

The many conflicts in Syria

Last year, after the regime forces made advances against the rebels, and the Islamic State was defeated, the Syrian civil war seemed to be winding down. However, the crisis is escalating with the regime beginning a new phase of the war in Idlib province, which is controlled by rebels and al-Qaeda-linked jihadists; Turkey sending troops across the border to fight the Kurdish rebels; and the U.S. seemingly determined to stay in Syria for a longer term. Like the first phase of the civil war, this phase is also multidirectional. The regime, backed by Iran and Russia, is fighting against the rebels and jihadists in Idlib, Eastern Ghouta, and some southern enclaves. Turkish proxies, backed by the air force, are attacking Kurdish militias in Afrin, a border town. The U.S., despite Turkey's warnings, continues to support the Kurdish militias in several other towns in the border region.

The downing of an Israeli fighter jet in Syria last week triggered this question once again. From the early phase of the civil war, Israel has been a passive player. In the initial stages, it backed rebels on the Golan side to create a buffer between the Golan Heights that have been occupied by Israel since 1967 and the Syrian mainland. With Iran and Hezbollah expanding their presence in Syria, Israel's focus broadened to curtail their influence. Last week, an Israeli fighter jet was carrying out a raid against an Iranian drone control facility in Syrian deserts when it came under Syrian anti-aircraft fire. Following the incident, Israel has steadily enhanced its air campaign in Syria against what it calls "Iranian targets".

The conflict is becoming more complex with more powers intervening. Earlier, among external powers, only Russia and the U.S. were making direct interventions, with Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar and Turkey all supporting their respective proxies. Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies may have taken a beating after rebels lost Aleppo, but Turkish and Israeli jets are now carrying out airstrikes in Syria. Russia appears to be stuck in the conflict. Its heavy bombing campaign helped turn the war in favour of the regime, but its attempts to push the government to make concessions in peace talks have been a failure. With more powers in the war, finding a solution is becoming more complicated.

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