



# Battleground Idlib

Russia & Turkey's Interests amidst  
the COVID-19 crisis

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# **Battleground Idlib: Russia and Turkey's Interests amidst the COVID-19 crisis**

## **Introduction**

The civil war in Syria similar to the continuing conflicts in Yemen and Libya has its roots in the 2011 Arab spring protests. The protracted conflict between President Bashar Al-Assad's forces and a fragmented opposition has been diffused by Russia and Iran and the ruling regime has succeeded to reclaim majority of territories. The north-western governorate of Idlib is one of the last rebel-held regions and the Syrian government is pursuing its efforts to reclaim control since late 2016. Turkey however has opposed Syria's advances in Idlib based on its strategic objectives and unique challenges. The competing objectives of Syria and Turkey have been manoeuvred by Russia to suit its interests. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated the strategic positioning of Syria, Turkey and Russia raising questions over its impact on the refugees, re-appearance of insurgent and terrorist groups and the overall implication on the decade long crisis. The research would therefore explore the strategic interests of Turkey and Russia and analyse its implications on Syria. It would also examine the strategic posturing of Russia, Turkey and Syria in light of the pandemic.

## **Research Questions**

1. What are the strategic interests of Russia in Syria?
2. What are the strategic interests of Turkey in Syria?
3. What is the importance of Idlib for the Syrian government?
4. What is the security, domestic and regional ramifications of Syrian government's advances in Idlib?
5. What is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Russia and Turkey's policies in Syria?

## **Towards the Civil War**

The protest in Syria began in March 2011 after authorities detained and tortured 15 boys in Daraa for writing anti-government graffiti. The government's response was harsh indicating reluctance to accept political accountability, democratic norms and any prospect of power-sharing. The treatment meted out to demonstrators on the succeeding days led to more protests in other parts of the state (Hanano 2012).

On 29 July 2011, defectors from the Syrian Armed Forces, led by Colonel Riad Assad, formed the Free Syrian Army (FSA) with the aim of removing the Assad regime. The insurgents by late 2011 seized large swaths of territories and the civil war gripped the entire state. The armed opposition groups after initial gains in 2011 and 2012 could not transform themselves into a national force and exhausted their resources culminating into the ongoing stalemate (Lister 2016). The FSA, despite its stated objectives, remained a disorganised group prominently engaged in providing security to the local communities.

Despite the non-sectarian nature of the initial protests, the civil war gradually took a sectarian turn after the involvement of radical and moderate Islamist groups backed by Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) etc. The entry of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Hezbollah to protect President

Assad's Alawite regime further bolstered the sectarian connotation. The external actors propelled the transition from the initial protests to full-scale insurgency to topple the Assad regime and every power saw in Arab Spring an opportunity to push its own agenda.

The gap in western policy between 'intent and rhetoric' emboldened the regional players such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar to use the conflict in Syria to establish regional hegemony (Khatib 2017, Eaton, Haid et al). Politically, the Gulf States favour a new political regime opposed to Iran. By 2012, radical Islamist armed groups began to emerge and coalesce, thereby changing the trajectory of the conflict in Syria for years to come. For instance, Ahrar al-Sham, a synthesis of various Islamist groups, began operating by the end of 2011. Similarly, Jabhat al-Nusra, which was later known as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, was formed in January 2012. These groups were actively supported by the Persian Gulf states to destabilise the Syrian political regime. The Gulf States rather than opting for democratic reforms saw the Arab Spring as an opportunity to settle score by pushing for quick regime change.

The US similar the Gulf States sought to weaken Iran's key ally in Syria. The US after initial reluctance imposed sanctions against President Assad and his close allies. It broadly opted for diplomatic and economic tools to condemn and weaken the regime. By 2012, the US intelligence services began recruiting and funding civilian opposition groups against Assad. The US' military involvement in Syria was largely directed against the Islamic State (IS). While the US restrained from directly attacking the Syrian military assets, it considered the use of chemical weapons as red lines and hit Syrian military and scientific facilities on 14 April 2017 in response to reported use of sarin gas in the rebel-held Khan Sheikhoun town in Idlib killing 89 people on 4 April 2017 (The White Helmets 2017; Al Jazeera 2017; BBC News 2017).

The US' key ally, Israel is historically opposed to the Baathist regime in Syria and the diplomatic relations between both states are absent. The Jewish state is also worried about Iran's alliance with the Syrian regime.

At the same time, the scale of confrontation between Israel and Syria has been minimal under President Assad. Therefore, the civil war and the ensuing uncertainty raised alarm within Israel about the instability and its ramifications in the border regions including the occupied Golan Heights. The entry of Iran and Hezbollah in the civil war in favour of President Assad prompted Israel to strike against Iranian and Syrian military targets in southern Syria that continued throughout the civil war.

France, the former colonial power in Syria maintained a pro-active posture towards the developments happening post 2011 Arab Spring. It supported the sanctions imposed against the Syrian regime and offered help to anti-Assad forces. It participated in the US led military expedition against IS. After the Assad regime was stabilised due to Russian and Iranian intervention, it has insisted on negotiated settlement between the government and the opposition.

Turkey after the beginning of insurgency in Syria sought to take advantage of the situation and hoped for a quick regime change. It supported numerous rebel groups to unseat the Assad regime. After IS took control of several oil fields in the security-scarce Syria, Turkey allowed tankers controlled by the IS fighters to move within its territory.

The anti-Assad camp during the course of the civil war gradually became fragmented between moderate groups seeking dialogue or regime change and radical groups seeking the reorganisation of the state based on Islamic laws using violent means. The conflagration of the conflict diminished any scope of reconciliation. The nature of the conflict therefore changed from tussle for accountability to obtaining absolute power backed by external actors for vested interests.

### **Russia's Interests in Syria**

Russia, after the commencement of insurgency in Syria, called for immediate cessation of hostilities on all sides. It suggested a peaceful resolution through a national dialogue between the government and the opposition without pressure of sanctions, deadlines, pre-conditions and



external interference. Russia welcomed the measures taken by President Assad on 21 April 2011 to lift the 1962 emergency law; suspend state security courts and permit government-approved peaceful protests. The reforms were however, insufficient as it did not grant independence of judiciary; accountability for security institutions and release of political prisoners (Charap, Treyger & Geist 2019; BBC News 2011). Critics have also pointed out that Russia's proposal for dialogue without preconditions would have placed the opposition at serious disadvantage vis-a-vis Assad and the security apparatus during negotiations.

Russia pursued diplomatic methods to stall the western efforts against Assad regime. Russia until mid-2011 in fact tried to mollify the western states by condemning Assad regime for human rights violations against civilians in the presidential statement of the UN Security Council (UNSC) on 3 August 2011 (UN 2011). Subsequently however, it opposed the attempts by the western and Gulf States to discredit and sabotage Bashar Al Assad regime through information warfare, sanctions, no-fly zones and supply of arms and equipment to rebel groups. It also countered the demands for unilateral withdrawal of government forces. Eventually, Russia along with China vetoed the UNSC Resolution for targeting the Syrian government on 4 October 2011 (UN 2011). The Russian delegate, Vitaly Churkin insisted that his government is not an advocate of the Syrian regime; however it would continue to block measures aimed at toppling Assad regime which may de-stabilize the region (The Guardian 2011). Russia between 2011 and December 2019 has vetoed 14 resolutions concerning the situation in Syria to safeguard the Syrian regime (Nichols 2019).

Russia prior to the intervention supplied Syria with light weapons, attack helicopters, unmanned aerial vehicles, air-defence systems, armoured vehicles, radars, electronic warfare systems, and guided bombs. At the same time, Russia engaged with multiple partners to pursue non-military methods to settle the ongoing conflict. Table 1 indicates the total number of engagement by Russia between January 2014 and September 2015.

