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US Withdrawal from Syria: Implications and Challenges

Abstract: *This paper provides an in-depth analysis of the prospects and challenges faced by the region, stakeholders, and the Syrian nation after the US withdrawal from the Syrian conflict. Conflict arises due to the varied principles and values of the parties involved, leading to hostility and disagreement. The paper discusses the implications of the US withdrawal, including the impact on the Syrian Kurdish community and the potential re-emergence of ISIS as a global threat to world peace. Furthermore, the withdrawal is likely to give Russia, Iran, and the Syrian regime a significant advantage in the Syrian conflict, which will have far-reaching consequences for the region and stakeholders involved.*

Key Words: US-withdrawal, Syria, ISIS, International Intervention, Stakeholders

Introduction

Conflict is a part of human history and the existence of conflict is as old as the existence of the world itself. If we throw light on the history of human existence, we find conflict from the beginning of human life on earth. The intensity of conflict may vary but it always existed between human beings. The beginning of conflict can be traced from the start of human interactions. The interactions can be between two people, groups, and political parties or even between states. It arises when one party thinks that its ideas, perceptions, feelings contradict with other and due to the lack of uniformity among them. It also arises when one party thinks that it is deprived of what they want from the other side. Conflict is well defined by Michael Nicholson, Professor of International relations and politics at the University of Kent, Canterbury. Conflict is an existing state of

disagreement or hostility between two or more people. Conflict is said to exist when two or more groups engage in a struggle over values and claims to status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate the rivals.

We come to know by studying the history of human life that human being were in conflict with each other due to various reasons.

- Due to political differences like differences in political ideologies.
- Due to religious difference like differences in doctrines. Throughout history religious differences have been worked as fuel for conflicts.
- Due to cultural differences like the dominance of one culture on another.
- Due to the disparity of economic sources like when one party thinks it is marginalized. The disparity of economic

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sources always contributes as a main cause of any conflict. When a group or community is marginalized in economic sources it would raise their voices against the oppressors and ultimately it turns into a conflict.

- Due to natural resources like land, minerals etc.

If we look towards the past decades we find a number of violent political conflicts around the world. According to one of the UN report, there are around 402 conflicts that are taking place in the world and are most serious in their nature. In this research, the researchers focus is on the Syrian Conflict and the US withdrawal from Syria and its implications for the region. The Syrian conflict is one of the serve disasters in the history of human being as this conflict engulfed 465000 to 500000 people and it is estimated that around 13 million people left their homes and migrated to different countries. These people are living under serve conditions in different parts of the world. Besides human loss, the infrastructure is completely destroyed including Roads, Buildings, and Telecommunication systems, and this conflict caused a lot of economic loss to Syria (Yacoubian, 2023).

In this article, the writer has thrown light on US withdrawal from the Syrian conflict and its implications and prospects for the region, Syrian people and Assad's regime. This article will be helpful to understand US withdrawal and its implications on different stakeholders in the region and will be helpful in understanding the causes of conflict, the destruction caused by conflict and the international interventions for the sake of self-interest. Different from other related works, this article will be helpful in understanding the role of superpowers in demoralizing the communities and nations for the sake of self-interest. History repeats itself and this can be seen in the Syrian conflict. The US withdrawal from Iraq left a void and it was filled by different proxies of regional states due to the said reason militants emerged in the region which caused threat to global peace and the region. The same will happen in the Syrian context, the US withdrawal will leave a void and again it will be filled by the regional proxies

and this article will be helpful in understanding the said implications of the US withdrawal (Aluzri, 2019).

