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**ADVISORY PANEL ON THE QUESTION OF  
THE FERTILE CRESCENT (APQ)**

**MITIGATING THE POLITICAL IMPACTS OF  
THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR**

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## Basic Overview of the Issue

Located on the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea in southwestern Asia, Syria has been a site of conflict for many years. The Syrian Civil War broke out in March 2011, and it quickly evolved into one of the most complex and devastating conflicts of the century.

The conflict started with the peaceful pro-democracy protesters advocating for political reform to terminate the prolonged authoritarian practices. These peaceful

demonstrations rapidly escalated

as a consequence of the violent repression executed by the Assad regime. The government brutally harmed the protesters in many cities, which denoted the beginning of widespread civilian violence throughout the nation.

By 2012, the intense conflict had deteriorated into a full-scale civil war. Hence, numerous factions, including but not limited to the Free Syrian Army and Islamist groups, have emerged. Therefore, Syria became a fragmented battlefield where multiple state and non-state actors were attempting to take over the government authority.

These actors included not only the many factions formed due to the presence of different cultural, political, and religious beliefs but also international actors such as Russia and the United States of America (USA). While Russia backed the Assad regime, various European countries and the USA have shown support for the opposition groups. These foreign powers have transformed this civil war into a proxy war, and the attempts to form a resolution have become more complicated.

Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and many other terrorist organisations have emerged from the turmoil and compete over territory and influence, which has led to even further disarray. This terrorism has extended beyond the borders of Syria. It has become an international issue, as well as leading Syria's conflict to be named a significant humanitarian



*Image 1: Map of Syria*



crisis due to the loss of over half a million lives. This crisis has resulted in a considerable number of Syrian refugees immigrating to other countries.

Holistically, the war has impacted the humanitarian situation, healthcare, economic stability, social life, marginalisation, geopolitical tension and many more aspects. The war, especially, had profound domestic and international political impacts, discussed in this report's "Detailed Background Information" section.

## Explanation of Important Terms

### *Civil War*

"a violent conflict between a state and one or more organised non-state actors in the state's territory" (Britannica)

### *Faction*

"a party or group (as within a government) that is often contentious or self-seeking" (Merriam Webster Dictionary)

### *Refugee Crisis*

"when many displaced people move from their home country to another, difficulty or dangerously" (World Vision)

### *Proxy War*

"a war fought between groups or smaller countries that each represent the interests of other larger powers, and may have help and support from these" (Cambridge Dictionary)

### *Safe Zones*

"specifically designated areas that aim to afford a form of heightened physical and humanitarian protection to the displaced civilian population in an ongoing armed conflict" (International Review of The Red Cross)

### *International Humanitarian Law (IHL)*

"a set of rules that seeks, for humanitarian reasons, to limit the effects of armed conflict" (International Committee of The Red Cross)

### *Sectarianism*

"very strong support for the religious or political group that you are a member of, which



can cause problems between different groups” (Cambridge Dictionary)

### *Humanitarian Assistance*

“assistance designed to save lives, alleviate suffering, and maintain and protect human dignity during and in the aftermath of emergencies.” (Science Direct)

### *Transitional Government*

“a temporary government, usually one that governs until official elections can take place in a country” (Longman Dictionary)

### *Ceasefire Agreement*

“an agreement, usually between two armies, to stop fighting to allow discussions about peace” (Cambridge Dictionary)

### *Arab Spring*

“wave of pro-democracy protests and uprisings that took place in the Middle East and North Africa beginning in 2010 and 2011, challenging some of the region’s entrenched authoritarian regimes.” (Britannica)

### *Intervention*

“intentional action to change a situation, to improve it or prevent it from getting worse” (Cambridge Dictionary)

