

# Peacebuilding Commission

The Situation In Syria



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## Introduction

Syria is no stranger to conflict. Situated in the “Fertile Crescent”, its location is ideal regarding trading routes, oil reserves and other natural resources. It serves as a continental nodal point, as one of the larger Middle Eastern regions, those wishing to travel from and to Asia, Europe or Africa may need to travel through it if transmitting through air or sea is not viable. Syria has had many different rulers, from many different empires neighbouring or within its modern-day borders. Regarding these empires, its most recent colonial rulers, England and then France, are responsible for the established borders. Post-World War II, these victors drew up Syria’s borders with little recognition for the differing religious views and ethnic identities present in the region, leading to the national displacement of ethnic groups like the Kurds.

After the Arab Spring, a conflict thought to be instigated in the United States of America, many Arab countries in North Africa and the Middle East engaged in an uprising against those in political power at the time. While this event in some countries was swift and decisive, others like Syria led to a long, all-encompassing conflict. The current president, Bashar al-Assad has been in power since 2000, becoming president shortly after his father died while in presidency. al-Assad’s assumption of power was met with controversy regarding aspects such as religious representation and the right to vote. It is now up to the commission to find a way to bridge the conflict between loyalists and the opposition, between different Syrian ethnicities and religions, and build a better way forward.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Levantine Arab

An indigenous Mediterranean group with claims going back to the Canaan civilisations. Although they definitely bear Arab DNA from centuries of intermarriage, these people have a unique ethnic claim to the inhabitants of Canaan before the Arab Conquest.

### Kurds/Rojava

Live in the north part of the country. They are a distinct ethnic group with a large population, a nation without a country. The majority of Kurds can be found in Syria, Turkey, Iran and Iraq. Regarding the Syrian Civil War, Kurdish people are isolating themselves from the majority ethnic groups. Kurds are not typically one religion, with many being Muslim or Christian.



### **Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)**

A multi-ethnic coalition with predominantly Kurdish members, followed by Arabs and Christian Assyrians. The SDF is focused mainly on combating ISIS, receiving automatic support from the United States of America and various European nations.

### **Assyrians**

Are predominantly Christian who are known to speak Aramaic, the language thought to have been spoken by Jesus Christ. With a unique heritage, and even a completely different alphabet, they are often persecuted and are currently dwindling in numbers.

### **Free Syrian Army (FSA)**

Formed by Syrian military personnel who defected from the government sponsored army in 2011, however it includes both civilians and military defectors. It has support from both Western and other Arab countries like Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Various opposition factions including the FSA have been accused of human rights abuses however.

### **Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)**

An alliance formed in 2017 with strong links to Al-Qaeda. They have an Islamist and Jihadist ideology. There are many definitions for Jihadism, but it's typically agreed to mean a desire to restore Syria as a Islamic Nation, as opposed to a multiethnic and religious one.

### **Ahrar al-Sham**

A less extreme version of HTS composed of mainly Sunni muslims, they are the majority religion in Syria. Its position in the conflict is currently undecided, with the group forming alliances with other factions only to switch to another one later on.

### **The Syrian Government Forces**

Led by President Bashar al-Assad, have been accused of widespread human rights abuses including the releasing open fire on civilians, using chemical weapons, indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas and even torture. Individuals are known to disappear into torture facilities. The bodies are kept in Salt Rooms, which is a method of preserving bodies without the access to a freezer.

### **The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)**

Infamous for their crimes against humanity across the Middle East and North Africa, particularly against the indigenous non-muslims inhabitants of these nations. Their brutality has been recorded, with acts such as mass executions and beheadings not being uncommon. They have a harsh interpretation of Islamic law to justify this.



## Background Information

### General overview

The Syrian Civil War features the Government's army and supporters who oppose various rebel factions, with both sides claiming the other side was the instigator. These rebel groups do not have a unifying ideology or even the same amount of resources, just a common disdain for the current regime, lead by president Bashar al-Assad. al-Assad is engaged in a dictatorship, having assumed control of Syria as President after the death of his father. He is an Alawite, a minority sect of Islam within Syria.

