

**Closed Session**

# Perpetuating or Breaking the Syrian Stalemate?





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The TRT World Forum 2018, recognized as one of the most significant political events of the year, took place from October 3rd- 4th at the Swissotel in Istanbul gathering together over 600 esteemed guests and panellists. Consisting of 8 public sessions, 11 closed sessions and keynote speeches delivered by some of our most esteemed guests, this year's Forum succeeded in providing a platform for serious engagement with the most pressing challenges of our time. The themes of the sessions ranged from the future of the Middle East and the European Union to the growing trend of Islamophobia, refugees, Turkish foreign policy in an age of crisis, the crisis of new media and female leadership in a world of conflict. Uniting all of these themes was a focus on the fragmented state of today's world and a sincere desire to offer meaningful solutions.

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AHMET ADNAN SAYGUN STREET NO:83 34347

ULUS, BEŞİKTAŞ

İSTANBUL / TURKEY

**TRT WORLD LONDON**

PORTLAND HOUSE

4 GREAT PORTLAND STREET NO:4

LONDON / UNITED KINGDOM

**TRT WORLD WASHINGTON D.C.**

1819 L STREET NW SUITE 700 20036

WASHINGTON DC / UNITED STATES

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## Background

**O**n October 4, 2018, TRT World Research Centre held a roundtable meeting on the Syrian crisis entitled "Perpetuating or Breaking the Syrian Stalemate." This was part of a series of roundtable meetings forming part of the two-day TRT World Forum 2018, which included eight public sessions and 11 closed sessions.

This roundtable meeting was held in English under the Chatham House Rule. This rule stipulates that 'when a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.'

While the Syrian crisis has come to be characterised by political stalemate, hope for a viable solution

remains. The United States, Russia and other global and regional actors have all attempted to occupy the moral high ground in defence of their various interventions. The US has justified their interventions against the Syrian regime on the basis of humanitarian intervention, while Russia has largely justified its actions on the basis of defending the sovereignty of Syrian government and fighting terrorism, resulting in further entrenching of stalemate in Syria. Additionally, a wide array of non-state and sub-state internal actors have been the part of the conflict under the umbrella justification of a 'peaceful future', showcasing the importance of civil society and armed opposition in determining war and peace. Taking into account external and internal actors in the Syrian case, this session aims to question the dynamics of perpetuating and breaking the Syrian stalemate in the context of external and internal factors impacting the Syrian crisis.

## Discussion themes of the session:

- Describe the attitudes of the two poles (Russia-West) in Syria.
- Explore the costs and benefits of the external interventions in Syria.
- Discuss the status of opposition and armed groups in conflict resolution and peace processes.
- Examine the possibility of a diplomatic solution for the Syrian crisis.
- Discuss Turkey's position as an effective mediator in peace talks.

# The International Nature of the Syrian Conflict

At the beginning of the conflict, Syria witnessed a struggle between the Assad regime and the Syrian opposition. This phase of the conflict has already ended, and the Syrian civil war has turned into a battle among international and regional powers. The latter tried to expand their influence in order to further their own interests, not for the sake of Syrian people, stability or peace in the country. The first speaker asserted that in essence, the Syrian civil war is an international political conflict, which has witnessed the deployment of sectarian references. If this conflict is solely analysed through sectarian lenses, the prescribed solution will also be related to fighting sectarianism, and will miss the point.

There were some divergences among the panellists concerning the analysis of the involvement of the major powers in the Syrian civil war. While the first speaker considered the war as a contest between Russia and the West and emphasised the role of Russia in changing the course of the war, other participants evaluated the war differently. For them, the lens of US/Russia polarisation is not sufficient to examine the conflict. The multipolar nature of the Syrian conflict is too important to be ignored.

Subsequently, the second speaker discussed the strategies of the key actors, namely the US, Russia, Iran, European countries, and Israel with their different roles and interests in the region.

## The U.S.

He highlighted the fact that there is no difference between the policies of Obama and Trump administration regarding Syria. Emphasis was made on the total inaction of Obama, and a comparable approach adopted by the Trump administration, which was passive in the face of the regime's brutality and use of chemical weapons. Initially, the US claimed that its presence on the ground was for humanitarian reasons, however, it subsequently transformed into yet another "war on terror" intervention. It was asserted that when the Assad regime was at its weakest, the US would step up its air campaign against Jebhat al-Nusra and the likes. The US was also backing old Assad regime allies like the Kurdish terror groups YPG/PYD the Syrian branches of the terrorist group PKK. It was also affirmed that the US worked towards lengthening the stalemate, allegedly to find a political solution in favour of Syrian people. In reality it was all about furthering their interests in the region, which were

centred on containing Iran, protecting Israel, and increasing their leverage inside Syria.

