

Conflict in Syria

Since its beginnings in 2011, the conflict in Syria has cost more than 250 000 lives and over 4 million Syrians have been forced to seek security in neighbouring countries – primarily in Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon. A further 7.6 million people are displaced within Syria. The rise of ISIL/Da'esh and other jihadist groups has aggravated the situation. Despite this humanitarian and security crisis, however, progress towards a political settlement to the conflict has been slow.

Towards a diplomatic solution?

The main impediment to a diplomatic solution in Syria is to find middle ground between two [conflicting visions](#) of Syria's future: with or without Bashar al-Assad. Neither past attempts by the Arab League nor the peace initiative [launched](#) by Russia and Iran in 2014 have found a solution. The [Geneva II Peace Conference](#) convened by the UN, the United States and Russia in January 2014 aimed to provide new impetus to the implementation of the 2012 [Geneva Communiqué](#) but the talks broke down after only two rounds. On 29 July 2015, the UN Security Council [endorsed](#) a [new approach](#) proposed by the UN Special Envoy for the Syrian crisis, Staffan de Mistura. It foresees establishing intra-Syrian working groups to steer the consultations towards a 'Syrian-owned framework document' on the implementation of the Geneva Communiqué. Four specific working groups will focus on: safety and protection, counterterrorism, political and legal issues, and reconstruction. The heads of the working groups were [announced](#) in September 2015.

Protection of civilians: an urgent task

With the diplomatic efforts underway, the situation of civilians in Syria and in neighbouring countries requires urgent improvement. The [report](#) of the UN Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions [2139 \(2014\)](#), [2165 \(2014\)](#) and [2191 \(2014\)](#) presented in July 2015 left no illusion: all parties to the Syrian conflict disregard the rules of international humanitarian law and their obligation to protect civilians. In August, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted [Resolution 2235 \(2015\)](#) establishing a mechanism to identify perpetrators using chemical weapons in Syria. 'Weapons and money flowing into the country are fuelling the fire', [says](#) UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon. Two military operations are currently under way in Syria: a multinational US-led [coalition](#) against ISIL/Da'esh and the [airstrikes](#) launched on 30 September by the Russian air force. The situation might improve, if the recent [ceasefire deal](#) facilitated by the United Nations and brokered with the help of Turkey and Qatar is respected. Moreover, Turkey has long campaigned for a 'safe zone' to be created in northern Syria – an idea [relaunched](#) at the 70th UN General Assembly but which so far has gained little traction. At the same time, ISIL/Da'esh and other jihadist groups continue to exploit the governance vacuum and spread terror.

The EU's position

The [conclusions](#) of the Foreign Affairs Council of 16 March 2015 reiterate that a lasting solution requires a Syrian-led 'sustainable and inclusive' political process leading to a transition, and that the Assad regime cannot be a partner in the fight against ISIL/Da'esh. The Council also adopted the Regional [Strategy](#) for Syria and Iraq as well as the ISIL/Da'esh threat, which provides the political framework for EU actions: humanitarian aid, preventing regional spill-overs, and countering terrorism. To date, the [relief and recovery](#) assistance provided by the EU and its Member States to Syrians and Syrian refugees amounts to €4.2 billion. This effort is complemented by the EU's Regional Trust Fund ([Madad Fund](#)) with an initial budget of €40 million. The informal meeting of EU Heads of State or Government on migration held on 23 September [resulted](#) in several decisions, including additional funding. On 29 September, the EU and Jordan [co-chaired](#) the Informal Ministerial-Level Meeting on the Syrian Crisis in New York. The EU was represented by HR/VP Federica Mogherini, Commissioner Johannes Hahn, and Commissioner Christos Stylianides.