



# SIX YEARS OF WAR IN SYRIA

**POLITICAL AND  
HUMANITARIAN  
ASPECT**

NR: 005

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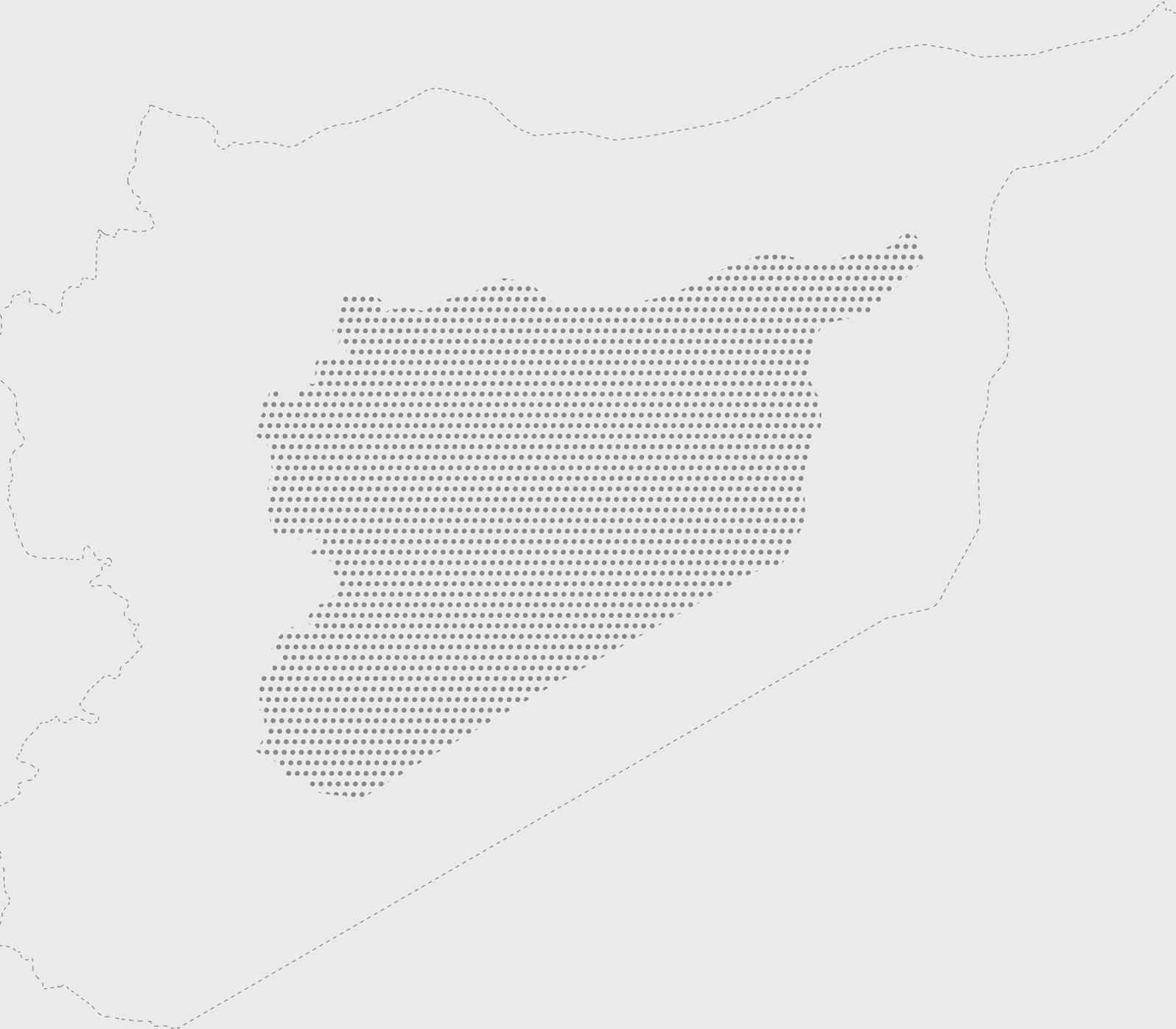
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# Content

07	<b>INTRODUCTION</b>
08	<b>RUN UP TO THE WAR IN SYRIA</b>
-----	
21	<b>POLITICAL ASPECT: SYRIA POLICIES OF INTERNATIONAL AND LOCAL ACTORS</b>
-----	
22	<b>INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS</b>
23	THE UNITED NATIONS
30	THE EUROPEAN UNION
34	THE LEAGUE OF ARAB STATES
35	<b>STATES</b>
36	TURKEY
43	THE UNITED STATES
50	RUSSIA
57	IRAN
61	SAUDI ARABIA
64	CHINA
66	<b>NON-STATE ACTORS</b>
67	SYRIAN POLITICAL OPPOSITION
73	DAESH
76	PKK'S SYRIA OFFSHOOT: PYD-YPG
80	HEZBOLLAH
-----	
83	<b>HUMANITARIAN ASPECT</b>
-----	
88	HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS
96	INTERNALLY DISPLACED SYRIANS
98	REFUGEES IN TURKEY
106	REFUEGES IN JORDAN
108	REFUGEES IN LEBANON
110	REFUGEES IN THE EU
-----	
116	<b>CONCLUSION: SHOCKWAVES OF THE SYRIAN WAR</b>
-----	
120	<b>ENDNOTES</b>



# Introduction

At TRT World, we aim to do things differently. Since we started the TRT World on 27 October 2015, we have promised to be the voice of the oppressed. We have aimed to emphasise the humanitarian angle of each story and be a catalyst for positive change. Since the launch of TRT World, Syria has always had a special place in our coverage. When Aleppo was being evacuated, TRT World was the only English broadcasting channel reporting live from western Aleppo and Idlib. We were the ones reporting from Idlib as the medical staff were cleaning chemical substances off civilians. The level of atrocity during the war, the suffering of millions of people and the impunity that the oppressors enjoyed never ceased in shocking us.

Each time we covered the Syrian civil war, we have tried to remain brave, independent and inspirational. In addition to being at the forefront, we have captured intimate stories that have ignited compassion and empowered positive action. Turkey, as the country that has hosted the largest number of refugees in the world, has been a source of inspiration during our coverage of the crisis. Prioritizing human life, and advocating for a political solution to solve the crisis have been our main goals.

In this report, prepared by TRT World Research Centre, we aim to take a step back and provide our audience with a perspective of what happened in Syria in the last six years. We tell the story of how peaceful protests met with brutality turned into a violent conflict.

The first part of the report deals mainly with the political and security aspects of the crisis in Syria. We deal with the background of the war, its outbreak and the main parties involved. We also give an account of the policies of international actors towards Syria, with the hope of helping readers properly internalise the twists and turns of the conflict. Moreover, we look at the international community's peace efforts briefly highlighting

missed opportunities to restore stability in the war-torn country. We also cover the rise of extremism and how the entry of various terrorist groups complicated the conflict further.

The second segment of the report tackles the humanitarian aspect of the Syrian War. There have been continuous violations of human rights in Syria in all their aspects, and which date back to before the current war even started. Syrian people were subjected to chemical attacks, torture, starvation and forced displacement. As such, we try to keep an updated record of these violations, to accurately reflect the inhumane hostility the Syrian people have been subjected to at the hands of the regime and radical terrorist groups operating within the country. As the world is witnessing the worst refugee crisis since the Second World War, we aim to give an all-encompassing picture of refugees displaced in Turkey, across other neighbouring countries and in the EU. An additional focus is also placed on the status of millions of internally displaced people.

Unfortunately, the Syrian crisis will continue to haunt the world unless the international community decisively intervenes. At TRT World, we believe the international community failed to prevent the outbreak and escalation of the war in Syria. Yes, repercussions of the prolonged violence in the country, from the spill over of terrorism to the mass refugee waves, have been felt throughout the world. However, this should not be the only motivation for the international community to seek an end to the conflict in Syria but rather it is our moral and ethical duty to end the incessant suffering of millions of Syrians.

**Ibrahim EREN,**  
Chairman of TRT World

# Run up to the War in Syria

17 December 2010 saw a wave of protests in Tunisia which triggered the Arab Uprisings, calling for democracy, justice, economic equality, and freedom. The uprisings took form in mass demonstrations, spreading from Tunisia across the Arab world, to Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria. The Arab Uprisings brought a new spirit to the region and gave people renewed vigour and vision for the type of life they wanted to lead. It instilled hope for more democracy, respect to human rights and adherence to the rule of law. The rapid toppling of Ben Ali in Tunisia, Abdullah Saleh in Yemen, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, and Muammar Gaddafi in Libya cemented an optimistic outlook for the future of the region. As such, the Arab Uprisings marked a turning point for Syria and Syrians.

In order to gain an insight into Syria's trajectory in the Arab Uprisings, one must understand the dynamics of the Assad regime. Bashar al Assad took over the administration of Syria on 17 July 2000 after the death of his father, Hafez al Assad. The history of Bashar's ascent to power is an interesting one, as he was not intended to be the second in command after his father, rather his brother Bassel was. Bassel al Assad died in a car crash in 1994, thereafter making Bashar the second in line after his father's death. Although Bashar al Assad initially presented himself as a reformer, he soon proved to be an authoritarian leader like Hafez. His rule has been characterised by widespread political oppression and cronyism, state violence, minority rule, corruption, and economic stagnation.

The Baath Party took power in 1963 after it suspended the political power-sharing framework operative at the time. The Baathists alongside the powerful ruling family prevented political participation and banned political dissent under Assad's rule. Hafez al Assad appointed party members to top positions in the public sector, government, and military, effectively transforming the



bureaucracy into a patronage network dominated by Baath Party loyalists.

The Baath Party gained a unique status in 1973 when its role as the leader of both state and society was engrained in the constitution. Its new status helped the party establish itself in almost every sphere of society, strengthening its grip on power. By the 1980s, the Baath Party had imprisoned, exiled or killed all of its opposition and potential opposition in a brutal and bloody crackdown. The decades to come would be epitomised by the Hama massacre of 1982, in which approximately 40,000 Syrians were killed, according to the Syrian Human Rights Committee. Further massacres took place across the country, albeit in smaller scales targeting primarily those involved or related to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. The notorious Tadmur also gains its reputation from this period, as the military detention centre, according to Amnesty International, became synonymous with brutal suffering and dehumanisation. In a report smuggled by a group of ex-political prisoners in 1999, which the Syrian Human Rights Committee gained access to – given they were the first human rights organization to document the brutality of the Assad



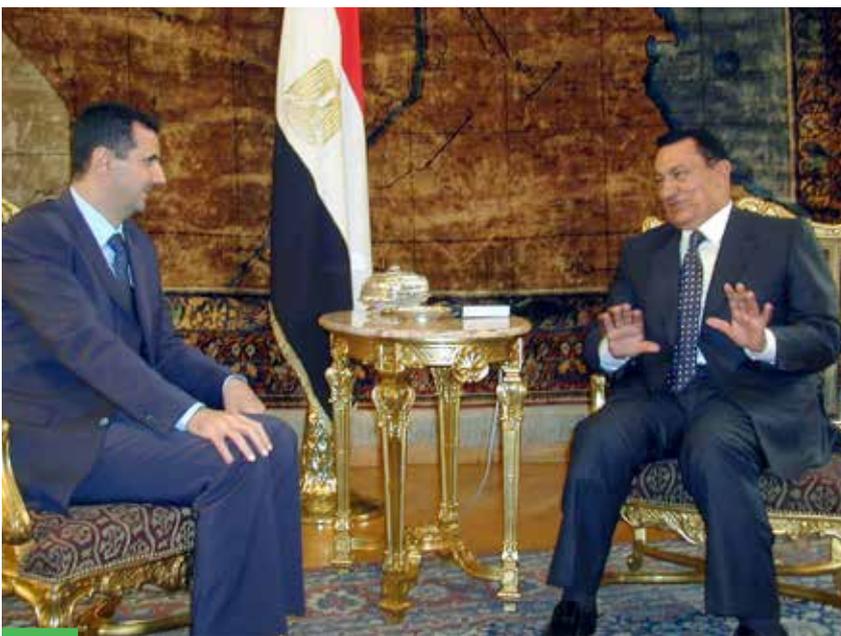
Hundreds of Syrians stage a protest in Sabkha city of Damascus. Source: AA

## Initial Causes of the War in Syria

- Political oppression
- Minority rule
- State violence
- Rampant corruption
- Economic stagnation
- Unemployment
- Persistent drought

regime in the 80s, the prison was described as “unique amongst Syrian prisons as it was a punitive institution in the form of a concentration camp—a live demonstration of intimidation, terror, torture and killing, as well as a source of psychological, emotional and bodily humiliation”. The massacre of Tadmur prison on 27 June 1980 claimed the lives of approximately 1000 political prisoners, a day after Hafez al Assad survived an assassination attempt. Though they found no evidence at the time, the assassination attempt was blamed upon the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, and the issuing of law 49/1980 came into effect, which effectively condemned all those associated with the organisation to death. Thus, Syria from then on was rendered the ‘Kingdom of Silence’, as after the opposition and massacres of the 80s, Syrians kept to themselves and away from politics to avoid a repetition of a brutal past protected by the constitution.

An amendment to the constitution in 2012 severed the party’s official ties to the state, however by which time the country had already fallen into turmoil and the constitutional change produced little effect. The party’s hold



Bashar al Assad and Hosni Mubarak came together during a meeting back in 2003. Source: Metin Turan / AA

## The Assad Regime and Its International Backers

The Syrian Arab Army (SAA) constitutes the main land force of the Assad regime. It comprises many corps, divisions, and brigades, each designated according to the number of soldiers it contains.

Bashar al Assad is the head of the army. He is followed by Defence Minister Fahd Jassem Al Friej and Bashar's younger brother Maher al Assad, who also is responsible for the Republican Guards and the army's elite Fourth Armoured Division. Together with the secret police, the Syrian army stands as one of the largest armies in the Middle East.

Supported by Iran's ground forces and the Shia militias of Hezbollah, the SAA fights against opposition groups in Syria. Russia's entry into the Syrian War in September 2015 further strengthened the Assad regime's position.

Although Russia claims to be in Syria to fight Daesh, the country is criticised for targeting opposition groups and civilians.<sup>1</sup> Russia's air strikes have helped the Assad regime to capture many strategic points from opposition groups. A 2015 analysis by Reuters stated that four-fifths of Russian air strikes targeted opposition groups rather than Daesh.

According to the UN, instead of directly engaging opposition groups with its land forces, the Assad regime pursues a strategy of systematic mass violence, sexual violence, torture, and imprisonment, toward opposition groups actively engaged in fighting and toward civilian populations.<sup>2</sup> The Syrian Network for Human Rights reported that the regime is responsible for 92 percent of the civilian deaths since the beginning of the war.<sup>3</sup>

on the country's military is particularly decisive. The party's military bureau directly oversees Syria's security apparatus and has the ultimate authority in military affairs. This pervasive command has helped Assad rule Syria through military oppression and fear of execution. The party also controls the state's vast intelligence service, known in Arabic as the mukhabarat, which penetrates every sphere of social life in Syria. This use of state violence has further fuelled popular resentment against the Assad regime.

The Baath party has maintained its influence and dominance during the civil war, with top military commanders and state officers still loyal to the Assad regime. Notwithstanding the defection of some prominent members, like Deputy Oil Minister Abdo Hussameddin, the majority of Syrian politicians remain loyal to Assad in his campaign against the opposition. Unwilling to sacrifice the privileges provided to those on the side of the state, or even perhaps the safety of their own lives, many Syrian politicians have remained

by their posts. It is difficult to judge the situation of the politicians and state officers who remain within the regime's fold of influence, it must be noted however – that regardless of their internal loyalties between themselves, remaining in such positions till this day has contributed to the strengthening of the regime and prolongation of the Syrian War.

Minority rule is another factor behind the armed resistance against the Assad regime. Assad and his family are members of the Alawite minority group, and have ensured that critical offices in the Baath Party and state institutions are occupied by Alawites. The country's security forces are also heavily dominated by Alawites. This has resulted in the construction of another major fault line in a society where Alawites and other Shia groups make up no more than 13 percent of the population, while Sunnis constitute 74 percent.<sup>4</sup> As the uprising in Syria escalated into an armed conflict, Alawites sided overwhelmingly with the forces of the Assad regime against the opposition, further exacerbating existing inter-group tensions.

The period prior to the outbreak of the conflict in Syria was marked by high levels of distrust in public officers, largely due to a culture of rampant corruption. Syrians engaged in business had to deal with corrupt officials. People were required to pay bribes even in simple interactions with police officers and to public officials to obtain licenses or other documents. Large businesses with close connections to the regime received favourable treatment, which put outsiders at a disadvantage and led to economic inequality. Small-business owners escaped to the informal sector to avoid the barriers imposed by the flawed administrative structure. While certain groups enjoyed the benefits of access to state funds and support, others did not. This structural inequality, together with high rates of inflation and unemployment, stoked further popular resentment against the Assad regime.

Some reports also cite a persistent drought between 2007 and 2010 among the reasons for the unrest in Syria. One of the worst droughts on record occurred immediately prior to



**Bashar al Assad.** Source: Kremlin Press Office / AA

Bashar al Assad, the current president of Syria, was born into an Alawiite family in 1965, in the capital city of Damascus. He studied medicine at the University of Damascus. Subsequently, he worked as a doctor and later travelled to London to study ophthalmology. However, as he would succeed his father's position, he was unable to finish his post-doctoral studies. In December 2000, he married Asma al Assad, an investment banker, and daughter of a British-Syrian cardiologist from an influential Sunni family from Homs. Assad and Asma have three children. He inherited rule from his father Hafez al Assad in 2000. Similarly, to his father, who ruled the country for 30 years, Bashar al Assad consolidated power in the hands of a few and repressed any alternative or opposition voices.

In 2011, when peaceful protests erupted in Syria, Assad used repressive measures to curb protests, assisted by security forces and his supporters. Although Bashar al Assad is yet to be taken to the ICC, human rights advocates consider Assad to be a war criminal given the war crimes and human rights violations he has committed since the onset of the uprising – and throughout the Syrian War. His strategic alignment with Iran and Russia has been influential in ensuring the survival of his regime.

**“He is perceived as overseeing the disruption of half of his country, the killing of half a million people, the displacement of 12 million people in Syria, and the destruction of many cities and historic landmarks in Syria. No one expected him to be that brutal.”**

**“One of my friends asked him about Hamza el Khatib. He was a child who was tortured to death in Deraa. He [Assad] looked at him and said ‘Do you know how many brothers Hamza el Khatib has?’. My friend was surprised by that question. Then Assad said ‘he had 13 brothers’ and started laughing. And my friend thought at that time that this was not normal. This is the way he was thinking, I guess, that sometimes you lose children, but it is not important if you are looking at the bigger scheme.”**

**Zaher Sahloul, Assad's former classmate**



**Syrian President Bashar al Assad and his brother Maher stand during the funeral of late president Hafez al Assad in Damascus on 13 June 2000.** Source: Str Old / Reuters

## **Maher al Assad**

Maher al Assad, the brother of Bashar al Assad, studied business administration at the University of Damascus. Like, his brother, he also joined the army after finishing his studies. Maher, the commander of the Syrian Republican Guard, had also been the head of the Syrian Army's elite Fourth Armoured Division.

Maher al Assad is an influential figure in the regime and in operations against the opposition. He is considered to be the second-most powerful person in Syria, and has been Bashar's right-hand man since the start of the civil war. In 2012, he was injured during a bomb attack in Damascus.

A joint inquiry for the United Nations and the global watchdog the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) resulted in a list of 15 individuals, including Maher al Assad and Bashar al Assad, who are to be scrutinised over links to a series of chlorine bomb attacks in 2014-2015.



Muallem is Assad's Foreign Minister.  
Source: Sefa Karacan / AA

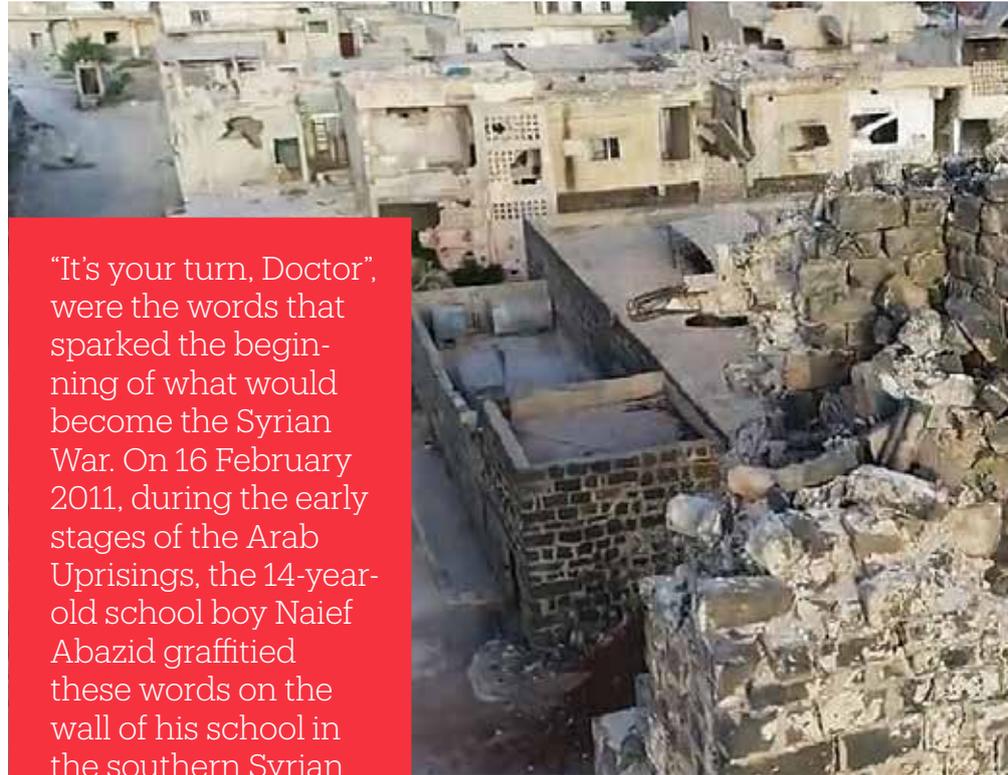
## Walid Muallem

Walid Muallem who was born in 1941 is Assad's foreign minister and a member of Ba'ath Party. Known for maintaining peace negotiations with Israel, Muallem has been serving in the Syrian foreign ministry since 1964. He also served as Syria's ambassador to Romania between 1975 and 1980 and to Washington between 1990 and 1999. He came to the position of foreign deputy minister in 2000.<sup>5</sup>

In February 2006, Muallem was appointed as minister of foreign affairs. Despite having significant experience in foreign policy and being one of the closest names to Bashar al Assad, his influence in the decisions made by Assad is constrained.

Nevertheless, since the beginning of Syrian War, he has been the main spokesperson of the Assad regime and has held many press conferences. During the press conferences, he has denied the regimes' atrocities against civilians and refused to accept the existence of Shabiha, pro-regime funded militant groups which have carried mass atrocities. In October 2012, he rejected the call by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon to declare unilateral ceasefires. In January 2014, he attended the Geneva II conference and described the opposition as traitors and terrorists.<sup>6</sup>

In February 2016, when Saudi Arabia planned to send troops to Syria to fight against Daesh, Muallem warned that any foreign soldiers who enter Syria without the regime's consent would "return home in wooden coffins".



"It's your turn, Doctor", were the words that sparked the beginning of what would become the Syrian War. On 16 February 2011, during the early stages of the Arab Uprisings, the 14-year-old school boy Naief Abazid graffitied these words on the wall of his school in the southern Syrian city of Deraa.<sup>7</sup>

the Arab Uprisings, severely affecting farming communities and causing widespread crop failure.<sup>8</sup> This resulted in the internal migration of many farming families, angry at the lack of government assistance, to Syria's urban centres. This influx of people led to increased unemployment and the further deterioration of economic conditions in city centres, thereby fuelling public anger against the Assad regime.

To voice their demands for reform in the aforementioned areas, the Syrian people began to protest as the Arab Uprisings swept through the region. It is worth noting that these early protests in Syria did not take the form of the mass processions seen elsewhere in the Arab world, largely due to widespread fear of reprisal by regime forces. Thus, Syria remained relatively calm until mid-March 2011, when a regime crackdown paved the way for the outbreak of mass protests across the country.

On 6 March 2011, Baathist security forces arrested and tortured 15 boys from Abazid's school. Their parents and community elders begged for their release but were reportedly told: "forget about your children. Go have new kids. If you cannot, send us your wives and we will get them pregnant for you."<sup>9</sup> Word spread, and on 15 March protesters in Damascus and Aleppo organised a series of peaceful gatherings in what they called "A Day of Rage."<sup>10</sup>

The government reacted violently, in what would become a turning point in the conflict. Later that week, thousands of locals in Deraa took to the streets to demand the boys' release and to call for democratic reform and an end to corruption. Security forces shot at them, killing four protesters.<sup>11</sup> During their funerals the following day, 10,000 people came together to protest the killings. Again, security forces fired into the crowd, killing six and injuring over 100.<sup>12</sup>



A view of war-torn Deraa. Source: Ammar Al Ali / AA

During the next week, several other protests, clashes, and killings took place.

Fifteen days after the schoolboys' arrest, Assad sent representatives to Deraa to release the boys, but the uprising had already been set in motion. By the end of March, over 100,000 people were rallying in Deraa. Dozens had been killed by Syrian security forces, and many more injured. Forty-five days after the fateful graffiti message, protesters across the country were calling for Assad to step down.

On 18 April in the city of Homs, hundreds of thousands marched to the city's clock tower square for a sit-in protest. At dawn the following day, Assad's security forces stormed the square and opened fire on the unarmed crowd. This became known as the "clock tower massacre", and was pivotal in the escalation of the Syrian uprising. Thousands of soldiers and ranking officers opposed the regime's crackdown on

civilians and defected. Military arms depots were opened to civilians, and what had been a peaceful uprising became an armed resistance.<sup>13</sup>

As the protests intensified, Turkey, once a close partner, repeatedly urged Assad to heed the demands of his people and put an end to the violence. On 9 August 2011, the then Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, held six hours of talks with Bashar al Assad and agreed on a 14-point framework for a peaceful transition. The framework as supposed to be declared within a two-week period.<sup>14</sup> Assad, however, failed to carry out these reforms and violated the framework from the very beginning.

On 15 August 2011, the Turkish foreign minister-fearing that Assad was prepared to carry out a bloodbath to maintain himself in power-expressed Turkey's demand that Assad immediately and unconditionally end all military operations against civilians.<sup>15</sup> When these operations continued, Turkey



Jaafari is the Assad regime's chief negotiator. Source: Mustafa Yalcin / AA

## Bashar Jaafari

Bashar Jaafari is a member of Ba'ath Party and the current permanent representative of the Assad regime to the UN. He studied French literature at the University of Damascus which he finished in 1977. In 1982, he obtained his diploma of International Political Relations from the International Institute of Public Administration in Paris. He continued his studies and finished his PhD in Political Science from Sorbonne University in 1989.<sup>16</sup> Jaafari was appointed as the First Secretary and Councilor at the Syrian Permanent Mission to the UN from 1991 to 1994. He also served as Minister Counselor at the Syrian Embassy in Paris from 1997 to 1998.

He has been appointed as the chief negotiator by the Assad regime after the outbreak of the war in Syria. Moreover, he served the Assad regime as the chief negotiator of the delegation to the Geneva II conference held in 2014. Besides, he led the Assad regime Delegation to the Moscow consultative Syrian meeting held in January 2015. During a press conference prior to the UN Security Council meeting on 28 September 2016, Bashar Jaafari laughed loudly instead of responding to a journalist who asked the following: "Representative, have you bombed hospitals in Aleppo?" Due to such a reaction, he was criticized by many officials including the US permanent representative Samantha Power who posted on Twitter: "This is the Syrian Regime's real face, they do not care about the thousands of people murdered".<sup>17</sup>



Turkish Coast Guard personnel helping refugees, after they toppled over a fishermen dinghy en route to Greece, January 2016. Source: Emin Menguarslan / AA

decided that there could be no peaceful transition as long as Assad remained in power. Consequently, relations between Turkey and Syria deteriorated, and Turkey cut all ties with the regime.

Despite growing domestic unrest and international condemnation of his government's conduct, Assad and his remaining forces refused to back down. The result has been years of conflict in which, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and the Syrian Network for Human Rights, at least 465,000 people have been killed and over 14 million displaced.<sup>18</sup> The conflict has also expanded significantly, attracting various local and regional armed groups, neighbouring states, and international actors supporting different sides in the conflict.

Over the course of the war, international actors have attempted to resolve the crisis on several occasions. Toward this end, four separate conventions have taken place in Geneva since 2012. While these

yielded some results on paper, they ultimately failed to resolve the conflict.

The Geneva I conference was convened by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, the special envoy of the United Nations and the Arab League to Syria, to secure a ceasefire between the Assad regime and the opposition. The failure of Geneva I led Kofi Annan to resign from his position as UN secretary general.<sup>19</sup> In 2014, the Geneva II conference was initiated by the UN and Arab League envoy Lakhdar Brahimi, but also failed to resolve the conflict. Following Kofi Annan's example, Brahimi resigned from his post as well.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, the current UN envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, continues to reconcile a diplomatic solution to the war.

Outside of the United Nations, members of the Arab League and the broader international community have come together within multiple frameworks, such as the Friends of Syria and the International Syria Support Group, in an effort to resolve the crisis.<sup>21</sup> Most recently,

Russia, Turkey, and Iran have organised the Astana talks to find a solution to the crisis.<sup>22</sup>

The sectarian civil war in Syria involves a complex variety of internal and external actors. Initially, the two main actors were the Syrian regime and a coalition of moderate opposition groups known as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which was established by defectors from the regime's forces. Afterwards, Hezbollah, Iran, Shia militias, and Russia came to the regime's aid, helping it retain a hold on power in the face of staunch opposition at home and abroad, further propelling the conflict into a full-fledged civil war. Meanwhile, the opposition has been weakened by the activity of radical groups, such as Daesh, commonly referred to as ISIS, in addition to the PKK's Syria affiliates the PYD and YPG.<sup>23</sup> The Syrian War is now a complex conflict involving shifting alliances and multiple groups with different goals and widely divergent ideologies.



Mamlouk is a prominent figure in Syria's Ba'ath regime

### **Ali Mamlouk**

Ali Mamlouk, a special security adviser to Bashar al Assad is one of his most-trusted men. Mamlouk is the chief of the Syrian National Security Bureau and comes from an originally Alexandrian family. He was born in 1945 in Damascus and has been working in different positions of the Syrian intelligence service since the 70s. After having worked under the interior minister Ghazi Kanaan in Lebanon at the military intelligence and air forces intelligence, he was promoted to his current position in 2005.

Mamlouk's relations with intelligence services of the Arab world has made him one of the main actors of the National Security Bureau of Syria. When Wikileaks revealed significant notes of a meeting in 2007, it became clear that Mamlouk and the Syrian National Security Bureau which he is leading play an important role in suppressing and controlling the small number of NGOs and the opposition. He is also the one who has maintained the negotiations with Saudi Arabia and the US.

Mamlouk who has been one of the major players in oppressing the protests all over the country, is in the list of officials subjected to economic sanctions by the US.<sup>24</sup>

**2011**

**15 March** Civilian protests demanding Bashar al Assad's resignation erupt in the city of Deraa after security forces arrest and torture teenagers for drawing graffiti on their school's wall in spirit of the Arab Uprisings. Security forces retaliate by opening fire on the protestors.

**29 July** Four months after the start of the protests, seven Syrian officers defect to form the Free Syrian Army.



Source: Burcu Ozer / AA

**18 August** US President Barack Obama says, "For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside."



Source: Samuel Corum / AA

**2012**

**24 February** The Friends of Syria Group meet in Tunisia for the first time in an attempt to address the situation in Syria. More than 60 countries and representatives including the United Nations, European Union, League of Arab States, Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Cooperation Council for the Arab Gulf States, and Arab Maghreb Union attend the meeting.

**16 March** Geneva I conference communique commences. Kofi Annan, the joint United Nations and the Arab League envoy to Syria, submit a six-point peace plan to the UN Security Council.



Source: Kremlin Press Office / AA

**12 June** The UN officially states that Syria is in a state of civil war.

**22 June** A Turkish F-4 Phantom reconnaissance jet was shot down by the Syrian regime.

**2 August 2012** Kofi Annan resigns.

**20 August** Obama declares that he will establish a "red line" against the use of chemical weapons in Syria.

## 2013

**9 April** Daesh splits from Jabhat Fateh al Sham, previously known as Al Nusra Front.

**9 August** US Secretary of State John Kerry meets with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. They agree to work toward inviting the Syrian regime and opposition for peace talks on the basis of the Geneva I communique, but no concrete plan is agreed.



Source: US Embassy in Italy / AA

**21 August** A chemical weapons attack takes place in Ghouta despite the US' "red line," killing some 1,700 people.

## 2014

**13 January** Daesh takes complete control of Raqqa after seizing it from the opposition.

**23 January** Geneva II conference commences in Switzerland. The Syrian regime and the opposition meet for the first time at the negotiating table, but fail to achieve a template for a transitional government.

**14 May** UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi resigns after the failure of the Geneva II conference.

**23 September** The US-led coalition launches an aerial campaign against Daesh in Syria and Iraq after the terrorist group takes control of Mosul. The US, Turkey, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE take part.



Source: Muhammed Yusuf / AA

**14 October** The US supports the YPG, an affiliate of the PKK, in the battle for Kobane with weapons, ammunition and medical aid.

## 2015

**18 June** YPG militants take control of a Daesh military base considered to be the group's first line of defence, north of its de facto capital in Northern Syria.

**29 August** The US and Turkey carry out their first joint operation in the Syrian conflict, conducting 20 airstrikes against Daesh in northern Syria near Marea, where both countries have agreed to establish a safe zone.