## Russia

The second speaker also contended that Russia's objective in Syria diverge from those pursued by Iran or the Assad regime. Russian interests consist in gaining a strategic foothold in the coastal regions, such as Latakia, and limiting US influence in the region. Among the main goals of Russia is to maintain its military and economic relations with the Assad regime. For this reason, when the Syrian regime looked like it might be on the verge of defeat, Russia intervened militarily, beginning with airstrikes on opposition held towns and cities, resulting in the deaths of many civilians.

After the second speaker's remarks on Russia, a participant reiterated what has consistently been the official Russian line on Syria. According to him, the Russian Federation has been consistently moving to stop the violence and put an end to terrorism in Syria. The participant claimed that there were several achievements in Russia's fight against some of the most dangerous terrorist group in Syria such as Daesh and Al Nusra. He expressed that Russian efforts to bring the regime and the opposition together for face to face negotiations was a courageous representation of Russia's policy in Syria. He also emphasised the humanitarian aid that Russia has deployed in Syria. The participant argued that Russian aims in Syria have often been misrepresented. Russian military presence in Syria via its naval facilities existed before the crisis, and other bases are important from organisational and logistical perspectives.

According to the second speaker, Russia has consistently blocked any attempt in the United Nations Security Council to further a political solution to the conflict, rejecting the Russian narrative articulated by the session participant. He also contended that Russia tried to create its own Syrian opposition which was called "the Syrian National Congress." There was also another platform for a pseudo-opposition group called the "Moscow platform." The latter was headed by the former Syrian deputy prime minister for economic affairs, who left Damascus and settled in Moscow. This individual was one of the first so-called opposition members advocating for Bashar Al Assad to remain in power in spite of its atrocities, crimes, and genocide against his people.

## Iran

It was asserted by the panel that Iran's strategy in Syria is motivated by two primary objectives. The first one is sectarian in nature and aims to provoke a demographic change in Syria by increasing the presence of the Shia population in strategic areas of the country. The second speaker claimed that at least 350 000 foreigners have acquired Syrian nationality since the war began. This practice has taken place in Damascus, Homs and other areas. The second Iranian objective, discussed by the panel, was Iran's expansionism in the region. Propping up the Assad regime ensures Iran has a strategic ally against its regional rivals, Israel and Saudi Arabia. It was also stated that Iran's

end game is to create a land corridor to the Mediterranean, extending from Iran to Lebanon through Iraq and Syria.

A participant clarified the official position of Iran. According to him, Iran was officially invited by sovereign countries, member-states of the United Nations, to secure Syria from terrorist threats. Moreover, seeing that Syria had become part of the chemical weapon convention, Iran advised Syria to implement the convention fully. Furthermore, Israeli manoeuvring in the region directly affects Iranian involvement. According to the participant, Syria's assistance to Iran during the Iran-Iraq war (1980 – 1988) is also another factor that led Iran to respond positively to Assad's call.

# Diplomatic Solution and Turkey's Role as Mediator

The third speaker stated that there is no military solution in Syria. Rather, the real question should be how to bring a genuine diplomatic solution in Syria. For him, the potential success of a peace process in Syria depend on several essential points. First, the Astana and Geneva talks need to be harmonised. Without co-ordinating Astana and Geneva, reaching a political solution in Syria does not seem to be possible. Second, the opposition needs to be preserved as a leverage on the Assad regime. Last, it is essential to maintain ties with Russia because the latest Sochi agreement showed that it is Moscow that ultimately calls the shots in Syria, not Tehran nor the Syrian regime.

## Status of the opposition

The third speaker evaluated the status of opposition as being one of the most important factors contributing towards a diplomatic solution in Syria. Territorial control of the opposition is necessary in order to keep them as a relevant actor in negotiations and the wider political process. There was a drop in the Syrian regime's morale when the opposition gained sizeable territorial control inside Syria in previous years. This factor could help in getting concessions from the regime, for whenever opposition groups lose territory, the regime uses stall tactics during negotiations about the future of Syria in order to bide time to gain a stronger strategic advantage. For this reason, territorial control of the opposition should be retained as leverage to force the regime to negotiate.

