

Forum: Security Council

Issue: Political Settlement in Syria

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Introduction

A brutal civil War fought over the last 6 years has left Syria devastated, parts of it in control of terrorist organizations, and the world, especially Europe with millions of displaced persons. This conflict has left over 11 million people displaced, and over half a million dead. The conflict is exacerbated by international players providing weapons and support for their allies in the War, as a result of which, despite various attempts at peace talks, none have been successful. This is mainly because most armed opposition groups have refused since 2012 to join formal negotiations to end the War unless President Bashar al-Assad, a dictator whose family has ruled Syria for almost half a century, removes himself from power before the talks start. However, after the government successfully took back Aleppo - formerly Syria's most populous city which the opposition had held for more than four years- the opposition is now more open to peace talks to settle Syria's future. Among numerous definitions regarding the meaning of a political settlement, it mainly refers to a legitimate process of negotiation between power holders leading to power sharing, reconciliation, security, and peace. Through various future peace talks, the world community is hoping for an ideal political settlement in Syria, which will include an immediate ceasefire with the eventual withdrawal of foreign militaries, a new constitution adopted through peace talks between the major forces and eventual free and fair elections held in the entire country. On the other hand, depending on the major players of this conflict, one of the worst outcomes may simply be an indefinite ceasefire without further peace talks regarding Syria's political future. Therefore, now is the time when the world community must acknowledge the fact that ending the conflict between the major forces will not only shape the future political system of Syria, but also bring about an end to the humanitarian crisis in Syria, the displaced persons crisis in Europe and the Middle East, and allow for a united campaign against terrorist organizations in Syria.

Background Information

The Syrian Civil War began in March 2011, and is an ongoing conflict taking place in the Syrian Arab Republic. Since the start of the War, every side of the conflict has suffered countless losses and been accused by the UN of various war crimes. Altogether, more than 320,000 civilians and soldiers have been killed, around 6.6 million Syrians are internally displaced, and around 4.8 million became refugees during the 5 year long conflict. The main local factions of the civil war, can be divided into four main groups, - each with their own local and international allies (see section below: Major Countries/ Forces Involved)

There are many reasons for the emergence of the civil war:

- Arab Spring - A wave of protests in the Middle East demanding democratic changes spread to Syria in 2011 largely over years of dissatisfaction with the government both under the current president, Bashar al-Assad, and his father, the former president.
- Government's Response - President Bashar al-Assad's violent responses to these protests escalated the conflict
- Sectarian Division - President Assad's regime is dominated by the Alawite sect of Islam (a minority sect, allied with the Shia sect), and rules over a Sunni dominated Syrian Arab Republic, thus the majority of the population wanted a Sunni leader and the Kurds wanted more rights and representation - also, the members of the Arab League support the Syrian Opposition partially due to their antithesis to Assad's Alawite regime
- International Involvement - Foreign intervention further escalated the conflict with major world powers supplying arms and support for different factions
- Regional instability and local support for fundamentalist Islamic ideas - Syrian people are becoming more tolerant towards radical, fundamentalist ideas, which comes in the form of terrorist organizations such as ISIS

The War started with mild protests, where the Syrian government sent the national army to crush the dissent in the small cities. After these violent retaliations, more and more people join the Syrian Opposition's armed revolution, which quickly escalated into a full scale civil war. Some of these rebel groups of the Syrian Opposition

were or are allied with international terrorist organizations, others are more secular with chiefly political, non-religious, aims. In September 2015, the Russian Federation began its military support for President Assad's regime. As disagreements between Russia and the United States and other foreign powers began to accumulate, the situation became more and more complicated and even negotiating ceasefires became near impossible.

Major Countries/Forces Involved

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- *The Government of the Syrian Arab Republic* (local allies: Iran, Hezbollah /international allies: Russia) - The government of the Syrian Arab Republic is currently led by president Bashar al-Assad. The government has been doing fairly well due to the military aid and support of the Russian Federation - mainly in the form of strategic air strikes against the Syrian Opposition and ISIS. Their goal is a unified Syria as before the War, with President Assad's regime still in power.
- *The Syrian Opposition* (local allies: Arab League and Turkey) - This group is the most disjointed of all the factions, with tens of different groups with different aims, all united in their opposition to the government of the Syrian Arab Republic and goal of ending Assad's regime. Mostly supported by the United States, Turkey and the Arab League in the form of non-lethal aid, training, money and intelligence.
- *The Syrian Kurds* (local allies: PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) /international allies: USA) - The Syrian Kurds make up between 7% and 10% of Syria's population. Before the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad began in 2011, most lived in the cities of Damascus and Aleppo, and in three, autonomous areas around the north-eastern part of Syria. Syria's Kurds have long been suppressed and denied basic rights from the government. The state has also sought to limit Kurdish demands for greater autonomy by cracking down on protests and arresting political leaders. Thus, their goals are to expand Kurdish lands and strengthen the autonomy of the region of Rojava.

