



# Addressing the Syrian Refugee Crisis

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## I. Introduction

Since 2011 the people of Syria have suffered from war, economic collapse and humanitarian catastrophe. The Syrian Civil War resulted in the world's largest single refugee and displacement crisis. The War forced more than 6.8 million to become refugees, fleeing the country, and 6.9 million were internally displaced (homeless) within Syria. These numbers are especially terrifying taking into consideration that the total pre-war population of Syria was roughly 22 million people. Today over 13 million Syrians need humanitarian and protection assistance. 12 million experience food insecurity. Half of the Syrian population live in extreme poverty, on less than \$1.90 a day.<sup>1</sup>

The crisis affects not only Syria but also the neighboring countries. Among 6.8 million Syrian refugees abroad the majority—approximately 5.2 million people—have found refuge in neighboring countries, primarily in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. Most of the others fled to Europe.<sup>2</sup> Turkey hosts the largest refugee Syrian population, over 3.6 million people.<sup>3</sup> This creates tremendous pressure on the regional

economy and popular political attitudes. The refugee crisis increased support for populist parties across Europe. Anti-immigration, anti-refugee and anti-Muslim policy agenda is often embraced by populist political forces in the European Union (EU).<sup>4</sup>



Bab Al-Salam camp for Syrian refugees in Azaz, near the Syrian-Turkish border. Photo: Reuters.

In addition to domestic political tensions, the refugee crisis causes disagreements on the international level. In 2020 Turkey threatened Greece to let hundreds of thousands of migrants through the border if the EU did not comply with their demands.<sup>5</sup> In 2021, the refugee crisis escalated on the border between Belarus and

<sup>1</sup> Reid, Kathryn, 2022. 'Syrian refugee crisis: Facts, FAQs, and how to help', World Vision, 12 July 2022, <https://www.worldvision.org/refugees-news-stories/syrian-refugee-crisis-facts>

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR, 2022. 'Syria Refugee Crisis Explained', United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 8 July 2022, <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained/>

<sup>3</sup> Reid, Kathryn, 2022. 'Syrian refugee crisis: Facts, FAQs, and how to help', World Vision, 12 July 2022, <https://www.worldvision.org/refugees-news-stories/syrian-refugee-crisis-facts>

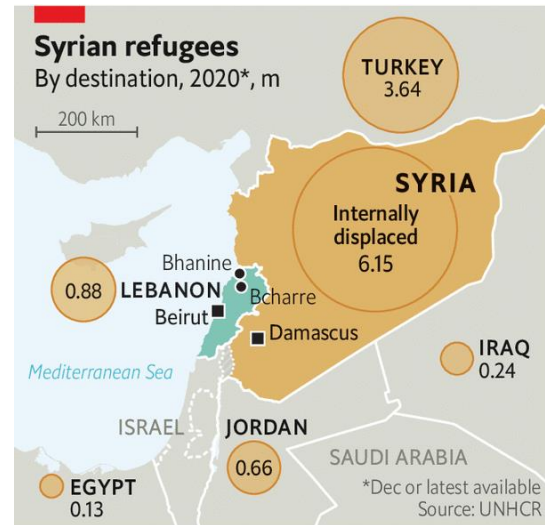
<sup>4</sup> HRW, n.d. 'European Union Events of 2018', Human Rights Watch, n.d., HRW, n.d. 'European Union Events of 2018', Human Rights Watch, n.d., <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/european-union>

<sup>5</sup> Kyilah, Terry, 2022. 'The EU-Turkey Deal, Five Years On: A Frayed and Controversial but Enduring Blueprint', MPI, 8 April 2022, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/eu-turkey-deal-five-years-on>

Poland. The EU accused Belarus and Russia of trying to use migrants to destabilize the EU.<sup>6</sup>

The Syrian refugee crisis threatens regional and international stability. It affects the political situation on national and international levels. The humanitarian, economic and refugee crisis spills over the Syrian borders which makes the active involvement of the United Nations and the Arab League essential. Since 2013 the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has passed 27 resolutions on humanitarian access, peace talks, and chemical weapons in Syria. The resolutions urge the Syrian government to protect the population and regulate cross-border humanitarian aid. Nevertheless, there is often a considerable disagreement between the members of the Security Council. China and Russia have jointly vetoed ten draft resolutions on Syria and Russia has independently vetoed an additional seven.<sup>7</sup>

The Arab League made efforts to prevent the civil war in 2011, calling on the government of Syria to avoid using military forces against peaceful protesters. However, the systemic violations of the responsibility to protect the population led to the Syrian suspension from the organization. Since that time, the influence of the Arab League in Syria has been declining.<sup>8</sup> In 2022 the League initiated an active discussion about the potential of Syria's return as a full member, though, no consensus had been reached yet.<sup>9</sup> Today the Arab world's most visible international organization struggles to find an effective role in the crisis.



The Economist

## II. Background

Under President Bashar al-Assad, who succeeded his father to become President in 2000, the Syrian economy went through a series of neoliberal reforms. Privatization, liberalization, and a reduction of subsidies on many products and services dominated the national economic agenda. The new President allowed the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to intervene in the process of economic liberalization. Syria's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) more than doubled between 2005 and 2010. However, this growth

<sup>6</sup> Mayens, Charles, 2021. 'Poland has accused Belarus and Russia of trying to use migrants to destabilize the EU', NPR, 17 November 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/11/17/1056646761/poland-has-accused-belarus-and-russia-of-trying-to-use-migrants-to-destabilize-t>

<sup>7</sup> GCR2P, n.d., 'Syria', Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, <https://www.globalr2p.org/countries/syria/>

<sup>8</sup> Macaron, Joe, 2020. 'The Muted Arab Attempt to Restore Influence in Syria', Arab Center Washington DC, 18 March 2020, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-muted-arab-attempt-to-restore-influence-in-syria/>

<sup>9</sup> MEE, 2022. 'Arab League rules out Syria's return until 'consensus exists'', MEE, 10 March 2022, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/arab-league-rules-out-syrias-return-until-consensus-exists>

mostly benefitted the economic elite, increasing inequality and impoverishment.<sup>10</sup>

High unemployment, corruption, and a lack of political freedom under President Bashar al-Assad, on the back of the Arab Spring, caused a wave of pro-democracy demonstrations in March 2011. This started in the southern city of Deraa, where teenagers were arrested for anti-government graffiti. Outrage over their mistreatment was the beginning of the uprising.<sup>11</sup>

Violence rapidly escalated with hundreds of rebel groups taking arms to resist Assad's administration. Parts of Syrian defense forces defected and joined the Free Syrian Army. Foreign powers began to take sides, sending money, weaponry, and fighters, escalating the conflict to a new level. Extremists from all around the world used the opportunity to join the rebels. The involvement of the jihadist organizations, such as the Islamic State (IS) group and al-Qaeda (Jabhat al-Nusra), gave additional credibility for international intervention.