Two regions remain outside the regime's control. The North-eastern part of Syria is dominated by the U.S. with the participation of the terrorist group PKK-YPG-PYD. This

territory is significant for the regime because of its value in terms of water and energy resources. Keeping this region under defacto U.S. control has created further pressure on the regime. The second region is the northwestern part of Syria, under the control of Turkey and Free Syrian Army (FSA), which is important both geopolitically and logistically. The ability of the opposition to threaten to and/or launch future attacks on regime targets is dependent on its continued hold on the region in question. Retaining of those pockets is a key element for keeping opposition forces at the table.

A participant rejected the latter approach, namely that giving more territory to the opposition acts as a leverage vis-à-vis the regime and argued that this is not the right way to end the conflict. This is especially true, he added, as the opposition has been incited by international forces to continue to fight.

## Pressuring the Assad regime

The third speaker also underlined the necessity of harmonising anti-regime positions in order to put pressure on the regime in the ongoing political negotiations. As it currently stands, the anti-Assad opposition is not united around a single political agenda. Furthermore, there has never been sufficient pressure applied on the Assad regime in a sustained and efficient manner. Instead of drawing a red line on the use of chemical weapons, the extent of civilian casualties should have been the limit beyond which the Syrian regime's behaviour was no longer acceptable. The

reality, however, was that international organisations put more efforts to coerce the opposition than they ever did against the Syrian regime.

Another issue raised by the third speaker was about the struggle against radical elements. While containment of radical groups by international players on the ground in Syria has been considered as a viable option, the speaker argued that the only way to effectively counter their presence is by continuing to fight them. In his view, radicals are not just the Al-Qaeda affiliates and Daesh, but also the PKK terrorist organisation. According to the speaker's perspective, the fight against all terrorist elements in Syria will help pave the way for a genuine political transition in Syria.

## Turkey as Mediator

One of the key points raised in this session was related to Turkey's role in bringing peace to Syria. The third speaker highlighted the fact that Turkey's primary motivation in Syria stemmed from national security concerns, namely to protect its borders from the terrorist groups PKK-PYD-YPG and other terrorist organisations. Turkey's ties with Russia and Iran through the Astana process, its military presence in the north-western part of the country, its geographical proximity to Syria and its relationship with opposition forces are all significant elements that make Turkey an indispensable partner in the Syrian peace process. Turkey's efforts for seeking a permanent political solution via the Geneva and Astana processes demonstrates its genuine intentions in support of peace and stability in the region.

## The Problem of Refugees and Syria's Devastating Scale of Destruction

After the civil war broke out, the flow of refugees represented a critical issue not only for Syria's neighbours but also for Europe. There was a general agreement among participants that the issue of refugees is a highly-politicised issue being used by most parties as political leverage card and by the Russians to attract funding to rebuild Syria. The first speaker emphasized that about the Syrian regime's stance towards refugees is not encouraging with regards to possible repatriation. Many Syrians remain unable to return due to financial and legal obstacles. Of particular concern for many is the potential of having to serve mandatory time in the Syrian army. The first speaker also warned that the regime might seek to take revenge on people who it deems as 'traitors' after seven years of civil war.

The second speaker discussed the dire situation in Syria today, referring to the latest statistical information. Currently, the combined number of refugees and internally displaced people is around 12 million, which is more than half of the entire Syrian population. The estimated number of casualties, including dead and wounded is thought to be around 2 million. 75 per cent of Syrians are either jobless or have been forced to drop out of their studies. According to the UN, the cost of destruction has reached 230 billion USD. In addition, the accumulated cost to the Syrian economy has been about 226 billion USD. 67 per cent of Syrian industry is totally or partially destroyed. 60 per cent of medical facilities are totally or partially damaged. 57 per cent of educational institutions are totally or partially

devastated. Moreover, 85 per cent of the population now lives below the poverty line. According to the speaker, this entails greater dependency on aid so long as the conflict continues.