## **Detailed Background of the Issue**

### **Historical Context**

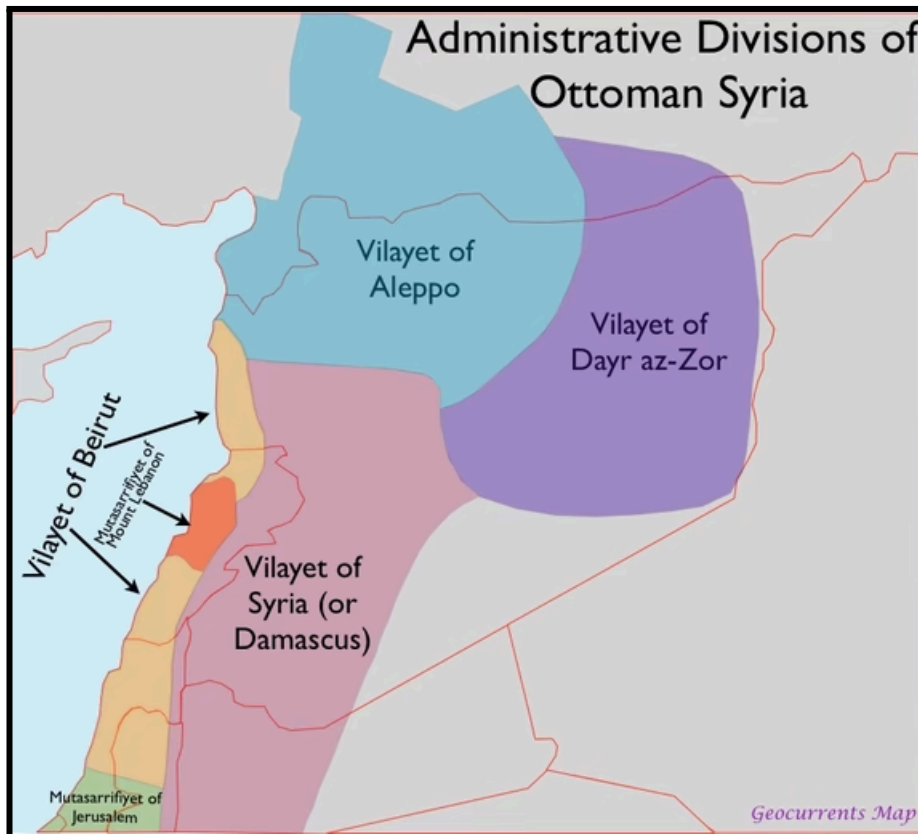
Historically, Syria has fought with Egyptians, Hittites, Assyrians, Persians, Macedonian Greeks, Romans, Mongols, Turks, Brits, and French. The nation has been a melting pot of various religious and ethnic groups, including Orthodox, Catholic, and other Christians, Alawis, Ismailis, Yazidis, Kurds, Jews, and Druze, alongside Sunni Muslim Arabs (The Atlantic). Since gaining its independence from the Ottoman Empire, Syria has undergone significant political, social, and economic transformations. To better understand the context, Syria’s history can be divided into four main periods from 1920 onwards: Before the Assad regime, the Hafez al-Assad regime, the Bashar al-Assad regime before the civil war, and last but not least, the Arab Spring and Civil War.





### **Before the Assad Regime**

During Ottoman rule, Syria was divided into provinces, with Muslim provinces sharing Islamic law. In contrast, other provinces created their own ethnic and religious constitutions through which they were self-governed except in military and foreign affairs (The Atlantic).



*Image 2: Administrative Division of Ottoman Syria*

In 1918, Arap troops captured Vilayet, Syria. Eventually, Ottoman rule ended, which lasted for many centuries. Despite the Nation's efforts to maintain its sovereignty, Syria quickly became a French mandate in 1920. In 1936, the French started working towards Syrian independence and dissolved autonomous regions. In 1943, Shukri al-Kuwatli led Syria to complete independence (BBC).

In 1947, Michel Aflaq and Salah-al-Din al-Bitar founded the Arab Socialist Baath Party. In 1958, Syria and Egypt formed the United Arab Republic, which led to discontent and the secession of the Syrian army. The party seized power in 1963, and Hafez al-Assad became the defence minister.

### **Hafez al-Assad Regime**



Eventually, in 1970, Hafez al-Assad took control of the Syrian government. He came from a minority group: Alawite, a heterodox Shia sect. Alawites have been persecuted for years and finally received positions of privilege under the French mandate after World War I ended (Council on Foreign Relations).



*Image 3: Hafez al-Assad*

Under his rule, Syria and Egypt started a war against Israel. Yet, they were unsuccessful in regaining the Golan Heights, which was lost when he was the prime minister. By various means, such as arrest, torture, and execution, Assad prevented his rivalries from rising (Britannica).

