

Sajid Karim
Md. Nazmul Islam

SYRIAN CRISIS: GEOPOLITICS AND IMPLICATIONS

Abstract

The Syrian crisis, which started in 2011 as an anti-government protest against President Bashar-al-Assad, transformed into a civil war in the first quarter of 2012. Since then, the war continued unabated resulting as one of the worst humanitarian crises after the Second World War by killing more than 470,000 people and displacing half of the Syria's total population either internally or externally. It has also dragged regional and global powers to wage proxy war in its territory and caused spill-over effects within and beyond the region. In this context, this paper is an attempt to analyse the Syrian crisis, geopolitics behind the crisis and its implications. In doing so, the paper identifies different factors, such as authoritarian nature of President Bashar-al-Assad's government, sectarian division and deteriorated socioeconomic condition within Syria, competing gas export interest from regional as well as global powers, the intervention of foreign powers as major reasons for deepening the crisis and prolonging this war. The ruling Ba'ath Party of Syria headed by President Assad, a coalition of Syrian opposition forces and their military entity, regional and global forces, namely Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Qatar, the United States, Russia, Lebanon's Shiite militia group Hezbollah and different Sunni armed extremist groups like Al-Nusra Front and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) are the main actors of this war. The paper argues that apart from its devastating impact on Syria's socio-political and economic condition, the crisis has shaken the entire Middle East in particular and made a corrosive effect on the West's relations with both Russia and China as a whole. It has also caused the biggest wave of disorderly migration since the Second World War and facilitated the emergence of armed extremist organisations like ISIS and Al Nusra Front, which are posing serious threats to national security of Syria and beyond.

1. Introduction

The Syrian crisis, which has evolved from a peaceful protest to a violent conflict, began as an offshoot of the 2010 Arab Spring.¹ The wave of Arab unrest that started with the Tunisian revolution in December 2010, reached Syria on March 2011, when citizens of the city of Deraa gathered to demand the release of fourteen school children who were arrested and reportedly tortured after writing on a wall, the well-known slogan of the mass uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt: "The people want the

Sajid Karim is Research Officer at Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS). His email address is: sajidkarim87@gmail.com; **Md. Nazmul Islam** is Research Officer at Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS). His email address is: nazmulir63@gmail.com.

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¹ Lucy Rodgers, David Gritten, James Offer and Patrick Asare, "Conflict Background", *BBC News*, 09 October 2015.

downfall of the regime.” Government’s harsh response made the conflict spreading all over the country in a very short period of time. The conflict was initially described as a struggle between President Assad regime and opposition forces, seeking to create a democratic Syria; but over the time, the situation became far more complex and murky.² At present, the crisis in Syria is partly a civil war between the government and opposition rebel forces; a religious war pitting President Assad’s minority Alawite sect, aligned with Shiite fighters from Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon against Sunni rebel groups; and increasingly a proxy war featuring Russia and Iran against the United States (US) and its allies.³ Since 2011, the conflict has so far killed 470,000 people,⁴ displaced nearly half of the country’s total population, resulted huge irregular and disorderly migration, raised tension among major global powers and facilitated the emergence of extremely capable notorious *Jihadist* organisations like Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Jabhat-al-Nusra Front, whose existence now pose a very real immediate and long-term threat to national security of Syria as well as potential danger for regional and international security.

Against this backdrop, this paper is an attempt to analyse the Syrian crisis, geopolitics behind the crisis and its implications. In doing so, the paper will try to seek answers to the following questions: What is the background of Syrian crisis? Who are the key actors of the crisis? What are their interests and what role are they playing? What is the geopolitics behind the Syrian crisis? What are the implications of the crisis at national, regional and global level? Efforts have also been made to find out whether the Syrian crisis has any direct or indirect impact on Bangladesh. For the convenience of discussion, the paper is divided into five sections including introduction and conclusion. Following the introduction, section two discusses the genesis of Syrian crisis. Geopolitics of Syrian crisis has been highlighted in section three. Section four analyses the implications of the crisis by linking the internal factors of Syria with regard to regional and global power-politics. Finally, a conclusion has been drawn. The paper is qualitative in nature based on both primary (Key Informant Interviews) and secondary data (e.g., books, journals, news clipping, seminar papers and internet based articles, etc). It limits incorporating data no later than 01 June 2016.

2. Genesis of the Crisis

The genesis and the background of the crisis are very complicated since several state and non-state actors are involved in direct and indirect manner at different levels in this complex geopolitics mix. This section is not an exhaustive of definitive account of the entire story rather a brief description of what was the

² Ted Galen Carpenter, “Tangled Web: The Syrian Civil War and Its Implication”, *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 01, Winter 2013.

³ Kathy Gilsinan, “The Confused Person’s Guide to the Syrian Civil War: A Brief Primer”, *The Atlantic*, 29 October 2015.

⁴ Ian Black, “Report on Syria Conflict Finds 11.5% of Population Killed or Injured”, *The Guardian*, 11 February 2016.

situation before the crisis and what were the dominating factors in the pre-conflict scenario. This section also analyses how the conflict has transformed into the form of counterinsurgency and finally a violent civil war.

For better understanding, it is imperative to define counterinsurgency and civil war at first. Here in this study, counterinsurgency is defined as government's campaign to restore order and ensure its own reach throughout the geographical confines of the state against armed opponents who aims at overthrowing the government. In this case, counterinsurgency in Syria describes Assad regime's attempts to regain control over the whole of its territory, an objective which was abandoned by the fall of 2012.⁵ In contrast, civil war implies controlling the entire territory within the state is no longer feasible, because the armed opposition has become strong enough to stop government's advancement consistently.⁶ In the case of Syria, the insurgency transitioned to a civil war when the opposition forces successfully overran regime's positions in the northern region and in the vicinity of Damascus in 2012.

2.1 *Background*

The current conflict that sparked in 2011 is not the lone incident of conflict in Syrian history. Syria fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1516 and remained a part of Ottoman Empire for four centuries. During this period, Syria witnessed massive deterioration in economic, social and political fields. In 1918, Arab troops led by Emir Feisal and supported by British forces captured Damascus by ending 400 years of Ottoman rule. But in July 1920, French forces occupied Damascus, forcing Feisal to flee abroad. In 1940 during the Second World War, Syria came under the control of the Axis powers after France fell to German forces. In 1941, the British army along with its French allies occupied the country and promised full independence after the end of the war. In 1946, Syria became independent when the last of the French troops left Syria after much protest by the Syrians.

Since its independence, the average lifespan of a government in Syria was less than one year, till Hafez al-Assad captured power in 1970.⁷ The senior Assad provided political stability to Syria and developed close relations with the then Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and Iran. His anti-West, anti-Israel, pro-Palestinian policy reflected the sentiments of Syrians who despised Western support for Israel. On 10 June 2000, President Hafez al-Assad died of a heart attack and his son, Bashar al-Assad was elected President on 10 July 2000. Bashar was partly educated in the West and was perceived to be a liberal. He started to take some positive steps towards liberalising the country, but the well embedded Ba'ath party veterans restrained his hands. While citizens were at first hopeful

⁵ Joseph Holliday, "The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War", *Middle East Security Report 8*, Institute for the Study of War, March 2013, p. 09.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ V. P. Haran, "Roots of the Syrian Crisis", *IPCS Special Report*, No. 181, March 2016, p. 2.

that the young Assad would usher in a more democratic government, he quickly followed in his father's footsteps — leading with an iron fist, cracking down the dissents and protests and imprisoning political dissidents.⁸ There were many evidences that during Assad's tenure in the office, critics were being imprisoned, domestic media was tightly controlled and economic policies often benefited the elites. The country's human rights record was also not promising at that time.⁹ President Assad maintained its hold on power through usual measures employed by a dictatorship by preventing free speech and denying political expressions. As anti-government protests grew throughout the nation in the spring of 2011, violent clashes eventually broke out which President Assad tried to make silent with brutal force. This prompted the protestors to form groups and eventually to arm themselves against the regime.