Therefore, according to the first speaker, the notion that the Syrian regime today can reconsolidate its power and bring peace in Syria is a fallacy, particularly when the details are examined. It has been emphasised that all of these factors make the idea of sustainable peace impossible without any pathway to justice and accountability. It is not possible for people to get back to their country without the prospects for sustainable peace.

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## Syria's Reconstruction

The first speaker then raised the issue of the politicisation of Syria's reconstruction. For example, rebuilding projects that have already taken place around Damascus became a way for the regime to reward its associates for their past support. On the other hand, areas that are considered hot spots for the opposition movements during the conflict will likely not be rebuilt with the same sort of dedication. If international funding does pour into Syria, it will be directed towards the pro-regime areas.

There are some limited international actions supporting reconstruction projects, as well as providing humanitarian and development assistance. For instance, China and Iran are both involved in financing a limited number of reconstruction efforts in Syria to date. However, most of the funding for the kind of infrastructure reconstruction is likely to come from the European Union.

### The Anticipated Role of the European Union (EU)

According to the first speaker, during the past seven years, the regime lost its moral legitimacy. Consequently, the EU is not really in a position to normalise its relations with a regime that has been accused of crimes against humanity. Unless there is a political solution in Syria, the EU will provide neither political recognition nor financial help to reconstruction efforts in Syria under the auspices of the regime.

Still, there are two different poles within the EU's highest decision making bodies. The first one wants to keep out of Syria as long as possible and offer no financial assistance whatsoever until a final political solution is reached. The second pole, on the other hand, considers offering partial political legitimacy to the regime combined with gradual lifting of economic sanctions while unpacking financial assistance progressively and tie the entire process with incremental progress towards the political solution.

In any case, the first speaker stressed the fact that very strict conditionality needs to be observed. Issues such as who makes the decisions, where the funding will be going, who is spending and how they are spending are crucial to the determination of funding for reconstruction. These conditions, however, will not be acceptable to the regime, as the latter is not ready to expect any conditionality. The belief that they have emerged victorious has made the Syrian regime unlikely to accept conditions imposed on them from the outside.

*Syria's reconstruction is a highly politicised matter. Rebuilding projects that have already taken place around Damascus became a way for the regime to reward its associates for their past support. Conversely, areas that are considered hot spots for the opposition movements during the conflict will likely not be rebuilt with the same dedication.*

## Is a Sustainable Settlement Possible?

While Syrians want peace, justice, accountability and so on, these aspirations – according to the first speaker – are unlikely to be attained. Many of the displaced Syrians and refugees want to go back to Syria, but they are aware that this is all but impossible. The regime is fixed on regaining control in security and military terms and is not interested in having the burden of caring for vulnerable civilian populations.

According to the first speaker, all elements indicate that the Assad regime will not ascribe to a sustainable political settlement scenario but rather to a winner-takes-all-scenario. Currently, the regime is deploying even more brutal tactics to ensure that the people will not take the streets again. Even though the regime is known to possess limited manpower or financial resources, they will continue to resort to any method in order to gain more territory and power whether through business, militias, or local warlords. The regime is already consolidating with the help of warlords who emerged in different parts of Syria.

The third speaker argued that it is not possible to call the Syrian regime a proponent of a political solution. When the Turkish government was in conversation with the regime to prevent the prolongation of the armed conflict, the latter was recalcitrant, even prior to a single shot being fired by the Syrian opposition. Similarly, when the international community has tried to find a solution for sustainable peace through the Geneva and Astana processes, the level of genuine engagement by the regime was left wanting, something that has at times frustrated even their Russian backers.

The third speaker went on to emphasise that the biggest challenge for Russia is to complement their military presence with reconstruction projects. Without the latter, there is always going to be a risk to their military presence in Syria, particularly in light of the widening gap in priorities between Russia, Iran, and the regime. On the other hand, Russian and Israeli interests seem to be experiencing a convergence of sorts. Nevertheless, Israel's priorities and approach in Syria are not entirely aligned, especially concerning the growing presence of Iranian troops and proxies such as Hezbollah. This factor can present occasional challenges for the Russian military presence in Syria.

While Russia can sustain its military support and is expanding its bases in Syria, Moscow is actively looking for a genuine political solution. Nevertheless, as the third speaker contends, Moscow is not nearly as good at diplomacy as it is at projecting force. Russia wants a political solution, which is customised to its requirements. However, Russia's terms are not acceptable to other players in Syria.

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