



Security Council

## **Resolving the conflict in Syria and Iraq: an international coalition against ISIS?**

### **Key words**

#### **Salafism and Sayyid Qutb**

Salafism is an intellectual movement that aims to reinterpret early Islam in order to form an “improved” religion. They believe Islam is no longer being practiced correctly and that great political and social changes need to be made regarding this area. Some believe these changes can be achieved through da’wa (preaching/evangelising), while others wish to use violence. Sayyid Qutb is the man most widely blamed for bringing salafism into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His beliefs provided a base for a new generation of jihadist militants, as he believed that many eastern leaders, who consider themselves Muslims, have deviated from the “right path” too much. This is also one of the main reasons why ISIS is considered the most extreme group of radicals even by al-Qaeda. Qutb shared ideas and was in contact with people such as the current al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and has previously been called “the philosopher of the Islamic revolution”.

#### **Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant**

Also known as the ISIL or ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham or Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) it is a militant Islamist extremist group. The previously called ISI became ISIS after joining into Syria in 2011 to fight president Assad. It appears that the Islamic State’s main aim is to continue with taking over Iraq territory and spreading their caliphate, which was officially established in 2014. ISIS reportedly also has plans on breaking borders into more surrounding countries including Palestine. The de-facto caliphate capital, a city in Syria called Al-Raqqah, and has become a target of many airstrikes. ISIS has gradually gained great amounts of media attention, which can partially be attributed to videos of beheadings, which they post online.

#### **Caliphate**

The word “caliph” comes from the Arabic khalifa, meaning “successor”. A Caliphate is a state that is governed by laws that are defined in accordance with Islamic ethics. ISIS claims to have restored a caliphate in 2014, which has great theological and ideological implications, meaning The Islamic State has declared Abu Bakr al-Bagdadi not only its leader, but also the leader of all Islam.

#### **Conflict in Syria – a short recapitulation**

The unrest of the Syrian Civil war began in the spring of 2011 in the context of the Arab Spring. Starting with the pro-democrats protesting in the city of Deraa after the torture of pupils, who had sprayed revolutionary slogans on the wall of their school, by the beginning of 2016 it has managed to evolve not only into a proxy war of major Arab powers and Iran, but a global issue, heavily affecting countries outside the region. It is therefore important to identify the main factors affecting its progression. Amongst them, the fact that it is not a simple conflict between the president's opponents and supporters, along with the influence of the Kurdish population, the Russian intervention, and the rise of the so-called Islamic state all dramatically increase its severeness. This should consequently also increase the UN’s urge to provide a solution as soon as possible.

The complexity of the war can be illustrated in Figure 1. To this day about 250 000 people have been killed.

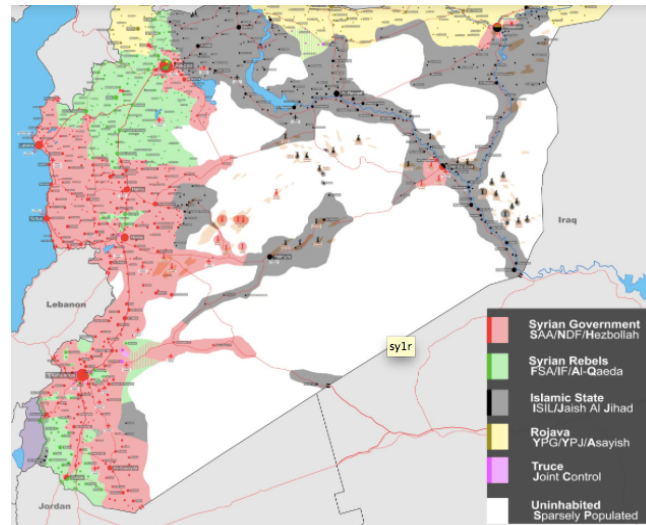


Figure 1 - The division of power in Syria

Although there has been a nationwide protest against Syria’s president Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian Interim Government is the only one to have responded violently. As a result, over a short period of several months, protests have escalated into an increasingly more complex armed conflict. As this is not solely a conflict between armies and many deaths include those of ordinary civilians, it has led to massive emigration. More than 4.5 million people have fled Syria, of which about 10% are currently causing disputes in Europe. Most refugees have fled to the neighbouring countries, which is causing further instability of the region. For example, 1 of 6 of citizens of Lebanon is now a Syrian refugee.