The main objective of this research is to give a detailed analysis of the US withdrawal from Syria, which would impart great effects on the internal and external forces fighting and its implications for the region. The main and foremost objective of this article is to show how the US withdrawal from Syria will effect the Syrian nation, specially the Kurdish community, the emergence of ISIS, leading role of US rivals like Iran, Russia and Turkiye in the region which would lead to another conflict. Secondly the aim of carrying this article is to show how the US withdrawal from the conflict will change the political dynamics of the region as after the US withdrawal there will be no opponent in Syria for the regime. The overthrow of Assad's regime was the main agenda of the Syrian nation but what will be the future of Syria in the US absence? Would Assad's removal from power be the demand of the Syrian nation or they will face another conflict in the shape of international proxies, especially of Iran and Saudi Arabia.

There are many factors which contributed as fuel for the Syrian conflict. Before the eruption of arm conflict in Syria. The Syrians were fed up from Bashar Ul Assad's regime and were inspired by the Arab spring. They were against the regime policies related to employment, Corruption, and freedom of speech. President Assad came in power succeeding his father who died in 2000. Peaceful demonstration were held in the city of Deraa, due to the inspiration of Arab spring. Assad's regime tried to crush the peaceful demonstration and due to this insane act of government the peaceful protest turned into arm conflict. The Syrian Army opened fire on the peaceful protestors on April 2011, who were demanding resignation from Bashar Ul Assad whose family was in power since 1971. Opposition supporters back the protest and took arms to defend themselves. The conflict intensified when 15 boys were torture by arm forces for writing in support of the Arab spring. President Bashar Ul Assad regime responded by torturing, detaining and killing protestors. Hundreds of people were killed,

detained and torture. The conflict changed into war in 2011 when some of army defectors declared formation of free Syrian army. Free Syrian army was formed to over throw Assad's regime (Ayton, 2021).

The regime declared these armed protestors as terrorist backed by different countries to demolished the regime. Assad's regime launched a military action against the protestors which longed for months. The military actions of the regime caused many civilian casualties and serve injuries. The casualties caused by the military crackdown on protestors ignited the spark and the peaceful protests turned into violent rebellion. Many army personals joined the rebellion forces, which included civilians. With the passage of time the rebellion shifted from one city to another. The Syrian government called Iran and Russia for help while Qatar and Saudi Arabia supported the rebels.

Foreign Intervention in Syria

Syrian conflict turn into civil war due to foreign intervention and backing. Countries having Shia dominance backed Assad's regime like Iran, Iraq and Hezbollah whereas Sunni majority countries backed rebel including countries like Turkiye, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. On June 2014, ISIS leader Abu Baker al Baghdadi announced the formation of a caliphate stretching from Aleppo in Syria to Diyala in Iraq, and renamed the group the Islamic State. One month after beginning bombings in neighbouring Iraq, then-President Barrack Obama initiated a U.S. air campaign against the Islamic State in Syria in September 2014. Early in 2014, the Islamic State swept over western and northern Iraq using the significant military strength it had developed in Syria. In late 2015 the first American foot forces invaded Syria – originally 50, expanding to the current official total of around 2,000. The Syrian Democratic Forces, so named because they drove IS out of the majority of its strongholds, recruited, organised, and mentored tens of thousands of Syrian Kurdish and Arab troops (The New York Times, [2019](#)).

United States and Russia played a vital role in turning the Syrian conflict into a civil war. Russia backed the Assad regime while the USA support anti Assad forces. Now Syria become a battle field for foreign countries to fight with each other. It is said that in 2013 the US began a furtive program to train, and to arm rebels. In 2017 the US carried out its first military intervention against Assad forces. It launched 58 cruise missiles at Syria air force back so many foreign countries to fulfill their own agendas made the situation in Syria more complicated and prolonged fighting these foreign countries like Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, USA, Russian played important in turning the conflict into sectarian war. These division based on sect added fuel to conflict and dimmed hope of cease fire and prolonged peace.