1980, the Muslim Brotherhood instigated uprisings in Aleppo, Homs, and especially in Hama (BBC). Hafez al-Assad ordered the military to put down these uprisings, which resulted in 25,000 casualties. These included many civilians and led to the city almost being destroyed (Council on Foreign Relations). Al-Hassad wanted Syria to be the leader of the Arab states, so he built a strategic alliance with Egypt, surprisingly exposing the Syrian military to defeat. After Israel invaded Lebanon, he reasserted control of the country (Britannica). The Iran-Iraq war began at the same time, and Syria supported Iran while sending some forces to Lebanon and Beirut to



enforce the ceasefire (BBC). Through these actions, he was able to build relationships with Western governments who had condemned his terroristic acts. He began to form closer ties with Iraq as Israel's partnership with Türkiye strengthened (Britannica). Hafez al-Assad's death on June 10, 2000, marked a significant turning point in Syria's history.

### ***Bashar al-Assad Regime Before the Civil War***

Bashar al-Assad, the third child of Hafez al-Assad and originally an ophthalmologist, succeeded his father in 2000. At 34 years old, Bashar al-Assad was appointed as the secretary-general of the ruling Ba'ath Party. He was quickly nominated as the presidential candidate, and running unopposed, he was elected to serve for a seven-year term on July 10 (Britannica).



*Image 4: President Bashar al-Assad*

A significant proportion of Syrians opposed this power passing from father to son. At the same time, because of his youth, education and exposure to the West, there was hope that his rule would end the authoritarian state and the stagnant state-controlled economic system. Thus, on his inauguration day, he went on record to say that he was in favour of liberalising the Syrian economy and was committed to several reforms. Still, he thought democracy was not a proper political system for Syria. At first, Assad slightly eased political censorship concerning freedom of expression and the media, allowing for greater liberalisation in the “Damascus Spring” period.

However, he altered his approach over the years and began threatening and



arresting people who actively demanded reforms. Assad used cabinet reorganisations and forced retirements to sideline the old guard and replace them with younger officials. He broke up and privatised state monopolies, but his economic liberalisation mainly benefited a politically connected elite without benefiting the general public. The end of subsidies and price ceilings exacerbated socio-economic issues, increasing unemployment. In 2007, Assad was reelected to a second term, aiming to end international isolation and mend relationships with regional powers. He maintained his father's hard-line stance in Syria's conflict with Israel (Britannica).

## Arab Spring and Civil War

Arab Spring protests and the uprising against Assad began in March 2011, ignited by a wave of pro-democracy uprisings in the region. Starting in Tunisia, the protests and the movement first spread throughout the Middle East, including Egypt, Libya and Syria. At first, the protests were peaceful demonstrations of the widespread dissatisfaction with the authoritarian regime. Many citizens expressed their frustration with corruption, unemployment, and political repression this way.



*Image 5: Arab Spring Protests*

Protests in Syria specifically started on March 15, 2011, asking for modest reforms ranging from the release of political prisoners to bringing an end to corruption. The protesters, including the teenagers, were arrested and tortured. The government didn't refrain from using lethal force. Violence against protesters increased, and opposition was put down by Assad, causing the government to face international condemnation. The crisis turned into a full-scale civil war with international allies supporting either Assad's regime or rebels. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar have provided funding and arms to rebels, while the Syrian government received weapons from Iran and Hezbollah. In 2013, the rise of extremist groups such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Jabhat al-Nusra forced





countries such as the USA to direct their attention against the new emerging threat.

Meanwhile, Russia launched an intervention of their own, sending in bombers against rebel groups. It was not until 2017 that Assad's domination in major cities reemerged. The international community's engagement in Syria has complicated the war, which has resulted in a complex conflict that is more of a proxy war than a civil war, as it has attracted regional actors and increased sectarian tensions (Britannica & Žuber and Moussa). Many have questioned Syria's compliance with international humanitarian laws due to reports of torture, extrajudicial killings, assaults on medical facilities, and other atrocities. Amnesty International reported that over 250,000 casualties have resulted, as well as 11 million refugees being displaced from their homes (Amnesty International). Thus, the war created one of the most significant refugee crises in history. Furthermore, the war left ninety percent of the Syrian population living in poverty (Council on Foreign Affairs). The international community has imposed sanctions on Assad's regime, targeting senior officials and key sectors, but these measures have had limited success in resolving the conflict (Britannica).

## Recent Updates

Assad's international support collapsed in December 2024, and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an opposition leader taking advantage of the weakened state, captured Hama, which led to the fall of the capital, Damascus, on December 8 (Britannica). This marked a significant turning point as the Ba'athist rule, which lasted over six decades, ended suddenly (CNN). HTS has formed a transitional government, intended to serve till 1 March, 2025 and seeks to integrate Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces into the national military organisation by bringing armed factions under a single command structure. Concerns have emerged regarding the government's political inclusivity and the dominant role of HTS due to the transitional administration's plans for a new constitution, which may potentially postpone the elections for another four years. (Dincel & Zaid Al-Ali). The transitional government has also been criticised for making military appointments and changing military infrastructure (Jazeera).