From the beginning of the war, Iran and Russia were the major foreign supporters of Assad's regime, providing Syrian forces with arms and expertise. Iran backed Syrian President Bashar al-Assad dynasty since the 1979 revolution. Since 2011 Iran has provided significant logistical, technical, financial, military, and training support. Syria remains to be an important strategic point for Iran. In Syria, Tehran has deployed several thousand troops and actively supported Hezbollah, a Lebanese

Shia Islamist political party and militant group that fights on the side of the Syrian Government since 2011. Russia intervened to defend Assad with air support and mercenary soldiers the next year.

For Israel, which has occupied the Syrian Golan since 1967, Hezbollah's active military involvement creates certain security threats. It caused Israel significant damage during the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War.<sup>12</sup> Hezbollah launched several provocative attacks against Israeli targets in the Syrian Golan region. Since 2013 Israel has conducted airstrikes against Hezbollah and Iranian targets in Syria.

To counter growing Iranian influence on the region, the most powerful Arab League members started supporting anti-Syrian government rebels. The civil war in Syria soon became a proxy war between Shia and Sunni powers, backed by Iran versus Arab countries, respectively. The United States stepped in when Assad used chemical weapons against rebels in 2013. Russia temporarily convinced Assad to give up chemical weapons to avoid the United States intervention. Even though the US did not launch any military operation by that time, they have sent experts and arms to Syrian rebels. Their active involvement began a year later, against the emerging power of ISIS, which was gaining control over territories in Syria and Iraq.

Another important party in the conflict is Syria's Kurdish population. An ethnically and linguistically distinct group, the Kurds inhabit lands close to the Turkish and Iraqi borders,

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<sup>10</sup> Daher, Joseph, 2018. 'The political economic context of Syria's reconstruction: a prospective in light of a legacy of unequal development', European University Institute, 5 December 2018, [https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/60112/MED\\_2018\\_05.pdf](https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/60112/MED_2018_05.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Tarabay, Jamie, 2018. 'For many Syrians, the story of the war began with graffiti in Dara'a', CNN, 15 March 2018,

<https://www.cnn.com/2018/03/15/middleeast/daraa-syria-seven-years-on-intl>)

<sup>12</sup> Ginsburg, Mitch, 2015. 'Hezbollah focuses PR on Israel, to deflect from its killing of Muslims in Syria', The Times of Israel, 24 May 2015, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/hezbollah-focuses-pr-on-israel-to-deflect-from-its-killing-of-muslims-in-syria/>

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constitute a large part of Damascus and Aleppo population. The former colonial powers of the region—Britain, France and Turkey—left the Kurds stateless, dispersed mainly between Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. In Syria, the Kurds try to avoid direct confrontation with Assad's government, which tolerates their political and paramilitary activism (as long as it was directed against Turkey) and criminal activity (mostly smuggling).<sup>13</sup> In the conflict Kurds helped the regime fight extremist groups, but also fought for their own autonomy against Damascus.

The political vacuum created by the civil war was an opportunity for the Kurds to establish stronger political and military positions in the region. Growing Kurdish militarization in Syria threatened Turkey, especially the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), militant political organization and armed guerrilla movement. In Syria, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) is the leading political party among Syrian Kurds.<sup>14</sup>

The active position in the conflict taken by Syria's Kurds created significant concern in

Turkey and stipulated the intervention.<sup>15</sup> In 2016 Ankara announced the *Jarablus operation* against ISIS and PYD. With American support, Turkey helped the Free Syrian Army to capture the town of Jarablus in the north of Syria. One of the initial targets of Turkey was to push Syrian Kurdish forces behind the Euphrates River, to create a buffer zone against the Kurds, insulating Turkey.<sup>16</sup>

The intervention escalated to direct confrontation with the Syrian Armed Forces. Turkish intervention resulted in occupation of several territories in northern Syria. These territories are the last resort for Syrian rebels. Turkey also hosts the most Syrian refugees; it accepted over 3.5 million people. At times Ankara uses refugees as an argument in disagreement with the international community. In 2019 Turkey threatened the EU to "open the gates" for migrants to enter Europe if international support for a refugee safe zone in northern Syria fails to materialize.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> ICG, 2013. 'Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle', International Crisis Group, 22 January 2013, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/syria-s-kurds-struggle-within-struggle>

<sup>14</sup> Carnegie, 2012. 'The Kurdish Democratic Union Party', Carnegie Middle East Center, 1 March 2012, <https://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=48526&reloadFlag=1>

<sup>15</sup> BBC, 2022. 'Why has the Syrian war lasted 11 years?', BBC, 15 March 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35806229>

<sup>16</sup> McKirdy, Euan, 2016. 'Turkey sends tanks into Syria against ISIS; rebels reportedly capture town', CNN, 24 August 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/08/24/middleeast/turkish-troops-isis-syria-operation/>

<sup>17</sup> Euronews, 2019. 'Turkey's Erdogan threatens to 'open the gates' for migrants to Europe', Euronews, 5 September 2019, <https://www.euronews.com/2019/09/05/turkey-s-erdogan-threatens-to-open-the-gates-for-migrants-to-europe>



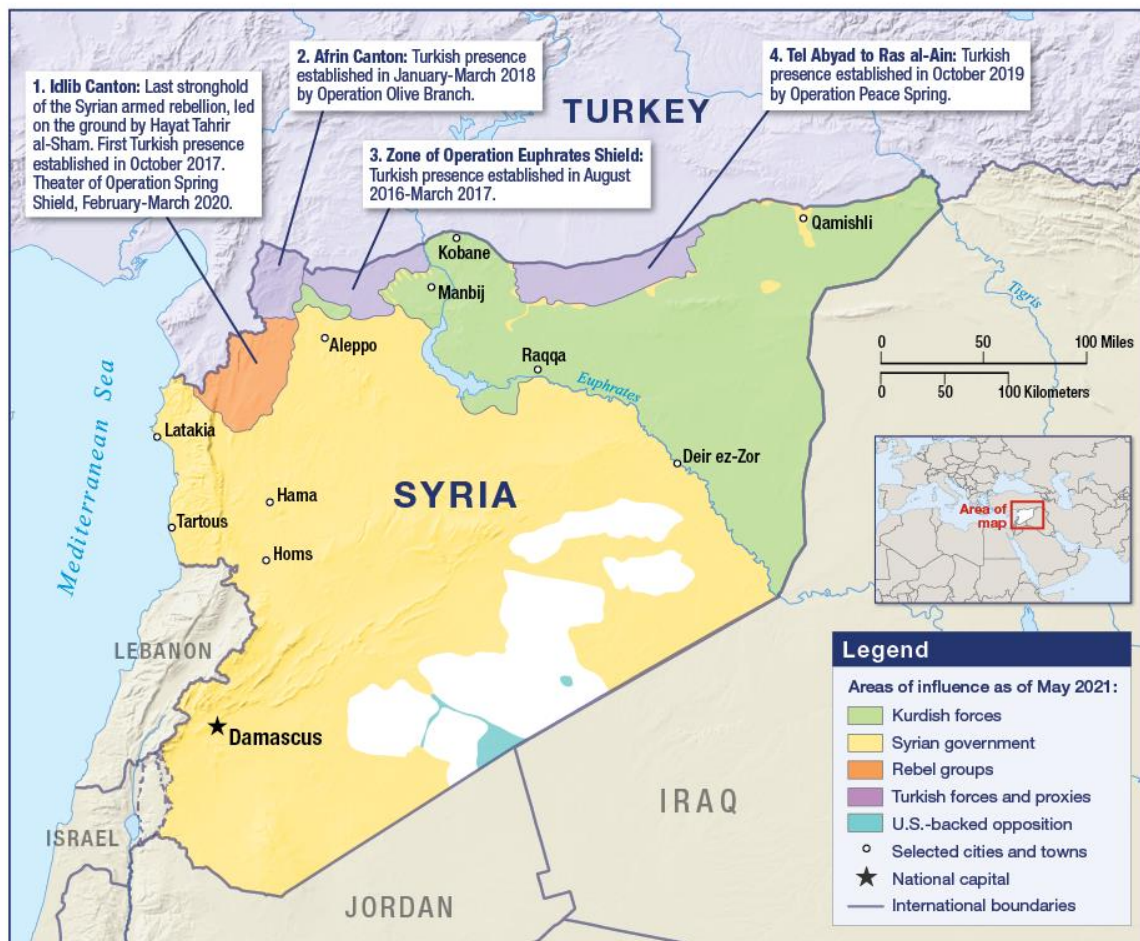
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MAP 1