- *Terrorist Organizations* - Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and others (currently the international community debates exactly which organizations to designate as terrorist). ISIS is a radical, jihadist, fundamentalist terrorist organization, formerly associated with the terrorist group Al-Qaeda, and are responsible for human rights abuses and war crimes on an international scale, not just in Syria, but throughout the world. Their goals are to establish a global caliphate, which puts all Muslims in the world under their rule.
- *Foreign Powers and Alignments* -
 - United States of America - The United States mainly supports the Syrian Opposition by providing supplies, arms, training and money. They also provide the Kurds with training and air support - believing that they are a viable and strong fighting force against ISIS.
 - Russian Federation - The Russian Federation assists the Syrian government, mainly through strategic air strikes against territories controlled by the Syrian Opposition and ISIS.
 - Turkey - Is against the Syrian Government and the Syrian Kurds, and supports the Syrian Opposition.
 - Arab League - Led by Saudi Arabia, the AL financially and militarily supports the Syrian Opposition.
 - United Nations - Attempts to be an impartial observer and provider of aid.

Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

In the last 6 years of the Syrian civil war, many major powers tried to resolve the Syrian Civil War with peace talks. However, they have all ended in failure due to complex problems regarding the different forces not wanting to give up their group's interests. Some of the most notable past attempts include;

- *March 2012* - The General Secretary of the UN, Kofi Annan's, six-point peace plan for Syria by the Arab League and the UN was made, but failed shortly after.
- *September 2013* - UNSC Resolution 2118 (2013) resolution passed, which required the Syrian government to assume responsibility for and destroy all of its chemical weapons and production facilities, and June 2014, Syria was cleared of all chemical weapons.

- *November 2013*- Russia suggested talks in Moscow between the Syrian government and opposition
- *November 2015* - The twenty members of the International Syria Support Group meets and drafts a peace plan for Syria which would be discussed in December of that year. However, Russia and the US would remain in disagreements about the role of Bashar al-Assad after a political transition.
- *February 2016* - Was intended to be a meeting of negotiations between the government of the Syrian Arab Republic, and the Syrian Opposition, but was suspended to the end of February due to the UN not wanting to be associated with the government's advance towards the Opposition in Northern Aleppo. UNSC Resolution 2268 (2016) endorsed these efforts. They too failed due to violations of the ceasefire.
- *October 2016* - US and Russia (Turkey, Saudi Arabia) had a meeting in Switzerland, on peacemaking in Syria, and promised to have a ceasefire. However, these meetings also failed due to violations of the ceasefire.
- *December 2016* - Russia, Iran and Turkey had a meeting in Moscow and decided to have a ceasefire in Syria because the Syrian Arab Republic successfully took over Aleppo from the Opposition after around 4 years of the Battle of Aleppo and these talks are still ongoing.

Possible Solutions

Below are different solutions, or parts of solutions, that the Security Council should consider when debating the issue:

- **Ceasefire:** A ceasefire will be the most essential aspect of starting peace talks to end the conflict, and solve this ongoing humanitarian crisis. Moreover a ceasefire will make it easy to work together and build a collective offensive against ISIS. Since there is currently a ceasefire in Syria, adopted in December 2016, recalling security council resolution 2336(2016), the security council should consider supporting or expanding this ceasefire or consider a completely new one if possible to make it stronger.
- **Ending the humanitarian crisis:** An indefinite ceasefire with the immediate access of international aid to all areas and allowing people to return to their homes supporting previous UNSC Resolution 2332 (2016) and UNSC Resolution 2191 (2014) .

- **Peace talks:** A major alternative to this war will be to abandon the nihilistic destructive logic of winner and loser and strive for a political compromise instead. It is to seek reasonable deals to distribute power fairly and embark on a serious reform process, on the basis of future peace in Syria supporting UNSC Resolution 2254 (2015).
- **Federal Solution:** A federal Syria could be an option of ending the conflict. The country could be divided by ethnicity, current military boundaries, and etc. This option could potentially satisfy all the different forces and include either a new national government with representation from each region or the continuation of the Assad regime with newly formed autonomous regions. (eg. Areas currently held by Syrian Opposition, Kurdish territories, etc.) Whether or not a federal solution is chosen, decentralisation, by allowing regions to strengthen their independence from the central government, even though they might not be granted autonomy, could appease parts of the population currently opposed to the Assad regime.

Seeking a serious political solution may seem impossible. But the human cost is too high to consider other options. A political solution requires a great deal of patience, wisdom and courage from all sides. The Security Council should be supportive and productive in seeking for peace and stopping the devastating war.

Reliable Useful Links

- *Detailed Chronology of the War and UN Actions:*
<http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/chronology/syria.php>
- *A List of All UN Documents (Security Council Resolutions, Secretary General Reports, ect.) relating to the Syrian Civil War:*
<http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/syria/>
- *General timeline:*
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syrian-civil-war-timeline-tracking-five-years-of-conflict-a6929411.html>