The number of immigrants in countries can be seen in Figure 2.

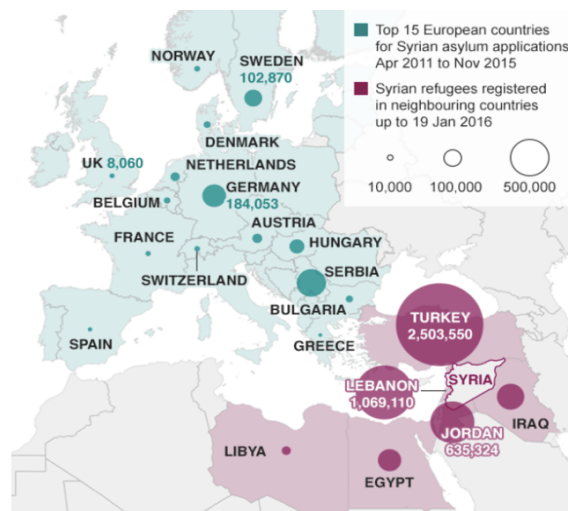


Figure 2 - Map showing the division of immigrants

The incoherent and inconsistent opposition to Mr. Assad is the main reason why these disputes have lasted with such intensity for a long period of time. Though the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, which is supported by the US and several Gulf states, is currently the most prominent opposition force, it has been rejected by some of the opponents. Furthermore, so far all Peace Talks have been ineffective. For example, the ones in early 2014, also

known as Geneva II, broke down because UN special envoy Lakhdar Brahimi blamed the Syrian government for refusing to discuss opposition demands.

In June 2014, with the rise of the Islamic state, the Syrian civil war escalated to a new level. Many of the fighters of the IS got involved in a “war within a war” in Syria, where they fought not only against Assad and the government, but also against rebels, the Kurds and rival jihadists from the al-Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front. In September 2014 there was an effort to destroy the IS once and for all. This included bombing raids by an America-led Coalition (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates), which was aimed not only at oil installations. This opposition’s failure was partially caused by US’s unwillingness to directly help the Syrian government.

Currently considered the largest ethnicity group without a state of their own, the Kurds play a crucial role in the development of unrests in the Middle East. There are around 30 million of them living in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and mostly the north of Syria, making up between 15 to 20 per cent of the entire Syrian population. After the killing of five people by the Syrian security forces took place during their leader Mashaal Tammo’s funeral procession, the Kurds frequently lead and involved themselves in the protests of 2011. This event triggered greater, organised demonstrations, which mark the beginning of the Syrian Uprising and have over time formed into the most consistent ISIS opposition force. While fighting for political autonomy of the areas in which they live, Syrian Kurds are actively working together with the newly formed Syrian National Council (hereby SNC) on destroying ISIS. However, they do not fully trust the SNC and often question its aims and goals, as they are not well represented in all decision-making bodies. They only have an estimated 22 seats in the 230-member body of the SNC’s General Assembly. Furthermore, as destroying ISIS might encourage Kurdish ambitions to establish an independent state in Turkey as well, the Turks have held back in fighting against the Islamic State. This has recently changed to the better as Turkey has sealed a deal with the US on setting up an “ISIS-free” bombardment zone along the northern borders of Syria, which would also become a zone free of the Kurdish militia, despite the fact that the Kurds intended on battling the Islamic State there. In order for the SNC to become internationally recognised and supported in addition to earning the allegiance of a critical mass of the Syrian population, it must work alongside the Syrian Kurds.

It is time the UN fully realises that the increasing amount of armed conflicts, especially in the Middle East, is a fundamental threat to the security of all peoples and nations. We must provide an effective solution as soon as possible as this conflict is rapidly spreading and directly affecting an increasing amount of countries. No longer are only the neighbouring ones struggling with refugees and terroristic threats, but as events of the past couple of years (especially the ones of Paris in November of 2015) have shown very clearly, they are heavily affecting Europe’s stability. The continuing view of nations that they can achieve their goals through military force combined with their stubborn approach and ill will calls for direct action. It is crucial for the UN to consider new strategies and approaches as it has a pivotal role to play in tackling the deepening crisis and possibly preventing a greater, worldwide one.

