**Forum: SC**
**Issue: The Syrian Conflict**

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## Introduction:

The Syrian Civil War is a complex, multi-faceted, ongoing conflict that began in 2011 as a popular uprising against the authoritarian government of President Bashar al-Assad. What began as a peaceful protest quickly escalated into a full-blown civil war involving multiple factions and international actors – such as rebel groups, ISIS, Russia, Iran, the US, and Turkey – which has resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people, and significant destruction of infrastructure and cities. The Syrian Civil War has also led to a massive humanitarian crisis, with millions of people forced to flee their homes and seek refuge in neighbouring countries and beyond. According to the United Nations, over 13 million Syrians require humanitarian assistance, and over 6 million are internally displaced. Despite numerous attempts to resolve the situation through diplomatic means and the adoption of several Security Council resolutions and treaties, the conflict persists, with no clear end in sight.

## Definition of Key terms:

**Civil war:** A violent conflict that occurs within a country between different groups that are part of the same nation. It is characterized by the use of force and violence, often resulting in significant destruction of property, displacement of people, and loss of life. Civil wars are typically driven by ethnic, religious, or political divisions and often involve government forces fighting against rebel groups or other factions seeking control of the state.

**The Arab Spring:** A series of pro-democracy uprisings and political protests that took place across several Arab countries, starting in late 2010 and early 2011. The protests were largely peaceful and were sparked by the dissatisfaction of citizens with their governments and ruling regimes, which were often characterized by corruption, authoritarianism, and lack of political freedoms. The Arab Spring led to significant political changes in several countries, including the overthrow of long-standing leaders, but also resulted in ongoing conflict and instability in some places.

**Terrorist organization:** A group that uses violence and terror tactics to achieve political or ideological goals. Such organizations often target civilians and non-combatants, and their actions are often viewed as illegal, immoral, and unjustifiable. The goals of terrorist organizations may vary widely, from seeking political change to advancing a particular religious or ideological agenda.

**Humanitarian crisis:** A situation with widespread suffering and distress among a population – often involving large-scale displacement of people, food and water shortages, inadequate healthcare and medical services – typically caused by factors such as war, natural disasters, or political instability.

**Militia:** A non-professional military organization, composed of citizens who are trained and equipped to perform military duties in times of emergency.

**Authoritarian:** A form of government characterized by strong centralized power, limited political freedoms, and the suppression of opposition through the use of force, censorship, and propaganda.

## Background:

The Syrian civil war began in 2011 as a result of the Arab Spring protests that swept through the Middle East and North Africa. In March of that year, protests erupted in the southern Syrian city of Daraa after the arrest and torture of teenagers who had painted anti-government slogans on a school wall. The protests quickly spread throughout the country, with demands for democratic reforms and the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad. The Assad regime responded to the protests with a brutal crackdown, killing hundreds of demonstrators and imprisoning many more. This, however, only strengthened the resolve of the protestors.

In July 2011, defectors from the military formed the Free Syrian Army, a rebel group aiming to overthrow the government, turning. Following this, several other rebel groups emerged across the country and by mid-2012, the conflict had escalated into a full-scale civil war, with the opposition groups controlling large parts of the country.

In 2013, a chemical weapons attack occurred in a Damascus suburb, killing hundreds of civilians. The international community accused the Syrian government of being

responsible, leading to the dismantling of Syria's chemical weapons program under the supervision of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).

The emergence of ISIS as a major player in the conflict brought a new level of brutality to the war. The group rose to prominence in Syria's power vacuum after 2012 as civil unrest grew. By 2014, ISIS had forcibly seized large swaths of territory in Syria and Iraq and declared the creation of a "caliphate". Furthermore, the group carried out mass executions and imposed its strict interpretation of Islamic law.

The involvement of foreign powers has only served to prolong the conflict and exacerbate the humanitarian crisis in Syria. Russia and Iran have both been a major supporter of the Syrian government and have provided military support, including troops on the ground and financial aid. Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shiite militant group, has also played a role in supporting the Syrian government, sending fighters to aid in battles. The United States and its allies have provided support to opposition groups, including the arming and training of rebel forces. In addition, the U.S. has conducted airstrikes against ISIS targets in Syria. Turkey has also played a significant role in the conflict, both in supporting opposition groups and in fighting against Kurdish forces.

By 2021, the Syrian government, with the help of its allies, had retaken control of much of the country, including major cities like Aleppo and Damascus. The same year, President Bashar al-Assad also secured a fourth term as president for seven more years in a controversial election which the Human Rights Watch said, "failed to adhere to standards for free and fair elections".

The conflict has also created a severe humanitarian crisis due to its devastating impact on the Syrian people. Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, there have been over 500,000 deaths and over 5.5 million people, mostly women and children, who have fled the country seeking refugee primarily in neighbouring Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. The scale of the refugee crisis has put a significant strain on the resources of these countries, making it difficult to provide adequate assistance to all those in need.