In addition to growing political tension, it is believed that the crisis in Syria is in some ways the inevitable re-balancing of power along the ethnic and religious lines. In spite of the fact that Syria is a country of 22.5 million people with a Sunni Muslim majority (74 per cent), the country is run by the member of a minority sect known as Alawite in which President Assad belongs.¹⁰ There were strong allegations that President was giving Alawites special privileges which instigated hatred among some Sunnis and other groups against the Alawites in general. Opposition remains strongest among the poorer section of the majority Sunni community who are deprived of many of their basic and fundamental rights. Along with it, deteriorated social and economic condition is also blamed for the emergence of the crisis. Under the sanctions imposed by the Arab League, the US and the European Union (EU), Syria's two most vital sectors- tourism and oil suffered the most. According to International Monetary Fund (IMF) report, Syria's economy contracted by two per cent in 2011. Unemployment was high at that time and access to basic needs including food, water, electricity and medical supplies was very limited.¹¹ As time went by, corruption deepened through creating a new upper class of people from all religions; who took advantage of the situation and got closer to the Alawite regime in order to further their businesses. This squeezed the traditional middle class and deprived them of much of their income, fomenting anger and hostility towards the regime and towards the Alawites in general.¹²

It is also argued that competing gas interest and future of energy extraction among the countries of the Middle East as well as Russia and the US also contributed to the Syrian crisis. Middle Eastern countries possess about 41 per cent of natural gas reserves of the world, among which Iran has 18.2 per cent and Qatar has 13.4

⁸ Jess Mchugh, "Causes of 2011 Syrian Civil War: Timeline of Five Years of Airstrikes, Bombings, Key Dates And Events", *International Business Times*, 14 March 2016.

⁹ In 2011, Syria ranked 119th among 176 countries of the world in Human Development Index.

¹⁰ Details of demographic features of Syria have been incorporated in section 3.

¹¹ "Syria: Origins of the Uprising", *BBC News*, 08 June 2012.

¹² Nadim Nassar, "What Caused Syria's Civil War?", *World Watch Monitor*, 16 August 2013.

per cent.¹³ Most of the regional and foreign belligerents in the Syrian war are gas-exporting countries with interests in one of the two competing pipeline projects (a graphical representation has been incorporated in Annex B) that seeks to cross Syrian territory to deliver either Qatari or Iranian gas to Europe.¹⁴ In 2009, Qatar's proposal to build a pipeline through Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and Turkey to import its huge reserve of natural gas to Europe was turned down by President Bashar al-Assad. It was believed that President Assad was ostensibly hoping to protect the virtual monopoly enjoyed by its ally, Russia, over the European gas market when he turned down Qatar's proposal.¹⁵ However, at the same time President Assad accepted Iran's proposal to build the Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline that would pump Iranian gas to Europe. The announcement of the Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline deal came in 2011, which was welcomed by Russian but not by Qatar. After the inception of the Syrian conflict in 2011, it was reported that Qatar had spent approximately US\$3 billion between 2011 and 2013 to oust the Assad regime.¹⁶ Thus, competition centring gas export and energy extraction among the regional and global powers influenced immensely in consolidation of Syrian crisis.

Water crisis in Syria also worked as a catalyst to trigger the violence in 2011. Though it may sound remote and implausible to many, but there were evidences that people, who were forced to migrate from rural areas to urban centre due to water crisis played an active role in the protest against the government at the beginning of the conflict. Syria experienced a devastating drought in 2006, which had severe impact on more than 1.3 million people. That drought was responsible for killing up to 85 per cent of livestock in some regions and forced people of 160 villages to abandon their residence due to crop failure.¹⁷ Water scarcity due to prolonged drought coupled with internal migration, poverty and unemployment created socio-economic instability. Weak response from the government and international community to address the crisis further triggered violent protest against the government.

There were several blunders on the part of the Syrian government to mitigate the crisis when it began in March 2011 and those faltering and counterproductive responses were responsible to escalate the conflict all over the country. The arrest of the children in Daraa, which ignited the anti-government protest in Syria was insensitive and strongly condemnable. The government's handling of the protests

¹³ Stasa Salacanian, "Oil and Gas reserves: How Long will They Last?", *BQ Magazine*, 01 February 2015, available at <http://www.bq-magazine.com/energy/2015/02/oil-and-gas-reserves-in-the-gcc>, accessed on 27 May 2016.

¹⁴ Mitchell A. Orenstein and George Romer, "Putin's Gas Attack: Is Russia Just in Syria for the Pipelines?", *Foreign Affairs*, 14 October 2015.

¹⁵ Harald Viersen, "Is Natural Gas Fueling the Syrian Conflict?", *Muftah*, 15 October 2015, available at <http://muftah.org/is-natural-gas-fueling-the-syrian-conflict/#.V0bGBvI97rd>, accessed on 26 May 2016.

¹⁶ Roula Khalaf and Abigail Fielding Smith, "Qatar bankrolls Syrian revolt with cash and arms", *Financial Times*, 16 May 2013.

¹⁷ Michael Shank and Emily Wirzba, "How Climate Change Sparked the Crisis in Syria", *US News*, 13 September 2013.

was also inept. Syria had a police force of a few thousands only, which necessitated deployment of security forces with lack of proper training on internal disturbances. Assad regime also used the notorious sectarian, pro-regime militias, known as the *Shabiha*, or “ghosts” in Arabic. These civilian militias, comprised overwhelmingly of Assad’s own minority Alawite sect; were often sent into largely Sunni areas to breakup protests, frequently killing unarmed protesters.¹⁸ There were many instances where excessive force was used, which created mass grievance among the common people. Tanks were sent to troubled areas; and naturally, this was played up in the media. What the government did not explain is that, it did not have sufficient armoured personnel carriers and hence sent tanks, a safe means of transport for soldiers to reach troubled areas.¹⁹ The soldiers were under pressure since there were several cases of rebels abducting their family members, relatives and sending word that they would be released only if they defect. The government’s public relations efforts were totally ineffective. In the initial stages at least over 40 per cent of the casualties were on the government’s side – armed forces, intelligence personnel and government supporters which were not highlighted in the media.²⁰ As a result, opposition forces grabbed the opportunity to accuse the government forces for most of the casualties, which alienated President Assad from the international community and portrayed him as a ruthless leader.

Not only that, the Assad regime had tended to force civilians out of insurgent-held areas; rather than clearing insurgents out of population centres. It was believed that by displacing restive populations, President Assad did more to escalate the conflict than to contain it.²¹ In addition, President Assad’s over dependency on a handful amount of trustworthy military units severely undercut his regime’s available combat power. Assad relied heavily on elite forces and deployed only small and trustworthy detachments from most conventional brigades. Taken together, Assad relied on approximately one-third of the Syrian Army’s doctrinal combat power to conduct his counterinsurgency campaign.²² This had limited the government force’s ability to control all of Syria simultaneously and to suppress the insurgency which subsequently transformed into a civil war.

2.2 Progression of the Crisis

As mentioned earlier, the crisis in Syria began in the southern city of Deraa in March 2011 when locals gathered to demand the release of fourteen school children, who were arrested and reportedly tortured after writing on a wall the well-known slogan of the popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt: “The people want the downfall of

¹⁸ Asaad Al-Saleh and Loren White, *Dissecting an Evolving Conflict: The Syrian Uprising and the Future of the Country*, Institute for Social Policy and Understanding and the New American Foundation, 2013.

¹⁹ V. P. Haran, “Roots of the Syrian Crisis”, *IPCS Special Report*, No. 181, March 2016, p. 12.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Joseph Holliday, *op. cit.*

²² *Ibid.*

the regime.”²³ The government’s harsh response deteriorated the situation. Within days, the unrest had spiralled out of control of the local authorities. The Anti-government rebellion got momentum when seven defecting Syrian officer formed Free Syrian Army (FSA), composed of defected Syrian Armed Forces officers and soldiers, aiming “to bring down the system (the Assad government)” with united opposition forces.²⁴ The Syrian National Council, a coalition of anti-government groups based in Turkey, was formed on 23 August 2011. By October 2011, the FSA started to receive active support from Turkey, who allowed the rebel army to operate its command and headquarters from the country’s southern Hatay Province close to the Syrian border, and its field command from inside Syria. In January 2012, Jabhat-al-Nusra – the new al-Qaeda franchise in Syria announced its formation, with Abu Mohammad al-Joulani as its head. Within a very short period of time, this group also embraced violence and terror against government forces as well as civilians.

As part of international effort to mitigate the crisis, Kofi Annan was appointed as the United Nations (UN)-Arab league Joint Special Representative for Syria on 23 February 2012. However, Mr. Annan failed to implement any sustainable peace plan for Syrian conflict and officially resigned on 02 August 2012. The situation in Syria degenerated during the summer of 2012 and the conflict transitioned into a civil war, when opposition forces successfully overran regimes’ positions in the northern region and closed to Damascus.²⁵ For the first time, a UN official, Herve Ladsous, UN’s head of peacekeeping, proclaimed Syria to be in a state of civil war on 12 June 2012.²⁶ The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) also declared Syria in the state of a civil war on 15 July 2012.²⁷

In April 2013, something happened that ultimately proven to be catastrophic for Syria in the long run: al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), also known as Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) got separated from its central leadership. Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISI, announced the creation of Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) by merging his forces in Iraq and Syria. The leaders of al-Qaeda and al-Nusra both rejected the move. ISIL was formally created by absorbing al-Nusra fighters and territory in northern and eastern Syria in the mid of 2013. In February 2014, ISIL, which changed its name to IS, was formally exiled from al-Qaeda, making it and Jabhat al-Nusra into enemies.²⁸ Thenceforth, the *Jihadist* group proclaimed *Caliphate* in some parts of Syria on 29 June 2014. The competition between these two groups further deteriorated the already worsen situation of Syria.

