

Policy Brief 2:

# Pathways to Peace in Syria

December 2020



## Executive Summary:

Since its eruption, the Syrian civil war has had a ripple effect across the Middle East, pulling in regional powers and foreign fighters even as the Syrian population has been disrupted and displaced. Bashar al-Assad unleashed his armed forces against popular protests in early 2011 adopting a military approach to a political problem and igniting a confrontation that rapidly descended into a bloody nightmare and humanitarian catastrophe.

The conflict in Syria quickly escalated as foreign powers intervened to push their own agendas. The United States, Turkey and several states in the Persian Gulf called for Assad to step down and lent support to anti-Assad forces, while Iran and subsequently Russia committed to keeping Assad in office. The convergence of competing foreign interests on Syria has entrenched hostilities.

Almost a decade of combat has since had a devastating impact, forcing more than half the population to leave their homes, while the country has been divided into a patchwork of territorial control apportioned between Syrian actors and their international backers. The Assad regime, propped up by the military weight of Iran, Russia and Hezbollah, holds the core of country. Rebel factions, with different degrees of Turkish backing, control Idlib province and portions of the Syria-Turkey border, and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Council administers the north-east with US support. Meanwhile, the remnants of the so-called Islamic State (IS) linger in the southern Euphrates valley.

While a tenuous balance holds, a peace that is acceptable to all players has not been reached. Repeated attempts at peace-making have failed to find common ground and have been stymied by the conflicting demands of diverse Syrian political groups and the divergent geopolitical goals of international players.

All parties must recognise that an unstable Syria has repercussions across the region – it is imperative for development and security in the Middle East that conflict in Syria be resolved. Myriad issues remain in the Syrian conflict today, many of which are intrinsically related to – or have been complicated by – the entry of foreign countries and non-state actors into the conflict. While recognising these largely detrimental impacts in Syria, this policy brief focusses on four key issues through which foreign states have an opportunity to use their hard-won leverage to influence peace in the medium term, and to take meaningful steps towards achieving the justice and stability that Syrians so deserve.

## Key Recommendations

As steps towards establishing an enduring peace, one that is acceptable to all actors, we recommend that the following measures be taken:

- The international community must redouble its commitment to protecting cross-border aid delivery channels (and reopening those recently closed) to ensure that future peace talks are not influenced by siege tactics.
- The international community must show leadership by supporting transitional justice, particularly via the trying of perpetrators of war crimes from all sides of the conflict, either through national courts with universal jurisdiction or via the international courts system.
- Russia, as the key backer of the regime, must push Bashar al-Assad to negotiate in good faith.
- Negotiations must include all local actors from across ethnic and political spectrums through mechanisms such as the Syrian Constitutional Committee, as well as other alternatives for conflict resolution.
- The Biden White House must re-engage in Syria, pursuing multi-lateral dialogue with all key players in Syria, including Iran.
- Turkey must respond accordingly to any conciliatory overtures from the Syrian Kurds.
- The international community must ensure that the Islamic State group is unable to return by both supporting local armed actors, as well as providing resources to address the drivers of IS's previous rise.



## Background

Syria is a country of considerable religious and ethnic diversity, to say nothing of the diverse political allegiances and aspirations of its peoples. The Assad family has dominated Syrian politics since 1971, first Hafez al-Assad and then his son, Bashar, who succeeded him on his death in 2000. Opposition to the Assad regime long predates the outbreak of the conflict in 2011. Civil society has been demanding political change for decades even in the face of the oppressiveness of the regime, leading to significant periods of unrest in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and also in the early 2000s.<sup>1</sup>

Since its establishment in 1946, the Syrian Republic has been beset by political turmoil and subject to foreign interference.<sup>2</sup> From ongoing French machinations and CIA influence through the 1940s and '50s, to Nasser's short-lived United Arab Republic experiment and Turkish encroachment on Iskenderun, Syria was never entirely free of external influence and intrusion. Due to its alignment with the Soviet Union, Syria became a frontline in the Cold War facing the Baghdad Pact states of Iraq, Turkey and Iran. Shared enmity with Israel and opposition to perceived US hegemony in the Middle East later brought Syria together with Iran and Hezbollah as part of an "Axis of Resistance".<sup>3</sup>

