Introduction

The situation in Syria has been steeped in a multifaceted conflict involving multiple countries with their own political gains. After the Assad regime violently suppressed ongoing pro-democracy protests in March of 2011, the country has been engrossed in an eight year-long civil war with more than 370,000 people dead, including 112,000 civilians. Since then, several neighbouring countries and extremist groups have joined the conflict, influencing the involvement of larger nations, such as the United States, creating a complicated proxy war. The criss-crossing interventions have sparked international tensions and issues, such as the Syrian refugee crisis, the emergence of extremist groups, the use of chemical weapons, and a nationwide humanitarian crisis.

The Syrian refugee crisis has become the largest refugee and displacement crisis, with around 6.7 million Syrians classified as refugees and another 6.2 million internally displaced within Syria. In order to escape the violence and build a better future, millions of families have sought refuge in neighbouring countries, such as Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq, whilst others ventured towards European nations. This has sparked major controversy between nations surrounding the sustainability and their capability of hosting such a number of displaced people in their society, where they face avid discrimination and lack of economic opportunities.

The war torn nation of Syria has provoked international coordination on the deescalation of conflict and potential peace settlements between the combatants. However, the difference in political interests between all parties involved has lead to extreme difficulties and impracticalities in coordinating such a settlement. The recurring use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime and the threat of extremist groups only further complicate this seemingly unresolvable war.
Definition of Key Terms

Refugee

As defined by the UNHCR, a refugee is “someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence”. Refugees are unable to return to their home country or are afraid to do so. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. Refugees differ from asylum seekers, who are migrants that may be a refugee or displaced person, but whose claim has not yet been evaluated.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDP)

As defined by the UNHCR an internally displaced person (IDP) is “someone who has been forced to flee their homes but never cross an international border”. The individual may seek safety in nearby towns, settlements, forests, or internal camps. IDPs are not protected by international law as they are legally under the protection of their own government.

Chemical Weapons (CW)

As defined by Article II of Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), a chemical weapon (CW) can be classified in three parts, either together or separately. These include toxic chemicals and their precursors, munitions or devices, and equipment ‘directly in connection’ with munitions and devices. Toxic chemicals that can cause death, temporary incapacitation, or permanent harm. Precursors are the chemicals required for the production of toxic chemicals. Munitions or devices are specifically designed to inflict harm through the release of toxic chemicals. Equipment in connection with munitions and devices are specifically designed for the employment of said munitions.

In Syria, Assad's government is accused of using Sarin, a highly toxic nerve agent that can lead to constant stimulation of muscles, leading to exhaustion, the inability to breathe, and death.

Shia and Sunni Muslims

Shia and Sunni are the two major sects of Islam, differing in doctrine, law and theology, but sharing fundamental beliefs and practices. Sunnis comprise 85% to 90% of Muslims (around 1.5 billion), making up most of the population in countries such as Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. The Shia comprise 10% of all Muslims (around 200 million) and make up the majority in countries such as Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, and Azerbaijan. In countries governed by Sunnis, Shia tend to make up the poorest groups of society and are denounced as heretics. Thus, there is ongoing conflict and tensions between the two Muslim groups in several nations.
Proxy War

An armed conflict between groups or smaller countries that represent the interest of larger powers. These conflicts are instigated by opposing powers who indirectly fight one another through enlisting third parties to do it for them. Throughout history, proxy wars have been instigated by the US and the Soviet Union, but are now common between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Background Information

The Roots and Beginning of the Syrian Civil War

President Bashar al-Assad assumed power in 2000, after the death of his father, who had ruled Syria since 1971. Whilst most of the nation comprised of Sunni Muslims, the Assad family were part of the Alawite minority, which dominated the regime’s security forces and militias. During his rule, private investment benefited the upper-middle class, leading to a population surge and creating vast inequality which caused the lack of food, jobs, and schools. These conditions and a lack of political freedom inspired the Arab Spring protests of 2010-2011 to spread into Syria. In March of 2011, pro-democracy demonstrations began in the city of Deraa and was responded to with violence in an attempt to repress the protests.

