Syrian Civil War - Factors at Play

What is the issue?

- Ten years since the outbreak of the crisis in Syria, the regime of President Bashar al-Assad seems to have won the civil war.
- Here is an overview of the ongoing transformations and the future course of the conflicts and relationships.

How has the territorial control transformed?

- In 2015, before the Russian intervention, Mr. Assad's area of influence had shrunken to the largely Alawite-populated region stretching from Damascus to the Mediterranean coast.
- But, now, his troops control most of Syria, except Idlib and the Kurdish territories.
- The Kurds enjoy autonomy in the border region with Turkey, but have bought a delicate peace with Damascus.
- In effect,the only parts of the country that lie outside the sovereignty of the Syrian government are:
    1. Idlib, controlled by jihadists and rebels
    2. some towns on the border that are held by pro-Turkey militias

What effect has this created?

- Mr. Assad's victory seems to have locked Syria in a prolonged geopolitical contest.
- The Syrian army turned around the war with help from Russia, Iran and several Iran-backed Shia militias, including the Lebanese Hezbollah.
- They are all still in Syria, which shares a border with Israel.
- This means the civil war has intensified the Iran-Israel conflict.

Has Israel's approach to the crisis changed?

- When the Syrian crisis unfolded in 2011-12, Israel took a 'wait and watch' approach.
- This was primarily because it preferred a stable regime in Damascus to the post-revolutionary chaos.
- So, despite the absence of a formal peace treaty, the Israeli-Syrian border

has been largely uneventful since the 1970s.
- But when Iran deployed militias and military assets in Syria in defence of Mr. Assad, Israel changed it approach.
- Also, across Israel's northern border, the Hezbollah has already established a formidable presence.
- Both Israel's 1982-2000 occupation of southern Lebanon and the 2006 war on Lebanon were resisted by Hezbollah.
- For its part, Israel would not like to have more Iran-backed Shia militias across the GolanHeights.
- So, it captured Golan Heights from Syria in the 1967 Six-Day War.
- This has been the de facto border between the two countries ever since.
- With current transformations in the power play, Israel changed its tactics.

What is Israel's changing tactics?

- It first started helping anti-Assad rebels in the Golan region by reportedly providing cash and medical aid.
- The plan was to create a buffer between the Golan Heights and the rest of Syria.
- This was done so that the pro-Iran militias could be stopped from coming face-to-face with Israeli troops.
- Later, after the tides turned in the civil war and Iran deepened its presence in Syria, Israel started bombing Iranian positions inside Syria.
- Since September 2015, the Syrian air space has practically been controlled by the Russians.
- But Russia looked away when Israel stepped up its bombings.
- Israel too has been careful not to hit Russian positions in the overcrowded Syrian battlefield.

- Israel had three key goals:

1. disrupt Iranian supplies for Hezbollah and other Shia militias
2. stop the militias advancing towards the de facto border
3. weaken Iran's presence in Syria, by continuously targeting them

- In this line, in the last 3 years (back from 2020), Israel has carried out dozens of aerial attacks in Syria.
- In retaliation, Syria has often fired anti-aircraft missiles.

What is Iran's role?

- For the Syrian government, support from Iran was a lifeline.
- While Russia provided air power in the civil war, Iran supplied ground troops.

- So, Mr. Assad did nothing to prevent the sprawling Iranian influence in his country despite Israeli attacks.
- On the other hand, Iran's response to Israeli attacks has been only to deepen its own footprints.
- As a result, Syria has emerged as a new theatre in the Israel-Iran geopolitical contest in West Asia, which could outlive the Syrian civil war.
- Already, the conflict has spilled from Syria into the Mediterranean and Red Sea waters where both sides target each other's ships.
- In all, the Israel-Iran contest is set to intensify further with -
    - Israel determined to contain Iran's growing influence in the region
    - the U.S. and other Western powers reaching out to Iran to revive the 2015 nuclear deal which could leave it more powerful economically

Source: The Hindu

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