

Civil War in Syria: Who fight who, for whom and for what

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I. Introduction

Civil war in Syria, as is popularly called, has now been dragging on for more than 6 years with no end in-sight. Initially, it was a popular movement having certain limited aims more democratic reforms, releases of political prisoners and an end to rampant corruption in the country; and that regime change was not included in the agenda. The popular uprising was launched by the combined opposition groups, and was initially unarmed popular movement for restoration of democracy in Syria. However, the government, with the aim to crush the uprising, adopted repressive measures with iron hand, which instead of demoralizing people involved in the uprising, further hardened their resolved. They started demanding not only more democratic reforms, but also started demanding the stepping down of President Assad and his Baath Party from power. Tens of thousands of people took to the street demanding the President Assad to step down and pave the way for democracy to enter the Syrian political set system. The security forces resorted to the cruelest form of repression to crush the uprising; and on many occasions, open fire on unarmed protestors in the street. Within a few months, thousands of unarmed civilians were killed and many more were mortally wounded.

As the security forces adopted the cruelest form of repression to crush the movement, people involved in the popular movement also took up arms-first to defend themselves from security forces and second to push back and expel the security forces from opposition dominated areas. Since neither side of the party to the war got decisive victory over the other, and neither side is ready to compromise the on their stand, war has to be continued until the time come when either side is totally crushed or either side or the two sides are ready to sit for negotiation in the spirit of give and take.

Thought, the civil war in Syria, during its initial stage, was confined to a conflict between forces loyal to Assad and his Baath party, and forces belonging to different opposition groups within the territorial boundaries of Syria the involvement of different entities from across the border accelerated problem related to the conflict. There are a number of entities which joint either side of the conflicting party which includes- pro-government militigs and pro-government state actors.

- (i). Syrian Armed Forces
- (ii). National Defence Force
- (iii). Shabiha.
- (iv). Christian Militias
- (v). Hezbollah
- (vi). Iran
- (vii). Foreign Shia Militas
- (viii). Russia

Pro-rebel forces

- (i). Free Syrian Army
- (ii). Islamic Front
- (iii). United States
- (iv). Salafist Factors
- (v). Al-Nusra Front
- (vi). Syrian Democratic Forces

1. Syrian Armed Forces

As for the Syrian Armed Forces, it has been reported that it is much weakened, and since early 2016, the Syrian Government is believed to have depended on a mix of volunteers and militias rather than the Syrian Armed Forces. Before the outbreak of the war, the Syrian Armed Forces were estimated at 325,000 regular troops and 280,000 reservists. Among the regular troop, 220,000 were in the navy air force and air defence force. However, there was heavy defection of Syrian Armed Forces in support of the rebel groups fighting for

the democratic reforms, the numerical strength of the army goes down significantly. According to Syrian observatory for Human rights, by 2012, tens of thousands of soldier had defected and Turkish officials estimated that as many as 60,000 soldier defected and formed the Free Syrian Army.

2. National defence Forces

The National Defence Forces (NDF) was formed by pro-government militias and they received regular salaries and military equipment, weapons etc from the government. It is estimated that the total numerical strength of NDF was some 1,00,000 troops. The NDF played an infantry role, directly fighting the rebels on the ground. They conducted counter insurgency operation against the rebels on behalf of the government. They acted in coordination with the army, who provides them with logistical and artillery support. This group of volunteers also included some 500 strong women volunteers called "Lioness of National Defence". This group of women volunteers are not directly engaged in fighting the rebels, but are engaged in manning check-points at several locations. The Nation Defence has significantly contributed to the strength of armed forces as it is the group which actually fight the battle on the ground.

3. Shabiha

Shabiha are drawn from minority ethnic Alawite to which President Assad belonged. It is an unofficial pro-government militia who are engaged by the government of Syrian. The government had also been accused of using the Shabiha group to conduct the cruelest form of repression against the anti-government protesters. The term Shabiha was used by the rebels to describe civilians they suspected of supporting Assad's regime. The Shabiha are, therefore, those civilians from Assad's Alawite ethnic group who support the ruling Assad regime; and that they are armed civilians, armed by the government to crush the popular uprising in Syria.