*Image 6: Putin and Assad*

The downfall of the Assad regime did not inherently result in peace. As of January 2025, the United Nations (UN) envoy for Syria warned the globe that the conflict has not ended despite the significant changes. The ongoing conflict stems from different opposition groups continuing to fight over the control of the territory (Mills and Loft).

According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), millions of people are still displaced. Many Syrians are known to be residing in Türkiye, Lebanon, and Jordan. More than 34,000 Syrian refugees returned in the first eight months of 2024 alone, yet many continue to live in danger (UNHCR). The mass migration has grown political tension and posed challenges for long-term regional stability.

## Major Parties Involved

### *Syria*

Syria has been the most involved and impacted nation. However, making statements about Syria's involvement as a whole is challenging, as it has long been fragmented into multiple factions and groups. These factions and groups play a crucial role in the conflict's dynamics.

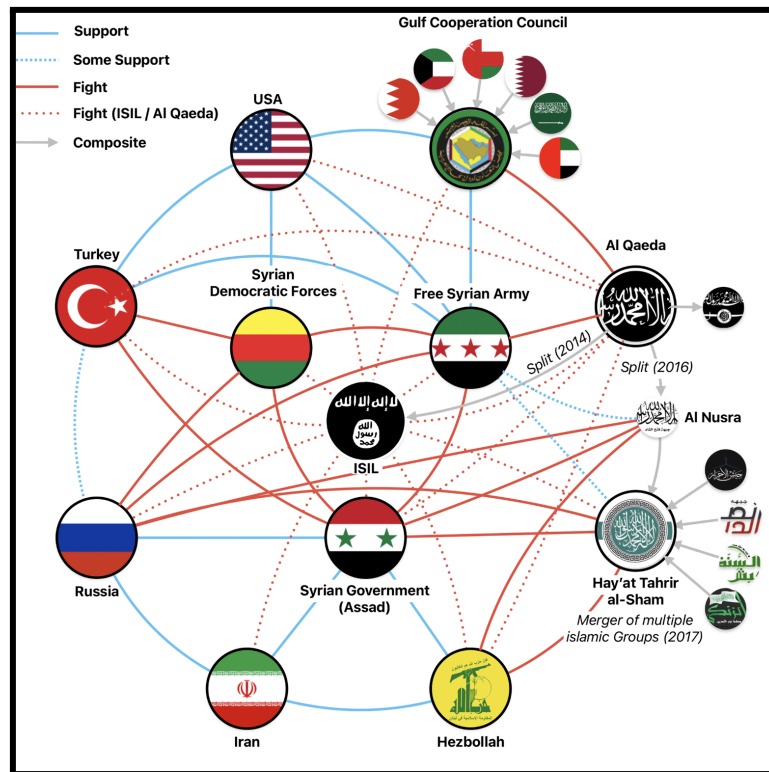


Image 7: All Actors Involved in the Syrian Civil War

### The Assad regime

The Assad regime led by President Bashar al-Assad, a trained ophthalmologist, has ruled Syria since 2000 after Hafez al-Assad's death. His regime, like his father's, has been characterised by authoritarian governance, exploitation of sectarian divisions and the subsequent widespread violence. The family held power in the presidency since 1971. The regime responded to the initial peaceful protests, violently escalating the conflict in the region. The regime has been criticised because of its frequent use of artillery bombardments, airstrikes, and chemical weapons. Recently, in December 2024, the Assad regime collapsed. Bashar al-Assad fled to Moscow following a major offensive led by rebel groups (Guzman).

### Syrian Interim Government (SIG)

Syrian Interim Government, a coalition of Syrian nationalist and Islamic groups, was established in 2013. It attempted to provide an alternative to the brutal and authoritarian Assad regime. The Syrian Interim Government tried to take control over the areas governed by the opposition forces. The Syrian National Army and the Free Syrian Army function as the Syrian Interim Government's military forces. Due to



internal divisions and external pressures, the government faced difficulties establishing its legitimacy and authority. SIG is anticipated to be crucial in forming the new government (Wikipedia).