These dynamics of internal opposition and external meddling proved catastrophic upon the outbreak of protests in Syria in March 2011. The protests began to militarise that summer following a harsh regime crackdown, with a power vacuum rapidly emerging as opposition forces made military and territorial gains. Turkey and several Gulf states, seeking to benefit through the ouster of Assad, entered the fray by sponsoring fledgling opposition militia. European states and the US, watching from the sidelines, decried Assad's ruthless tactics against his own citizens and lent support to various opposition entities including the Free Syrian Army and, eventually, a profusion of proxy forces. Meanwhile, Iran and Russia rallied to sustain the Syrian government. As conflict intensified, foreign non-state actors such as the Islamic State of Iraq also sought to capitalise, sending emissaries into Syria to establish groups that later became Jabhat al-Nusra and the so-called Islamic State (IS). IS in particular rapidly presented a global threat, compelling the US and other Western states to join the campaign against it.

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The Syrian geopolitical landscape has come to reflect the broader dynamics of the Middle East, dominated by three loosely aligned blocs. On one side stand Russia and Iran, who, as described by Syrian activist Malek al-Abdeh at a Deakin University policy discussion that took place as part of this project, are "frenemies",<sup>4</sup> ostensibly allied in opposing Western interests, yet competitors for influence in the Middle East. Against them stands the US, as a dominant player and sole super power, alongside Israel and, in the wake of recent developments, several GCC members. On a third side, is Turkey, newly re-asserting its authority beyond its borders and seeking to create a role for itself as leader of the Islamic world.

These three blocs each clearly support specific Syrian actors. Iran and Russia continue to back the Assad regime. The US is the main patron of the Syrian Democratic Council administration in the north-east and Turkey supports several Sunni Arab militias and, to some extent, Syria's Turkmen minority. Indeed, as Reader in International Relations at Queen Mary, University of London, Christopher Phillips argues, external logistical and military support has been essential to the fortunes of both the regime and to the forces opposing it and has significantly determined the intensity and course of the war.<sup>5</sup>

The respective interests of – and rivalries between – these blocs are similarly apparent. Both Iran's and Russia's interests are served by preserving Assad's rule, or at least someone who will not turn towards the West. The US favours democratisation and disapproves of the Assad regime but Washington's tentative support of the north-eastern administration reflects its reluctance to become entangled in a complex Middle Eastern conflict. Turkey is similarly disapproving of Assad but, while wary of Iran's and Russia's reach, it has been most alarmed at the prospect of political advances for the Syrian Kurds.

These factors have played a role in the intensification and prolonging of the Syrian civil war, an insight that dawned on one key opposition activist at the 2012 Friends of Syria conference. Interviewed in 2020, he stated, "I realised that this was going to be for the long haul, a long-term conflict, and that the involvement of so many countries made us less relevant."<sup>6</sup> Regional rivalries and foreign interests have become as potent in determining the course of the war as have the grievances and goals of diverse Syrian players.

Within the complex calculus of these sometimes-clashing human concerns and geopolitical interests, several key issues stand out as items that could be influenced by foreign actors should the political will be found. It is these that, we argue, need to be addressed as first steps towards establishing a lasting peace.

## Indifference to the plight of Syrian citizens

Throughout the conflict, the Assad regime has demonstrated a callous indifference to the suffering of its own citizens. The UN has described the actions of multiple parties to the conflict as "characterized by a complete lack of adherence to the norms of international law."<sup>7</sup> It might be argued that Bashar al-Assad's violent response to peaceful protests in 2011 set the tone for what was to become a lawless, spiteful and bloody battlefield.