## Turkey's Presence in Syria, May 2021



SOURCE: Adapted from Max Hoffman and Alan Makovsky, "Northern Syria Security Dynamics and the Refugee Crisis," Center for American Progress, May 26, 2021, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2021/05/26/499944/northern-syria-security-dynamics-refugee-crisis>.

NOTE: The author made some modifications to the original map such as adding caption boxes and rephrasing some elements in the legend.

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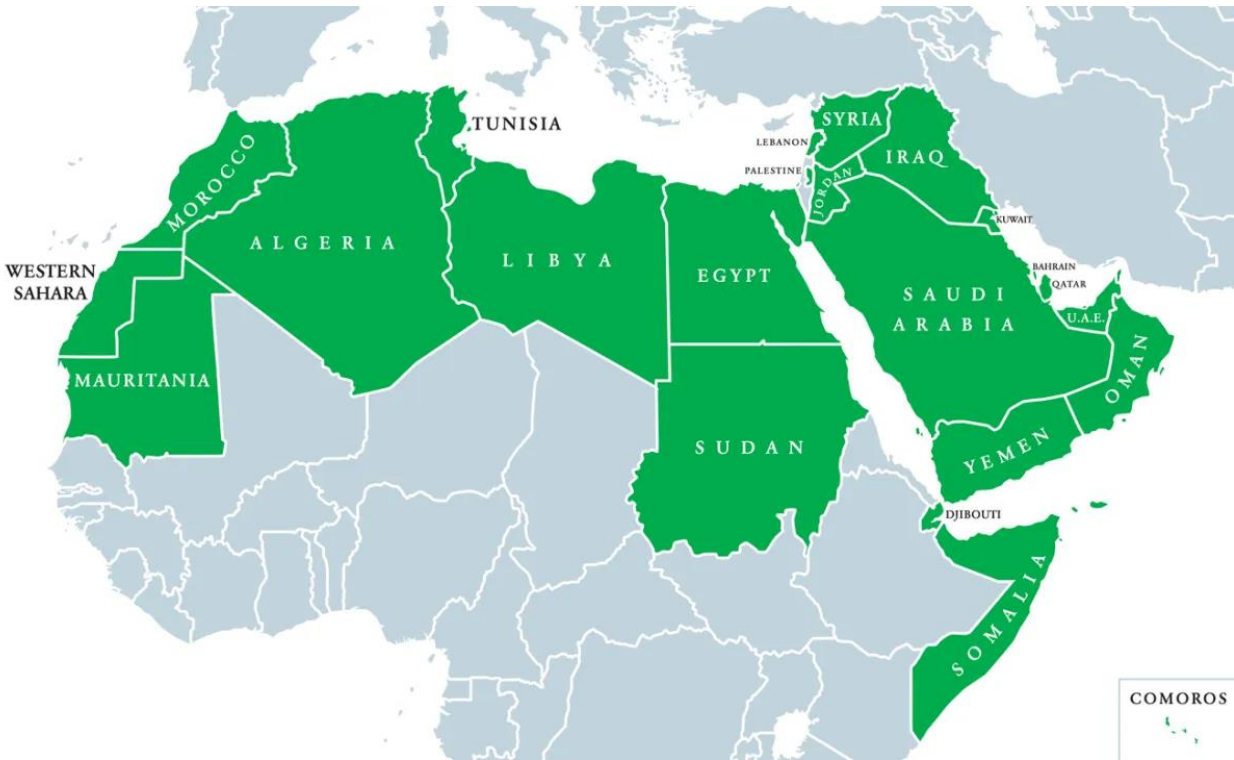


Figure: The 22 Member States of the Arab League

In 2015, when Assad's government appeared to be losing, Russia launched its military deployment in Syria. Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed in the U.N. General Assembly that their target was the Islamic State.<sup>18</sup> Russian intervention allowed the Syrian Government to regain control over much of the territory, including Palmyra and Aleppo.

Syria is an important regional strategic ally for Moscow. Since the Cold War it has hosted the Russian naval base in Tartus, which is Moscow's only Mediterranean repair and replenishment point. In addition to airstrikes against Syrian

opposition forces, Russia was accused by the international community of using mercenaries from the Kremlin-linked Wagner Group. By using mercenaries, Russia can deny it is experiencing any casualties.<sup>19</sup>

Before the war, the United States tried to arrange a deal between Israel and Syria. Israel would give back occupied territories in the Golan, and Syria would break its alignment with Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas. After the violence against protesters in 2011, the negotiations collapsed. Washington shifted to support the rebels with training, money, and intelligence.

<sup>18</sup> Birnbaum, Michael, 2022. 'The secret pact between Russia and Syria that gives Moscow carte blanche, Washington Post, 15 January 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/01/15/the-secret-pact-between-russia-and-syria-that-gives-moscow-carte-blanche/>

<sup>19</sup> Linder, Andrew, 2022. 'Russian Private Military Companies in Syria and Beyond', CSIS, 23 September 2022, <https://www.csis.org/nfpf/russian-private-military-companies-syria-and-beyond>

The United States joined the Friends of Syria Group, an international diplomatic collective of countries created to counterbalance Russian and Chinese diplomatic support to Assad's regime in the United Nations Security Council.

