

Forum: Security council

Issue: The question of Syria

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Introduction

Since March 2011 Syria has faced a civil war. This civil war has claimed the lives of at least 350 000.¹ Approximately 13.2 million people have been displaced, of those approximately 6.6 million have fled abroad.²

The Syrian refugee crisis is still the largest in the world. Türkiye hosts the most with 3.6 million syrian refugees. Unfortunately more than 70% of Syrian refugees are living in poverty and the covid-19 pandemic has only worsened the situation.³

The war has several sides, most of which receive support from other countries or international organisations.⁴ The main combatants are the Syrian Arab republic, led by Bashar al-Assad, supported by Russia and Iran; Islamic militant groups such as ISIL, Turkey and Syrian rebel factions such as the Free Syrian Army, supported by many western nations such as the US.⁵

For the past 3 years, The Syrian civil war has been in a stalemate, which has made the country relatively peaceful. However, as of December 2022 tensions have been rising in the area. Airstrikes by Turkey, Israel and Syrian government forces have rocked the country and there is a real threat of further escalation.⁶

Definition of Key Terms

Displaced people

¹ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/09/1101162> accessed 30.11.2022

² <https://www.unhcr.org/statistics/unhcrstats/5ee200e37/unhcr-global-trends-2019.html> accessed 30.11.2022

³ <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained/> accessed 14.12.2022

⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syria> accessed 30.11.2022

⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/event/Syrian-Civil-War> accessed 30.11.2022

⁶ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/11/1131157> accessed 1.12.2022

persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters.⁷

Islamic militant group

An Islamic militant group is a group of individuals who carry out terrorist attacks and/or military actions motivated by fundamental and/or extremist islamism

Arab spring

The Arab spring was a series of generally pro-democracy protests in 2011. It began in Tunisia and spread to Syria some time later, beginning the Syrian civil war.⁸

Free Syrian Army (FSA)

The free syrian army is an umbrella group of rebels formed by Syrian army defectors in July 2011.⁹

Jihadist

A muslim who takes part in or supports a Jihad, which is a holy war waged on behalf of Islam.¹⁰

Al-Nusra front

Also known as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, was a jihadist militant group which aimed to establish an islamic state in Syria and has since merged with groups of similar ideology.¹¹ It later merged with other groups to become Hay'at Tahṛīr al-Shām (HTS)

ISIL

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), also known as ISIS, Dā'ish and the Islamic State, is a transnational islamic militant group operating primarily in Syria and Iraq. It splintered from the Al-Nusra front in 2013 and proclaimed the establishment of an islamic

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<https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-internally-displaced-persons/about-internally-displaced-persons> accessed 30.11.2022

⁸ <https://www.history.com/topics/middle-east/arab-spring> accessed 6.12.2022

⁹ <https://www.britannica.com/event/Syrian-Civil-War/Civil-war#ref1270688> accessed 13.12.2022

¹⁰ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/jihadist>

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Nusra_Front accessed 13.12.2022

caliphate in 2014. In 2019 its long-time leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi committed suicide and as of 2022 it holds no significant territory. ¹²

Chemical weapons

A weapon made with substances (such as incendiary mixtures, smoke, or gases) with irritant, burning, poisonous, or asphyxiating properties. ¹³

Islamic caliphate

An Islamic state led by a single, often both religious and political, leader. ¹⁴

Syrian national army

The Syrian National Army is the second largest rebel group fighting in the Syrian civil war. It is largely dominated by Turkey and has been used as a proxy by Turkey. It also suffers from infighting. ¹⁵

Explanation of the Question

The situation in Syria is highly complex, with several involved parties who have spent more than a decade at war. There are no easy or simple solutions to the conflict and it is likely that it will continue for a long time, should it go without any intervention.