The brutal conduct of pro-regime forces is well documented and has resulted in multiple accusations of war crimes.<sup>8</sup> This extends to Russian forces, which, since entering the battlefield in September 2015, have been a key factor in the Assad regime being able to reclaim territory. A 2020 UN report accused Russia of launching indiscriminate attacks in civilian areas in Idlib among other locations, while other reports have documented the extensive and intentional targeting of civilian and humanitarian infrastructure such as hospitals, in

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violation of international law.<sup>9</sup> Although the Assad regime and its allies appear to have disproportionately engaged in this conduct, it is worth noting that many conflict actors stand accused of behaviour that may amount to war crimes.<sup>10</sup> Courts in the Netherlands and Germany are currently pursuing cases in relation to such behaviour.

Throughout the conflict, the Assad regime has weaponized food and aid supplies, including essential childhood vaccinations. In a tactic described as “starve or kneel”, the regime deliberately blockaded towns such as Madaya, Darayya and Zabadani held by opposition groups, preventing the entry of food, medicine and other supplies in order to force the inhabitants into submission.<sup>11</sup> This was a blunt tool that had devastating impacts on civilians who were forced to go without food and medicine but were also subject to arrest or targeted by regime forces if they tried to escape besieged towns. It directly contributed to local ceasefire agreements and population transfers that allowed the Assad regime to wrest back control of these towns.

Although this tactic is less pronounced today as the conflict winds down, the regime continues to weaponize aid deliveries by refusing to approve cross-line aid deliveries to hostile areas. The most egregious examples of this policy are Idlib, one of the last strongholds of opposition forces, and the Rukban camp near Tanf, home to around 10,000 refugees near the Jordanian border and which, as of September 2020, had not received an aid delivery in more than a year.<sup>12</sup> North-east Syria has also been routinely denied essential aid, including medical supplies. The potential impacts of this policy was underlined in April this year when it emerged that authorities in Damascus (where COVID-19 tests then had to be processed due to lack of capacity in the north-east) had taken 11 days to notify medical authorities in north-east Syria that a (by-then sadly deceased) patient had tested positive for COVID-19, risking significant disease spread among already vulnerable communities.

Nonetheless, while the regime’s obstructiveness in the face of its own citizens’ suffering is not new and is unlikely to change, it has lately been the international community’s (including the UN and other major multilateral organisations) failure to hold Syria to account for its behaviour or support stable alternatives that has been a standout feature of the Syrian conflict. Indeed, UN Security Council Resolution 2165 was designed to combat this very issue by ensuring the timely delivery of international aid across Syria’s borders directly to those in need. But recent renewals of the resolution have faced staunch opposition from China and Russia on the Security Council, leading to the closure of key border crossings. This means that the three million citizens languishing in Idlib rely almost completely on the Bab al-Hawa border crossing, which has limited capacity and infrastructure on the Syrian side of the border, while north-east Syria is now almost totally reliant on aid delivered through Damascus. This leaves millions of displaced Syrians at the mercy of Assad regime, which has previously demonstrated a willingness to “withhold or redirect humanitarian aid in contravention of its international obligations.”<sup>13</sup>

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Meanwhile, the destruction wrought by years of war has had dire impacts on the economy, which has been further undermined by corruption, sanctions and COVID-19. The devaluation of the Syrian currency has meant that by mid-2020 an average government wage was just \$16 per month, while rampant inflation saw the price of sugar cost almost two days' wages.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, the pandemic rages unchecked in Syria amid heavy censorship, government mismanagement and corruption. One study in August 2020 suggested that 89,000 people in Damascus province alone were infected by COVID-19, a number that is certain to rise and cause further devastation due to lack of infection controls and little political will or concern for the wellbeing of ordinary citizens. The state's rapidly shrinking capacity and economic position is evident even in the most loyal of areas, exemplified by the enormous queues for subsidised bread and fuel in Damascus, and wildfires in the country's coastal mountains in October 2020 that were left to burn largely out of control through 160,000 acres of forest and agricultural land in the face of regime indifference and incapacity. In short, large numbers of Syrians today face hunger or are reliant on international aid to meet their daily needs.<sup>15</sup>