Source: AA

**30 September** Russia enters the conflict, launching a military campaign backing the Syrian regime with air strikes and cruise missiles in opposition-held areas and Daesh-held areas.



Source: Kremlin Press Office / AA

**23 October** Turkish, US, Russian, and Saudi foreign ministers meet to discuss the Syrian crisis. The first such meeting after Assad's visit to Moscow.

**14 November** The foreign ministers of 17 countries meet in Vienna and agree to a proposal calling for a ceasefire and nation-wide elections to be held in Syria.

**23 November** France launches a fresh round of air strikes on Daesh targets in Syria and Iraq after the Paris attacks.

## 2016

**1 February** Geneva III conference starts after delays caused by a dispute over the participation of opposition groups.



Source: Volkan Furuncu / AA

**27 February** Cessation of hostilities after an agreement between the US and Russia.

**11 March** The Syrian Network for Human Rights documents more than 477 breaches of the ceasefire in Syria since the cessation of hostilities came into effect on 27 February. Staffan de Mistura calls for elections to take place in 18 months.

**14 March** The Russian military announces that it will begin to withdraw the "main part" of its armed forces from Syria.

**15 September** The UN urges the Syrian regime to allow immediate aid deliveries to hunger-stricken civilians in besieged areas in Aleppo after a ceasefire brokered by Russia and the US.



Source: Mustafa Yalcin / AA

**25 September** Warplanes belonging to the Syrian regime and Russian warplanes strike opposition-held areas in Aleppo ahead of a UN Security Council meeting.

**22 December** The Syrian regime takes full control of Aleppo. Civilians and opposition members are evacuated after an agreement between Turkey and Russia.



Source: Fatih Aktas / AA

**2017**

**23 January** Syria peace talks begin in Kazakhstan's capital Astana, between Turkey, Russia, and Iran, accompanied by UN and US observers, marking the first non-Western peace initiative. Syrian regime officials and opposition representatives agree to swap prisoners and continue to honour the ceasefire overseen by Turkey, Russia, and Iran. The US is present but participates passively in the peace talks.



Source: Sefa Karaca / AA

**17 February** The second round of peace talks in Astana ends without a major breakthrough. Once again, Syrian regime officials and opposition representatives agree to swap prisoners and continue to honour the ceasefire overseen by Turkey, Russia, and Iran.

**3 March** The UN peace talks at Geneva IV conference which began on 23 February end without achieving a solution to the ongoing crisis.

**4 April** The Assad regime is accused of carrying out a chemical attack on Khan Shaykhun in Idlib, by the US, the UK and Turkey. Over 70 civilians are killed, and over 300 severely injured.

**7 April** The US launches a cruise missile attack on the Assad regime targeting the Shayrat Air Base, near Homs.

**Situation in the Syrian War April 2017**

Source: Liveuamap







# **POLITICAL ASPECT**

## **SYRIA POLICIES OF INTERNATIONAL AND LOCAL ACTORS**



# **INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS**

Source: Cem Ozdel / AA

# THE UNITED NATIONS

## Former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, September 2016

“Syrian tragedy shames us all. The international community’s collective failure should haunt every member of the Council, given that well over 300,000 Syrians had been killed, half of the country’s population had been uprooted and much of its infrastructure lay in ruins.”<sup>25</sup>

The Syrian War has cast doubts about the role of the United Nations in solving the problems pertaining to global issues, particularly the Security Council (UNSC). The UNSC is the most important body of the UN, as it is responsible for the maintenance of world peace. It has been criticized for its failure to take the necessary measures to cease the ongoing war. The question raised now is whether the United Nations is going to share the same fate as the League of Nations, which collapsed after preventing the occurrence of WWII, as history appears to be repeating itself and many have claimed that this pivotal moment is the “League of Nations moment” for the United Nations.

Former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon in his address to the Security Council on the situation in Aleppo, in December 2016 admitted that the UN has failed in Syria. He said, “I have said before that we have collectively failed the people of Syria. The Security Council has not exercised its preeminent responsibility with regard to the maintenance of international peace and security. History will not easily absolve us...”<sup>26</sup> The failure of the UN appeared in the early years of the Syria Crisis. The stepping down of the UN’s first special envoy to Syria sent a clear message to the international community’s ineffectiveness in tackling the Syria Crisis. Kofi Annan who was appointed as the Joint Special Envoy of the United Nations and League of Arab States (JSE) on 23 February 2012, led the diplomatic mediation initiative of

the United Nations. However, Annan resigned by defining his duty as mission impossible after his six-point peace plan did not succeed.<sup>27</sup> The most important reasons behind his resignation were the militarization on the ground and lack of unity among the members of the UNSC, according to his statement.<sup>28</sup> Annan’s successor, Lakhdar Brahimi, also stepped down from his position in May 2014 after the Geneva Talks failed. He blamed the international deadlock which inhibited the reaching of a common ground on how to resolve the crisis in Syria. He criticized the United Nations for not exerting enough pressure on the Syrian regime to negotiate with opposition groups. Staffan de Mistura, replaced the position of Brahimi, and is now leading the international mediator role in Syria.

## Timeline of International Efforts

<b>2 November 2011</b>	The Assad regime agrees to the Arab League peace plan, which includes monitoring of the process by the League. Syria's non-compliance with the plan results in the suspension of its membership in the League.
<b>19 December 2011</b>	Syria signs another Arab League plan. The continuation of the conflict leads to the collapse of the plan.
<b>16 March 2012</b>	Kofi Annan, the joint United Nations and Arab League envoy to Syria, submits the Geneva communique, a six-point peace plan, to the UN Security Council.
<b>1 April 2012</b>	A total of 70 nations participate in the conference in Istanbul as the Friends of Syria to put pressure on the Assad regime.
<b>30 June 2012</b>	The Geneva I Conference, an "action group" meeting chaired by Annan, is held to identify steps and measures to stop violence in Syria.
<b>9 August 2013</b>	US Secretary of State John Kerry meets with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. They both agree to work toward inviting the Syrian regime and opposition for peace talks on the basis of the Geneva communique within the following months, but no concrete plan is agreed.
<b>23 January 2014</b>	The peace talks for a transitional government continue at the Geneva II Conference in Switzerland between the Assad regime and opposition groups.
<b>23 October 2015</b>	Following the embattled Bashar al Assad's visit to Moscow, the then Turkish Foreign Minister Feridun Sinirlioglu meets with US, Russian, and Saudi counterparts at a key summit on the Syrian conflict in Vienna.
<b>14 November 2015</b>	The foreign ministers of 17 countries at the International Syria Support Group meeting in Vienna agree to a plan for a ceasefire to take place in Syria and for the nation to hold elections.
<b>18 December 2015</b>	The UN Security Council unanimously adopts a resolution which draws an international roadmap for a political transition starting with a ceasefire beginning in January.
<b>25 January 2016</b>	The Geneva III Talks are announced by the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura.
<b>27 February 2016</b>	A cessation of hostilities in Syria occurs after an agreement between the US and Russia begins, excluding Daesh terrorists and the al Qaeda-linked al Nusra Front.
<b>11 March 2016</b>	UN Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura calls for elections in the war-ravaged country to be held in 18 months.
<b>10 September 2016</b>	A ceasefire agreement between the Assad forces and mainstream rebel groups is reached by the US and Russia. Shortly after, the ceasefire is abandoned.
<b>15 October 2016</b>	Talks on Syria between Turkey, the US, Russia, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, and Egypt end without a plan or joint statement.
<b>23 January 2017</b>	Opposition and regime delegations meet in Astana as agreed by Turkey and Russia.
<b>23 February 2017</b>	Opposing sides meet with the participation of Staffan de Mistura, but no concrete results are achieved.



The then Special Representative of the UN and the Arab League to Syria, Kofi Annan met with Bashar al Assad on July 2012. Source: EPA / AA

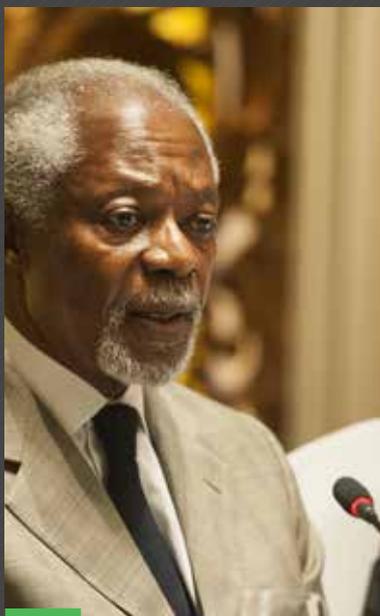
### **The failure of the UN**

Aside failing to halt the conflict on the ground, the UN has also failed to provide humanitarian assistance to the people suffering from the clashes and attacks of the warring parties. On 22 February 2014, the UNSC unanimously adopted Resolution 2139, which aimed to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance in Syria. The resolution also has demanded that all parties halt

attacks on civilians, and put an end to the sieges in Homs.<sup>30</sup>

The Syrian regime has been also called on to allow the UN agencies to function across conflict lines. The following resolutions, 2165 and 2191, adopted in July and December 2014 respectively, have permitted the UN bodies to carry out aid operations into Syria from

adjacent countries bypassing the regime. A report released by civil society organizations dealing with the Syria Crisis, called "The Failing Syria: Assessing the impact of UN Security Council resolutions in protecting and assisting civilians in Syria" shows that one year into the adaptation of the UNSC 2139 resolution, the situation got worse in terms of human suffering and killings. Besides,



Former UN chief and UN-Arab League envoy to Syria Kofi Annan.  
Source: Aung Naing Soe / AA

## Kofi Annan

Former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan was appointed as a special envoy by the United Nations and Arab League in February 2012 to negotiate an end to the crisis in Syria.

He prepared the six-point of the Geneva I conference which included a pragmatic solution through political diplomacy, the withdrawal of troops, and the cessation of the use of heavy weapons in populated civilian areas. The Geneva I conference sought to ensure the timely and safe delivery of humanitarian assistance to areas affected by the war.

Later, in August 2012, Kofi Annan resigned, stating that his job as envoy had become a "mission impossible."

### Kofi Annan, UN Special Envoy to Syria, 2 August 2012

"Without serious, purposeful and united international pressure, including from the powers of the region, it is impossible for me, or anyone, to compel the Syrian government in the first place, and also the opposition, to take the steps necessary to begin a political process."

the impact of the UNSC resolutions on increasing the humanitarian aid delivery to the people in need was not sufficient.<sup>31</sup>

Resolution 2258, adopted on 22 December 2015<sup>32</sup> and Resolution 2332, adopted on 21 December 2016<sup>33</sup>, renewed the authorization of UN agencies and partners to deliver humanitarian assistance across conflict lines. These resolutions reiterated their call to all parties, particularly the Syrian regime, to comply with the international humanitarian and human rights law. However, according to the Secretary-General latest report released on 19 April 2017, the delivery of the prescribed assistance has remained challenging.<sup>34</sup>

All UN member states have accepted responsibility to protect their citizens from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity in September 2005. They also agreed that if one state fails to protect its people from these atrocities, the international community will take the responsibility upon itself to help protect the affected people from these crimes. According to the agreed charter, in these situations, the international community should act in a "timely





Cem Ozdel / AA

and decisive manner” in order to prevent humanitarian sufferings through diplomatic and other necessary means.<sup>35</sup> However, although the crimes committed by the regime forces and other armed groups have amounted to the war crimes, the UN remains incapable and short of stopping further occurrence of these incidents.<sup>36</sup>

On 27 September 2013, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2118 that required the destruction

of chemical weapons in Syria, after the Ghouta chemical attack. The resolution in particular banned the Syrian government from using, developing, producing and acquiring chemical weapons. The resolution also prohibited the transfer of chemical weapons to other states and non-state actors. Additionally, any groups in Syria are forbidden from similar process concerning chemical weapons.<sup>37</sup> However, the adoption of the resolution has not stop the use of chemical weapons



Former UN-Arab League Special Envoy for Syria Lakhdar Brahimi.  
Source: Fatih Erel / AA

## Lakhdar Brahimi

Veteran and Algerian diplomat, Lakhdar Brahimi was selected as the UN-Arab League special envoy for Syria in August 2012, replacing Kofi Annan.

He worked on the Geneva II conference and organised two rounds of negotiations between opposition forces and the Assad government. The negotiations mainly focused on calls for a ceasefire, the formation of an interim government, and the eventual holding of elections.

Brahimi also resigned from his duty because of the failure of the negotiations. Brahimi accused the UN of not exerting sufficient pressure on the Assad regime to fulfil its obligations during the negotiations with opposition groups.



Mohammad Alloush, chief negotiator of the Syrian opposition, speaks during the third session of the Syria peace talks in Astana.  
Source: Alia Raimbekova / AA

## Mohammad Alloush

Mohammad Alloush is the political leader of the opposition group Jaysh al Islam, which operates to the east of Damascus.

He was appointed as chief negotiator of the opposition during the Geneva talks from January 2016 to May 2016. Alloush resigned from his leadership position in May, stating that "the three rounds of talks were unsuccessful because of the stubbornness of the regime and its continued bombardments and aggressions towards the Syrian people."

In January 2017, he announced his participation as a representative of the opposition in talks with the Assad regime in Kazakhstan.

## Report of the Secretary General, 19 April 2017

"The delivery of humanitarian assistance to people in need remained extremely challenging in many areas of the country as a result of active conflict, shifting conflict lines, administrative impediments and deliberate restrictions on the movement of people and goods by the parties to the conflict."

by the regime forces. Khan Shaykhun chemical attack in Idlib province on 4 April 2017 was the latest regime use of chemical weapons which killed at least 86 people including 28 children.<sup>38</sup> According to French state sources, experts have scientifically proved that sarin gas was used in the Khan Shaykhun chemical attack, and that the Syrian regime is directly responsible for it.<sup>39</sup> This is a clear breach of the convention signed by the Syrian regime to destroy their chemical weapons stockpile. It also violates the UNSC resolution of 2118 that necessitates the Syrian regime to halt any process with chemical weapons. According to the report more than 100 allegations of use of chemical agents including sarin and chlorine have been taken place since 13 October 2013.<sup>40</sup>

The UN Human Rights Council mandated Commission of Inquiry (CoI) has repeatedly reported that the regime and pro-regime forces are committing crimes against humanity war crimes.<sup>41</sup> In its latest report released on 13 March 2017, (CoI) again reiterated the UNHRC's concern that the Syrian regime is violating international humanitarian

law. The report laid out that during the period monitored, 21 July 2016-28 February 2017, both regime and pro-regime forces continue to target civilian and use prohibited weapons.<sup>42</sup>

The situation during the siege of Aleppo, as described by Jens Laerke the UN humanitarian spokesman, was as "a complete meltdown of humanity in Aleppo" and another failure of the international community. According to Atlantic Council's Breaking Aleppo report, the pro-regime forces targeted civilians indiscriminately with incendiary weapons, cluster munitions and chemical weapons, and yet the UN was unable to take action to stop the bombing of the civilians.<sup>43</sup> The UN humanitarian chief Stephen O'Brien called the inaction of the UN as "our generation's shame."<sup>44</sup> Similar sufferings have been repeated in different places in Syria. Starvation in the town of Madaya grabbed the public attention after photos of people dying of starvation and malnutrition began spreading across human rights and media agencies. Since July 2015, Madaya had been under

## Report of the Secretary General, 2014

“Despite the adoption of Presidential Statement 2013/15, Resolutions 2139 (2014) and 2165 (2014), the protection situation has worsened. Reportedly, over 1,000 civilian deaths have occurred in August (2014), the deadliest [month] since the start of the war. Civilians live in appalling conditions.”

complete siege by the Syrian regime and Hezbollah forces, with no access to food or water as checkpoints were set up to prevent people from gaining their basic needs. According to the Syrian American Medical Society's report, this has brought about mass starvation which has killed up to 40,000.<sup>45</sup> Although the UN delivery of humanitarian assistance into Madaya has recently resulted in limited relief, the fact that the international community failed to completely stop the siege has been written as another failure for the international organisation. Other besieged cities in Syria have faced a similar fate with people of Aleppo and Madaya. According to the UN report, the starvation imposed upon besieged towns is a systematic tactic used by the regime that could amount to a war crime.<sup>46</sup> Although the UNSC resolution 2139 (2014) together with additional resolutions obligates to the Syrian regime to alleviate the human suffering in besieged cities, the international community remains unable to enforce the compliance of the resolutions by the concerned parties.<sup>47</sup>

A report written by Dr. Simon Adams, named “Failure to Protect: Syria and the UN Security Council” released on 5 March 2015 concludes that although responsibility to protect is an international norm, it is not independent from the actors that will uphold this norm.<sup>48</sup> The failure of protecting Syrian people from death and atrocities is the result of the institutions that would not implement their responsibility.

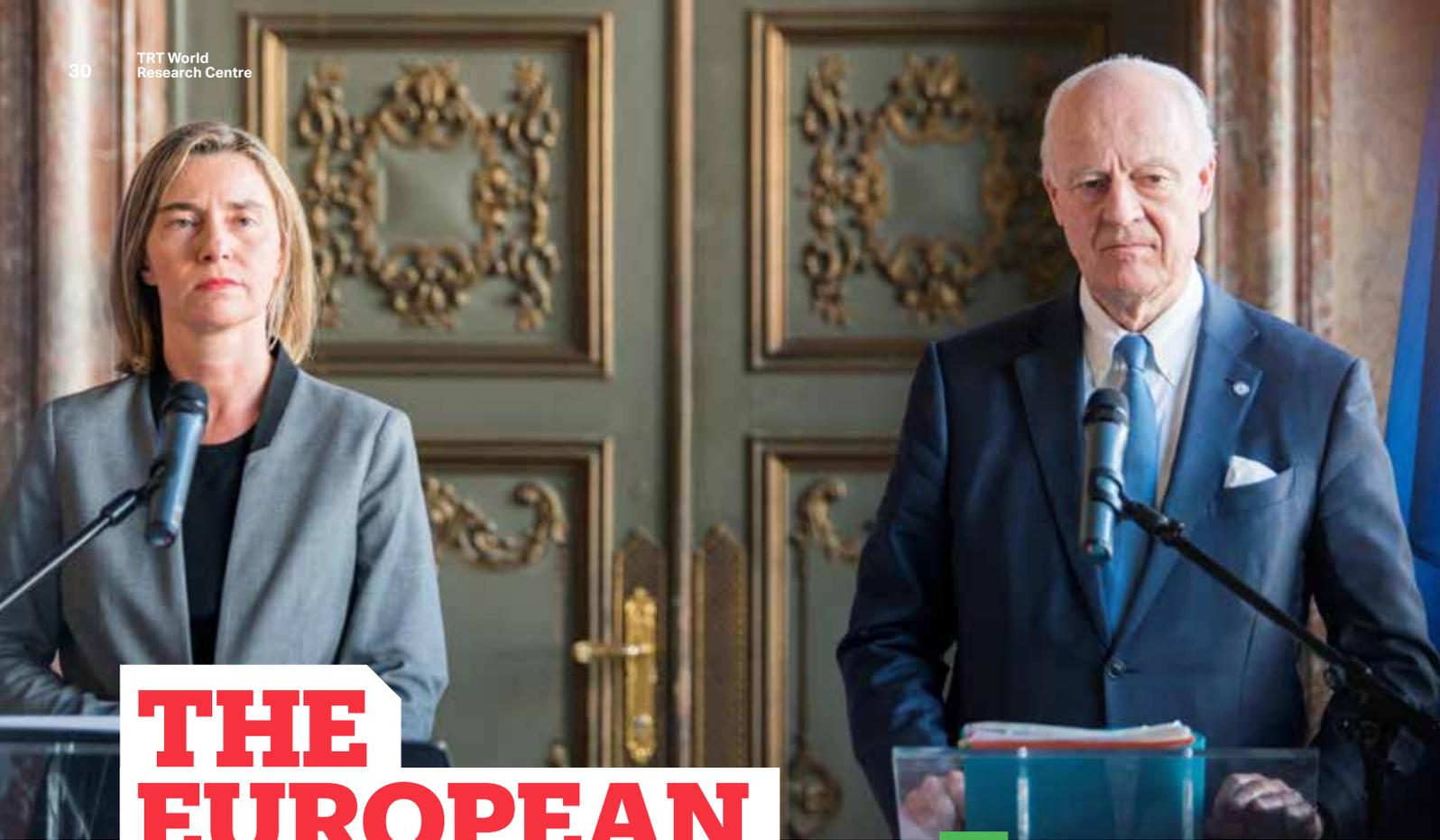
Besides Syrian government having the number one responsibility for the continuation of the killing of people, the UN, particularly Security Council, bears as much responsibility to protect Syrian people. Being unable to take decision in the face of mass atrocities in Syria causes to questioning of the Council and lost its credit as the defender of the international peace and security.<sup>49</sup>



UN Syria Envoy Staffan de Mistura.  
Source: Alia Raimbekova / AA

### Staffan de Mistura

In July 2014, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon appointed former Italian-Swedish diplomat Staffan de Mistura as the new UN envoy to end the crisis in Syria. After the fall of Aleppo in December 2016, de Mistura played a key role in negotiating a ceasefire between the regime and rebel forces.



# THE EUROPEAN UNION

Source: *The European Commission / AA*

## The EU's Role in the Syrian War

The EU's role has remained in a second-tier position vis-à-vis the Syrian crisis among international actors. There are multiple reasons for why the EU has adopted a passive attitude and has been unable to comprehensively approach the roots of the crisis. First of all, the EU assumed that the Assad regime would fall in a very short span of time. Secondly, the internal dimensions have prevented the EU from being able to have an influence together with its international allies. Besides, the EU has failed to find an appropriate ally to find a solution to end the war due to Russia's intervention and the complexity of the war.<sup>50</sup>

In its 2007 Syria Strategy Paper, the EU identified its strategy as: "Syria is a key factor in regional stability and plays a pivotal role as a transit country between the EU and the Middle East."<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, the EU took unwarranted economic and political measures in the first phase of the conflict. What followed was that when the European Union observed that the war was having serious impacts on its own member

The EU has taken a back seat in terms of its role and influence in the ongoing Syrian War. Prior to the Syrian War, the EU had the political leverage to press Syria into carrying out economic and political reforms. This was partly realised through the mechanisms established with the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and European Neighbourhood Program. However, the EU later suspended these programs and started implementing sanctions on Syria.

In the initial phase of the popular uprising against the Assad regime, the EU responded to the regime's violent oppression by strongly condemning its cruelty and use of live ammunition. The EU's role in the crisis diminished as the continent was hit by a massive exodus of the Syrian people fleeing the war. EU member states could only focus on the refugee crisis and became increasingly disinterested in the war itself. Over the course of the war, the EU has repeatedly emphasised the role of international organizations

and the need to arrive at a political solution based on the Geneva communique of 30 June 2012.

The EU has not taken decisive action to address the Syrian crisis, nor has it developed a well-drafted or comprehensive policy on Syria. This is due in part to the institutional structure of the EU, which has prevented the formation of an all-inclusive approach to the ongoing crisis. Member states have been reluctant to address the root causes of the problems affecting Europe, instead they are applying stopgap measures in a makeshift fashion to address the particular problems each state faces. This assortment of divergent policies and policy preferences ultimately fails to address the long-term repercussions of the Syrian conflict on the continent, including in areas such as the refugee crisis, border security, and development of a counter-terror strategy in the face of Daesh terror attacks.



Refugees in Slovenia, October 2015.  
Source: Ales Beno / AA

states, it was too late to take significant action in order to find sustainable solutions. Consequently, taking into account the major players involved in the conflict, it was not Russia neither the US, but it was the EU that was the most affected since it was obliged to struggle with an increasing security threat, terrorism and refugee crisis.

Before the war started, the EU had extensive relations with Syria mainly based on its European Neighbourhood Policy and Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. However, after the war, the EU adopted a harsh attitude towards Syria by applying sanctions and taking political measures, which resulted losing its political leverage. The Assad regime's response towards the EU's policies and attitude did not delay, its foreign minister stated on June 2011: "We will forget that there is Europe on the map," and promised to look "eastward and southward and in every direction that extends its hands to Syria. The world is not only Europe." Indeed, the Assad regime came closer to other allies such as Russia and Iran due to the EU's severe actions, which further

decreased the EU's leverage, and even further increased the leverage of the regime's allies.

The EU has from the very beginning of the war sought justice by supporting policies of transitioning the authoritarian regime to a democratic form of government, which are led by civil society organizations. One of the most important reasons why the EU has been in limbo is related to the fact that its role continuously faced a dilemma in terms of choosing between a light intervention due to its responsibility as a leading global power and full engagement in ending the conflict. While the EU has been more supportive of civic actors in opposition controlled areas, it has been less supportive of creating ceasefires agreements.

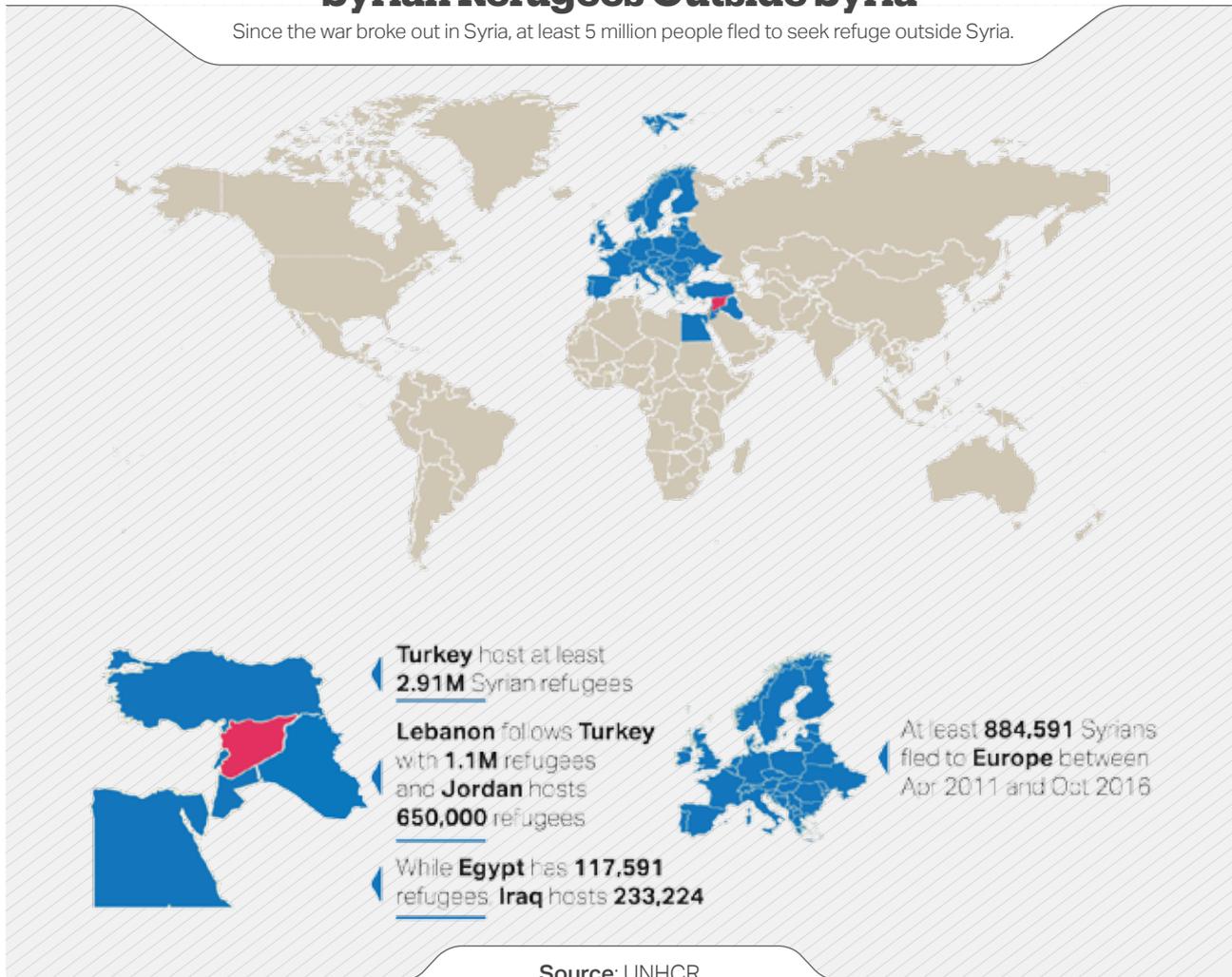
In October 2015, the European Council released its conclusions on Syria which have been channeled through the International Syria Support Group led by the UN. In its conclusions, the European Council conveyed that under the present leadership there cannot be a lasting peace. The EU concluded that a Syrian-led political process based

"The temporary emergency relocation scheme was established in two Council Decisions in September 2015 in which Member States committed to relocate 160,000 people from Italy and Greece (and if relevant from other Member States) by September 2017. On 8 June 2015, the Commission adopted a proposal on a European Resettlement Scheme, which was followed by an agreement among the Member States on 20 July to resettle 22,504 persons in clear need of international protection, in line with the figures put forward by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)."

**March 2016 press release on the European Commission website.**

## Syrian Refugees Outside Syria

Since the war broke out in Syria, at least 5 million people fled to seek refuge outside Syria.



on the Geneva communique of June 2012 will bring back stability to Syria by creating the necessary environment for efficient counter terrorism efforts. Only in this way, unity, sovereignty and an independent territorial integrity of the Syrian State can be established.<sup>52</sup> The fact that the raging war continues it can be concluded that the EU's objectives stated in the European Council conclusions have not been met. The EU's approach has been seriously criticized for applying a "one size fits all" approach that is compared to a pre-existing, tested and comfortable rulebook. Instead of developing its own strategy, the EU followed and supported international efforts to solve the conflict, which are clearly ineffective.

Coming to the latest official EU position, which is laid out in the Foreign Affairs Council Conclusions and European Council Conclusions, the EU is continuing imposing sanctions and extending restrictive measures against the Assad regime at least until 1 June 2017. In general, the EU's position is to provide support to the Syrian opposition and to the International Syrian Support Group (ISSG) to cease hostilities as well as to achieve a broader ceasefire.<sup>53</sup>

### The EU Policies against Daesh

On 16 March 2015, the European Council adopted the EU Regional Strategy for Syria, Iraq, and the Daesh threat. This strategy outlined the

framework that would be implemented to counter Daesh terrorism spreading from Iraq and Syria. The report underscored that the fight against Daesh and efforts toward a political solution should go hand in hand. The new strategy also reiterated the EU's support for the military campaigns led by the global coalition.

In addition, the EU declared its commitment to protect world heritage sites, drawing attention to Daesh's destruction of archaeological and cultural sites. Jesse Casana's 2015 report, "Satellite Imagery-Based Analysis of Archaeological Looting in Syria", however, indicates this exclusive focus on Daesh's role in such destruction is misleading. The report states that while 21

percent of looted or damaged sites are located in Daesh territory, 28 percent are in areas controlled by YPG militants, 16.5 percent in regime-controlled areas, and 27 percent in opposition-held territory. While the report does acknowledge that destruction is often worst in Daesh-held territory, the widespread nature of looting and other damage to such sites in other areas indicate that efforts to address the issue must be more comprehensive should they want to be successful.

The EU Regional Strategy document states that the Assad regime cannot be a partner in the fight against Daesh. On 23 May 2016, the Council reiterated its commitment to the 2015 strategy. Although the EU has produced comprehensive strategy documents against

the Daesh threat, the strategy suffers from lack of cooperation and coordination. This lack of cooperation became apparent after the Daesh attack in Brussels on 22 March 2016, which killed at least 31 people. One of the attackers, Ibrahim El Bakraoui, had been deported in June 2015 from Turkey.

After Bakaroui's deportation, it was revealed that Turkey had warned Belgium that he was a terrorist. President Erdogan said that despite Turkey's warnings, Belgian authorities had failed to confirm the suspect's links to terrorism following his deportation. Belgium's Interior Minister Jan Jambon also confirmed that his country had "made a mistake" by not heeding Turkey's warnings about the Brussels bomber being a "foreign terrorist fighter."

Source: Ales Beno / AA

## Turning Points

**In May 2011**, the European Council suspends bilateral relations with Syria under the European Neighbourhood Policy and implements a steadily escalating series of economic sanctions. In September 2011, the EU suspends Syria's participation in EU regional programs.

**In November 2011**, the European Investment Bank's loan and technical assistance provision with Syria are terminated.

**On 18 August 2011**, France, Germany, the UK, and the EU call on Assad to resign, echoing the demand of US President Obama. The EU statement notes that Bashar al Assad had lost legitimacy in the eyes of the Syrian people, and will therefore have to resign. The EU would later continue to insist that Assad should step down.

**On 10 December 2012**, the EU acknowledges the Syrian National Council, composed of moderate Syrians in exile, as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people.

**In May 2013**, the EU begins to provide military assistance to the Syrian National Coalition for Opposition and the Revolutionary Forces. The EU also works to implement safeguards to ensure that this assistance is not subject to misuse.

Due to the escalating threat of Daesh and increasing influx of refugees, the EU begins to interpret the Syrian crisis as a security problem, thereby ruling out its previous solution of resolving the conflict by means of a political process based on a democratic transition.