In 2013, the Obama administration was ready to launch an intervention operation answering the question of the usage of chemical weapons by the Syrian government. However, the initiative did not find support in Congress. The U.S. won approval from the UN Security Council—including approval by Russia—for a plan to remove chemical weapons from Syria.<sup>20</sup> In 2016, former president Donald Trump had intentions to completely withdraw from Syria. However, a chemical attack on Khan Sheikhoun, a rebel-held town in northeastern Syria in 2017 stipulated the United States to launch strikes on the Shayrat air base in central Syria.<sup>21</sup> In 2019 Trump signed the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act to sanction the Syrian government for war crimes and any party supporting it.<sup>22</sup>

### III. Current situation

Since 2017, the attention of the international community has shifted from the Syrian conflict. With support from Hezbollah, Iran and Russian, the Assad regime regained control over much of the country. The intensity of the fighting declined, but parts of the country—such as the Turkish border region and northwestern Idlib region—remain outside government control. Turkish, Syrian, and Russian forces all are deployed in the northeast, alongside proxies and Syrian Kurdish militias.<sup>23</sup> As of October 2022, the US also had soldiers, approximately 900, deployed in Syria, for counter-terrorism operations.<sup>24</sup>

Israel also remains active in Syria, mostly conducting airstrikes against Lebanon's pro-Iranian Hezbollah group in Syria.<sup>25</sup> Iran continues to supply military equipment to its forces and allied fighters in Syria. In 2022 it increased use of aerial supply lines as a more reliable means of ferrying military equipment to allied fighters in Syria, following disruptions to ground transfers. In September 2022, for example, Israel attacked Damascus International airport and other positions south of the capital, killing five Iranian soldiers to disrupt Iran's supply lines.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Kaplow, Larry, 2018. 'History Of U.S. Responses To Chemical Weapons Attacks In Syria', NPR, 13 April 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/04/13/602375500/history-of-u-s-responses-to-chemical-weapons-attacks-in-syria>

<sup>21</sup> Crowley, Michael, 2018. 'Trump strikes Syria', Politico, 13 April 2018, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/04/13/trump-syria-strikes-523051>

<sup>22</sup> US Dept. of State, 2022. 'Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act', U.S. Department of State, 17 June 2020, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/caesar-syria-civilian-protection-act//index.html>

<sup>23</sup> WPR, 2022. 'The Syrian Civil War's Never-Ending Endgame', WPR, 20 July 2022,

<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/the-syria-civil-war-might-be-ending-but-the-crisis-will-live-on/>

<sup>24</sup> Kaufman, Ellie, 2022. 'US-led coalition forces repel drone attack near base in Syria', CNN, 15 August 2022,

<https://www.cnn.com/2022/08/15/politics/drone-attack-syria/index.html>

<sup>25</sup> Al-Khalidi, Suleiman, 2022. 'Israeli strikes hit Iranian targets near Russia's Mediterranean bases', Reuters, 14 August 2022,

<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrian-state-media-says-israel-targets-coastal-province-tartous-2022-08-14/>

<sup>26</sup> 'Israel attacks Damascus airport, five soldiers killed, Syria says', Reuters, 27 September 2022 <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli->

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The fighting has declined from its height ten years ago, but more than half of the Syrian population remains displaced and affected by the humanitarian crisis. The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) works for durable solutions for refugees and internally displaced people. Having little to no financial resources, most Syrian refugees stay in the urban areas of neighboring countries. Most of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq live in extreme poverty. To address the issue, the UNHCR coordinates the response with Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt, under the *Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP)*.<sup>27</sup>

One of the important questions to be addressed is how to find a durable solution for Syrian refugees. Being a refugee should not be permanent. Refugees should be able to rebuild their lives as citizens either coming back to a safe environment in their own country or being resettled in another.<sup>28</sup> It is important to follow the principle of non-refoulement, according to which those who seek asylum may not be returned to a country in which there are reasonable grounds to believe they will be subjected to persecution.

While the Arab League has no major programs of its own on the ground in Syria or neighboring countries, its support is essential for the work of the UN, UNHCR, and the hundreds of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) working to ease the plight of refugees and IDPs.

One of the most relevant questions today is how to ensure the sustainability of the cross-border mechanism in Bab Al Hawa, the last remaining UN-facilitated gateway for the delivery of UN

humanitarian aid directly to opposition-held areas of Syria. Assad's administration backed, by Russia, sees the direct humanitarian supplies to the opposition as a weapon of war. Since 2020 Russia has used its power of veto to force the closure of all UN-facilitated border-crossings but one: Bab Al-Hawa. However, the UN mandate for the cross-border mechanism in Bab Al Hawa must be reviewed and extended every six months.<sup>29</sup>

## SYRIA AID DELIVERY MECHANISM Only one cross-border corridor is operational



Source: UN Security Council

ARAB NEWS

[attacks-vicinity-syrias-damascus-syrian-state-media-2022-09-16/](https://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/attacks-vicinity-syrias-damascus-syrian-state-media-2022-09-16/)

<sup>27</sup> 3RP, n.d. 'Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan', 3RPSYRIACRISIS.org, n.d., <https://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/>

<sup>28</sup> UNHCR, n.d. 'Finding Durable Solutions for Refugees', UN High Commissioner for Refugees, n.d., <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/61a0fe634>

<sup>29</sup> Kassaify, Ephrem, 2022. 'How Syria's Bab Al-Hawa aid corridor became hostage in a geopolitical game', Arab News, 16 June 2022, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2105006/middle-east>



## Syrian refugees and IDPs

The Syrian Civil War caused the largest refugee crisis in the world. For 11 years, the Syrian population has been suffering under brutal violence that has killed hundreds of thousands of people, torn the nation apart, and set back the standard of living by decades.<sup>30</sup> The number of Syrian refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) is still growing. By March 2022 more than 13 million have either fled the country or are displaced within its borders.<sup>31</sup> The vast majority of Syrian refugees are hosted by neighboring countries.

Fleeing by land and sea, over 6.8 million Syrian refugees remain in the Middle East. Turkey hosts over 3.6 million refugees from Syria. This is the largest refugee population in the world. Most refugees in Turkey live outside of the refugee camps and in need of humanitarian help. Lebanon hosts over 830,000 refugees from Syria. They make up more than 14 percent of Lebanon's population. As in Turkey, Syrian refugees in Lebanon still mostly live in informal, primitive settlements. Legal restrictions prevent them from taking formal jobs or gaining permanent residency status. The situation is much the same in Jordan, which hosts 675,000 Syrian refugees. Over 260,000 Syrian refugees

escaped to Iraq, which hardly can provide basic services for all the people in need. Egypt host 141,300 Syrian refugees.<sup>32</sup>

Escaping the war, Syrian refugees face extreme poverty and unemployment. The humanitarian crisis was escalated by the COVID-19 pandemic which left millions of people in the region without livelihoods. Even though neighboring countries demonstrate solidarity with Syrian refugees, the inability to meet their basic needs increases the risk of social problems, such as child labor, gender-based violence, early marriage, and other forms of exploitation. In addition to this, the poor sanitary situation in overcrowded camps or camp-like settlements often leads to the spreading of diseases which affect vulnerable groups.<sup>33</sup>