Damascus also imposes conditions on Syrians seeking to return home from abroad. Those entering Syria must convert US\$100 to Syrian pounds at exchange rates set by the Treasury, a measure intended to bolster government stocks of hard currency but which has been interpreted by many Syrians as an entry visa to their own country and an effort to prevent unwanted citizens from coming home.<sup>16</sup> The fee is prohibitive for many Syrian refugees languishing outside the country. Meanwhile, worse fates await some Syrians who fled during years of conflict and responded to government appeals to return. The safety of returnees is theoretically guaranteed, but it is clearly a hollow guarantee. Reports abound of Syrians, whether returning home from rebel-held territory or overseas, or living in "reconciled" areas, being forced to inform on opposition figures, disappeared, harassed or detained by officials.<sup>17</sup> It is worth noting that those in opposition-held Idlib also face repressive conditions, including regular targeted assassinations of local journalists and critics by armed factions.

It is in this context that foreign states and institutions must act. With the regime unwilling to tolerate or accommodate any opposition or engage in meaningful negotiations, an international community which has consistently failed to uphold international humanitarian principles and law, and a rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation, any peace process forged today would be created on a bedrock of cynicism, human suffering and desperation. It is hardly a recipe for a sustainable peace. All foreign parties, including multilateral organisations, must act now to protect the dignity and livelihoods of all those inside the country, to hold to account all those who stand in the way of basic humanitarian aid delivery, and to try and punish the perpetrators of war crimes to ensure that a transitional justice process begins. Only once the needs of the Syrian people are adequately met, and when aid delivery is regular and consistent, can local parties sit at the negotiating table as equal partners in peace.

## Lack of broad engagement in peace negotiations

There has been no shortage of attempts to negotiate peace in Syria. A non-exhaustive list of negotiations would include rounds of talks in Geneva (2012-17) and Astana (2015-16), the formation of the International Syria Support Group in Vienna (2015), conferrings of opposition groups in Riyadh (2015, 2017) and Russia-sponsored talks in Sochi (2018). All such attempts have failed to bring the conflict to an end, and in many cases have led to the entrenchment of divisions or have created conditions that favour particular warring parties.

Key reasons for such failures have been the exclusion of important stakeholders from discussions and the undue influence of external parties who have consistently failed to take account of local concerns or realities on the ground. One activist at the Riyadh conference in 2015, in which the High Negotiations Committee was elected to represent the opposition at the 2016 Geneva talks, noted that while Syrian opposition representatives were invited to participate, it soon became clear that Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, among others, pushed their own representatives on the meeting with a view to establishing a negotiating body in their own vision that would secure their interests in Syria.<sup>18</sup> Another opposition figure, who was involved in preparations for the first round of Astana talks, argued that the forum was dominated by Russia and the Assad regime, and that the intention was to “manage... the struggle inside Syria, not to lessen it.”<sup>19</sup> As a result, agreements reached have proven extremely limited, insufficiently flexible and have rarely encapsulated the diverse goals and grievances of all interested parties involved in the conflict. Failing to engage parties across the board makes finding a solution to a problem that is at heart a political problem all the more difficult.