**Table 1**

Russian Diplomatic Engagement between January 2014 and September 2015

<b>Interlocutor</b>	<b>Number of Engagements</b>
United States	55
Syrian Government	52
Syrian Opposition	32
European Union (EU) member states	22
United Nations	9
Iran	4
Israel	3
Saudi Arabia	3
Turkey	3
Arab League	2
Jordan	2
Bahrain	1
Iraq	1

Source: Charap, Treyger & Geist 2019

Russia had initially maintained that the anti-government protestors and armed opposition groups share the blame for violence. Russia referred the armed rebel factions as 'terrorists' since October 2011 to counter the western narrative against the Assad regime and delegitimize the opposition. The Russian government also alleged that a major section of these groups comprises of foreign fighters (Bagdonas 2012). From the Russian perspective, the contest in Syria transformed from genuine peoples' movement for political reforms to full-fledged insurgency seeking regime change. Russia devised methods to promote fragmentation among various opposition groups by prioritising left-wing outfits such as National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change or the Popular Front for Change and Liberation over Syrian National Coalition (SNC). In 2015, Russia facilitated two rounds of meetings in January and April between the Syrian government and the opposition. The talks however

failed after SNC demanded Assad's resignation prior to convening talks. The diplomatic stalemates convinced Russia about the futility of non-military methods to resolve the conflict (*Ibid*).

The areas of control under the Syrian forces continued to shift between 2012 and 2015. The Assad government's forces by mid-2015 lost large swathes of territory that came under the control of the armed rebel groups and the Islamic State (IS). The IS captured the eastern governorates of Raqqa in January 2014 and Deir az Zor in July 2014 (RAND 2020). The IS also penetrated in the Al Hasakah governorate. In Homs, the rebels were cornered in the Al-Waer neighbourhood by mid-2014. Jabhat Al Nusra took over Idlib in May 2015 and the Syrian forces was fighting against rebels as well as the IS in Aleppo (Awad 2018).

In this light, the military strategy of the Syrian regime was focussed on consolidating its position in the western Syria stretching from Homs, Hama, Damascus, Latakia, and Tartous connecting with the Qalamoun Mountain in Lebanon under Hezbollah's control (Shaheen 2015). It was militarily the weakest period for the Syrian regime and Russia feared that the Syrian regime could face imminent defeat in the coming days.

Eventually, Russia entered the Syrian conflict in favour of the Assad regime on 30 September 2015 with the stated objective of defeating the Islamic State (IS). Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov later clarified that the Russian intervention is directed against 'all terrorists' operating in Syria (BBC News 2015). In the initial period, the primary driver was aimed at averting an adverse military outcome to curb the growth of terrorist groups. Russia feared that the removal of Assad would embolden the transnational terrorist groups. Russia was cautious of the large number of Russian speaking fighters from Chechnya and Central Asia recruited in the IS (CSIS 2017). The success of the IS in the Levant therefore, posed direct challenge to Russia's national security. Russia's critics have pointed out that the IS has served as a convenient excuse to bestow support for Assad's autocratic regime and white-washing the atrocities including the alleged reports of chemical attacks. Russia has however insisted that it

intends to defend the state structure and the position of President Assad rather than the person himself. Moscow insisted that the intervention was conducted at the request of President Assad to restore state sovereignty. By contrast, the US and Turkey's involvement have occurred without the approval of the Syrian government (Chappell 2015).

Russia's move in Syria has countered the US policy of destabilising autocratic regimes by supporting domestic opposition irrespective of ideological alignments. Moscow feared that Assad's removal by force would have legitimised the western states' policy of regime change i.e. imposition of UNSC resolutions, no-fly zones, economic sanctions and arms embargoes similar to Libya in which Muammar Gaddafi was toppled through external intervention that resulted in the state descending into a chaotic civil war (Allison 2013).

### **Military Efforts**

The Russian intervention comprising of fighter jets, combat air support missions for Syrian ground forces installing no-fly zones, mercenaries and ground forces for special operations etc. have helped the Syrian regime in recapturing major parts of the state in 2016. Russia has offered security assistance; conducted military operations; provided arms and logistical supplies; secured influence over the political elites; established Hmeimim military base and security outposts and penetrated Syria's key economic sectors (Pakhomov 2015). The absence of rival air power such as the US; air access to the territory; access to air and naval bases; maritime access; on the ground intelligence were major components of Russia's military intervention in Syria. Russia's efforts are premised on maintaining a long-term military presence in Syria and in the region (*Ibid*). Russia on 26 August 2015 signed an agreement to build and utilise the Hmeimim air base in Latakia. Both states agreed to extend the presence of Russian troops for 49 years on 27 July, 2017. Earlier on 18 January 2017, both states also agreed to place 11 Russian battleships in Tartous for 49 years (DW 2017).

The Tartous naval facility was established in 1971 to facilitate the activities of erstwhile Union of Soviet Socialist Republics' (USSR) Mediterranean Squadron. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, the squadron was withdrawn and the facility was used by Russian forces for resupplying fuel in warships. The facility until 2011 hosted around 50 officials along with three floating docks, one floating workshop and storage facilities (Harmer 2012; Global Security 2020). Russian Navy Commander-in-Chief Vice Admiral Viktor Chirkov watching the developments in June 2012 noted that the base is critical for its missions in Mediterranean Sea and the Gulf of Aden and hinted the possibility of pro-active measures to safeguard its assets (Harmer 2012). Consequently, in 2012 the facility was reinforced with one destroyer, one frigate and three landing ships and 2013, four warships and one spying vessel were deployed (Fedyszyn 2013). In 2015, the port was upgraded by extending new berth, dredging and logistical support. The 2017 extension agreement has allowed Russia to utilise the naval base free of charge and offers immunity to Russian military officials.

Russia placed 4500 troops between September 2015 and 2016 and around 3000 in March 2018. In term of ground forces, government forces, Hezbollah and other Shiite militias were the primary forces in the Syrian battleground. Russia provided air cover and deployed military advisors in all Syrian battalion, brigade, regiment and division. Moreover, a small contingent of Russian support personal and Spetsnaz troops have been attached with the state armed units. Russia though the use of mercenaries portrayed the image of low casualties domestically. Russia is keen to rebuild Syrian armed forces to reduce its dependence on Iran and its allies (Charap, Treyger & Geist 2019). Russia has emphasised on the eventual evacuation of all foreign troops while maintaining its primacy in Syria's strategic landscape.

## **Regional Peace-making**

Russia was aware of the risk involved in directly intervening in Syria, however, in the background of the US re-positioning, Moscow has emerged

as the new security provider and it has succeeded in establishing tactical ties with all the foreign participants in the Syrian conflict i.e. Turkey, Israel, Iran, Egypt and the Persian Gulf states. Russia is aware that it can maintain its pre-eminence in the region only if it remains unchallenged by regional actors. It has sought to place itself above regional tussles and allowed limited escalation between Turkey and Kurdish militias; Israel and the IRGC and Hezbollah in the Syrian battleground. At the same time, it has facilitated strategic understanding among regional rivals (Charap, Treyger, and Geist 2019). It has positioned itself as the facilitator and guarantor of negotiations such as the Astana Process and the Sochi agreement which would be discussed in the subsequent section. The Russian government has notably utilised the de-escalation agreements such as Astana and Sochi agreements to fragment large geographic regions. It has allowed the Syrian government forces and its military allies to optimally utilise limited resources one area at a time (Alami 2018). Russia is therefore crucial for containment or continuation of the Syrian conflict.