In Europe, Syrian refugees live in relatively better conditions, but not all European nations are willing to host them. Among a million Syrian asylum-seekers and refugees in Europe, 70 percent are hosted by Germany and Sweden. Austria, Greece, and the Netherlands are also among the main destinations for Syrian refugees.<sup>34</sup> In 2015, the European Union made an effort to redistribute the influx of refugees and imposed mandatory refugee quotas for the member-states. However, it created significant disagreements in the European Union. Hungary and Poland refused to take in any refugees.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Reid, Kathryn, 2022. 'Syrian refugee crisis: Facts, FAQs, and how to help', World Vision, 12 July 2022, <https://www.worldvision.org/refugees-news-stories/syrian-refugee-crisis-facts>

<sup>31</sup> UNHCR, 2022. 'Eleven years on, mounting challenges push many displaced Syrians to the brink', UNHCR, 15 March 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/briefing/2022/3/623055174/eleven-years-mounting-challenges-push-displaced-syrians-brink.html>

<sup>32</sup> Reid, Kathryn, 2022. 'Syrian refugee crisis: Facts, FAQs, and how to help', World Vision, 12 July 2022, <https://www.worldvision.org/refugees-news-stories/syrian-refugee-crisis-facts>

<sup>33</sup> UNHCR, 2021. 'Syria Refugee Crisis – Globally, in Europe and in Cyprus, 18 March 2021, <https://www.unhcr.org/cy/2021/03/18/syria-refugee-crisis-globally-in-europe-and-in-cyprus-meet-some-syrian-refugees-in-cyprus/>

<sup>34</sup> UNHCR, 2021. 'Syria Refugee Crisis – Globally, in Europe and in Cyprus, 18 March 2021, <https://www.unhcr.org/cy/2021/03/18/syria-refugee-crisis-globally-in-europe-and-in-cyprus-meet-some-syrian-refugees-in-cyprus/>

<sup>35</sup> Rankin, Jennifer, 2020. 'EU proposes to ditch refugee quotas for member states', The Guardian, 23 September 2020,

The British disagreement with the EU refugee policy was one of the driving forces of growing right-wing populism and stipulated the public support of Brexit.<sup>36</sup>

The pressure on social services and problems with integration stimulates anti-refugee political moods in Europe. Often, nations make the decisions independent from the EU or the UN position. In 2019, Denmark notified about 1,200 refugees from the Damascus region that their residency permits would not be renewed, after the government decision that the region is safe to return.<sup>37</sup> The UN Refugee Agency plays a leading role by collaborating with States and other partner to promote, facilitate, and coordinate voluntary refugee repatriation and maintains the position that it is not safe to return to Syria and it is neither facilitating nor promoting returns.

Lebanon and Jordan, who welcomed Syrian refugees in the beginning of the conflict, have, in recent years, adopted restrictive measures in relation to refugees. Legislation in both nations limits employment opportunities for non-citizens. As the result, most of Syrian refugee families live in poverty and cannot meet their essential needs. In addition to this, the neighboring countries initiate new repatriation

policies in relation to Syrian refugees. In 2019 Lebanon's General Security decided to deport all Syrians who entered Lebanon irregularly after April 24. Turkey also announced a new project for the voluntary return of 1 million refugees to northern Syria.<sup>38</sup> The Human Rights Watch considers refugee repatriation to Syria unsafe. According to the Human Rights Watch, Syrian refugees who returned to Syria between 2017 and 2021 from Lebanon and Jordan faced grave human rights abuses and persecution at the hands of the Syrian government and affiliated militias.<sup>39</sup>

## IV. Role of the Arab League

The Arab League was founded in 1945 as a regional organization to enhance cooperation on economic and military affairs and other matters of common interest among Arab countries. The Arab League was founded in response to concerns about postwar colonial divisions of territory and strong opposition to the emergence of a Jewish state on Palestinian territory. With the headquarters in Cairo, the organization was initially brought together Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Transjordan (known today as Jordan), and Yemen.<sup>40</sup> Today

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/23/eu-proposes-to-ditch-refugee-quotas-for-member-states>

<sup>36</sup> Garrett, Amanda, 2019. 'The Refugee Crisis, Brexit, and the Reframing of Immigration in Britain', CES, 1 August 2019,

<https://www.europenowjournal.org/2019/09/09/the-refugee-crisis-brexit-and-the-reframing-of-immigration-in-britain/>

<sup>37</sup> Strzyżyńska, Weronika, 2022. 'Zero asylum seekers': Denmark forces refugees to return to Syria', The Guardian, 25 May 2022,

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/may/25/zero-asylum-seekers-denmark-forces-refugees-to-return-to-syria#:~:text=In%202019%2C%20the%20Danish%20>

[Ogovernment.safe%20for%20refugees%20to%20return.](https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/05/erdogan-unveils-plans-send-1-million-syrians-back-anti-refugee-sentiment)

<sup>38</sup> Ertan, Nazlan, 2022. 'Erdogan unveils plans to send 1 million Syrians back as anti-refugee sentiment escalates', Al-monitor, 4 May 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/05/erdogan-unveils-plans-send-1-million-syrians-back-anti-refugee-sentiment>

<sup>39</sup> HRW, 2021. 'Syria: Returning Refugees Face Grave Abuse Struggle to Survive Amid Devastation, Property Destruction', HRW, 20 October 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/10/20/syria-returning-refugees-face-grave-abuse>

<sup>40</sup> Masters, Jonathan, 2020. 'The Arab League', CFR, 19 February 2020,

<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/arab-league>

it has 22 Member States, but Syrian membership remains suspended since November 2011.

The Arab League has a reputation of a loose organization, unable to make strong demands on its Member States.<sup>41</sup> It is often criticized for the lack of coordination and cohesion. Even in relation to Israel, the League was not always coherent. In 1979, Egypt initiated unilateral peace negotiations with Israel and was suspended from the League for ten years. One of the greatest diplomatic achievements of the League was the Arab Peace Initiative, a plan adopted in 2002 and aimed for normalization of the relations between Arab nations and Israel. The Arab Spring that began in 2011 offered the league a historic opportunity to redefine itself. In Libya, the League supported the overthrow of the dictator Moammar Qaddafi. The League has demonstrated cohesion, backing the no-fly zone in Libya to support the opposition. The members of the League collectively condemned the regime and urged the U.N. Security Council to impose the measure.

After Qaddafi was overthrown, the Arab League turned its focus to the escalating conflict in Syria. Since September 2011, the Arab League tried to mediate in the Syrian Civil War. They formed an Arab Ministers' Commission for Syria and conducted a meeting with Assad's administration, aimed to end the violence. The Arab League developed an Action Plan, initially approved by the Syrian government, and endorsed by the United Nations. The Plan called to stop all acts of violence committed by any side to protect Syrian citizens; release all detainees arrested from the beginning of the crisis;

withdraw all military equipment and artillery from cities and residential neighborhoods; allow Arab League-affiliated organizations as well as Arab and international media outlets full access to move freely in Syria to monitor the situation on the ground.