# THE LEAGUE OF ARAB STATES

Source: Mohamed Hossam / AA

The League of Arab States attempted to end the Syrian war twice in the past but its attempts failed due to various reasons including internal divides and the lack of effective cooperation and dedication. On 2 November 2011, member states of the League suggested the first peace plan asking the Syrian government to stop violent acts against the protesters.<sup>54</sup> The Damascus administration which agreed to the peace plan broke its promise only in a few days on 6 November 2011 killing at least 23 protesters. In response, the League suspended Syria's membership on 16 November 2011.<sup>55</sup>

On 19 December 2011, the Arab League and Syria signed another peace plan and the Syrian government agreed to accept monitors coming from the League member states.<sup>56</sup> Upon arriving in Syria on 26 December 2011, nearly 50 monitors observed that the government was not keeping its promise to stop the crackdown. One of the team members stated what was happening in Syria was genocide and the government was taking revenge on its own people.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, many criticized the presence of the Arab League

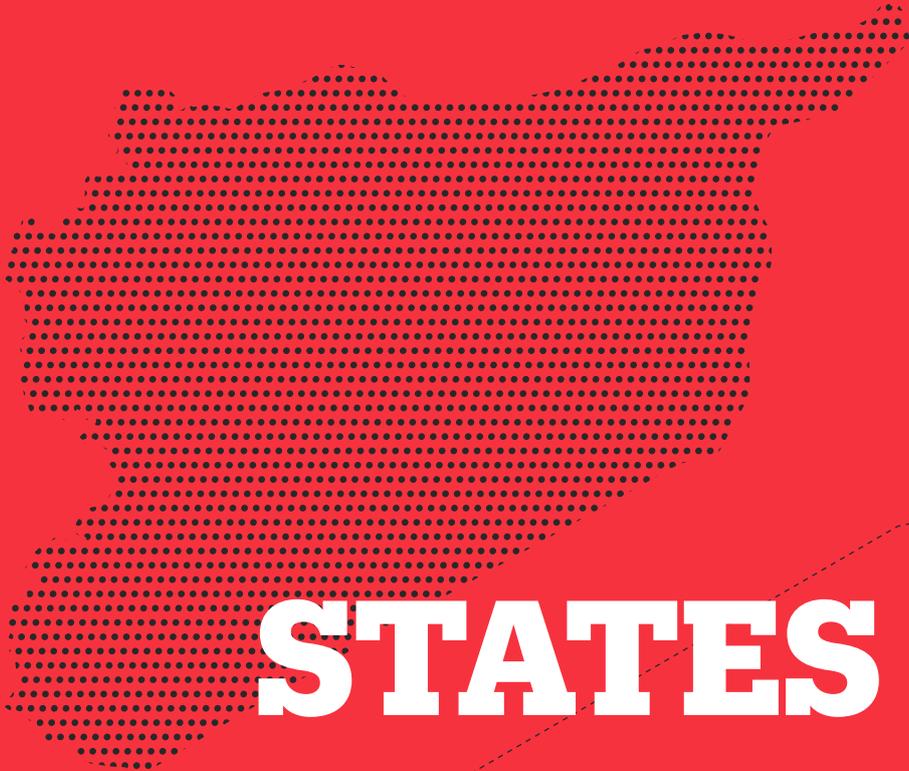
monitors in Syria claiming it gave legitimacy to violent acts of the government against its own people. On 20-22 January 2012, member states of the League decided to extend the duration of the mission but Saudi Arabia disagreed with this decision. Pulling its monitors from Syria, Saudi Arabia called on Russia, China, Europe and the US as well as other Islamic states to put sanctions on Syria. Right after the decision of Saudi Arabia, some other member states decided to withdraw their observers. In other words, both peace plans suggested by the Arab League ended up failing.

Another reason why the Arab League could not be successful at their missions was the Syrian government and its allies such as Iran accused the League of being treacherous claiming it was acting as an instrument of Western powers.

The Arab League itself has not done much to put an end to the Syrian war in the past few years. After the violent acts of Daesh and other terrorist organizations have jumped into other countries in the neighborhood and non-Islamic countries all around the world have got involved in this crisis more than the Arabic countries in the

region, the League has started to realize they must shoulder more responsibility. For example, when the member states met in Jordan in March 2017, Arab League chief Ahmed Abul Gheit asked Arab governments to do more to resolve the crisis in Syria rather than leaving it to other powers. "In my view it's not right that Arab governments stay out of the biggest crisis in the region's modern history," stated Gheit. "It is not right that this kind of terrible crisis gets passed over to international and regional powers to manage as they like and control according to their own interests. These conflicts all pose a serious threat to Arab security."<sup>58</sup>

In sum, the Arab League offered two peace plans to solve the crisis in the early years of the war. However, the plans did not work out due to the various reasons and the member states did not pursue a resolution plan actively after that until the recent years. Realizing the involvement of countries like Russia, China and others across the world in this problem more than the Arab countries in the region might leave them out during the reshaping process of the region after the war is over someday.



**STATES**



Suruc Refugee Camp in Sanliurfa, Turkey. Source: Halil Fidan / AA

# TURKEY

## Turkey's relations with Syria before the War

During the end of the Cold War and its immediate aftermath, relations between Turkey and Syria were tense. Syria was a Soviet ally, whilst Turkey was in the Western camp. The tensions were further exacerbated by Syria's support for the PKK, and disputes over water resources.

Relations between the two countries began to improve after 2002, when the AK Party came to power in Turkey. Turkey's determination to improve relations with its Middle Eastern neighbours which it had hitherto neglected led it to take

steps toward better relations with Syria. Turkey's initiative was well received in Syria, and a new phase in the relations between the two countries began.

The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 was the main driver of change in the region that led to further rapprochement between the two countries. While their principal fears diverged, both countries were extremely uneasy about the future of Iraq. Turkey was concerned about the territorial integrity of Iraq while Syria was more concerned with the US presence on its borders. United by their concern for the region, Turkey and Syria strove to improve the communication channels between each other.

The economy was another motivation in the rapprochement. Turkey's new vision of proactive foreign policy necessitated increased economic relations, while Syria wanted to diversify its commercial connections. As a result, a free-trade agreement was signed between the two countries in 2004 which boosted their volume of trade significantly.<sup>59</sup>

Prior to the beginning of the Syrian War in 2011, Turkish-Syrian relations were relatively strong. Turkish foreign policy at the time was to integrate Syria, which had been largely isolated, into the international community. This close relation was not limited to trade agreements alone, but also



Syrian refugee camp in Elbeyli, Turkey. Source: Kerem Kocalar / AA

included energy deals and joint military exercises.<sup>60</sup> Multiple high-level visits took place between the governments of the two countries, and their leaders developed a cordial working relationship. The outbreak of the war, however, marked the rupture in relations.

In the context of the Arab Uprisings, Turkey had declared its position to be on the side of the people, and has tried to remain in line with the demands of the Arab world for freedom and democracy. When protests erupted in Syria in 2011, Turkey called on Assad to allow peaceful protests and to make the necessary reforms to democratize the country. In the initial period of the protests, the then Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu made multiple visits to Syria, where he encouraged Assad to carry out

democratic reforms, hold free and fair elections, and avoid violence.

However, as the regime's response to the protesters grew increasingly harsh, the tone of Turkey's criticism also increased. After a challenging process of diplomacy to convince Assad to make reforms and to convince the international community to suspend interventionist rhetoric about Syria, Turkey abandoned its hope in the Assad regime.<sup>61</sup> The Turkish embassy in Syria closed on 26 March 2012, sometime later than that of the US, UK and France embassies, making it one of the last countries to leave Damascus.<sup>62</sup>

"The threats that Syria poses to regional and international security and stability will not be eliminated effectively unless security and stability are reinstated in Syria. The objective of a stable and peaceful Syria can only be achieved through a process of democratic transition that will meet the legitimate demands and aspirations of all Syrians. This process should be owned and led by the Syrians with the support of the international community. The future of Syria must be determined by the Syrians themselves."<sup>63</sup>

**Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs**

## Turkey's Policy Towards the Syrian Civil War

Throughout Syria's six-year war, Turkey has been among the staunchest supporters of the moderate opposition and efforts to achieve a political solution to the crisis. In the face of human rights violations, Turkey has worked to protect the Syrian people by pressuring the Syrian regime. In 2011, Turkey hosted meetings for the Syrian opposition in Istanbul and Antalya.<sup>64</sup> On 30th November 2011, Turkey declared a number of sanctions directed at Syrian regime. These measures included imposing travel bans on Baathist figures who engaged in violence and businessmen who supported the regime financially, suspending the sale of military equipment to the Syrian military, and freezing the Syrian regime's assets in Turkey.<sup>65</sup> Finally, Turkey announced the suspension of all diplomatic ties with Syria after the Houla massacre on 25 May 2012, where the regime killed more than 100 civilians.<sup>66</sup> Turkey has been a part of all the international attempts to solve the Syrian crisis. In an effort to find a solution to the problem and end the tragedy in Syria, Turkey hosted the Friends of Syria group on 1 April 2012, with the participation of 83 countries and representatives from the UN, including the Arab League, EU, Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and African Union. It also hosted the Syrian National Council, the civilian wing of the opposition, which aims to overthrow the Baathist regime.<sup>67</sup> Aiding a cohesive opposition was seen as a crucial component on the path towards fostering a sustainable and effective political solution for Syria.



Turkish Red Crescent tents raised for the first wave of Refugees in 2011.  
Source: Erdal Turkoglu / AA

One of Turkey's main concerns has been the regime's indiscriminate use of conventional weapons against civilians and opposition groups alike. This is in addition to the concern over the regime's chemical weapons stockpile. Despite the adoption of the UN Security Council resolution on 27 September 2013, which claimed to secure the destruction of the Syrian regime's chemical weapons stockpile, the absence of military sanctions against the regime meant that chemical weapons continue to be a danger to the country's people, and as demonstrated in the latest chemical attack on Khan Sheikhoun in April 2017.<sup>68</sup>

### Safe Zone Proposals

Turkey hosts the largest number of refugees of any country in the world. The overwhelming majority of the 3.5 million refugees in Turkey are Syrians who had to flee the country because of the indiscriminate nature of the regime's attacks

against its own people. In order to prevent Syrians from being forced to leave their country, Turkey has argued for the establishment of a safe zone in the northern part of Syria on numerous occasions.<sup>69</sup> Unfortunately, Turkey's proposals did not garner international support.

Turkey's proposal envisaged the establishment of no-fly zones that would secure civilians from the regime's air raids and harassment from radical groups. This would have created safe havens allowing Syrian refugees to remain in their country in safety, easing the burden imposed on neighbouring countries by the steady flow of refugees from Syria and allowing for aid to be distributed to them in a better-coordinated fashion.

By keeping the residents of Syria within the country, the safe-zone proposal also sought to contribute to the post-war reconstruction of Syria. Now, millions of Syrians live outside Syria where they have



established new lives. According to the UN, at least 7.6 million people in Syria have become internally displaced, and at least 4.9 million are refugees in other countries. Thus, Syria has lost a significant part of its human capital.

In July 2015, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu stated, "Safe zones will be created automatically as regions in the north of Syria are purged of Daesh. People fleeing the region can then be placed in these safe zones."<sup>70</sup> According to US sources, the question that should be asked is not whether any attempts are carried out to free regions from Daesh, but rather the extent to which a given region can be considered safe.

In February 2017, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated that one of the main purposes of Operation Euphrates Shield, Turkey's military operation in northern Syria, was to create a safe

corridor of around 4,000 to 5,000 square kilometres along the Turkish border.<sup>71</sup> Erdogan also said that a no-fly zone must be ensured in order to secure the safe zone, where displaced refugees including Arabs, Kurds, and Turks, could find shelter.

**Turkey's Military Engagement in Syria**

In July 2015, the threat level posed to Turkey had grown, with brutal terrorist attacks carried out by Daesh against Turkish military forces on the Turkish-Syrian border. An increasing number of terrorist attacks were also taking place within Turkey itself, carried out by individuals and groups with ties to both Daesh and the PKK.

In order to secure its borders and address the threat of terrorism, Turkey officially launched a two-pronged campaign against Daesh as well as the PKK-affiliated PYD/

YPG in Syria, in August 2016.

Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield aimed at cleaning Daesh off from its border, keeping the YPG east of the Euphrates River and securing the Turkish-Syrian border by establishing a safe zone in northern Syria for civilians.<sup>72</sup> The proposed area of intervention was later extended in order to address the growing threat from Daesh, and to prevent the PYD from creating autonomous zones at Turkey's doorstep.

Military operations were successful in securing areas to the east of Azaz, the towns around Mare, the region of Dabiq, and finally al-Bab, which occupies a key position in route to Daesh-held territory. Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim said on 29 March that the Turkish-led Operation Euphrates Shield had come to an end, and that subsequent operations would continue under a new name.<sup>73</sup>



Teachers teach card game to Syrian children at Al Farah Child and Family Support Center in Ankara, Turkey, February 2017.

Source: Ozge Elif Kizil / AA

### Turkey's Recent Efforts

During the siege of Aleppo and incessant shelling of the city by regime and Russian forces, Turkey reiterated its demand for safe zones to be created in the north of the country. The international community failed to do so, and people across the world were shaken with the horrific images coming from Aleppo as a result.<sup>74</sup>

Under these conditions, Turkey assumed a critical role in establishing a ceasefire and evacuating civilians from Aleppo. At the same time, several Turkish NGOs continued to aid residents of Aleppo and support those living in camps in Syria.<sup>75</sup>

The first months of 2017 were marked by the Astana talks, spearheaded by Turkey and Russia. The outcome of the talks is not yet clear, but Turkey retains its position of advocating a political solution to the conflict while concurrently ensuring the security of its own border.



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan meets with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres and the UN Special Envoy for Refugees Angelina Jolie in Mardin, Turkey on June 2015.

Source: Kayhan Ozer / AA

# Operation Euphrates Shield

A dramatic change in the Syrian conflict occurred with Turkey's commencement of Operation Euphrates Shield; in alliance with the moderate Free Syrian Army groups on 24 August 2016. Since then, Turkey has been officially involved in the Syrian War. The operation was proposed after dozens of attacks had been carried out by the PKK and Daesh in Turkey, mainly targeting civilians. Turkey's primary concern is the threat posed by Daesh, and the danger presented by the PYD's efforts to unite self-proclaimed cantons in northern Syria - which would provide the PKK with a safe haven.

The Turkish government's decision to clear the northern Syrian border was due to its prior occupation by groups such as PKK and Daesh. As such, Turkey wanted to

prevent any terror attacks and danger which may target its own people. Turkey's move was acknowledged to be a right to self-defence, as established under the UN Charter Article 51. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that the Operation Euphrates Shield was not an invasion but an effort to resettle the local Arab and Turkmen populations back in their towns, which had been invaded by the PYD. The operation also aimed to create a de facto safe zone to halt the mass migration of refugees.

On 29 March 2017, Operation Euphrates Shield came to an end after Syria's al Bab was cleared of Daesh. The operation removed Daesh from the border town of Jarablus on the Euphrates River and secured roughly a 100-kilometer stretch of the border. The operation then moved to the Daesh stronghold of al Bab, located 30 kilometers south of the Turkish border. Al Bab was liberated from Daesh on 23 February 2017.

Turkish troops are still stationed in the secured regions and along the border. The number of Turkish troops involved in Operation Euphrates Shield has not been disclosed. Turkish President Erdogan has said that preparations are underway for new operations against terrorist groups.



### Reasons behind the operation.

The existence of an authority vacuum in Syria provides a breeding ground for terrorism along Turkey's southern border.

Countering Daesh's terrorist state in northern Syria.

Countering the efforts of the PYD to seize Daesh territory and establish rule in the region.

### Main objectives of the operation.

To remove the increasing threat of terror within the borders of Turkey through a reactive (defensive and intrastate) and an active (operational and extra-territorial) strategy.

To provide border security for Turkey.

To markedly reduce the operational capacity of Daesh and ultimately eliminate the group.

To prevent the PKK/PYD/YPG from acquiring control of northern Syria.

To demolish bases which the PKK/PYD/YPG uses for headquarters and training.

To establish terror-free zones in areas where civilians lived before the civil war and simultaneously to reconstruct the infrastructure of those zones to protect the demographic structure of those regions.

To block attempts to cut off the connection between Turkey and the region.



Firas Faham / AA

## Al Bab's Importance

### To the PKK/YPG:

Al Bab has greater significance for PKK and its Syrian offshoot the YPG than for Daesh.

If the PKK and YPG had taken al Bab, it would have meant the establishment of an YPG- and PKK-controlled corridor running across northern Syria.

### To Daesh:

Al Bab is a strategic location to meet the logistics needs of Daesh, lying as it does on the Afrin-Tell Rifaat-al-Bab-al-Raqqah-Deir ez-Zor line.

It is the northernmost point held by Daesh and consists of no-man's

lands extending toward Daesh's so-called capital at al Raqqah.

Losing control of al Bab meant that al Raqqah would be next.

### To Turkey:

If the FSA could be placed in control of the region, Daesh would be forced to retreat to al Raqqah and the threat the group posed to Turkey would be significantly diminished.

Control of al Bab would pave the way for subsequent operations against Daesh in al Raqqah and the YPG in Manbij, as well as eliminate the chance of a YPG corridor being established to Turkey's south.



Lieutenant General Zekai Aksakalli, commander of the Turkish Special Forces, has led the Operation Euphrates Shield. Source: AA

### Zekai Aksakalli

Being Turkey's Special Forces commander since 2013, Zekai Aksakalli is hailed as a heroic figure in Turkey, due to both his role in thwarting the 15th July coup attempt, and throughout the operations held against Daesh in Syria. Aksakalli is known to have prevented the Special Forces Building in Ankara from being occupied during the coup attempt, on July 15th.

Zekai Aksakalli actively led the Euphrates Shield operations, which started on August 24th 2016, and which ended with the liberation of Jarablus, Al-Bab amongst other towns which were under Daesh rule, on Syria's northern border to Turkey.

# THE UNITED STATES

The Obama administration's Syria policy was inconsistent from the very beginning. The restoration of relations between the US and Syria was a policy priority for Obama after his inauguration. By repairing relations with Syria, President Obama aimed to provide a smooth withdrawal of US forces from Iraq, the isolation of Iran, and the resolution of disputes between Syria and Israel.

This ambitious agenda and diplomatic movement came to a halt after the start of demonstrations in Deraa in Syria. At the beginning

of the government's crackdown on the Syrian protesters, the US administration tried to convince the Syrian regime to adopt some political reforms and avoid using force against the protesters. However, the regime did not heed this advice and continued its intensified attacks on protesters.

In August 2011, President Obama made a definitive statement and asked Bashar al Assad to step down. This statement was seen as a sign of a new US policy that would remove the Assad regime from power due to its brutal suppression of the peaceful

protesters. However, soon it was revealed that the administration did not have a strategy to remove Assad from power.

In 2012, the US administration was heavily focused on the elections, but a year after the "Assad must go" statement, President Obama made a second strong statement. In August 2012, President Obama, due to the reports about the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime, declared that the movement and the use of chemical weapons by the regime would be his "red line."

The US President Barack Obama speaks during his annual end-of-year news conference at the White House in Washington, DC, on 16 December 2016.  
Source: Samuel Corum / AA



A protest against the Assad regime in front of the White House.  
Source: Muhammed Bilal Kenasari / AA



## Turning Points

### Use of Chemical Weapons as Red Line

On 20 August 2012, Obama declares that the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime would be a red line for the US that would warrant military engagement.

On 21 August 2013, Syrian regime forces attack Ghouta, a Damascus suburb, with chemical weapons. Hundreds of civilians are killed. Although the White House confirms the evidence of the use of chemical weapons, Obama decides to seek congressional approval for US military action.

On 4 September 2013, Obama denies that he set a red line on the use of chemical weapons. Moscow proposes a deal whereby the Assad regime would hand over its chemical weapons stockpile, and Washington accepts.

### Daesh Threat and the US-Led Coalition

The US changes its Syria strategy after the Daesh threat emerges as a more imminent problem. It shifts its efforts from toppling Assad to tackling Daesh, especially after the group gains control of the city of Mosul, the second-largest city in Iraq, on 10 June 2014.

The beheading of three American hostages by Daesh frustrates US public opinion and pushes the administration to take action against the terrorist group.

After the Obama administration declares on 28 August 2014 that it has no strategy for defeating Daesh, it ramps up efforts to develop a comprehensive strategy. Later, in September 2014, 68 nations and organisations come together to form the Global Coalition against Daesh, with the ultimate aim of tackling it on all fronts, disrupting its global ambitions, and dismantling its networks.

### Train and Equip Program

In 2015, the US announces a train-and-equip program. The ultimate aim of this program is to form a force made up of moderate Syrian rebels to help fight Daesh, defend rebel-held areas, and enforce a political solution to the ongoing crisis.

With a budget of \$500 million, the program envisages training and equipping about 3,000 vetted Syrians in 2015 and another 5,400 in 2016. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Jordan offer to host training programs.

In May 2015 the training begins, with 90 vetted Syrians selected from among 1,200 identified potential participants. The number of participants drops dramatically after they are forced to sign a contract not to attack Assad forces. The train-and-equip program fails due to a lack of persistent and active US support. Consequently, the 54 trained fighters deployed in northern Syria are quickly eliminated on their first operation by the Syrian affiliate of al Qaeda, the Jabhat Fateh al Sham, formerly known as al Nusra Front.

However, the US did not craft a statement about the use of conventional weapons by the regime. During this period, the regime employed the air force and even used Scud missiles on populated centres in the country.

One of the critical turning points for the Obama administration's Syria policy came when the Syrian regime once again used chemical weapons, this time in Damascus in August 2013. This was the most well-documented and reported attack, killing hundreds of civilians in a clear breach of the "red line" that President Obama had drawn a year earlier. While everyone was expecting a strong reaction from the US to what was already a dangerous violation of international norms, President Obama decided not to take punitive military measures. This decision significantly changed the dynamics on the ground in Syria.

The agreement with Russia for the Syrian regime to hand over its chemical weapon stockpile in order to forestall a US military intervention was interpreted as a green light by the regime. It continued its brutal suppression of protesters and civilians through unlimited use of conventional weapons. The barrel bombs and militias from Lebanon and Iran were already operating in full swing during this period. Al Qaeda and other radical groups manipulated this inaction as a rallying point for recruitment in Syria during this period.

The fall of Mosul was a clear shock for the US administration, and another shock came when two American hostages were executed by Daesh in August 2014. The US formed an international coalition to launch air strikes against Daesh targets in Syria and Iraq, but the administration did not have a clear strategy to defeat Daesh.

After much criticism about this lack of strategy, President Obama revealed his strategy to degrade and destroy Daesh in September 2014. The strategy focused primarily on air strikes, without sending in boots on the ground. Later, especially in Syria, the US depended heavily on the YPG, an offshoot of the PKK, which is considered a terrorist organization by Turkey, the US, and the EU. Supporting, arming, and training a terrorist group, the YPG, against another terrorist group, Daesh, has created serious problems in the demographics and sociology of northern Iraq, and has also stoked tensions in the US bilateral relations with Turkey.

Following this period, the primary focus of the US shifted away from the civil war in Syria and moved to the fight against Daesh. Countries like Turkey reminded the US administration that Daesh was a result of the situation in Syria and that the conflict in Syria needed to be resolved in order to deal with groups such as Daesh. However, the US preferred to ignore the wider situation in Syria. This situation further emboldened the Syrian regime and its supporters.

In September 2015, Russia intervened militarily in the situation, and started to deploy its military in support of the Syrian regime forces. Although Russia declared that the main goal of the deployment was the fight against

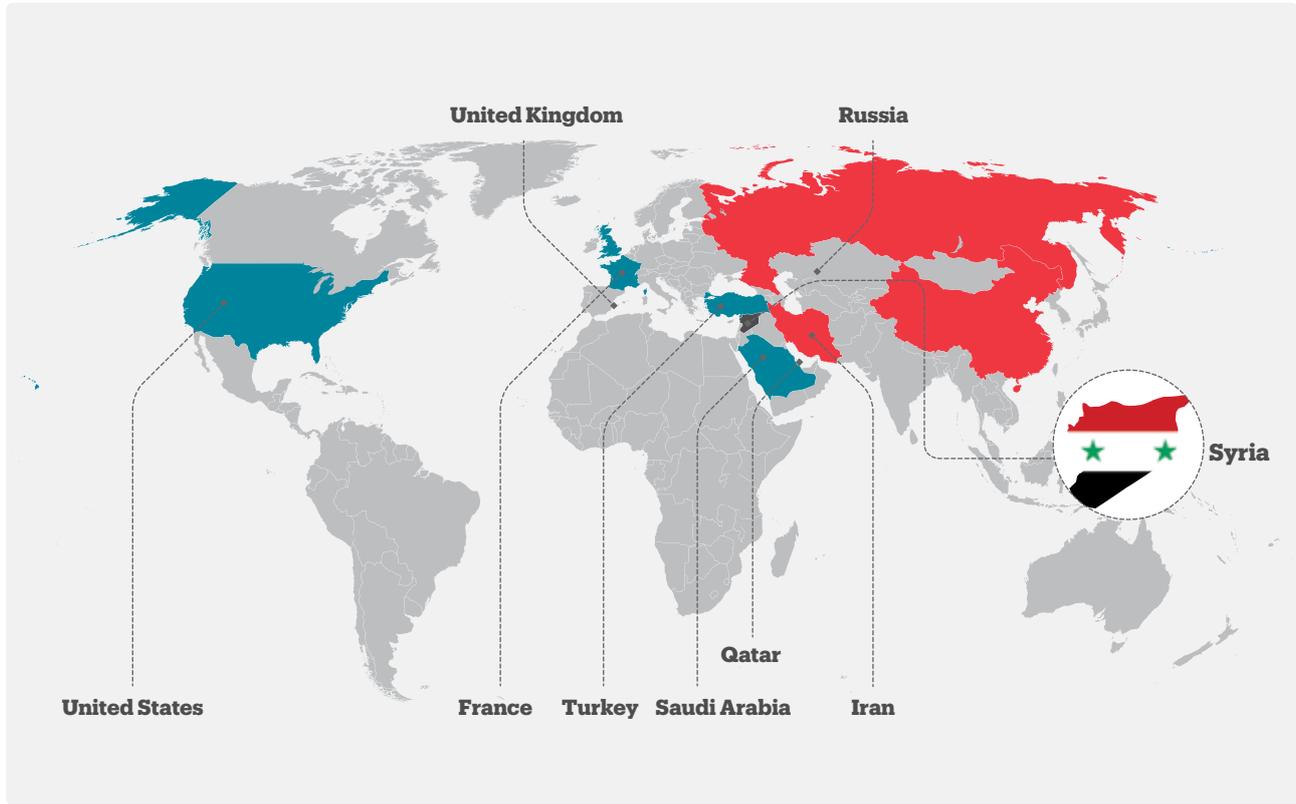
**Assad Must Go** On 18 August 2011, amid increased violence and crackdowns on protesters in Syria, Obama calls on Bashar al Assad to step down in a written statement. This is his first explicit call for Assad to resign.



Source: Samuel Corum / AA

“We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus. That would change my equation.”

**Obama, 20 August 2012**



■ Opposes Assad Regime
 ■ Backs Assad Regime



US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov after their meeting to discuss Syria's chemical weapon use, 12 September 2013.  
Source: Murat Unlu / AA

Daesh, it was soon clear that the Russian military was attacking Syrian opposition forces. Russian forces were used to empty Syrian cities and residential areas so that the regime could re-establish control in these territories.

The Obama administration once again failed to understand the seriousness of the situation and was shocked by the rapid Russian incursion in the country. Despite some wishful thinking from the administration, Russia's support enabled Assad to gain the upper hand on the ground in only a short period of time. When US-armed opposition forces became targets for Russian bombings,

the US failed to take any concrete steps other than holding long and inconsequential summits in order to force a cease fire.

In the early years of the conflict, the Obama administration failed to react to the situation. When the Syrian regime was supported primarily by Iranian regime forces, the US did not intervene because the administration did not want to endanger a possible nuclear deal with Iran. When the chemical weapon attack took place, the administration avoided military action out of fear of starting another Iraq war. The lack of an exit strategy became the biggest talking point against a military intervention. After

Russia became directly involved in the conflict, the US sought to avoid a proxy war with Russia, just like in Afghanistan, and decided to cede the ground to Russia. At the end of the day, the US willingly became a failed superpower and has been relegated to spectator status as another massive humanitarian tragedy unfolds in the Syrian conflict.

**Author: Kilic Bugra Kanat**

## Trump picks up where Obama's failed Syria policy left off

Syria will forever stain Obama's legacy.<sup>76</sup> Since the outset of the Syrian revolution in 2011, the unprecedented humanitarian disaster has been continuously deteriorating. The appalling death toll and the range of devastation that war-torn Syria has suffered is indescribable. More than 470,000 deaths were caused by brutal chemical attacks and barrel bombs let alone a vast number of extrajudicial killings.<sup>77</sup> These atrocities raise the question of how Syrian generations will judge the international passivity and the indecisiveness of Obama in the face of mass carnage?

Whether we like it or not, Obama's policy produced a de facto threat to the stability of the entire Middle Eastern landscape. His cautious hesitation, poor choice of partners, intermixed priorities and lack of a straightforward inclusive Syria policies, ultimately led to the rise of a new wave of fundamental radicals, failed states and an emblematic stage for turmoil and disorder.

Obama notoriously drew a "red line" over the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons only to back away from it, and the reason was Washington's interests with Russia and Iran's nuclear deal.<sup>78</sup> It was neither the legitimacy of the attack nor the hesitation of the Congress. There is no doubt that Obama's eight years in the Oval Office paved way for the rise of Donald Trump.<sup>79</sup>

Though overtly Obama is believed to have left with an increasing favorability among American constituents, his non-interventionist foreign policies were behind the Americans

predisposition to adopt Trump's populist rhetoric of "bringing America back again" and "America first".<sup>80</sup>

## Candidate's illusions and Executive's realities

During the US presidential election, Middle East analysts were anticipating either a third Obama-like term if Hillary Clinton won the election, or an atypical and unpredictable turn under Donald Trump. Now, Trump is the 45th acting US president and he is facing the challenge of translating his controversial electoral campaign statements into action.

Whenever the opportunity arises, Trump releases his biting criticism of Obama's foreign policies. He labelled Obama as a "terrible president"<sup>81</sup> and described his Syria policy a "total failure".<sup>82</sup> Trump publically branded his predecessor as the "worst president"<sup>83</sup> in the country's history. When Donald Trump entered the Oval Office, he found an in-tray bulging with urgent issues. There is no doubt that Obama's legacy particularly in the Middle East constituted a major vexatious challenge to the new president.

However, Trump's Middle East strategy itself is perplexing and unfathomable. As a candidate, he believed that the US could annihilate Daesh either by allying with Russia or the Assad regime. His predecessor, Obama, believed that the only capable ally able to defeat Daesh were Kurdish militias. Obama's administration saved military and logistical support to its proxies, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which is dominated by the terrorist Peoples' Protection Units (YPG)

that is an offshoot of the outlawed terrorist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

On the other hand, Trump's recent decision to directly arm the Syrian (YPG) against Daesh surprised all the analysts who thought that he had changed it's policy direction.<sup>84</sup> While for those who believe that Obama is still running the White House, the move has been perceived as a natural result of the long term investment of the American administration in the Kurdish militias and unequivocal evidence that nothing has changed.<sup>85</sup>



Both Obama and Trump are working with American interests in mind, irrefutably turning a blind eye to the humanitarian crises that their policy is generating. The US army has taken control of Rmeilan airfield in Syria's northern province located between the cities of al-Shadadi and al-Hasakah. The move was taken to boost its military existence in the northern region of Syria.<sup>86</sup> All these American airbases on Syrian soil are purely balancing Washington's presence vis-à-vis Russia and Iran.

### **Establishment not individuals**

Retaking Daesh de facto capital, Raqqa, would be a critical success for the international coalition under Trump's leadership. However, to achieve a landslide defeat over the radical cult, American strategists unanimously believe that Trump has to choose a regional ally - Turkey, SDF, Russia or even the Syrian regime. It is well known that the US military has deployed several hundred Special Forces alongside its air support to local ground forces to prepare for the battle to oust the group from its capital.<sup>87</sup>

The challenges to retake Raqqa are genuinely complicated. There are two principle questions that Trump advisors need to address: who is going to take part in the operation? And who will fill the void after defeating Daesh?

The United States and its coalition will start a full-scale offensive against Daesh and its affiliates and will increase pressure on al Qaeda splinters. Trump publically states that he is interested in establishing interim zones of stability, through ceasefires, to allow refugees to return home.

Although it is still unclear how the safe zones would work and whether they will be established in the northern or southern fronts. With the current case-scenarios being discussed, it seems that in the aftermath of Daesh's defeat an inevitable partition of the country is unavoidable and has become John Kerry's plan B.<sup>88</sup>

Trump claims to understand Turkey's concerns and knows how to satisfy Turkish partners yet seems to deliberately follow the footsteps of his predecessor and disregard Turkey's serious apprehension. Instead he works on a bid to superficially placate Ankara by offering it a role in the post-Daesh era.

### **Trump's Syria policy**

On 17 April, the Associated Press published an article titled "Trump's Syria plan starts coming into view".<sup>89</sup> The article argues that though Trump's plan for Syria is still developing, it has come into life particularly after the US military launched its tomahawk cruise missile attack against Assad in response to a chemical weapons attack. The article introduced the breakdown of the strategy into three basic phases: crushing Daesh, reinstating stability in war-torn Syria, and lastly reintroducing a political transition period in which Assad ultimately be advised to step down.

However, his propositions are rather loose, nonchalant and implausible. Through Trump's doctrine, it's incrementally feasible to whitewash Assad and consider him a regional partner. It is unlikely that Trump's reaction to Assad's chemical attack in the province of Idlib has radically changed Trump's view of Assad.<sup>90</sup>

Analysts believe that the only possible scenario after defeating Daesh is Assad's positioning to retake Raqqa. The last potential option for Trump is Assad himself. Assad's attempts to get closer to Trump have been evidently observable, particularly with his claim that Trump could be a "natural ally" and that his pledge to fight Daesh is encouraging.<sup>91</sup>

Relations of the main international and regional players do sit on the brink of a steep cliff and the potential for further conflict is clear, unless Turkey, the US, Russia and Iran manage to strike a compromise that alleviates tensions and satisfies each party's regional strategic aspirations.

