



IPCS

INSTITUTE OF PEACE AND CONFLICT STUDIES

ROOTS OF THE SYRIAN CRISIS

By

VP HARAN

INTERNAL SITUATION | EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT | ROLES OF
DIFFERENT ACTORS | CRISIS TRAJECTORY

IPCS SPECIAL REPORT #181

MARCH 2016



HOMS, SYRIA, 2016

IMAGE COURTESY: RUSSIA WORKS



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HOMS, SYRIA, 2016 | **IMAGE COURTESY: RUSSIA WORKS**

INTRODUCTION

In December 2010, when trouble erupted in Tunisia, the Arab countries of West Asia and North Africa were mired in serious problems. In the entire Arab world, political freedom was at a premium, to varying degrees. There was large scale unemployment. Benefits of economic growth were cornered by a few; and the younger generation was restive. The crisis in Tunisia spread swiftly to other regional countries, for the economic and political conditions were not much different. It was thought that unrest would spread to Syria and the regime would collapse. This did not happen. Calls for rising up against the ruling Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime did not find traction. It took a lot of coaxing and involvement of external forces to get the fire ignited in Syria in mid-March 2011.

Contrary to predictions, the Syrian regime has withstood relentless pressure and onslaught from abroad for nearly five years. A closer look at the conditions in Syria in 2010/2011 would help understanding why the regime has survived; the complexity of the situation in Syria; and what makes the search for a negotiated political solution difficult.

SYRIA: INTERNAL SITUATION

Since its independence in 1946, the average lifespan of a government in Syria was less than one year, till Hafez al-Assad captured power in 1970. The senior Assad provided political stability to Syria albeit legitimate questions still remain on how this was accomplished. He developed very close relations with the then USSR and Iran. His anti-West, anti-Israel, pro-Palestinian policy reflected the sentiments of Syrians who loathed Western support for Israel, which was occupying the fertile Golan Heights. Hafez al-Assad was not seen often in public and did not connect much with the people; but was respected nevertheless, partly out of fear.

PRESIDENT BASHAR AL-ASSAD

In 2000, Hafez's son Bashar al-Assad succeeded him. Bashar, who was partly educated in the West, was a reluctant politician and was brought into politics when his brother Bassel, died in 1994. He was perceived to be a liberaliser. He did take some steps towards liberalising the country, but the well entrenched Ba'ath party veterans restrained his hands. He was connected with and liked by the people; he was visible, which went down well with the younger generation; his economic reforms went down well with the people despite the problems they caused for some sections of the population; and, he ensured political stability. Relations with the West began improving gradually, but received a debilitating setback when Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri was assassinated. Syria, which had dominated the scene in Lebanon since 1976 and which had its army in Lebanon then, was blamed for the killing. The Special Tribunal for Lebanon that enquired into the incident blamed Hezbollah cadres for the killing. In December 2010, Bashar was acknowledged to be extremely popular within Syria, including in Western diplomatic circles. His popularity took a knock as the unrest continued and security forces resorted to heavy-handed tactics to control the situation.

ECONOMY

In 2010, the economy was doing reasonably well; and despite declining oil revenues, the GDP grew at an average of 5.5 per cent between 2005 and 2009. Unemployment was over 8 per cent, low since many of the un/underemployed Syrians easily found jobs in the Gulf. Foreign debt was 12.5 per cent of the GDP, and much of it was owed to Russia. Hafez had deliberately limited foreign borrowing as he did not want Syria to become vulnerable to foreign political pressure. Thus, it is evident that at the end of 2010, there was no serious economic problem that could be

the underlying cause for the outbreak of unrest.

SECTARIAN SITUATION

The Syrian conflict is portrayed by many as a sectarian one since a majority of the population was Sunni and the President is an Alawite, considered a sub-sect of Shias. To begin with, the conflict was not sectarian. Syria under Ba'ath party was a secular oasis in the region. 59 per cent of the population is Arab Sunni, but they were not a homogenous lot. For Bedouins and tribals among them, loyalty was primarily to their tribe. The Kurds, Alawites, and Christians of different confessions and others constituted the remaining 41 per cent. Bashar is an Alawite, and his wife Asma is a Sunni from Homs. Bashar was popular among most of the minorities. The overwhelming support he enjoyed would indicate that he enjoyed the support of most of the Sunnis as well. Friction between different sects was within manageable limits. Whatever its faults may be, the Ba'ath party zealously ensured that Syria remained secular. The sectarian angle crept into the conflict gradually, as the armed rebels, mostly Sunnis, began targeting minorities. The situation worsened after external forces dispatched Takfiris and Salafists to Syria and the involvement of al Qaeda expanded.