²³ “Guide: Syria Crisis”, *BBC News*, 09 April 2012.

²⁴ “Free Syrian Army Founded by Seven Officers to Fight the Syrian Army”, *Syria Comment*, 29 July 2011.

²⁵ Joseph Holliday, *op. cit.*, p. 09.

²⁶ “Syria in Civil War, Says UN Official Herve Ladsous”, *BBC News*, 12 June 2012.

²⁷ “Syria in Civil War, Red Cross Says”, *BBC News*, 15 July 2012.

²⁸ Zack Beauchamp, “Syria’s Civil War: A Brief History”, *VOX Explainers*, 02 October 2015, available at <http://www.vox.com/2015/9/14/9319293/syrian-refugees-civil-war>, accessed on 24 May 2016.

The crisis got renewed attention in the mid of August 2014 with the allegation of the government's chemical weapon use on civilians which prompted the international community to consider the issue of intervention more seriously. The attack in the Ghouta region of the Damascus countryside on 21 August 2013 was marked as the watershed moment in the attitude of the US and its allies towards Syrian conflict. The US accused President Assad's force of killing 1,429 people in a poison-gas attack on 21 August incident which was denied by him. Assad blamed the rebels for this deadly attack. A joint statement²⁹ from the US and ten other nations called for a strong international response whereas Russian President Vladimir Putin restated his opposition to any sort of strike.³⁰ The tension between the US and Russia also escalated centring this chemical attack. In addition, differences among the members of the UN Security Council hindered any attempt to create a robust and unified effort to end the violence. Along with China, Russia vetoed three Security Council resolutions condemning the regime's violence.³¹

On 23 September 2014, the US, joined by five Arab allies,³² launched an intense campaign of airstrikes, bombings and cruise-missile attacks against the ISIS and another militant group in Syria – marking the first US military intervention in Syria since the start of that country's crisis in 2011.³³ In March 2015, a coalition, named Army of Conquest was formed by Islamist rebel factions mainly active in the the Idlib Governorate, with some factions active in the Hama and Latakia Governorates. The coalition had eight members³⁴ including Jabhat al-Nusra Front which was actively supported by Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Another major turning event of Syrian civil war was Russia's direct military intervention. On an official request by the Syrian government, Russia launched its first air strike in Syria on 30 September 2015. The areas those were targeted for the airstrike appeared to be held by groups opposed to ISIS and the Syrian government.

Global powers initiated a peace process in Vienna on 30 October 2015 known as the talks of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) in which Iran took part for the first time. Unfortunately, participants of the talk failed to reach on a common ground regarding the future of Syrian president Basar al-Assad.³⁵ However, the second round of the peace talk, which was held on 14 November 2015, resulted in a peace plan for Syria and was attended by all the all 20 members of ISSG. This time, Russia and

²⁹ This joint statement was issued by the US, Australia, Canada, France, Italy, Japan, Republic of Korea, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Turkey and the UK.

³⁰ "Syria Crisis: Russia and US no Closer", *BBC News*, 06 September 2013.

³¹ Asaad Al-Saleh and Loren White, *op. cit.*

³² Five Arab allies participating in the strikes with the USA were Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Jordan.

³³ "US, Arab Allies Launch First Wave of Strikes in Syria", *Fox News*, 23 September 2014.

³⁴ Ahrar ash-Sham, al-Nusra Front, Liwa al-Haqq, Jaysh al-Sunna (Its Hama branch merged with Ahrar ash-Sham), Ajnad al-Sham, Imam Bukhari Jamaat, Sham Legion, Turkistan Islamic Party, Jund al-Aqsa (former member).

³⁵ This peace talk was also attended by the UAE, Qatar, Jordan, Egypt, China, France, Germany, Italy, as well as the EU.

the US again remained at discord about a possible role of the Syrian president Bashar al-Assad in any political transition of Syria. The UN again announced the formal start of peace talk for Syria on 01 February 2016 and urged world powers to push for a ceasefire. However, on 03 February 2016, only two days after the formal beginning, the peace talk was suspended by the UN envoy Staffan de Mistura until 25 February 2016. The UN Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 2268 on 26 February 2016 that demanded all parties to comply with the terms of a US-Russian deal on a "cessation of hostilities".³⁶ However, the truce involved Syrian government and rebel forces, but not the armed militant groups like ISIS or al-Nusra Front. In spite of the ceasefire, the conflict between government forces, rebel groups and *Jihadist* groups still continued. A total of 135 people were killed in the first week of the truce in areas covered by the cessation of hostilities agreement. It was also observed that 552 people were killed within the same period in the areas not covered by the truce.³⁷ However, in a welcome development, the US announced ceasefire for Aleppo, one of the most war torn cities of Syria, after successful talks with Russia on 04 May 2016. Though, the ceasefire offers some ray of hope to the beleaguered Syrians, but violent conflict still going on in many parts of the country where people are getting killed regularly. It is unfortunate that there exist many stumbling blocks which are restricting the conflicting parties to make any ceasefire or peace accord successful. Some of those obstacles can be enumerated as – presence of a complex web of belligerent parties who share a long history of mistrust and animosity, geopolitical complexity and interest of regional and global powers, the presence of religious extremist entities, etc. This whole gamut of internal and external factors is making it nearly impossible to implement any peace deal in Syria which is causing the worst form of the sufferings for the people of the country.

3. Geopolitics of the Syrian Crisis

Syria's geophysical location coupled with its unique demographic features largely influences the country's ongoing crisis. Without comprehending the geopolitics behind the Syrian crisis, it is extremely difficult to understand the current situation and its implications especially in regional and global sphere. The country is located in the Middle East region that has been world's one of the most turbulent regions throughout the history. It is a Southwest Asian country lies at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea and north of the Arabian Peninsula. Syria is bordered by Lebanon and Israel on the west, Turkey on the north, Iraq on the east and Jordan on the south. The country's centrality in the region and its proximity to some of the world's largest energy-rich countries has made it a crucial factor in the region. Syria's position has also made it a decisive factor in the prospect of two of the key gas pipelines: Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline (the "Islamic Pipeline") and the Qatar-Saudi Arabia-Jordan-Syria-Turkey pipeline (the "Qatar-Turkey Pipeline") to supply gas from Iran and Qatar to Europe. It

³⁶ "Syria Conflict: Attacks Reported as Truce Comes into Effect", *BBC News*, 27 February 2016.

³⁷ "Syria Ceasefire: '135 Killed' in First Week of Truce", *Al Jazeera*, 06 March 2016.

is worth mentioning that Europe has significant gas energy needs and a quarter of it comes from Russia, which is one of the important allies of Syria.



Apart from the geophysical factors, Syria is also a key strategic player for Iran and Russia to uphold and secure their interest in the Middle East. Russia desires a stronghold of Syrian Mediterranean port Tartus where the former has its only naval installation outside of its territory. Iran views Syria a secured direct supply line to Hezbollah, the Lebanon based Shiite militia and a tool for Tehran to expand its influence within the “Shiite Crescent” — the growing number of Shiite regimes loyal to the Islamic Republic.³⁹ In contrary, the regime’s well-established hostility with Israel and bitter relationship with Gulf States has further added a new layer of complexity into the politics of the Middle East. Moreover, Syria’s closeness to Russia and Iran and its assistance to Hezbollah have put it odd with the USA.

Moreover, the unique demographic feature of Syria also bears great significance. According to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) World Factbook 2011⁴⁰, the total Population of Syria is 22.5 million with diverse ethnic and religious groups. Ethnicity in Syria includes Arab-90 per cent, Kurds-8 to 10 per cent, Armenians-1 per cent and others-1 per cent. In terms of religion, Syria’s population is 90 per cent Muslim (74 per

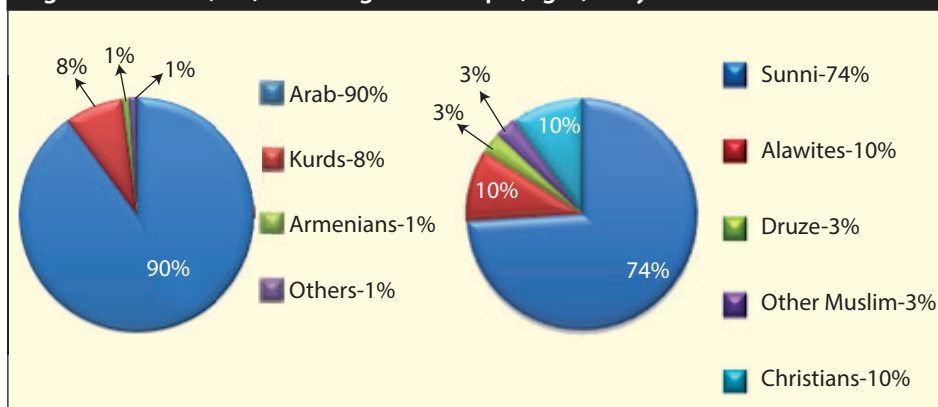
³⁸ Source: “Syria”, *Operation World*, available at <http://www.operationworld.org/syri>, accessed on 10 June 2016.