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A particular sticking point has been the Assad regime's unwillingness to enter into substantive negotiations with opposition groups, which it routinely maligns as “terrorists” or tools of foreign powers.<sup>20</sup> Assad continually re-asserts his intention to “liberate every inch of Syria”, a goal endorsed by many of his backers within Syria whose attitude to peace is exemplified in the popular catch-cry “Assad or we burn the country.”<sup>21</sup> Vladimir Putin, a key ally of the Assad regime, has argued that “Syrians and only Syrians” should determine the fate of their country,<sup>22</sup> but this appears to have been aimed at deterring Western intervention in Syria rather than indicating a broad approach to solving Syria's political problems. By the same token, at times Assad's backers Russia and Iran negotiated directly with opposition actors to the exclusion of the Syrian regime. One opposition figure involved in the ceasefire in Aleppo was engaged in direct discussions with the Russians while no Syrian regime figure was present. He commented, “From 2017 onwards, Russia [had] total leverage over the regime... the regime without Russia is worthless,” adding that Iran and Russia sought advantage through such negotiations without ever considering the interests of Syrians.<sup>23</sup> Another interviewee close to the regime disputed this assessment, arguing that Russia has been frequently “frustrated by the recalcitrance of the regime.”



Turkey has also placed restrictions on broader participation in multi-party talks on Syria. Ankara has repeatedly refused to approve Kurdish involvement in negotiations,<sup>24</sup> whether through the medium of the Democratic Unity Party (PYD) or Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), accusing both groups of being extensions of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), with which Turkey has been at war for over 35 years. Ankara maintains this position due to what it calls legitimate security concerns, but in so doing it denies a voice to key political actors that represents a significant, ethnically diverse population in north-eastern Syria.

Meanwhile, the US has been noticeably reluctant to bring its diplomatic or military weight to bear in Syria, fearing becoming embroiled in another Middle Eastern war. US policy makers now recognise their approach was a failure. One White House official noted that then-president Obama's tepid backing for the opposition in Syria had catastrophic consequences, US support being insufficient to overturn the regime or end the war but sufficient to inflame the conflict.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, one senior Syrian activist argued that the US's indecisiveness had sent a message to Iran and Russia that they could act as they saw fit.<sup>26</sup> The presidency of Donald Trump did little to bring clarity or resolution. Trump's priority was to extract the US from "endless wars",<sup>27</sup> a goal that he never achieved. In the process, Trump pursued an incongruous diplomatic course in Syria. Foreign actors have revelled in this inconsistency. Trump's sudden withdrawal from north-eastern Syria in October 2019 prompted a fully fledged Turkish invasion of the area in a campaign euphemistically named "Operation Peace Spring" that at its core aimed at displacing Kurdish forces and creating demographic change in areas along the Turkish border. The campaign ultimately benefited Turkey's opponents in the Assad regime, who were able to take over Kurdish-held military positions in the uncertainty that followed, creating steps towards Kurdish-regime détente (that to date has not been realised).

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Within these complex geopolitical circumstances, international players have undoubtedly complicated – and often undermined – Syria's prospects for peace. Nonetheless, conflict fatigue is palpable among players on all sides. Russia and Iran face their own internal economic problems and cannot prop up the Syrian regime in perpetuity, particularly as the regime's fiscal position (discussed above) becomes increasingly tenuous. At the same time, some of the opposition's supporters have taken steps towards the normalization of relations with the Assad regime, with the UAE re-opening its embassy in Damascus amid reports that Saudi Arabia was considering doing the same.

In this context, war-weary foreign states may be more amenable to using their influence to forge a lasting peace in the Syrian conflict. Although such peace cannot be forged without the central involvement and approval of local players (unlike the Astana agreement), foreign states must now use their leverage to encourage local parties to the negotiating table for substantive discussions.

With Joe Biden entering the White House, the opportunity arises for a US reset in Syria. Biden will need to make good on some of the mistakes that earlier administrations have made. Key here will be ensuring all voices are represented, as well as striking the right tone in discussions with Russia, Iran and Turkey to re-establish working relationships that can translate into real change on the ground for the Syrian population.

## The Kurdish factor

Prior to the outbreak of conflict, the Syrian Kurds were a disempowered constituency within the country's political make up and little-known to the international community. The landscape has shifted enormously over the course of the war, with Kurdish political entities winning enhanced diplomatic and territorial status. This has added another layer of complexity to the resolution of the conflict and the political challenges that Syria faces.