This is not to suggest that everything was always hunky dory in Syria. Through centuries, Syria was repeatedly invaded from all directions, which has made the society violent and people aggressive, by nature. Families rewarding sons with weapons for passing school exams is not unknown among some tribes. While the situation was smooth on the surface, there were subterranean tensions; but those cannot be categorised as sectarian. These tensions were kept in check via a series of live-and-let-live arrangements to prevent them from affecting societal peace and harmony.

DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT

There was a serious democratic deficit in Syria. There was no political opposition worth mentioning; the Ba'ath party had structured the polity such to maintain its monopoly. Any political activity outside the Ba'ath party was put down ruthlessly. Given the palace intrigues that preceded Hafez ascended power, he took care to structure the security apparatus such that each one of them kept a watch on what the others were doing. This helped nipping any brewing challenge to authority in the bud. This structure of the security agencies has continued to this day and has served the regime well. There are approximately 10-12 influential officials, each loyal to

the president, but cannot work with the others. This meant that none of them could have replaced the president. This 'There Is No Alternative' factor has worked heavily in the president's favour. This is also an important issue that inhibited stronger action by some sections of the West against President Assad.

RELATIONS BETWEEN THE BASHAR AND THE BA'ATH PARTY

There was friction between the resident and the Party. Bashar was a liberal, which put him in conflict with the established stalwarts of the Party. In his first speech after taking over as president, he outlined several ideas for liberalising the society, which enthused the political opposition. However, the president, whose popularity far exceeded that of the Party's, faced resistance from latter. The 2007 Party Congress decided on political reforms but these could not be implemented. The Party was resentful that insufficient attention was being paid to agriculture, irrigation, rural infrastructure, and workers affected by economic reforms. It was also uneasy with Bashar's foreign policy choices. His opening out to the West, choice of Turkey and Qatar as close friends, and insufficient attention to relations with Russia and Iran, did not go down well with the Party. On this, the Party was proven correct, for Turkey and Qatar turned against Assad, whereas Russia and Iran, the traditional friends, have stood by him in these difficult days. When trouble broke out, the Party advocated a hardline approach, but Bashar preferred a softer line. Despite these differences, the president and the Party worked together when Syria was faced with externally sponsored insurrection.

SITUATION IN SYRIA IN 2010

When the Arab Spring began sweeping North Africa, there was no discernible disaffection among the Syrian population towards Bashar. There was resentment towards the Mukhabarat, the intelligence agency, which was perceived to be high-handed; liberals preferred a multi-party system; and the business community was unhappy with economic reforms. However, there were no serious economic or social problems. Bashar confidently asserted that Syria will not face problems like some other countries in the region stating that conditions in Syria were different.

What he had not factored in was that Syria's foreign policy was resented by many in the Arab world and the West who viewed the Arab Spring as an opportunity to get rid of an inconvenient regime.

EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

A brief survey of Syria's relation with the countries of the region and major powers is necessary to understand that there were no serious issues that would warrant their animosity towards Syria or its leader.

THE WEST & THE GULF

Syria's pro-Palestinian stance on the larger West Asian issue, its role in Lebanon, socialist policies, closeness to Russia and Iran, support for Hezbollah etc., positioned it in direct conflict with the West and the Gulf. Its policies were considered as posing a threat to the security of Israel. What was overlooked was that Israel was occupying the fertile Syrian territory of Golan Heights since the 1967 Arab Israeli conflict. Syria was technically in a state of war with Israel in March 2011 and emergency was in force. With the countries of the Gulf, there was sectarian friction as well.

In 2010, the US had convinced the Gulf States that they were being surrounded by a Shia arc stretching from Iran to southern Lebanon, and that in due course, there will be attempts by the Shias to destabilise the Gulf. The February 2011 developments in Bahrain and the problem earlier faced by Saudi Arabia from the Houthis [Shias] in Yemen, were taken by Gulf States as confirmation of apprehensions expressed by the US. In the then situation in the Arab world, it was thought that the Syrian regime could be targeted with reasonable chance of success.