Not having enough representation or tolerance for the other ethnic and religious groups in Syria has led to further persecution with some of these groups forming factions of rebel groups. Initially, it is said that the people of Syria were displeased with al-Assad's current regime and sought to protest, which was met with the government's troops opening fire on the protesting civilians. Alternatively, some say that Western powers possibly supplied civilians with weapons to destabilise the current regime prior to the army's initial attack. Regardless of the credibility of this claim, it is known for a fact that rebel groups have abused, killed and displaced civilians in the name of the rebellion, leading civilians to question whether the rebellion or the current government is worse. Corruption is seen throughout both sides of this conflict, and inevitably as left civilians feeling unsure of who to trust or turn to. Each side seems to have an ulterior motive. The conflict in Syria as a whole is a subset of a larger issue, essentially being a proxy war between the United States of America and the Russian Federation, with al-Assad having immense aid from the Russian military as of 2015.

### Border conflict contributing to Syria's political instability

Before looking at the Syrian war on a larger scale, it's important to understand the war's intricacies on a micro-scale. Syria is bordered by Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan, with a small section of disputed land touching Israel. These borders are a byproduct of the Sykes Picot agreement, a secret treaty between France, Britain, Italy and Russian to determine their spheres of influence in the case of the Ottoman Empire's demise. The Kurdish people are an ethnicity in their own rights with unique culture and traditions, often being described as a nation without a country. After WWII, the Fertile Crescent was split up with little regard to ethnic and religious borders, leaving the Kurdish people displaced. The general area of Kurdistan borders Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, with Western Kurdistan being located in Syria. After the Arab Spring, Kurds, or Rojava, have isolated themselves from the other Syrians fighting for independence and self determination. The border issues with Israel are located around the Golan Heights, with Al Quneitra as the main focus point. Al Quneitra is the abandoned and destroyed capital of the Quneitra Governorate, being a crucial site in the Yom Kippur War, now serving as a UN-patrolled buffer zone. The United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) was formed as a method of peacekeeping between



Syria and Israel with the hopes of maintaining a ceasefire following the fallout of the Yom Kippur War. With this in context, the buffer zone and border crossing has been the focus of some rebel groups who temporarily occupied it. Rebel groups maintained control until 26 July 2018, when the Syrian army took back Quneitra following the rebels' surrender.

### **Neighbouring interactions, disagreements and alliances**

Regarding international relations and involvement in the Syrian War as a proxy war, the Syrian government has done well to limit unnecessary interactions with outside parties. Small domestic markets and enterprises have been nationalised and public banking has been made illegal. These efforts are actually working to help Syria's economy, keeping money flow within the nation.

However, Syria has not neglected all outside interactions. Following their support of Iran against Iraq, Iran has been a close ally, backing up Assad's current regime. Contrastingly, Turkey is not on good terms with Syria. Turkish border problems have increased as Turkey has taken in the most Syrian refugees at 3.5 million costing over 8 billion dollars to their economy in aid.

### **The Russian Federation's intervention**

Russia entered into the conflict in 2015, having naval ports in Tartus. Attacks have been recorded with air and ground strikes on schools, hospitals and marketplaces, breaching multiple human rights. Russia and China have blocked many sanctions from being imposed and resolutions from passing as they have interests in Syria's location and resources and the United States' involvement in the Arab Spring is a threat to this. In July 2023, The Russian Federation vetoed the Cross-Border Aid Text. The resolution would have authorised the renewal of cross-border aid delivery for the next nine months to Northern Syria, the region bordering Turkey where that is more inhabitable compared to the mountainous centre of Syria. Russia's veto has particularly closed down the operations along the Bab al-Hawa crossing, a strip of land used by the United Nations and NGOs to deliver 85% of aid to Syria. Iran also agreed with this veto under the concern that Western nations may have ulterior motives and intentions.