Early Conflicts and Factions

By August 2011, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) had formed, an anti-Assad militia comprised of army defectors, volunteers, and other armed groups. Their aim is to be the “military wing of the Syrian people’s opposition to the Assad regime”. In October 2015, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) was established, consisting of groups such as the People’s Protection Units (YPG) and Women’s Protection Units (YPJ). They followed the same goals to free the country from Assad’s regime using military force.

The United States, the EU, and the Arab League introduced sanctions towards senior members of the Assad regime and called for Assad to step down as President. However, Syria’s allies, Iran and Russia, gave their support, forging the international divisions and sides that will remain throughout the conflict.

The Assad regime, under the pressure of the civil war, has several goals. These primarily revolve around maintaining territory, alliances, and government. The regime is determined to ensure its personal survival and remaining as an autonomous government, as seen in its heavy military efforts and strong alliances with several countries.
Meanwhile, the Kurdish groups of Syria secede from Assad’s rule in the north in 2012. Ethnically and linguistically a distinct group, they have been long suppressed and devoid of basic fundamental rights. The Kurds represent most of the fighting forces for the YPG and SDF and have established a self-governing region known as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. Although they have established their own political presence, the Kurds have avoided over-entanglement in the conflict and are awaiting a chance for autonomy.

**The Emergence and Threat of Extremist Groups**

The Syrian Civil War has attracted extremists groups to enlist into the FSA, resulting in the emergence of several jihadist and al-Qaeda affiliated groups. This has limited the willingness of countries, specifically the USA, to directly assist the FSA and anti-Assad groups, at risk of indirectly supporting terrorism. The emergence of the incidents and atrocities perpetrated by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS or ISIL) since 2014 caused the US to redirect its efforts to counter them.

![Diagram of foreign involvement in the Syrian civil war](Source: Wikimedia, 2015)

**Military Intervention in Syria**
The Syrian Civil War evolved into a complicated proxy war by early 2012. These alliances and divisions have been strengthened over the years, with all sides contributing more military forces towards Syria. In total, this has lead to a death toll of more than 370,000 with around 112,000 civilians.

![Map of military involvement in the Syrian War](source: Wikimedia, 2015)

**Figure 2: Map of military involvement in the Syrian War (Source: Wikimedia, 2015)**

**Use of Chemical Weapons**

Syria has had a strong chemical weapons program that has existed since the 1980s as a deterrent to Israeli nuclear weapons. In 2013, a French intelligence report found 10,000 tonnes of nerve agents and their precursors in Syria’s stockpile. Despite ratifying the Chemical Weapons convention in 2013, the Syrian government was accused of one of the deadliest chemical attacks the same year. The nerve agent, sarin, was employed on the Ghouta agricultural belt around Damascus on the 21st of August. The death toll reached more than 1,300 and at least 3,600 patents were displaying “neurotoxic symptoms”.

Another instance occurred on 4th of April, 2017, when more than 80 people were killed on the rebel-held town of Khan Sheikhoun. The most recent instance occurred on the 7th of April, 2018, when more than 40 people died from chlorine attacks on the rebel-held town of Douma. Despite evidence accusing the Syrian government of fault, they have denied any allegations, claiming that the attacks were mere fabrications.

These chemical attacks have received condemnation from the EU, the USA, and most of the world apart from Syria’s allies. With Russia and China having veto powers in the Security Council, it has been difficult for any action to be taken against the Syrian government over the alleged use of chemical weapons.