### **Aid and Reconstruction Efforts**

Russia's military efforts in Syria have been relatively low cost. Russia's estimated cost was at US\$ 4 million per day during the peak of its military expedition in October 2015 as compared to the US' at US\$ 11.5 million per day during Operation Inherent Resolve against the IS in 2014 (Hobson 2015). The military cost however had an adverse effect on the already stagnated Russian economy facing renewed sanctions since December 2014.

Russia is seeking to expand its role in the post-war Syrian economy by advancing line of credit, supply of vital strategic products, investment contracts in key sectors such as agriculture, electricity, oil and gas, tourism, real estate etc. As mentioned previously, the Russian government has allocated US\$ 500 million to develop the Tartous Port (Reuters 2019). It has also committed US\$ 200 million to revive the Homs based fertiliser plant. In terms of humanitarian aid, Russia has contributed US\$ 17 million and agreed to supply 100,000 tons of grain between late 2019 to mid 2020

(Matveev 2019; Moscow Times 2019). Russia has also set up Electronic Certification Centre in coordination with the Syrian National Agency for Network Services in September 2019. It has supplied 144 construction machinery to the Syrian Ministry of Public Works and Housing. In terms of Russian private investment, the trend is slow due to impediments caused by sanctions, difficulty in bank transfers and bureaucratic red tape (Matveev 2019).

Russia intends to reconnect the Syrian government with the global economy. It has encouraged regional and international support while maintaining capacity to stir the course of events in Syria. The estimated cost of the reconstruction projects in Syria is at US\$ 250 billion to US\$ 400 billion. The Russian government is keen to involve the oil rich Gulf States, the EU states and China in the reconstruction process (Daher 2019).

Russia is however cautious of international efforts to destabilise the Assad regime by weaponising humanitarian aid. For Moscow, reconstruction and resettlement of refugees are viable ground for cooperation between the Syrian government and regional and international actors. Russia will likely use the subject of refugees as leverage by proposing to facilitate their return in exchange of western re-construction efforts. Therefore, the political survival of the Assad regime is pertinent for de-militarisation and eventually lowering the economic cost of the conflict. Finally, Russia's main interest does not lie in the reconstruction process or the source of investment, but rather managing the outcomes (Ramani 2019; Vohra 2019).

The complete control of Syrian territory under President Assad compliments Russia's plans to continue its primacy and manage the outcome of the conflict. However, Russian and Syrian plans for total control faces challenge from the Kurdish militias as well as from the continued presence of the anti-government rebels in Idlib and the adjoining areas. The Syrian government's plans in Idlib have been repeatedly impeded by Turkey that has cited the growing pressure of refugees in its territory

due to the recurring crises to retake the rebel held areas. The aspect of refugees contributes partly to explain Turkey's calculations in Syria. The subsequent section would examine the strategic interests of Turkey and analyse its manoeuvring in the Syrian battleground.

## **Turkish Interests in Syria**

For Turkey, the civil war in Syria has become a formidable challenge to the policymakers. Historically, the ties between Turkey and Syria transitioned from animosity to amity and currently, to stark hostility. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Syria supported the Kurdish separatism in Turkey partially as a response to Ankara's policy of exploiting the water resources from Tigris and Euphrates rivers for its ambitious South East Anatolia Regional Development Project (GAP) (Onis 2009). The relations improved in 1998 when after immense military pressure from Turkey, the then-President Hafiz al-Assad decided to expel the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Ocalan from his 'safe haven' in Syria. The PKK leader was eventually captured in 1998 from the Greek embassy in Nairobi, Kenya (Weiner 1999). Following this development, in 1998, Turkey and Syria signed the Adana agreement in which Syria recognized PKK as a terrorist organization and committed not to provide it with financial, logistic or military support (Cengiz 2019).

After the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, the relations with Syria became the hallmark of the success of Ahmet Davutoglu's 'zero problems with neighbours' policy'. Turkey viewed Syria as a "gateway to Arab East" and cultivated political, economic and security relations by setting up of higher council for strategic cooperation, removal of visa restrictions, conducting joint military exercises, and signing of a free trade agreement (Taspinar 2012). After anti-government protests emerged in Syria, Turkey started pushing the Assad regime to undertake democratic reforms. This policy of persuasion quickly shifted to open confrontation after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan called for overthrowing of the Assad regime and began supporting and aiding political and armed opposition groups. It has participated in four direct



military interventions i.e. Operation Euphrates Shield between August 2016 and March 2017; Operation Olive Branch between January and March 2018; Operation Peace Spring between October and November 2019, and recently launched Operation Spring Shield between late February and early March 2020 to pursue its interests.

During these operations, the aim of Turkish military mainly revolved around pushing the IS fighters away from its border; curtailing the advance of Kurdish militia fighters and creating the 'safe zones' to relocate the refugees from Turkey to Syria (Al Jazeera 2017). It has been a significant player in all the peace processes on Syria, including the Russian-led Astana process and the Sochi peace talks. Therefore, it is pertinent to understand the drivers of Turkish foreign policy and the primary goals of the Turkish state in Syria.

### **Erdogan's Pan-Islamist Ambitions**

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's pan-Islamist ambitions form the core of Turkey's confrontational approach towards the Assad regime in Syria. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) after coming to power has embarked on a plan of Islamizing the state through various social engineering tools such as lifting the Burqa ban; introducing legislation to limit the sale of alcohol; attempt to criminalize adultery in 2004; initiating a program to Islamize the education system etc. Consequently, the Islamist ideology of the party in power came to dominate its foreign policy list as well. Under the AKP, the role of religion, specifically Sunni Islam, has increased tremendously in Turkish foreign policy. It is most prominent in Ankara's projects of "building mosques, financing religious education, restoring Ottoman heritage—and advertising its unique brand of Islamic leadership along the way" (Tol 2019).

The conflict in Syria provided another opportunity to AKP and President Erdogan to export his Islamist agenda abroad. AKP prior to the civil war, tried to persuade President Bashar al-Assad to accommodate the Muslim Brotherhood in the Syrian political system. This support provided by

Turkey to the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria allowed the group to have a voice “disproportionate to its actual following inside the country” (Carnegie 2012). After the beginning of uprising in Syria, the Muslim Brotherhood became a part of the Syrian National Council which brought together various factions of Syrian opposition under one umbrella in Istanbul. In October 2011, the group gave a call for Turkey to intervene in Syria militarily and establish protected humanitarian zones in Turkish territory (Philips 2012). Turkey was deeply convinced that the Assad regime will not be able to survive the crisis and it began providing the logistics, military, and financial support to radical Islamist groups fighting the Assad regime. Turkey provided the territorial base and passage for the exiled opposition of Syria and other foreign fighters including Islamic State (IS) terrorists (Tol 2019).

### **Containment of Kurdish Insurgency**

The primary aim of the military operations launched by Turkey in Syria since 2016 was the removal of the Kurdish militias from the border region in a bid to safeguard its security and territorial integrity. Turkey has been fighting Kurdish insurgency at the home front since the 1980s. After the imprisonment of Abdullah Ocalan in 1999, PKK declared a unilateral ceasefire which it broke in 2004 resuming violence. The Turkish state under AKP has prioritized negotiations as a preferred approach to end the conflict. During this period, the Turkish government adopted various democratization initiatives such as giving more cultural and legal rights to its Kurdish population and opened a channel of negotiations with the PKK. The talks culminated into Dolmabahce Agreement in 2015 delineating list of priorities to resolve the Kurdish issue (Hurriyet Daily News 2015). However, President Erdogan's denial of it led to the collapse of talks, and the PKK resumed violence in 2015 (Cuhadar 2019).