³⁹ Joseph Hughes, “The Geopolitics of the Syrian Civil War”, *Fair Observer: Make Sense of the World*, 20 July 2014,

⁴⁰ Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, 2011.

cent Sunni and 10 per cent Alawites, 3 per cent Druze, 3 per cent others including Ismaili Islam and Ithnaashari) and 10 per cent Christian. There is also a small (4,500) Syrian Jewish community. These ethnic and religious breakdowns are another part of Syria's complexity.

Figure 1: Ethnic (left) and Religious Groups (right) in Syria⁴¹



In addition to socio-economic and geophysical factors, involvement of different actors and interest of different stakeholders have also influenced hugely to Syrian crisis. The ongoing crisis in Syria contains myriad rebel groups.⁴² Because of that, as well as involvement of different local, national, regional and global actors, it is extremely difficult to identify two distinct sides of Syrian conflict. Although it is convenient to identify the current Ba'athist government headed by President Bashar al-Assad and the coalition opposition forces as the main actors of the war; however there are other actors, potentially more important than those engaged in the violence and which at the end might play a larger role than those presently fighting for control.⁴³ Some analysts have divided the combatant groups of Syria into four broad categories: loyalists (regime forces and their supporters); rebels (from "moderate" to Islamist); Kurdish groups (who aren't currently seeking to overthrow Assad, but have won autonomy in north-eastern Syria, which they have fought ISIS to protect); and finally, foreign powers.⁴⁴ From another source of 2013, it was estimated that 13 "major" rebel groups were operating in Syria; and counting smaller ones, the US Defence Intelligence Agency puts the number of groups at much higher than that.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, the number of other countries involved to various degrees has grown; including the US and Russia. The following is an attempt

⁴¹ Compiled from CIA Factbook 2011.

⁴² David E. Cunningham, "Veto Players and Civil War in Syria", in *The Political Science of Syrian War*, Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) Briefings 22, Washington DC, December 2013, p. 26.

⁴³ Mark Bound, "Syrian Conflict Study: Introduction", *Research Gate*, 20 July 2013.

⁴⁴ Kathy Gilsinan, "The Confused Person's Guide to the Syrian Civil War: A brief primer", *The Atlantic*, 29 October 2015, available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/syrian-civil-war-guide-isis/410746/>, accessed on 26 May 2016.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

to discuss the key actors who have been directly involved in the geopolitics of Syrian crisis.

The government of Ba'ath party headed by President Bashar al-Assad remains at the crux of the Syrian conflict which has a number of political and material resources at its disposal and enjoys qualitative military supremacy. Despite defection, regime forces remain essentially intact.⁴⁶ The regime suffered an initial setback at the beginning of the conflict due to strong opposition from the rebels backed by regional and Western powers. Radical Islamist militants also waged war against the government by declaring *Caliphate* in some part of the country further added tremendous pressure to the government. However, with the wholehearted support from Iran and Russia along with military support from Lebanon based Shiite militia group Hezbollah, the Assad government seems well situated to continue fighting and prevent the opposition to take over state power. Assad government is also receiving support from Iraq and China.

The Syrian opposition, which is currently waging a war to oust Assad government is multi-layered, and its power diffuse. The opposition consists of political and military groupings, each of which is divided along multiple, crosscutting, fault lines. They are termed as "insiders" and "outsiders"; "establishment" figures and emerging grassroots leaders; secular, Islamist, and ethno-sectarian factions and combatant groups.⁴⁷ The military component of the opposition consists of an array of armed elements which vary according to their size, combat experience and effectiveness, sources of and access to weaponry, locus of operations, political orientation and relationship to the communities in which they are active. Some militias maintain direct ties with the FSA. Others do not, but nonetheless identify themselves as members of the FSA.⁴⁸ At the beginning of the conflict, the opposition forces formed a coalition named National Council of Syria in August 2011 to topple down the government and establish a modern, civil and democratic state.⁴⁹ Later, it unified with several other opposition groups to form the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, commonly named as the Syrian National Coalition. This National Coalition was recognised by many of the regional and world powers, namely Gulf States, the US, France, the UK, the EU etc. as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people and was also granted Syrian seat of the Arab league.

Apart from national actors, foreign actors from outside have also been playing very crucial role in the course of the Syrian conflict. Among all external actors Iran's role needs special attention as the country is deeply engaged in this conflict from the beginning and is one of the few allies of President Assad government within the region. Syria has been Iran's closest state ally since the Islamic Republic's inception

⁴⁶ John Calabrese, "The Regional Implications of the Syria Crisis", *Middle East Institute*, 21 December 2012.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ "Q&A: Syrian opposition alliance", *BBC News*, 16 November 2011.

and has been the crucial link between Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah, acting as a hub to transport personnel, weapons and finances.⁵⁰ Iran considers Assad government as an indispensable ally and equates Syria's security with Iran's security.⁵¹ As a result, Iranian assistance to Syrian government gradually increased, both in magnitude and visibility with the advent of the conflict. Tehran helped Syria to circumvent Western and Arab sanctions and extended credit lines and other payment facilities to the country's ministries and facilities.⁵² Most importantly, Tehran provided an uninterrupted flow of weaponry to Assad's forces through the main civilian and military airports of Damascus and helped recognise Syria's battered conventional military airports for urban warfare.⁵³ In addition, Syria's proximity to one of Iran's enemy, Israel, also influences Iran to continue its wholehearted support to Assad regime.

Another important ally of President Assad in the war is President Vladimir Putin as Syria has nurtured a very warm relations with the Russia since independence. Syria has a strong political, economic and defence link with Russia. To Russia, Syrian crisis was a crucial one, since it was unacceptable for Russia to see Syria going down and facing the same fate as Libiya, another key Russian ally.⁵⁴ Therefore, Moscow's approach to the Syrian conflict has been driven by its determination to prevent a repetition of the Libyan intervention and to avoid abandoning a long-term client-state.⁵⁵ Russia's support for Assad government also derived from its intention to secure its military presence in Syria *vis-à-vis* the Middle East and oppose the influence of the US over the region.⁵⁶ Syria has also been a big market for Russian military exports.⁵⁷ At the initial stage, Russia's multiple vetoes⁵⁸ to the UN Security Council worked as strong diplomatic shield for President Assad from world outrage. As the civil war progressed, Russian support for Assad government became more and more vivid which reached its tipping point on 30 September 2015, when Russia launched its first air strike in Syria against Assad's oppositions and rebel forces and elevated herself as one of the most important actors of the war.

Hezbollah, the Lebanon based Shiite militia group, has long been an ally of the Ba'ath Party government of Syria and is currently helping President Assad in his

⁵⁰ Joseph Holliday, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁵¹ Emile Hokayem, "Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War", *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, December 2014-January 2015, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, pp. 71-72.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Phil Sands, "Iran's Secret Night Flights to Arm Syria's Assad Revealed", *The National World*, 27 October 2013, available at <http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/irans-secret-night-flights-to-arm-syrias-assad-revealed>, accessed on 22 May 2016.

⁵⁴ Stuart Gottlieb, "Syria and the Demise of the Responsibility to Protect", *The National Interest*, 05 November 2013, available at <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/syria-the-demise-the-responsibility-protect-9360>, accessed on 22 May 2016.

⁵⁵ John Calabrese, *op. cit.*

⁵⁶ Currently, Russia has one naval base in Tartus and one airbase in Khmeimim, Syria. The country has also recently decided to build a military encampment in the ancient Syrian town of Palmyra.

⁵⁷ "Syria Crisis: Where Key Countries Stand", *BBC News*, 30 October 2015.

⁵⁸ Russia along with China vetoed four times on UN Security Council resolution regarding Syria.

campaign against Syrian opposition forces. The US claimed that Jayas-al-Shabi, the loyalist of Assad government, was created and is maintained by Hezbollah and Iran's Revolutionary Guard, by virtue of financing, weapons, training and advice. According to Israeli intelligence sources, Hezbollah is working to forge loyalist government militias into a 100,000-strong irregular army to fight alongside the government's conventional forces.⁵⁹

In contrary, from the beginning of the conflict, Saudi Arabia has been working closely with opposition rebel forces to topple President Bashar al-Assad. The country's strong opposition to the Assad regime is rooted in a combination of personal and geopolitical motivations. Late King Abdullah accused Bashar al-Assad for the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, a close friend of him. Moreover, from a strategic perspective, Saudi Arabia aims to have a strong hand in developing a "new Syria", i.e. one that is not aligned with Iran.⁶⁰ There are allegations that the Saudis are currently providing military and financial assistance to several rebel groups, including those with extremist ideologies to oust President Assad.