### **Reasons for international interest in Syria, from both the West and East**

Syria is home to many natural oil reserves, however, it is by far not their biggest market and isn't on the same scale as their neighbouring middle eastern countries. It's speculated that China and Russia's involvement in Syria is not just regarding oil reserves, but perhaps it's prime location for industry and transportation. With many proposed plans for the construction of an oil pipeline from Qatar to Europe through Syria, alongside the "Friendship Pipeline" or "Islamic Gas Pipeline" (with the latter being coined by Western nations), some journalists and researchers believe that the Syrian Civil war was instigated by the CIA as a reaction to Syria's rejection of the pipeline proposal in favour of the Friendship pipeline. In addition, there are speculations that Russia's involvement in the Syrian civil war is motivated



by the potential benefits of the Friendship Pipeline in an effort to prevent the Qatar-Europe pipeline from being built. Agence France-Presse, a French international news agency, has spoken against Syria's rejection of the pipeline that would be built through its own soil, by implying Syria is protecting Russia as an ally, with Russia being Europe's top supplier for natural gas.

## **Population Demographics**

The French and the British established the borders of many middle eastern countries, grouping many different religions and ethnic groups into the same categories and countries. Alawites have been commanding Syria since the 70's even with being a minority.

Syrian demographics are governed by two distinct factors, religion and ethnicity. With Syria's unique location being the nodal point for many movement patterns, it's no surprise that this nation hosts a large array of different demographics. 74% of Syrian's identify themselves as Levantine arabs, 9-10% Kurdish, Kurds or Rojava, 4% Assyrian and 1.5% Circassian. In contrast, Syrian religious demographics are composed of 74% Sunni, 12% Alawites, 3% Shiites, , 3% Druzes and 8% Christian, however one must consider the uncertainty in these numbers as certain ethno-religious groups have been targeted disproportionately. It's important to note that Syrian legislation does allow for religious freedom but by constitutional law the president must be Muslim.

Syria currently has the largest refugee population in the world since the Rwandan genocide. Before the war the population of Syria was 23 million. At present, the population has slightly increased from 18.5 million in 2021 to 21.3 million as of 2024. 10 million people are estimated to have been internally displaced and over 5 million have fled since 2011. South American nations such as Brazil and Venezuela have given humanitarian visas to refugees, with Brazil having the highest Syrian diaspora population at 4 million. Additionally, Venezuela has openly aligned with the Syrian government.

## **Major parties Involved**

### **Arab League**

The Arab League, composed of countries from the Middle East and North Africa with a majority of Arab in their population, have been involved in the Syrian Civil War to some extent. The League attempted a diplomatic resolution early-on to the onset of the conflict, calling for political dialogue. Unfortunately, international division amongst member states, differing political views regarding the Syrian government, and the growing concern of the rise of extremist groups complicated the attempt to find a unified response. Some member states such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar supported certain opposition factions with arms and financial aid. The Arab league ultimately suspended Syria's membership in 2011, condemning the current government. Overtime, border conflicts have led to a complex web of alliances and rivalries between Syria and its neighbours.



### **The Russian Federation**

Provides crucial support to al-Assad's government. The conflict escalated in 2015 when Russia began conducting airstrikes against various opposition groups, including both moderate rebel factions and more extreme jihadist groups. Russia's military intervention significantly bolstered al-Assad's front. Russia has become an advocate for the Syrian government, engaging in peace talks and supposedly participating in international efforts to find a solution. Russia has a strategic military base in Tartus, a port on the Mediterranean Sea. The Russian Federation believes that any missions crossing into the Syrian border should be authorised by the Syrian government first and foremost. Russia is no stranger to vetoes either, and in total, regarding the Security Council resolution providing essential humanitarian aid to Syria, they have vetoed a total of 17 different times.

### **The United States of America**

The USA may have possibly instigated the conflict in the first place, possibly providing arms to various groups at the preliminary stages of the civil war. Interestingly, they have refrained from supporting many of the current opposition groups, citing that they don't have trust in any of them in the case the government is deposed and these groups come into power instead. One group the United States has publically fought is ISIS. In the early stages of the war, the USA provided assistance to the FSA and SDF in an attempt to bolster their efforts against the loyalist groups. However, after the conflict evolved the USA shifted their focus to solely countering ISIS, leading a coalition conducting airstrikes against the Jihadist group. It is almost certain the United States of America has conducted ulterior operations away from the public eye.

### **Turkey**

Turkey has been focused mainly on maintaining its national security throughout this conflict. Sharing a long border with Syria, they experienced a vast amount of Syrian immigrants that severely damaged their economy. Turkey initially supported opposition factions with the aim to weaken the Assad government. Concerned about the rise of Kurdish forces along their border, Turkey intervened militarily in northern Syria from 2016 to 2018 targeting Kurdish groups and ISIS. Turkey's actions have occasionally put itself at odds with the US and Russia.