Interestingly, it was during the same period that the US decided to provide military and logistical support to the Syrian Democratic Forces (PYD), an alliance of Arab and Kurdish militias formed in 2015, in its fight against the Islamic State. The People's Protection Units (YPG), the armed wing of

Syrian Democratic Forces (PYD), primarily consisted of Kurdish fighters (Al Jazeera 2019). The PYD, YPG and PKK consider the imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, who led the Kurdish insurgency in Turkey since the 1980s, as their guide. Due to its close linkages with PKK, Turkey deems YPG also as a terrorist group (CRS 2019).

However, with the military and logistical support provided by the US and other Western states, YPG has proved its suitability in the fight against the IS. The control of territory by the Kurdish groups in northern Syria increased the anxieties within the security establishment in Turkey. By forging an alliance with the Kurdish groups in Syria and overlooking the Turkish sensitivities, the US policy has created a rift in its relations with Turkey, a NATO member, and pushed it towards a more hostile approach in Syria. For Turkey, securing control over these territories was crucial to safeguard its borders and ensure the relocation of Syrian refugees to the 'safe zone' created during the operation.

## **Refugee Issue**

The driving force behind Turkey's hard power-based approach towards Syria is the looming refugee crisis inside its territory. At present, Turkey is hosting more than 3.6 million registered Syrian refugees inside the state (Leghtas 2019). Turkey had pursued an "open-door policy" towards the Syrian refugees fleeing the war in Syria and granted them "temporary protection status" (Sonmez 2019). However, the presence of large number of refugees has created economic and social strains for Turkey. The growing tensions between the refugees and local communities have increased public discontent towards AKP's policy in Syria. The refugee crisis in Turkey became one of the critical reasons for the setback suffered by AKP in the municipal elections in 2019 (Cupolo 2019).

Moreover, Turkey has witnessed a threefold increase in intercommunal violence among the local communities and Syrian refugees. The mounting tensions in Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir are driving inter- ethnic rivalries, socio-economic inequality and urban violence (ICG 2018). In its bid

to resolve the growing pressure, Turkey has been insisting on resettling around 1 million refugees to the 'safe zone' areas between Ras al-ain and Tel-Abyad which it captured during Operation Peace Spring in 2019. Turkey's Operation Peace Spring allowed it to seize 120 kilometres long and 30 kilometres wide territory between the towns of Ras al-ain and Tel-Abyad inside Syria before halting the operation by signing separate deals with the US and Russia (Reuters 2019). One of the objectives cited by the Turkish state before launching Operation Peace Spring in October 2019 was the creation of 'safe zones' for the Syrian refugees.

Furthermore, the refugee crisis inside Turkey has become one of the most substantial leverages which the AKP government is threatening to use against the EU time and again. In October 2019, President Erdogan warned the EU countries of releasing 'waves of refugees on Europe if the European Union categorized Turkey's 'Operation Peace Spring' into northern Syria as an 'invasion' (Sonmez 2019). Following the Russia-Syrian airstrike in Idlib on February 27, 2020, which killed 34 Turkish soldiers, President Erdogan once again threatened to 'flood' Europe with Syrian refugees. By using the refugee card against the EU, President Erdogan aimed at pressurizing Europe to update the refugee accord between Turkey and the EU signed on 18 March 2016, but it was not fully implemented (Gursel 2020). Turkey was offered financial support worth US\$ 6.6 billion to accommodate 4 million refugees under the 2016 deal (European Union 2016). At the same time, by creating a furore about Syrian refugees, the ruling party in Turkey aimed at assuaging and distracting the public perception over the losses incurred by the Turkish military in Syria.

## **Preserving Control over Northern Syria**

Turkey has launched four different military operations inside Syria since 2016. It has gained a significant hold over the territories in northern Syria. Turkey's objective of maintaining control over these territories in north Syria is rooted in its security concerns due to Kurdish insurgency and the refugee crisis. As mentioned earlier, the primary objectives stated

by the Turkish government before launching these military operations include ousting the YPD-linked Democratic Union Party (PYD) away from the border areas; and to create a 'safe zone' for the resettlement of the refugees. By seizing and holding critical territory inside northern Syria, the Turkish government aimed at ensuring the long-term security and stability of its border areas.

Turkey launched its first military Operation 'Euphrates Shield' in August 2016 against the Islamic state in Jarabulus—al-Rai—al-Bab triangle. During this operation, Turkish armed forces captured Jarabulus, al-Bab, cleared nearly 60-kilometre border stretching from Jarabulus to al-Rai (Gurcan 2019; Ramani 2019). Politically, Turkey's operation Euphrates Shield created a need for a peace process parallel to UN-led Geneva talks culminating in the Astana agreement of 2017 among Turkey, Russia and Iran. The three states agreed to set up four de-escalation zones to end hostilities between anti-government militias and forces fighting on behalf of Assad regime. The *zone 1* included the territories of Idlib province as well as parts of north-eastern Latakia province, western areas of Aleppo province and the northern regions of Hama province. The areas of Eastern Ghouta near Damascus constituted the *zone 2*, Rastan and Talbiseh enclave in northern Homs province became part of *zone 3*. Finally, the opposition-held south along the border with Jordan that includes parts of Deraa and Quneitra provinces came under *zone 4* of Astana agreement (Al Jazeera 2017).

Turkey launched its second military operation 'Olive branch' into the YPG-held territory of Afrin in north-western Syria on January 20, 2018, in close coordination with the Russian forces. The principal aim of the operation was to bring 10,000 square kilometre area of Kurdish-controlled Afrin under the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) (Hurriyet Daily News 2018).

During this period, the fragile security situation in Idlib and its likelihood of turning into a large-scale humanitarian disaster by unleashing a mass flow of refugees towards Turkey's border remained a severe concern for

Ankara. Consequently, in September 2018, Turkey and Russia signed the “Memorandum on Stabilization of the situation in the Idlib de-escalation area” in Sochi. Under Sochi agreement, Turkey and Russia agreed to create a 15-20 kilometres deep demilitarized zone within the Idlib de-escalation area. The agreement classified the opposition forces into mainstream and radical groups. It also called for the removal of radical terrorist groups by October 15, 2018, and removal of heavy weaponry by mainstream groups by October 10, 2018. It allowed Turkey to maintain 12 observation posts in Idlib, and both sides agreed to joint patrol by Turkey and Russia and Turkish forces were allowed to maintain 12 Observation Points. More importantly, the agreement stated that the transit traffic on the routes M4 (Aleppo-Latakia) and M5 (Aleppo-Hama) would be restored by the end of 2018 (The National 2018). However, the provisions of the Sochi deal were never fully implemented, and the radical terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham continue to operate in Idlib and its adjoining areas (RFI 2019).

Turkey has used limited military operations as an effective tool to boost its diplomatic capabilities and secure its strategic assets. Operation ‘Peace Spring’ was launched on October 9, 2019, to seize control over the territory between Tel Abyad in the west to Ras al-Ayn in the east of Syria to ward off Kurdish militias close to its border and resettling refugees (White House 2019; Schmitt, Haberman & Wong 2019).

During the operation, Turkish armed forces penetrated 30 kilometres inside the Syrian territory and gained command over the M4 highway linking Aleppo to Latakia. Following the military action, President Erdogan and President Putin met in Sochi on October 22, 2019, and signed another 10-point agreement to resolve the Syrian crisis. The agreement stipulated that the Kurdish militias, namely YPG, will withdraw to a distance of 30 kilometres from the Turkish-Syrian border. At the same time, the deal allowed Turkey to retain control of the M4 pocket and the area between Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn which it captured during the operation Peace Spring. More importantly, in Sochi, Turkey and Russia agreed to reboot the Adana agreement signed initially between Turkey and Syria in 1998

(Al Jazeera 2019). Adana agreement allowed Turkey to penetrate inside Syria up to 5 kilometres to dismantle PKK camps and capture Kurdish insurgents (Younes 2019). Turkey's failure to abide by its commitments made during the Astana process and Sochi agreement concerning the elimination of radical Islamist groups from the Idlib province became a major irritant in Turkey-Russia relations.