Like Saudi Arabia, the Turkish government has been a staunch critic of President Assad since the start of the uprising in Syria. The country is a key supporter of the Syrian opposition and has faced the burden of hosting almost two million refugees.⁶¹ The country has also been referred by Reuters as a major sponsor of the insurgency against President Bashar al-Assad.⁶² However, the Syrian crisis has also posed serious security threat to Turkey as the Kurdistan Workers' Party and its offshoot in Syria; the Democratic Union party is operating freely in south-eastern Turkey-Syria border and recruiting new fighters for its campaign against Turkey. After a terrorist attack in July 2015, Turkey agreed to let the US-led coalition forces to use her air bases for strikes on Syria against ISIS. Conversely, Israel's role in the Syrian civil war is somewhat limited compared to other neighbouring countries, though hostility between these two nations goes back to the countries' creation in the late 1940s, driven by Syria's support for the Palestinian resistance against the new Jewish state. Syria and Israel have no diplomatic relations and both of the countries fought three major wars since 1948. Nevertheless, Israel prefers Assad regime's fall because they regard Iran-Hezbollah-Syria alliance as the gravest threat to Israel. However, Israel is also well aware of the fact that possible demise of the Assad regime might present serious risks for Israel in the form of spill-over of hostilities to the Syria-Israel border and possible attack of radical Islamist in Israeli territory. Because of this ambiguity, Israel's role in the Syrian war is very obscure.

Syria's closeness to Russia and Iran, assistance to Hezbollah, 'anti-Israel' policies and suspected nuclear programme put it at odds with the US. Syria under

⁵⁹ "Let's Try a Less Awkward Embrace", *The Economist*, 23 March 2013.

⁶⁰ John Calabrese, *op. cit.*

⁶¹ "Syria Crisis: Where Key Countries Stand", *BBC News*, 30 October 2015.

⁶² "Backed By Russian Jets, Syrian Army Closes in Aleppo", *The World Post*, 02 April 2016.

the Ba'athist party has been seen as a thorn in the flesh of the US for over 50 years.⁶³ Right from the beginning of the conflict, the US had been accusing President Assad responsible for widespread atrocities and demanding his resignation from the presidency. The US supports Syria's main opposition alliance, the National Coalition and has been providing limited military assistance to the "moderate" rebels. Since September 2014, it has begun air strikes on ISIS and other *Jihadist* groups in Syria as part of an international coalition.

In addition to the aforementioned actors, role and activities of *Jihadist* groups also need special attention as emergence of those groups and their subsequent declaration of *Caliphate* have added a new dimension to the Syrian crisis and aggravated hostility and tension among different actors. The ascendance of the al-Nusra Front and subsequent emergence of ISIS have profoundly affected the future of Syrian crisis and exposed the contradictory position of each regional power. These groups are now well-poised to mount a grave challenge to the stability of the Syrian state in the long run.⁶⁴ Although they operate as separate entities and show a hostile attitude to each other, both groups have one prime objective to overthrow Assad government and establish an Islamic *Caliphate* which will extend beyond Syria's borders.

4. Implications of the Crisis

The implications of different wars might be dissimilar at different levels, but every war is similar in one aspect that it brings countless casualties, ineffable destruction and endless brutalities. The Syrian crisis, which has later transformed into a civil war is not an exception from this regard and so far has negatively impacted not only the domestic order of Syria but also threatened to make the regional and global stability vulnerable. In this regard, this section basically tries to elucidate and analyse the impact of the conflict through linking the internal factors of Syria in regard to regional and global politics. Though Bangladesh is not directly affected by the crisis, but it has some indirect effects on the interests of Bangladesh as the country's foreign reserve largely depends on remittance from the the migrant workers in the Middle East. For this reason, the impact of Syrian crisis on Bangladesh has also been discussed in the latter part of this section in brief.

4.1 National Security and Political Integrity of Syria

The ongoing conflict has a huge devastating impact on Syria and its citizens are the worst victims of the conflict. The death toll is not easy to confirm, but according to the Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR), it is estimated that the

⁶³ V. P. Haran, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

⁶⁴ Elizabeth O'Bagy, *Jihad in Syria*, Middle East Security Report 6, Institute for the Study of War, September 2012.

deadliest war has directly and indirectly killed 470,000 Syrians, a far higher total than the figure of 250,000 used by the UN until it stopped collecting statistics at the end of 2014.⁶⁵ Considering Syria's small population, the death toll is a huge blow to the nation. The remaining Syrians are also living in dire condition and many of them have fled to neighbouring countries to find safety. The UN reports, that nearly one-fifth of the total population has been registered as refugees under the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and since some refugees do not have the opportunity to register with the programme, the actual number of refugees is probably much higher.⁶⁶ Every year the conflict has witnessed an increasing number of refugees. In 2012, there were 100,000 refugees. By April 2013, there were 800,000. That doubled to 1.6 million in less than four months. There are now 4.3 million Syrians scattered throughout the region, making them the world's largest refugee population under the UN mandate.⁶⁷ The UN predicts there could be 4.7 million registered Syrian refugees by the end of 2016 — the worst exodus since the Rwandan genocide 20 years ago.⁶⁸

Moreover, half of the country's population has been internally displaced. Currently 13.5 million people in Syria are in need of humanitarian assistance.⁶⁹ An entire generation of young people has been exposed to the horrors of war and denied access to basic services such as education and healthcare. An estimated 400,000 people are living in besieged areas where humanitarian access is limited and where some are dying of starvation.⁷⁰ Life expectancy has dropped from 70.5 years in 2010 to an estimated 55.4 years in 2015 and mortality rate increases from 4.4 per thousand in 2010 to 10.9 per thousand in 2015.⁷¹ The impact of war on the Syrian health sector is also devastating as attacks on hospitals since the inception of conflict five years ago have left more than 700 doctors and medical workers dead.⁷² This has severely curtailed Syrian people access to basic health care services.

The youngest refugees in Syria are now facing an uncertain future. Some schools have been able to divide the school day into two shifts and make room for more Syrian students. But there is simply not enough space for all the children, and many families cannot afford the transportation to get their kids to school. According to the UN, more than half of all Syrian refugees are under the age of 18 and most have been out of school for months, if not years. This will surely have an adverse impact

⁶⁵ Ian Black, "Report on Syria Conflict Finds 11.5% of Population Killed or Injured", *The Guardian*, 11 February 2016.

⁶⁶ V. P. Haran, *op. cit.*

⁶⁷ UNHCR, *Syria Regional Refugee Response: Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal*, Geneva, Switzerland: 2015.

⁶⁸ "Quick facts: What You Need to Know about the Syria crisis", *Mercy Corps*, 05 February 2016, <https://www.mercycorps.org/articles/iraq-jordan-lebanon-syria-turkey/quick-facts-what-you-need-know-about-syria-crisis>, accessed on 17 May 2016.

⁶⁹ Raziye Akkoc, "What has been the Real Cost of Syria's Civil War?", *The Telegraph*, 15 March 2016.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² "More Than 700 Doctors, Medical Staff Killed in Syria War, UN Says", *South China Morning Post*, 22 June 2016.

on Syria's future. The youngest are confused and scared by their experiences, lacking the sense of safety and home they need. The older children are forced to grow up too fast, finding work and taking care of their families in desperate circumstances. In this regard it is to mention that children are being actively encouraged and sometimes forced to join the war by the parties to the conflict offering gifts and salaries of up to US\$400 a month.⁷³ This war-torn unusual condition is facilitating radicalisation of the youths of the Syria who are falling easy prey to radical extremist organisations currently operating in Syria to establish Islamic *Caliphate* in the region.