Background & causes

Syria's current situation can be traced back to the Arab Spring of 2011. The torture of a dozen or so teenagers incited peaceful protests, which were quickly met with violent repression by the government. This repression quickly turned the peaceful protests into a civil war.¹⁶ The rebels were joined by several defectors from the Syrian army. This marked the foundation of the Free Syrian Army, or FSA. Some time later Jihadists began to arrive in Syria, with al-Qaeda forming the group known as the al-Nusra front, from which ISIL splintered.¹⁷

¹²<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islamic-State-in-Iraq-and-the-Levant/ISIL-outside-of-Iraq-and-Syria> accessed 13.12.2022

¹³ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/chemical%20warfare> accessed 14.12.2022

¹⁴ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/caliphate> accessed 15.12.2022

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¹⁵ https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/2022/state-of-the-syrian-national-army-march-2022.pdf 15.12.2022

¹⁶ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/17/what-is-the-arab-spring-and-how-did-it-start> accessed 5.12.2022

¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JFpanWNgfQY> accessed 30.11.2022

However, Syria's troubles began well before 2011. After the First world war, France took control of modern day Syria, ending roughly 400 years of Ottoman reign. The French reign saw several revolts and uprisings, culminating in independence in 1946. The first 17 years of Syrian independence were marked by instability, revolts, coups and a brief union with Egypt. In 1963 the Ba'ath party took control of the country and in 1970 Hafez al-Assad became president. His reign was marked by a war with Israel, involvement in the Lebanese civil war and a rebellion in the city of Hama. After his death in 2000, his son Bashar al-Assad took over the presidency.¹⁸

In his inaugural speech, Bashar al-Assad announced his support for economic and political reforms, though he rejected the possibility of democracy. For some months after the start of his reign he would allow more political openness but he would then clamp back down on the rights of the people. He would begin using torture, imprisonment and assassination against his political adversaries. His economic reforms failed to lift the population out of poverty and he resorted to using anti-western rhetoric and nationalism.¹⁹

In the period leading up to the Arab Spring from 2006 to 2011, up to 60% of Syria's land experienced a drought, one of the worst droughts in recorded history. This led to many of the farmers moving to the cities, straining the population.²⁰

After the initial protests, the situation began to resemble a civil war. UN High Commissioner officially classified it as a civil war in December of 2011.²¹ In November of 2011 the first large-scale fighting took place in Homs with government forces shelling the city.²² Following the initial fighting, a UN peace delegation led by former Secretary General Kofi Annan, managed to broker a brief 6-month ceasefire. This however fell apart and fighting resumed.

²³

In 2013, Islamist militant groups began to take the stage, notably the Al-Nusra front and some time later ISIL. In 2014 and 2015 ISIL made staggering gains in both Syria and Iraq, which combined with their provocative actions and propaganda, concerned western powers. Russia also became involved in 2015, helping Assad fight the rebels. By 2016 ISIL began to

¹⁸https://www.history.com/topics/middle-east/the-history-of-syria#section_3 accessed 12.12.2022

¹⁹<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Bashar-al-Assad> accessed 14.12.2022

²⁰<https://climateandsecurity.org/2012/02/syria-climate-change-drought-and-social-unrest/> accessed 14.12.2022

²¹<https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna45514855> accessed 14.12.2022