4. Bassel al-Assad

Bassel al-Assad is reported to have created Shabiha in the 1980s to be used by the government in a crisis situation. The Shabiha have been describe as a notorious Alawite paramilitary who are accused of acting as unofficial enforcers for Assad's government, gunmen loyal to Assad. According to Qatar based Arab Centre for Research and policy studies, "Shabiha are semi-criminal gangs promised of thugs closed to the government". Despite the group image as an Alawite militia, some Shabiha operating in Aleppo have been reported to be Sunnis. In 2012, the Assad government was believed to have created a more organized official militia known as Jaysh al-Shabi, allegedly with the help of Iran and Hezbollah. The vast majority of Jaysh al-Shabi are believed to have been drawn from Alawite and Shiite volunteers. In short, they are primarily created by the government and safe-guard the interest of the ruling Assad government.

5. Christian Militias

The Christian militias in Syria and northern Iraq are largely made up ethnic Assyrian, Syriac-Armenians and Armenians. The Christian communities of Syria belonging to these communities, realising that they, as minority communities, are most secured under the secular government of Assad's Baath party, fought on the sides of the government along with the Kurdish forces. According to world Tribune.com, "The sources said thousands of Christians were joining the Syrian Army as well as such a National Defense Force, and the popular Committees." They said that NDF helped organization Christian units to protect the communities, particularly in Assyrian Region of North-East Syria. A major unit has been called , 'the Christian Resistance and said to have been operating in the Homs Province".

The Eastern Arabic speaking Assyrian, in order to defend their ancient towns, villages and farmsteads from ISIS, formed Assyrian Defense Forces, Dwekh Nawsha and Sootoro in Northern Iraq and Eastern Syria. They, most of the time fought along with Kurdish and Armenian groups. Assyrian fighters from Sootoro have also occasionally clashed militarily with the Kurdish accusing them of attempting to appropriate Assyrian lands for Kurds. The female protection forces of the land between the two Rivers is an all female force of Assyrian Fighters in the North-Eastern part fighting ISIS alongside other Assyrian and Kurdish units. In Lebanon, Maronite Christian militias also fight ISIS and other Sunni Islamic groups trying to enter their area of domination.

Hezbollah of Lebanon

Though General Secretary of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah denied the involvement of HJezbollah fighter in Syrian war on the side of government forces in October, 2012, in February, 2013 the former Secretary General of Hezbollah, Sheikh Subhi al-Tufayli confirmed that Hezbollah was involved in fighting for Syrian Army. They, as confirmed by Sheikh Subhi, helped the Syrian Army to retain control of some 23 strategically located villages inhabited by Shites of Labanese citizenship. Nasrallah, General Secretary, confirming the involvement of Hezbollah in Syrian war, said, Hezbollah fighters died in Syria doing their Jihadish duties.

The Hezbollah, in, coordination with Syrian Army gained control of territory in Al-Qusayr District of Syria in May, 2013. They gained control of 60% of the Al-Qusayr District by the end of May 2013. As reported, there were clashes between Syrian opposition rebels and Hezbollah fighters, particularly in the Homs Governorate; and Nasrallah have been reported to have called on Shiites and Hezbollah to protect the shrine of Sayida Zeinab. However, Assad denied the involvement of foreign fighters in Syrian Civil war on the side of government forces which was, however, rejected by the opposition rebel groups.

Nasrallah, General secretary of Hezbollah on 25, May, 2013, announced that Hezbollah were fighting against Islamic extremists and pledge that his group will not allow Syrian Militants to control areas that border Lebanon. In his televised address, he said, If Syria falls in the hands of America, Israel and the takfiris, the people of our region will go into a dark period.

6. Foreign Shia Militias

The involvement of foreign Shia fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan is significant in that Shia fighters from these countries are far more numerous than those Sunni non-Syrian fighters. The number of Afghans fighting in Syria on behalf of the government has been estimated at between 10,000 and 12,000. Though the number of Pakistanis is not known, since approximately 15% of Pakistan population constitutes Shia, the number of Shia fighters from Pakistan is believed to be significant. The main forces from foreign Shia militia groups are The Liwa Falimiyun (Falimiyun Brigade) composed of exclusively of Afghanistan and fight under the auspices of Hezbollah, the Afghanistan and the Pakistan Liwa Zayunabiyun (Zayunabium Brigade) formed in November, 2015. Most of the fighters are refugees; and Iran has been taking advantage of their inability to obtain work permits or establish legal documents relating to legal residency in Iran; and using threats to volunteer themselves to join the fighters. These Afghanistan and Pakistan origin fighters are paid relatively high salary. Some fighters were said to have told the journalists that " The Islamic State (ISIS) is the common enemy of Iran and Afghanistan..... this is a holy war" and that they wish to protect the Shia pilgrimage site of Sayyida Zaynab from Sunni Jihadis.