The response of Assad's regime against the pro-democratic protests was violent. The regime decided to take armed action against protestors took many lives of civilians. The United States noticed the human rights violation in Syria and in between 2011 and 2012, United States withdrawal his ambassador from Syria. The use of force against the opponent continued and the conflict turned into a disaster for the world. In July 2012 Syrian government threatened to use of a biological weapon if outsiders forces invade the country. The former US president Barak Obama said if biological weapons are used in Syria, he will reconsider his policy towards the regime. In 2013 Syrian government was accused of using biological weapons against a civilian protestor. In response to the use of biological weapons Barak Obama requested congress to give permission for limited military strikes against forces (United States Institute of Peace, [2019](#)).

Later Syrian said it would implement a disarmaments agreement crafted by Russia and the United States. In 2014 the US policy towards Syria changed. The policy of the United States shifted towards counterterrorism operations against Islamic States also known as ISIL. United States support opposition parties in Syria continue to counter terrorism towards Syria was based on the following points:

- Counter terrorism or action against ISIL which was a great threat to world peace.
- A political settlement of the Syrian conflict.
- Prevent reorganization and regeneration of Islamic state and to create a bar for Iran from military constructions to stay permanently in Syria.
- To block Iranian and Assad's forces from the Syrian Northeast region after defeating Islamic State. After defeating ISIL a small residual US personals would remain to create a fly zone for Iranian forces.
- To reduce Iran's and Hezbollah's influence from Syria
- 2014 United States launched air strikes against the Islamic state. The goal of air strikes was to limit the influence of ISIL and preventing Islamic state from using Syria as a home to operate in Iraq.

In October 2014 combined joint task force – operation inherent resolve (CJTF-OIR) was formed by the defense department of United States. The purpose of this committee was to formulize military action against the Islamic state. The united stated personals in Syria increased from 50 in late 2015 to 2000 by 2017. The objectives of increasing the United States personnel in Syria was to train the locals against ISIL and to give assistance in the battlefield. In early 2018 president trump in a press conference announce the United States expedited withdrawal from Syria (Yacoubian, [2023](#)).

US Military's Withdrawal from Syria

President trump's decision of withdrawal from Syria was welcomed by some countries like Iran, Russia and Turkiye. The decision was taken due to the collapse of an Islamic state. The decision of withdrawal got criticism from domestic and international scholars and policy makers and who thought that the United States withdrawal from Syria could enable the re-emergence of Islamic states. The United States embolden Russia and Iran in Syria, which are always its rivals in the world. Some national and international segments embraced the decision

of president trump's arguing that the main objective to counter the Islamic state has been achieved. Dana white spoke person of the pentagon in her press conference said that the United States coalition in Syria has liberated Islamic state held land. Now US has done its job and the Islamic state is no more in Syria and we are taking back our troops. In first phase government decided to evacuate 1600 personals and the rest will be evacuated gradually. The rest of 400 personals remained in Syria and they were part of multinational forces (Willkie, 2018).

US Withdrawal and its Implications on the Syrian Government and its Citizens

The main objective of ISIS was a caliphate, but they have been defeated and they have lost caliphate. ISIS is on the decline, but one cannot say it is defeated because ISIS is an ideology of thousands of people. Only the fighters of ISIS have been defeated but their ideology still alive and it is easy for them to recruit and make new fighters from all around the countries, especially from around the Arab world.

ISIS is revitalize itself in the coming years and it can emerge as a greater threat to the peace of the Middle East and the world. It is easy for ISIS to retake the control of the Syrian treaty as Syrian is in a state of conflict. ISIS and other jihadi groups can enjoy a free hand in mobilizing its fighters. So one can say that ISIS is still a potential threat to the world and especially for the Middle East after the withdrawal of United States from the battlefield on video message president Trump said "We have won the war against ISIS. We have beaten them badly. We have taken the land. And now it's time for our troops to come back home". The land no doubtlessly has been taken from ISIS and many fighters have been killed but it is simple for ISIS to recruit and train fighters. The hunger of ISIS can be fulfill from the refugee camps that have grievances from Assad's regime.