²²

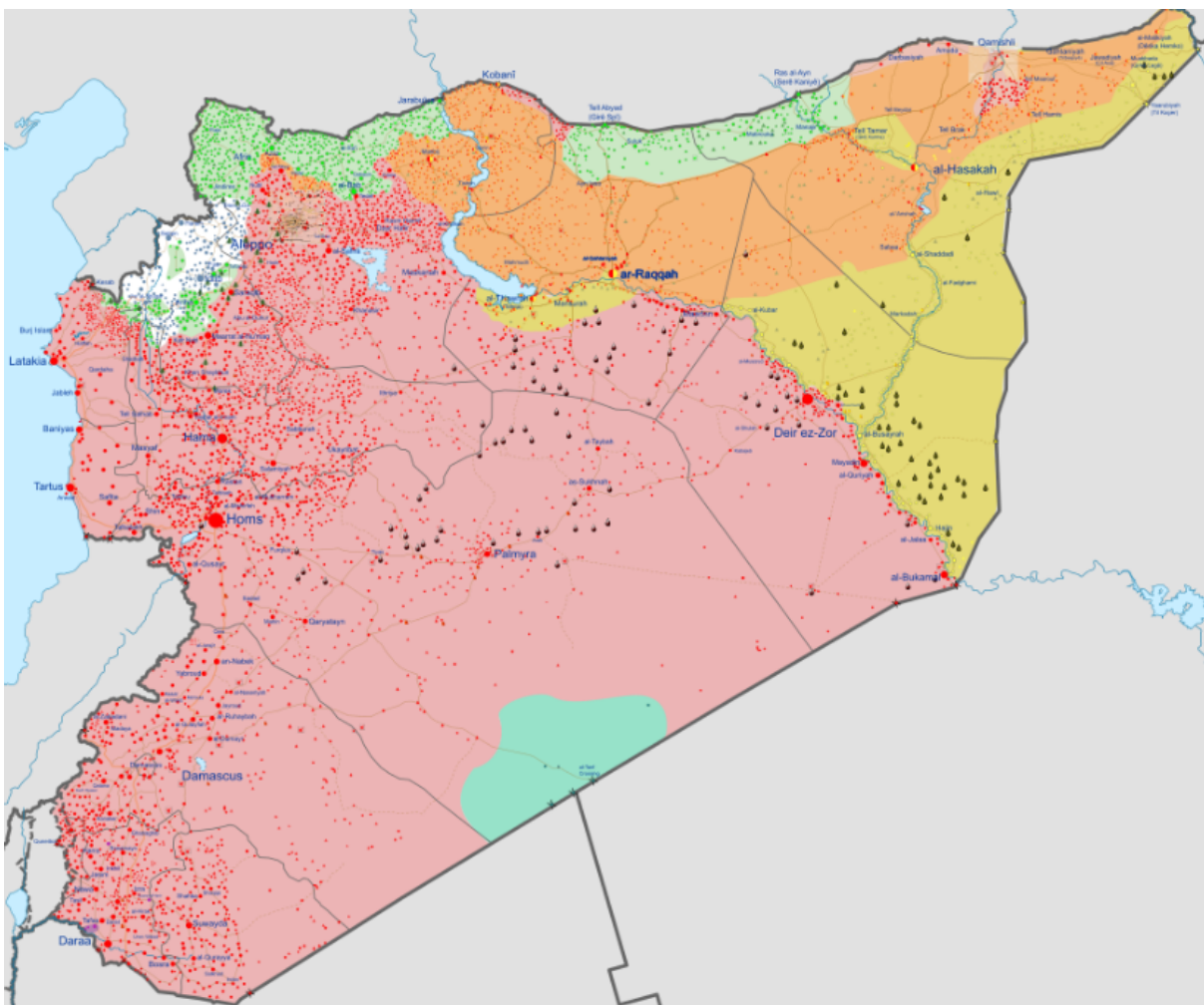
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Early_insurgency_phase_of_the_Syrian_civil_war#cite_note-ISW_2011-34 accessed 14.12.2022

²³

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/middle-east/Kofi-Annan-resigns-as-UN-Syria-envoy/articleshow/15329904.cms> accessed 14.12.2022

suffer the weight of fighting several enemies at once. This, along with US led air campaign leveling many of their key strongholds, lead to ISIL losing territory. In 2017 western powers became increasingly involved, for example with the US striking a Syrian government air base with cruise missiles. Heavy fighting continued through 2017 and 2018 with the government winning key victories. In 2019 Turkey attacked kurdish-controlled areas in Northern Syria and ISIL was finally defeated.²⁴

Currently the government holds about $\frac{2}{3}$ of the country, with the rebels mostly confined to Idlib, Turkey in the north and the Kurds taking control of the last $\frac{1}{3}$ of the country (the yellow and orange on the map). The humanitarian situation is the worst its ever been with 90% of the population below the poverty line.²⁵



Military control as of September 2021²⁶

²⁴ <https://www.britannica.com/event/Syrian-Civil-War/Civil-war> accessed 15.12.2022

²⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_e_KpYlfZAY accessed 15.12.2022

²⁶ By Ermanarich - Own work, derived from the Template:Syrian Civil War detailed map. This is a retouched picture, which means that it has been digitally altered from its original version. Modifications: Marks for the cities and towns as well as colour on the ground were added to show the situation in the Syrian Civil War.. The original can be viewed here: Syria location map3.svg: .