However, the violence did not stop. In November 2011, the Arab League threatened Assad with travel bans and economic sanctions, as well as suspend Syria's membership in the Arab Ministers' Commission. In December 2011, the Arab League initiated a monitoring mission to observe the implementation of the plan. However, the violence did not stop. In January 2012, the Arab League proposed a new initiative for Syria, calling for Assad to step down and requested a resolution from the UN Security Council to support the proposal. The initiative was welcomed by the United Nations in the General Assembly<sup>42</sup> and the Security Council.<sup>43</sup> But it was not acceptable to the Syrian government. As the violence continued, the Arab League suspended the monitoring mission.

The failure of Assad's regime to comply with the initiative has led to the suspension of Syrian membership in the Arab League. However, once again, the decision was not unanimous. Lebanon and Yemen opposed the decision, Iraq abstained, Syria did not vote. Iraq, Lebanon, and Algeria were also against recognition of the Syrian opposition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people.

Since 2018, the Arab League Member States have talked about readmitting Syria to the League. This would demonstrate a level of

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/66/253 (2012) (New York: United Nations, 21 February 2012), [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Syria%20A%20RES%2066%20253.pdf)

[CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Syria%20A%20RES%2066%20253.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Syria%20A%20RES%2066%20253.pdf)

<sup>43</sup> UN Security Council Resolution S/RES/2042 (2012) (New York: United Nations, 14 April 2012), <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Syria%20SRES%202042.pdf>

acceptance of Assad's regime. In recent years, Damascus continues to improve its relations with Gulf Arab states, especially. In 2022, after a long break without diplomatic representation, a new ambassador from Bahrain formally took up his post in Syria. Saudi Arabia, since the beginning of the war, supported Sunni fighters battling Assad's forces, sanctioned Damascus and condemned its use of military force against civilians and nowadays showed intentions for rapprochement with the regime as a tool to counterbalance the growing Iranian influence.<sup>44</sup> The UAE decided to reopen the embassy in Damascus after Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed's trip to the Syria in 2021.<sup>45</sup> In July 2022 Algeria's foreign minister decried Syria's suspension from the Arab League during a visit to Damascus.<sup>46</sup> Qatar, however, is not considering normalizing ties with Syria and hopes other countries will be discouraged from taking further steps in that direction.<sup>47</sup>

## V. Role of the United Nations

Since the beginning of the conflict in 2011, the United Nations strongly relied on the position of the Arab League in relation to Syria. In

December 2011, the General Assembly endorsed the implementation of the Plan of Action for Syria developed by the Arab League.<sup>48</sup> Britain, France, and Germany collectively consulted with the Arab League to prepare a draft resolution on Syria.<sup>49</sup> The General Assembly also supported the Arab League's initiative on a Syrian political transition in 2012. For the United Nations, the Arab League is an important consultation platform on regional issues. For the Arab League, the proactive collective position in the United Nations is an opportunity to find international legitimization for their own political agenda.

Even though the Arab League does not have an official status in the United Nations, like the observer status of the EU, it actively cooperates with the United Nations since 1989, when two organizations signed a Memorandum of Understanding. In June 2019, the United Nations opened a Liaison Office to the League of Arab States in Cairo, the first official representation in the organization. Two organizations regularly cooperate through the secretariats and respective agencies in addition to common programs, funds, capacity-building exercises, and staff exchanges.

The position of the Arab League in relation to Syria helped to establish a common ground for the U.N. resolutions in 2011 and 2012.

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<sup>44</sup> Ayton, Matthew, 2022. 'Times have changed': Saudi Arabia-Syria in rapprochement talks', Al Jazeera, 8 June 2022,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/8/times-have-changed-saudi-syria-in-rapprochement-talks>

<sup>45</sup> Alam, Kamal, 2022. 'How UAE's deep ties with Syria came out in the open', MEE, 24 March 2022, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/syria-uae-publicly-embracing-why>

<sup>46</sup> AP News, 2022. 'Algeria's top diplomat backs Syria's return to Arab League', AP News, July 25, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-syria-bashar-assad-damascus-arab-league-881425710833e22b8a3b1715cade83e3>

<sup>47</sup> Reuters, 2021. 'Qatar has no plan to normalise ties with Syria, says foreign minister', Reuters, 12

November 2021,

<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/qatar-has-no-plan-normalise-ties-with-syria-says-foreign-minister-2021-11-12/>

<sup>48</sup> UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/66/176 (2012) (New York: United Nations, 23 February 2012),

<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Syria%20A%20RES%2066%20176.pdf>

<sup>49</sup> Charbonneau, Louis, 2011. 'EU, Arabs seek U.N. assembly condemnation of Syria', Reuters, 16 November 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-un/eu-arabs-see-u-n-assembly-condemnation-of-syria-idUSTRE7AG09P20111117>



However, the influence of the League in the U.N. has declined in recent years. There is a plethora of ways the Arab League can be involved in the work the U.N. institutions and decision-making process. In addition to working on the political level in the General Assembly and Security Council, the United Nations is involved in addressing refugee and humanitarian crisis. The institutions like the U.N. Refugee Agency (UNHCR), United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the Syria Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) provide the U.N. humanitarian response in Syria.

The U.N. Refugee Agency provides humanitarian aid for Syrian refugees, helping with cash for medicine and other necessities, stoves and fuel for heating, insulation for tents, thermal blankets, and winter clothing. The agency helps refugees with access to clean water and sanitation. For those who have been displaced but remain in Syria, the UNHCR provides shelter kits and non-food items as well as protection services and psychosocial support. The agency also co-leads the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP), a strategic, coordinating, planning, advocating, fundraising, and programming platform for humanitarian and development partners to respond to the Syrian crisis.<sup>50</sup>

5.8 million Syrian children need humanitarian aid to meet their basic needs. The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund aims to ensure that children in Syria are protected from all forms of violence, have access to education, and emergency health and nutritional services. The fund works with Syria

and the nations hosting Syrian refugees to strengthen national systems and capacities to alleviate child poverty through enhancing child-focused social protection.<sup>51</sup>

The Syria Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights monitors and reports on the human rights situation in Syria, seeking to highlight emerging human rights concerns and provide early warning analysis of the evolving and complex situation in Syria.<sup>52</sup> Established in 2019 with the aim of strengthening the integration of human rights across the humanitarian response of the United Nations, the Office supports the humanitarian leadership in each of the hubs of Damascus, Amman, Gaziantep.<sup>53</sup>

All things considered, the United Nations can provide help to refugees and coordinate efforts to address the humanitarian crisis in Syria. The organization can monitor and give assessment to the actions of conflicting parties. It also can call parties for actions to establish sustainable peace. However, taking into consideration the plurality of the conflicting interests and positions on the issue of the members of the United Nations, it may be hard to reach a consensus. The durable solution can only be Syrian owned.