Whilst it is unfortunate that in the present context Syrians are ripped away of their agency to continue their revolution and decide their future for themselves, conventional wisdom dictates that sooner or later - Syrian nation which rose with the spirit of freedom and justice will indeed reclaim the field and be the sole determiner of their future.

**Author: Ahmed al Burai**



**The US Support for YPG** On 13 September 2014, Daesh launches an offensive on the city of Kobane in northern Syria. Between 18 and 22 September 2014, almost all people in Kobane flee to Turkey after Turkey opens its border to welcome them. According to the UN, the number of people who fled Kobane was around 130,000 people.

As Daesh continues to advance into Kobane, the US carries out its first air strikes on Daesh militants in Kobane on 27 September 2014, and drops supplies of weapons and ammunitions to YPG militants on 20 October 2014. The Daesh advances are repelled after FSA fighters join the battle on 29 October 2014, followed by the Iraqi Peshmerga forces with heavy weapons after Turkey allows them to use its land to cross into Kobane from the Turkish border. As a consequence of the multiple actors' efforts to save Kobane from falling into the hands of Daesh, YPG militants take control of the city on 26 January 2015.

The US decides to support YPG militants in subsequent operations, effectively making the YPG its main partner on the ground. With the close air support of the US, the YPG advances into new territories not traditionally populated by Kurds, thus escalating the risk of ethnic clashes between YPG militias and other mostly Arab populations.

On 16 June 2015, YPG militants supported by the US capture the city of Tal Abyad from Daesh. During the offensive, thousands flee the region and cross into Turkey. The city had mostly been populated by Arabs and Turkmens. An Amnesty International report claims that the YPG militants took advantage of the offensive and forced the Arab and Turkmen residents out of their own lands. The report further claims that the YPG committed war crimes by deliberately razing villages around Tal Abyad.

Turkey, one of the significant allies of the US in the fight against Daesh, views the YPG as the Syrian offshoot of the PKK terrorist organization. Turkey repeatedly condemns the US for its support of the PKK terrorist group's Syrian offshoot, the YPG.

In order to divert criticism from Turkey and prevent ethnic rivalry in the region, the US encourages the establishment of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), mostly dominated by the YPG militants along with a small number of Arabs.

Currently, the YPG's (PKK) presence in Manbij is the main issue stirring up tension between the US and Turkey.



Russian president Vladimir Putin with Assad in Moscow, October 2015.  
Source: Kremlin Press Office / AA

# RUSSIA

Russia is the primary actor to have dramatically changed the trajectory of the Syrian civil war. Moscow pledged its support for the Damascus regime from the very beginning of the war. Russia's veto power at the UN Security Council or its direct military involvement in Syria since the end of 2015 is said to have saved Assad-led Syrian government at a crucial turning point in the conflict. The survival of the Syrian regime critically rests on Russian support, which has consisted of political, military, humanitarian and financial assistance despite international condemnation as to its direct role in the deaths and displacement of

hundreds of thousands of civilians.

A range of issues can explain Russia's intervention in the Middle East conflict. Russia filled a power vacuum, created by the US administration under former president Barack.<sup>92</sup> Syria had been a staunch ally of Russia since the Cold War when the Soviet Union and the Syrian Baathist Party led-by Hafez Assad, the father of Bashar, had cooperated in international affairs. Russia's historical ties with Syria facilitated Moscow's political and military presence in the east Mediterranean.<sup>93</sup>

Russia had entered the conflict region in order to further geopolitical

and security interests that it had been pursuing since the Cold War era.

With both naval and air bases in Tartus and Latakia respectively, Russia has expanded its capacity in dealing with military conflicts in which Moscow offered aerial and ground support to Assad forces. In order to legitimize its military involvement, Russia has so far leaned on the rhetoric of combatting with terrorist groups in Syria like Daesh and al Qaeda affiliated al Nusra Front — which later on changed its name into the Jabhat Fateh al Sham — saying that its military presence is a request of the Syrian regime and legally permitted by international law.<sup>94</sup>

# The Overview of the Russian Involvement

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Syria has been a close strategic ally of Russia in the Middle East since the Cold War.

Russia declared its support for the Assad regime in 2011, and has provided the regime with military aid and diplomatic support.

Russia has blocked several UN Security Council resolutions from 2011 onward, effectively paralyzing the international body and preventing it from producing an effective response to the Assad regime.

Russia's position in the UN Security Council has been to agree to resolutions condemning violence in Syria as long as they do not entail sanctions or open the way to military intervention.

After the 2013 Ghouta attacks in which chemical weapons were used by the Assad regime, Russia convinced the regime to hand over its chemical weapons stockpiles, thus forestalling an international military intervention in the conflict.

The turning point in Russian involvement in Syria took place in 2015, when Russia began to carry out air strikes against opposition forces and to ramp up its involvement in terms of personnel and equipment, allegedly in response to a formal request by the Assad regime.

Under the pretext of combating international terrorism, Russia has started targeting moderate opposition forces as well as Daesh to help the Assad regime return from collapse and regain ground.

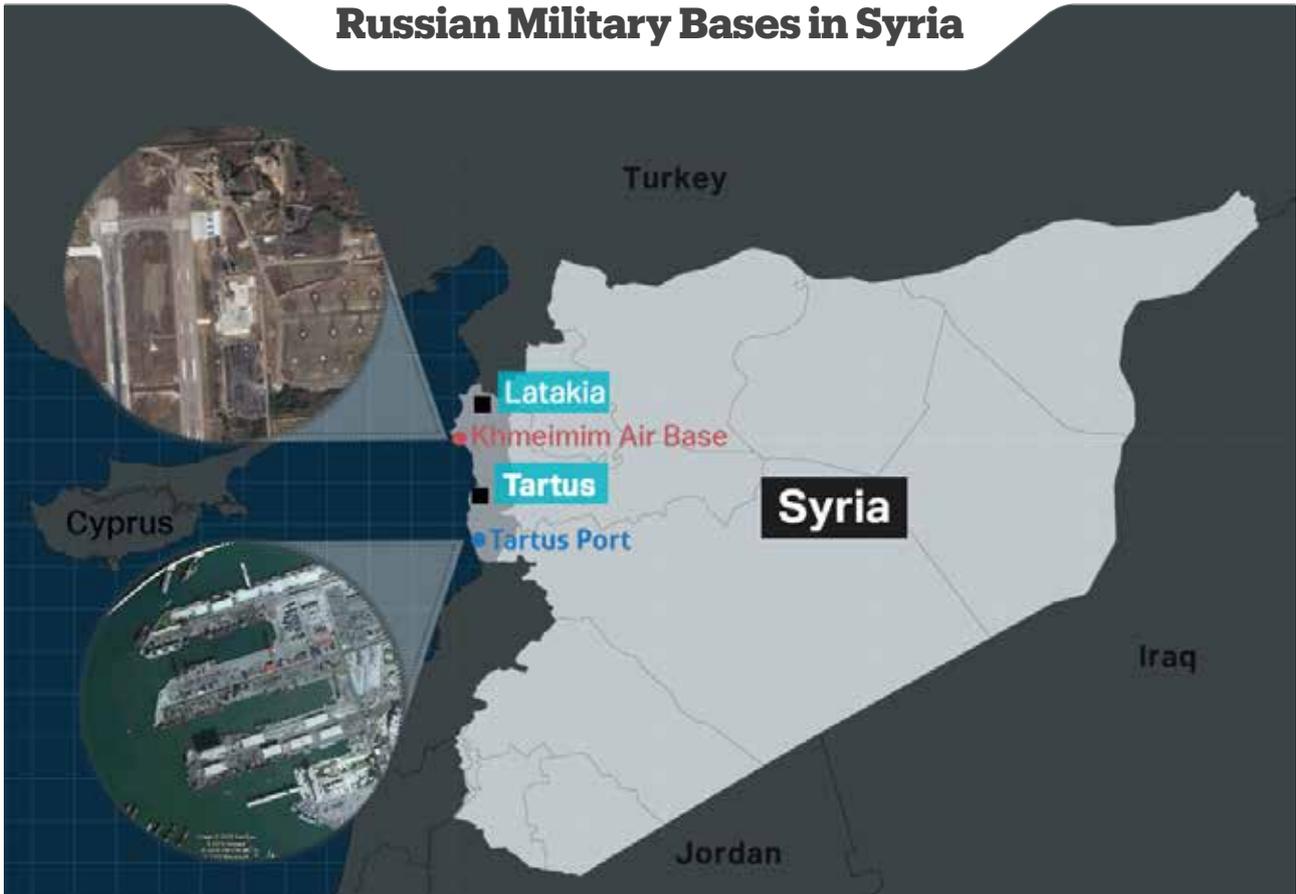
Russia uses its operation in Syria as a means of testing its weapons as well. Russia's defence minister declared that they had used Syria to test more than 160 weapons.<sup>95</sup>

On 24 November 2015, Turkish fighter jets shot down a Russian plane near the Syrian-Turkish border that was allegedly violating Turkish airspace, marking the worst confrontation between Russia and a NATO member since the end of the Cold War and the beginning of a diplomatic row between the two countries that would continue until mid-2016.

On 19 December 2016, Russian Ambassador to Turkey Andrey Karlov was shot dead in Ankara while delivering a speech at the opening ceremony of a photo exhibit. Russian President Vladimir Putin said that the envoy's killing targeted Russian-Turkish ties and Syria peace efforts.

Currently, Russia directs its operations in Syria from the Tartus naval base and the Khmeimim air base.

## Russian Military Bases in Syria



However, Russia has become a belligerent party in the war as it targeted not only terrorist groups, but also the armed opposition groups, most of which are the components of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). One way or another, Russian involvement has prolonged the duration of the war, while it also helped Assad's tenacity in clinging to power.

A report published by the Syrian Network for Human Rights indicated that the Russian military involvement was responsible for huge civilian casualties as much as Daesh.<sup>96</sup> The report said, "2,704 civilians, including 746 children have been killed by Russian forces" between 30 September, the day when the Russian airstrikes started in Syria, and 1 August 2016.<sup>97</sup>

In addition to that, another report which was released by the London-

based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights gave the death toll higher as the report said nearly 10,000 people were killed by the Russian airstrikes in one year.<sup>98</sup> This situation displays the humanitarian aspect of the Russian military interference in Syria, where thousands of people either internally displaced or took refuge in the neighbouring countries as a result of the Russian airstrikes on behalf of the Syrian regime.

During the course of the war, the Russian military support helped the regime to retake once a while the country's second largest city of Aleppo from both terrorist groups and the FSA.

The Russians resumed their diplomatic efforts to settle a political solution to the ongoing crisis. In this way, Russia and the US led the

Geneva talks under the auspices the UN since 2014, but the talks thus far have been a zero sum game as the parties could not extend beyond their own agendas regarding the fate of the Syrian regime.

In an effort to create an alternative platform to the Geneva talks, Russia enhanced political dialogue and security cooperation with the regional powers like Turkey and Iran. Hence, the Astana peace process, which started in the Kazakh capital this year with Russia, Turkey and Iran as the guarantor states to the warring parties in Syria.

The guarantors recently agreed to the creation of de-escalation zones in the areas of Aleppo, Idlib, Latakia and Hama to save civilians from the military conflict. The US is also believed to have supported the plan, but its implementation on the ground in Syria



Source: Volkan Furuncu / AA

## Russia's UN Veto

Russia has used its veto in the UN Security Council on several occasions against resolutions regarding the Syrian civil war, thus further prolonging the conflict. In previous years, Russia vetoed six separate UN Security Council resolutions on Syria: in October 2011, February 2012, July 2012, May 2014, October 2016, and December 2016. The most recent Russian veto came at the end of February 2017, marking the seventh veto of a UN attempt to take punitive measures against the Assad regime. The possibility of sanctions was discussed at the UN

Security Council after a UN commission report on the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime in 2014 and 2015. The report indicated that regime helicopters had dropped toxic chemicals on at least three occasions. Russia and China vetoed the resolution, which included a condemnation of the violation of the international law, the imposition of sanctions on 21 regime figures implicated in the use of chemical weapons, and the establishment of an embargo to curb their transport and use.

is still a sensitive issue between the regime and the opposition groups as it requires a solid political will of the guarantor states.

The Syrian regime, for instance, has objected to monitoring the de-escalation zones by international observers such as the United Nations,<sup>99</sup> which, no doubt, would hamper diplomatic efforts of the conflict resolution.

On the other hand, the regime's use of chemical weapons against civilians has weakened Russia's political position as Moscow has

used its veto power in each time in favour of the Assad government at the UNSC.<sup>100</sup>

Russia used its veto power seven times, either to prevent the imposition of Western-driven sanctions on the Assad government, or to forestall any investigation about the regime's war crimes and human rights abuses which would require the UN's punitive measures.

Moscow has consistently demanded a UN investigation into what it claimed was an 'alleged

chemical attack' in Idlib<sup>101</sup> despite the fact that the previous attacks has been documented by human rights groups.<sup>102</sup> In addition, Russia has also opposed to a unilateral investigation by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in Syria as it claimed the process would not be a transparent one, hereby demanding an independent commission.<sup>103</sup>

As such, Russia has so far nominally defended Syria's territorial integrity,<sup>104</sup> whilst also continuing to support the People's Protection Units (YPG), the PKK terror organization's armed



A young Syrian man next to the dead bodies of his family members.  
Source: Ibrahim Ebu Leys / AA

offshoot in the north of Syria. Russian President Vladimir Putin has said Moscow will continue to cooperate with the YPG militants in Syria, but will not supply weaponry to the group,<sup>105</sup> who are an ally of the US in the fight against Daesh, in the region.

Russia's support of the YPG creates tension with Turkey as the parties have tried to normalize the bilateral ties since Ankara shot down a Russian war plane on the Turkish-Syrian border.<sup>106</sup> As much as Russia and Turkey normalize the ties, their enhanced cooperation might contribute positively for a permanent resolution in Syria.

Moscow's collaboration with the Kurdish factions which are affiliated with the YPG in Syria either facilitate its operational capacity on the

ground, or it also undermines the main pillars of its Syria policy which at the end could spoil the Kremlin's diplomatic efforts to resolve the Syrian conflicts. Moreover, Russia might confront with the US over the drive of YPG in Syria since Washington has been trying to fill its power gap through the militant group in Syria. For the time being, the YPG remains a tense issue between the regional and international powers and its presence as an armed group is very likely to continue destabilizing the region during the post-conflict Syria.

Russia is one of the most prominent political figures in Syria and its political will is a prerequisite for a post-conflict settlement. For the time being, it has diverted the global public attention from a frozen

conflict in east Ukraine to Syria and continuing to support the moribund regime in and around Damascus. Moscow will have to reassess its policies in Syria to maintain its geopolitical influence and geo-economic interests in the region. The Astana process has opened a window for peace in Syria if the parties, most particularly Russia, are able to resume a constructive diplomacy to solve the crisis.

## Battle of Aleppo

Aleppo, the largest city in Syria, has held a strategic position in the conflict. The city's importance arises from its industrial capacity, large population, and strategic position in the north of the country. Historically, Aleppo has always been the centre of commerce and traders. In fact the late arrival of Aleppo to the revolution is primarily due to the regime's excessive diligence in the first 2 years in attempting to contain any uprising or disruption to the city.

Widespread protests started in the eastern part of the city in May 2012. By July 2012, the villages on the outskirts of Aleppo were under the control of opposition groups. Residents of eastern Aleppo were predominantly anti-regime, whilst the population of western Aleppo sided largely with the regime; rendering the city divided across geo-political lines.

Before the war, the number of Aleppo's inhabitants was estimated to be over 3 million. According to UN estimates, the population of eastern Aleppo had decreased to 322,000 by 2016.

The Battle of Aleppo was a particularly brutal chapter in a civil war already marked by the neglect of humanitarian values. Human Rights Watch documented the use of chemical weapons by the regime during the battle. Hospitals, schools, water facilities, and market places were



Residents escape Assad-regime bombardment in the al-Moyaser neighborhood of Aleppo, Syria, on 29 November 2016.  
Source: Jawad al Rifai / AA

hit by the regime forces backed by Iran and Russia. Russian air strikes in particular played a vital role in the Assad regime's ultimate seizure of the city. As many human rights organizations documented at the time, civilians were often the target of these strikes. The Violations Documentation Centre reported the death toll in Aleppo to have been 31,200 between 19 July 2012 and 20 December 2016.

## Timeline Battle of Aleppo

In 2012, opposition forces captured the southern and northeastern sections of the city and took hold of Maarrat al Numan, which was a major supply line for regime forces.

The opposition captured eastern Aleppo in July 2012.

In January 2013, a large explosion claimed the lives of 82 people at the University of Aleppo.

The regime launched a large-scale operation in conjunction with Hezbollah militants against opposition forces in October 2013. The successful operation allowed regime forces to reopen their supply lines.

By the beginning of 2015, the situation of the opposition forces had improved, compared to a year earlier. However, when Russian air strikes started in September 2015, their situation declined.

Regime forces besieged Aleppo in 2016 with the support of Russia and Hezbollah.

The international community tried to strike deal to evacuate civilians trapped in the city.

The evacuation of civilians began in December 2016, under the harassment of Shia militia forces. The International Committee of the Red Cross announced that the evacuation of Aleppo was finalised on 22 December 2016.

After the evacuation, regime forces captured nearly the whole city.



City of Homs, 4 March 2012. Source: AA

### **The Siege of Homs by Assad's regime**

Since the beginning of the uprising in Syria, Homs was known as the capital of the revolution. Despite the diversity of Homs, containing residents of all sects and most prominently of the Sunni and Alawi sects – no such sectarianism existed at the start, but was rather developed during the later stages of the conflict as sectarianism became a tool for the polarising sides. In March 2011, inhabitants of the city began revolting against the regime. When the regime besieged the city, opposition forces armed themselves and fought back. What followed was the siege of the old city and the massacre of those who had stayed behind.

A three-day ceasefire was signed under the auspices of the UN between the Assad regime and opposition groups on 7 February 2014, after which 1,500 people were evacuated. During the talks between the regime and opposition, several skirmishes continued.

On 17 February, after the ceasefire ended, the Assad regime relaunched its attacks on civilians living in Homs. Eventually, the last rebels gave up in May 2014. After three years of fighting, Syria's third-largest city had been battered, starved, and reduced to rubble.

April 2017 saw the evacuation of the last rebel-held area in Homs, as the fourth exodus of Syrian rebel fighters and their families left their home city to Jarablus – which is currently under the control of Turkey. Prior to this, another wave of evacuees relocated to al-Bab, another Turkey-controlled area in Syria, marking the end of rebel rule in Homs and full regime control.



Iranian President Hassan Rouhani meets Assad's Foreign Minister Walid Muallem at the Presidential Palace in Tehran. Source: Iranian Presidency / AA

# IRAN

The overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003 destabilised much of the Middle East. Ever since, Iran has positioned itself as an increasingly influential political force in the region.

Saddam Hussein was a dictator who ruled Iraq for 24 years under the Iraqi Baath Party, which marginalised the country's Shia and non-Arab population and viewed them with suspicion. Hussein was also a dangerous enemy for Iran, a majority-Shia country. Under his rule, Iraq invaded Iran in 1980, marking the beginning of the eight-year Iran-Iraq War.

With Saddam Hussein out of the picture, Iran tactically backed Shia militias in Iraq in order to gain influence across the nation.

His downfall also created the circumstances that allowed Iran to expand its influence elsewhere in the Middle East.

Although Iran has a record of conducting proxy operations in the Middle East, its intervention in Syria was conspicuous; resources and personnel were devoted to the fight on a massive scale.<sup>107</sup> With the outbreak of civil war in Syria, greater numbers of Shia militias surfaced in the region, engaging in pitched battles with armed Sunni groups.

Since 2012, about 5,000 Shia militants have reportedly been fighting in Aleppo alone.<sup>108</sup>

Iran sees Syria as an existential war, where all other parties can afford to lose, save Iran.<sup>109</sup> Iranian officials

have often presented the Syrian War as a way not to fight wars in Iran, but wage them abroad instead. The narrative is, if Assad falls, Iran will have to fight on its own borders.<sup>110</sup> As such, the regime in Iran has no tolerance for criticism of its role in Syria. Authorities have arrested many individuals who have problematized the regime's adventurism abroad at the expense of domestic matters.<sup>111</sup>

As Iran is already gaining a foothold in Syria, a Sunni-Arab-majority country, it is also looming large in nearby northern Iraq, where Shia-dominated Iraqi government forces, reinforced by Iranian-trained militias and the US air force, are fighting Daesh to take control of Mosul; another Sunni-Arab-majority city which is a crucial point for Iran's Shia Crescent.

# The Overview of the Iranian Involvement

Iran has had a strong relationship with the Assad regime since the 1980s. During the Iran-Iraq War, Syria was the only Arab country to expressly support Iran.

Iran has been the staunchest supporter of the Assad regime since the start of the conflict in 2011.

The Assad regime's predominantly Alawite character is a source of affinity with Iran.

In Iran there are rival factions with different views of the country's position on Syria. There are domestic critics who claim the Syria policy damages Iran's standing and economy. Yet, the current Iranian policy in Syria is dominated by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which prefers an all-in, hard-line stance.

The IRGC considers Syria to be its gateway to Lebanon and to Hezbollah. Thus, it fears that if Iran loses its foothold in Syria, it will lose Lebanon as well.

Qasem Soleimani, the head of the Quds Force, directs Iran's operations in the country.

Iran's first reaction to the conflict in Syria was to provide training and technical, financial, and logistical support.

Later on, Iran increased its presence on the ground as well.

It deployed its own personnel as well as foreign Shia groups to support regime forces. Foreign groups consist mainly of Hezbollah and Shia fighters from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

## How Extensive Is Iran's Involvement in Syria?

What began as a protest movement against Bashar al Assad by Syrian civilians in early 2011 quickly escalated into an international proxy war. Iran viewed the opposition movement and opposition groups as a plot to destabilise Assad, its key ally in the Arab world, and to undermine Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Moreover, it saw the opposition as a threat to its geopolitical reach. Syria has long been a key ally providing Iran with access to its proxies in Lebanon and Palestine. Through Syria, Iran was able to move around people, weapons and money.<sup>112</sup>

It therefore established a presence in Syria, deploying its military forces and recruiting Shia militias from countries with sizable Shia populations. These have played a critical role since the beginning of the civil war in helping to maintain Assad's grip on power.

At the very beginning of the conflict, Iranian support was mainly limited to providing technical and financial support conducted by the Quds Force.<sup>113</sup> Later on, the Quds Force was crucial in creating the National Defence Forces, a Syrian paramilitary organisation that mustering 100,000 fighters.<sup>114</sup>

Tehran sent its own armed units, so-called "defenders of the shrine," into Syria to protect the Sayeda Zeinab Mosque near Syria's capital Damascus, where Shia tradition holds that the Prophet Muhammad's granddaughter is buried.

Soleimani masterminded the creation of Assad's National Defence Force.<sup>114</sup> It is a coalition of numerous militias recruited by Iran from countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Lebanon to fight against anti-Assad opposition forces. These groups have committed some of the worst human rights violations in the country.

Several Iranian generals, including Major General Hossein Hamadani, Soleimani's deputy, were killed in action in Syria. An October 2015 report

asserted that at least eight Iranian generals had been killed in Syria since the beginning of the civil war.<sup>116</sup>

Iran seeks public support and mobilizes its population by depicting the war in Syria as a holy cause for the country. "The door for martyrdom, which was closed by the end of the Iranian Iraqi War, is now open in Syria," Khamenei said in a ceremony marking death of Iranian soldiers in Syria.<sup>117</sup>

**How Powerful Are the Iranian-Backed Shia Militias in Syria?**

Iran is not new in having and supporting proxy groups around the Middle East. It has used them since the 1979 revolution.<sup>118</sup> It is not a single group but an extensive network of fighters and a complex

mechanism of providing them with resources.<sup>119</sup> Phillip Smyth, an expert on Shia militias in the Middle East, estimated in November 2016 that the number of fighters belonging to the Iranian proxy groups and "foreign legions" in Syria was between 15,000 and 25,000. Many of the foreign fighters are coming from Afghanistan and Pakistan, according to Avi Dichter, the head of Israel's foreign affairs and defence committee.<sup>120</sup> Iranian military commanders, too, have confirmed that "thousands" of Afghan Shia militants have been recruited by Iran to fight in Syria.<sup>121</sup> Many were Afghan refugees recruited with promises of residency or naturalization and attracted by the regular salary.





Qasem Soleimani. Source: Office of the Iranian Supreme Leader / AA

## Qasem Soleimani

General Qasem Soleimani is the commander of the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. Soleimani is a veteran of the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988. He was appointed the commander of the Quds Force in 1997 and has been an influential figure in overseeing Iran's foreign military activities since then. Under his leadership, the Quds Force has actively supported the Syrian army since 2013.

Soleimani's strategic roles in determining Iran's influence in the Middle East have made him a charismatic figure in Iran.

There were reports that he was wounded seriously while fighting near al Eis on the outskirts of Aleppo in 2015, although Iranian sources denied the news.<sup>122</sup>

Soleimani is considered a war criminal for his involvement in the Syrian War.



Qasem Soleimani in Aleppo. Source: AA

Lebanon's Hezbollah has also played a crucial military role in the Syrian conflict, deploying thousands of its fighters. More than a thousand Lebanese Hezbollah militants have been killed in action since October 2012.<sup>123</sup> In addition, they now have a powerful Syrian branch that controls checkpoints in several districts of Damascus. According to some estimates, at least 5,000 Iranian-backed militants from Iraq, Lebanon, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan were fighting for the Assad regime in the Sunni-dominated city of Aleppo.<sup>124</sup>

## How Has Iran Increased Its Influence across the Middle East?

In the wake of the US invasion of Iraq, Baghdad has been led by Shia-dominated governments backed by Iran. Tehran has also been on good terms with Syria's Assad regime since the 1980s. In the Iraq-Iran War, Damascus was the only Arab capital to support the non-Arab Iran over Iraq, despite Iraq's shared Baathist ideology.

In contrast to the Iraqi Baath Party, the Syrian Baath Party had a strong Alawite presence and was not staunchly pro-Sunni.

Author: Murat Sofuoglu



# SAUDI ARABIA

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US Secretary of the State John Kerry with Saud al Faisal, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs of Saudi Arabia, during Geneva II in Montreux, Switzerland, 22 January 2014.  
Source: Jean Marc Ferre - UN / AA

In 2013, the Syrian president Bashar al-Assad reiterated that Saudi Arabia is the chief backer of terrorist groups and that it is leading “the most widespread operation of undeviating sabotage against not only Syria but also all Arab countries”.<sup>125</sup> Saudi Arabia has undoubtedly been involved in the Syrian conflict both directly and indirectly. Different western media and intelligence reports have claimed that the Saudis have offered large-scale supply of weapons and other military arsenal to several Syrian rebel groups since the outset of the revolution.

For instance, according to New York Times, Saudi Arabia has funded a

huge procurement of armaments and anti-tank weapons from Croatia that have then been shipped to Jordan.<sup>126</sup> In addition, an article was published by The Independent claiming that Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries have supplied combatants of rebel groups linked to the Jaish al-Fatah or Army of Conquest with advanced and sophisticated weaponry. Also, in October 2015, the Business Insider reported that Saudi Arabia supplied Syrian rebels with highly effective weapons. The report claimed that Saudi Arabia had delivered 500 U.S.-made TOW anti-tank missiles to the groups to help them fight the Assad regime.<sup>127</sup>

The Saudis have played a primary role in the political dynamics of the Syrian conflict and have participated in substantial junctures of the war. For example, in mid-December 2015, immediately before holding the Vienna talks, Saudi Arabia held a colossal meeting and invited a good range of the Syrian opposition that was about to take part in the pending peace talks.<sup>128</sup> It was the first time most of the main rebel groups have been involved in peace negotiations since the conflict began.

The attendees of that conference decided to set up what was labeled as the Higher Negotiations Committee headquartered in

Riyadh. This body was created to manage the rebels' involvement in the projected negotiations with the Syrian regime in early 2016.<sup>129</sup> Shortly after, Saudi Arabia unilaterally announced the formation of a collation of Muslim countries that aims at combating all forms of terror. However, analysts considered this move as a step that the Saudis took to demonstrate their symbolic leadership of the Muslim world and thus the idea became practically meaningless.

In early February 2016, the Guardian reported that a Saudi military official declared that his country is willing to take part in any international coalition effort that aims at fighting Daesh and even offered to send ground troops to Syria to fight the terrorist group.<sup>130</sup>

### **Saudi Arabia and Trump era**

Now, in Trump's era, the fight against Daesh is imminent and the Saudis are part and parcel of Trump's alleged Sunni Coalition that aims at deterring Iran and fighting terrorism. Obliterating Daesh in its Syrian de facto capital, Raqqa, would be a monumental success for the international coalition under Trump's leadership.

As expected, Trump's rhetoric as a candidate fundamentally changed immediately after embarking on his executive tasks in the White House. In March 2016, he said "We are not being reimbursed for our protection of many of the countries, including Saudi Arabia." "We defend Saudi Arabia. They don't pay us nearly what they should be paying." He added at a rally of his election campaign in Las Vegas, "How stupid are we? A country like Saudi Arabia wouldn't exist for a week".<sup>131</sup>

However, in March 2017, he managed to reset relationships with Saudi Arabia when he rolled out the red carpet for the Saudi

Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. He gave visiting royals a massive profile-raising boost and an exceeding pledge to expand and hoist mutual relations. No doubt that Trump has guaranteed what he will get in return and that is definitely his Return On Investment (ROI) or what he calls reimbursement.<sup>132</sup>

In his Syria's policy, Trump is in dire need for a battle that costs him nothing. And that is what his strategy is totally based on; he will outsource military forces steered by his senior officials with the financial support of his close allies in the Gulf and mainly in Saudi Arabia. However, the challenges to retake Raqqa are genuinely complicated: Who is going to take part in the operation? And who will fill the power vacuum after Daesh is defeated?

Firstly, Trump's Middle East strategy is to outsource local partners to achieve his ambitious and perilous objectives. In return, Trump needs to satisfy his potential partners. To achieve this, he has to capitalize on mutual benefits so that he could retain their loyalty and ensure effectiveness of their field performance.

Financially, Saudi Arabia, as the symbolic leader of the Gulf countries, has recently demonstrated its absolute willingness to support Trump's policies to combat Iran and Daesh in Syria. Saudi Arabia has uniquely close relationships with one of Trump's foreign policy architects, Rex Tillerson- the acting U.S. Secretary of State. As ex-CEO of the biggest oil company in the world, Exxon Mobil, Tillerson travelled the world clinching deals in the Gulf, Iraq, Iran, and Russia. Today, this company is one of the prevalent foreign investors in Saudi Arabia and also one of the prime private sector procurers of Saudi Aramco crude oil.<sup>133</sup>

### **Looming Raqqa operation**

When it comes to Syria, Riyadh and Washington recognize the sensitivity of Ankara's attitude. The officials in both capitals understand the needs of their Turkish partner; Turkey's main concern is to marginalize the terrorist organization PKK and its regional affiliate YPG, whose attempts to constitute an autonomous state in the northern stretch of Syria has become one of the greatest threats to Turkey's national security. If Trump thinks that Turkey-backed rebels are incapable of defeating Daesh and that arming Kurdish militia groups are the best available option, then Turkey is ready to offer him better alternatives. There are two viable options that could generate success while easing Turkey's concerns: the first being the involvement of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of Iraqi Kurdistan, which is cooperating with Turkey in its operations in Sinjar and other places. Roj Peshmerga is a close ally to the international coalition and has shown military success in all operations that it has taken part in. Another option would be to involve the Arab tribes in the northern swathes of Syria along with the Free Syrian Army, who Ankara has been supporting since its' inception. Recently, the leaders of 50 Syrian Arab tribes met in Turkey, and announced that they would form the Army of Al-Jazirah and the United Euphrates Tribes tasked to cleanse these regions of Daesh presence. These groups are also fully supported by Saudi Arabia.<sup>134</sup>

However, the purported Arab tribe front is not too cozy with Kurdish militia groups and therefore the coalition would not consider them a possible option. There are other Arab tribes at Hasakah and Deir ez-Zor who have already sent troops to fight with the mainly Kurdish and US-



Turkish, Saudi Arabian and Qatari Foreign Ministers in New York to attend the meeting of International Syrian Support Group, 17 December 2015.  
Source: Abdulhamid Hosbas / AA

backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Interestingly, Ahmad al-Jarba, the former head of the Syrian National Coalition, announced that he will be participating in the Raqqa operation with 3,000 of his men under the SDF banner. Al-Jarba has strong ties to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Saudi Arabia's support for both fronts has created a paradox which could manifest as a potential divergence point among the royal princes, Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia's deputy crown prince and Crown Prince, bin Mohammed bin Nayef. The meticulous personal relationship between the two princes is blurred. Prevalent arguments circulate social media platforms speculating who is more dominant particularly in light of the stark differences in the princes' public profiles.<sup>135</sup> Therefore, if Trump wants to weigh alternatives, he will most probably not read from the page of Mohammed bin Nayef, who is a friend of Turkey. Mohammed bin Salman is the prince Trump is most likely to side with.

However, one should wonder if the international coalition's case-

scenarios regarding Syria will resemble the current situation in the Iraqi city of Mosul. Similar to the case in Mosul, there appears to be not enough planning of who will control Raqqa after Daesh is defeated. Will it be the Kurdish militias? Unquestionably no. The majority of the citizens in Raqqa and the encompassing are Arabs and Turkmens, who would certainly not accept to be governed by the Kurdish militia. More prominently, Turkey demands Kurdish groups withdraw east of the Euphrates. There are lots of indicators that Washington prefer the Kurdish as an ally. However, if the US insists on this decision Turkey's reaction will be unpredictable.

Will it be the Syrian regime? The same problem persists. Will the people of the region be willing to replace the terror of Daesh by the state terror of Assad and his dogmatic proxies? Syrians and the rest of the world have seen how ruthless and sectarian Iran's allies are in Mosul and other parts of Iraq.