Additionally, an estimated 6.8 million Syrians remain internally displaced within the country, struggling to survive amidst the ongoing conflict. The dire humanitarian situation has left 70 percent of the population in need of assistance, with 90 percent of the population living below the poverty line. The ongoing conflict has also resulted in widespread destruction of infrastructure, including hospitals, schools, and homes, leaving many Syrians without access to basic necessities such as healthcare and education.

## Current situation:

The situation in Syria remains complex and dire despite recent developments. While the Assad regime has regained control over much of the country and active fighting between the government and rebel groups has mostly subsided, there are still occasional flareups, especially in North-western Syria. Turkey also continues its attacks on various militias within Syria, concentrating mostly on the YPG and the Syrian

government declared that it would not seek any reconciliation with Turkey, unless Turkey withdrew all of its proxy forces from Syria.

The country's ruined infrastructure and millions of displaced people struggling to access necessities such as food, water, and medical care means that though Assad has regained control over a significant part of Syria, he now faces the challenge of rebuilding the country, for which he lacks the necessary funds. The United States and other western countries that do possess the financial resources to assist with the rebuilding process have made it clear that funding will not be provided unless there is a change in regime. Moreover, Assad has expressed no intention of introducing institutional reforms that might satisfy his critics. This results in a recurring cycle of domestic crises, putting the well-being of Syria and its people at risk. The Mw 7.8 earthquake, which struck southern and central Turkey and northern and western Syria on February 6th, 2023, only further exacerbating the humanitarian issues plaguing the country.

Finally, while forces of ISIS in Syria have mostly been defeated, there are ongoing concerns about the potential for renewed violence from them and other extremist groups. The situation in Syria remains highly volatile, and the path to lasting peace and stability remains uncertain.

## Timeline of Events:

**March 2011:** Protests against the government of President Bashar al-Assad begin in the southern city of Daraa.

**July 2011:** The Free Syrian Army (FSA) is formed by military defectors.

**February 2012:** The FSA gains control of parts of the city of Homs.

**May 2012:** The UN-backed peace plan brokered by Kofi Annan is agreed upon but ultimately fails.

**November 2012:** The Syrian National Coalition is formed as a political opposition group.

**March 2013:** Rebels seize control of the city of Raqqa, declaring it the capital of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

**August 2013:** A chemical weapons attack on civilians in the suburbs of Damascus leads to international pressure on Syria to turn over its chemical weapons.

**June 2014:** ISIS captures Mosul in Iraq, establishing a caliphate in the region.

**September 2014:** The US-led coalition begins airstrikes against ISIS in Syria.

**March 2015:** Rebel groups launch a major offensive against government forces in the northern province of Idlib.

**September 2015:** Russia begins a military intervention in support of the Syrian government.

**February 2016:** A ceasefire agreement brokered by the US and Russia goes into effect.

**July 2016:** The Syrian army, with support from Russian air power, recaptures the city of Aleppo from rebels.

**February 2018:** Pro-government forces launch an assault on rebel held Eastern Ghouta.

**July 2018:** The Syrian army recaptures Daraa, the city where the protests that sparked the civil war began.

**March 2019:** The last ISIS stronghold in Syria is recaptured by the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces.

**May 2019:** The Syrian government recaptures the last rebel-held areas in the province of Hama and northern parts of Homs province.

**October 2019:** The US announces the withdrawal of its troops from northern Syria, leaving the region open to a Turkish military offensive.

**March 2021:** President Bashar al-Assad is re-elected in a landslide victory in a controversial election.

**July 2022:** The SDF and Syrian military actively coordinate to create defence plans to guard against a potential Turkish invasion.

**August 2022:** Kurdish forces focus on fighting ISIS in the areas around Kurdish portions of Syria.

## Major parties involved:

**Syrian Government (the Assad regime):** The authoritarian government of President Bashar al-Assad that seeks to maintain its grip on power and crush the opposition by any means necessary including the use of chemical weapons and other atrocities.

**The Syrian National Coalition:** A loose coalition of groups including secularists, islamists and moderate rebels that seeks to overthrow the Assad regime and establish a democratic government.

**Free Syrian Army (FSA):** A coalition of decentralized rebel militias founded on 29 July 2011 by soldiers who defected from the Syrian Armed Forces.

**The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF):** A union of ethnic minority militias (Kurdish, Assyrian, Armenian, Turkmen and Chechen among others) located in North and East Syria. It is militarily led by the People's Protection Units (YPG), a Kurdish Militia which is primarily focused on securing autonomy for the Kurdish regions of Syria. They have also played a key role in fighting against ISIS and other jihadist groups.

**The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or ISIS (also known as The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant or ISIL):** A militant, Sunni-Salafi, jihadist terrorist organization that emerged from the chaos of the Syrian Civil War and seized the control of large parts of

Syria and Iraq. ISIS is responsible for numerous atrocities including mass executions enslavement and the destruction of cultural heritage sites.