■ Syrian Arab Republic (SAA)
 ■ Syrian Arab Republic & Rojava (SAA & SDF)
 ■ Rojava (SDF)
 ■ Syrian Interim Government (SNA) & Turkish occupation
 ■ Syrian Salvation Government (HTS^[h])
 ■ Revolutionary Commando Army & United States' occupation
 ■ Opposition groups in reconciliation

Effects

The economic cost of the war has been severe. The country is caught in a downward spiral after 10 years of continuous conflict. Relief funding has also not kept up with demand.²⁷ The country has suffered extensive destruction of infrastructure, which has significantly affected the realization of essential economic and social rights.

Due to the situation in Syria, more than half of the pre-war population of Syria has become refugees. Of these refugees around half have become internally displaced, while the other half has fled abroad. Despite common misconceptions, only 5% of these refugees currently live in refugee camps.²⁸ These refugees were the main contributor to the large influx of refugees to Europe in 2015.²⁹

The humanitarian situation in Syria is abhorrent. According to the WHO, over 12.2 million people are in dire need of health assistance and around half a million children are chronically malnourished. Additionally, over a third of the country's primary health care centres and a quarter of its hospitals are non-functional. There is also a chronic shortage of health care workers due to the fighting.³⁰

Key Member States and NGOs Involved and Their Views

Syria

The Syrian Arab Republic, led by Bashar al-Assad, is a member of the UN.³¹ They are receiving support primarily from Hezbollah, Iran, Iraq and Russia.³² The Syrian government naturally believes itself to be the legitimate ruler of Syria and opposes resolutions condemning its actions.

Modifications made by Ermanarich.En:Module:Syrian_Civil_War, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=50441125> accessed 15.12.2022

²⁷ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/09/1100042> accessed 30.11.2022

²⁸ <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained/> accessed 14.12.2022

²⁹ <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2015/10/01/roots-of-europe-s-refugee-crisis-pub-61465#1> accessed 15.12.2022

³⁰ <https://www.who.int/emergencies/situations/syria-crisis> accessed 15.12.2022

³¹ <https://www.un.int/syria/> accessed 1.12.2022

³² <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/4/14/syrias-war-explained-from-the-beginning> accessed 14.12.2022

Russia

Russia is a keen supporter of Bashar al-Assad and his regime. Russia and Syria have signed a Treaty of friendship and cooperation.³³ Ever since 2015, Russia has been Syria's main ally. Russia and China have frequently vetoed resolutions on Syria in the Security Council.³⁴ As a firm ally of al-Bashar's government, Russia opposes resolutions against the interest of the government of Syria and especially those criticizing its own actions.

USA

The US has supported anti-government rebels and led an international campaign against ISIL.³⁵ Syria has been on the US list of state sponsors of terrorism since 1979. The US does not have an embassy in Syria, nor does Syria have an embassy in the US. The US has also imposed numerous sanctions against the government of Syria, while also being the single largest donor to the humanitarian response in Syria.³⁶

Turkey

Ever since the start of the Syrian civil war, Turkey has had a strained relationship with the Syrian government due to Turkey providing support to Syrian rebel groups, namely the Syrian National Army (SNA). Turkey has also attacked Syrian territory because it sees the Kurdish militias in the north of the country as a threat. Turkey has come into conflict with the US due to its support of the Kurdish groups. Turkey has cooperated with Russia in the north and Russia is attempting to mediate between the relationship between Turkey and the government of Syria, with some success.³⁷

Timeline of events³⁸

Date	Description of event
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³³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russia%E2%80%93Syria_relations#Further_reading

³⁴ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/4/14/syrias-war-explained-from-the-beginning> accessed 14.12.2022

³⁵ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/4/14/syrias-war-explained-from-the-beginning> accessed 14.12.2022

³⁶ <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-syria/> accessed 15.12.2022

³⁷ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/whats-at-stake-in-turkeys-military-escalation-in-syria> accessed 15.12.2022

³⁸ <https://www.britannica.com/event/Syrian-Civil-War/Uprising-in-Syria-2011> accessed 13.12.2022
(source for all points unless otherwise stated)