In its bid to strengthen its control over the territories captured by the Turkish military in northern Syria, Ankara has started investing in the reconstruction of these areas. Furthermore, the Turkish government has adopted the strategy of cooperating with local elements in areas such as al-Bab, Jarablus, Azaz, Cobanbey and Afrin to ensure that the local communities accept its reconstruction efforts. Further, Turkey has established "systems for security, education and religion and even issuing ID cards to residents" (Tastekin 2018). In Azaz, Turkey has built a road network, provided Turkish language classes for children, constructed cell towers, and helped in the training of local police. These reconstruction efforts have made Turkey's presence in these regions an everyday part of life (Daily Sabah 2018).

### **Erdogan's Domestic Legitimacy**

The domestic electoral compulsions of the AKP also play a factor in shaping Turkey's Syria policy. To win over his conservative and ultra-nationalist electoral base, President Erdogan created a nationalist fervour in the country against the Kurdish separatism. It allowed him to gain necessary support for his interventionist policies in Syria. Turkey's ruling party, AKP, has framed its demand for 'safe zones' as well as its fight against the Kurdish militias inside Syria in terms of national security. Also, the breakdown of talks with the PKK in 2015 and the resumption of violence by the insurgent group reinforced the securitized approach adopted by the ruling party towards the Kurdish issue in Turkey and Syria. By framing the Kurdish issue as a security threat, the ruling AKP gained legitimacy to use hard power to deal with the Kurdish threat emanating from inside the state as well as from any foreign territory. In 2016, President Erdogan

further strengthened his authoritative powers as he began purging the opposition including the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) in the guise of a state of emergency declared following the failed military coup.

Further, the decision of intervening in Syria by different military campaigns has served the ruling party to distract or divide the opposition as well as the broader public from various other crucial issues such as the rise of authoritarianism in the country and the dwindling economy (Koontz 2020). However, the recent Idlib offensive launched by Russian-backed Syrian regime, which killed over 50 Turkish soldiers since February 2020, has generated widespread debate in the country about the necessity of Turkish intervention in Syria. In the aftermath of Idlib offensive, "the public approval for the Turkish leader had dropped by almost two points since December 2019, from 43.7 per cent to 41.9 per cent in January this year" (Arab News 2020).

### **Syrian Government's Role and Objectives**

The political and strategic trajectory of the President Bashar Al Assad's government has been highly arduous during the course of the civil war facing existential threat between 2012 and 2015. The balance of power however, was restored in its favour after Russia, Iran and Hezbollah's involvement and aided by the gradual fragmentation among the opposition groups.

The Syrian command structure is largely unified and Assad enjoys complete authority over state institutions, security and intelligence services. During the initial period, the military strategy focused on counter-insurgency methods to repel the growing number of rebel groups. The rise in number of defections within the military ranks shrunk Syrian forces and limited its capacity to reclaim territories. The support of the pro-government militias such as Alawite Shabiha warlords and local Popular Committees was crucial to reinforce the Syrian armed forces. The militias closely coordinated with IRGC and Hezbollah to conduct its activities.



The government forces and the militias have conducted artillery attacks, air strikes, ground operations and according to some reports, sectarian massacres that led to evacuation of civilian population in the rebel-held regions. Syrian forces by mid 2015 maintained defensive posture and focused on securing the strategically important towns and military assets. Subsequently, it reoriented its focus towards Idlib after successive military victories and reclaiming major parts of the state. The military success in Idlib is crucial for the Turkish government to reaffirm total sovereignty. In the case of the north-eastern region, the government pursued diplomacy and series of agreements have been signed with the Kurdish led SDF. However, in the north-western region, the government's attitude is more combative against groups that have refused to accept the legitimacy of the Assad regime.

One of the major objectives of the Syrian government in Idlib was securing control of the 450 kms M 5 highway connecting four largest cities of the state namely Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo and M 4 highway connecting Damascus and Latakia. The M 5 highway stretching close to the Turkish border in the north and the Jordanian border in the south is a crucial economic corridor in the region. Zeina Karam noted that the highway carried US\$ 25 million per day worth of goods prior to the conflict. The government forces lost control of the crucial route in 2012 disrupting the economic supply chain for the regime controlled territories. The military made limited progress in securing parts of the highway in 2014. Syria's objectives are not only limited to strategic interests but also securing commercial interests. The military victory in Aleppo in December 2016 paved the way for offensive action (Karam 2020).

Syrian forces along with its allies continued with ground offensive and by July 2018, it recaptured rebel held areas in Homs governorate and Eastern Ghouta. Presently, the strategic objectives of the Syrian government are territorial consolidation; de-radicalisation; pursuing conditional return of refugees; economic and political rehabilitation and renewing the political legitimacy of the Assad regime. The government's repeated attempt to

regain Idlib along with parts of Hama, Latakia and Aleppo is central to fulfilling its strategic objectives (BBC News 2020).

The Syrian efforts were delayed as a result of the Sochi agreement in October 2018 that called for ascertaining the removal of rebel groups including radical groups in the demilitarised zone by Turkey. Turkey also continued to maintain the 12 observation points to deter advances of the government forces against rebels in Idlib. The post-Sochi ceasefire was short-lived and efforts by government to recapture Idlib finally commenced in April 2019 leading to direct clashes with Turkish forces that has continued in early 2020 (BBC News 2020).

### **Idlib Ordeal**

In Idlib, armed rebellion erupted against the Assad regime at an early stage of the conflict and the government lost control over major part of the governorate between 2012 and 2014. The economically and politically marginalized region quickly became a hotbed of numerous rebel groups. A coalition of hardliner rebel groups including Jaish Al Fateh, Jabhat Al-Nusra and Ahrar Al-Sham expelled the Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF) between October and November 2014. The hardliners took complete control over the governorate by May 2015 (Al Rifai 2015). The Syrian government blamed Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey for backing these Al Qaeda linked outfits. Turkey was also accused of allowing foreign fighters to enter Syrian territory. After Russia's entry in the conflict, the rebel groups in Idlib continued to retaliate against government attacks and groups from other parts of the state gradually moved to Idlib and its surrounding areas to secure safe haven from Russian and Syrian onslaught. The Syrian government also sent hundreds of rebels and their families to northern Syria including Idlib who were considered unwilling to reconcile with the Assad regime (Al-Khalidi 2017).

Moreover, the regrouping of Jabhat Al-Nusra occurred in Idlib, as a result of the expansion of IS in other parts of the state. Jabhat Al-Nusra or Jabhat Fath Al-Sham gradually neutralized other rebel groups from the

area including Ahrar Al-Sham. The Shiite villages of Al-Fua and Kafarya backed by Hezbollah fighters however remained outside the control of the radical groups (Al-Tamimi 2020). Jabhat Al-Nusra maintained regular coordination with other rebel groups in the region including the US backed Free Syrian Army (FSA). The foreign actors involved in the crisis predicted that the consolidation of opposition groups including Islamic hardliners would facilitate the desired political transition (Al-Tamimi 2020).