**Russia:** The Russian government has been providing military support to the Syrian government led by President Bashar al-Assad since 2015. Russia has deployed troops, military advisors, and advanced weaponry to support the Syrian military. They have also carried out airstrikes against rebel groups and other anti-government forces. Russian involvement has been crucial in turning the tide of the war in favour of the government forces.

**Iran:** Iran has been another major supporter of the Syrian government throughout the civil war. Iranian military advisors and fighters from Iranian-backed militias have been active on the ground in Syria, providing crucial support to Syrian government forces. Iran has also provided significant material assistance to the Syrian government, including weapons, ammunition, and around nine billion dollars in financial support. In addition to supporting the Syrian government, Iran has also been involved in fighting against ISIS in Syria.

**Hezbollah:** A Shia Islamist political and militant group based in Lebanon, that has been involved in the Syrian conflict since 2012. They have supported the Syrian government, by sending fighters as well as providing military training, logistical support, and intelligence. The group has also fought alongside Syrian government forces in key battles, including in the recapture of the city of Aleppo.

**The United States:** The US became involved in the Syrian conflict in 2014 with the goal of defeating ISIS. In addition to fighting ISIS, the US has also been involved in arming and training rebel groups in Syria that are opposed to the Assad regime. The US-led coalition has conducted several airstrikes against ISIS targets as well as Syrian government facilities – specifically suspected chemical weapon facilities.

**Turkey:** Turkey, initially, supported rebel groups seeking to overthrow the Assad regime by providing them with military and logistical assistance. In recent years, Turkey has shifted its focus to fighting against Kurdish forces in northern Syria, particularly the People's Protection Units (YPG), which it considers a terrorist group. This has resulted in Turkey launching several military operations and establishing a "safe zone" in northern Syria. The country also hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees in the world, and which has put a strain on Turkey's resources and infrastructure.

## Previous attempts to solve the issue:

**UNSC Resolution 2118 (2013):** This resolution called for the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons stockpile and established the United Nations Joint Mission to oversee the process. However, the Syrian government has been accused of continuing to use chemical weapons, and the destruction of the stockpile remains incomplete.

**Geneva II peace talks (2014):** This was a series of negotiations held in Geneva between representatives of the Syrian government and opposition groups. The talks did not lead to a resolution of the conflict.

**UNSC Resolution 2254 (2015):** This resolution called for a ceasefire and a political transition in Syria, as well as the establishment of a transitional governing body. However, the resolution has not been fully implemented.

**Astana peace talks (2017):** These talks were held in Kazakhstan and included representatives from Russia, Turkey, and Iran, as well as the Syrian government and some opposition groups. The talks focused on establishing a ceasefire and creating de-escalation zones.

**Sochi Congress (2018):** This conference was held in Sochi, Russia and was attended by representatives from the Syrian government and various opposition groups. The conference focused on drafting a new constitution for Syria.

**UNSC Resolution 2401 (2018):** This resolution called for an immediate ceasefire throughout Syria, as well as the delivery of humanitarian aid. However, the resolution has not been fully implemented.

**Syrian Constitutional Committee (2019):** This committee was established by the UN to draft a new constitution for Syria. However, the committee has faced numerous obstacles, and progress has been slow.

**Ceasefire agreement in Idlib (2020):** A ceasefire agreement was brokered by Russia and Turkey to end the fighting in Idlib. While the ceasefire has been largely holding, there have been occasional flare-ups of violence.

Overall, the various resolutions, peace talks, and negotiations related to the Syrian conflict have had limited success in resolving the conflict. While some progress has been made in certain areas, such as the destruction of chemical weapons and the establishment of de-escalation zones, the conflict has not been completely resolved.

## Possible Solutions:

**Negotiations:** Negotiated settlements between the Syrian government and opposition groups as well as the Syrian government and Turkey is one way of deescalating the situation. This could involve the release of political prisoners and a political transition process that includes free and fair elections and the withdrawal of Turkish troops from Syria.

**Humanitarian Aid:** Providing humanitarian aid to those affected by the conflict is essential, including food, water, medicine, and shelter. This could involve the international community providing support to Syrian organizations (such as Syria Relief and Development or The Syrian Archive) that are working to address the humanitarian crisis.

**Reconciliation and Reintegration:** There needs to be a process of reconciliation and reintegration for all those who have been affected by the conflict, including those who have been displaced or have lost loved ones. This could involve providing support for trauma counselling and other forms of mental health support.

**Addressing Root Causes:** Addressing the root causes of the conflict, such as poverty, inequality, and political repression, is crucial for long-term stability in Syria. This would involve supporting economic development and job creation initiatives, as well as promoting political reforms that respect the rights and freedoms of all Syrians.

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