



## **War against ISIS and the Dilemma of the Coalition**

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US-led forces have come back once again in Iraq not long after they had left the country with the self-applause for the victory against the terrorism and establishment of democracy in the war-torn nation. It would be the fourth US war in Iraq after the war of liberation of Kuwait; war against late Saddam Husain and subsequent war against Al-Qaeda. The focus of the new war is to eliminate menace of Islamic States in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) which has captured the large swath of territories in Iraq and Syria and so the new war also includes the Syria.

The decision of US came after a prolonged phase of dilemma whether it should engage militarily in West Asia afresh or leave it to be resolved by the warring groups and regimes in the region itself. In the Paris meet of September 15 2014, 50 nations decided to join the US-led coalition against the ISIS.

The US-led coalition is faced with a series of dilemma and is groping in the dark about the objectives, manners, outcome and the ways of execution of the operation. France became the first nation to join the assault on Iraqi territories but it along with other European allies made it clear that they had no intention of pounding the Syrian territories because it had no mandate either from the UN or the Syrian government.

This decision on the part of France is a clear message that US involvement in Syria is a

unilateral move and the gross violation of the UN norms. While US claims that it need not seek the authorization from the UN because it had launched the war at the invitation of Iraqi government itself and the similar plea offered by the French government but what about Syria. The US official pronouncement affirmed that the war against ISIS in Syria would not be a violation of its air zone because Syria is no more a legal entity.

Iran, one of the strategic players in the region, has called the war in Syria as illegal because it is without Syrian consent and lacks the approval of UNSC. Earlier Iran itself was keen in joining the war and it claimed more than once that regional and global cooperation is must and no war against ISIS could be successful without Iran.

Syrian President too was more than eager to join the coalition but US under immense pressures from other Arab allies denied it accusing both Iran and Syria of being the parts of the problems because of its sectarian and exclusive policies in Iraq and Syria. US's decision to keep Iran and Syria out of the coalition seems to emanate from its commitment not to give an impression that it was more a Shiite coalition against Sunni ISIS antagonizing its Gulf allies.

Gulf nations under the leadership of Saudi Arabia took no time in endorsing the desire of the US to join the coalition because they construed it as a God-sent opportunity to remove President Assad under the pretext of combating the ISIS. The will of the Gulf nations to join the coalition needs to be seen more as a strategic ambition of dethroning Assad than any sincere objective of defeating the ISIS. One Arab commentator has put it very rightly that US did not create the coalition but it merely joined the Arab coalition against Mr. Assad. The alliance with the Gulf nations renders the war more paradoxical when US Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff observed that few Arab nations were funding the ISIS because of the failure of Free Syrian Army to remove Mr. Assad.

Though Turkey has succumbed to US pressure to join the coalition but its strategy is shaped more by its own internal political dynamics. Turkey decided to join the coalition after a prolonged dilemma because of the hostage crisis of its diplomats. The presence of large number of Alawites (seemingly a pro-Assad community) in Turkey and large Kurdish populations on Turkish-Syrian border have put the Turkey in a fix. Turkey is well aware of the fact that

weakening of ISIS in Kobani-a Kurdish hub on Turkey-Syria border- would strengthen the Kurdish ambitions for freedom, causing instability in Turkey. Turkey has already conditioned its support to Kurds against their fight against ISIS in Kobani and asked them to maintain political distance from the Syrian regime which is exploiting them for its own strategic gains.

Turkey has asked the US to create a no-fly zone on Syria-Turkish border (a Kurdish hub under deep influence of Kurdish Workers Party) but US has not conceded so far. Like most of the Gulf nations, Turkey's decision too seems to emanate from its prolonged desire to remove Mr. Assad and it might use the war against ISIS as a pretext to achieve its other strategic objectives in the region. Kurdish group wants Turkish government to rescue Kobani against ISIS while Turkey has closed its border along with Kobani in order to prevent the sneaking of the Turkish Kurds to join the fight against the ISIS. Turkey has called ISIS and Kurdish Workers Party a replica of each other as both are a threat to its national unity and integrity

This is not only the dilemma between Assad and ISIS that has put the coalition in a jeopardy but the issue of seeking boots on the ground is rendering the coalition a strategy-starved entity. US has already ruled out that it had any intention of sending the boots in Iraq or Syria but it wants the Arab nations to participate in the ground battle. US Joint Chief of Staff himself confessed that air strike would not suffice to achieve the aims of the coalition. Likewise the identification of the ISIS members would be an uphill task because they in large number have sneaked among the civilian populations creating a danger of a large-scale collateral damage during the war.

In conclusion, it would be a war unlike against Al-Qaeda because ISIS is four times larger than Al-Qaeda and a wealthy group with no clear blueprint. US-led coalition might take the benefit of the weakening of the ISIS to weaken the Assad while Assad might target the moderate forces in the name of ISIS. No one can anticipate who will fill the power vacuum after the departure of the coalition and the elimination of ISIS. Of course US would like the moderates to fill the power vacuum but they are not that powerful because they are being assaulted from both sides: regime and the extremists in Syria. One also needs to see whether it would be a war against terrorism of ISIS or against oppression of Mr. Assad.

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