The Kurds' stocks initially rose when the Assad regime abandoned the north-east of the country in July 2012 in order to concentrate its military efforts on combatting rebel forces closer to Damascus. Thereafter the Democratic Unity Party (PYD), having won a form of de-facto autonomy, established a civilian administration across Afrin, Kobanî and Hasakah. Although celebrated by Kurds across the Middle East, this arrangement immediately alarmed Ankara, which was extremely wary of the PYD's links to the PKK and anxious at the prospect of an autonomous Kurdish zone that extended to Turkey's southern border and was contiguous with the Kurdish Region of Iraq.<sup>28</sup>

Circumstances changed again in late 2014 when the Islamic State (IS) began extending its reach across northern Syria. IS' blood-thirsty tactics, aspirations to establish a "caliphate" and its apparently global reach aroused equal measures of criticism and fear from the international community. At this point, the Peoples' Protection Units (YPG) militia of the PYD presented as the most effective force countering IS. The Kurdish-led YPG, which later evolved to incorporate other guerrilla forces and become the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), won international backing and saved the US and others from having to commit boots on the ground. Through Operation Inherent Resolve, established in October 2014 with the express purpose of rolling back IS, relations between the US and Syrian Kurdish groups grew closer. With the support of US air power, the SDF eventually defeated IS in March 2019, in the process establishing the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, home to over 3 million people of various ethnicities.

While the territorial defeat in Syria of IS was welcome, Turkey's concerns only grew and Ankara's goals in Syria shifted accordingly. Turkey was once a strident critic of Assad and intent on his removal but it is now more concerned with curbing Kurdish influence in Syria, accusing the Kurds of seeking their own state and alleging that the north-east region will become a springboard for the PKK.<sup>29</sup> The Turkish military has made several forays to strike the SDF since 2016,

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the most recent in October 2019 when Trump pulled US troops back from the Syrian border at the behest of Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, mentioned above. In service of this goal, Turkey has leveraged many of its Syrian partners to turn its weapons inwards in order to fight against Kurdish forces rather than the Assad regime, highlighting another way in which foreign state interests have undermined the integrity and focus of warring parties in Syria.

Landlocked and outgunned by powerful neighbours, Syrian Kurds realise that their fortunes depend on external support, or at least tolerance. The SDF has occasionally attempted to negotiate its political status with Damascus, particularly since the 2019 Turkish incursion, but these talks made little progress in the face of a regime that is willing to concede very little. Perhaps most interestingly, SDF leader Mazloum Kobani has recently indicated a willingness to negotiate with Ankara, stating, "we are open to any understanding with Turkey on security and beyond",<sup>30</sup> provided the US plays a mediating role. This represents a significant potential opening in the relationship between Syria's Kurds and Turkey, although it would require the SDF to significantly distance itself from PKK factions in Syria, the challenges of which should not be understated. Nonetheless, it is imperative that Turkey recognises the significance of Kobani's outreach, which was made via a highly publicised interview with the International Crisis Group, and therefore clearly targeted at an international audience. An opportunity now exists to open discussions for a solution that allows Syria's Kurds and other groups in the northeast some degree of political autonomy while also assuaging Turkey's security concerns. This should not be overlooked by Turkey, which until now has let its domestic fears over its own Kurdish population blind it to opportunities for peace and stability in Syria.


## The Islamic State: the lingering threat

While foreign states have undoubtedly played a central role in the Syrian conflict, foreign non-state actors too have had a critical impact. They have been a central conduit of external interference, and, by sheer weight of numbers and their divergent strategic and political goals, they have made the theatre of war all the more complicated and more vicious.

The Islamic State (IS) is most notorious foreign non-state actor in Syria. After taking Mosul, Iraq's second city, in mid-2014, IS proposed Raqqa in Syria's Euphrates valley, which it had captured the previous year, as the capital of its "caliphate". The group's bloody advance won it international attention and opprobrium yet at the same time attracted a steady stream of international recruits who entered its territory across the Turkish border.

