apart, with millions displaced internally, millions made refugees, and hundreds of thousands killed. According to the UN, 6.1 million people are internally displaced, more than 5 million have fled Syria and 13 million including 6 million children are in need for aid.⁸ The present humanitarian situation is indescribable. Neighboring Jordan and Lebanon have a flood of Syrian refugees already, and the situation there is only escalating into destitution. On April 14, Syrian regime forces took full control of Eastern Ghouta. Yet two weeks later it has yet to allow UN humanitarian aid to enter the main town of Douma.⁹ What led to this situation was a lack of string opposition in the government, religious divide and intolerance and lack of freedom of speech. ISIS flexed its muscles in 2014 only because whenever there is an institutional

⁶ The New Arab, "Saudi Arabia Threatens 'fall' of Qatar Government, Unless It Pays for US Troops in Syria," *Alaraby*, April 24, 2018.

⁷ Tom O'Connor, "Can Iraq Get the U.S. to Join Russia and Iran's War against ISIS in Syria?" *Newsweek*, April 26, 2018.

⁸ United Nations, "Syria Emergency," *UNHCR*.

⁹ Agence France-Presse, "Syrian Army Declares Full Control of Eastern Ghouta Rebel Enclave," *Hindustan Times*, April 15, 2018.

vacuum the stronger entity fills in the space. It seems at present, Syria is immersed in not only sectarian wars but two simultaneous cold wars: one between the US and Russia and the other between Iran and Israel as well.

Syria today presents a fascinating combination of many contradictions. In making sure he remained as President of Syria, Assad has transformed Syria into a kind of client-state for Russia, Iran and local militias that utterly dependent upon them for support. Throughout the war, the UNSC has failed to act. Veto power has been used in a negligent manner to obstruct and complicate. Permanent members have focused on scoring political points at home and with their allies, rather than building common ground and demonstrating leadership. There is a need for political pluralism with engagement of Syria's political opposition in the political system otherwise no amount of peace talks or military intervention can make a difference. It will only make the situation worse if that is even possible. Chemical weapons strikes have become a new normal for the Syrian people now. If the regime takes back territory it is a hollow victory. If the rebels do the same nothing is different. The time where third parties needed to step in is gone, this was a Syrian problem to begin with and that is the only way it can end now. Only the present Syrian Government and opposition can awaken their conscience and sit down and resolve this.