Kurdish allies, who control 30% of Syrian territory, will be the first group to be impacted by the US exit. Trump is disengaging from every ally that the US has fought alongside in

the past. The US has also poured billions of dollars into their construction and maintenance (Mogelson, [2020](#)). The majority-Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces, which control Raqqa, will be forced to reach an agreement with the regime, giving President Bashar Al Assad control of Syria's resource-rich northeast. Local Arab forces cooperating with the Americans will also need to change sides if they want to live. Syrian defense force is dominated by Kurds who fought in the frontline with the United States to ISIL. United States forces trained, equipped and financed these Kurdish forces against the ISIL. After the United States withdrawal from Syria these forces will abandon the campaign due to limited or lack of resources because they will not get back up from United States forces. Besides the Kurds the United States withdrawal from Syria will greatly affect the Syrian civilians. Syrian and Kurds in the northeast part will face threats and their security will be in risk with the United States withdrawal. These Kurds forces or civilians can face attacks from Turkey as well as from ISIL. Many people are leaving their homes due to fear of being killed. The Kurdish group have proven to be highly pragmatic in their relations with the United States (Streiman, [2022](#)).

The United States withdrawal is likely to give Russia, Iran and the Syrian regime a major advantage in the Syrian conflict. This could be seen from the tweet of Russian president Vladimir Putin, who praised the United States decision of withdrawing from Syria. Russia, Iran and Assad regime already have the upper hand in the Syrian conflict. They have control over the majority of the territory. After the US withdrawal, it would also end its air campaign. Russia will freely use air space whenever needed. Syria is in the hands of Russia, Iran and president Bashar ul Assad and this has been shown in Astana talks between Russia, Iran, Turkey and the Syrian regime in which the United States was not involved. President Bashar-ul-Assad has now freedom in Syria as all actors like Russia, Iran are with him and Turkey is no any harm for his regime. With the help of his allies Assad survived seven years' war and now it seems no threat for his regime (SETA Foundation, [2019](#))

Security Implications of US Withdrawal

After the United States withdrawal, the Syrian conflict can change into a broader regional war. The regional war would not be involved a direct war of different countries, rather it could be a War of many fronts, limited military incursions, guerilla movements, and multiple terrorist campaigns. The people of Syria are now divided into two groups on the basis of religion and show loyalty with their religion not with the institutions. After the United States and their allied western forces withdrawal, the situation could give birth to another bigger conflict among Syrians. Shia militias are being recruited all over the world to just protect their holy places. The militias are given sectarian motives. Hezbollah and Iran are supporting Assad's regime due to Iran's self-interest. Assad is a player of Iran and his fall can limit Iran's influence in the region (Mogelson, [2020](#)).

The forces against Assad are directly supported by Saudi Arabia. Mujahidin's and jihadists are recruited in regions having a Sunni majority. The forces fighting Assad's seems that they are fighting as a religious obligation. Iran and Saudi Arabia wage their wars in Syria and both are trying to retain their self-interest and influence in the region. Without a solution of the Syrian conflict the United States withdrawal can lead a lot of destruction to Syria and can create Syria a battle field for other countries. Thousands of fighters fighting in Syria have been recruited from different parts of the world. The most of concern of the world is about the threat which can be faced by these thousands of jihadist. United States withdrawal from Syria can give more chances of infiltration of more jihadists across the world into Syria. This can lead to another jihad movement which later can create hostilities to the region and world as well (Clarke, [2019](#)).

Initially, Turkey aimed to overthrow Assad's regime but later due to geopolitical, economic and security costs to its change Turkey's stance towards the Bashar-ul-Assad regime. Secondly Turkey's narrative towards Assad's regime due to the advancement of Kurdish fighters in the border area of Turkey. The main priority of Turkey became counter

terrorism and making its border secure from Kurdish fighters. In the above context Turkiye welcome the United States withdrawal from Syria. The United States will give a free space for Turkiye to intervene freely in Syria to defeat its enemies. Turkiye is seeking the United States pullout from Syria as an opportunity to make its influence in Syria by directly involving in the Syrian conflict. In Syria more than 60 miles of border land is under the Kurdish militias and Turkiye look at it as a great threat. This Kurdish expansionism is more important for Turkiye to deal rather the mere over throwing of Assad's regime. After the withdrawal of the United States Turkiye is making its policies on basis of the following points.