In addition to socio-political impact, the economic impact of Syrian crisis is also enormous. Considering its total economic loss, starting from its wealth and infrastructure to the population and economy; Syria has almost been demolished. The massive destruction of war coupled with economic and other sanctions imposed by the global powers have inflicted heavy toll on Syrian economy and there has been a continuous contraction in the GDP since 2012.⁷⁴ In 2013, the trade sector suffered a drastic annual decline of 46.6 per cent⁷⁵ due to the decrease in the supply of goods, price hike of basic goods and the direct and indirect damage to hundreds of thousands of commercial outlets. As a result in 2014, consumer prices rose by 53 per cent from 2013.⁷⁶ The Syrian pound dropped to one-sixth of its pre-war value and foreign currency reserve depleted to between US\$2 to 5 billion from US\$18 billion.⁷⁷ Prices in conflict zones and besieged areas are much higher than elsewhere in the country. Employment conditions and pay have deteriorated and the number of working women is declining because of security concerns. About 13.8 million Syrians have lost their source of livelihood.⁷⁸ Health, education and income standards have all deteriorated sharply. Poverty increased by 85 per cent in 2015 alone.⁷⁹ Of course, the Syrian people are not concerning themselves with economic issues at present, but, when the war will finally end, the Syrian people will have to bear with a devastated economy and destroyed resources available to rebuild it. Moreover, when the people will not find job opportunities within the country, then they will try to reach other countries in the region and in Europe that will further worsen the ongoing global migration crisis.

The current conflict is a big blow for Syria's tourism and energy sector also. The destruction within Syria has devastated many Syrian cities. The war strategies of both sides involve capturing key strategic areas, and cities like Damascus and Homs have been pounded by incessant bombing and fighting. The damage has been caused to numerous historic buildings and archaeological locations. The war has affected 290 heritage sites, severely damaged 104 and completely destroyed 24, including all six

⁷³ Raziye Akkoc, *op. cit.*

⁷⁴ Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR), *Syria, Alienation and Violence-Impact of Syria Crisis Report 2014*, Damascus, Syria, March 2015, p. 15.

⁷⁵ Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR), *op. cit.*, p. 21.

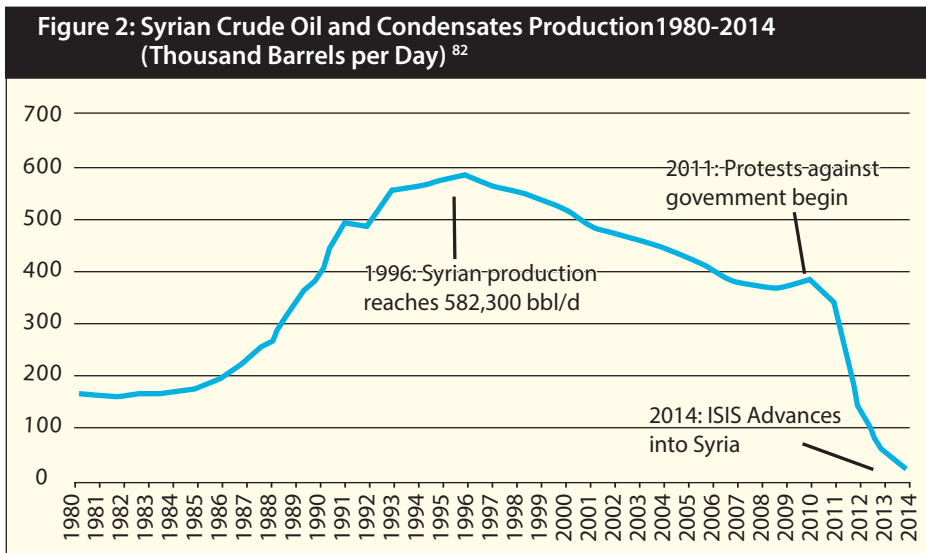
⁷⁶ *Ibid*

⁷⁷ Zachary Laub, "Syria's Crisis and the Global Response", *Council Foreign Relations*, 11 September 2013.

⁷⁸ Ian Black, 2016, *op. cit.*

⁷⁹ Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR), *op. cit.*, p. 46.

the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) World Heritage Sites in the country.⁸⁰ Though much of the world’s attention has focused on pillage and destruction in Palmyra, but damage to the energy supply and potential earnings is probably another big concern. The war between the Syrian government and rebel forces, plus the onslaught of the ISIS, has essentially cut off all meaningful sources of oil production in the country. The country has 2.5 billion barrels of oil reserves, more than any of its neighbours aside from Iraq. But war has damaged much of the country’s infrastructure, including oil and natural gas pipelines, oil fields, and much of the electric grids. Several oil fields have fallen under the control of the ISIS. The country now suffers from power outages and a shortage of refined fuels. Even if the international community could somehow restore peace in the country, it would take many years for Syria’s oil sector to get back on its feet. Simply put, Syria has ceased to be an oil producer, with no prospect of a rebound in the foreseeable future.⁸¹ The following figure shows the production of Syrian Crude oil and impact of conflict on it.



The conflict in Syria is grinding down the country’s national mechanism and creating the conditions for continuing the conflict. Although the national government survives on paper, but it does not exercise direct control over its national security, services and institutions, including the armed forces that might create further mayhem within Syria. Syria is now in a serious threat to become a failed state and if this happens, this might generate political instability, social unrest and armed conflict to its neighbours which will ultimately destabilise the whole Middle Eastern region.

⁸⁰ “Syria’s Six UNESCO World Heritage Sites All Damaged or Destroyed”. *The Independent*, 16 March 2016.

⁸¹ Nick Cunningham, “Why The Syrian War Is Not Pushing Up Oil Prices”, 07 October 2015, available at <http://energyfuse.org/why-the-syrian-war-is-not-pushing-up-oil-prices/>, accessed on 16 July 2016.

⁸² Nick Cunningham, “Why the Syrian War is Not Pushing Up Oil Prices”, *The Fuse*, 07 October 2015, available at <http://energyfuse.org/why-the-syrian-war-is-not-pushing-up-oil-prices/>, accessed on 16 July 2016.

4.2 Regional Outlook

The regional context for the Syrian conflict is as complex as the internal setting reflecting both a triangular geopolitical contest for dominance among Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey and the ancient bitter rivalry between the Sunni and Shiite factions of Islam.⁸³ Moreover, separate and contradictory efforts to oust President Assad at the beginning also exposed growing discontent among the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries centring this war. Many analysts have opined Syrian conflict as a regional proxy war with a loosely knit Sunni coalition consist of the Gulf States; Turkey and other Islamist groups challenging a Shiite axis comprising Syria Alawites, Lebanon's Hezbollah, Iraq and Iran.

The conflict has sparked a regional struggle between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran. From the inception of the crisis, Saudi Arabia has been adamant about calling for President Assad's ouster and for a transitional government in which the FSA and the Syrian National Council would play a major role, whereas Iran remains committed to support the present government by providing various forms of assistance ranging from arms to money. There is a growing concern that tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran might ignite Shiite-Sunni conflict in a larger context and can spread beyond the region. It should also be noted that the rivalry has also been an important factor in the simmering tensions in Bahrain, where a Sunni monarchy rules a majority Shiite population. Tehran has sought to galvanise discontented Bahrainis and Riyadh has backed the current government to the hilt, even sending in the Saudi security forces in 2011 to bolster the monarchy and crush anti-regime demonstrations.⁸⁴ These types of regional conflicts have potential negative global implications as well.

No country in the region is more likely to be affected by the situation in Syria than its neighbour Lebanon. In addition to its geographic proximity, Lebanon's ethnic and religious composition closely resemble to Syria. The conflict in Syria has been negatively affecting Lebanon in several ways. First, it has created a refugee crisis in Lebanon, which is ill prepared to address the issue because its social service networks are underfunded and understaffed. Second, the conflict has re-ignited sectarian, mainly Sunni-Shiite tension at the community and national political levels. Third, it has deepened the political impasse between the country's two most powerful political players - March 8 and March 14 alliances. The March 8 is led by Hezbollah and Amal, two Shiite Muslim parties, which have close links to the Alawite Muslim-dominated Syrian regime, and the March 14, which is led by the predominantly Sunni Muslim Future Movement that is supportive to the Syrian rebellion. Although these two blocs are used to maintain a distance since 2005, the conflict in Syria has served to further polarise the two.⁸⁵

⁸³ Ted Galen Carpenter, *op. cit.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Andre Colling, "The Impact of the Syrian Conflict on Neighbouring States", *News24*, Cape Town, 27 August 2013.

The Syrian conflict has been a major test for Turkey's Middle East policy as well as its domestic politics. Regionally, Syria has become a challenge for Turkey's vision to engage regional actors, including former adversaries, through trade, investment, political and cultural exchanges to implement its "policy of zero problems with neighbours".⁸⁶ On the domestic front, besides the refugee problem, Turkey has been accused of supporting Islamist militants in northern Syria against Kurd groups and seeking to contain its own Kurd separatist campaign in the south east.⁸⁷ Turkey is likely to continue to support armed groups in Syria against its traditional opponents and this support could well have long-term consequences for the Turkish government depending on the outcome of the conflict in Syria.