**Military Action in Idlib**
Idlib is a major city captured by rebel forces in 2015. As of August, 2019, it currently stands as the last rebel-held city in Syria and one of the last regions of heavy fighting. On April 26th 2019, Russian jets joined the Syrian army as part of a campaign which targeted hospitals and residential buildings, killing 544 civilians, including 130 children. The Russian and Syrian army deny any allegations over their indiscriminate attacks. With the conflict lasting for months on end, it is a slow war of attrition to place pressure on the rebel factions. The campaign has forced at least 300,000 people to evacuate their homes towards areas of relative safety along the Turkish-Syrian border.

The Syrian Refugee Crisis and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

The Syrian Refugee Crisis is the result of the Syrian Civil War, causing millions of Syrians to flee their country due to extended violence and conflict. Refugees are a difficult matter as they involve the cooperation of other countries and intricate issues such as cultural assimilation and societal reintegration. Out of 6 million Syrians, half of the country’s pre-war population, most (around 5 million) have left to neighbouring countries and whilst others (around 1 million) towards Europe. Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq host 3.4 million, 1 million, 660,000, and 250,000 respectively.

The Problem of Refugees

Syrian refugees face a number of challenges in the neighbouring countries of Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq. These countries have different policies and laws towards refugees. Typically, Syrian refugees have limited access to work, education, and healthcare, but this will differ from country to country. The general living conditions of refugees in these countries are poor and are in constant need of humanitarian aid.
Refugees heading to Europe cross the Mediterranean Sea on the boats of smugglers, resulting in over 2,700 people who are believed to have died or have gone missing along the route. In 2015, Germany, Sweden, and Austria updated their policies, becoming the main destination for asylum seekers. However, there is conflicting public opinion and significant political views over the impact and sustainability on Europe’s ability to house Syrian refugees.

The Problem of IDPs

Out of the 6.1 million IDPs in Syrian, around 870,000 were living in “last resort sites” along the Turkish-Syrian border. IDPs living in official camps and informal settlements face overcrowding, with some sites at 400% capacity. The IDP situation in Syria is only worsened by the deliberate targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure such as schools and healthcare facilities. Deescalation zones negotiated between Turkey, Russia, and Iran in 2018 were established in the provinces of Idlib and eastern Ghouta. However, renewed government offensives and campaigns in the zones the year after ruined any hopes of potential settlements for IDPs.

The Golan Heights

The Golan is a key strategic position that was originally Syrian territory in 1967, but was occupied and later annexed by Israel in the Six-Day War. The 1981 annexation was not internationally recognised and the UN Security Council deemed Israeli sovereignty over the area to be null. Indirect and direct peace talks between Israel and Syria over the exchange of territory have failed to reach any agreements. Out of the 40,000 people living in Golan, around half are Jewish settlers. On the 25th of March, 2019, President Donald Trump announced that the US recognises the Golan Heights as a part of Israel. By doing so, it sets a precedent that territory can be captured in war, violating international law. All 28 member states of the European Union declared that they did not recognise Israeli sovereignty.
Major Countries and Organizations Involved

The Syrian Government

The Syrian government is an authoritarian government with most of the political power held by the Assad family. Threatened by protests calling for democracy, the regime responded with violence, starting the civil war. They have been actively involved as the opposition to the rebels, sending thousands of armed forces to maintain the regime's territory. In recent years, they have succeeded in regaining major cities and territories with the help of allies such as Russia and Iran.

Syrian Democratic Forces and Kurds

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) is a Kurdish-led military alliance that played a key role in fighting ISIS in Syria. They control most of Northern Syria and number 25,000 fighters from at least 15 armed factions and are backed by the US. Their goal is to establish a democratic and federal territory in the Rojava region in the north.

Free Syrian Army

The Free Syrian Army (FSA) is a loose faction founded by the opposition movement from the 2011 uprising against President Bashar al-Assad. They were first organised by army defectors in August of 2011 and gained thousands of volunteers. The army consists mostly of Sunni muslims from different countries. The FSA's main goal is to free Syria from Assad's regime and establish a more democratic government system. The FSA's leadership is decentralised and has the presence of Islamists extremists, as certain militias, such as the Al Nusra Front, are affiliated with Al Qaeda.

