

VIEW : US-Syria conflict and its consequences — Muhammad Omar Iftikhar

The US wants to monitor Iran's activities from a close range and it can do so by having a military presence in Syria. This can be a reason, among many, why the US wants to attack Syria

The Syrian crisis is overshadowing the Middle East as the US has accused Bashar al-Assad's regime of using chemical weapons. Tensions were high when President Barack Obama announced to strike Syria but then had a surprise change in plans. President Obama said that the US forces would act only if the Congress approves the attack. This abrupt twist comes at a time when the entire Middle East and South Asia was mentally prepared for another war akin to the 2002 Iraq War. Interestingly, this time again, the US is using chemical weapons as a motive to attack Syria. However, the consequences of the war might put a political and an economic burden over the Pentagon.

Furthermore, the Syrian dilemma took a serious turn when Russia made its presence felt and jumped into the US-Syria conflict. Russian President Vladimir Putin issued a blunt statement to carry out a massive military strike against Saudi Arabia if the west attacked Syria. According to sources, the Saudi Arabia-Russia relationship stood on thin ice when President Putin held a meeting with Saudi Prince Bandar Bin Sultan in August. Prince Sultan warned the Russian president that the Kremlin should accept Syria's defeat otherwise Russia would have to deal with grave consequences.

The entire eastern hemisphere would come under jeopardy if Russia does attack Saudi Arabia. This will not only disturb the Muslim sentiments attached with Saudi Arabia, but it will also damage the global demand and supply of oil. Moreover, it would be for the first time since the Cold War that the US and Russia would fight over the same issue simultaneously, which will not bode well for the rest of the world.

Sources claim that the US Senate foreign relations committee has agreed on a draft resolution to send military force to Syria. Although a war with the US is looming over Syria, Al-Assad is not alone in this predicament, as Syria has been garnering support from Russia and Iran. Interestingly, Russia has to side with Syria for two reasons. First, Russia is one of Syria's biggest arms suppliers, with its defence contracts with Syria worth more than four billion dollars. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Syria bought arms from Russia worth \$162 million in 2009 and 2010 and signed a \$550 million deal to buy combat training jets from Russia. Moreover, Russia supports Syria on an ideological

principle, as it does not want the US to expand its presence in other regions of the world, especially the ones that are in proximity to Russia. Sergey Lavrov, Russia's Foreign Minister, has asserted that there is no evidence of the Syrian government carrying out chemical attacks, and has openly accused Washington "to create artificial groundless excuses for military intervention."

Furthermore, Russia, being a member of the UN Security Council, can veto the Council's resolutions and has done so in the past. If Russia does veto a resolution to postpone the attack on Syria, then the US may have to rethink its strategy.

Iran is another regional neighbour that has its influence over Syria. Religion is a common denominator between the two countries as Iran is the most populous Shiite Muslim nation in the world and the Alawites, a branch of Shia Islam, dominates the Syrian government. The Syrian rebels, however, are Sunnis. Moreover, Syria did support Iran during the war against Iraq (1980-88) and enjoys diplomatic closeness with Tehran. Ideological and religious factors are playing a role in Iran-Syria relations, as analysts believe that Iran does not want a Sunni government in Syria. Moreover, Iran is supporting Syria because the Syrian rebels are garnering their support from Iran's rivals, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. If Iran has a diplomatic affinity with Syria, then the US-Iran relationship is also in a crisis as Washington is concerned over Tehran's nuclear ambitions. The US wants to monitor Iran's activities from a close range and it can do so by having a military presence in Syria. This can be a reason, among many, why the US wants to attack Syria.

Although President Obama was confident to launch an attack on Syria, it was a sudden turnaround when he informed that the Congress members would vote over the issue. Analysts would wonder why the Congress members did not raise their voice when the White House issued the statement in the first place. Although President Obama has assured that the attack would be "limited in duration and scope", he should realise that sending troops in Syria might not bode well for the region, as Washington is still paying the political and economic price for engaging with Afghanistan and Iraq.

The writer is a freelance columnist for various English dailies and writes on international relations with focus on South Asia. He tweets @omariftikhar