## **Timeline of Events**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Description of event</b>
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March 2012	Protests erupt in Syria, demanding political reforms and the release of political prisoners. The Arab Spring has begun.
April 2012	Security forces representing al-Assad crack down on the protests, leading to casualties.
July 2012	Defectors from the Syrian military form the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in opposition to the al-Assad regime.
June 2012	The Annan Plan, a UN-backed peace plan, fails.
August 2012	The Battle for Aleppo begins, becoming a focal point of the conflict
September 2013	UN inspectors confirm the use of chemical weapons in Ghouta, near Damascus.
October 2013	Diplomatic efforts lead to a deal for the destruction of Syria's chemical weapon
January 2014	ISIS captures the city of Raqqa, establishing it as a de facto capital.
June 2014	ISIS captures Mosul in Iraq, spreading its influence further.
September 2014	American-led coalition airstrikes Syria in the name of combating ISIS.
March 2015	Russia intervenes militarily in support of the Syrian government.
September 2015	Russia launches their own airstrikes against various opposition groups.
February 2016	A ceasefire agreement is brokered by the USA and Russia.
July 2016	The Siege of Aleppo marks the advent for mass civilian casualties. A military confrontation breaks out between the Syrian opposition who are





	against the Syrian government, supported by Shia militias, Hezbollah and Russia
December 2016	al-Assad's government retakes Aleppo, marking a significant turning point.
April 2017	The supposed detection of chemical weapons attack in Khan Sheikhoun prompts U.S. missile strikes against a Syrian airbase
May 2017	De-escalation zones are agreed upon by Russia, Turkey and Iran.
April 2018	American, British and French airstrikes follow another chemical attack in Douma.
October 2018	Turkey launches an offensive against Kurdish forces in northern Syria.
March 2019	ISIS loses its last stronghold in Baghouz, marking a turning point in the conflict against ISIS.
October 2019	US withdraws from Syria, leaving a window for Turkish military to attack Kurdish forces in northeastern Syria.
2020-2024	Russia essentially represents the Syrian government's wishes within the UN, leading to any attempts to rectify the current situation being quelled. The situation has not improved, however in recent years there has been a trend in the Syrian population increasing, perhaps due to a decrease in conflict during the Covid-19 pandemic.

## Relevant UN Treaties and Events

- Resolution 2642 (2022), 12 July 2022, (S/RES/2642/22)



- Statement by the President of the Security Council, 22 November 2019, (S/PRST/2019/14)
- Russian Federation: draft resolution, 8 July 2022, (S/2022/541)
- Resolution 2504 (2020), 10 January 2020, (S/RES/2504)
- Integrated and coordinated implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the major United Nations conferences and summits in the economic, social and related fields, 26 June 2023, (A/77/L.79)
- “They have erased the dreams of my children”: children’s rights in the Syrian Arab Republic\*, 13 January 2020, (A/HRC/43/CRP.6)

## Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

While attempts have been made within the United Nations and NGOs to solve the situation, the nature of veto powers has halted the majority of progress being made. It’s worth being said that while the Russian Federation has partaken in the killing of innocent civilians, aiding al-Assad’s regime, The United States’ intentions aren’t necessarily clean either. Syria is being used by both sides to sabotage the other and prevent its resources from landing in the other’s hands, essentially being the middleman between a Russo-American conflict. Any involvement from these superpowers must be met with critical analysis, as a large amount of resources are in question regarding this area. If a solution were to be made, perhaps the best way forward would be to limit any and all involvement from P5 nations regarding Syria, instead accepting aid from the UN’s organisation or other nations. Below, the main previous attempts to solve the issue are listed.

### Geneva Talks (2012-2017)

Several rounds of Un-convened peace talks in Geneva were held between representatives of the Syrian government and the opposition. With the aim to reach a solution to the conflict in both a political and social aspect, and the hopes of forming a transitional government. Unfortunately, the idea of forming a transitional government was not a balanced solution in the eyes of the government representatives and the negotiations never reached a comprehensive agreement.