Intervention of State Actors

The intervention of state actors in Syrian Civil war either in support of the government of Assad or in support of opposition allies has furthered complicated Civil war in Syria. Though, states involved in the war denied their involvement in the war in one way or the other, there are numerous evidence to Prove their involvement. Countries of the region; Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar are believed to have involved in the war directly or indirectly. Iran, for eg. Has admitted that it involved in the war by providing military advice to Assad's force by providing financial, technical and military support to Syrian government. In the same way, Saudi-Aria, Qatar and other Arab states of the region give support to the opposition allies in their fight against Assad's government. USA and its Arab coalition partners are there to give different forms of support to the opposition groups depending on the need of the situations. In the same way, Russia has directly intervened in the war in support government by providing sophisticated weapons, rendering air strikes on opposition rebel groups etc.

It is therefore, established that the involvement of state actors, whether directly or indirectly, instead of creating a congenial situation for resolution of the conflict, only further aggravated the ground situation.

Involvement of Iran

Though, Iran continues to deny the presence of its combat troops in Syria in support of governments Forces, its acknowledge that it was giving military advice to Assad's forces in their fight against terrorist groups in Syria. Right from the beginning of the Civil Uprising in Syria, Iran has provided the Syrian government with financial, technical and military supports, including training and some combat troops. Syria and Iran, being a closed strategic partners in the region, Iran sees the survival of Syria is crucial for its regional interest. It is for this reason that Iran supreme leader, Ali Khamenei was reported to have been vocally in favor of the Syrian government. Iran was believed to have some 10,000 operatives in Syria, but according to Jubin Goodarzi, Assistant Professor and Researcher at Western University, Iran aided the Syrian government with limited number of deployed units and personal, at most in the hundreds and not in the thousands as opposition claimed. In the meantime, Iranian backed Lebanon Hezbollah fighting the opposition rebels since 2012; in 2013 they provided battle field support to Syria government forces to enable them to make advances on the opposition rebel groups. In 2014, Iran has stepped up its support to government forces which co-incised with the peace talk at Geneva II. As stated by Syrian Minister of Finance and Economy, more than 15 billion dollars had been provided by the government of Iran. The Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, Quds Force Commander Qasem Suleimani has taken charge Syrian President Assad's Security portfolio and has overseen the arming and training of thousands of pro-government Shiite fighters. As reported, 328 IRGC troops, including several commanders were killed in Syria while fighting with combined opposition groups.

Involvement of Russia

Russia also intervened in Syria since 30 September, 2015, Russia President, request the Russian Federation Council to give permission for using Russia Armed Forces in Syria. Accordingly, the Council issued permission as requested by President Putin; and on the same day, Russian General Sergey Kuralenko arrived at the US Embassy in Baghdad and requested that any US forces in the targeted area to leave immediately. An hour later, the Russian aircraft based in the government held territory began conducting airstrikes against the rebel forces. These was the first direct involvement of Russia in the Syrian war. On 18 June, 2017, the US fighter jet shot down Syrian government Su-22 which was engaged in bombing rebel position; and in response, Russia announced that US led coalition warplanes flying west of the Euphrates would be tracked by Russian anti aircraft forces in the sky and on the ground. The Russian military announces further that they suspended the hotline (the deconfliction line) with their US counterpart based in Udeid. Nevertheless, a few days later, the US military stated that the deconfliction line remained open and that Russia had given the US a prior notification of its massive cruise missile strike from warship in the Mediterranean that was conducted on 23 June, 2017, despite the fact that the US was not among those countries mentioned as being forewarned in Russia's official report on the strike. On 27 June, 2017, the US Defence Secretary, Jim Mattis told the press, we deconflict with the Russians it's a very active deconfliction line. It's on several levels, from the Chairman of Joint chiefs and the Secretary of State with their counter parts in Moscow, General Gerasimov and Minister Lavrov. Then, we have got a three star deconfliction line that is out of the Joint Chiefs of Staff out of the J5 there. Then we have battlefield deconfliction line. One of them is three-star again, from our field commander in Baghdad, and one of them is from our CAOC (Combined Air Operation Centre) for real time deconfliction.