The rise of IS changed the complexion of the Syrian war, signalling a significant shift in conflict dynamics by opening up an additional front in the war for the Syrian opposition, which was now fending off advances from both Assad and IS. Its rise also meant a change of tactics for the US. Previously focused on supporting forces attempting to remove Assad, Washington shifted its attention to countering IS in the view that if IS ruled Syria it would be a greater threat to

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the population and broader region than Assad is or would ever be. This too complicated the Syrian opposition's fortunes, with groups that received US support under the ill-fated "train and equip" program directed to only fight IS. The advent of IS was also transformative for Syria's Kurds, who, as noted above, made considerable territorial and political gains as they steadily pushed back IS with international support. This, in turn, changed Turkey's priorities in Syria's and its commitments within the theatre of conflict.

The SDF, backed by an international coalition, retook Raqqa, later claiming victory over IS in Syria in March 2019.<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, even if it has been defeated as a territorial entity and military force, IS has not been entirely eradicated.<sup>32</sup> Cells of IS fighters continue to harass both regime and SDF military targets across an arc of territory from the central desert region to Deir Ezzor, and the southern Euphrates valley, while an estimated 10,000 IS men and boys languish in makeshift prisons in Syria's north-east. Although IS today is not the active military threat it once was, it remains a substantial vulnerability for Syria, and one that could easily resurge in the right conditions. The makeshift prisons represent a particular vulnerability given that the group had previously regenerated from near-eradication on the back of several similar prison breaks in 2012 and 2013. In fact, the complex relations between and divergent strategic goals of the various actors involved in the Syrian theatre have exacerbated this risk. In particular, tensions between Turkey and the SDF, and the associated diplomatic dance that the US has had to pursue in mediating between the two, have meant that due effort has not been applied to finishing IS once and for all. During the Turkish incursion in northern Syria in 2019, some IS prisoners under poorly resourced SDF guard were reportedly able to escape, highlighting the precariousness of the current situation.

Yet the issue of a resurgent IS can be managed if all those pitted against it acted cohesively to not only secure existing prison facilities and stamp out the low-level insurgency, but also to work towards improving conditions for those living inside Syria that provided fertile ground for the group's previous rise.<sup>33</sup> The international community must also continue to support capable local actors such as the SDF, who can contain IS. For this to be possible, mediation between Turkey and the SDF is imperative.

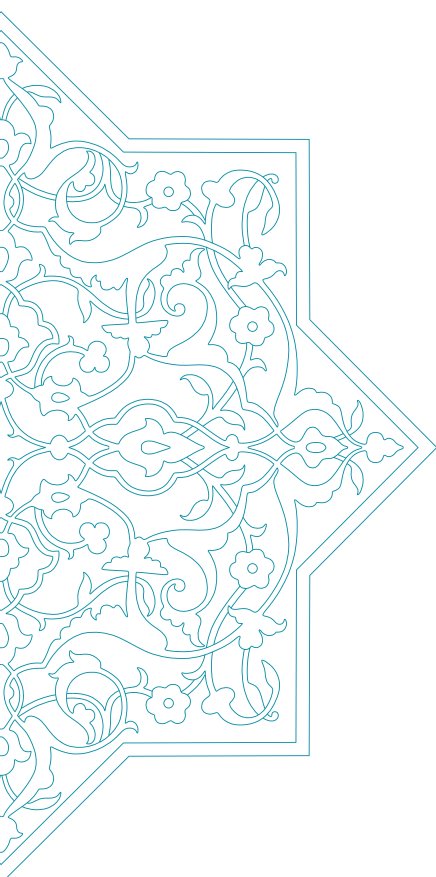


## Conclusion:

The active military phase of the Syrian conflict may be winding down, but the conflict is further from resolution now than it was when the events began in the fateful spring of 2011. Today, foreign states continue to exercise undue influence over warring parties in Syria, having compromised their integrity and goals over the course of many years and often diverging from their original pursuits. Although there is no denying that a genuine and vibrant Syrian constituency and civil society continues to exist, particularly outside regime-held areas, such actors have often been overlooked in favour of warring parties with a questionable commitment to the Syrian people.