### **Syrian Salvation Government**

The Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) was formed by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in late 2017 as another alternative to the Assad regime. Since then, it has operated mainly in Idlib. The group has been similarly criticised for its authoritarian practices. It has positioned itself as a de facto authority in the region, leading to endless clashes between opposing groups. HTS is the group responsible for forming the transitional government. Hence, the Syrian Salvation Government will likely significantly shape post-Assad Syria (Holliday).

### **United States of America (USA)**

The USA has been firmly against Assad's undemocratic rule since 2011. As a significant power in the world, the USA has been one of the two key member states, turning the civil war into a proxy war. The USA has been engaged in military intervention in the region since 2014. In December 2024, the USA had over 900 troops. Yet, the re-elected president of the United States, Donald Trump, stated that the United States should not intervene. USA troops in the region are expected to drop in the upcoming months.

### **Russia**

Russia has been playing an integral role in the progression of the civil war, significantly as the war progressed into a proxy war. Russia supported the Assad regime against other rebel groups supported by the USA, Türkiye, etc., from the start of the Arab Spring protests in 2011. Furthermore, as a UN Security Council permanent member, Russia has used its right to veto whenever needed to protect the Assad regime and its interests. With the Ukraine-Russia conflict getting out of hand, Russia became arguably less influential in the Syrian territory, leading to a weakening regime that eventually collapsed. Assad fled to Moscow and has been granted "humanitarian" asylum (Guzman).

### **Türkiye**

Türkiye, as a neighbouring country, can be considered one of the most important outside powers involved in the conflict. Türkiye's president Erdoğan has supported the 2011





Arab Spring uprising and the rebel groups such as Ha'yat Tahrir al-Sham. There are specific indications that Ha'yat Tahrir al-Sham received Turkish help. Turkey's Syrian National Army (SNA), a Turkish-owned entity, is a key ally of rebels in northern Syria. After ISIS's defeat, Turkey is concerned about the rise of the Syrian-Kurdish entity, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) (Council on Foreign Relations). Turkey initiated military operations in northern Syria, including Operation Euphrates Shield in 2016, Olive Branch in 2018, and Peace Spring in 2019, targeting both ISIS and Kurdish militants (Wikipedia). To control the risks posed by ISIS and YPG, Turkey has sent troops to northern Syria, establishing safe zones. The continuing conflict has led to millions of Syrian refugees arriving in Türkiye, establishing Türkiye as a key player in the repatriation of displaced Syrians after the Assad regime (Özkizilcik).

### *Iran*

Iran has been an ally of the Assad regime since the beginning of the war in 2011. Alongside Russia, Iran chose to back the Assad regime militarily and financially. Iran's support for Assad is crucial for holding control over strategic areas, such as securing a land corridor to Hezbollah. With Assad's recent fall, Iran now faces immense challenges in Syria, potentially losing control over strategic areas and reducing power projection (Guzman).

### *Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)*

HTS is formed by the terrorist organisation al-Qaeda. HTS is a Sunni Islamist militant group which led the recent overthrow of Assad in Idlib. Headed by Ahmed al-Sharaa Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, HTS is considered a terrorist organisation by the UN and several countries but has rebranded as a more moderate organisation. Since taking over, HTS has tasked Mohammed al-Bashir with leading a transitional government until March 1, 2025. The global community is concerned about HTS potentially misusing its position of power (Guzman).

### *Kurdish Groups*

#### *People's Protection Units (YPG)*

YPG was formed as a result of the escalating violence in 2011, representing the Kurdish population. YPG is closely associated with the Democratic Union Party, historically tied to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), deemed as a terrorist by Türkiye, the USA and the EU. Initially, YPG's actions centred around defending the



Kurdish areas. However, over time, they transitioned to a more aggressive strategy in response to the rise of extremist groups like ISIS. The YPG became a crucial ally of the USA and participated in the Syrian Democratic Forces. Türkiye opposed this faction as Türkiye perceives YPG as a threat along its border Because of YPG's connections to the PKK (Veen)

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

SDF is a Kurdish-dominated coalition backed by the USA. SDF has been an umbrella group that includes various ethnicities and factions. Ankara and Washington designate the SDF as a terrorist organisation (Guzman).

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

ISIS originated from al-Qaeda in Iraq. It seized territories in Iraq and Syria, including Raqqa, and fought against the Assad regime and opposition groups. The US formed a coalition to combat ISIS as it expanded in the region. ISIS, despite losing control and caliphate, continues to exist in Syria post-Assad, having opportunities for regrouping and regaining influence (Britannica).