Identifying any broader impact in Iraq is difficult because it continues to experience nearly daily violence involving Sunni and Shiite Muslim communities since 2003. But it can be assumed that the war in Syria has impacted negatively on the shared border regions with Iraq. Fighting between rebels and Syrian regime forces has regularly been reported, leading to cross-border armed attacks. Sunni militants in Iraq have attempted to establish closer links to their compatriots in Syria and many of them are directly involved in the current conflict. Another concern is any establishment of a Kurd region in northern Iraq is likely to bolster general Kurds' goals for a single Kurd state and will raise tensions with Turkey and Iran, which are both battling with Kurd separatist in their southeast and northwest respectively.

Jordan has primarily experienced a major influx of refugees with approximately 500,000 displaced people moving into the country since 2011.⁸⁸ But, the medium- to long-term impact of the conflict on Jordan remains uncertain. Any post-conflict scenario may witness a return of Jordanians fighting in Syria to Jordan. Existing anti-government sentiment among Jordan's Salafist⁸⁹ community may increase further and develop into a more confrontational position, including armed agitation. Further to this, Jordan has allowed the US military to base a small contingent in its territory to assist its own security forces. This presence boosted the country's overall defensive posture as well as opens it up to possible retaliatory unrest/violence from anti-Western groups based in the country and within the region, which are already heavily critical of Jordan's pro-Western stance.

Currently, the impact on Israel from this conflict, remains relatively low, but Israel has increased its military alert levels in the northern part of the country after the genesis of the crisis.⁹⁰ Israel is monitoring the complicated Syrian conflict with significant concern. Israel views Bashar al- Assad as problematic and predicable enemy and prefers the fall of the Assad regime. On the contrary, the possible demise of the Assad regime

⁸⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Policy of Zero Problems with Neighbours*, Republic of Turkey.

⁸⁷ Nick Danforth, "Turkey's 'Kurdish Problem' – Then and Now", *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, Philadelphia, January 2016.

⁸⁸ UNHCR, *Syria Regional Refugee Response: Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal*, Geneva: Switzerland, 2015

⁸⁹ Salafi Jihadism or Jihadist-Salafism is a transnational religious-political ideology based on a belief in physical jihadism.

⁹⁰ Andre Colling, *op. cit.*

presents serious risks for Israel in the form of the possible transfer of chemical weapons to hostile actors (Hezbollah), the spillover of hostilities to the Golan Heights, or the possible disintegration of Syria.⁹¹ Also, if the regime falls and a rebel government emerge, the reaction from Israel will depend on the make-up of that government because a rebel government with a strong Islamist character is also against Israel's interests.

The Syrian crisis was started to establish democratic rights within the country, but its negative impacts have overshadowed the preliminary noble intent. Now it is evident that the conflict will have a lasting impact on the country and the region regardless of its outcome. The large presence of refugees is expected to take a significant financial toll and influence security environments of the various states along side Syrian border. Sectarian tensions worsened by the war will matter for the medium-term and will serve to influence both domestic and regional political systems. Furthermore, pre-existing tensions, particularly in Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey could deteriorate further and might turn into open conflict.

4.3 *Global Politics*

The problems experienced in Syria are of utmost importance to the entire world as failure to address it could severely harm global peace and stability. It has already made a corrosive effect on the West's relations with both Russia and China. Disagreements about how to deal with the fighting in Syria have produced a bitterness between both sides. Since the start of the conflict, the world has been experiencing the largest wave of disorderly migration after the Second World War. There is a sharp link between unrest in the Middle Eastern region and the global energy market. The threat of existing terrorism and violent extremism has been worsened with the formation of ISIS and other extremist organisations due to the outbreak of the conflict in Syria. Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) is a threat not only to counter the terrorist but also for ensuring regional peace and stability, which is also linked to the global security mechanism.

The initiator of this human tragedy was the authoritarian regime of Bashar al-Assad, but it was made worse by the two rival global powers - the US and Russia and their allies. The conflict has made a rift in the relations between these two nations and their allies. From the beginning of the conflict, there have been different levels of interventions by the global powers, mainly to protect their own interests during and in the post conflict era in the region using the declaratory posture of protecting human rights and combating the rise of terrorism. It cannot be gainsaid that the importance of good relations among the West, Russia and China goes far beyond the issue of Syria. It would be a tragedy if policymakers allow differences regarding Syria policy to disrupt those crucial relations and trigger an East-West cold war.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

The Syrian crisis provides Russia with the golden opportunity to consolidate its strategic footing in the Middle East. The political vacuum that had been created because of the crisis has allowed Russia to initiate a game changing move through direct military intervention in Syria and deepen its involvement in the whole region. Through its reinforcement of the Syrian regime, Russian has attained the status of a dominant player in shaping the future of the Middle East.⁹² The new role of Russia has refrained the US from addressing the asymmetry in the US and Russian level of engagement and forced the US to accept Russia's new dominant role in Syria in particular and in the Middle East as a whole. This has also made Russian President Vladimir Putin indispensable to any political solution in the region. Though, it is very early to predict whether this new role of Russia in the Middle East will give birth to a new East-West cold war, but it can be said that this will abridge the US's hegemony over the politics of the Middle East. In addition, it is also reported that business is booming for Russia's weapon manufacturer after the country showcased its military might in the course of five-month long campaign in Syria.⁹³ Russia's arms exports hit a new record US\$ 14.5 billion in 2015 with orders surging to US\$ 56 billion.⁹⁴ Many security experts believe that Syria is being used as a training ground for Russian military to test new, modern and highly effective high-precision weapons and this ongoing conflict has helped Russia to boost its status as a major arms producer and exporter. In addition, being the largest gas exporter of Europe⁹⁵ and with no hope of a pipeline bringing the Middle Eastern gas through Syria in the near future, Russia is now in well placed to protect its dominant role over the European energy market.

Regarding the Syrian refugee crisis , it is important to mention that in 2015, the world has seen the biggest wave of disorderly migration since the Second World War. International community has been struggling to respond to handle the surge of desperate migrants and among these irregular migrants, more than 50 per cent came from Syria. Half of Syria's total population has been displaced and more than 4.5 million people have fled Syria since the beginning of the conflict, and most of them are women and children.⁹⁶ As the conflict gets worsened, more number of people are being forced to flee. For example, 1.2 million were driven from their homes in 2015 alone.⁹⁷ According to the UNHCR, the total number of worldwide displaced people reached 59.5 million at the end of 2014, with a 40 per cent increase taking place since 2011 and among them Syrian refugees became the largest refugee group in 2014 (3.9 million, 1.55 million more than the previous year), overtaking Afghan refugees (2.6 million) who had been the largest refugee group

⁹² Avinoam Idan, "Russia in Syria and Putin's geopolitical strategy", *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 22 October 2015.

⁹³ Christopher Miller, "Booming Business: Russia's Syria Operation Nets Arms Dealers Billions", *Mashable*, 30 March 2016, available at <http://mashable.com/2016/03/29/booming-business-for-russian-arms-dealers/#SN1FnOip2qq3>, accessed on 29 June 2016.

⁹⁴ Mansur Mirovalev, "Syria's War: A Showroom for Russian Arms Sales". *Al Jazeera*, 06 April 2016.

⁹⁵ Russia controls 70 per cent of gas supplies to Europe.

⁹⁶ V. P. Haran, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

⁹⁷ "Syria: The Story of the Conflict", *op. cit.*

for the last three decades.⁹⁸ These data show how the conflict in Syria negatively affecting the global migration especially in the Middle Eastern region and the countries of the Europe as a corollary effect. This huge migrant inflow in Europe has also caused division among the European states regarding a course of action against it. Germany's policy of attracting unfiltered migrants faced heavy criticism from many of the European states. Because of the migration crisis, a possibility has been raised that the European states might re-introduce pre-EU stringent border control which will hurt the European economy very badly in particular and will adversely impact its overall image as a whole.

Though there are strategic differences between Russia and the US, regarding the Syrian conflict but the rise of extremist organisation, especially the emergence of ISIS is a 'horror story' for both of these global powers. ISIS has sparked deep anxieties in the region and around the world by slaughtering minorities, institutionalising sex slavery, vanquishing state armies and executing opponents in gruesome spectacles of violence.⁹⁹ It has destroyed heritage sites, such as temples in the ancient city of Palmyra and fuelled the global antiquities trade. The group has waged terror attacks from France to Yemen and perhaps most perplexing factor is, thousands of young men and women from Europe — not all of Muslim origin — have flocked to join it.¹⁰⁰ ISIS has also attracted many foreign fighters to join the Syrian civil war. According to a report, more than 12,000 foreign fighters from at least 81 countries are stationed in Syria.¹⁰¹ These foreign fighters, apart from their negative role in Syria, will also have worrying consequence when they will return to their home country because of their exposure to an environment of sustained radicalisation and terrible violence.