Saudi Arabia and Iran

Iran and Saudi Arabia are supporting the Assad regime and Syrian rebels respectively as a result of long-standing tensions between Shia and Sunni muslims. Both countries have contributed significant funds and military aid towards the Syrian War, with the Iranian government spending at least $6 billion USD annually on maintaining Assad’s government whilst the Saudi government supplies various military arms and funds through Jordan.

The United States and The Russian Federation

The involvement of the US has been very dynamic throughout the war. The Obama administration originally joined to respond to the humanitarian crisis instigated by the Assad regime but shifted its focus to fighting ISIS in 2014. The US, along with its other allies, has also imposed several sanctions on the Assad administration. When the Trump administration took over the US, they had
initially vowed to stay out of the Syrian War. The ‘defeat’ of ISIS convinced the US to order the withdrawal of 2,000 US troops in Syria.

After the 2017 chemical attacks, the Trump administration responds by launching 59 Tomahawk missiles into a Syrian airbase. This was met with worldwide controversy, with Russia claiming the strikes as “aggression against a sovereign state in violation of international law and under a false pretext”. In 2018, the US, UK, and France launched more than 100 missiles on alleged Syrian chemical weapons facilities after the Douma incident.

![Map of countries' stances on US airstrikes on Syria](source: The New York Times, 2018)

The Russian Federation has been involved in the Syrian Civil War since the beginning, supplying arms and equipment to the Assad regime. Russian military intervention started in 2015, when the Syrian government requested military aid against rebel groups. Its goals were to fight against terrorist organisations, such as ISIS, and reclaim territory from anti-government groups. The intervention allowed for the Syrian government to recapture Palmyra from ISIS in March 2016 and the major city of Aleppo in December 2016. Recently, Russian air forces have been involved with the military campaign against Idlib, targeting civilian areas and healthcare facilities.
## Timeline of Events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Description of event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>A military coup reestablished Syria as an independent country, and a new civilian government is formed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>A coalition of military officers, including Baathist and Nasserist officers, seized power in March. The Baathist faction takes control soon after.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>Israel seized the Golan Heights from Syria.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>Assad took power in a coup, ousting the previous Jadid government.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June, 2000</td>
<td>President Assad dies and Bashar Al-Assad succeeded as President.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March, 2011</td>
<td>Pro-democracy demonstrations in cities around Syria are violently suppressed by the Syrian government, sparking the civil war.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May, 2011</td>
<td>The European Union and the US imposed an arms embargo, travel restrictions, and asset freezes to senior Syrian officials, extending to Assad himself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 29, 2011</td>
<td>The Free Syrian Army is formed by defectors from the Syrian military.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 3, 2011</td>
<td>The UN Security Council condemned the Syrian government for its use of violence against protestors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 18, 2011</td>
<td>Heads of state from the US, Germany, France, and the UK called for Assad to step down as president.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July, 2012</td>
<td>The FSA seized parts of the city of Aleppo in the north.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November, 2012</td>
<td>Syrian opposition leaders announced the formation of a new coalition called the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 21, 2013</td>
<td>The nerve agent, sarin, was employed on the Ghouta agricultural belt, resulting in 1,300 deaths. the use of chemical weapons spark major controversy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 22, 2014</td>
<td>An international conference, Geneva II, is held to negotiate an end to the conflict, but no progress is made.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 30, 2014</td>
<td>The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) overran Mosul, gaining significant territory in their caliphate and establishing themselves as a prominent group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 30, 2015</td>
<td>Russian military intervention began with airstrikes against anti-Assad rebels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December, 2016</td>
<td>The Syrian government, along with Russian air power and Iranian-sponsored militias, recaptured Aleppo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 4, 2017</td>
<td>Chemical weapons are used on the rebel-held town of Khan Sheikhoun, with 80 deaths from a sarin-like substance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 7, 2017</td>
<td>The US launched 59 Tomahawk missiles on Syrian air bases in response.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 7, 2018</td>
<td>Chemical attacks on the rebel-held town of Douma resulted in 40 deaths.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Hague International Model United Nations, Singapore 2019 | XV Annual Session

April 14, 2018
The US, UK, and France launched more than 100 missiles on alleged Syrian chemical weapons facilities.