### **Hezbollah**

Hezbollah has played a direct combat role in numerous battles across Syria, training and supporting militias. Assad's fall poses an existential threat to Hezbollah, as Israel has killed the Lebanese Shia militant group's leadership in Lebanon, including longtime leader Hassan Nasrallah, and the group is likely to halt Iranian weaponry flow to the Lebanese militant group (Guzman).

## **Chronology of Important Events**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Description of Event</b>
<b>March 2011</b>	As part of the Arab Spring, pro-democracy protests against President Bashar al-Assad's regime break out throughout Syria.
<b>July 2012</b>	The International Committee of the



	Red Cross organisation deems the situation a civil war.
<b>January-August 2014</b>	The Islamic State ISIL expands its territory in Syria.
<b>September 2015</b>	Russia's military intervention in favour of Assad alters the balance of power.
<b>October 2015</b>	The United States starts to back moderate rebel factions more.
<b>April 2017</b>	A United States missile strike follows a chemical attack in Khan Shaykhun.
<b>September 2018</b>	Idlib emerges as a central point of conflict. Government forces prepare for an offensive against the remaining rebel faction strongholds.
<b>2020-2023</b>	The conflict continues with intermittent ceasefires.
<b>November 2024</b>	Significant territory gains result from a new onslaught launched by a coalition of rebel factions.
<b>December 7, 2024</b>	As opposition troops capture Damascus, Assad flees to Russia. His ruling comes to an end.
<b>January 2025</b>	Opposition forces create a provisional government. The political landscape remains divided.



## Relevant International Documents

- Security Council Draft Resolution, 4 February 2012 [S/2012/77](#)
- Security Council Resolution 2254, 18 December 2015 [S/RES/2254](#)
- Security Council Resolution 2268, 26 February 2016 [S/RES/2268](#)
- Security Council Resolution 2336, 31 December 2016 [S/RES/2336](#)
- General Assembly Resolution adopted in the sixty-seventh session, 4 June 2013 [A/RES/67/262](#)
- General Assembly Resolution adopted in the sixty-sixth session, 7 August 2012 [A/RES/66/253 B](#)
- General Assembly Resolution adopted in the sixty-sixth session, 21 February 2012 [A/RES/66/253](#)

## Past Attempts to Resolve the Issue

Many seeking peace have employed initiatives to address the ongoing conflict, including The Astana Process, which began in 2017 and involved Russia, Iran, and Turkey in establishing ceasefire zones. It has led to a reduction in violence, but it has yet to achieve political resolution to the Syrian civil war (Mahmud). Assad's reluctance to negotiate has hindered UN support for a Syrian-led political process (Council on Foreign Relations). The UN Special Envoy has promoted dialogue in regional capitals to promote national reconciliation and restore Syrian sovereignty (UN).

The European Union (EU) allocated approximately €9 billion to individuals affected by the crisis, alleviating immediate needs yet not exerting sufficient pressure on the Assad regime. The EU's engagement with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) guarantees that aid is delivered to those in need without reinforcing the regime's influence. However, humanitarian assistance is complicated by the Syrian government's use of aid to enhance its legitimacy and undermine international regulations (Yırcalı).

International actors focused on countering extremist groups in Syria have drawn attention to them. Türkiye has become involved due to concerns over spillover effects into Turkey and Kurdish autonomy. Diplomatic efforts and international counterterrorism efforts are also being considered. The US has shifted its strategy to counterterrorism while calling





for de-escalation, aiming to stabilise regions while addressing extremist threats (Council on Foreign Relations & Mahmud).

## Solution Alternatives

A comprehensive and multifaceted approach is required to address the political impacts of the Syrian Civil War and establish a foundation for sustainable peace. This involves improving dialogues and political processes, addressing the refugee crisis, increasing compliance with international humanitarian law, and augmenting regional security. Drafting and adopting a new Syrian constitution that ensures power-sharing minority protection and inclusive governance would create a foundation for long-term political stability. Furthermore, to address the refugee crisis, establishing non-combatant zones within Syria to facilitate the safe return of refugees may be a critical measure. Disarming and reintegrating armed groups into civilian society through targeted reintegration programs can be used as a strategy to combat extremism while also promoting proliferation.

## Useful Links

- <https://syria.liveuamap.com/>
- <https://news.un.org/en/focus/syria>
- <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-syria>
- <https://www.nytimes.com/article/syria-civil-war-rebels.html>
- <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14703995>
- <https://ecfr.eu/article/back-to-the-battlefield-a-new-chapter-in-syrias-civil-war/>
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