If Syria's government remains in disorder, then terrorist organisations will have a strong foothold in the country, and their hegemony over the Middle East will spread. This occurrence would directly cause the collapse of global oil market that depends on Middle Eastern resources and will have an adverse impact on global economy. In fact, the decline in the price of oil and the rise of ISIS correlates strongly, which is evident from the fact that ISIS began capturing major cities in Syria and Iraq in early-2014 while global stockpiles of oil started to increase. Another detrimental impact of the Syrian conflict is the destruction of the Syrian culture. This does not pose as much threat as the other aspects of the war, but it is still important to preserve Syrian culture as a tribute to humanity as a whole. Without Syria's precious culture, the world would have a piece missing in its own global culture.

⁹⁸ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Mixed Migration into Europe*, Geneva: Switzerland, 2015.

⁹⁹ Philip Issa, "Syrian Civil War: Five Ways the Conflict has Changed the World", *The Independent*, 13 March 2016.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Jason M. Breslow, "Why Are So Many Westerners Joining ISIS?", *Frontline*, 11 August 2014.

4.4 *Implications for Bangladesh*

The paper basically focuses on the impacts of the Syrian crisis on Middle East region and on global politics, where Bangladesh is not directly involved. Moreover, there are certain factors like geographical distance between Syria and Bangladesh, absence of any diplomatic mission of Bangladesh in Syria suggest why Syria is not directly linked to the interests of Bangladesh. But, Syria's location in the Middle Eastern region creates anxiety for Bangladesh as instability in Syria in particular and in the Middle East as a whole might hamper the labour market of Bangladesh. About 76.43 per cent of total Bangladeshi migrant workers reside in the GCC countries¹⁰² -- Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates which are directly or indirectly involved in the Syrian war and it is assumed that if there is any unrest in these countries due to the crisis then it will definitely impact the overseas employment market of Bangladesh. Fortunately, the Syrian crisis has not been able to adversely impact the current overseas employment trend of Bangladesh in the Middle East countries. Moreover, there has been an increase in the overseas employment rate of Bangladesh in 2014-15 that initially dropped by 30 per cent in 2013 (Annex A). But the matter of concern is remittance income has not accelerated although manpower exports went up significantly and it is reported that remittance fell 8.33 per cent year-on-year to US\$ 1.21 billion in May as low oil prices erode the incomes of the Middle Eastern countries¹⁰³ and it is believed that the decline in the crude oil price is one of the outcomes of the Syrian civil war.

Another growing concern for Bangladesh is that a portion of Bangladeshi diaspora living in the Middle Eastern region might get radicalised by the ideology of the rising extremist groups. But still, this has not happened either as the existing diplomatic missions of Bangladesh in different Middle Eastern countries are working to raise awareness among the Bangladeshis not to get motivated by the perpetrators.

Growing tension between Shiite and Sunni factions of Islam in the Middle East has emerged as another concern for Bangladesh regarding the conflict. As a moderate Muslim country, Bangladesh always wishes for a peaceful co-existence among different factions of the Muslim world. Yet the recent tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran has posed a challenge for Bangladesh because the former is one of the largest partners of Bangladesh's international relations and the latter has become an opportunity for Bangladesh to export products like textiles, chemicals, pharmaceuticals and jute items.¹⁰⁴ Bangladesh can also be benefited from importing oil at a cheaper rate from Iran. In this regard, Bangladesh has to remain careful and sharp in maintaining its bilateral relations with both Saudi Arabia and Iran to stay in a win-win situation.

¹⁰² Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), *Statistics of the Overseas Employment and Remittance from Bangladesh since 1976 to 2016 (up to May 2016)*, Dhaka 2016.

¹⁰³ "Remittance Falls 8pc in May", *The Daily Star*, 08 June 2016.

¹⁰⁴ Asadul Kibria, "Post-Sanctions Iran Offers Business Opportunities", *The Financial Express*, 25 July 2015.

5. Conclusion

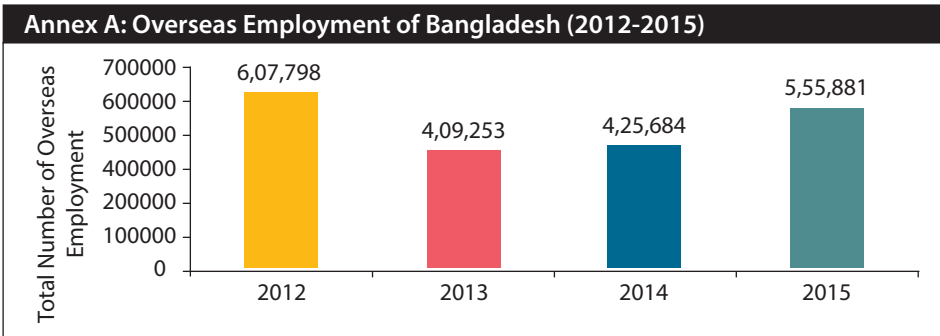
Civil wars are devastating. Both sides destroy infrastructure and wage economic warfare, causing devastation and dislocation. Beyond the casualties of war, human capital is destroyed by the lack of health services and education as investment shifts to weapons.¹⁰⁵ They can damage not only a specific country, but also the implications of that particular war can severely affect other countries. In the current globalised world, no state is isolated from the actions, reactions and interactions among different states. Though every state is individual and sovereign, but one country's internal policy and situation impact the others in the current international system either directly or indirectly both in a positive and negative manner. The ongoing crisis in Syria has epitomised it clearly that how a conflict can severely create a predicament situation not only within the country but also within the region with having an outreach to the global power-politics. It is not sure whether the conflict will ultimately unseat Bashar al-Assad, nevertheless it has already had a major impact on the Middle East and the overall international system and that impact, for good or bad, is likely to continue, even if the guns of the conflicting parties fall silent.

The current crisis has massively destroyed Syria, where more than one per cent of the total population have been killed, half of the population has been displaced and one fifth have become refugees. Surely, the conflict will have a short to midterm negative impact on Syria's education system, culture and economy; but the worst impact is that it is grinding down the country's national mechanism and creating a situation for long lasting internal conflicts. Sectarian tensions deteriorated by the conflict will matter to manipulate both domestic and regional political settings. The large presence of refugees within the region and beyond is not only challenging the governance of global migration, but also influencing the security structure of the various states along with Syria's border and in Europe. The rise of different terrorist organisations is a shock to intensify the existing threat of global terrorism and extremism.

The longer the war drags on, the greater the chance for Syria to turn into a failed state, increasing the likelihood of regional destabilisation as well as creating corrosion in the global peace and stability. Without a significant shift in the balance of power or a major diplomatic breakthrough, the conflict is unlikely to end in the near future.¹⁰⁶ Warring parties, both directly and indirectly involved in the conflict need to exercise greater caution and flexibility, least they should generate additional problems for an already troubled country in particular and the region as a whole.

¹⁰⁵ Brian Michael Jenkins, *The Dynamics of Syria's Civil War*, Washington DC: Rand Corporation, p. 21.

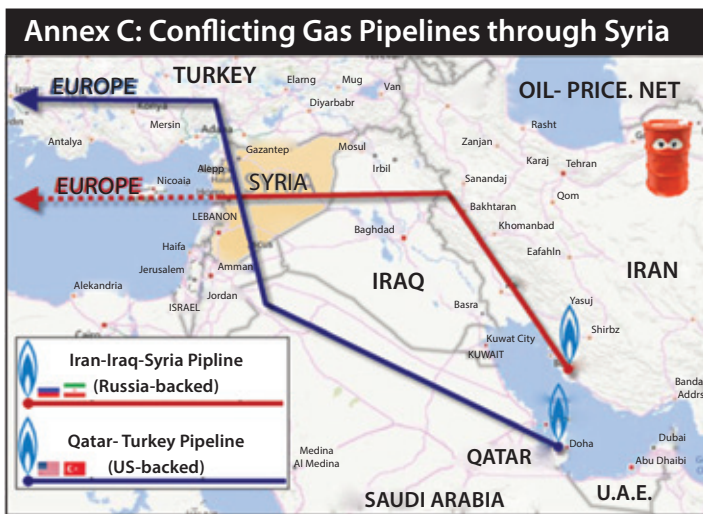
¹⁰⁶ Asaad Al-Saleh and Loren White, *op. cit.*



Source: Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), *Overseas Employment and Remittance*, Ministry of Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment, Government of Bangladesh

Annex B: List of Interviewees

Name	Designation	Date
Mr. Masudur Rahman	Director General, West and Central Asia Wing, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Bangladesh	18 May 2016
Mr. K. M. Ali Reza	Deputy Chief, Ministry of Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment, Government of Bangladesh	19 May 2016



Source: Steve Austin, "Oil prices and the Syrian civil war", *Oil-Price.Net*, 14 October 2015, available at <http://www.oil-price.net/en/articles/oil-prices-and-syrian-civil-war.php>, accessed on 10 June 2016.