Combined Opposition Allies

As discussed in the preceding discourse, there are a number of groups and entities, both from within Syria and from outside Syria fighting alongside the government forces, there are also a number of groups and entities both from within Syria and from outside Syria fighting alongside opposition rebel groups. The armed opposition rebel groups consists of various groups that were formed during the course of the conflict or groups drawn from outside the country. The opposition, according to Seymour Hersh, is financed by Saudi Arabia to the tune of 700 million dollars a year. The al-Qaida affiliated al-Nusra Front, allied with a number of other smaller Islamist groups operate in the north-west part of the country under the Free Syrian Army. The Free Syrian Army, under CIA-run programme, received sophisticated weaponry and other military support from the US, Turkey and some Gulf countries that effectively increased the total fighting capacity of the Islamist rebels.

In the east the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) a jihadist militant group originating from Iraq, made rapid military gains in Syria and Iraq. ISIL eventually came into conflict with other rebel groups, specially, with al-Nusra, leader of which did not want to pledge allegiance to ISIL. The ISIL, has already controlled a third of Syria's territory and most of its oilfields including gas production by July 2014. The ISIL, therefore, became the strongest anti-government force. By 2015, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey are openly backing the Army of Conquest, an umbrella rebel group that reportedly include an al-Qaida link al-Nusra Front and another Salafi coalition known as Ahrar ash-Sham, and Faylag Al-Sham, a coalition of Muslim Brotherhood-linked rebel groups. They became the dominant group within the armed opposition. Also in the north-east, local Kurdish militias took up arms and fought with both rebel Islamist factions.

2. The Free Syrian Army

The Free Syrian Army was formed on 29 July, 2011 by defecting Syrian Army officers, to defend Civilians protester from Syrian security forces who resorted to the cruelest and merciless method to crush the pro-democracy protest movement. Soon after its formation, the free Syrian Army started encouraging their fellow officers to defected and joint them in their fight against the government. Consequently more and more number of Syrian Army including top ranking officers defected and join the Free Syrian Army; and by December, 2011 the number of Syrian Army who defected was estimated to be 2500. Initially, the Free Syrian Army set-up its headquarter in Turkey, but in September, 2012, it moved its headquarter from Turkey to northern Syria. It functioned as an umbrella organization rather than as a traditional military chain of command.

It was reported that the Free Syria Army consisted of well trained soldiers and ex-officers, well-organized up to some extent, but they have no sufficient weapons to effectively fight the government forces who were far better armed.

The US, in April, 2013, announced that it would transfer 1.23 million in nonlethal aid to Syrian rebel through Salim Idriss, leader of Free Syrian Army who later acknowledged the rebels were badly fragmented and lacked military skill. In the meantime, about Yusaf a commander of Islamic state said that many of the Free Syrian Army who were trained by USA actually joint the IS, but by September 2014, the Free Syrian Army was joining an alliance and common front with Kurdish militias to fight ISIS.

Islamic Front

The Islamic Front, having around 40,000 to 60,000 members was formed on 22 November, 2013. It is a merger of seven rebel groups fighting the government forces in Syria and is believed to have been backed and armed by Saudi Arabia. A spokesman for the group who refused to be named stated that it will not have ties with the Syrian National Council. The Islamic Front maintain that they were for revolution and not for politics and foreign agendas.

Salafist Factions

As stated by US Secretary of State John Kerry, the Salafist faction, Salafi Jihadist groups constitute 15 to 25% of the total rebel forces. According to Charles Lister, about 12% of rebels have link with al-Qaida 18% belong to Ahrar ash-Sham and 9% belong to Suqor Al-Sham Brigade. These figures are in contrast with a report by Jane's Information Group, a defense outlet claiming almost half of the rebel group are being affiliated to Islamist groups. The British think-tank Centre on the region and Geopolitics says that 60% of the rebels could be classified as Islamic extremists.

It is, estimated that 2000 to 5,500 foreign fighters have joined the Syrian Civil war on the side of the rebels since the beginning of the protests out of which 7-11 percent came from Europe. It is also estimated that the number of foreign fighters does not exceed 10 percent of the total rebel forces. Another report, on the other hand, said could be 15,000 by early 2014.