October 15, 2018
A deescalation buffer zone is implemented in and around Idlib, negotiated between Russia, Turkey, and Iran.

March 25, 2019
President Donald Trump announces that the US recognises Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights.

April-June, 2019
Russian air forces and a campaign by the Syrian government launches heavy bombardment onto Idlib, targeting civilian sites.

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

List of previous relevant UN Security Council resolutions on Syria:

- **14 April 2012 - S/RES/2042** - Authorised the dispatch of an advance team of up to 30 unarmed military observers to Syria to monitor compliance with the ceasefire agreement.

- **27 September 2013 - S/RES/2118** - Required the verification and destruction of Syria’s chemical weapons stockpiles, called for Geneva II peace talks, and outlines a plan for the transitional governing body in Syria with full executive powers.

- **22 February 2014 - S/RES/2139** - Demanded that all parties allow humanitarian access in Syria across conflict lines, in besieged areas, and across borders.

- **6 March 2015 - S/RES/2209** - Condemned any use of toxic chemicals and stressed that those responsible should be held accountable.

- **20 November 2015 - S/RES/2249** - Called for member states to take action against the territory under the control of ISIS and to prevent terrorist attacks by ISIS and Al-Qaeda affiliates.

- **18 December 2015 - S/RES/2254** - Focused exclusively on a political solution to the Syrian crisis with free and fair elections under UN supervision within 18 months and called for a ceasefire against civilian targets.

- **19 December 2016 - S/RES/2326** - Demanded immediate, unhindered access for the UN monitoring of civilian evacuations from Aleppo.

- **31 December 2016 - S/RES/2336** - Welcomed and supported efforts by Russia and Turkey to end violence in Syria and jumpstart a political process.

- **24 February 2018 - S/RES/2401** - Demanded a nationwide ceasefire in Syria for 30 days, excluding military operations against ISIS, Al Qaeda, the Al-Nusra Front, and its affiliates.

- **13 December 2018 - S/RES/2449** - Demanded that all parties allow for unimpeded access for cross-border humanitarian aid and called for improved humanitarian assistance in 2019.

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue
Geneva Peace Talks on Syria

The UN Security Council resolution 2118 called for a Geneva II conference on the Syrian Civil War that took place in the months of January and February of 2014. Another round of peace talks, known as Geneva III, took place on February of 2016. These talks had the intent of resolving the Syrian War by bringing together the Syrian government and opposition to discuss the steps towards a transitional government with full executive powers. However, the Syrian government had no plans to resort towards a political solution beforehand and saw no reason to change. The conferences were used by the Syrian opposition to convince foreign backers to send anti-aircraft missiles. These talks failed on the premise that both sides refused to accept the mere motion of a political solution and were too focused on military action.

EU Migrant Quota Demand

In 2015, Germany began to demand a quota system that would distribute migrants coming to Europe more equitable among EU member states due to the Syrian refugee crisis. In 2018, this demand was dropped as many EU countries such as Poland and Hungary adamantly refused mandatory migrant quotas. This was not a sustainable method to deal with the Syrian refugee crisis as a majority of public opinion in the EU believed that the refugees would harm their society’s well being and the economy. Instead, methods to convince public opinion to be more accepting of refugees would have been more helpful and less demanding.