SAUDI ARABIA

For long, Syria's relations with Saudi Arabia were fraught with tensions. The Saudis were US allies, and Syria, a Russian ally. Saudi Arabia resented Syrian involvement in Lebanon that continued after the civil war had ended. Syria was blamed for the 2005 assassination of Rafic Hariri, a close friend of the late Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, and relations between Damascus and Riyadh went into a deep freeze. This was compounded by an uncharacteristically intemperate remarks by Bashar on Arab leaders, during the Israeli action in Southern Lebanon in 2006. The late Saudi king boycotted the Damascus Arab League Summit in December 2008.

From 2009 onwards, relations began improving, as Riyadh wanted Damascus's support for developments in Lebanon. By 2010, Bashar had visited Saudi Arabia thrice. At Saudi request, Syria imprisoned some persons involved in drug smuggling. In October 2009, King Abdullah

visited Damascus after Syria played a helpful role in Lebanon after elections, leading to Saad Hariri's appointment as the prime minister. The two leaders visited Beirut together. Syria endorsed Saudi armed action inside Yemen against the Iran-supported Houthi rebels, and Saudis sending armed forces to Bahrain in March 2011. However, the Saudis turned against Syria in no time and extended political, financial and material support to the opposition and egged them on. A Sunni religious preacher was allowed to make obnoxious statements against Bashar and to incite sectarian disaffection. King Abdullah was the first Arab leader to publicly condemn the incumbent Assad government, in August 2011, for its firm-handed handling of protests.

QATAR

The Emir of Qatar was a close friend of President Assad, but to Assad's surprise, Qatar turned out to be a fair weather friend. New agency Al Jazeera played a questionable role in inciting protestors against the Syrian regime and in projecting a totally distorted view of the developments in Syria in the Arab world, turning public opinion against Damascus. An Egyptian Islamic scholar in exile in Qatar was allowed a free hand to incite public opinion in Syria. From the initial stages, it was evident that Qatar was supporting the opposition and actively assisting them. Qatar and Saudi Arabia also manipulated the Arab League and in November 2011, got Syria suspended from the League.

EGYPT

Relations between Syria and Egypt were never smooth after Syria pulled out of the United Arab Republic in 1961. Egypt's acquiescence to ceasefire during the Arab-Israeli war in 1973, contrary to the understanding with Syria, Camp David Accord, etc. did not go down well in Syria. It took some years before relations with Egypt began improving. In early 2011, Egypt itself was in turmoil after the overthrow of then President Hosni Mubarak and hence could not do anything in Syria; but it joined the Gulf States, initially reluctantly, in their actions against Damascus via the Arab League.

IRAQ & JORDAN

Between 2008 and 2010, there were numerous ups and downs in the Syria-Iraq relationship. With a Shia government in power in Iraq, Tehran worked overtime to successfully smoothen the Damascus-Baghdad bilateral. Arms and terrorists flowed into Syria from Iraq in the early days of the unrest, but these happened without the knowledge of the Iraqi government. Jordan, heavily dependent on foreign aid, was easily persuaded to join the Gulf countries in their activities against Syria.

TURKEY

Syria-Turkey relations began strengthening with Bashar in Damascus and Erdogan in Ankara. Turkey's then Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu was a frequent visitor to Damascus. Relations were at an all-time high in 2010. Turkey played the role of conduit between Syria and Israel. In December 2009, the two countries signed over 50 agreements/Memoranda of Understanding. One of these formalised the borders between the two countries, as claimed by Turkey. The issue of sharing of the waters of Tigris was also resolved to Turkey's advantage. The Ba'ath Party was not happy as they did not trust Turkey. The two countries facilitated easier cross-border movement, including by abolishing visa requirements.

Even when relations were good, Turkey's then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan tried to convince Bashar that the Muslim Brotherhood was not extremist and that they should be brought into the democratic mainstream. Bashar took some steps to appease Erdogan as also the religious sections in Syria. Among others, these include permission for sermons by clerics after Friday prayers and permission to return for many clerics exiled by his father. These did not go down well with the secular Ba'athists. Given this state of relations, one would have expected Turkey to be at least neutral when troubles began unfolding. Erdogan initially demanded the release of Muslim Brotherhood activists and the political rehabilitation of the Brotherhood. Over 85 per cent of the 260 prisoners released in March 2011 were Brotherhood activists released at Turkey's 'request'. As the situation began deteriorating, much to Bashar's surprise, Ankara put its full weight behind the opposition. Erdogan had taken Assad for granted. Erdogan's regional ambitions are responsible for his Syria policy in the current situation.