Al-Nusra Front

Al-Nusra Front is believed to have a close link with Al-Qaida; and it is the biggest group fighting the pro-government forces in Syria. It is the most aggressive and violent rebel group believed to have involved in deadly suicide bombing in different cities of Syria. Being behind in more than 50 suicide bombings in the country, the Syrian government as well as the USA designated it as a terrorist organization. Though the leader of the group said that it would not merge with Islamic state of Iraq, the leader of IS in Iraq, Abu muhammad al Galani said that Al-Nusra is a branch of IS in Syria which is operating for and on behalf of IS. The estimated strength of Al-Nusra is estimated at between 6000 and 10,000.

Though, the Al-Nusra has been fighting the pro-government forces alongside Free Syrian Army, their relation was not so good. The Mujahideen's intention of imposing the Sharia law much disturbed many Syrian. Some rebel commander even accused foreign fighters of stealing the revolution, of robbing Syrian factories and of displaying religious intolerance. Al-Nusra has also been accused of mal-treating ethnic minorities in Syria right from its formations.

Syrian Democratic Forces

The group was formed in December 2015 by the Kurdish People Protection unit and its numerical strength is believed to be between 55,000 and 80,000. This group is an alliance of Arab, Assyrians, Armenian, Kurdish and Turkmen militia fighting for restoration of democracy in Syria. Though they are opposed to Syrian government, they instead of fighting pro-government forces involved in fighting against Al-Nusra and IS.

The Kurdish are Sunni Muslims and they constitute 10% of the total population of Syria. As a minority in Syria they suffered from all kinds of discrimination under the Assad Baath party rule. They are deprived of basic civil, cultural, economic, political right, etc. However, when the uprising in Syria started the Assad regime granted citizenship right to an estimated 2,00,000 Kurds with the aim to neutralized a potential Kurdish support to the uprising. Despite this concession most Kurds remain opposed to the government. They, as of now, are fighting pro-government forces on the ground.

Islamic State of Iraq and Levant.

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant is an Iraq based extremists Islamic group created for the establishment of Islamic state. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human right, the Islamic state group is the strongest and most formidable group which controls large part of Northern Syria. Until 2014, the group was led by the Abu Baath Al-Baghdadi and imposed strict Sharia law in the land it controlled. It has an estimated strength of 7000 fighters in Syria, including many non-Syrian. The Islamic State is accused for abusing human right and non-tolerance of non-Islamic militias, foreign journalists, aid workers.

As reported, 2014 the ISIS has already controlled third of Syrian territory and established itself as the dominant force of Syrian opposition. According to IHS Market, between April, 2016 and April 2017, ISIL fought the Syrian government forces 43% of times, Turkish backed rebel groups 40% of times and Syrian Democratic Front 17% of times. It was able to recruit more than 6300 fighters in July, 2014 alone. It was also reported that some Syrian rebel groups signed a non-aggression agreement with ISIL as they were unable to fight with both ISIL and pro-Syrian government forces at a time.

As seen in the fore-going discussion, though the main warring parties to the war in Syria are opposition rebel groups and pro-government forces which includes, the Syrian Armed Forces and dozens of foreign militia group, it has been seen that even among the rebel groups, there are forces which have conflicting interests, conflicting political ideology, conflicting aims and objectives. There are elements of Islamic extremist or Jihads and also elements of moderate Islamic groups whose interest are far apart; they are united for the time being for having confronted by a common enemy-government forces These are also instances of intra-rebel confrontation which weakened the opposition rebels significantly. On the other side, those foreign militias entering the theater of Syrian war, are not always in good terms with the government. There are also reports that fighters belonging to one group which is creating a serious problem within the group. It is, therefore, true that Syrian civil war has now been heading towards a multi-dimensional war between and among different groups involved in the war. The entry of IS in the theater of Syrian civil war has also created a new dimension to the war. Being having a separate objective of creating a separate state for Islam in Iraq-Syrian, its interest is not in conformity with the interest of other rebel groups fighting for restoration of democracy in Syria by overthrowing the Assad's Baath Party rule. Since such is the ground reality of the situation, even if the Assad regime could be overthrown, then civil war in the country will go on between rebel groups. There will be a struggle between moderate groups and extremist groups for the creation of government.

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