One of the things that the United Nations cannot do is to establish a peacekeeping mission. The Syrian government would hardly be willing to accept foreign military presence that could secure the territories controlled by the opposition. This kind of initiative would be most probably vetoed in the Security Council by Russia and China. In the beginning of the conflict the United Nations deployed a small

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<sup>50</sup> UNHCR, n.d. 'Syria Emergency', United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/syria-emergency.html>

<sup>51</sup> UNICEF, n.d. 'What we do', United Nations International Children's Fund, n.d., <https://www.unicef.org/syria/what-we-do>

<sup>52</sup> OHCHR, n.d. 'Syria', Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, n.d.,

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/countries/syrian-arab-republic>

<sup>53</sup> OHCHR, n.d. 'Our presence', Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, n.d., <https://www.ohchr.org/en/countries/syria/our-presence>

advance team of unarmed military observers designed to end the escalating conflict. Nowadays, however, the positions of Assad's regime are too strong to accept another mission.

The United Nations, however, could establish a better humanitarian cooperation with the Syrian government. Keeping the humanitarian corridors on the opposition-controlled territories, the United Nations could suggest opening new humanitarian mechanisms through government-controlled territories. To do so, the international community must accept, to a certain level, the legitimacy of the Assad's regime, which is problematic in the current circumstances.

## VI. Landmark UN resolutions

After the escalation of violence in 2011, the Arab League proposed the Plan of Action for Syria, according to which Assad's administration was supposed to begin talks with the opposition, withdraw the army from cities and towns, release all political prisoners, and permit access to members of the media, human rights groups and Arab monitors.<sup>54</sup>

UN General Assembly resolution (A/RES/66/176, 2011)<sup>55</sup> condemned the

<sup>54</sup> Sly, Liz, 2011. 'Arab League announces peace plan for Syria', Washington Post, 2 November 2011, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/arab-league-announces-peace-plan-for-syria/2011/11/02/gIQAkBM6fM\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/arab-league-announces-peace-plan-for-syria/2011/11/02/gIQAkBM6fM_story.html)

<sup>55</sup> Security Council Report, n.d. 'UN Documents for Syria: General Assembly Documents', Security Council Report, n.d., [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un\\_documents\\_type/general-assembly-documents/?ctype=Syria&cbtype=syria](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un_documents_type/general-assembly-documents/?ctype=Syria&cbtype=syria)

<sup>56</sup> Al Arabiya, 2022. 'Syria rejects Arab League plan for power transition; opposition welcomes initiative', Al Arabiya, 23 January 2022, <https://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/01/23/189957>

violence in Syria and called for the full implementation of the Arab League's plan. The government accepted the plan but failed to implement it. In 2012, the Arab League called Bashar al-Assad to transfer power to his deputy for a national unity government to be formed and for early elections to be held.<sup>56</sup> The UN General Assembly endorsed the Syrian political transition and requested the Secretary-General to appoint a special envoy for Syria in the resolution A/RES/66/253.<sup>57</sup> In 2013, the also General Assembly welcomed the establishment of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, the official representation of the Free Syrian Army (A/RES/67/262).<sup>58</sup> The General Assembly several times expressed regret about the inability of the Security Council to adopt decisive measures. In 2016 the General Assembly established the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to assist in the investigation of the crimes under international law committed in Syria since the start of the conflict A/RES/71/248.<sup>59</sup>

One of the key Security Council resolutions was adopted in 2013, which required the verification and destruction of Syria's chemical weapons

<sup>57</sup> Security Council Report, n.d. 'UN Documents for Syria: General Assembly Documents', Security Council Report, n.d., [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un\\_documents\\_type/general-assembly-documents/?ctype=Syria&cbtype=syria](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un_documents_type/general-assembly-documents/?ctype=Syria&cbtype=syria)

<sup>58</sup> UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/67/262 (2013) (New York: United Nations, 4 June 2013), [http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/a\\_res\\_67\\_262.pdf](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/a_res_67_262.pdf)

<sup>59</sup> UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/71/248 (2016) (New York: United Nations, 11 January 2017), [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/a\\_res\\_71\\_248.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/a_res_71_248.pdf)

stockpiles ([S/RES/2118](#)).<sup>60</sup> In 2014 the Security Council adopted the resolution that authorized cross-border and cross-line access for the UN and its partners to deliver humanitarian aid in Syria without state consent ([S/RES/2165](#)).<sup>61</sup> The resolutions [S/RES/2235](#) and [S/RES/2209](#) adopted in 2015 condemned the use of chemical weapons called for establishment of the UN-OPCW Joint Investigative Mechanism.<sup>62</sup>

## VII. Country and bloc positions

**The Arab League:** The Arab League took a leading role in the promoting a ceasefire in Syria in 2011 and 2012. The initiatives of the Arab League were supported by the United Nations Secretary-General. However, the failure of implementation led to the exclusion of Syria from the League. Nowadays, Syria's return to the Arab League is imminent. Iraq and Egypt are enthusiastic about accepting Syria back.<sup>63</sup> Saudi Arabia, which was one of the key supporters of the rebels in Syria, took steps in the direction of a rapprochement with Assad's administration.<sup>64</sup> The UAE called for the removal of US-led sanctions, which imposed penalties on parties who deal with Syria and acknowledged that it

had been a major mistake to expel Syria from the Arab League.<sup>65</sup>

**Algeria:** Under the rule of the National Liberation Front and the influence of the military's Department of Intelligence and Security (DRS), Algeria is especially concerned to eliminate foreign influence in its domestic affairs. Its policies tend to support Syria's President Assad, out of concern with establishing precedents for international action that could be used against Algeria. In the Arab League, Algeria stresses caution.

**Egypt:** The home country of the Arab League also is its most populous country with over 80 million people. Egypt considers itself the moral center of the Arab League. Above all, it works to ensure Arab League solidarity against outside actors. In practice, this means support for any measure that enhances the power and importance of the Arab League. While Egypt and its supporter welcome assistance from other countries, they are keenly suspicious of efforts by outsiders to influence the region. Egypt's other major goal is always to maximize pressure on Israel to relinquish its rule over Palestinian people and land, and to relinquish weapons of mass destruction. While Egypt criticizes the Syrian government for its crimes, it does not want to strengthen—even inadvertently—Israel.