LEBANON

Syria's influence in Lebanon started waning after Hariri's assassination in 2005 and the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon. Damascus's assistance to Hezbollah continued but was explained away by the former in the regional context. Syria facilitated government formation by Saad Hariri after the Lebanese elections in 2009, at the persuasion of the Saudi King Abdullah, whose efforts led to Saad visiting Damascus twice. By 2009, the two countries had established diplomatic relations and exchanged Ambassadors. On Saudi advice, Saad Hariri overlooked Syria's alleged role in his father's assassination; but had not forgotten it. When trouble began brewing in Syria, the Sunnis of Lebanon, of whom Saad Hariri was the leader, were glad to see the former in trouble and started helping the opposition avenge the 'humiliation' they had suffered at Syrian

hands for nearly 30 years. Many countries were using the porous border between Syria and Lebanon to send in equipment and fighters into Syria.

As is evident from the above, Syria had few friends in the region in early 2011, and even friends it counted on, turned out to be fair weather friends. At the international level, Syria had some trustworthy friends, but more enemies.

RUSSIA, CHINA & IRAN

Hafez al-Assad had carefully nurtured relations with Moscow and Tehran. Despite Bashar's reaching out to the West, close relations with these countries has continued. Syria had strong political, economic, cultural and defence links with Russia. The Russian navy enjoys limited right to the use of Tartus port. Many Ba'ath Party officials and senior government officials were educated in Russia. Russia was the main source of technology, defence equipment and development finance. It helped that Libya happened before Syria; and Russia felt cheated, as the UNSC resolution was interpreted in a way it had not foreseen, to launch an invasion of Libya. They would not be fooled this time.

China too had serious reservations on what happened in Libya. Furthermore, it had to worry about religious extremism in some of its regions. It was a Chinese expert at the border to service scanning equipment who detected the inflow of arms from Iraq and alerted Syria. China had a good understanding of what was going on in Syria and extended political support. With two permanent members of UNSC supporting it, Syria did not have to face UN sanctioned international action.

With Iran, apart from economic and political links, there was the religious factor too. Many important Shia shrines are located in Syria and used to attract tens of thousands of Iranians every year. Syria was on Iran's side during the Iran-Iraq war. Most importantly, Syria was on the transit route for Iran's assistance to Hezbollah in Lebanon and actively assisted Iran in this.

FRANCE

Since Bashar assumed Syrian presidency in 2000, Damascus's relations with France saw many ups and downs. Rafic Hariri's assassination in 2005 turned the West, particularly France, against Syria. The President of France and Hariri's friend, Jacques Chirac, ensured that relations with

Syria were frozen. When Nicolas Sarkozy was elected as the French president, Bashar was invited for the Bastille Day celebrations in 2008. He also worked overtime to get the EU to extend to Syria a Partnership Agreement. When the Dutch had reservations, he found a way out. But Syria backed out thanks to behind the scenes actions of the Dutch Jewish community; and Sarkozy felt let down.

When Syria came under pressure, France was in the forefront to unseat Bashar. As the power that held the mandate for Syria after the World War I, France seemed to have assumed some residual rights over Syria. From the very beginning, France supported and actively assisted the opposition and in close coordination with the UK, got the EU to unleash a series of sanctions against the Syrian leadership. In early 2012, the UK and France tried to establish an operations and coordination center in Homs, like the one established in Benghazi, Libya; but the Syrians successfully checkmated them.

THE UK

The UK was unhappy with Syria for the 'anti-Israel' policy and support for Hezbollah. This issue figured prominently in the January 2011 discussions UK Foreign Secretary William Hague had with Bashar. The UK and the US were certain of Syria's complicity in the transfer of missiles to Hezbollah. They suspected that the missiles had been deployed by Hezbollah, south of Lebanon's Litani River, in contravention of undertakings given to the international community. They were rightly of the view that this would be of serious security concern to Israel. The UK, fresh from the 'success' in Libya, joined hands with France to unseat the regime.

THE US

Syria's closeness to Russia and Iran, help to Hezbollah, 'anti-Israel' policies, and suspected nuclear programme, put it at odds with the US. Syria under the Ba'athists was a thorn in the flesh of the US for over 50 years. Nevertheless, post 9/11, Syria had quietly helped the US by sharing information that was helpful in nabbing several al Qaeda suspects. US congressmen visited Damascus frequently. Incumbent US Secretary of State John Kerry visited Syria frequently, his last visit being in November 2010. This had been preceded by several causes for friction: Syria's suspected nuclear facility near Deir ez-Zor [Israel destroyed the facility in September 2007; and later, it emerged that it was not a nuclear facility]; the cross border helicopter operation in Abu Kamal in eastern Syria by the US to nab a suspected al Qaeda leader; and the US allegation that

Syria was actively supporting the opposition in Iraq against the US, among others. Many Syrian mercenaries were fighting the US forces in Iraq [as in several other places, including Chechnya]. Many Arabs from North Africa, recruited by al Qaeda, took advantage of Syria's liberal laws on employment and tourist visas for Arabs, to sneak into Iraq via Syria, prompting the US to allege official Syrian support. Relations with Syria started looking up from 2010 when the US decided to send an ambassador to Syria after many years.