## **Key countries**

### **Russia**

Russia is one of the president's Assad’s most important international supporters. As Russia wields the veto power, the Russian diplomats have so far blocked any resolution critical of Mr. Assad in the UN Security council. Moreover, they continue to supply the Syrian government with weapons despite international criticism. The intention of Russia is not completely understood, however, it is believed that Putin wants to protect the key naval facility Tartous, which is Russia's only Mediterranean base, along with the air facility in Latakia. Putin has claimed to be fighting “all terrorist”, however there is evidence showing that he is protecting Assad's territory. As an example Russia's current main targets including Rastan, Aidoun or Talbisah are nowhere near major IS

strongholds located in the north. Even more alarming news include reports from several Western-backed groups, which have claimed to have been attacked. As a response Russia has rejected accusations of war crimes over the bombing of hospitals during recent events. It is also important to know that President Putin recently ordered the withdrawal of most of the Russian forces from Syria as he claims that the mission set for the Russian militia had been accomplished.

### **United States of America**

The US believes that president Assad is responsible for atrocity of the civil war and that he must be removed. President Obama has said: "The future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way. His calls for dialogue and reform have rung hollow while he is imprisoning, torturing, and slaughtering his own people. We have consistently said that President Assad must lead a democratic transition or get out of the way. He has not led. For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside." This supports the national coalition and supplies "moderate" rebels in limited measures as the US still worries that the supplies could fall into the hands of ISIS. As mentioned before, the US has been conducting bombing attacks on the jihadists of ISIS, however it is still avoiding attacks that may benefit president Assad.

### **Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia is a Sunni ruled kingdom, which believes Assad must to be removed by any measures, regardless of whether they are diplomatic or military. At the moment it is the major provider of military and financial assistance to many rebel groups. In 2013 Saudi Arabia was shocked by Obama's decision not to intervene in Syria after president Assad used chemical weapons. In 2015 Saudi Arabia had supported rebel groups including the JaF (Jaish al-Fatah also known as the Army of Conquest, which reportedly includes an [Al-Qaeda](#)-linked [Al-Nusra Front](#) and has been declared a [terrorist](#) organisation by the United States). However, at the beginning of 2016 about 30 Sunni-lead Muslim countries decided to fight international terrorism and in early February of 2016 a Saudi military official announced, "The kingdom is ready to participate in any ground operations that the coalition (against ISIS) may agree to carry out in Syria.

### **Iran and Hezbollah**

As one of the Shia powers Iran openly supports president Assad by giving him both military and financial aid. This has influenced the Hezbollah's decision to send troops to help the Syrian government and army. One of the reasons Iran is so fond of Mr Assad are the opportunities created for them to send over weapons, fuelling the Lebanese Shia Hezbollah movement. Although Iran supports Syria it has signed on to the road map based on the [2012 Geneva Communiqué](#) that was agreed upon during the two rounds of [Syria talks](#) in Vienna towards the end of 2015.

### **Turkey**

Before any major conflicts had started, Turkey and Syria had friendly relations - Turkey initially objected president Assad's resignation. However, as disputes in the region have escalated into armed conflicts, Turkey now believes that the transgressor responsible for killing 250 000 has to be immediately removed. Another reason behind their significantly worsened relations are Syrian forces as they shot down a Turkish jet in 2012. President Erdogan is currently militarily and financially supporting Syrian rebels and training a Free Syrian Army out of the refugees. Along with that Turkey still maintains a small enclave within Syria itself, called the [Tomb of Suleyman Shah](#). There are currently 30 soldiers in the tomb and Syria has been reminded that since the territory belongs to Turkey, it therefore also belongs to NATO.

Russian and American officials claim to have found proof that Turkey is providing financial aid to ISIS and that by ignoring their border security they have allowed many jihadists through into Syria. Turkey, however, joined the US-lead coalition to bomb ISIL and has previously let the US use their base for bomb attacks on ISIL.

**Sources and links:**

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- <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2672.aspx>
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**Recent action taken by the UN:**

- <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/17/united-nations-plan-islamic-state-funding-terrorist-group-al-qaida>
- <http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12168.doc.htm>
- <http://www.un.org/press/en/2016/sc12261.doc.htm>

(The last two include statements made by several countries, which might help you with your individual research.)