On 28 January 2017, Jabhat Al-Nusra joined hands with four other groups, namely, Harakat Nur Al-Din Al Zanki, Liwa Al Haqq, Ansar Al-Din and Jaysh Al-Sunnah to form Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) which remains the dominant rebel force in the region (Joscelyn 2017; BBC News 2017). The former Al Qaeda fighters have renamed their group to rebrand itself as distinct from Al Qaeda and its affiliates (Prasad 2020). Several elements within HTS have been closely associated with Turkish forces that rely of weapons and resources. Besides the HTS in Idlib, there are fighters from Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Turkey, Chechnya and Xinjiang. Notably, one of HTS' most prominent religious leaders, Abdullah al-Muhaysini is close to Turkistan Islamist party fighting for independence of the Uyghur community which could possibly raise China's interest over developments in Idlib (Hussein 2017).

HTS' North Brigade is concentrated in the rural areas of western Aleppo and South Brigade operating between Jabal Shashabo area and Jabal Al-Turkmen area in north-eastern Latakia. The Red Bands or Al-Asaib al-Hamra Force are responsible for military operations behind enemy lines. The group also manages an effective social media presence. In 2019, Popular Resistance Brigades or Saraya al-Mugawama Al-Shabiya was set up to embolden frontline defences as well as improve auxiliary supports (Al-Tamimi 2020).

The HTS sought to attain both factional hegemony on both military and administrative levels. It has maintained control over the provincial capital and the Bab al-Hawa border crossing. HTS, in order to consolidate its

political position in Idlib, organised the Syrian National Conference on 11 September 2017, to appoint a new Prime Minister and form constituent assembly. The conference was essentially organised by the HTS to consolidate its political position in Idlib. The conference agreed on the recognition of Islamic Law as the only source of legislation and preserve of the Islamic identity of the Syrian society. It is committed to overthrowing the 'illegitimate' regime of President Assad, extending security and justice in the 'liberated' areas, renouncing external intervention and any form of division, federalism and occupation while maintaining 'balanced' ties with states supporting the insurgency in Syria (ICG 2019). The Syrian Salvation government or *Hukumat al-Inqadh al-Suriya* emerged as a result of the conference in November 2017. The government was essentially the civilian wing of the HTS. The majority of the opposition groups gradually recognised the authority of the Salvation government. The group has displayed flexibility by cooperating with its ideological rivals. HTS in order to reinforce itself as a civilian government created numerous ministries such as Interior, Justice, Education, Higher education, Health, Economy and Resources, Development and Humanitarian issues, Agriculture and *Dawa Awqaf* (Al-Tamimi 2020: 7; ICG 2019). Moreover, the Salvation government reorganised the local councils in Idlib, Jisr al-Shughour, Salqin and Harem. Therefore, it has assumed governance role, however the political effectiveness is unclear. Moreover, it is financially strained and relies of the aid sent by NGOs to sustain the civilian population (Taataa 2019).

According to the 2018 Sochi agreement, the two crucial highways M5 and M4 were supposed to be "open for traffic, linking the government's stronghold on the coast with Aleppo before the end of that year" (Al Jazeera 2019). However, these highways remained closed since the rebel forces present in the region did not allow Turkey and Russia to undertake the joint patrolling of the highways, which was necessary to ensure the protection of the traffic.

The lack of progress on these previously agreed issues eventually led to the Syrian government offensive against the insurgent held of areas in Idlib in

April 2019 with the desired goal of securing every inch of its territory. The government forces made significant gains by retaking Morek and Khan Sheikhoun. It gained control over border crossing with the insurgent controlled areas and secured key section of the highway linking Aleppo and Homs (Yee & Saad 2019; Al Jazeera 2019). From the Russian perspective, the offensive was aimed at forcing Turkey to comply with the 2018 Sochi agreement. As mentioned earlier, the agreement stipulated the creation of 15 to 20 kms of buffer zone in coordination with Turkey. However, Turkey refused to apply the terms of the agreement while maintaining the observation points and continuing support and providing supplies to these groups. The Russian forces provided air cover and attached officials with the 25<sup>th</sup> Division Special Assignments and Liwa al-Quds. Iran also cooperated with the government forces to mobilise the Local Defence Forces (LDF). IRGC contributed in supervising the regional and the provincial sectors (EPC 2020; Kose 2020).

The Syrian offensive also increased the potential of direct confrontation with Turkey. Turkey along with its ally, Syrian National Army (SNA) focussed its efforts in the frontline areas in Idlib close to the government controlled areas. On 19 August 2019, the government air forces attacked a Turkish convoy heading towards Idlib killing three and injuring 12 civilians. It was largely seen as strategic posturing to force Turkey to withdraw support to the rebel groups and comply with the agreements. Turkey denied that the supplies were sent to insurgent groups and in fact insisted that it was heading towards its observation post in Morek. The UN recorded that between April and August 2019, around 500 civilians have been killed and 42 attacks were carried out against healthcare facilities (Al Jazeera 2019).

There were also reports of shelling near the Russian controlled Hmeimim base in August 2019 (Al Jazeera 2019). The humanitarian situation in Idlib is dire affecting large numbers of civilians who are forced to reside in makeshift camps with food shortages and poor health services. Furthermore, the border with Turkey has been sealed. The Syrian forces after the April 2019 offensive has opened the humanitarian corridor

in Soran village on the southern edges of the rebel held areas for safe access of civilians from southern Idlib and northern Hama to government controlled areas (Al Jazeera 2019). Reportedly, the Syrian government has placed civilians with opposition links arriving from the insurgent controlled areas under detention. It has raised fears about the sincerity of the government's intention for fair treatment of civilians after the re-integration. By December 2019, the government forces captured Maaret al-Numan in southern Idlib and analysts predicted the possibility of the fall of Idlib in the near future (Kajjo 2019).

The Syrian forces' advances towards Idlib continued in January 2020. Turkey was determined to dilute the Syrian and Russian efforts towards Idlib deployed 12,000 troops and set up 12 new outposts in the region, in addition to the 12 military observation points it had established under the 2018 Sochi deal." (Gurcan 2020). Turkey warned the Syrian forces with military action in case of its failure to withdraw behind the agreed observation posts until the end of February. Syrian forces however refused to comply with the Turkish threat leading to escalation in February 2020. In early February 2020, direct clashes led to the death at least eight Turkish and 13 Syrian soldiers (McKernan 2020).

The insurgent groups supported by Turkey recaptured Saraqeb from government forces. After Syrian air raids killed 34 Turkish soldiers on 27 February 2020, Turkey launched Operation Spring Shield and five choppers, 103 tanks, 72 artillery and rocket launchers, 10 armoured vehicles, 23 howitzers, five ammunition trucks, one SA-17 and one SA-22 air defence system and three ammunition depots were destroyed (Al Jazeera 2020). Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar claimed that more than 2000 Syrian soldiers and pro-Assad fighters were killed (Vox 2020; Global Security 2020). President Erdogan warned about an attack of Syrian regime assets and reportedly 200 positions were targeted (TRT World 2020; Kirby 2020). Turkey reported numerous instances of shooting down Syrian aircrafts. Turkey specified that their advance is not directed towards confronting Russia. Russia stated that Turkish forces failed to inform about its presence and cooperation with insurgents in Balyun area

that led to the deaths of soldiers (TRT World 2020).

Turkey also relaxed the western and land borders to movement of refugees towards European states. Turkish Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu noted that 76,358 migrants had passed through Edirne towards Greece. The migrants were provided with bus service to proceed towards the Greek border. The measures were aimed at pressuring the European Union (EU) to undertake pro-active measures to relieve Turkey's refugee crisis and force Assad's forces to withdraw from Idlib (BBC News 2020). The head of Turkey's presidential communications department, Fahrettin Altun asserted the Syrian government as threat to its national and regional security and Europe and it functions as a criminal network 'terrorising' its own citizens (Al Jazeera 2020). Turkish Envoy at the UN, Feridun Sinirlioglu requested the UNSC to intervene to prevent Syria's war crimes. Turkey's position was largely accepted by the US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) members calling for Syrian forces to withdraw from Idlib to avert the flow of rogues. President Erdogan and US President Donald Trump discussed about possibility of deploying Patriot missiles for deterrence on 29 February 2020. Russia had already deployed two warships with Kalibr cruise missiles in the Mediterranean Sea to deter Turkish escalation against Syrian forces. Russia also continues to hold control over the air space in Idlib restricting Turkey's use of fighter jets and helicopters against Syrian forces.