In an attempt too evade Turkey's wishes, the coalition's plan B could be

the involvement of Saudi Arabia. On 25 February, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir made an unannounced visit to Baghdad, looking for re-establishing detached relations with Iraq, perhaps with an eye toward the Saudi role in the region once the terrorist group is defeated. Saudis are mainly interested in constituting a balance with the broad regional Iranian influence.

Saudi Arabia is eager to see the US confront Iran and its proxies in Syria and Iraq. This is impossible and merely wishful thinking since the US-led coalition is fighting alongside Iran's proxies in Iraq. Therefore, it is not only limited and risky, it would seriously jeopardize US counter-terrorism priorities. As far as its geopolitical interests and objectives are sustained, the Trump administration shows its willingness to provide even more support to its partner in their regional quests.



Wang Yi, Minister of Foreign Affairs of China makes a speech at the Geneva Conference on Syria, January 2014. *Source: Jean-Marc Ferre - UN / AA*

# CHINA

## **Dynamics of China's policy toward Syria**

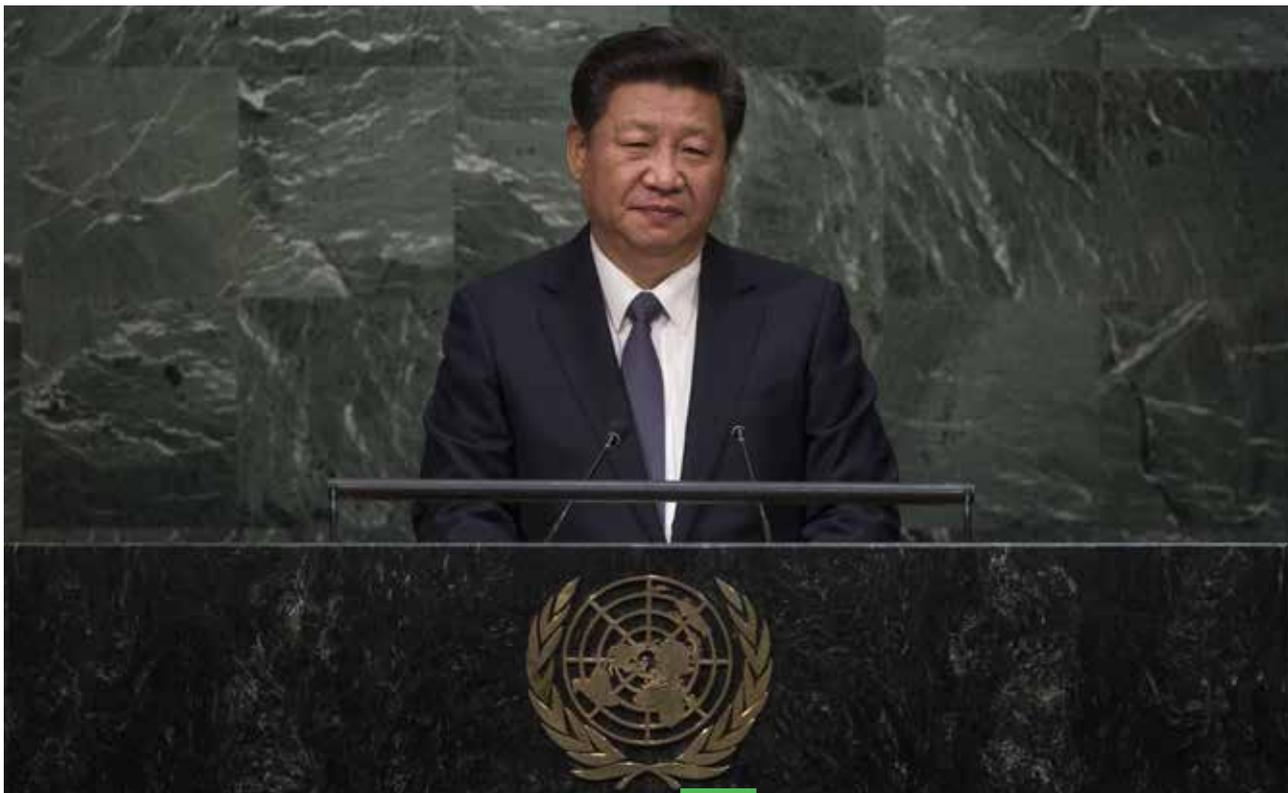
China's involvement in the six years of the Syrian civil war can be generally assessed in the framework of its veto power at the UN Security Council, where The US, UK, France and Russia are also among the five permanent members. China has been a passive bystander during the first years of the war, yet still gradually supported the Syrian regime in the international arena.

Contrary to Russia, China has not intervened directly in the ongoing conflict, but rather it has cooperated with Moscow in order to prevent the Western-led efforts to sanction the Assad regime.<sup>136</sup> As such, China has backed UN resolutions in favour of the regime, and did not react to Russia's military intervention<sup>137</sup> in Syria. Yet, Beijing has consistently urged great powers to avoid military conflicts and reiterated a need for political solution in dealing with the Syria crisis.<sup>138</sup>

China has also stepped up its efforts to keep Assad in power in recent years, and particularly as Russian military involvement has become increasingly more visible on the

ground. Last year, The People's Liberation Army (PLA) envoy led by Rear Admiral Guan Youfei met with the Syrian Defence Minister Lt. General Fahd Jassem al Frejj in Damascus.<sup>139</sup> After the meeting, China promised to provide military and humanitarian aid to the Syrian regime, also in addition to committing to fight against terror groups on the battlefield.

Hence, China abandoned its conventional 'wait and see' strategy, shifting from pragmatism to realism in its Middle East policy. As regional and international actors reshaped the Middle East in accordance with their own interests over Syria, China could not abstain from geopolitical



Xi Jinping addressing the UN in September 2015. Source: *Cia Pak - UN / AA*

calculations in a region where it has invested political, economic and security ties.

A new generation of security threats have obliged Beijing to pursue a more proactive foreign policy regarding the ongoing conflicts in Syria. Given that Syria has become a new hotbed of terrorism, militancy and insurgency, Uyghur recruits of Daesh and al Qaeda affiliated groups in the war-torn country have raised China's security concerns.<sup>140</sup> But, Beijing has long been securitizing the separatist cause of the Uyghurs in order to justify its oppression in the ethnically Turkic-Muslim region.

Thousands of Uyghur militants<sup>141</sup> are believed to have come from China's restive north-western region of Xinjiang, where a nationalist separatist cause has been radicalized with an insurgent militancy since the US invasion of Afghanistan. Organized under the flagship of the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP), also previously known as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), some oppressed Uyghurs joined the militant groups in Syria.

Economically, China considers Syria as the eastern end of the ancient silk road. Therefore, bringing stability to the region is of utmost importance for the Chinese leadership that has been envisaging to reignite commerce and economy through a long-anticipated "one belt, one road" initiative between China and the

Levant. In this regard, China either expects to be part of the reconstruction of the post-war Syria, or it is eager to return to its pre-war status during which it was one of the arm supplier of the Syrian regime.

The Syria crisis will be a litmus test for all regional and international actors, including China, which has so far shown its enthusiasm to keep Assad in power. But, Syria's fragile warfare conditions promise little for Beijing unless the status quo is changed for a predictable future. Pursuing a constructive diplomacy is a very troublesome process which sometimes turns into a double-edged sword in the Middle East. In this sense, China seems to have rocky roads to go to contribute for peace, stability and security in Syria.

On the other hand, it has potentials to terminate bloodshed and warfare environment as a rising power in international relations. It apparently requires China to conveniently use its veto power at the UNSC, which does not necessarily entail to block all Western resolutions on Syria. China needs to balance geopolitical blocks given the fact that its rapid economic growth would oblige it to set forth an alternative international order to the west. Otherwise, the Syrian War has also potentials to drag more problems into China unless a fair and just political settlement between the regime and opposition groups is established in the country.



# NON-STATE ACTORS



# SYRIAN POLITICAL OPPOSITION

US Secretary of State John Kerry meets Ahmad Jarba in New York.  
Source: Basri Sahin / AA

The Syrian political opposition, or mu'arada, as is the word most commonly used in Arabic, have undergone tremendous transformations and changes over the past six years. Upon the protests in Syrian turning into a fully fledged revolution during the spring and summer months of 2011, an official representation of the revolution was in demand, and thus started the long string of events, formations and meetings of several political opposition representations.

Prior to the revolution in Syria protracting and subsequently turning into a war and large-scale humanitarian crisis, the factions representing the opposition were clear and united in their demands. As such, there were two main Syrian voices to start off, the 'pro-

regime' and the 'anti-regime'. The former was represented by the regime itself, whilst the latter was represented by the revolution as a whole, and as of August 2011, by The Syrian National Council (SNC).

With internal and external factors impacting the effectiveness of the SNC, more opposition bodies began forming (or falling out), leading up to the eventual formation of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, which represented a larger body of the Syrian political and military opposition. However, the protection of the Syrian war began bringing about alternative voices whose demands were not in line with those of the National Coalition, who have also been rendered as 'opposition'.

As such, the two factions which started off in Syria and which more or less represented either side of the Syrian nation have become a little murkier and more complex, in sync with both the events on ground and with the emerging voices on the political sphere.

Two main camps occupy the Syrian opposition today, the 'anti-Assad' camp and the camp which does not seek to topple the regime, but rather change its structure.



## Burhan Ghalioun

The first president of the SNC, Burhan Ghalioun, a French Syrian academic originally from the city of Homs, and long-time critic of the Assad regime. Ghalioun led the SNC for nine months, until internal conflicts within the opposition body led him to resign. At the beginning, Ghalioun was perceived as a unifying figure to lead the various opposition factions in a transitional period. It was not long before he began facing criticism that he was too close to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, which subsequently led him to believe he was too divisive a figure to continue leading. Ghalioun remains anti-Assad, and calls for a democratic civil state in which the current regime plays no role in. He frequently gives talks on the future of Syria, as well as his current occupation which is a sociology professor at the Universite de Paris III Sorbonne.

Source: Yasin Aras / AA



## Mashaal Tammo

Marshal Tammo was a Kurdish Syrian, political and human rights activist. His opposition to the Assad regime preceded the Syrian revolution. He was the founder of the liberal Kurdish Future Movement, which angered many Kurds as he did not advocate for separatism of regional autonomy, but rather for a pluralistic and democratic Syrian in which Kurdish Syrians had an equal say in as other Syrians. Tammo was a member of the SNC, and well respected among Syrians in general. He was assassinated by masked gunmen in October 2011. The Assad regime have been accused of his assassination, however the regime rejects this and blames it upon 'terrorists'. The day after his assassination, 50,000 people took to the streets to both protest and mourn Tammo, security forces opened fire on them and killed five.

Open Source



## Khaled Khoja

Khaled Khoja was the president of the National Coalition between 2015-2016, arguably during the years in which the Syrian revolution was completely marginalised as the Assad regime was resurrected by Russian and Iranian involvement. Khoja was born in Damascus, and is Syrian Turkmen with Turkish citizenship. He was detained twice during Hafez al Assad's reign, and was among the founders of several opposition groups at the beginning of the revolution, including the SNC. He is an independent opposition member.

Source: Micheal Hernandez / AA

## Anti-Assad opposition

### The Syrian National Council

The Syrian National Council was the first official political body of the Syrian opposition. The initial aims of the SNC were to end the rule of Bashar al-Assad and the one-party system in Syria, and establish a civil, democratic state in Syria instead. As such, the SNC were comprised of approximately 71 representatives

of different factions and organisations. The first president of the SNC was Burhan Ghalioun, a long-time opponent to Assad and perceived as a unifying figure for the various different factions. The SNC's support at the beginning of the revolution was welcomed widely by Syrians on ground. In fact, as Syrian revolutionaries named their Friday protests and organised chants and slogans to compliment the weekly theme, the Friday after the formation of the SNC was named "The Syrian National Council Represents Me."

The SNC met a total of 4 times together over the course of a year before criticism about their lack of diversity called for action: a more representative body. As such, the biggest criticism of the SNC from its onset was that it was primarily Islamist dominated. Three main defections took place citing lack of diversity, including the defections of Kamal Labwani, Catherine al Talli and Haytham al Maleh. Setting grounds for the National Coalition to be formed with the support of international actors.



Lakhdar Brahimi holds a press conference after mediating between the delegations from the Assad regime and Syrian opposition, 31 January 2014. Source: Fatih Erel / AA

### National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces

The National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces was founded in November 2012, following the criticism that the preceding opposition body did not represent the whole revolution. As such, the SNC initially occupied 40% of the National Coalition. The ultimate aim of the National Coalition is to overthrow the Assad regime and bring victory to the revolution both inside and outside Syria. Their goals, as stated on their website, are as follows:

- To unify support for the joint leadership of the military council, the revolutionary council, and the FSA
- To generate a fund to support the Syrian people through international coordination
- To create a Syrian National Legal Committee
- To establish a transitional government after receiving international recognition

The leadership of the National Coalition started strong, as such they were formed at a time in which Assad was on the brink of collapsing. In December 2012, 100 states informally recognised the National Coalition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people in the 'Friends of Syria' meeting in Marrakech, and by May 2013 at least 20 states at officially recognised them as the 'sole legitimate representatives of the Syrian people'. Representatives to the National Coalition were allocated in different states and Unions, including the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Turkey, France, Qatar and the EU. May 2013 also saw the National Coalition give membership to 15 members of the Free Syrian Army, making them the first political opposition entity to give official representation for the militarised factions on ground.

The first president of the National Coalition was Ahmed Moaz Al Khatib, an Islamic cleric in the

Umayyad mosque. Similar to Ghalioun, Al Khatib was perceived as a unifying figure with the requisite skill to lead the opposition. Al Khatib lead the National Coalition up until his surprise resignation in April 2013. The reasons cited for Al Khatib's resignation were the interference of international actors, however speculations have also been cast upon internal conflict in which Al Khatib conflicted with the majority of the National Council's assembly, including that of the formation of the Syrian interim government and the election of Ghassan Hitto to lead it, which he (Al Khatib) perceived to be premature.

Following the resignation of Ahmed Moaz Al Khatib came the election of Ahmed al Jarba, in which the National Coalition witnessed perhaps the more interference in its politics via international actors, thereafter weakening it in effectiveness and Syrian agency.



Source: Samuel Corum / AA

## Ahmed Moaz al Khatib

Ahmed Moaz al Khatib was the first president of the National Coalition. He is a former imam at the Umayyad mosque in Damascus. Al Khatib hails from a notable Damascene family of Islamic scholars. His appointment as the president of the National Coalition was seen as uniting all factions under a respected and unifying figure. He resigned from the National Coalition in April 2013, citing international involvement; speculations also point to the creation of the interim government and the appointment of Ghassan Hitto as prime minister of the government in exile as part of his resignation. He believed the creation of the body and position were premature. Moaz al Khatib remains prominent amongst the Syrian opposition, and still has a base of dedicated supporters.



Source: Arif Hudaverdi Yaman / AA

## Riad Seif

Riad Seif is the current president of the National Coalition, and long-time democracy activist. He started his career as a businessman, and later a member of the Syrian parliament. Upon the death of Hafez al-Assad, he declared his intention to start a new political party to compete with the Baath party, and after several tense months was arrested on the charge of "defying the state and trying to change the constitution by illegal means". Seif was convicted for five years, and released in 2006. After his release, Seif was constantly harassed by Syrian intelligence and warned not to speak to diplomats or international organisations. He was arrested several times after his release in 2006, the last of which was on the onset of the revolution in May 2011. On November 2012, Seif was elected as vice-president to Ahmed Moaz al Khatib upon the founding of the National Coalition. He has been involved in the opposition since, and was elected president to the National Coalition on 6 May 2017.



Source: Enes Kanli / AA

## Ahmed al Jarba

The second president of the National Coalition, Ahmed al Jarba is a former political prisoner from al-Qamishli, Syria. He served as president for a whole year, and is known to be backed by Saudi Arabia. Upon his departure from the National Coalition, al Jarba became the president of Syria's Tomorrow Movement which is considered to be a part of the Cairo platform. The movement is backed by both Egypt and the UAE, and calls for pluralistic and democratic reform in Syria. Whilst not a part of the National Coalition, the movement maintains relations with them, and al Jarba has met with his National Coalition successors on various occasions.

The impact, support and effectiveness of the National Coalition coincided with the events on ground, and the progress (or counter-progress) of the revolutions. As such, the strongest period of the National Coalition was during the strongest period of the revolution in 2012 and the beginning of 2013, before Hezbollah entered the country and the battle for

certain cities began. The National Coalition enjoyed the support of the international community more than it enjoyed the support of the Syrians on ground, who after the resignation of Moaz Al Khatib and failure of the SNC, were becoming disillusioned with the political opposition.

The National Coalition remains the official political representatives of the Syrian opposition, despite the emergence of other grounds with differing demands. As such, they

remain the representatives of the revolutionary demands, and despite their setback, still enjoy the relative support and acceptance of Syrians, including civil society organisations, local councils and coordination groups on ground, certain moderate armed faction, and the diaspora.

The current president of the National Coalition is Riad Seif, office assumed in May 2017.

## Free Syrian Army

The Free Syrian Army (FSA) was the first Syrian opposition armed group, founded by Riyad al Asaad, a former military officer in the Syrian Air Force, in 2011. The FSA is mainly composed of moderate opposition forces.

In 2012, Salim Idris, a former brigadier general, took command of the FSA. That year, the Free Syrian Army made substantial gains against the Assad regime. The FSA's gains close to the centre of Damascus raised concerns among members of the international community about the prospects of the Assad regime.

In early 2013, following the gains of the opposition, US president Barack Obama called on Assad to step down for the first time. Although the FSA was initially supported by the US, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, the US eventually diverted its support to the YPG militia. Due to the lack in sustainable support, FSA fighters began defecting to other opposition groups and the group's influence declined, particularly after the rise of Daesh and Jabhat Fateh al Sham (previously known as Al Nusra Front). After two years of stagnation, the FSA came to life once more with Turkey's support in Operation Euphrates Shield, a military campaign against Daesh and YPG terrorists that began in August 2016.

### Ahrar al Sham

Ahrar al Sham is currently one of the largest opposition groups fighting in the Syrian War. The group was formed in 2011 by Hassan Abboud (Ebu Abdullah Hamavi). In an interview with BBC reporter Paul Woods, Ahrar's founder Abboud said that they would never be a part of Daesh nor other groups that kill innocent people with suicide bombers. "Ahrar will continue fighting against the regime and Daesh," Abboud added. In September 2014, a suicide attack on a base in Idlib where their group's commanders were holding a meeting killed 45 Ahrar fighters, including Abboud. Abboud was succeeded by Abu Yahya al Hamawi and in 2016, the group's shura council elected Ali al Omar who currently leads the Ahrar al Sham.<sup>142</sup>

Ahrar was initially active in the province of Idlib, and later expanded its activities across Syria. Ahrar has built a network of cooperation with other rebel groups in the country. The group has been operating alongside the Free Syrian Army (FSA) on southern fronts, such as Homs, and in suburban towns of Damascus to fight against the regime and Daesh. Ahrar al Sham supported Operation Euphrates Shield against Daesh and the YPG terrorists. Ahrar is believed to have an estimated 10,000 fighters, thus making it one of the stronger armed rebel groups in Syria.<sup>143</sup>



Salim Idris makes a speech in the ninth plenary session of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces.

Source: Munir Zakiroglu / AA

### Salim Idris

Salim Idris is the former chief of staff of the Free Syrian Army's Supreme Military Council (SMC), which was formed to fight against the Assad regime. He served as a general in the Syrian army until 2012. He organised moderate opposition groups and has promoted pro-democratic principles.

In 2014, he was replaced by General Abdullah al Bashir due to his perceived ineffectiveness in organising the opposition groups.

## Reform opposition

The Cairo and Moscow platforms are compromised, or founded primarily by ex-regime ministers and politicians. The premise of all these groups is their complete rejection of the military factions and opposition, as well as their call for a political solution in Syria. As such, both groups do not necessarily seek to topple the Assad regime, rather they seek to work for democratic reform in Syria.

The Cairo platform is headed by Jihad Makdessi the ex-foreign minister of Syria - who appeared to have resigned in early 2013, citing that he could no longer support the polarisation and violence ongoing in the country. Makdessi was not welcomed by the Syrian National Coalition at the time, not least due to his political views but because as general rule of the them the National Coalition did not accept defected regime ministers and officials until they are fully certain of their allegiance to the opposition and revolution.

The Moscow platform is headed by Qadri Jamil, once the deputy minister for economic affairs in the Syrian government. As such, the two groups do not differ much from each other, other than the fact that both Russia and Egypt have decided to adopt them as 'opposition groups' for further influence in the Middle East.

### **National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change**

A third alternative opposition exists: the internal opposition based in Damascus. The National Coordination Committee for



The United Nations headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland. Source: Evren Atalay / AA

Democratic Change is the Assad-approved opposition, which shares the same aims as the previous aims - and which has the privilege of communicating with the Assad regime without fearing condemnation nor safety. In the elections in Syria of 2014, they offered a presidential candidate to stand as an alternative to Assad.

Criticisms of these opposition groups comes often in accusations of either infiltrating the opposition and weakening it, or in diluting the revolution's demands. They are not recognised by the majority of the Syrian people, and have little support base.

### **Geneva**

The Geneva talks more or less encapsulate the Syrian Peace Process, which was initiated by the then Syria Envoy, Kofi Annan in 2012. On June 2012, a United Nations lead effort came up with the 'final communique' which states that any political settlement must deliver a transition that:

- Offers a perspective for the future that can be shared by all in Syria.
- Establishes clear steps according to a firm time-table towards the realisation of that perspective.
- Can be implemented in a climate of safety for all, stability and calm.

- Is reached rapidly without further bloodshed and violence and is credible.

The key steps in the transition should include:

- Establishment of a transitional governing body with full executive powers that could include members of the government and opposition, and should be formed on the basis of mutual consent.
- Participation of all groups and segments of society in Syria in a meaningful national dialogue process.
- Review of the constitutional order and the legal system.
- Free and fair multi-party elections for the new institutions and offices that have been established.
- Full representation of women in all aspects of the transition.

All the Geneva conventions to follow since, have been based upon the final communique. The first time the Syrian opposition attended the Geneva convention was in January 2014. Since, the Syrian opposition and the Syrian regime have attended the Geneva conventions, but without negotiating with each directly. All communication has been conducted through shuttle diplomacy.

# DAESH

Daesh is the most notorious militant organisation operating in Iraq and Syria, controlling large territory. Its alleged goal is to establish a caliphate based on its extreme interpretation of religion.

Daesh's origin goes back to the early 2000s, when Abu Musab al Zarqawi organised militant training camps under the name Jamaat al Tawhid Wal Jihad. It was affiliated with al Qaeda during the American occupation of Iraq, after which its role declined for the next ten years.

During the American occupation many al Qaeda affiliates were imprisoned in the Abu Ghraib prison and were severely tortured. A significant number of people who were imprisoned in Abu Ghraib have become Daesh affiliates.

Since its reemergence in April 2013, the group have has been actively involved in Iraq and Syria. Although primarily Daesh engaged itself in several fights against regime forces, most of its efforts as became apparent later were and remain directed against Syrian opposition groups. This has led most Syrian armed opposition to consider Daesh an enemy. The Syrian opposition delegation headed by Nasr Hariri, a senior member of the largest anti-regime group, stated that Daesh and the Syrian regime are cooperating against opposition groups in the Syrian War. Apart from fighting on the battlefield, Daesh has expanded its network and plotted terrorist attacks globally.

Daesh's brutal tactics include abductions, crucifixions, suicide bombings, mass killings, rape, beheadings, and destruction of historical sites among others to achieve its goals. With fighters estimated to be 17,000–31,000 comprising local and foreign fighters, it poses a danger to Syrians, the region as well as the international community.<sup>144</sup> Due to its control of large swathes of land and strategic oil resources in both Syria and Iraq, Daesh is believed to be the world's richest militant group with an estimated wealth of 875 million USD in 2014, primarily gained through illegal oil sales, ransom, looting of public/private properties, smuggling, bribes, taxes imposed on the people it controls. To counter the Daesh threat, a US led coalition called "Operation Inherent Resolve" started directing airstrikes against the group in August 2014.<sup>145</sup> Turkey, which shares a significant border with Syria, began "Operation Euphrates Shield" in August 2016 to secure its border and push Daesh and other terrorist groups from its border.<sup>146</sup>



An image taken from a video released on 5 July 2014 by al Furqan Media shows Daesh leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi preaching in Mosul. [Open Source](#)

## Abu Bakr al Baghdadi

Abu Bakr al Baghdadi is the leader of militant terrorist organization Daesh. The US Pentagon confirmed that al Baghdadi was detained in Iraq's Abu Gharib prison in 2004 during the US invasion in Iraq when the prison was notorious for torture and other human rights violations. The detention process is thought to have contributed to his radicalisation.<sup>147</sup>

During the American occupation of Iraq, Baghdadi founded the insurgent group and al Qaeda affiliate Jaysh al Sunnah Wa al Jamaah. His close association with Abu Musab al Zarqawi, leader of the Iraqi branch of al Qaeda, helped him to rise through the ranks of the organization. After the death of Zarqawi, Baghdadi became the leader.

In 2011, Bahdadi appointed Abu Mohammad al Julani to carry out the operations of al Qaeda in Syria under the name the al Nusra Front. In 2013, Baghdadi renamed his organization Daesh and declared the al Nusra Front part of it. Later that year, Baghdadi refused Julani's request for the al Nusra Front to be granted the autonomy to work alongside other opposition forces in Syria against the regime. In 2014, Ayman al Zawahiri expelled Daesh from al Qaeda.

Completely separated from al Qaeda and under the leadership of Baghdadi, Daesh captured Mosul in 2014, the second-largest city of Iraq. A few days after, Baghdadi delivered a Friday sermon in Mosul in which he proclaimed himself caliph. Under Baghdadi, Daesh seized control of significant regions of Iraq and Syria.

## Timeline

### Daesh Terror Attacks around the Globe

#### **SURUC** **20 July 2015**

A total of 32 Turkish citizens were killed in a massive explosion that hit the garden of the Amara Cultural Centre, where members of a youth association (SGDF) had gathered for a press meeting before crossing into Syria to support the people of Kobane. Turkish government officials blamed the attack on Daesh, as the suicide bomber who carried out the attacks had links to the terrorist organization.

#### **ANKARA** **10 October 2015**

A march organised by leftist labour unions and political parties was targeted by a pair of suicide bombers at around 10:00 am, just as crowds had started to gather in front of Ankara's main train station, killing 103 people and wounding more than 500 others.

#### **PARIS** **13 November 2015**

The French capital of Paris was shaken by multiple terror attacks targeting six different sites. French President Francois Hollande announced the death toll as 129 and the number of injured as more than 300, a total of 80 of whom were in critical condition.

#### **ISTANBUL** **12 January 2016**

A 28-year-old Syrian detonated a bomb in Istanbul's Sultanahmet Square, a popular tourist area where the historic Blue Mosque is located. Thirteen people were killed, including the attacker, and 16 were injured. Daesh claimed responsibility for the attack.

#### **ISTANBUL** **19 March 2016**

A suicide attack carried out by Daesh in front of the Beyoglu Governorate on Istiklal Street in Taksim killed four people and injured 36.

#### **BRUSSELS** **22 March 2016**

Three coordinated suicide attacks took place during the morning rush hour. Two explosions took place at the Brussels Airport in Zaventem, and one at Maalbeek metro station in Brussels. Seventeen people were killed and 81 people were injured.

#### **ISTANBUL** **28 June 2016**

A bloody airport attack took place at Ataturk Airport. Daesh was accused after three armed suicide bombers opened fire and blew themselves up at the airport, killing 42 people and injuring another 239.

#### **NICE** **14 July 2016**

A vehicle stocked with guns and grenades rammed into a crowd watching a fireworks display during Bastille Day celebrations, killing dozens and injuring over 100.

#### **GAZIANTEP** **20 August 2016**

Thirty people were killed in a bomb attack on a wedding in Turkey's southeastern city of Gaziantep. Most of those killed were women and children. Moreover, 69 people were in hospital with 16 of them "heavily injured."

#### **BERLIN** **19 December 2016**

At least 12 people were killed and 48 injured when a truck plowed into a crowd at a Christmas market in Berlin. Daesh claimed responsibility a day after the attack.

#### **ISTANBUL** **1 January 2017**

Daesh claimed responsibility for a shooting at a nightclub in which 39 people were killed and 69 injured in the early hours of New Year's Day. The gunman was captured by the police after a long man hunt.

#### **KABUL** **7 February 2017**

At least 22 people were killed and another 41 wounded when an attacker blew himself up outside the Supreme Court in the Afghan capital of Kabul. Daesh claimed responsibility for the suicide attack.

#### **SEHWAN** **16 February 2017**

A suicide bomber attacked a crowded Sufi shrine in southern Pakistan, killing over 90 and leaving thousands injured. Daesh claimed responsibility.

## Rise of Extremism Export of Terrorism

The world is now menaced by the threat of terrorism from the radical groups that have spread across Syria, particularly Daesh, Hezbollah's terrorist fighters, and affiliates of al Qaeda. Syria's transformation into a failed state has created a fertile breeding ground for such groups, and more people are radicalised with every year that the conflict continues.

Infamous for its inhumane treatment of civilians and soldiers in the areas it controls, Daesh has released dozens of photographs and videos of its members beheading their captives, burning them alive, throwing them from buildings, and carrying out mass executions. Yet these are only the atrocities it carries out in Syria and Iraq; its barbarism goes well beyond its self-proclaimed borders. As such, Daesh and its affiliates have shown that they have the capacity to - and will - conduct terrorist attacks in countries far from Syria and Iraq. According to a CNN report on Daesh attacks around the globe, as of February 2017, Daesh has carried out and inspired more than 140 terrorist attacks that had claimed over 2,000 lives and injured thousands in 29 countries across the world.<sup>148</sup>

### Foreign Terrorist Fighters

Over the course of the conflict, the rapid successes and advances of Daesh, the YPG, and Hezbollah in Syria and Iraq have attracted many recruits from the region and from across the world. According to the UNSC, terrorist groups like Daesh and its affiliates have attracted over 30,000 foreign recruits from over 100 countries.<sup>149</sup>

In September 2014, the UNSC adopted a resolution addressing the urgent need to tackle the threat posed by these foreign terrorist fighters (FTF). The resolution defined FTFs as individuals who travel to a

state other than their state of origin to take part in terrorist activities.<sup>150</sup> As these FTFs start to either return to their countries of residence or move to third countries to join other radical groups, they threaten to carry the sort of violence that has marked the Syrian crisis to the wider world.

As a part of their training, FTFs learn how to fight, produce homemade explosives, and gain expertise in the use of a vast array of weapons, hence making them ready to launch terrorist attacks in the countries they return to. According to Europol's Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2016, it is estimated that over 5,000 Europeans have travelled to Iraq and Syria. A third of them later returned;<sup>151</sup> equating the returnees to as many as 1,750 potential FTF's. While 15 to 20 percent of FTFs have been killed in the battlefield, almost half of them still remain in the conflict zone, meaning that threats of terrorism exportation remain at the door.<sup>152</sup>

The recent terrorist attacks in Brussels, Paris, Istanbul, and London are the repercussions of the export of Daesh terrorism. These attacks have proved that Daesh and its affiliates seek to enhance their power-projection capabilities by investing in secret networks and covert cells abroad. Daesh's nightclub attack in Istanbul in the early hours of New Year's Day, 2017, revealed the complex network underpinning the group. Abdulkadir Masharipov, the Uzbek national suspected of carrying out the attack, was arrested together with one Iraqi man and three women from Egypt, Somalia, and Senegal. This demonstrates the danger posed by Daesh's expanding network of traveling FTFs.

Aside the direct attacks, one serious concern posed by FTFs returning to their home countries is that they may inspire radicalisation and lone-wolf attacks in the name of the group. Ultimately, by spreading the group's ideology and raising funds through encrypted communication systems and internet services, Daesh can gain new recruits and finance new attacks across the world with relative ease.

The spread of Daesh terrorism is not limited to Europe; both North and West African countries are also under the direct threat from the spread of terrorism. Affiliates of Daesh in Libya have destabilised the country and threaten the stability of neighbouring countries, particularly Egypt and Tunisia. Daesh's presence in West Africa and the Sahel, Boko Haram in Nigeria, and al Shabab in Somalia continues to destabilize the region as a collective. As such, it is no doubt that FTFs traveling to these areas to join radical groups further exacerbate the security problems of the region.

### Definition:

**Foreign terrorist fighters:**  
"Individuals who travel to a state other than their state of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict."