July 1, 2011	Large scale protests take place all over Syria
July 29, 2011	The FSA is formed
August 18, 2011	President Barack Obama among several other heads of state issue statements calling for Assad to step down
September 27, 2011	The first large-scale battle takes place between government forces and rebel groups
February 4, 2012	Russia and China jointly veto a Security council resolution condemning the actions of Assad's regime
February 23, 2012	Former secretary-general of the UN Kofi Annan, is sent as a peace envoy to Syria by the UN and the Arab league
March 27, 2012	Assad accepts the peace plan offered by Annan
April 19, 2012	Ban Ki-moon, secretary general of the UN, states that Syria has failed to comply with the terms of the UN peace plan
June 22, 2012	A Turkish reconnaissance plane is shot down over Syria, marking the first combat between the countries
March 19, 2013	Chemical weapons are reportedly used in a town near Aleppo
September 14, 2013	The US, Russia and Syria agree to place Syrias chemical weapons under international control
September 16, 2013	UN inspectors confirm that Chemical weapons were used in Damascus
June 30, 2014	ISIL declares the establishment of an islamic caliphate
May 20, 2015	ISIL captures the ancient city of Palmyra and proceeds to destroy its historic artifacts and structures
September 30, 2015	Russia carries out its first airstrikes in Syria, marking its entry into the war
March 2016	Syrian troops retake Palmyra, with Russian air support

April 7, 2017	The US strikes a government-controlled air base, using cruise missiles, in retaliation for a chemical weapons attack against rebel forces
March 2019	ISIL is militarily defeated ³⁹
October 9, 2019	Turkey launches an offensive into northeastern Syria
October 26-27, 2019	The leader of ISIL Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi commits suicide by detonating a suicide vest ⁴⁰

UN Involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

The first and most successful intervention by the UN was early on in the conflict with the former secretary-general of the UN, Kofi Annan, managing to ceasefire. This however fell apart after six months and Annan later resigned in frustration.⁴¹

- Security council resolution 2254 (18 December 2015)⁴²

By some estimates, there are 238 resolutions relating to Syria from 2011 onwards.⁴³ Of these this is perhaps the most important. It calls for, among other things, an attempt at a peace and an end to the harming of civilians.

Some relevant treaties include

- The Universal declaration of human rights
- The Geneva conventions and their protocols
- The convention on the rights of the child

These are relevant in how often they have been violated in Syria.

³⁹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/3/23/isil-defeated-in-final-syria-victory-sdf> accessed 14.12.2022

⁴⁰ <https://www.npr.org/2019/10/30/774617578/head-of-u-s-central-command-says-isis-leader-baghdadi-buried-at-sea> accessed 14.12.2022

⁴¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kofi_Annan_Syrian_peace_plan accessed 15.12.2022

⁴² <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2254> accessed 15.12.2022

⁴³ https://digitallibrary.un.org/search?ln=en&rm=&ln=en&sf=&so=d&rg=50&c=Resource%20Type&c=UN%20Bodies&c=&of=hb&fti=0&fct_1=Resolutions%20and%20Decisions&fct_3=2019&fct_3=2018&fct_3=2017&fct_3=2016&fct_3=2015&fct_3=2014&fct_3=2013&fct_3=2012&fct_3=2011&fct_3=2020&fti=0&p=syria accessed 15.12.2022

Many UN agencies are working in Syria, notably UNICEF, which is working on protecting children from the conflict. ⁴⁴

Possible Solutions

There is only one clear solution to the current situation in Syria, ending the war. It is impossible to address the economic or humanitarian crisis in the country without first ending the war. Over a decade of conflict has made this very difficult.

Here are two possible outcomes for the war

1. Assad's regime takes control of the rest of the country, defeating the rebels and restoring the pre-war situation. This however, would make everyone else incredibly agitated and likely lead to the government having to violently crack down on whatever is left of those areas.
2. The many parties of the Syrian civil war agree to a peace treaty and form a single government without al-Assad. This is the outcome the Western powers and also many UN resolutions have called for, but there have been numerous attempts for a peace already, and none of them have succeeded.

Bibliography

All sources used have been listed in the document.

⁴⁴ <https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/syrian-crisis> accessed 15.12.2022