The potential for escalation however, forced Russia to intervene and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov offered condolences and President Putin held telephonic conversation with President Erdogan to dilute escalation and both sides expressed commitment to normalise the situation. International pressure calling for de-escalation also increased during this period. The UN noted that 134 civilians including 44 children were killed in February 2020 (Al Jazeera 2020).

To end the hostilities in Idlib, Turkey and Russia agreed on a ceasefire deal in Moscow on March 5, 2020. Under the Moscow deal, Turkey reiterated its commitment to expel the radical groups including the Hayat

Tahrir al-Sham, that continue to control the north of M4 highway linking Damascus with Latakia and Aleppo. Both sides agreed to carry joint patrols along the M4 highway and set up a security corridor stretching 6 kms to the north and 6 kms to the south (Al Jazeera 2020). At least 59 Turkish soldiers were killed after Operation Spring Shield was launched. Moscow deal established the Syrian regime's hold over M5 highway and "territories of about 3,000 square kilometres (1,160 square miles) in the east, in addition to a territory of about 800 square kilometres (310 square miles) to the south of the M4, which spans some of Syria's most fertile agricultural fields. The agreement has fixed the new frontlines that have shrunk the areas of control under HTS and militias supported by Turkey. The Moscow deal ensured that out of 12 observation posts established by the Turkish military in the region, six remain surrounded by the Syrian forces, "including four outposts to the east of the M5 and two in southern Idlib" (Gurcan 2020; Karam 2020). Turkey has stated that it will maintain the bases until the Idlib issue is resolved entirely. The agreement therefore succeeded in halting the Syrian offensive in Idlib; however it failed to deliver lasting arrangement to safeguard the civilian population.

Turkey is seen as a suitable external supporter for the HTS and similar to the Sochi deal, it has been assigned to separate the group from other moderate opposition which is improbable in the near future. Moreover, HTS is unwilling to compromise with its hegemony in the areas under its control and agree to Turkish deployment of outposts in exchange of non-interference in the administration. HTS has opposed the new frontlines and opposed the joint patrol of the M4 highway. Shortly, after the ceasefire agreement was signed, fighting continued in southern Idlib between Syrian forces and the rebels killing 15 people. Turkey has also warned the Syrian forces with military action in case of failure to withdraw behind the line of agreed observation points. It displays vulnerability of its strategic position which is largely surrounded by the Syrian forces. Turkey has deployed around 20,000 troops to halt the advance of the Syrian forces north of the M4 highway. Domestically, Erdogan has portrayed the agreement positively that blocked the inflow of new refugees from Idlib and prevent attacks on Turkish troops (Cafarella, Dunford, Land & Wallace 2020).



## **The Impact of COVID-19 in Syria**

The first positive case in Syria was recorded on 22 March and the first death was reported on 29 March 2020 (Serrieh 2020). The confirmed number of positive cases as on 25 July 2020 is at 608 and the total number of deaths are 35 (John Hopkins University of Medicine 2020). However, the relatively low numbers does not provide a clear picture on the spread of the pandemic in the state but depicts the low number of testing (Zelin and Alrifai 2020). The state undergoing brutal civil war since 2011 had devastating impact on the healthcare as well as water, sanitation and energy infrastructure. The air raids conducted by Syrian and Russian forces to reclaim the lost territories have also destroyed large number of hospitals.

According to the UN, the total number of operational hospitals was at 57 and ICUs with ventilators at 325 concentrated in the few urban centres such as Damascus, Latakia, and Tartous in March 2020. The UN also noted that 80 percent of the Syrian population are under the poverty line with 11 million relying of humanitarian aid and 8 million living on food aid. The six million internally displaced persons (IDPs); 130,000 Syrians detained in government prisons and thousands of IS fighters and their families imprisoned by the Kurdish militias are at high risk of contamination. The Syrian government at the same time is financially weak to upgrade the infrastructure. The remittances coming from Syrian workers in Lebanon and Arab states have also depleted due to the poor state of the regional economies (Asseburg, Azizi, Dalay and Pieper 2020). In terms of economic measures, the government has suspended collection of taxes in hospitality and tourism sector and introduced the National Strategy for Social Emergency Response to relieve the pressures faced by contractual and seasonal workers, disabled and elderly citizens etc. The government's decision to freeze payment of loans for three months has faced backlash from banking industry. Moreover, the lack of comprehensive economic plan for businesses leading to sever losses has been criticised (The Syria Report 2020).

The Syrian territory is administratively fragmented among the government controlled areas; Kurdish self-administered areas; areas under the control of Turkey and the allied militias; HTS ruled areas etc. The pandemic has failed to resolve the conflictual dynamics among the warring parties and impeded coordination to tackle the crisis. The World Health Organisation (WHO)'s efforts are focussed in the government controlled areas and there is absence of coordination with de-facto authorities in north-east and north-west Syria. The co-head of the Executive Council of the Syrian Democratic Council, the civilian arm of the Syrian Democratic Forces controlling the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), Ilham Ahmad mentioned that WHO has not delivered the PCR committed to the Kurdish region. The Syrian government has delayed the test results for patients in the north-eastern region (The Syria Report 2020; Zelin and Alrifai 2020).

The external actors have also continued with measures to stymie the flow of essential humanitarian aid during this critical period. Turkey has reportedly withheld the supply of drinking water in the Kurdish controlled areas in north-east Syria. The government forces have also withheld access to Rukban camp near the Jordanian border, populated by the US backed rebels by arms-twisting them to surrender. The access of humanitarian aid and the pandemic has been weaponised by the government as well as Turkey to gain strategic leverage. Assad government is seeking the international community to relax sanctions to access essential medicines and medical equipments (Zelin and Alrifai 2020).

The situation is further complicated by the restrictions imposed by the Syrian government. The government similar to other states have carried out restrictive measures such as imposing lockdown, suspending non-essential economic activities, part-time opening of public sector enterprises, closing borders etc. The government has closed Al-Ya'rubiya on the border with Iraq and Al-Ramtha on the border with Jordan affecting essential supplies. The border crossings have however failed to stop the movement of fighters and smugglers benefiting from the shortage of essential medicines increasing the chances of infection (Asseburg, Azizi, Dalay and Pieper 2020).

In the case of Idlib, the humanitarian situation is dire and the recent offensive by the Syrian government has displaced around 1 million people and destroyed around 80 hospitals according to Doctors without Borders. The health workers have been repeatedly attacked and there is a shortage of resources and supplies. The pandemic has added another layer of complexity in the humanitarian crisis facing Idlib. The basic adherence of social distancing norms; self-isolation and maintaining hygiene are untenable in the overly crowded urban spaces and the makeshift camps in which large numbers of internally displaced people reside (Doctors without Borders 2020; Orton 2020). According to experts writing in the *Journal of Public Health* in early May 2020, there are around 1.4 doctors per 10,000 people; 0.625 hospital beds per 1000 people; 5.7 intensive care unit (ICU) beds per 100 000 people and 47 functioning ventilators for the whole region. In the rebel held areas in Idlib, the areas are fragmented among numerous outfits, therefore WHO initiated coordination in complex conflict environment is not possible (Ekzayez, Al-Khalil, Jasiem, Al Saleh, Alzoubi, Meagher, Patel 2020).