Though it also assisted the opposition, the US was not visibly in the forefront in the initial stages. 10 days after trouble broke out in Syria, the then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said many congressmen of both parties who had gone to Syria in recent months had said they believe Bashar is a reformer. This was only a temporary reprieve for President Assad. There are credible reports that the US and some EU countries had put forward some proposals to the Syrian government through back channels, and that Syria had responded positively. These efforts fell apart because regional players could persuade the Syrian opposition to not accept any compromise.

The CIA was active from the beginning, but there were differences of views between the CIA, Pentagon and the state department. The US' then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin Dempsey cautioned against arming the opposition when there was no clarity on its identity. He was correct. The intelligence, money and equipment given to the Syrian opposition quickly found its way into the hands of al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. The US was also clear that state institutions should not be dismantled [following their unpleasant experience in Iraq] as such moves could create a vacuum with no certainty as to who will move in to fill the vacuum.

The US could not identify a leader who could credibly replace Bashar. They were fully conscious of the likely fallout for Syria, Israel and the region, should the Syrian regime collapse suddenly. In the assessment of many observers, unlike Libya, Tunisia and Egypt that imploded, Syria, because of history, location, and cross border tribal linkages, was most likely to explode and affect other countries in the region. A destabilised Syria and the region would have serious security implications for Israel, which is of paramount concern for the US. Many in Syria, including some in the internal opposition, were of the view that if Bashar steps aside suddenly, it will lead to sectarian clashes and all out civil war, which will be taken advantage of by the armed opposition. By then there was clear evidence of extremists of different shades being active all over Syria and the people of Syria dreaded the prospect of their country plunging into a chaos like Iraq.

TROUBLE ERUPTS

While internally, the conditions were stable and would not have led to an uprising, external factors and active external efforts were responsible for trouble to erupt in Syria. The spark was provided by the insensitive handling of a protest by about 15 school students who were accused of painting anti-regime graffiti. They were arrested and tortured, leading to a demonstration by a few thousand people on 18 March 2011, in Daraa, a city on the border with Jordan. External involvement in this is not clear. The main demands of the protesters were the release of the arrested children, repeal of land transfer laws and lifting of emergency. The top leadership was shocked, for they never thought this could happen in Syria. They took two days to react. The children were released. It was explained that emergency has been in force for over 40 years in the context of Syria's war with Israel and that it will be lifted once the government completes the formalities.

According to the Land Law in question, prior approval of the government is required for transferring land within 10 kilometers from the border. This had resulted in corruption and delays; and the government decided to repeal the law. On 24 March 2011, Syria's Political and Media Adviser to the Presidency, Bouthaina Shaaban held a press conference to announce the government's decisions. Damascus was hopeful that with these decisions, the protests would not spread. They were proved wrong, for, with every passing Friday, protests spread to different cities in stages. External involvement in all this became extremely clear by then.

ROLE OF MEDIA

The media played a huge role in the protests spreading fast. Some sections of the media, particularly the Arab language and Gulf media put out grossly exaggerated versions on protests, inflated casualty figures and blamed security forces for all the violence, even when there was clear evidence of armed attacks by the protestors. Their sole purpose was to incite Syrians to rise up against the regime. Neutrality and objectivity were cast aside in their eagerness to contribute to the fall of the regime. The Syrian government was unable to handle this media onslaught. This resulted in public opinion in the Arab world turning against Syria and its president.

CONFUSED OPPOSITION

Protestors were not clear on what they wanted, for they were only given money by their foreign

handlers and asked to shout anti-regime slogans. President Assad called groups of people from each province to ascertain their grievances. The demands ranged from personal and religious to political reforms without clarity on what they wanted, socio-economic grievances, local issues etc.