UN Security Council Resolution 2178

# PKK'S SYRIA OFFSHOOT

## PYD-YPG

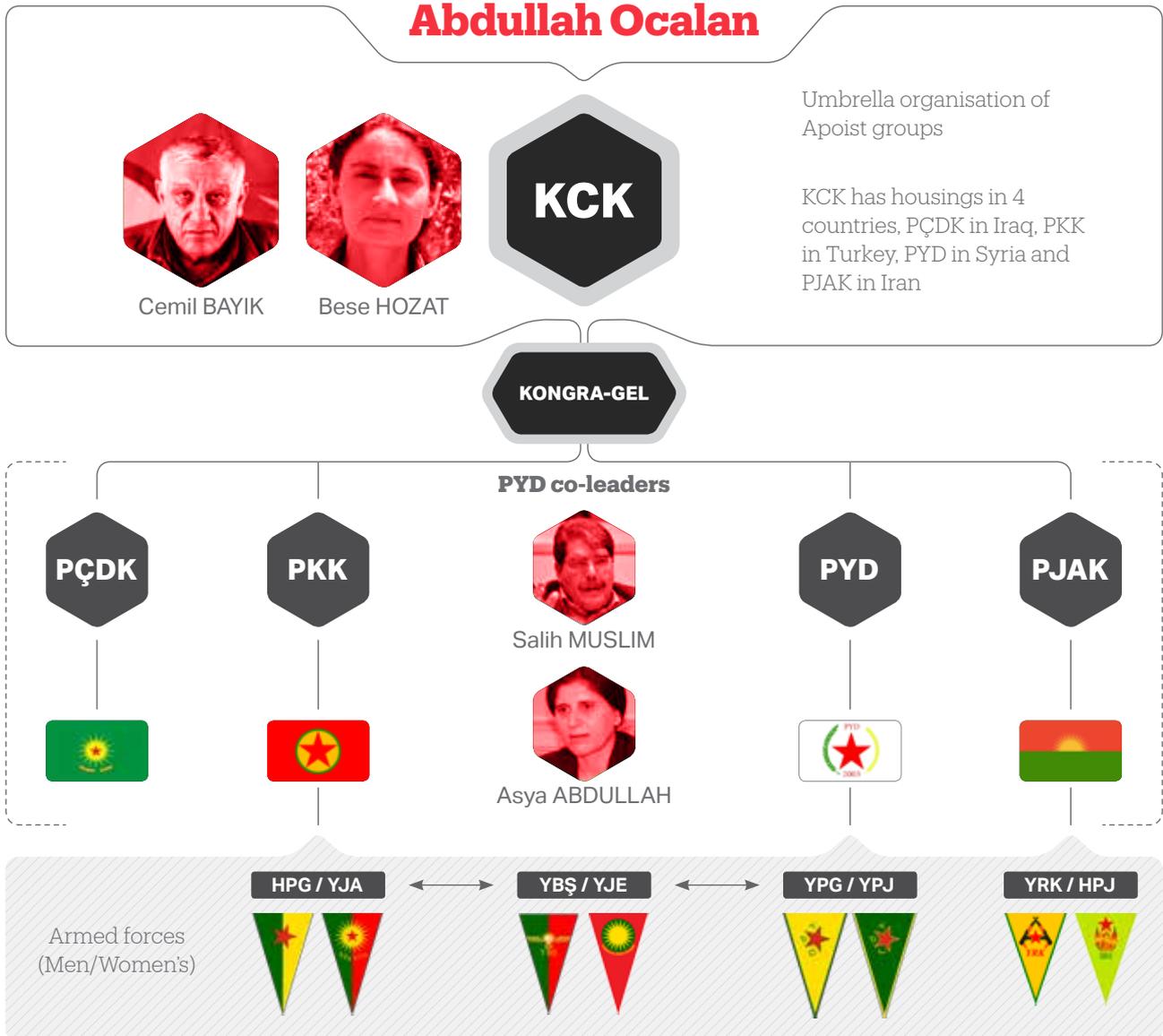
The War in Syria has provided terrorist groups with new opportunities to expand their support bases. The most remarkable example of this is the PYD, the Syria branch of the radical Marxist terror group PKK. The PYD was established long before the Syrian War with the aim of increasing PKK's influence in Syria. The PKK's imprisoned leader Abdullah Ocalan ordered the establishment of PYD during a visit of his lawyer in 2002. In the 8th congress of the PKK, the terrorist organisation decided to form offshoot organisations in Syria,

Iraq and Iran. Thus, the PYD was found in 2003 as the Syrian Branch of PKK.<sup>153</sup> A statement of KCK (umbrella organisation of Apoist groups) in its official newspaper Serxwebun shows the link between PKK, PYD-YPG and KCK: "PYD as the Western Kurdistan organisation of KCK...".<sup>154</sup> Moreover, code of the PYD recognises Abdullah Ocalan as the leader and KONGRA-GEL (legislative body of the KCK) as the highest legislative power.<sup>155</sup> The PYD used the Syrian War, to present itself as a legitimate actor.

The YPG is the armed wing of the PYD and is based in Kurdish-majority regions of northern Syria. The YPG was founded in 2011, shortly after the start of the Syrian civil war. A year after the Syrian civil war started, regime leader Bashar al Assad withdrew his forces from the northern border with Turkey. The withdrawal of regime forces left a security vacuum on the Syrian side of the border, which the YPG moved



### Abdullah Ocalan



Cemil BAYIK



Bese HOZAT



Umbrella organisation of Apoist groups

KCK has housings in 4 countries, PÇDK in Iraq, PKK in Turkey, PYD in Syria and PJAK in Iran



#### PYD co-leaders



Salih MUSLIM



Asya ABDULLAH



#### HPG / YJA



#### YBŞ / YJE



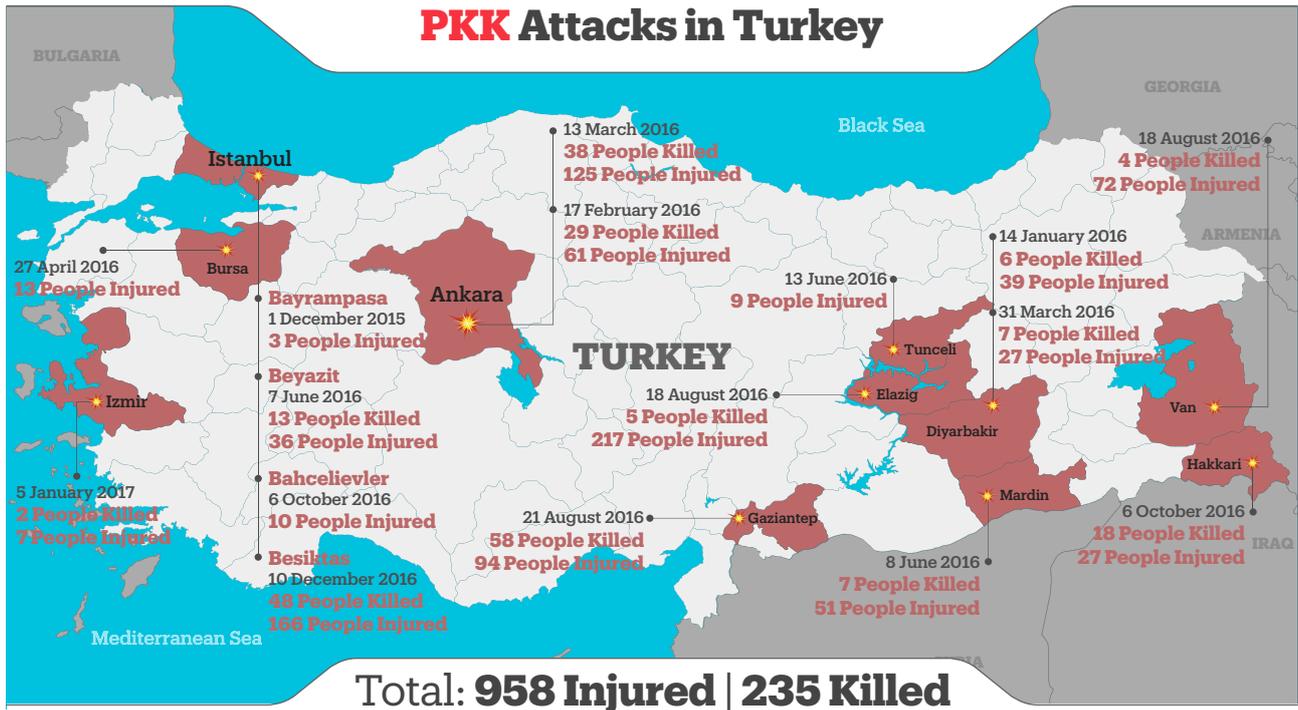
#### YPG / YPJ



#### YRK / HPJ



Armed forces (Men/Women's)



in to fill. They have declared the establishment of three autonomous cantons in areas that they control - Afrin, Kobane and Jazira.

Despite its brutal ways which extend from child soldier recruitment to demolishing of civilian homes, the YPG has generated sympathy abroad with a strong propaganda campaign, presenting themselves as the only truly democratic force on the frontline against Daesh.<sup>156</sup> This image has attracted foreign fighters from Western countries such as the UK, Greece, Spain and the US to Syria to fight for the YPG, with some losing their lives in the struggle against Daesh.<sup>157</sup>

The YPG welcomed Russia's military intervention in Syria, which began in late 2015. It took advantage of Russian air strikes on Syrian opposition forces in northern Aleppo to expand its territory.<sup>158</sup>

But the group's main backer has been the US, which has supported the YPG through the SDF with arms, training and logistical support.<sup>159</sup>

PYD-YPG's confrontation with Daesh has led to a rapprochement with the US. Although the US and EU

considers the PKK and KONGRA-GEL as terrorist organisations;<sup>160</sup> they refuse to acknowledge PYD-YPG as their Syria wing. The US denies the link between the YPG and the PKK, even at the expense of testimony offered by Washington's former Secretary of Defense Ash Carter.<sup>161</sup> There are also a number of reports on the organisation that clearly demonstrate the link between the two, including one that records some 2,500 cases of YPG members who were killed in action and were previously known to fight for the PKK.<sup>162</sup> While the US acknowledges Turkey's concerns over the YPG and repeatedly reassures its commitment to protecting its NATO ally, Washington has proceeded to arm the YPG and go ahead with plans to back them in their bid to take the city of Raqqa from Daesh.<sup>163</sup> US insistence on this policy has strained relations between Ankara and Washington. Furthermore, the support has given PYD-YPG a ticket to hide their terrorist activities from the eyes of the international community, and to facilitate PKK attacks in Turkey. Turkish authorities have confirmed the perpetrators of suicide bombings which led to death of more than 80 people in Istanbul and Ankara have received training from the PYD-YPG.<sup>164</sup>

Furthermore, authorities believe weapons transferred to PYD-YPG are being handed over to the PKK, as sophisticated shoulder launched surface to air missiles (MANPADS) have been captured by the Turkish security forces in operations against the PKK.<sup>165</sup> Coincidentally, these weapons are being used by the PKK ever since the US, Russia and EU countries have commenced to equip the PYD-YPG with such weapons.<sup>166</sup>

The PYD-YPG practices a totalitarian regime in Northern Syria, as such the terrorist organisation suppresses other Kurdish political group's activities in the region.<sup>167</sup> In a statement by Xalid Eli, an official from the Kurdish National Council (KNC), he said their friends were jailed by the PYD-YPG. Reports also show that the office of the KNC and Syrian Kurdistan Democratic Party (SDKP) were set on fire by the PYD-YPG. This comes in addition to the terrorist organisation threatening to halt their political activities.<sup>168</sup> PYD-YPG oppression is not only directed to Kurdish politicians, more than 500 thousand Kurds have escaped their rule and fled to Turkey and Northern Iraq.<sup>169</sup>

The PYD-YPG follows a Kurdification policy in the regions that it dominates.



Salih Muslim, head of PYD, in a PKK rally. [Open Source](#)

The terrorist organisation forcibly displaces Turkmen and Arab residents of Northern Syria in order to change the demographics of the region.<sup>170</sup> Victim statements in Amnesty International's report show the degree of PYD-YPG brutality in the region. "They (PYD-YPG) pulled us out of our homes and began burning them... Then they brought the bulldozers and they began demolishing the homes" says Farah a former resident of Husseiniya village in Qamishli. Yasser of al Ghebin village in Tal Abyad says: "They [the YPG] said, 'If you don't leave we will tell the warplanes [of the US-led coalition] to attack you...'" the PYD-YPG also forces people to join their lines. Sultan from al Hasakah district says: "When the [PYD-]YPG entered the village at night they lined 63 people along the wall including me and my brother. They told us, 'You either join us or leave the land of Kurdistan'.<sup>171</sup>

Foreign fighters from the West are an elusive propaganda tool for the PYD-YPG, and leading media outlets compete to interview them. Few interviews, however, reveal the story in its entirety or at least attempt to draw the parallels between foreign fighters joining the PYD-YPG and those joining Daesh and similar organisations. In fact, most reports and interviews glorify them and their cause, whilst turning a blind eye to the reality on the ground. A former PYD-YPG fighter, Patrick, captured the reality of the foreign fighter policy of the PYD-YPG: "We were treated very poorly. We were kept in very poor conditions, and the only time we were put in good accommodations was in preparation for interviews for media that were coming through... Some of the foreigners even had their passports and phones taken away. The PYD told the fighters this was because they feared Daesh might gain a propaganda victory if they killed or captured a foreigner and discovered their passport. However, it might have had just as much to do with ensuring the fighters could not leave at will or speak to anyone on the outside without a PYD minder present.<sup>172</sup>

### PYD-YPG's Child Soldiers

A report by Human Rights Watch in 2015 raises the concern of PYD-YPG's recruitment of children under the age of 18.<sup>173</sup> The recruitment appear to take place both forcibly and by choice, which in both cases are illegal by international law, as the Optional Protocol to the Children's Rights Convention on Children and Armed Conflict says that non-state armed groups should not recruit children under 18 for any purpose.<sup>174</sup>

The Human Rights Watch report compiled a list of 59 children, 10 of them under 15, who were allegedly recruited by or volunteered for YPG or YPJ forces since July 2014. The human rights organisation also confirmed that some of the children were enlisted without their parents' consent. A quote from the report below:

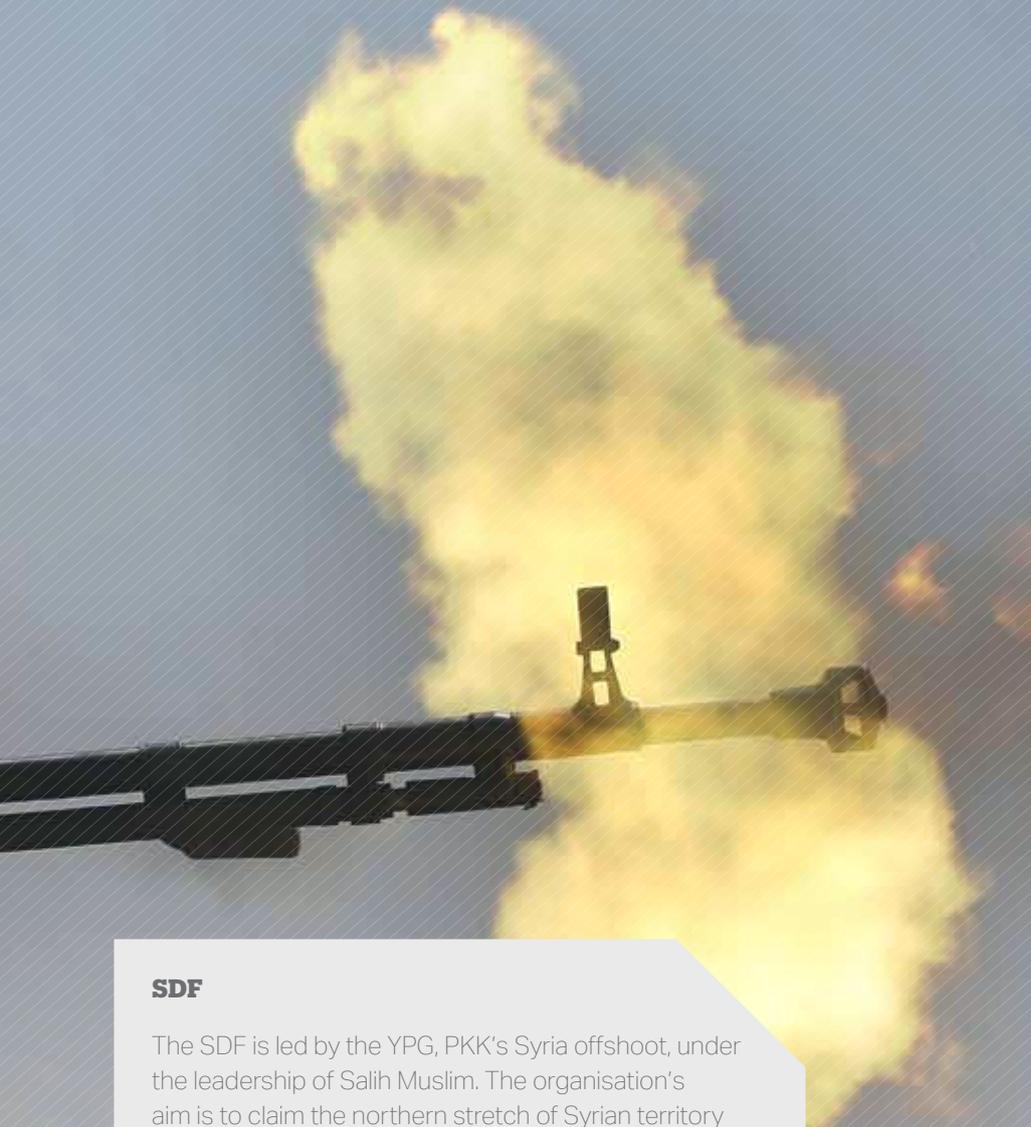
"My daughter went to school and was taken from there by a group of YPJ," a father of a 14-year-old girl near Qamishli said. "We knew nothing about her until a YPJ commander called and informed us that she had joined YPJ."

The report further states that despite having signed a 'deed of commitment' in 2014 with the non-governmental organisation Geneva Call, pledging to demobilize all fighters under 18 within one month, the YPG did not fulfill this commitment and continued with its child recruitment.

"We were playing computer game with my uncle's son. He told me "Let's join PKK and go to Syria to fight against Daesh". I accepted. We found someone to mediate us to join the PKK. The mediator, while taking us for surrender, he was talking on the phone, cryptically saying "I am on my way. Shall I come to the place we have tea? I slaughtered two black sheeps. They are in the black bags. On the trap". When we crossed the border, the YPG members received us. I saw foreign national soldiers under the YPG terrorist organization in Tel Tamr District. They were wearing YPG uniforms and fighting on the battlefield to support the YPG."<sup>[sic]</sup>

#### M.B., 16 years old.<sup>175</sup>

"Cases of recruitment and use of children by Syrian Kurdish armed groups were documented. Reports of boys and girls aged 14 to 17 years associated with Syrian Kurdish armed groups in Al Hassakeh governorate in support and combat functions were documented and verified. Children have mostly been used to man checkpoints and transfer information and military supplies, but they have also been trained to participate in combat. A 17-year-old boy stated that he had joined Syrian Kurdish armed groups in July 2012 to protect his neighbourhood in the border town of Al Qamashli (Al Hassakeh governorate). He claimed that he had received training and later had participated in military operations and guarded checkpoints."<sup>176</sup>



## SDF

The SDF is led by the YPG, PKK's Syria offshoot, under the leadership of Salih Muslim. The organisation's aim is to claim the northern stretch of Syrian territory extending toward the Mediterranean Sea, and to declare autonomous rule there based on the PKK's radical Marxist ideology. With an estimated number of 30,000-50,000 militants,<sup>177</sup> YPG is seeking to create what it calls an 'autonomous Kurdish region in northern Syria or Rojava'.<sup>178</sup> The SDF has strong links with the PKK, as most of its militants are members of the PKK.<sup>179</sup>

The US has used its air power to support the group's operations in Syria, and both the US and Russia have supplied it with heavy weapons. The SDF's ambiguous solidarity with the Assad regime and its clashes with the moderate rebels have made it a bitter enemy of the opposition. The PKK is recognised as a terrorist organization by the US, the EU and Turkey. Known to be a cover for the PKK's activities in northern Syria, SDF and YPG forces targeted the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army when they were against Daesh during the Operation Euphrates Shield.<sup>180</sup>



Salih Muslim, head of PYD, PKK's Syria offshoot.  
Source: Dursun Aydemir / AA

## Salih Muslim

Salih Muslim is the leader of the PKK's Syrian affiliate group, which aims to establish autonomous rule based on the PKK's radical Marxist ideology in northern Syria under the PYD's domination.

Muslim was born in Kobane in northern Syria. After receiving some education in Syria, he studied chemical engineering at Istanbul Technical University. He became affiliated with the radical Marxist Kurdish movement in the 70s, and was inspired by the struggle of Mustafa Barzani against the regime of Saddam Hussein. After finishing his studies, Muslim went to Saudi Arabia to work as an engineer before returning to Syria in the 90s. He joined the PYD in 2003, and became a member of the executive council. Before the Syrian War, Muslim fled to Iraq to avoid of a prison sentence issued to him by the Syrian regime. Although Barzani was the one to give him refuge when Muslim was in exile, he later persecuted and shut down all political parties close to Barzani.



Hassan Nasrallah is the general secretary of Hezbollah, Lebanese political party and paramilitary Shia force based in Lebanon. Source: Ratib Al Safadi / AA

### Hassan Nasrallah

Hasan Nasrallah was born in Beirut in the year 1960. During the Lebanese civil war, he and his family had to leave the capital city and moved to their village Bassouriyeh situated in southern Lebanon. Since 1992, Hassan Nasrallah is the general secretary of Hezbollah, the Lebanese political party and paramilitary Shia force based in Lebanon. Nasrallah became the leader after Hezbollah's preceding leader Abbas al Musawi was killed by an Israeli attack.

In May 2013, Nasrallah announced Hezbollah's solidarity with the Assad regime and sent paramilitary forces to Syria. The survival of the Assad regime is considered to be of paramount importance to Hezbollah, and Iran has been supporting the group along the Syrian-Lebanese border.

Nasrallah has criticised the Arab countries for backing the opposition in Syria. Nasrallah's cousin Hamzah Yassine was killed in southern Syria during the fight against the opposition.

# HEZBOLLAH

Hezbollah is a Shia paramilitary force founded in 1985 and one of the key non-state actors in the Middle East. Sometimes referred to as "state within state," it controls huge chunks of land in eastern and southern Lebanon as well as some parts of Beirut. It has been backed by Iran since its inception.

Some Western countries, including the US of America, designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization<sup>181</sup> and imposed sanctions on the group for its alleged involvement in terror attacks, kidnappings as well as international criminal operations.<sup>182</sup>

Under the leadership of Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah announced its military support to the Syrian Army in June 2013 during the siege of the Syrian town of al Qusair on the Lebanese border. In a televised speech, Nasrallah said "Syria has real friends, in the region and the world, who will not let it fall in the hands of America, Israel, and Takfiri groups."<sup>183</sup>

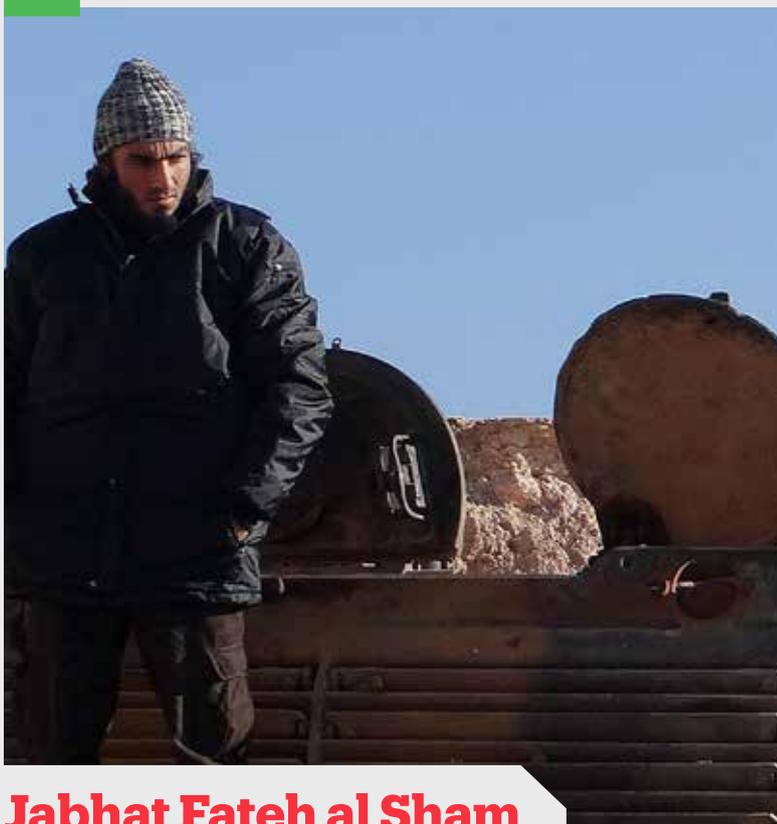
With Hezbollah's aid, the Assad regime recaptured the town from the opposition. Although Hezbollah ostensibly entered the conflict in Syria to protect Shia holy shrines and Lebanese villages on the border, it became more deeply involved as the Assad regime began to lose ground, offering tactical support, training, and otherwise bolstering the regime's war effort. As a justification for Hezbollah's continuous engagement in the Syrian conflict, Nasrallah claimed in 2015 that his troops are fighting an existential threat posed by Daesh.<sup>184</sup>

The Hezbollah militia's intervention later extended to Sunni areas such as Aleppo, and as far as Hasak and Deir Ezzor.<sup>185</sup> Up to 4,000 Hezbollah fighters have been fighting alongside the Assad regime since 2013. However, there are other reports indicating that Hezbollah has deployed as high as 10,000 of its militias in to Syria.<sup>186</sup> Many have been killed, including a number of senior commanders. Hezbollah remains deeply involved in the Syrian War today.

The Hezbollah's deeper involvement in Syrian War has also sparked violence and sectarian tensions in Lebanon between those supporting the Syrian regime and those who oppose it.<sup>187</sup> This has led Syrian fighters to carry out reprisal attacks against the Hezbollah strongholds and targets in Lebanon.<sup>188</sup> Since the start of the Syrian civil war, Israel has also several times conducted air strikes against the group targeting convoys believed to be carrying weapons to the group.

Despite the international sanctions, Israel airstrikes and some battlefield loses, Hezbollah will continue to be effective force in the Syrian conflict and maintain its unwavering support for the Syrian regime. It will receive huge funds from its traditional supporter— Iran-- thanks to the Iran's nuclear deal and the subsequent lifting of economic sanctions on Iranian economy. In fact, Hassan Nasrallah has openly shown his support for the nuclear deal claiming that a richer Iran will play a major role in the Middle East and hence, will "reinforce the position of its allies".<sup>189</sup>

Source: Ahmed Hasan Ubeyd / AA



## Jabhat Fateh al Sham

Jabhat Fateh al Sham, previously known as the Al Nusra Front, was the official affiliate of al Qaeda in Syria. Al Nusra was formed in late 2011 when the then leader of al Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, assigned Abu Muhammed al Julani to oversee the group's operations in Syria. Al Nusra became active in the war in early 2012, when the group claimed responsibility for a series of suicide attacks in regime-held areas.

The US coalition began to target al Nusra in September 2014, by launching airstrikes on its bases. The group retaliated by attacking US-backed groups such as the Syrian Revolutionary Front (SRF) and Harakat Hazzm.

Over the course of the conflict, al Nusra extended its operations and partnered with many opposition groups in joint operations against the Assad regime. After a series of conflicts with al Qaeda and Daesh, headed by Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, al Nusra severed its affiliations with al Qaeda and changed its name to Jabhat Fateh al Sham, in July 2016. Jabhat Fateh al Sham continues to operate on many fronts against Daesh, PKK affiliates, and the Syrian regime.

Jabhat Fateh al Sham has a relatively small number of fighters, fewer than 10,000 members,<sup>190</sup> compared to other armed opposition fighters in Syria. Jabhat Fateh al Sham's relationship with other Syrian groups is considered to be mixed. It has collaborated with opposition fighters on many fronts against the regime, and confronted others on a non-regime basis. The group also shows little tolerance to US-backed groups, accusing them of supporting the Assad regime. One such example is the Jabhat Fateh al Sham killing and abduction of some 56 US trained rebels to fight against Daesh in 2015.<sup>191</sup>



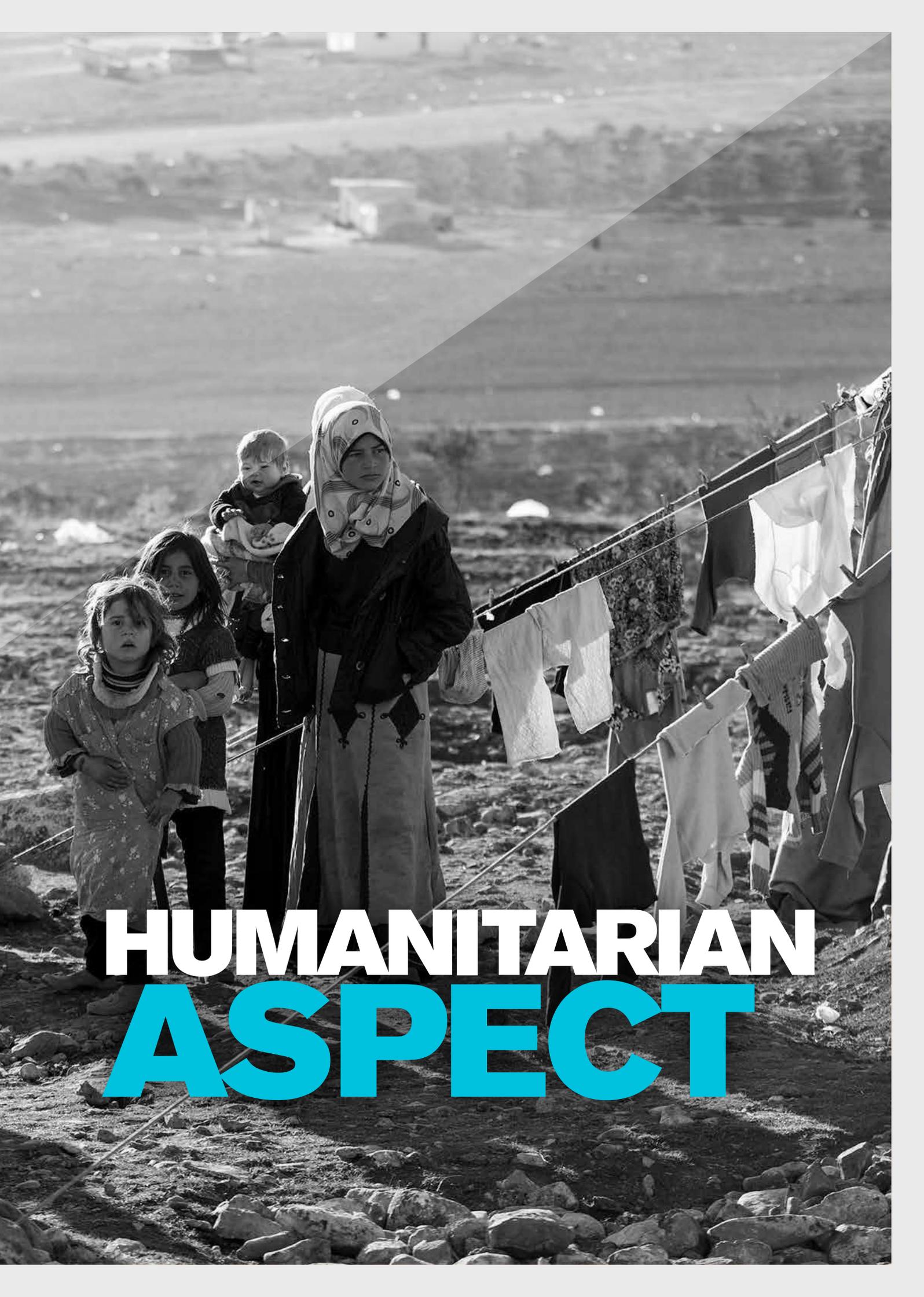
Abu Muhammed al Julani.  
Open Source

## Abu Muhammed al Julani

Syrian-born Abu Mohammed al Julani is the current chief commander of Tahrir al Sham, previously known as the al Nusra Front and Jabhat Fateh al Sham. Julani's actual name is Ahmed Hussaïen al Shar'a, the name al Julani in his nom de guerre is in reference to Syria's Golan Heights, which was occupied by Israel in 1967. Julani, who was born to a father who worked in the oil industry and a mother who was a geography teacher, studied media at the University of Damascus. However, his studies were interrupted by the Iraq war, which motivated him to leave his studies and join the insurgency in Iraq.

During the American occupation of Iraq in 2003, Julani fought American troops and became a prominent leader of al Qaeda there. When al Nusra was formed in late 2011, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, the leader of the Iraqi branch of al Qaeda, assigned Julani to conduct their operations in Syria. In 2016, he released a statement formally severing the al Nusra Front from al Qaeda and formed Jabhat Fateh al Sham. In January 2017, Jabhat Fateh al Sham rebranded itself again by stating that it had agreed to merge with four factions to form a new alliance called Hayat Tahrir al Sham. The organization is currently the second largest anti-Assad militant faction in Syria.



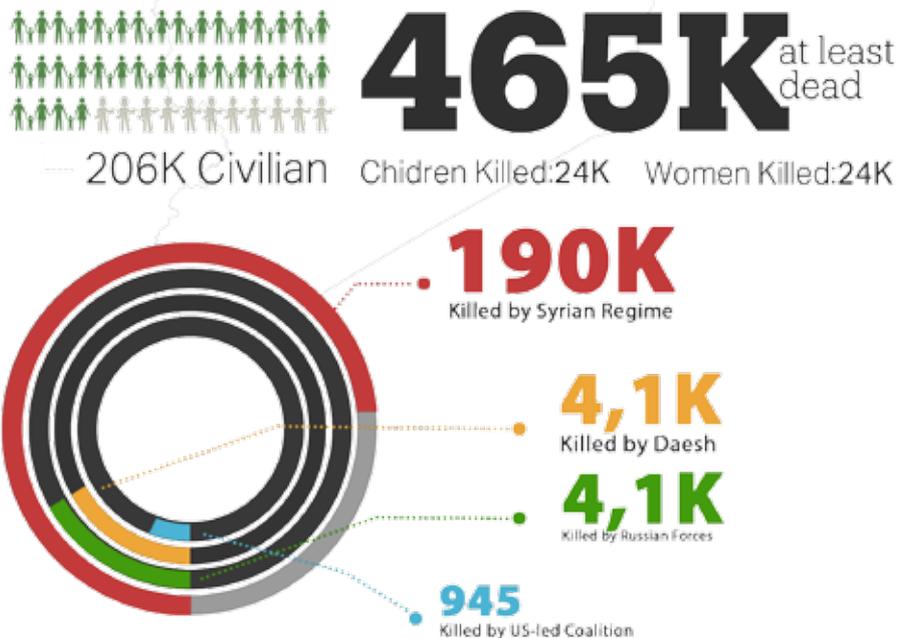


# HUMANITARIAN ASPECT



# Civilians Killed in Syria

Since March 2011, the beginning of Syrian civil war, at least **465K** people including **206K** civilians have lost their lives.