### **Impact on India's Interests**

India has historically maintained cordial ties with the Bashar Al Assad regime and supports Syria's claim over the Golan Heights occupied by Israel in the 1967 Arab-Israel war. Syria has reciprocated by supporting India's position on the Kashmir conflict (Siddiqui 2018). India has continuously expressed its scepticism against the western policy of regime change in the region and its effectiveness learning from the 2003 US invasion of Iraq and the removal of Colonel Muamar Gaddafi in Libya under the pretext of the 'Responsibility to Protect' by external powers in 2011. India considers the regime change policy of directing, financing and instigating intervention to forcefully implement democratisation as detrimental to the stability of the international system.

The violent removal of the incumbent political leadership in Libya facilitated the dismantling of the existing institutional and security structures leading to chaos. The democratisation process therefore remained incomplete and

prone to factionalism and violence. The power vacuum in Libya as well as Egypt especially in the Sinai peninsula after 2011 Arab Spring protests proliferated the growth of radical groups including the IS. The civil war in Syria also offered a fertile ground for the IS which was increasingly gaining its footprint in India (Mehta 2017).

India therefore, favoured restoration of state order under Bashar Al Assad and largely abstained from the UN Security Council resolutions criticising the regime. It shared the fear with Russia and China that the resolutions might be used to justify external intervention. India rejected the unilateral actions that could continue instability and escalate the crisis rather than resolving it. Indian policy makers argued for peaceful resolution of the conflict while addressing the genuine grievances of the political opposition groups. The UN, according to the Indian perspective, should assist the Syrian parties and oversee the democratic process. It therefore, voted for the UNSC resolution proposed by the Arab League calling for the settlement through Syrian led inclusive political process on 4 February 2012 (Hindustan Times 2012). Subsequently, it abstained from voting on UN General Assembly resolution in August 2012 that called for severing diplomatic ties with the Syrian regime and demanded resignation of President Assad (Jacobs 2012).

India maintained its support for the Assad regime and continued regular diplomatic engagement during the course of the civil war while expanding ties with the Persian Gulf states that were actively plotting to remove Assad. India hosted the Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad in August 2011. The Deputy Foreign Minister sought India's support as the chair of the UN Security Council and apprised about the 'misinformation campaign' against the government. India urged the Syrian delegation to facilitate political reforms and restrain from use of force (MEA 2011). The then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh held discussion with Syrian Prime Minister Wael Al Halki during the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Summit in Tehran in August 2012. The political and media advisor to President Assad, Dr. Bhutainai Shaban visited India in 2013

and thanked the government for its continued support. In January 2016, Syrian Foreign minister Walid Al Moualem met with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, then Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj and National Security Advisor, Ajit Doval and discussed about the security situation in the region including the IS, peace talks, trade and energy prospects and humanitarian aid (Ahrum Online 2016). The Indian government offered medicines worth US\$ 1 million during the visit. In August 2016, Minister of State for External Affairs M.J. Akbar visited Syria to promote security and economic cooperation (Siddiqui 2018). The Syrian Minister of Higher Education Atef Naddaf visited India in April 2018 to enhance cooperation in the field of education (MEA 2011). The Modi government during the visit also offered 1000 scholarships to Syrian students under “Study in India” scheme (Falak 2018; Pandey 2018).

Moreover, India was also keen to engage in intelligence cooperation to counter common threat arising from the IS. India at the same time expressed its disinterest in join any anti-IS military coalition in Syria which were carried out under the banner of the US or Russia or the Persian Gulf states (Subramanian 2016).

The Indian leaders during the series of bilateral meetings expressed their intentions to participate in the post-war reconstruction process and offered line of credit especially in the power and steel sector (The Economic Times 2019). India's reconstruction capacity in Syria has been however, affected by the economic consequence of the COVID-19 crisis. India has offered hydroxychloroquine tablets to Syria during the ongoing pandemic (The New Indian Express 2020). In the case of the conflict in Idlib, India is sympathetic towards the desire of the Assad government to regain control over its sovereign territory and facilitate political reforms. However, the humanitarian costs as well as the growth of radical groups in the war torn state are of special concern to India. Therefore, India must advise the friendly regime in Damascus to exercise restraint and keep the path of negotiation with opposition groups open in order to de-escalate and culminate the civil war.

## Conclusion

The new ceasefire agreement signed on 5 March 2020 has brought relative calm in the area. Few analysts have argued that the pandemic has led to the re-adjustment of priorities of the Syrian government, Turkey and Russia. The affect of the pandemic is different for actors that rely on ground forces such as Turkey and Syria as compared to Russia that have maintained control over the airspace. Moreover, Israel's air raids have continued in the Syrian territory in order to weaken the entrenchment by Iran and its allies.

The Syrian government is likely to continue efforts at recapturing the rebel held territories. However, these efforts are likely to be constrained not only by the direct challenge posed by Turkey and the anti-Assad militias, but also by the weak financial resources. Domestically, the economic consequence of the lockdown has further weakened the capacity building of the Syrian government that may escalate anti-government protests. The economic consequence of the pandemic would impede the reconstruction programmes funded by Russia and Iran.

The Russian economy has been deeply affected by the pandemic as well as the low oil prices. Russia has maintained unconditional support for Assad's regime and it seeks to institutionalise its sway by emboldening the regime's capacity to exercise its sovereignty. It is committed to full restoration of state authority by neutralising or integrating armed groups involved in the Syrian conflict. These goals are not likely to be deterred by the pandemic. In case of Idlib, Russia would seek to restore the operational control of the Syrian government over Idlib. Russia has penetrated in Syria's energy and economic sectors and its hold is likely to continue. The control of the Russian forces in the Syrian airspace has been key to its military pre-dominance; therefore it is unlikely to back down as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

In case of Turkey, the economic challenge facing the state has given rise to strong anti-refugees sentiments which have been further increased by the pandemic. Therefore, its military strategy in Syria would be focussed

on creating larger buffer zones to prevent the inflow of refugees. The March agreement has temporarily halted the flow of refugees. However, it is cautious about the renewed efforts of the Syrian government to recapture Idlib accentuating the humanitarian crisis that would directly impact Turkey. Turkey is likely to depend on European states to dilute the pressure posed by the refugee crisis.

Moreover, Turkey's military positions in Syria offer significant leverage in the diplomatic meetings such as Astana process, Sochi agreement and the Moscow agreement. Therefore, it is likely to continue its military presence and prioritise support for the militias despite the economic pressure posed by the pandemic. The pandemic could also be utilised to corner the Kurdish militias in north-east Syria by Turkey. At the same time, the economic pressures could lead Turkey to comply with the terms set by the US in the regional dynamics including the treatment of Kurds. While direct military challenge is expensive and unlikely, Turkey is likely to take measures to weaken military and the administrative control of the Syrian government by empowering the anti-Assad militias.

The local, regional and global actors are therefore not likely compromise on their strategic interests, but adapt their operational priorities and strategies in light of the pandemic. The pandemic would therefore emerge as a new contributing factor affecting the conflict dynamics, power balance and military strategy. The past agreements have helped in restructuring the conflict dynamics in favour of the Syrian government. However, final agreement on resolving Idlib is unlikely due to divergent interests of Turkey and Russia.

Under the new circumstances, the risk of military escalation continues to remain high in north-east Syria between Turkey and the Kurdish militias. Moreover, the pandemic could provide opportunity for the resurgence of the IS in the security scare and underdeveloped regions of Syria. The strategic rivalry between Iran and Israel is also likely to continue in the Syrian battleground.

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