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<sup>60</sup> UN Security Council Resolution S/RES/2118 (2013) (New York: United Nations, 27 September 2013), [http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_res\\_2118.pdf](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2118.pdf)

<sup>61</sup> United Nations. Security Council Resolution S/RES/2165 (2014) (New York: United Nations, 14 July 2014). ([http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_res\\_2165.pdf](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2165.pdf))

<sup>62</sup> UN Security Council Resolution S/RES/2209 (2015) (New York: United Nations, 6 March 2015)., [http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_res\\_2209.pdf](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2209.pdf)

[FCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_res\\_2209.pdf](#)

<sup>63</sup> Harb, Imad, 2021. 'Syria's Return to the Arab League Is Imminent', Arab Center Washington DC, 5 October 2021, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/syrias-return-to-the-arab-league-is-imminent/>

<sup>64</sup> Ayton, Matthew, 2022. 'Times have changed': Saudi Arabia-Syria in rapprochement talks', Al Jazeera, 8 June 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/8/times-have-changed-saudi-syria-in-rapprochement-talks>

<sup>65</sup> Alam, Kamal, 2022. 'How UAE's deep ties with Syria came out in the open', MEE, 24 March 2022, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/syria-uae-publicly-embracing-why>

**Jordan and Lebanon:** the countries most affected by the Syrian situation are those who host millions of Syrian refugees. The situation for Jordan and Lebanon is delicate because both have to live next to Syria and accept its influence in their domestic affairs. Lebanon has seen Syria occupy its territory on occasion, and endured wars between Syria and Israel fought on Lebanese territory. Jordan remembers when Palestinian forces, with Syrian support, invaded and tried to take control of the entire country. Both Jordan and Lebanon welcome assistance from other Arab League states to manage their massive refugee problems. They also want to ensure the war does not spill over into their borders.

**Qatar and the United Arab Emirates:** Some of the wealthiest Arab league member states also are the most adamant supporters of aggressive action to solve the problems of the Syrian people. Because they do not border Syria, they have greater freedom of action. The consequences are less likely to affect them directly. Their money has been instrumental in supporting refugees and internally displaced Syrians. They have supported rebel factions in the past and might again. But they are cautious about precedents that could encourage international action to overthrow non-democratic governments, a problem for both of their monarchies.

**Saudi Arabia:** The wealthiest member states of the Arab League is cautious about events in Syria. It supports humanitarian assistance. It is critical of the government of President Assad, which it regards as opposed to traditional Sunni Islam. Saudi Arabia has extreme freedom of action under its de facto ruler, Prince Mohamed

bin Salman. This makes it less predictable than other member states.

**Turkey** is not a member of the Arab League. Since it intervened and took control of Syrian territory and it has become a target of Arab League criticism.<sup>66</sup> Since 2016 Turkey actively intervened in the Syrian conflict, ostensibly to target ISIS and Kurdish separatists who Turkey suspects of terrorist attacks in Turkey. Ankara finds that both groups create a national security threat for Turkey. Turkey remains to be one of the key nations hosting Syrian refugees. Recently Ankara showed signs of intention to reallocate significant number of Syrian refugees to north-east Syria in effort to create a buffer zone between Kurdish forces and the Turkish border.<sup>67</sup>

## VIII. Some proposals for action

Because the Arab League often prizes Arab unity above all, it often refuses to lead on devise problems like Syria. Instead, it stresses issues all Arab States can agree on, especially criticism and isolation of Israel and help for creation of a Palestinian state. Some member states will want to act more aggressively to alleviate the suffering of the Palestinian people. Some might even call for war crimes prosecution of President Assad and his military leaders. But other member states will want nothing to do with criticism of Syria. They will want to keep their traditional focus on the crimes of Israel. They will insist that other countries—especially the wealthy countries of Asia, Europe, and North

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<sup>66</sup> Daily Sabah, 2022. 'Turkey rejects 'unfounded allegations' leveled by Arab League', *Daily Sabah*, 11 March 2022, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkey-rejects-unfounded-allegations-leveled-by-arab-league>

<sup>67</sup> Chulov, Martin, 2022. 'Turkey's rapprochement with Syria leaves regional refugees fearful', *Guardian*, 23 August 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/23/turkey-rapprochement-with-syria-leaves-regional-refugees-fearful>



America—bear more of the costs of humanitarian help.

**Sanctions:** The Arab League has greater discretion than the United Nations. Steps which are impossible in the UN may be possible in the Arab League. In 2017 the United Nations Security Council tried to adopt the resolution drafted by Britain, France and the US to impose international sanctions on the government of Syria over use of chemical weapons. The resolution was vetoed by China and Russia.<sup>68</sup> The Arab League has more flexibility in some respects and can act more creatively. It can target specific Syrian leaders and trade practices. It also can target its financial assistance to support specific groups. Alternatively, the Arab League might choose to support the Syrian government in its battle of self-preservation against ethnic Kurdish, Sunni Islamist, and regional rebels.

**Humanitarian Aid:** Humanitarian needs in Syria are at their highest levels since 2011. Of the 4.1 million people in the northwest who require aid, 2.4 million are reliant solely on the Bab-al Hawa cross-border mechanism. But member states of the Arab League generally believe that humanitarian assistance is the responsibility of the entire international community. Even the wealthiest oil exporters like Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE do not want so much financial responsibility. While Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and others have welcomed Syrian refugees, they wany all countries to help with their support. They may use the Arab League to press for stronger international action through the United Nations. With the mandate for global assistance set to expire in January 2023, the Arab League could

lead demands for greater help from all countries, through the United Nations Security Council. The Arab League cannot demand the Security Council do anything, but they might press aggressively for help and reassurance.

**Monitoring:** In 2011 and 2012 both the United Nations and the Arab League deployed monitoring missions to Syria. However, the escalation of the war made the implementation of the mandates impossible. Nowadays, the war has relatively deescalated and there is potential to deploy new monitoring missions. However, this will require a sustainable ceasefire between the Syrian government and opposing groups.

**Diplomatic support:** In 2015 the Security Council gave a mandate to the United Nations to facilitate a Syrian-led political process. In 2019 the UN Special Envoy for Syria facilitated the establishment of the Syrian-led, Syrian-owned, credible, balanced, and inclusive Constitutional Committee. The Committee serves a platform for negotiations between the Syrian Government, opposition, and civil society.<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, the achievements of the committee are quite marginal. The Arab League can continue to facilitate the negotiations in this format or suggest an alternative, possibly involving the UN.

**Membership:** As a regional organization of Arab states, one of the Arab League's most powerful tools is granting or rescinding state membership to Arab states. Although largely symbolic, it must not be forgotten that the purpose of the Arab League emphasizes symbols of unit and status. Rescinding membership is an important statement to the leadership of Syria, to the other Member States—for whom it shows

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<sup>68</sup> Reuters, 2017. 'Russia and China veto UN resolution to impose sanctions on Syria', Guardian, 28 February 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/01/russia-and-china-veto-un-resolution-to-impose-sanctions-on-syria>

<sup>69</sup> OSES, n.d. 'Constitutional Committee', OSES, n.d., <https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/constitution-al-committee-0>

the limits of what behavior will be accepted and what will not—and to the rest of the world.

If Syria remains a member, other members of the Arab League send a powerful message to the world that Syria's actions are acceptable, are not of concern to the other members of the Arab League, or are best met through talk, not action. If Syria is denied membership, the other members of the Arab League can also tell each other and the world that Syria's actions are acceptable or are not of concern to the other members of the Arab League.

For many member states, Arab solidarity is more important than anything else in the Arab League, especially solidarity against Israel, and to some extent other foreign enemies like Iran. They will not act against Syria without the strongest of reasons. Other Arab League Member States prize principles of international human rights law and international humanitarian law. They will feel compelled to act against Syria's behavior.

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