

# Syria in its fifth year of civil war

## Overview, analysis and thoughts on resolving the conflict

by *Christian-Peter Hanelt*  
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As a result of the Paris terror attacks, the German Federal Armed Forces are supporting the international coalition fighting the so-called “Islamic State” (IS) in Syria since December 2015. This is reason enough to take a closer look at this Middle Eastern country, where civil war broke out in early summer 2011.

After the First World War, the then colonial powers Great Britain and France created a number of countries from what remained of the Ottoman Empire. One of those countries was Syria, a nation of artificial borders. In 1946, Syria gained its independence. The government promoted secularization and saw to it that the benefits of modernization accrued to many, which meant that the country’s twelve different ethnic and religious groups lived together in relative peace until the 1980s. During the rule of the Assad dynasty, however, problems and conflicts arose, culminating in open revolt in 2011.

Corruption and nepotism made it possible for a small number of Syrians to accumulate great wealth. One clan has had a monopoly on political power for a long time: the Assad and Makhlouf families, who belong to the country’s Alawite minority (Shiite spectrum). Both are supported by an apparatus consisting of the military and secret police, and by allies Iran and Russia. Conversely, 50 percent of Syrians are younger than 20 and

have few prospects of finding a job or enjoying economic prosperity. In addition, the country has experienced a long period of drought and an economic crisis, which have led to poverty among the rural population and in Syria’s mid-sized cities, a majority of whose inhabitants are Sunnis.

Syria’s civil war began in 2011 with mass demonstrations, first in remote areas, then in the major cities of Damascus and Aleppo. One of the main demands made by the protesters was political and economic inclusion. The Assad regime quelled the demonstrations using force. The situation escalated into a national civil war which has since become a staging ground for political rivalries between Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, on the one hand, and between the US and Russia, on the other. Against this background, all attempts by the United Nations to negotiate a ceasefire have failed.

### **Syria in its fifth year of war**

Since the civil war erupted at least 250,000 people have been killed in Syria. Twelve million people – approximately half of Syria’s population – are displaced. Of those, eight million are still in Syria and four million have fled to the neighboring countries of Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq, and to nearby regions under Kurdish control. Tens of thousands are fleeing to Europe. The United Nations only has €10, instead of €30, to spend on each refugee in the overfilled camps each day. There are 2.2 million

registered Syrian refugees in Turkey alone, of whom 80 per cent live in precarious situations in Turkish cities, where they are being tolerated as “guests” and where they are not allowed to work legally. Poverty and the lack of a future in the camps are the main reasons why Syrians are now trying to get to Europe.

Large parts of Syria have now been destroyed. The World Bank estimates it will cost €147 billion to rebuild the country. For all intents and purposes, the collapsing nation currently consists of several areas, in particular: the section ruled by the Assad regime; the “Islamic State” (IS) which extends into Iraq; areas under Kurdish control; and areas autonomously held by various rebel groups.

Intense fighting is taking place on the different fronts. Cynical calculations inform events on the ground: While Assad largely deploys barrel bombs, condemned by the international community, against the country’s civilians but spares IS-held areas, Kurds and secular rebels are attempting to fight the jihadists of IS. They, in turn, are terrorizing the population and are systematically destroying and selling off priceless cultural treasures.

Since no support was forthcoming for more moderate and secular opposition groups and for the Free Syrian Army (FSA), many combatants have joined radical Islamist groups such as IS, al-Nusra, Jaish al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham. Assad’s militias are being supported militarily, logistically and financially by Iran’s Revolutionary Guards and Lebanon’s Hezbollah. At the same time, western nations are arming Kurdish peshmerga forces to combat IS militants in Iraq and are carrying out aerial attacks on IS sites. Recently, Russia launched a military and diplomatic offensive in support of the Assad regime, although it is not fighting IS as

much as it is attacking areas held by the secular and Islamist opposition from the air.

### **Rivalries complicate finding a solution**

A number of states are pursuing diametrically opposed goals in Syria. Saudi Arabia is attempting to strengthen the Sunni majority in the country and to roll back Iran’s influence in the region. Conversely, Teheran is siding with the Alawites (Shiite spectrum). Syria is also of key importance to Iran since the routes supplying Hezbollah in Lebanon run directly through the country. The US, in turn, does not want to be drawn into the civil war, but does want to support its allies Israel, Turkey and Saudi Arabia while curtailing Iran’s and Russia’s power in the region.