It may be tempting to view the resolution of the Syrian conflict as an impossibility, but the time is right to harness the war weariness of the foreign states that have contributed so significantly to its intractability. None of the states currently involved in the conflict has an appetite for open-ended involvement, even those such as Russia and Iran who have secured substantial economic and military spoils for their efforts. States such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar have gradually disengaged from the opposition, and while the incoming Biden administration may be more consistent and engaged than its predecessors, it too faces substantial challenges at home and is likely to favour steps towards resolving rather than complicating the conflict.

It is in this context that this policy brief has highlighted four key areas in which the international community, including foreign states and multi-lateral organisations, can engage in order to bring Syria closer to peace. Although none of the recommendations alone will bring a holistic, lasting peace to Syria, if even one was achieved it would lead to a significant improvement in the wellbeing of the millions of Syrians who continue to suffer from a war being fought in their name. Yet there is also little doubt that the complete resolution of the Syrian conflict is in the best interests of all involved, including the foreign states. In this regard, the time is right to act.



## Endnotes

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## About the Project:

From January 2018 until December 2020, the research team of Professor Shahram Akbarzadeh, Dr Dara Conduit and Dr Zahid Shahab Ahmed conducted the project, "Assessing the impact of external actors in the Syrian and Afghan proxy wars", facilitated by Carnegie Corporation of New York. The project undertook a comparative analysis of the proxy wars in Syria and Afghanistan in order to examine the impact that external players have had on the conflicts, and to advance new understandings on the evolving role of state and non-state actors in the regions.

This report draws on a multifaceted research methodology. In the project's initial phase, Deakin University worked in collaboration with local partners, Pak Institute of Peace Studies (PIPS), Quaid-i-Azam University (QAU) and the Afghan Institute of Strategic Studies (AISS) to gather data through archival research and interviews in Kabul, Islamabad and Peshawar. Deakin University then spoke to Syrian activists, political and military figures and advisors based across the Middle East, Europe and the US. Data collection was led by Dr Zahid Shahab Ahmed, Dr Dara Conduit and Dr Niamatullah Ibrahim. Dr Shabana Fayyaz of QAU and Mr Muhammad Amir Rana of PIPS in Pakistan, and Dr Davood Moradian and Dr Omar Sadr of AISS in Afghanistan facilitated the Afghanistan data collection, while Dr Dara Conduit led the Syria research, through in-person interviews and archival research. The project agenda and priorities were established with a gathering of policy makers and scholars from across South Asia and the Middle East in Islamabad in February 2019. A concurrent conference, organized in collaboration with PIPS, on 'Strategic dimensions of peace and conflict in South Asia and the Middle East' saw experts on Afghanistan and Syria from Australia, Qatar and the UK present research papers. Most recently, the project proceeded with four online policy dialogues bringing together a range of expert voices from those working on the ground and within academic and policy-making circles. Offering their insights on Afghanistan were Afghan politicians and political advisors, Indian diplomats and policy researchers, advisors to the Pakistani prime minister and members of the Pakistani military. Contributors to the Syria policy dialogues included academics and practitioners from the UK, Germany and Syria, as well as Syrian civil society advocates, development consultants and conflict resolution practitioners.

Deakin University funded a PhD scholarship for Abbas Farasoo to also work on this project. He has also been instrumental in building the project database alongside Dr Niamatullah Ibrahim, Dr Taghreed Jamal Al Deen and Neda Zeyghami from Deakin University, Narmeen Fayyaz and Mahnoor Rasheed from QAU, and Hadi Ayoobi and Homaira Sidiqee from AISS. Dr William Gourlay collated research data and drafted this policy brief.

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