Possible Solutions

Despite failed attempts at peace settlements in the past, the Syrian Civil War can only be solved through a political solution during a long-term ceasefire. However, with Russia having vetoed potential ceasefire negotiations in the past, it is difficult for this solution to occur without some bargaining power to sway Russia’s decision. This could include the possible economic expansion of Russia’s ally, China, into the Middle East, provided the ceasefire and withdrawal of Russian air forces in Syria.

The renewed peace talks should not focus on a transitional government, as it is currently impossible to have a successful settlement with the removal of the Assad regime. Instead, the talks should call for a change in the way the regime operates, rather than a change in the regime. They should emphasise the ability for Assad to remain in power but implement slight pro-democracy reform, such as political freedom and freedom to assembly. This could be further improved with the promise of economic incentives, such as the removal of sanctions and proposed trade benefits.

These reforms should also take into consideration the political autonomy of the Kurdish population in Northern Syria. The Assad regime cannot simply ignore the military and political threat of
the SDF and should have a platform for negotiating territorial and governmental disputes with them. This could bring up an issue of a two-state solution or a temporary permanent autonomous zone (PAZ) for Kurdish communities.

The use of chemical weapons against Syrian civilians cannot go ignored. A UN or OPCW investigation should be mandated to uncover the groups responsible for such crimes and they should be held responsible at an appropriate court level. Any discovery of chemical weapons or their precursors should be handled and destroyed by the UN or OPCW.

Addressing the Syrian refugee crisis would mean to address the refugee crisis of the entire world. Seeing as it is not in the Security Council’s place to change the refugee policies of countries, efforts should be focused on the delivery of humanitarian aid to the refugees and IDPs. Previous UNSC resolutions have emphasised the authorisation of unimpeded cross-border aid delivery. These should be echoed or even built upon in future resolutions in order to ensure that the rebel-held city of Idlib and other sites with significant populations of IDPs receive sufficient aid.

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https://www.peacewomen.org/e-news/article/summary-un-efforts-syria
Accessed 18 July 2019

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Munayyer, Waffa. “For residents of Syria's last rebel-held province, no place is safe as military offensive ramps up”, 31 May 2019
Accessed 20 July 2019

Accessed 20 July 2019
Appendices

Appendix I - Resources and Resolutions for Further Reading

Good summary of the Syrian War (as of 2017) by Vox.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JFpanWNgfQY

Full list of UNSC resolutions for Syria.

https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un_documents_type/security-council-resolutions/?ctype=Syria&cbtype=syria

Summary of Russian vetoes concerning UNSC resolutions on Syria. (Bias)

https://theconversation.com/how-russias-un-vetoes-have-enabled-mass-murder-in-syria-103565

Statistics on IDPs in Syria

http://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/syria

Article on the humanitarian situation of refugees in the neighbouring countries of Syria.

https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/20180604-DISTEFANO-EN.pdf

China’s potential influence from US withdrawal out of Syria


Trump’s tweet on recognising Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights.

https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1108772952814899200?lang=en
Appendix II - Diagram of Political Parties Involved

Web of allies and enemies
The relationship among stakeholders in Syria is complex and dangerous

- Sunni
- Shia
- Backing
- Fighting
- Opposes

**Source:** Maclean’s Research (Nov, 2015)

[Link to source](https://www.macleans.ca/news/world/whos-supporting-whom-a-map-of-the-tangled-coalitions-in-syria/)
Appendix III - Map of Syrian Refugees in Other Countries

Where have all the Syrian refugees gone?

- Turkey 3,644,342
- Syria
- North Africa 35,713
- Lebanon 948,849
- Jordan 671,551
- Egypt 133,028
- Iraq 252,451
- Greece 61,365
- Bulgaria 21,385
- Austria 55,550
- Belgium 23,995
- France 21,660
- Denmark 21,400
- Sweden 120,855

Top 10 European countries for asylum applications*
Syrian refugees registered in neighbouring countries**

*Latest figures to end of 2018
**Latest figures up to February 2019

Source: Eurostat / UNHCR

Source: BBC News (2019)