Source: SNHR and SOHR

## Violations of Human Rights during the War in Syria

### Prison Torture

Human Rights Watch obtained over 50,000 photographs from a regime defector in late 2015, identified as "Caesar". The images were of 6,786 corpses of Syrians who had been kidnapped and tortured to death inside Syrian regime prisons.



Source: AA

### Siege and Starvation

According to a Siege Watch report published in 2016, more than a million people at the time were living in 46 besieged communities in Syria. The report mentioned that most besieged areas were around capital, Damascus, and Homs. About 200,000 people are besieged in the eastern city of Deir Ezzor till this day by both Daesh and the Syrian regime. A prominent example of starvation and siege is Madaya, a city in Eastern Ghouta, home to 40,000 Syrians which was under siege by regime forces and Hezbollah fighters from June 2015 until April 2017. Like all other cities in Syria which have either been under siege or remain under siege, the regime deployed a 'starve or surrender' tactic. Land

mines were placed around the town for two years, in order to prevent people from fleeing. Starvation is not the only issue when it comes to besieged cities in Syria, rather electricity, running water and medical care are all either cut off or limited in order to truly force the residents into surrendering.



Source: AA

### Targeting hospitals

Hospitals, health care and medical relief facilities have been a primary target of the regime (and since 2015, of Russian air forces) since the beginning of the Syrian uprising. SHRC documented 142 incidents in 2016 alone in which hospitals and medical centres had been attacked, whilst SAMS (Syrian American Medical Society) documented 172 attacks on hospitals and medical facilities across the country between June – December 2016, 42% of which were recorded in Eastern Aleppo alone. This is aside the 92 documented incidents by SHRC in which ambulances were targeted in 2016. Hospitals in opposition-held areas are being dug six metres underground in order to avoid regime

and Russian airstrikes, and keep both doctors and patients alive in a country where death is ever-present. Prior to the regime re-taking Eastern Aleppo, all hospitals were terminated by regime and Russian airstrikes.



Source: AA

### Indiscriminate Weapons

The use of indiscriminate weapons have been deployed in Syria since 2011, with reports from both international and Syrian based human rights organisations. A range of the most deadly munitions used by the Syrian regime and Russian airforces include: cluster bombs, barrel bombs, incendiary munitions, bunker busters and thermobaric bombs." Indiscriminate weapons are responsible for the overwhelming majority of deaths in the Syrian War, as they most frequently target civilians from warplanes or distance launching, and cannot be defended against.



Source: Mamun Ebu Omer / AA



Source: AA

### Terrible living conditions

Aside the constant fear of death, bombardment and snipers - Syrians suffer terrible living conditions every day, and particularly those who live (or had lived) in opposition-held areas, as the regime controlled their access to water, electricity, food and health care. Basic necessities are often not readily available, and food prices have been rising dramatically due to their scarcity. Whilst NGO's reach out to help Syrians living in such conditions, the situation remains abysmal, unhealthy and inhumane.



Source: AA

### Human smugglers

More than 818,000 Syrians have been terribly exploited by human smugglers while seeking to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe.

### Abducted Childhood

According to the charity foundation Save the Children, 7.5 million Syrian children have been affected by the war and 250,000 children live in terror in besieged areas of Syria, where barrel bombs, air strikes, and shelling are a daily occurrence. Deprived of food, children are forced to eat boiled leaves and animal feed, while living in constant fear of attack.



Source: Veli Gurgah / AA



Source: Ibrahim Erikan / AA

# Human Rights Violations

## Human Rights Violations against Children

According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, **24,578** children were killed in Syria between **March 2011 and February 2017**.

### The Syrian Regime

The regime and Iran-backed militias has killed more than **21,084** (85.78%) children since March 2011, including 714 children who were killed by **snipers** and no less than 276 children who died due to the **siege**. In addition to that, more than 160 children died under **torture** in prisons.

### DAESH

Daesh has killed **498** (2.03%) children. Daesh also uses children in the fighting and in suicide attacks.

### Jabhat Fateh Al Sham

Jabhat Fateh al Sham has killed **51** (0.21%) children.

### YPG

The YPG has killed **79** (0.32%) children and arrested **321**, in addition to conscripting children into its ranks.

### The Opposition

Opposition forces have killed **879** (3.58%) children. Some of the children arrested by opposition forces were also used in military activities.

### International Coalition Forces (ICF)

ICF have killed **315** (1.28%) children since the military campaign started on 23 September 2014.

### Russian Forces

Russian forces have killed **1,108** (4.51%) children since 30 September 2015.

Source: Syrian Network for Human Rights

## Human Rights Violations against Women

According to Syrian sources, **23,502** women died in the hands of influential parties in Syria from **March 2011 until February 2017**.

<b>The Syrian Regime</b>	The Syrian regime and Iran-backed militias have killed <b>20,767</b> (91%) women.
<b>The Opposition</b>	Killed <b>823</b> (3.53%) women.
<b>Russian Forces</b>	Killed <b>746</b> (3.2%) women.
<b>Other Parties</b>	Killed <b>472</b> (2.02%) women.
<b>DAESH</b>	Killed <b>381</b> (1.64%) women.
<b>Jabhat Fateh Al Sham</b>	Killed <b>73</b> (0.37%) women.
<b>International Coalition Forces</b>	Killed <b>179</b> (0.77%) women.
<b>YPG</b>	Killed <b>61</b> (0.26%) women.

Source: Syrian Network for Human Rights

## Total Number of Detainees

According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, no less than **106,727** individuals were under arrest or otherwise forcibly detained between **March 2011 and February 2017**.

<b>The Syrian Regime</b>	Forcibly detained <b>92,879</b> (87.02%) people, including <b>6,177</b> women and <b>2,819</b> children.
<b>DAESH</b>	Forcibly detained <b>7,419</b> (6.96%) people, including <b>271</b> women and <b>217</b> children.
<b>Jabhat Fateh Al Sham</b>	Forcibly detained <b>1,619</b> (1.52%) people, including <b>64</b> women and <b>24</b> children.
<b>YPG</b>	Forcibly detained <b>2,114</b> (1.96%) people, including <b>61</b> women and <b>328</b> children.
<b>The Opposition</b>	Forcibly detained <b>2,696</b> (2.53%) people, including <b>813</b> women and <b>289</b> children.

Source: Syrian Network for Human Rights Human Rights Watch

**Note:** Other sources list the total number of persons detained as 117,000 (Human Rights Watch) and more than 200,000 (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights).

## Methods of Torture in Prisons

Syria is known for its notorious prisons since before the Syrian revolution. In the 1980s the notorious Tadmur military prison became home to thousands of political prisoners, many of which never saw light of day again. On June 27 1980, the regime of Hafez al Assad brutally massacred over a thousand political prisoners housed in the jail. Systematic torture and persecution continued at Tadmur until the facility reverted to a military prison following Hafez's death in 2001. Though this was a significant development at the time, the crimes committed at Tadmur were never investigated.

Bashar al Assad continued his father's horrific torture methods throughout the revolution, not only in Tadmur (up until its destruction by Daesh in July 2015), but in countless detention centres across the country. The detainees are cut off from the outside world. Their families, friends, and relatives are not even informed whether they are alive or not. The torture starts from the very first moments of their arrest with a welcome beating by the guards. The interrogation process also includes torture to make detainees confess. The torture continues for months, and includes beatings, sexual violence, and electric shocks.

The detainees have to endure severe and inhumane conditions and are denied basic human needs. Detainees are often packed into overcrowded cells with no access to fresh air or sunlight, and are denied proper food, clean water, and medicine. Thus many detainees suffer from infections, diseases, and mental illness among other serious problems. Torture often results in death in these detention centres. According to the Human Rights Data Analysis Group (HRDAG), at least 17,723 people were killed in government custody between March 2011 and December 2015, an average of 300 deaths each month. Amnesty International believes that this is a conservative estimate and that the actual total is much higher.

**Source:** Amnesty International Syrian Human Rights Committee

## Deaths under Torture

An estimated **12,966** individuals died due to torture at the hands of the influential parties in Syria between **March 2011 and February 2017**. Actual figures are likely much higher.

<b>The Syrian Regime</b>	<b>12,864</b> (99.22%) people killed under torture, including <b>161</b> children and <b>41</b> women. However, according to Amnesty International, the Syrian regime killed 13,000 prisoners over five years in <b>Sednaya prison</b> alone, with many more killed across Syria.
<b>DAESH</b>	<b>30</b> (0.23%) people, including one child and 13 women.
<b>Jabhat Fateh Al Sham</b>	<b>17</b> (0.13%) people.
<b>YPG</b>	<b>22</b> (0.17%) people, including one child and two women.
<b>The Opposition</b>	<b>30</b> ( 0.23%) people, including one child and one women.
<b>Other Parties</b>	<b>3</b> (0.02%) people.

**Source:** Syrian Network for Human Rights Amnesty International



Source: Firas Khalife / AA

# RESOLUTION 2139

The **UNSC** on **22 Feb 2014** issued resolution 2139 banning the Syrian regime from using **barrel bombs** in populated areas

**First Use of Barrel Bombs 01 Oct 2012**

More Than **50,000** Barrel Bombs Dropped

Since **22 Feb 2014** Date

Civillians	<b>10,000+</b>
Children	<b>%30</b>
Women	<b>%25</b>

**2015:** 17,318 bombs, **2,032 civilians** (499 children, 338 women)

**2016:** 12,958 bombs, **653 civilians** (166 children, 86 women)

**2017** (Jan&Feb): **1136 bombs**

Source: Syrian Network for Human rights

# GHOUTA CHEMICAL ATTACK

The Ghouta Chemical attack took place on the morning of 21 August 2013 during the the third year of the Syrian civil war. The attack claimed the lives of thousands of civilians, with SHRC documenting 1400 deaths. This attack against civilians by the Assad regime was unequivocally recognised as a war crime. However, the Syrian regime and Russia accused the opposition itself of conducting the chemical attack and blaming it on the regime.

Up until 2013, the Ghouta massacre was considered as one of the bloodiest in the series of indiscriminate killing by the Syrian regime. It was also the first time the international community openly condemned Assad for his use of forbidden chemical weapons. While other chemical attacks had taken place before Ghouta, the Ghouta attack was significant in its scale and its visual documentation. The Assad regime used an aircraft rocket to deploy the chemical sarin, a nerve agent which cause violent physical and psychological damage. In addition to those who were killed during the attack, many of those wounded continued to suffer its long-term effects.

The Ghouta chemical attack triggered an international outcry and a rift in the international community. Allies of the Assad regime dismissed reports of the attack, while pro-opposition countries condemned the regime and increased their support for opposition groups. US President Barack Obama came under great criticism both at home and abroad for his perceived failure to act in the face of the attack, which was widely regarded as a breach of the "red line" he had set down in a speech the previous year. Ultimately however, the massacre became a benchmark of international complacency and complicity in the crimes against

humanity committed in Syria. Since, Obama's 'red line' has become an analogy for unfulfilled promises, and from then on the Syrian people for the most part came to a realisation that they were completely alone.



After the chemical weapon attack targeting Ghouta, an eastern suburb of Damascus. Source: Arbin Subregional Commission / AA



A child killed in the Ghouta chemical attack. Source: Shaam News Network / AA

# Death Toll

## Various estimates on the death toll of the Ghouta attack



According to French intelligence, at least 281
According to UK intelligence, at least 350
According to Doctors Without Borders, 355
According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 502
According to the United States, 1429
According to the Free Syrian Army, 1729

### International Reactions to Ghouta

<b>UN:</b>	Former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon: "The secretary general condemns in the strongest possible terms the use of chemical weapons and believes that this act is a war crime."
<b>US:</b>	Former President Obama: "big event of grave concern." Former Secretary of State John Kerry: "undeniable" and "inexcusable."
<b>UK:</b>	Former British Foreign Secretary William Hague: "I am deeply concerned by reports that hundreds of people, including children, have been killed in airstrikes and a chemical weapons attack on rebel-held areas near Damascus."
<b>Russia:</b>	Former ministry spokesman Alexandar Lukashevich: "provocation planned in advance."
<b>Turkey:</b>	The Ministry of Foreign Affairs: "[It] can only be defined as barbarism and atrocity. The people who are responsible for this atrocity are the administrators of the regime and a ravenous group aiming at preserving their power at all costs. Turkey calls on the UN Security Council to fulfil its responsibility now."
<b>Iran:</b>	Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif: "The international community must show a serious reaction to the use of chemical weapons by the terrorists in Syria and condemn this move."



Victims, tortured and abused by the Assad regime.  
Source: TRT World

## Surviving Bashar:

Syrian women tell stories of rape, torture

TRT World gained exclusive access to a group of women who say they were raped and tortured by troops loyal to the Syrian regime. Ali Mustafa met the women close to the Turkey-Syria border at Reyhanli and listened to their stories of survival.

"They stripped my clothes off and did their worst." Shandana uses an alias, afraid of revealing her identity, as she tells us about her detention, torture, and rape by Syrian regime forces.

She is one of seven women, all with similar stories, that TRT World met at an undisclosed location close to the Turkey-Syria border.

Wearing large dark glasses that cover most of her face, Shandana tells us her journey from a suburb of Damascus to Bashar al Assad's torture chamber.

"At the beginning of the revolution, I was helping with relief work with

opposition activists. The regime considered this as a terrorist activity."

"I now wish they had tortured me like a man, at least I could live with myself," she said.

Shandana's story is similar to that of Mariam Khilif, one of the other women—the only one who agreed to reveal her identity.

Mariam was a nurse in Hama when a military intelligence unit detained her. "They hung me up from my hands for three days, then pulled my teeth out using pliers, and then they did things to me no human could imagine."



Victims, tortured and abused by the Assad regime. Source: TRT World

As she told her story, Mariam broke down several times, crying, as she recollected that time in her life in 2013.

"These are women who have lost everything," said Ali Zeer, a Syrian lawyer now living in Turkey. Zeer has documented 85 cases of women who said they were raped and tortured by regime forces.

"They would make women watch gang-rapes of both men and women. It would have the desired effect," said Zeer. He told us that women would readily confess to crimes they did not commit and would also implicate family members in anti-regime activities.

"The screams were the worst," said a woman in a white scarf with a Syrian flag. She spoke of women being humiliated in front of her. "They'd tie the women to beds posts and then a man called Azrael would go around with a sharp-ended stick. There was blood everywhere," said the woman in the white scarf.

"They'd say anything, admit to any crime to avoid a similar fate," said Zeer the lawyer. But a confession was often the beginning, not the end of a victim's struggle.

Once released, the survivors were abandoned by their families. In many cases husbands would divorce

survivors for dishonouring the family.

"This would happen even if the women had not been raped," said Zeer.

He says in some cases women even contemplated suicide. "They will live with severe trauma for the rest of their lives," he said.

"We lost everything. We lost our families and our children," said Shandana, with tears trickling beneath her large sunglasses.

**Authors: Ali Mustafa and Sare Selvi Öztürk**



# Internally Displaced Syrians

An internally displaced woman, fled from Daesh, washes her laundry after taking shelter in the opposition-controlled Susanbat/Sursimbat village near the al Bab district in Aleppo, Syria, on 19 February 2017. Source: Emin Sansar / AA

Internally displaced Syrians constitute a larger number than Syrian refugees, and are essentially refugees within their own country, without the protection of any such government. Whilst legally it is implicated that they are under the protection of the Syrian regime, the practicality of this is disputable as the Syrian regime itself is for the most part the reason for their displacement – as they too are the main reason for the extremely dangerous situations they live in after their displacement. Some

7.6 million people—including 2.8 million children<sup>192</sup>—are displaced within Syria, which makes Syrians the largest internally displaced population in the world. This situation has been further exacerbated by the collapse of the healthcare system and systematic bombardment of hospitals and make-shift health centres, raising fears of an increase of unpreventable diseases.

The Syrian Human Rights Committee's (SHRC) Annual report of 2016

indicates to a systematic policy by the Syrian regime which subjugates residents in opposition held-areas to either forced displacement, or to succumbing to regime rule and liasing with regime forces, (in the case of men: enlisting with the Syrian Arab Army).<sup>193</sup> This is further reinforced by monitoring the Syrian regime's plan for creating a 'useful Syria' and 'useless Syria'. As such, the regime seeks to regain control over the critical provinces in Syria, primarily between Damascus and Aleppo and thus are in need of a demographic

Source: Emin Sansar / AA



## Syrian Children and Education

According to a **2016** report issued by **UNICEF**:

- More than **2.8 million** children across Syria and the region do not have access to education.
- Of these, **2.1 million** were inside Syria and **700,000** were in neighbouring countries.
- More than **6,000** Syrian schools are no longer in use. Most of them have been turned into military centres or shelters for displaced families. Other schools have been damaged by the fighting and the attacks carried out by Russian forces, international coalition forces, Syrian regime forces, and other armed groups.
- More than **52,000** teachers have left their jobs and many others have been killed in attacks on schools.
- Half of children in central Damascus, rural Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Idlib are deprived of educational opportunities.
- In Lebanon, **250,000** children are left without education.

**Source:** Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Syrian Network for Human Rights, Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Syrian Center for Policy Research, UNICEF

change to keep in tact with their plan; and hence systematic internal displacement.<sup>194</sup> SHRC documented that a minimum of 50,000 Syrians had undergone systematic forced migration in 2016 alone, 5000 of which were from Darayya in rural Damascus and 40,000 from Eastern Aleppo.

Of course, not all IDP's are displaced because they were forced directly out of their homes. There are many reasons for the displacement of IDP's all of which are ultimately encapsulated by

the war. Besiegement, redrawn battle-lines, loss of documents, starvation, bombardment, are all reasons for internal displacement. In many cases IDPs are poorer and cannot afford to leave their own country. As such, illustrating the conditions of people who have been displaced within Syria through news agencies is virtually impossible, as it is both dangerous and generally inaccessible for journalists to get close to the region where the internally displaced have settled. This is in addition to NGOs and aid

agencies often lacking the ability and facilities to reach IDPs, meaning that in most regions IDPs have difficulty finding even basic food.

Despite this, the international community chooses to focus more on the refugee crisis than the IDPs. Those more attentive to the plight of IDPs, however, argue that more energy should be used to address the issue of those internally displaced within Syria, stating that today's IDP is tomorrow's refugee.



# Refugees in Turkey

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his wife Emine Erdogan greet Syrian refugees during their visit to refugee camps in Islahiye town of Turkey's Gaziantep province on 7 October 2014. Source: Orhan Cicek / AA

In the current refugee crisis engulfing the world, and which is the worst crisis since the second world war, it is Turkey that hosts the largest population of refugees in the world. The number of refugees in Turkey has already passed 3.5 million, and though Syrians constitute the bulk of refugees in the country, Turkey also hosts refugees from other countries such as Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Iran. As a result of the influx of refugees, Turkey has had to redesign its entire migration policy. Legal changes were made to address this need, and the Directorate General of Migration Management was established.

For years, Turkey has implemented an open-door policy toward the war-stricken population of Syria and has struggled to tend to the needs of refugees and to maintain the internal balance of the country

simultaneously. As for the general public's reaction, Turkish society has adopted a welcoming attitude towards the Syrian refugees. Civil society has been particularly generous towards them, raising millions of dollars. Unlike Europe, Turkey has not experienced large anti-refugee protests, and refugees live in almost every corner of the country with relatively little tension. Moreover, Turkey is taking further measures to integrate refugees into the fabric of the society.

Though Turkey prides itself in its hospitality toward refugees, displaced Syrians have placed a heavy burden on the country's economy. According to data released in February 2017, the number of refugees in Turkey is 3,551,078.<sup>195</sup> When the numbers are compared, Turkey has three times more refugees than all of European countries combined. Despite setting up camps to

## Turkey's Syrian Refugees in Numbers

<b>3,551,078</b>	Number of refugees in Turkey
<b>258,868</b>	Number of refugees in camps
<b>\$25 billion</b>	Amount spent on refugees by Turkey
<b>510,000</b>	Number of refugee children provided with education
<b>841,118</b>	Number of refugees who have undergone free surgical operation
<b>1,000,000</b>	Number of refugees who have received free inpatient treatment
<b>178,000</b>	Number of Syrian babies born in Turkey

Source: AFAD, EC

accommodate the refugees, most have chosen to live outside the refugee camps in order to blend in with Turkish society. The Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) has established 26 temporary protection centres (refugee camps) that host 258,868 refugees.<sup>196</sup>

From the onset of the Syria crisis, Turkey has spent \$25 billion on refugees. This budget has been used for various purposes; the most prominent of which has been securing free public services such as education and free healthcare to registered refugees. The Ministry of National Education took steps to provide education opportunities to 510,000 children, this is in addition to thousands of Syrians enrolling in Turkish public and private universities. With regards to healthcare, the latest figures state that one million refugees have received free medical treatment in hospitals. According to the Turkish Ministry of Health, as of 2016, 824,796 refugees had undergone surgical operations, inpatient

treatment, and at least 178,000 Syrian babies have been born in Turkey. Furthermore, through various programs, thousands of Syrian refugees have received vocational training from handicrafts to computer usage, to prepare them for a life outside their own country.

Turkey's main complaint to the international community has been burden sharing. While some international institutions have agreed to support Turkey in helping to deal with its refugee population, Turkey considers this aid to be too little and too late. Senior officials in Turkey have frequently accused the EU of dragging its feet in fulfilling its part of the Refugee Readmission Deal of March 2016. As part of the deal, the EU was to provide monetary support to offset the expense of refugees in Turkey and begin a process of negotiating visa-free travel for Turkish citizens.

In order to control the refugee phenomenon when it was still in its early phases, Turkey proposed

the establishment of a safe zone in northern Syria which would have provided Syrians a haven away from the violent conflict. In the end, Turkey's proposal did not get the attention of the international community, and the refugee issue transformed into an international political crisis affecting countries both within and outside the immediate region. The influx of refugees has constituted a security concern as well. The rise of Daesh and terrorism in northern Syria has risked compromising Turkey's border security, which led Turkey to ramp up its security measures. Currently, Turkey follows a dual policy of caring for refugees at home while fighting terrorists abroad.

# Turkey`s Aid to Syria

Turkey has provided humanitarian aid to refugees from the beginning of the crisis. It has spent \$12.1 billion dollars, in line with UN standards. Additionally, AFAD, the Red Crescent (Kizilay), and other Turkish public institutions and NGOs have disbursed approximately \$25 billion dollars in aid. This money has been used for food, shelter, medical needs, and other purposes. According to a Global Humanitarian Aid report, Turkey ranks second among the countries that provided the most humanitarian aid in 2016.

## Healthcare support to Syrian refugees | 2012 - 2016

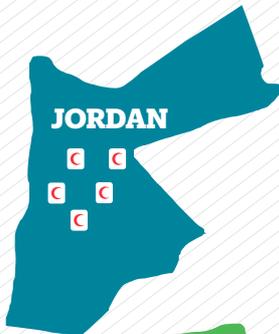


**1 million**

refugees received inpatient care

**841,118**

patients underwent surgeries



**Over 2 million**

received outpatient services

**500,000**

refugees received primary healthcare



**Nearly 14,000**

patients underwent surgeries

**1 million**

refugees received primary healthcare

**15,295**

patients were treated for chronic illnesses

Source AFAD, EC



President Erdogan with Bana Alabed, seven-year-old girl who tweeted on attacks from Aleppo, and her family. Source: Kayhan Ozer / AA

### Turkey's Initiatives for Refugee Children

To date, the war in Syria has affected over 7.5 million children.<sup>197</sup> Whilst 6.1 million people are displaced, more than 5 million refugees have sought refuge in neighboring countries of which more than 3 million are currently situated in Turkey.<sup>198</sup> The fact that almost one third of refugees in Turkey are 'school age children' has resulted in the adoption of a specific approach by the government to combat Syria's lost generation. In this regard, Turkey has engaged in multiple fundamental policies to be able to let the most innocents of the conflict acquire a new life. In recent years, Turkey has been as announced the world's second most generous country by the Global Humanitarian Assistance Reports, which convey that the country devotes a significant part of its Gross National Income following the United

States.<sup>199</sup> Factors behind Turkey's adequate approach to the refugee crisis are related to the rigorous approach of government officials, as well as to the Turkish people's embracing attitude. Opportunities offered to school children in the field of education are considered to be significant by Turkey's government. As such, by providing education to war weary children, Turkey's purpose is to teach the language of peace instead of war.

### Syrian school-age Children are re-enrolled in Turkish schools

Turkey's priority has always been to provide education to Syrian children. According to the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), Turkey hosts more than 1.5 million Syrian refugee children of which some 833.000 are school-age children.

Until now, together with the Ministry of Education's cooperation Turkey has managed to enroll more than 510.000 refugees at schools since the war broke out.<sup>200</sup>

In order to reach to all school-aged children, sustainable progression is considered a must by the Turkish state. In the centers of the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD), 80.742 children have become able to continue their studies. The Turkish state provides the opportunity and supports AFAD-run refugee centers to increase the number of children attending schools in camps. Yet there are still many children deprived of education, in this regard mainly high school students are not able to follow proper education.

According to a more recent report of UNICEF, 40% of Syrian children of school age are missing out on



- The government of Turkey which has been in partnership with Unicef strengthened its education systems. Since 2013, around 20,000 Syrian volunteer teachers have been trained and 400 schools have been renovated and refurbished.

- Spent money by Turkey to refugees is more than 25 billion dollars which means that the country exerts itself to the utmost to provide Syrians decent living conditions.<sup>201</sup>

- To improve the quality of inclusive education and to increase access to learning, currently around 13,000 teachers receive monthly incentives.

- Moreover, including Syrian children in a national program is among the efforts by granting cash subventions to vulnerable families to motivate them to support their children's education.<sup>202</sup>

**A kindergarten for Syrian children.**  
Source: Kerem Kocalar / AA

education in Turkey, which equals to an approximate number of 380,000 children. The fact that more than 50 percent of the children are enrolled is praised, but more needs to be done. Between April 2011 and September 2016 nearly 180,000 babies were born to Syrian families in Turkey. As the future of the conflict is still unpredictable, Turkey is preparing to provide long-term facilities.

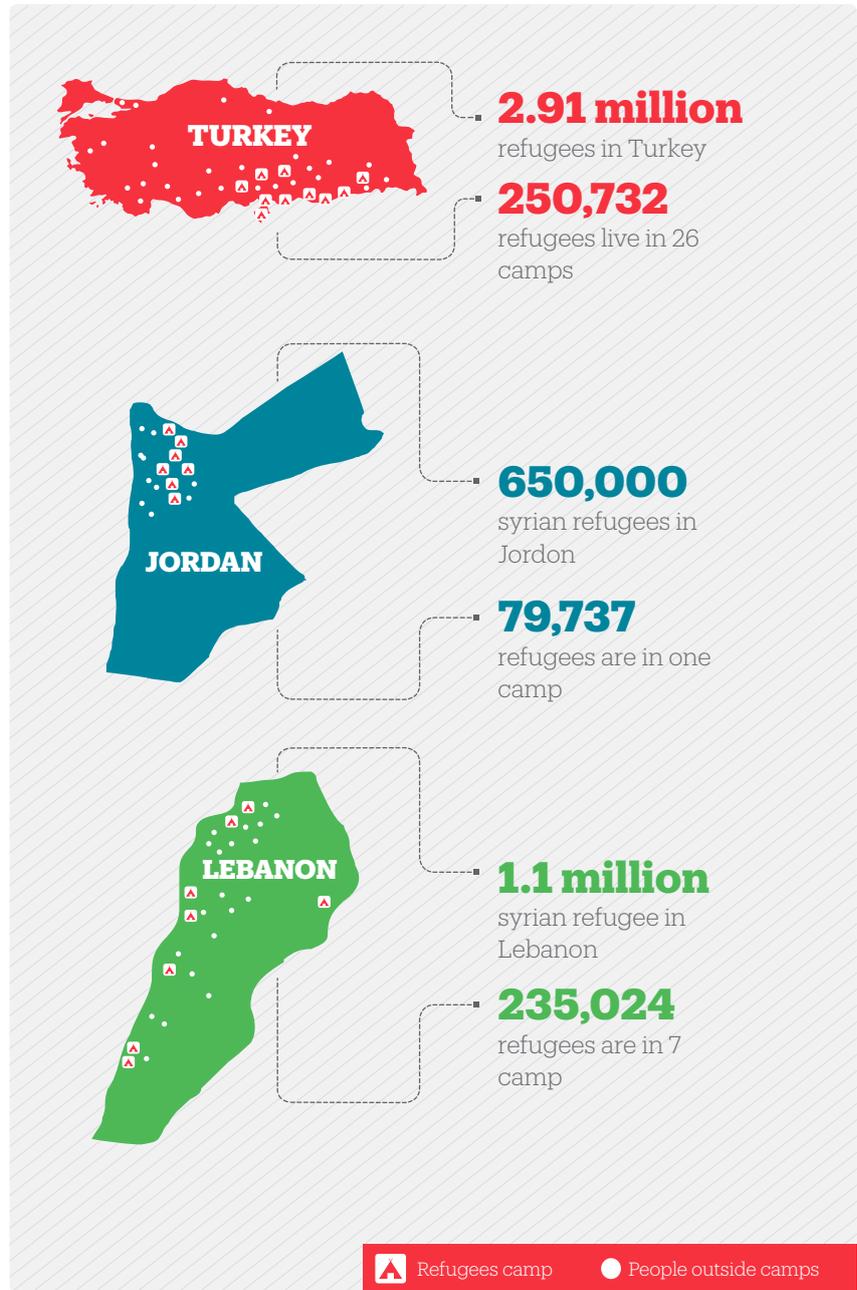
Still a serious part of the approximate number of 900,000 children between the ages of 5 and 17 are facing three main barriers. First, due to the lack of decent income, children are entering the workforce in order to help their families to earn a living. Second, Syrian families have to

choose between the following two options, either sending their children to school or spending their money on basic needs. Lastly, there is a language barrier for Syrians which prevents them from being smoothly integrated to the Turkish education system. Besides the difficulty to learn a language there are also families who do not see any benefit in following Turkish education. Nevertheless, as the Turkish government had recognized these impediments, it has taken precautionary measures to improve access to education. Moreover, the government has also attempted to decrease the number of refugees working in the black market by issuing work permits to adults.

Ali Riza Altunel, the head of a lifelong learning department of the ministry of education has conveyed the following about the education of school-age refugees: "In the future, the people of Syria will need the experience and wisdom of the well-educated youth. Together, they will build a peaceful Syria. We are doing what a neighbor should do for them".

Ultimately, although Turkey has implemented adequate policies to approach the education crisis of refugee children by building schools, providing education centers and supplying notebooks, textbooks and desks, the situation more extensive analysis in order or provide more sustainable and long-term solutions. Syrian families, too, must make concessions and be willing to draw closer to the opportunities provided by the Turkish government. Instead of sending them to work,

## Refugee camps in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon



families have to be convinced that sending their children to school is more conducive to the child's future. goes without saying that refugees are vulnerable, and suffer astounding amounts which one who has not been in their situation fails to understand, and this their state of limbo and attempts at securing some sort of income – at the expense of the child's education is not surprising. Thus it is in this

respect that the Turkish government is trying its best to adopt an inclusive approach in which refugees can feel safe and secure, and know that they have the state's backing and support.

Emira Salih was able to survive the civil war by fleeing to Turkey with her children. Source: TRT World

### Syrian Refugees Reimagine Their Homeland

The idea of revolution continues to smoulder in Syrian hearts as they try to rebuild their lives in refugee camps in southern Turkey.

Syrian refugees living inside or outside the camps in Turkey's south-eastern frontier provinces are bound by one common vision: a homeland free from Bashar al Assad, the Syrian-regime leader who faced a people's uprising that challenged his autocratic rule.

The impact of six years of gruelling war is visible on their faces. Men who looked youthful before the war now have greying hair, wrinkled faces, and tired bodies. Women who lost their



husbands and sons speak with pride about how they became "martyrs for the cause."

TRT World spent a week in refugee camps in southern Turkey and met with Syrians of different ages and cultural backgrounds. They discussed their identities and how

they are coping with life. From the relationship between a father and daughter, to a former fighter who now runs a barber shop, we explore the broader implications of the war through this series of portraits.

#### Emira Salih, 42, Hatay

I was a teacher and my husband was a school principal in Aleppo. Initially, he did not fight in the war. But as Assad's forces began to raid our neighbourhood, he took up arms to defend us. One day he came home around noon. Fighter jets were making rounds over the neighbourhood. Two of our daughters also returned from school. The school administration sent them home, thinking the jets might pound their building. We all

gathered in the garden. I scolded my two-year-old son for playing with dirt in a corner. He cried and ran inside the house. As I followed him, my husband asked me to fetch a lighter from the kitchen.

Inside, a heavy wave pulled me down on the floor. I couldn't understand what it was. A few minutes later, I realised a bomb had been dropped on my garden, which was covered in mud and blood. I heard my daughters crying. They both were

badly injured. One of them said, "Mother, something is stuck in my leg." I found her leg was almost gone. Only a piece of vein held it together. I told her not to worry and to make a prayer. My husband was lying nearby. I didn't hear anything from him. Soon after, people showed up and drove my daughters to the hospital. I couldn't understand why they left my husband behind. At the hospital, my daughters were on different stretchers. I didn't know which one to take care of in that

moment. My younger daughter lost her right leg and the older one received injuries in one of her legs.

Later I realised that my husband had died instantly.