- Turkiye is trying to prevent the emergence of Kurdish zones on its border. For this purpose Turkiye is fighting with Kurdish forces preventing it from making an autonomous Kurdish zone.
- Secondly Turkiye is negotiating with Russia about Turkish military operation in the northeast part of Syria. For this purpose on January 23 Putin-Erdogan meeting was held in Moscow.

This meeting focused on co-operation between these two states in Syria after the United States withdrawal. Turkiye is negotiating a term with Russia for its fight against the Kurdish, it needs a green card to directly intervene into Syrian Kurdish areas to combat with YPG (it is Kurdish people protection unit). In return Turkiye could offer to cease support for the Syrian opposition. The United States withdrawal is creating a dangerous power vacuum in Syria. Turkiye is ready to fight with Kurds .the Kurdish led Syrian democratic forces were the partners of the United States in fighting against ISIL this act of Turkiye can lead to another conflict (Ayton, 2019).

Iranian regime and Syrian government are close strategic allies. Iran has shown itself as one of the reliable ally of Syrian government. It has provided significant support to the Syrian government in civil war, including military aid,

logistics, financial and technical support to Syria. It sees that the survival of Assad's regime is crucial to the regional interest of Iran. Iranian military and intelligence agencies are advising the Syrian military to keep Assad on power. Syria is only consistent ally of Iran since the Islamic revolution of Iran. Syria provides thoroughfare to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Iranian cite Syria as its 35th province. Assad's regime is a buffer against Saudi influence and the United States influence. Zabadani, city in Syria is vital importance to Iran because in June 2011, this city was used as a hub by Iranian to supply military logistics to Hezbollah. Before start of the Syrian war Iran had around three thousand Iranian revolutionary guards stationed in Syria and these personnel trained local troops and managing arms and supply routes to Lebanon. After United States withdrawal from Syria Iran will freely influence in the region as it will not have any parallel rival. Iran has capability to reshape landscape and civil war into self-oriented scenario which will benefit Iran's self interest in the region. Iran will influence the region by influencing Syrian economy, security sector and politics (Mogelson, 2020).

This influence can be seen in Iraq when President Barak Obama announced United States withdrawal from Iraq and it resulted in infiltration of Iran in every sector of Iraq. After withdrawal of United States from Iraq, Iran filled the void and its allies. The proxies of Iran in Iraq posed great threat to United States and its allies. Iran suppressed Arab Sunnis and created parallel state institutions and the suppression of Sunnis in Iraq resulted in creation of ISIL in 2014. So the United States withdrawal from Syria will give room to Iran to influence the region (Clarke, 2019).

In September 2015 Russia military intervene in Syrian civil war on official request by Syrian government. Russia got request for assistance against rebel groups. Russian airplanes carried out airstrikes against rebels convey carrying logistics in Khmeimim. After operation Russian government announce that it will carry out air strikes against organizations and besides this their goal is to help the Syrian government. Russian goal was to retake the territory captured by various anti-government