When protests began in Homs, the main demand was the release from prison of about a dozen drug peddlers and arms smugglers who had been arrested at Saudi request. It was much later that the opposition asked for drastic political reforms including the removal of the president. This happened only after the West and the Gulf made such a demand and stepped up assistance to the rebels in an effort to overthrow the regime before the end of Ramadan month, which in 2011, occurred in September. After approximately three to four months, presence at protests began declining, but simultaneously, the levels of violence by the opposition shot up. By then, the presence of extremists among the opposition had gone up significantly, with hardcore extremists from the region coming in through neighboring countries. Their movement was mostly organised by the external sponsors of the opposition.

The opposition in Syria was a disparate lot. Efforts from abroad to forge a coalition did not meet with success. They lacked cohesion, credibility and a common program of action. The Syrian National Council experiment did not make much headway due to constant squabbling, presence of a large number of non-resident Syrians, and the dominant role played by Muslim Brotherhood among others. The Brotherhood controlled the flow into Syria of cash and weapons given by external sponsors. Over time, the opposition became highly polarised.

FALTERING RESPONSE OF THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT

There were several mistakes on the part of the Syrian government. The arrest of the children in Daraa was insensitive and strongly condemnable and response to this should have been faster. The government's handling of the protests was inept. Syria had a police force of a few thousands only, which necessitated deployment of security forces. Security forces were trained in taking on external enemies and terrorists but not in handling internal disturbances. There were many instances of use of excessive force. The Syrian government took action in some cases but did not make them public since it felt it would demoralise the forces. Tanks were sent to troubled areas; and naturally, this was played up in the media. What the government did not explain was that it did not have sufficient armoured personnel carriers, and hence sent tanks, a safe means of transport for soldiers to reach troubled areas. The soldiers were under pressure since there were

several cases of rebels abducting their family members and relatives and sending word that they will be released only if they defect. The government's public relations efforts were totally ineffective. In the initial stages at least, over 40 per cent of the casualties were on the government's side – armed forces, intelligence personnel, and government supporters. Had this fact been highlighted, it would have somewhat blunted the charge that the government was resorting to excessive force.

On the political side too, Damascus faltered. Considering the gravity of the developing situation, the response was inadequate and slow. There were differences in the top leadership with the Ba'ath party advocating a tough response. Bashar also allowed back channel efforts with some Western countries to delay the political response. By the time he realised that these efforts were leading nowhere, violence had spread and the response of the opposition, whose ranks had increased by then with the induction of hardcore extremists mostly from abroad, was brutal.

Some major provisions of the new constitution, which were enacted in February 2012, should have been announced much earlier. These include the deletion of Article 8 – which had assigned a pre-eminent role for the Ba'ath Party – and the introduction of multi-party democracy, providing for direct election of the president and limiting presidential terms to two tenures. These announcements could have been made even when back channel efforts were on, but came too late to make any impact on the streets.

ISLAMIC STATE IN SYRIA

Some seem to be of the view that the involvement of the Islamic State (IS) in Syria began about a year and half back. Al Qaeda in Iraq, which subsequently became the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, was active in Syria right from the beginning. The first major operation it carried out was on two security posts near Daraa around 20 April 2011. They were in the forefront of the capture of the border posts along the Turkish border. They received assistance from abroad both directly and indirectly.

CONCLUSION

A peaceful and secular country is getting destroyed. Half the population is displaced; nearly one-fifth are refugees abroad; an estimated 1 per cent of Syrians have died; and over half the population desperately requires humanitarian assistance. Whatever may be the reasons for the crisis, whoever may be responsible, the immediate need is to find a way to stop the violence. This is going to be a herculean task, given that there are groups, supported from abroad that are beyond the purview of international law.

Both the Syrian government and the moderate opposition should make every effort to implement the December 2015 UN Resolution, providing for an international roadmap for a Syrian peace process. This will hopefully reduce the level of violence and isolate the IS and other extremist groups. In his 2012 report to the UNSC, the UN Security General's Special Representative, Kofi Annan, said the Syrian crisis can have a dangerous impact for the entire region, if not handled properly. His prognosis is being played out in the region.

In a welcome development, a ceasefire between the Syrian government and the moderate opposition has been brokered by the US and Russia, and it came into effect on 27 February 2016. However, action would continue against terrorist organisations such as the IS and the al Nusra Front. The international community has welcomed and supported the ceasefire. The UN should now focus on expediting efforts towards commencing political dialogue and step up humanitarian assistance. The ceasefire offers the first ray of hope in five years to the beleaguered Syrians.



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Umayyad Mosque, Aleppo, Syria, UNESCO World Heritage Site, 2013
Image Courtesy: Dimitar Dilkoff/AFP/Getty Images

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