

## Syria: Turning commitments into action

What started as local anti-government protests in the city of Daraa in 2011 quickly evolved into a popular uprising. The conflict has since cost the lives of 470 000 people and resulted in the displacement of almost 11 million. This is no longer a revolution but an internationalised conflict hijacked by big-power politics, and Syrians and their neighbouring countries are paying the price.

### Syria in 2011: a perfect storm

The conflict in Syria has its [roots](#) in structural and [economic](#) problems that were already widespread in Syria in the early 2000s. Prior to the violent uprising of 2011, the countries of the greater Fertile Crescent had experienced one of the most severe [droughts](#) in history. Between 2006 and 2009 the income of over 75 641 affected households decreased by 90% and their assets and sources of livelihood were severely compromised, resulting in large-scale migration out of the affected areas to urban areas (figures range from 40 000 to 60 000 families). A [reallocation](#) of resources and capital to the military resulted in the growth of black markets, disrespect for the rule of law, and increasing dependence on external support. After promises of reforms in 2011, Bashar Assad's regime resorted to violent [methods](#) of repression escalating the spiral of violence and leading to the biggest humanitarian crisis since World War II.

### Syria in 2016: in a search of a political solution

Despite many years of diplomatic efforts – including the [Six-Point Proposal](#) by Special Envoy Kofi Annan and the Arab League's 2012 [peace initiative](#) – the main political challenge in Syria remains the same: to design a political transition process acceptable to all sides of the conflict. In the light of limited progress towards implementation of the 2012 [Geneva Communiqué](#) – which called for the establishment of a transitional governing body, review of the constitutional order and free elections – in August 2015 the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) [endorsed](#) a [new approach](#) presented by UN Special Envoy for the Syrian crisis, Staffan de Mistura. Building on this process, the United States and Russia, a group of 17 countries (including Saudi Arabia and Iran), plus the EU, the UN and the Arab League [formed](#) the International Syria Support Group (ISSG). The ISSG joint [statement](#) of 14 November 2015 served as a basis for the [first](#) UN Security Council [Resolution 2254](#), adopted on 18 December 2015, laying out a possible political solution to the conflict in Syria, including establishing 'credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance' and UN-administered elections. The process has recently suffered some setbacks owing to violations of the cessation of hostilities agreement from February 2016 and [difficulties](#) with engaging Assad's regime and the opposition in direct talks.

#### *External military involvement*

Instability in Syria has provided fertile ground for the operations of jihadi groups like Jabhat al Nusra and ISIL/Da'esh, which have in turn led to the military involvement of several external powers. The United States [mounted](#) a 65-nation global [coalition](#) against ISIL/Da'esh in September 2014, with 22 coalition members currently engaged in the military operation [Inherent Resolve](#). Several EU Member States, including the [United Kingdom](#), [France](#) and [Germany](#), are currently militarily involved in Syria, albeit to different degrees (e.g. [airstrikes](#) against Syrian targets – including the oilfields under ISIL/Da'esh control, [command centres](#), recruitment sites for jihadists, a munitions depot – and [reconnaissance](#) missions). The declared aim of fighting ISIL/Da'esh has also prompted other external actors to increase their involvement – most notably [Russia](#), [Turkey](#) and [Iran](#) – although the real reasons for their presence have often been questioned. Russia and Iran, in particular, have been criticised for providing the Assad regime with military [support](#) and for attempting to change the conditions on the [ground](#) to his advantage.



### *The humanitarian situation*

Since 2011, as the result of internal repression and the unfolding conflict, about 4.6 million Syrians have fled the country, seeking refuge across the region – primarily in Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon. Another 6.5 million people have been internally displaced, while about 394 000 people live in [besieged areas](#) in Syria. It has been [estimated](#) that, as of February 2016, 470 000 civilians had been killed. Extensive human rights violations and war crimes have been [documented](#) in the reports of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. In July 2015, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon described the ongoing conflict as a 'slaughter' and a 'shameful symbol of the international community's divisions and failure'. The UN [reports](#) on the implementation of UNSC Resolutions on the situation in Syria have regularly highlighted that hostilities by all parties continue to feature 'widespread disregard for the rules of international humanitarian law and the parties' obligation to protect civilians'. [Targeting](#) of humanitarian workers and civilian buildings further aggravates the humanitarian situation on the ground.

### *Regional spill-overs*

Directly affected by the humanitarian disaster, Syria's neighbours are also struggling with the consequences of the conflict and have taken the driving seat in designing an adequate response. Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt have each become home to hundreds of thousands of Syrians. A fragile situation in host countries in the region has shifted the focus of many donor agencies to [building resilience](#). The World Bank and UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) are trying to [minimise risks](#) and build resilience in host communities, to ensure that local services and local people in countries neighbouring Syria are not overwhelmed by the numbers of refugees arriving on their doorstep. However, with [needs](#) rapidly increasing, many countries and donor agencies are facing [funding shortages](#). The Regional Refugee and [Resilience](#) Plan in response to the Syria Crisis and the 2016 Syria [Humanitarian](#) Response Plan are underfunded, with just 19% and 29% of funding covered respectively.

## The European Union's response

The EU has tried to influence the regime in Damascus by progressively expanding targeted [sanctions](#) and inflicting substantial [damage](#) on regime-affiliated businesses. The EU has repeatedly [stated](#) that the regime bears primary responsibility for the conflict and that its actions are fuelling extremism and undermining potential political transition. The EU has also regularly [called](#) for the regime to stop targeting civilians and halt airstrikes and artillery attacks, and for an immediate end to all violence. A broader policy framework has been defined in the EU Regional Strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the ISIL/Da'esh threat – [adopted](#) in 2015 and [revised](#) in May 2016. The strategy reiterates that the political process launched by the ISSG – and acknowledged in UNSC resolutions 2254 (2015) and [2268](#) (2016) – is the only way to put an end to the conflict. The EU's collective humanitarian, development, economic and stabilisation [assistance](#) to Syrians and Syrian refugees amounts to over €8 billion, including €3 billion pledged at the London ['Supporting Syria and the Region'](#) conference. In addition, to allow for a more flexible and speedy response to shifting needs, the EU [established](#) the [Madad Fund](#), with the overall [objective](#) of supporting the resilience of refugees from Syria, as well as that of the communities and administrations hosting them. As of 20 May 2016, pledges and contributions to the fund amounted to a total of €733 million of the €1 billion target.

## Outlook: is there a plan?

A lot of effort over the past five years has gone into working out various solutions that could bring an end to the suffering of the Syrian people. Hardly any of them, however, have brought tangible results. While a political solution to the conflict is still a distant idea, all efforts in the coming months should focus on implementing the commitments already made:

- **Political goals:** resumption of political intra-Syrian negotiations; support for Syrian civil society as partners in the political transition; confidence building measures, including the release of detainees.
- **Humanitarian goals:** delivering humanitarian aid to besieged areas through rapid, safe and unhindered access for humanitarian agencies, including via air drops and air lifts if necessary; support for neighbouring countries as agreed at the London conference.
- **Security goals:** refraining from further militarisation and escalation of the conflict, in particular from the Assad regime's forces; full implementation of the cessation of hostilities agreement.