groups which are labeled as moderate opposition by United States in Syria. Russia is directly involved in Syrian conflict, assisting Assad's regime. Without presence of United States forces, Moscow will expand its role and influence across Middle East. The Russia's strategy would never change after United States exit from Syria. This is the best opportunity for Russia to influence the Middle East and Russia will cash the Syrian conflict for its influence on the region. The battle is seen as a means of demonstrating Russia's aspiration to become a major global force. Russia has announced it will operate in the Syrian energy sector and it will rebuilt different facilities. Russia is the only power in Syria and it is taking full advantage off the void created by the United States withdrawal from Syria. Besides this Syria is the best place for Russia to give combat experience to its soldiers. Russia fence minister has said that around 48000 service members had gained combat experience during the Syrian operation. The main purpose of Russian intervention in the Syrian conflict is to regain its status as a world power. Russia is trying to show that it has an influence on global policies and after United States withdrawal from Syria, Russia will be able to prove it's important in global policy formation. The Syrian conflict is now the world biggest challenge and after the downfall of the soviet union , Russia has chance to prove its self as a powerful state in the world by becoming part of the Syrian conflict. Russia become an active part of Syrian conflict, if the world wants to resolve the issue they need to engage Russia as well (Sabrine, [2021](#)).

Russian try hard to retain Assad inn power, Assad is closed ally of Russia in the middle east, through Assad regime Russia will secure military influence in the region. For this purpose Russia has built its airbase in the western province of Latakia. Another Russia base has been constructed in the Syrian port city of Tartus. The Syrian conflict has given Russia a great chance to show, its power to the world.

Conclusion

The Syrian conflict turned into a civil war due to foreign intervention and backing. Countries

having Shia dominance backed Assad's regime and supported directly where Sunni majority countries backed rebel which include countries like Turkiye, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. The caliphate will extend from Aleppo, Syria, to Diyala, Iraq, according to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, who also changed the group's name to the Islamic State. One month after beginning bombings in neighbouring Iraq, then-President Barack Obama initiated a U.S. air campaign against the Islamic State in Syria in September 2014. Late in 2015, the United States and its allies dispatched troops straight to Syria to combat the threat posed by ISIS. As US allies along with the United States, have provided training, supplies, logistics and intelligence for the Syrian Democratic Forces, the Kurdish-dominated group that has done most of the fighting. U.S., French and British forces also operate heavy artillery and conduct airstrikes that have been decisive against the militants.

US withdrawal from Syria will leave room for another conflict. The regional countries will become competitors to gain their dominance in the region. The competition between the regional countries will give birth to another conflict and it will be serve in its nature and only the Syrian people will face the destruction. During this tug of war between different countries ISIS can again emerge from its remnants and it would be a great threat to regional peace and security. President trump's decision of withdrawal from Syria has brought the region into critical situation. The presence of approximately two thousand United States soldiers seems low but these two thousand troops have greatest important for the Syria and region. Regimes and its allied forces knew that the United States presence on the ground was not about the presence of only two thousand troops because the United States could extend beyond troops it has on the ground that prospect now has gone.

ISIS may have lost its caliphate but they are far away from defeat this group may pose a great threat to the world in the coming years. UN presence of United States troops will give them a space to re-organized and reconstruct their organization in coming years. The Kurdish force were the United States allies against

encountering ISIS. After the United States troop's withdrawal from Syria, it will be hard for Kurdish forces to fight ISIS, because firstly they will face financial constraints, secondly, these Kurdish fighters will face a great threat from Turkiye.

Besides ISIS concern the United States' withdrawal will leave a void that will be filled by the enemies of the United States. Trump's decision of withdrawing will strengthen Iranian proxies in Syria. Thousands of Iranian-trained fighters are fighting to prolong Assad's regime. Iran sees the United States' withdrawal as its victory and it would strengthen Iranian influence in the region. Iran has the capacity to

reshape the political landscape of Syria. It will influence Syria's economy, politics, and security. United States' withdrawal will help Iran strategically and will give room for the Iranian regime to pursue its long-sight land bridge which will link Tehran to Beirut and the Mediterranean. The United States withdrawal encourages Iran to create its influence throughout the region and it will create a great loss to the United States and its allies in the region. In 2011 president Obama did the same mistake as president Trump has committed now. After the United States withdrawal from Iraq Iran has proven that it has the capacity to fill the void left by the United States.

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