### UN Security council Resolutions

On the topic of resolutions being vetoed by China and Russia, there was a series of resolutions passed skirting around the main conflict. For example, in 2013 Resolution 2118 called for the destruction and dismantlement of chemical weapons in Syria. Additionally, in 2015, Resolution 2254 devised a roadmap for political progress, outlining the crucial need for a ceasefire and later on elections. These resolutions weren't controversial enough to be vetoed, but they also weren't impactful enough to improve the overall situation in Syria. On top of this, implementation of these measures was extremely slow-paced.



### **Astana Process (2017-2021)**

Aside from these UN-related efforts, the Astana Process involved the nations of Russia, Turkey and Iran as guarantors for ceasefire agreements. Violence did actually see a temporary reduction in certain areas, but the overall political landscape of Syria remained unchanged.

### **The Syrian Constitutional Committee (2019-2024)**

Led by the United Nations, the SCC was established to draft and discuss the possibility of a new constitution for Syria. Interestingly, the committee involved members from civil society and the opposition, as well as the current Syrian government, which is by far one of the most progressive aspects of these solutions. Although consensus on Syria's issues is hard to come by, a habitual gathering of Syrians from different political stances, religions and ethnicities is completely necessary for peace moving forward

## **Possible Solutions**

### **Diplomatic negotiations to achieve a ceasefire**

By engaging major global and regional powers, including the United Nations, the Russian Federation, the United States, Turkey and the key Arab states in an effort to facilitate negotiations. This form of international mediation may have possible results. Additionally, by taking into account the voices of representatives such as the Council of the Syrian Charter (see link in appendix), we can conduct inclusive talks to find a middle ground between opposing parties. Through dialogue we can implement a comprehensive ceasefire which will allow enough time for the rebuilding of infrastructure and the delivery of humanitarian aid. By establishing mechanisms for post-conflict reconciliation, we can use justice to address grievances.

One effective negotiation point that could potentially invoke a ceasefire is getting all Superpowers and nations in the Arab League to sign a treaty forbidding the construction of any oil pipeline. Seeing as this is the main aspect of Syria that Russia and the United States have gotten involved over, the treaty, along with other measures, could've dissuaded them from trying to take the oil for themselves if they know the other side couldn't get it either. This may also calm down the situation inside of Syria, as many Syrians don't enjoy international involvements within their borders.

### **Autonomy**

On a regional level, exploring options for splitting the current Syrian government, perhaps providing certain regions with a degree of autonomy based on local demographics and needs, may work as a viable solution. By introducing some level of autonomy alongside one overarching government, the power can be given back to the people, while not unsettling the current establishment too much. We can develop committees for the inclusion of various ethnic and religious groups to involve them in decision-making processes at both a local and national level.



This way of coexistence will garner international support for the reconstruction of war-torn areas, with nations sharing a similar history, ethnicity or religion helping the committees and semi-autonomous or autonomous regions get started. This could extend further to focus on economic development and institution-building at the local level. The only drawback to this solution is that new ethnic divides regarding culture and land rights may form, leading to further conflict. Lastly, the decision of which groups obtains which land must NOT be decided by an outside party, as we've seen through countless historical examples of how this doesn't work.

### **Focusing on humanitarian aid and rehabilitation**

Calls for an immediate and comprehensive ceasefire to halt hostilities are great and very much needed, however, realistically it might not be possible at this point in time. In order to save as many lives as possible, we must not wait for a ceasefire, and still try to assist civilians on a local level. Humanitarian access is not proportionate for all affected areas. It is vital that more non-conflict zones are established by the United Nations so that organisations such as Medecins Sans Frontieres and Amnesty can conduct their vital work without further damage being caused to those already affected.

This comes with its own drawback, as the Syrian government has made it very clear they do not want outside nations or organisations tampering with their way of order, and any resolutions regarding this issue may be vetoed. Therefore, it may be a good idea to write clauses in a manner that are effective but non-confrontational, or extremely specific so there's no gap for misinterpretation by either those with the power to veto or those who may carry out misconduct under the vagueness of a clause.

Establishing more secure, smaller humanitarian corridors to start or expanding on those already established is less provocative. These efforts will help mobilise an international effort to support the reconstruction of infrastructure, education and healthcare.

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## Appendix or Appendices

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