On the other hand, it is Moscow’s intention to be seen as an equal partner to Washington by shaping developments in the Middle East, maintaining a major military presence in the region, supporting dictatorships of the sort found in Syria and, in light of the Islamists also present in Russia, fighting IS.

Finally, the Turkish government wants to prevent the Kurds from getting any closer to establishing a state in the region, while some Kurdish groups are, in turn, being supplied with weapons by European countries and the US. Paradoxically, Ankara does support the autonomous Kurdish Regional Government in northern Iraq. Consequently, there are tensions between Turkey’s government and the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad.

Now that the Russian air force is intervening in Syria and that IS-held areas are being bombarded more heavily, the Turkish and Syrian air space is becoming increasingly crowded – the downing of a Russian fighter jet by the Turkish air force is just one indication of the immense tensions. At the same time, there are more and more signs

that IS is being thrown back at various fronts due to the international coalition's air strikes. At the same time, terrorists of IS carry out attacks such as the ones in Istanbul und Paris and are expanding within Libya.

### **What might a successful solution look like?**

Ending the conflict in Syria will be extremely difficult. Relatively few promising solutions exist. Here are a number of suggestions:

Technical and financial support for UNHCR, the UN's refugee agency, is essential for reducing the suffering of Syria's civilian population in the short term. This means assisting with the creation of schools and vocational training facilities in its camps.

Following the example of the case against former Serbian president Milošević, the Islamic State's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Syrian dictator Assad should be charged with crimes against humanity at the UN's International Court of Justice in The Hague.

Even though most members of the opposition deem Assad's continuance in office a red line, a possible solution might be to refrain from a 'regime change', which could lead to even more chaos, and to opt for a 'face change'. In combination with a pluralization of the political spectrum one should aim to preserve the remaining state structures.

For an opposition, which is capable of acting, to exist, Western nations must also provide meaningful political, diplomatic and financial support to Syria's secular opposition. This is something that must not be left to Saudi Arabia and Qatar alone.

Since various minorities fear Syria's Sunni majority, the United Nations should consider offering all ethnic and religious groupings security guarantees.

In addition, Syrian cities and towns in the country's north and south that are governed by moderate opposition and civil society groups must finally be protected from the Assad regime's deadly aerial barrel-bomb attacks and the attacks carried out by IS on the ground. This will only be possible through the creation of "buffer zones." Over time, model cities could be established there to provide hope and encourage Syrians to return home.

It is necessary, to deprive IS of its grassroots by presenting local Sunni tribes with an alternative and to deprive IS of its mystique as well as to oppose its online propaganda more resolutely.

Finally, diplomacy has created new hope: The diplomatic momentum generated by the Iranian nuclear agreement in the summer of 2015 has been used by Washington and Moscow to gather 17 states around the bargaining table in Vienna. It is of utmost importance, that regional powers, such as Iran, Saudi-Arabia and Turkey, remain included in the effort of resolving the conflict in Syria. Even though Teheran and Riyadh have cut their diplomatic ties in January 2016, rapprochement between Iran and Saudi-Arabia remains essential in order to establish peace in Syria.

'Realpolitik' also demands the intensification of EU-Turkey relations, both parties' collaboration regarding the refugee crisis, and the opening of further chapters of the accession negotiations. At the same time, Turkey is suffering from the surging costs caused by war and refugees. Therefore, Brussels might be able to influence Ankara's refugee and human rights policies as well as its foreign policies towards the Kurds and Syria.

One tragic aspect is that the European Union has the least political and diplomatic influence in Syria, but, along with Syria's neighbors, is bearing the greatest financial and humanitarian burden of the country's civil war. In contrast, Moscow, Teheran and Riyadh are fueling the conflict but are hardly affected by the ensuing flow of refugees.

### **Further Reading**

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<http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/publications/publication/did/spotlight-europe-022015-a-gulf-csc-could-bring-peace-and-greater-security-to-the-middle-east/>

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