My daughters were transferred to Turkey for medical treatment. So we came to Gaziantep. Shortly after moving here, I had an accident. A car jumped the red light and hit me at a pedestrian crossing. I don't know what will happen in the future. I have faith in Allah. My children have no one except for me. Normally as a mother I am the one who is supposed to console my daughter. But like my children, I too have deep wounds. One day, when someone bought a pair of boots for one of my daughters, she hid them from me. She told her sister that "if our mother sees them, she will remember that I don't have one leg and that will make her cry."

**Omer Mircan, 12, Nizip camp, Gaziantep**

I feel very good when I pray. I feel like my stress is going away. I miss being at my home in Syria, and I miss my cousins too. We used to play football together at our grandparents' house. I pray for many other things, but I mostly pray about going back to Syria. I want everyone in this camp to be able to go back to Syria.



Source: TRT World

Source: TRT World



**Fatima Jindi, Boynuyogun camp, Hatay**

I have seven children. I have lost five of them. One of them died because of heart disease. The other ones died in bomb attacks. I pray to Allah for everything. Everything belongs to him, and we will return to him. Only one of my sons came here to Turkey with me and he has lost his son in the fighting. My grandson was very young and kind-hearted. I am 100 years old now. Look at my hands! I love knitting, but it is getting hard with my eyes becoming weak. I'm thankful to Allah for the opportunities, but I miss my daughter in Idlib very much.

**Abdullah Ismael, 28, Nizip camp, Gaziantep**

I played for Etihad for seven years in Aleppo. It is one of the leading football clubs of Syria, something like Besiktas of Istanbul. It was a good team. In 2006, we played against Turkey's Fenerbahce. I played as left winger. I am good at shooting the ball with both my feet. My coach called me Maradona.

But the war in Syria changed everything. While my family moved

to Gaziantep, Turkey, and began a new life as refugees, I stayed back and joined the Free Syrian Army. I fought against the Assad regime for two years. During that time, I missed my family and football a lot. In 2013, I came to Gaziantep to see my parents, wife, and children in the refugee camp. I chose to retire from fighting and live with them. In the camp, I met other professional players and we formed a team. We practice football almost every evening. Our team participates in local Turkish leagues in Gaziantep.

Source: TRT World



# Refugees in Jordan

In the beginning of 2016, Jordan's King Abdullah asserted that the people of Jordan had reached their boiling point due to the influx of hundreds of thousands Syrian refugees. According to the king, the inflow of Syrians had serious repercussions on the social fabric of his country. "If the process continues like this, sooner or later people will burst out," he said. He called on the international community to allocate adequate support to Jordan. The UN declared that \$7 billion was needed for the emergency relief of people in Syria and refugees in surrounding countries.

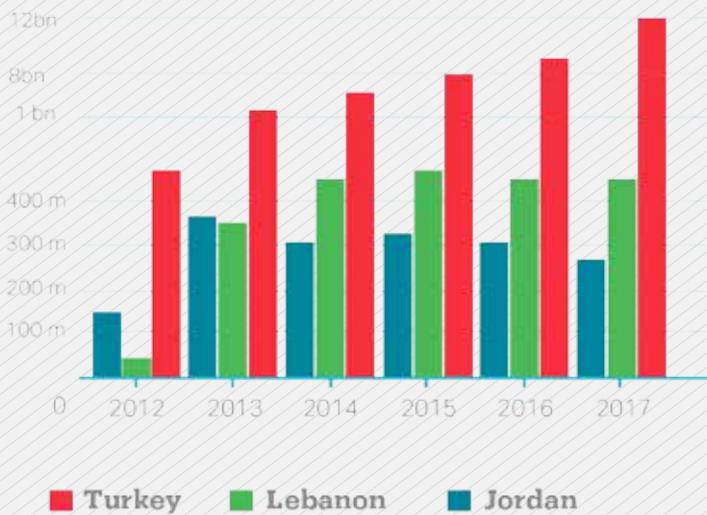
Out of the total of 4.6 million Syrian refugees registered by the UN, about 650,000 are in Jordan. However, according to the Jordanian government, these numbers do not reflect the true total. Besides the number of registered refugees, it says, there are another million unregistered Syrians residing in Jordan. This number includes Syrians who fled their home country before the war began in 2011. Thus, education and health-care services in the country are severely stretched. If Jordan does not receive sufficient aid, the situation in the country may grow into a crisis that could further aggravate

circumstances in the region.

Registered refugees now constitute almost 10 percent of the total population in the country.<sup>203</sup> Around 60 percent of them live in the north of Jordan as urban refugees. The Zaatari refugee camp, the fourth largest in the country, houses about 282,000 refugees. People can only leave the camp when a Jordanian guarantees their living expenses. This situation makes them more dependent on the international emergency relief provided in the camp.

In Rukhban, on the Syrian-Jordanian border, satellite images show that in January 2016, there were 363 tents.

## Financial investment for Syrian refugees



■ Outside funding  
■ Government funding

Source: AFAD, UNHCR

In September 2016, the amount of tents rose to 8,295 just in a few months. More and more Syrians have situated themselves in the border district. In this no-man's land that is known as "the berm," there are no toilets, electricity, or clean water. The consequences are fatal, and an increasing number of people are dying due to diseases resulting from conditions in the camp.

In the last few years, Jordanians have harshly criticised the government's refugee policies. People complain about decreased salaries and the inflation in food prices. In order to calm tempers all around, Jordan has applied a stricter admissions policy. King Abdullah, in one of his interviews, condemned the hypocrisy of countries that criticize the Jordanian borderland. "If you would like to keep the morality high with regards to this issue, then we are more than happy to bring Syrians to the airport to transfer them to your country."



Children in Syria were also heavily affected by the war. Source: Salah Malkawi / AA

## Statistics of Refugees in Jordan

**656,170** \_\_\_\_\_ Total Persons of Concern

**515,162 | 79%** \_\_\_\_\_ Total Urban, Peri-Urban, and Rural Population

**141,008 | 21%** \_\_\_\_\_ Total Camp Population

Source: AFAD, EC



# Refugees in Lebanon

Refugee Camps became the new homes for millions of Syrians all around the region.  
Source: Muhammed Salih / AA

With a population of 4.5 million, Lebanon is more than four times smaller than Syria. The influx of over one million refugees to any country would be difficult to deal with, but for a country like Lebanon, a small nation with multiple internal problems, the consequences are much harder.

The flow of Syrian refugees into Lebanon has increased dramatically over the course of the war. A year after the uprising against Bashar al Assad first broke out, there were 18,000 Syrian refugees in Lebanon. The following year, there were 356,000. By April 2014, there were 1

million. Currently, there are between 1 and 1.5 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon, which amounts to 20-25 percent of the total population of the country.

The World Bank estimates that the civil war in Syria has cost Lebanon billions of dollars. Not only has it diminished trade between Lebanon and its neighbours, it has also caused tourism to decline and forced the government in Beirut to spend money to help the refugees. In Lebanon, most Syrians live in urban districts. They find accommodation with guest families, stay in empty public buildings, or

live in self-built tents. As in other countries, there is an increasing need for food, drinking water, and medical care.

According to reports from multiple human rights NGOs, refugees in the country live in difficult conditions and their experience is made more difficult by Lebanon's policies. More than 90 percent of Syrian refugees are deep in debt and 70 percent live in poverty; this leads to a situation in which Syrians cannot afford to pay the price for a new residence permit. Therefore, the number of refugees residing in the country illegally is increasing steadily.

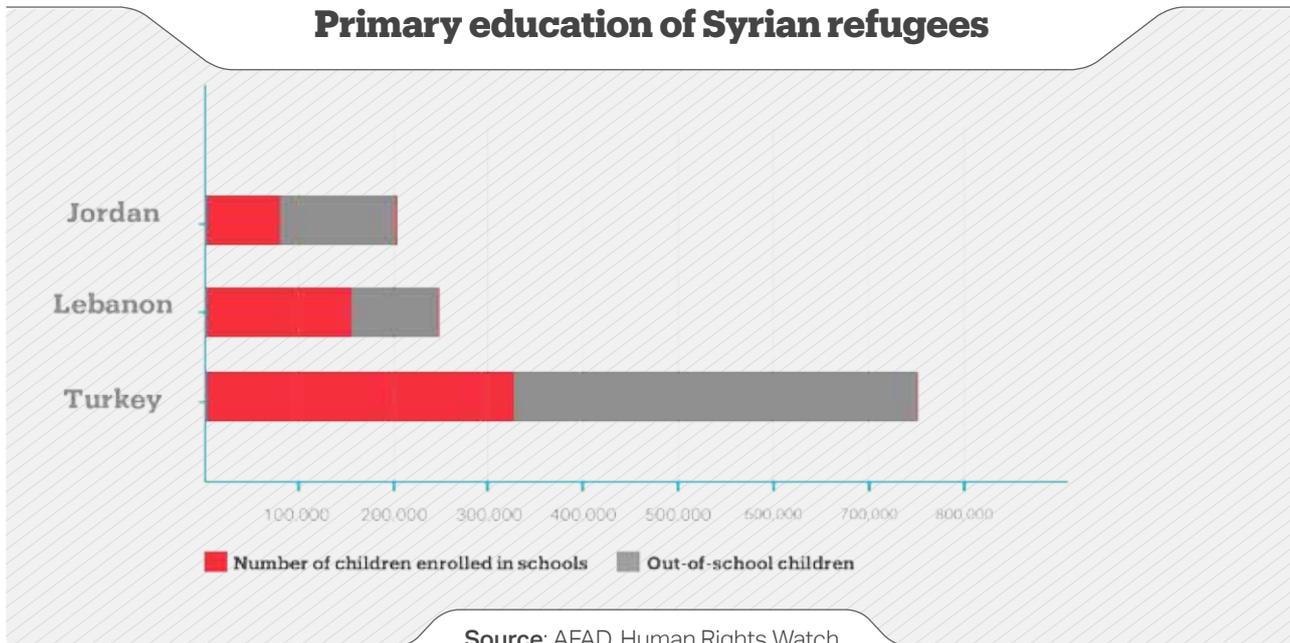


Refugee bazaar in Lebanon.  
Source: Muhammed Salih / AA

The Lebanese government has dealt with the troublesome issue of refugee camps for decades. There are still a large number of Palestinian refugees living in the country. With the influx of Syrians, the number of refugees has tripled. Unlike Turkey and Jordan, Lebanon has not been able to establish adequate refugee camps for Syrians. Thus, the refugees are completely scattered across the whole country.

According to many accounts, Lebanese people are increasingly vocal about refugee-related problems in the country. The enormous inflow has severely damaged the country's infrastructure and its provision of services, and refugees are competing with the poorest Lebanese for jobs. Tens of thousands of Syrian children are not able to go to school because there are simply no places for them.

### Primary education of Syrian refugees



# Refugees in the EU

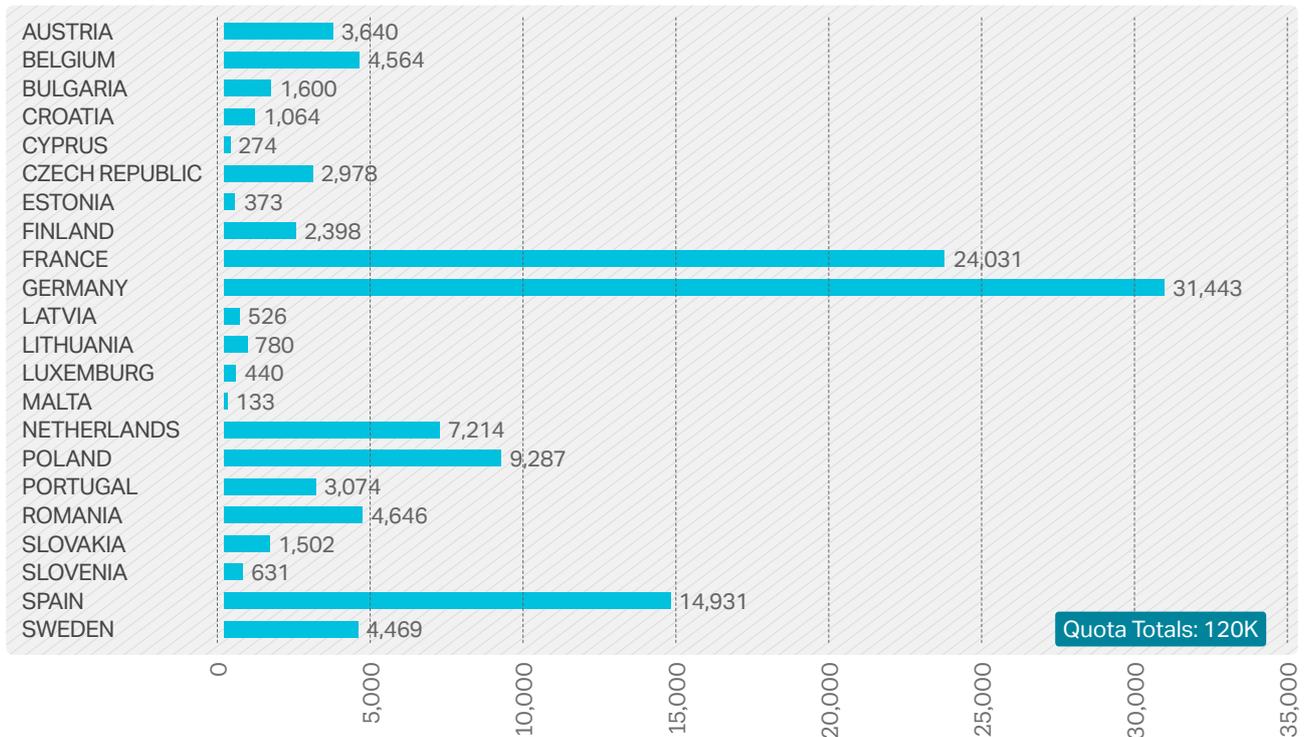
Although the Syrian civil war started in 2011, four years passed before it began to constitute a serious problem for the European Union. More than one million refugees and migrants have fled to EU member states to escape the war and dire conditions in Syria. The influx of refugees and subsequent crisis affected the southern EU states initially, before it spread to the rest of the European countries – becoming a problem to the EU in general. To prevent the flow of more refugees, the EU promised to supply

humanitarian aid to other countries hosting refugees, like Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. Yet, this European assistance has not been sufficient for the actual needs of the large number of refugees these countries host. The crisis mainly affected southern EU member states in the first phase. However, it has spread to other European countries and become a problem of the EU in general.

Although more than 1 million refugees have entered the EU, they are not equally spread among the member states. Germany has accepted the bulk of them, nearly 1 million asylum seekers. What aggravated the problem was that EU member states could not implement a shared policy with regards to the refugee crisis. The crisis only resulted in greater divergence between the policies of the member states. In order to share the burden of the exodus, in July 2015, EU member states agreed to relocate 160,000 asylum seekers from Greece and Italy to other member states by September 2017. The

## EU's Refugee Relocation Quotas | Sept 2015

UK, Ireland and Denmark can choose whether to take part in the quota scheme



Source: European Commission

relocation process has been a slow one, and according to a 2 March 2017 European Commission press release, only 13,546 of the 160,000 Syrian and other refugees had so far been relocated. European Commission Vice President Frans Timmermans has warned that the commission will consider punishing member states if they fail to share the burden of asylum seekers stranded in Greece and Italy. EU countries can be hit with large financial penalties by the commission, the executive arm of the 28-nation bloc, if they break rules.

In order to stop the hundreds of thousands of refugees seeking to settle in the EU, countries such as Germany, Austria, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark have applied temporary border controls. Furthermore, multiple member states have adjusted their legislation to make their countries unattractive for refugees. Denmark and Switzerland, for instance, require refugees to pay for their stay with their own financial resources. During

the relocation negotiations in 2015, Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, and the Czech Republic refused to comply with the compulsory quota system developed based on each EU-member country's population, income, and unemployment rate. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban said that the inflow of refugees threatened to undermine Europe's Christian roots. Later on in the process, Hungary erected a razor-wire fence on its borders to keep out refugees passing into the country illegally. It also held a referendum on whether to accept the resettlement of 1,294 refugees, Hungary's quota under the relocation agreement. Although more than 98 percent voted "no" in the referendum, the low turnout rate rendered the result invalid.

In general, the refugee crisis has led to a deterioration of the social order in EU countries and the rupture of social cohesion between member states. Since some member states have been reluctant to shoulder the burden of the

**Refugees walk near the border fence between Hungary and Serbia, 13 September 2015. Source: Thomas Campean / AA**



refugee phenomenon, a shared policy has proved impossible.

The general principle within the EU is that asylum must not be a lottery. EU member states have a shared responsibility to welcome asylum seekers in a dignified manner and to ensure that they are treated fairly and that their case is examined according to uniform standards. In that way, the outcome of an application for asylum should be similar across the EU. Yet the approach of individual member states and how they have dealt with the crisis have not been compliant to these standards. Another measure the EU has adopted to ease the adverse effects of the refugee flow has been to agree to resettle

refugees from neighbouring, non-EU countries. This EU resettlement framework aimed to voluntarily transfer 22,500 refugees from outside the EU to EU member states by enabling refugees to enter legally into the EU without risking their lives in the hands of criminal networks. As of 27 February 2017, however, member states had only resettled 14,422 of the total 22,504 refugees agreed to under the framework.

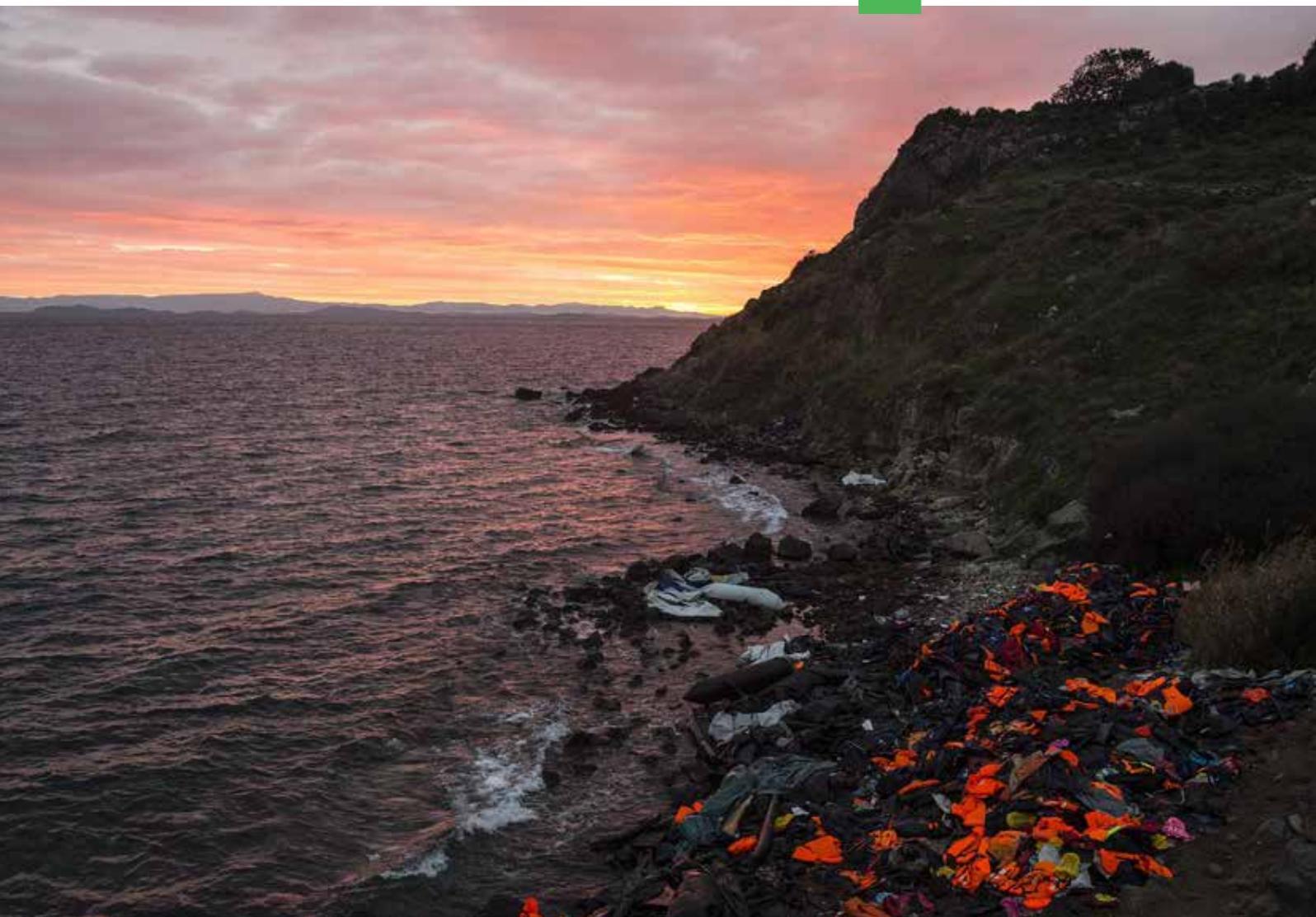
Some of the worst tragedies of the refugee crisis have played out on the waters of the Mediterranean Sea, as asylum seekers drown while attempting to reach Italy and Greece. In 2016 alone, around 5,000 asylum seekers lost their lives at sea. That same year, more than 350,000

asylum seekers arrived in Europe by sea, often after enduring difficult conditions. Most of these migrants were carried by human smugglers and criminal networks.

On 2 September 2015, the lifeless body of three-year-old Syrian boy Alan Kurdi washed up on the coast of Turkey. Images of his body appeared in newspapers, prompting sympathy and outrage across the world. Alan was traveling with his family to Europe to escape the war in Syria. On 3 September 2015, in reaction to the death of Alan Kurdi, Turkey's President Erdogan said, "European countries, which have turned the Mediterranean, the cradle

Life vests left by refugees on the shore of Greece's Lesbos Island, December 2015.

Source: Ozge Elif Kizil / AA



of the world's oldest civilizations, into a cemetery for refugees, share the sin for every refugee who loses their life." [sic] Turkey hosts more than 3 million refugees and has repeatedly accused the EU of not doing its part to solve the refugee crisis.

In March 2016, Turkey and the EU reached an agreement intended to halt the flow of illegal refugees into Europe. Under this deal, the EU would establish a fund to offset Turkey's economic expenses related to its refugee population, and the EU would provide a visa-waiver scheme for Turkish citizens travelling to the bloc. The agreement also created a refugee-exchange program, according to which the EU would accept one refugee

from Turkey for every refugee deported from the bloc for having entered illegally. However, although Turkey has ramped up its border controls to prevent illegal refugees from crossings into EU-member countries, the EU has fallen short of fulfilling the conditions of the deal by prolonging the delivery of the promised funds and by not granting visa-free travel to Turkish citizens.

Although the flow of refugees by sea has started to decline as a result of Turkey's increased border controls and provision of better conditions for refugees, smugglers and human traffickers continue to promise hope for desperate refugees, while the EU drags its feet in sharing the burden of protecting refugees from dying

at sea. The difficulties the EU has faced in dealing with the refugee crisis have been compounded by the rise of populist right-wing parties and anti-immigration discourse within the bloc. These parties have garnered significant popular support in several EU countries. In order to attract voters or to maintain their voter base, even some mainstream parties that have historically been tolerant of immigrants have come out in opposition of accepting and supporting refugees and other migrants. This, in turn, has resulted in poorer conditions for asylum seekers and fewer grants of asylum.

Refugees are trying to reach to the camp in Brezice from the Slovenian-Croatian border, October 2015.  
Source: Ales Beno / AA



Source: Roberastorgano / AA



## HOW DID THE SIX EASTERN EUROPEAN NATIONS REACT TO THE REFUGEE CRISIS?-IN POLICY, AND IN PRACTICE

“Since Slovakia is a Christian country, we cannot tolerate an influx of 300,000–400,000 Muslim immigrants who would like to start building mosques all over our land and trying to change the nature, culture and values of the state.” — **Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico**

### 1. Hungary

“Every single migrant poses a public security and terror risk.” —Viktor Orban, Hungarian Prime Minister.

“Those arriving have been raised in another religion, and represent a radically different culture. Most of them are not Christians, but Muslims.” —Orban.

Hungary was one of four EU members in September 2015 to reject the bloc’s quota dictating how many refugees each country was supposed to take in. All four countries—Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia, collectively known as the Visegrad group or V4—backed out.

The public adopted a similar stance. Ninety-eight percent of Hungarians rejected the EU’s quota in a referendum held in October 2016.

In September 2015, Hungary built a 175-kilometer razor-wire fence along its border with Serbia to keep out refugees and migrants. Those caught within 8 kilometres of the border were sent back to Serbia.

### 2. Czech Republic

“It’s just like a jail ... there are fences, barbed wire, policemen, security guards. The people there are really desperate.” —Hana Kavanova, volunteer at the Bela-Jezova detention centre.

The Czech Republic was another Eastern European country to reject the EU quota. Ninety-four percent of all Czechs believe that refugees and migrants in their country should be deported, an August 2015 poll conducted by Focus found.

Images of Czech security personnel writing numbers on the hands of refugees with permanent markers triggered comparisons to the Nazi treatment of Jews in Europe during the Second World War. Rights groups and activists accused Czech authorities of treating refugees and migrants like criminals. What is more, refugees at such detention facilities pay €9 a day to stay there, and are regularly strip-searched and forced to hand over cash and mobile phones, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein has said.

### 3. Slovakia

"Since Slovakia is a Christian country, we cannot tolerate an influx of 300,000–400,000 Muslim immigrants who would like to start building mosques all over our land and trying to change the nature, culture and values of the state." —Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico "I can tell you we will never—under a quota system—bring one single Muslim to Slovakia." —Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico Slovakia also rejected the EU quota, saying it was only willing to take in Christian refugees.

The country has also built a fence on its borders with Hungary and Austria to keep refugees and migrants out.

### 4. Bulgaria

"They beat them, they use water torture, they set dogs on them, so they come with a lot of dog bites, they taser them and they beat them, missing teeth, cut faces, they do it every day, it is not just one off." —Sharon Silvey, volunteer worker on the Bulgarian-Serbian border.

Unlike Slovakia, Bulgaria already has a significant Muslim population. Yet Bulgaria's former prime minister, Boiko Borisov, said—while in office—that Bulgarians are concerned that more Muslims coming from outside would "abruptly change" the country's demography.

Refugees and migrants being held in Bulgarian detention centres also reported serious mistreatment at the hands of the authorities.

"They hit me and took my money," said Alan Murad, a

17-year-old Iraqi asylum seeker. "I ran away from hell at home, trying to find paradise in Europe. Instead, I found another hell." Other refugees also reported that their phones and coats were stolen by border police.

One volunteer worker on the Bulgarian-Serbian border claimed that Bulgarian police were torturing refugees.

### 5. Croatia and Slovenia

"I am sorry for Europe ... We did not think Europe is like this. No respect for refugees, not treating us with dignity. Why is Europe like this?"—Ari Omar, an Iraqi refugee in Slovenia.

"At the back end you have the Serbian police, and at the front end you have the Croatian police ... Police didn't want it to become another refugee camp so they haven't allowed tents to go up."—Ahmed Twajj, a British doctor working on the Croatian-Serbian border.

Slovenia began building a razor-wire fence along its border with Croatia in late 2015. The country's prime minister, Miro Cerar, announced that the Balkan route for refugees trekking northwards was closed. Many refugees who had already made it to Slovenia were stuck there when Austria also erected its own barrier on its border with the country.

In October 2015, thousands of refugees and migrants trapped in Slovenia rioted against poor treatment at the hands of the authorities. They complained of a lack of food, water, and blankets in the Brezice camp on the border with Croatia.

Croatia—which is not in the Schengen Zone, an area established to ensure free passage throughout most of Europe—also refused transit to refugees and migrants taking the Balkan route northwards.

As a result, some 2,000 refugees and migrants attempting to enter Croatia from Serbia were left stranded without shelter in the no-man's land between the two countries.

Refugees and migrants were also stuck at the border with Slovenia. "You kill us" and "We are dying here, open [the] gate," refugees called out after Croatian border guards who let them through to Slovenia refused to take them back when Slovenian border guards refused to let them in.

**Author: Ertan Karpazli**



Syrian refugees disembark from an overcrowded dinghy, arriving on the Greek island of Lesbos.  
Source: Yannis Behrakis / Reuters

## Conclusion: Shockwaves Of The Syrian War

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The raging war in Syria continues to destroy the country. Its vibrant cities and historic sites have been reduced to rubble. The size of its economy has imploded; its agricultural sector -an important sector for food security- experienced a loss of \$16 billion since the outbreak of the war.<sup>204</sup> Half of its population has been displaced or has fled the country. The people of Syria have endured mass shootings, bomb explosions, and chemical attacks, resulting in more than 465,000 people losing their lives.

After six years of conflict, it has become clear that the impact of the war has not been constrained within the borders of Syria, but instead it has sent shockwaves in the form of terrorist attacks and a tidal wave of refugees.



French police secure the scene near the Louvre Pyramid in Paris on 3 February 2017 after a French soldier shot and wounded a man armed with a knife who tried to enter the Louvre museum. Source: Mustafa Sevgi / AA

### The rise of terrorist attacks

Terrorist organisations, such as Daesh and the PKK, have used the instability of Syria and Iraq to consolidate their power. Their propaganda and ideology have radicalised and attracted individuals from different parts of the world to carry out terrorist attacks within Syria and beyond its borders.

There has been an increase in the number of terrorist attacks since the outbreak of the Syrian War. In Turkey alone, terrorists have carried out 22 attacks between October

2015 and January 2017, killing and injuring hundreds. In the city of Beirut in Lebanon, suicide bombers killed 43 people in November 2015; and in December 2016 a shooting killed 10 people in the city of Karak in Jordan.

Daesh reach is not limited to the region, however, as it has managed to carry out terrorist attacks in Europe and North America. The terrorist attacks in Paris, Brussels, Nice, and Berlin killed more than 150 people and injured hundreds more. In Canada and the US, Daesh's propaganda managed to radicalise individuals

to carry out terrorist attacks, that included a man running over two soldiers in Quebec; and a mass shooting in San Bernardino, California that killed 14 people. These are just but a few examples of what has become a long list of Daesh's terrorist attacks in various parts of the world.

The PKK, on the other hand, has used its newly acquired geographic depth in Syria to carry out attacks in Turkey. Furthermore, in numerous occasions, weapons given to the PYD to fight against Daesh were used in the PKK's attacks in Turkey.

## The tidal wave of refugees

The second shockwave of the Syrian War has been in the form of a humanitarian crisis as more than 6 million people have fled the country. As of April 2017, UNHCR has registered more than 5 million Syrians refugees, but according to the International Rescue Committee the number does not reflect the additional 1.2 million people that have fled to Europe to seek safety.

The neighbouring countries of Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon have been the countries to accept the most Syrian refugees, putting pressure in their economies. Turkey has welcomed more than half of the total number of Syrian refugees. It has used its own economic resources to cover almost all costs of accepting such high number of refugees due to the failure of the EU to provide the promised economic assistance. In Lebanon and in Jordan, the situation of refugees has been very different due to Lebanon and Jordan's reliance on foreign aid to cover the refugee-related costs, their limited economic resources and the resentment of their population.

The US and the European Union, the richest country and region in the world, response to the influx of Syrian refugees has been slow and for the most part negative. According to the State's Department Refugee Processing Center, the US has accepted merely 20,520 Syrian refugees since the outbreak of the war.<sup>205</sup> Furthermore, the Trump administration reduced the yearly quota of refugees that the US receives from 110,000 to 50,000, and has banned Syrians from entering the US, claiming that they pose a terrorist threat.

The European Union's incoherent response to the thousands of Syrians showing up at its borders has led to a concentration of the refugee population in Greece, Italy and

Germany. In 2015, the EU had pledged to relocate 160,000 refugees among its members by September 2017, but only about 10% of that quota has been met. With the exception of Germany, which opened its borders to one million refugees from Syria, Iraq and other countries in 2015, most of the EU members have refused to accept refugees. Most refugees are still stuck in Greece and Italy, where they lack access to clean water, proper food, and health services.

Furthermore, the UK announced that it would end its program of accepting unaccompanied minors; and the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia have strongly rejected the EU attempt to spread refugees among its members. In summary, refugees are stopped from entering the European Union, and those that have managed to enter live in fear of being deported, especially after the rise of far-right movements in the continent.

The EU failure to provide a safe passage to refugees, has led to thousands of them to make the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe. According to UNHCR, between 2015 and 2016, more than 7,500 people died while attempting to reach Europe through this route. Instead of adhering to its core values of "human dignity" and "respect for human rights" and using its economic resources to alleviate the humanitarian crisis, the European Union has turned its back to the millions of Syrian refugees fleeing the war.

## The failure of international community to intervene

The involvement of non-state actors -Daesh, Hezbollah, Free Syrian Army, Ahrar al Sham- and states- Assad regime, Russia, Iran, Turkey, the US, the UK, France, and Saudi Arabia- has added a layer of complexity to the Syrian War, due to their diverging interests and policies.

Time after time, after every humanitarian crisis, the international community's promise has been "never again." After the horrors of the Holocaust in Europe, the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, the ethnic killings in Rwanda and Bosnia, and the genocide in Darfur, the international community has promised, "never again." Yet, time after time as new humanitarian crisis erupt, the promise continues to be broken.

The international community has failed to take coherent and decisive actions to intervene in the Syrian War. The decision to standby or lack of full commitment by the international community, particularly of military powers like the US and the European Union, has allowed the Assad regime, its supporters, and the various terrorist groups involved in the fighting to carry out atrocities against the Syrian people.

The Syrian War will be just another event added to the growing list of humanitarian crisis that the international community was supposed to prevent from happening ever again. As the war enters its seventh year, the best that the international community can now do is to find a collective solution, such as setting up Turkey's proposed safe zone, to end the atrocities that continue to occur in Syria, and to open its doors to the millions of refugees that have fled the war.



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