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 ceasefire deal 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 launched 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.