



PEACE NEGOTIATIONS
POST-CONFLICT CONSTITUTIONS
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CEASEFIRE NEGOTIATIONS IN SYRIA

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Executive Summary

The Syrian Civil War began in 2011 as part of the Arab Spring protests and uprisings. The initial peaceful demonstrations turned into an armed insurrection and involved local, regional, and international actors such as the United States, Russia, Turkey, Iran, and extremist groups like ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra. Efforts to resolve the conflict have been made through local ceasefire negotiations and international peace processes, involving the United Nations, the Arab League, and Russia. These ceasefire negotiations have taken place between the government, opposition groups, and various international players, but have not involved extremist groups. The timeline of the ceasefire negotiations and attempts at resolution have been marked by various phases of military escalation and de-escalation, with new actors and factors entering the conflict. The conflict is currently at a stalemate with a new economic crisis.

CEASEFIRE NEGOTIATIONS IN SYRIA

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Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this case study is to examine the phases of negotiations within the Syrian Civil War, map out the various prior attempts at ceasefire agreements, and outline the issues that led to their failure or success.

Background

The Syrian Civil War began in 2011 as part of a wider series of anti-government protests, uprisings, and armed rebellions that were classified as the Arab Spring and spread across much of the Arab world. While existing economic woes and lack of freedoms initially inspired peaceful Syrian demonstrations, these demonstrations later grew into an armed insurrection.

Throughout the Syrian Civil War, a number of local, regional and international actors have become involved in the conflict, either directly or through providing support to an engaged party. Involved actors include the United States, Russia, Turkey, and Iran, as well as non-state and extremist armed groups such as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (“ISIL” or “ISIS”) and Jabhat al-Nusra.

Attempts to resolve the war have included local level ceasefire negotiations as well as international peace processes involving the Arab League, the United States, the United Nations (the Geneva Peace Process) and Russia (the Astana-Sochi Peace Process).

Ceasefire negotiations that have taken place during the course of the Syrian Civil War have included representatives of President Bashar al-Assad’s Syrian Ba’athist government, the United Nations, the Arab League, the United States, the Russian Federation, Turkey, Iran, and Syrian opposition groups. Radical Salafist forces, ISIL, and Jabhat al-Nusra have not engaged in any of these discussions seeking a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

Prior Ceasefire Negotiations

There have been a number of attempts at peace and efforts to strike a deal ceasing active hostilities within Syria. Annex A outlines the timeline of these efforts in detail.

Arab League peace plans for Syria (September 2011–January 2012)

Nabil Elaraby, the head of the Arab League, visited Damascus in September 2011 to meet with President al-Assad and other senior Syrian officials.¹ Elaraby presented a 13-point document detailing the Arab League's proposals to end the conflict.² Elaraby claimed a breakthrough and a promise from Assad to begin a dialogue with the opposition in an effort to end the violence. However, no document was formally signed.

This first attempt of an Arab League peace plan contained the following points: (1) holding of multi-candidate presidential elections in 2014, the date of the end of the current president's term; (2) a call for the Syrian government to immediately stop acts of violence against civilians and to withdraw military presence from the cities; and (3) demands for compensation from the Syrian government for those affected civilians, reparation for all forms of harm to citizens, and the release of detainees who did not participate in the violence.

On November 2, 2011, it was announced that the Syrian government had accepted the peace plan proposed by Nabil Elaraby of the Arab League in Cairo.³ Syria was represented in the discussion by its Ambassador to the league, Youssef Ahmed.⁴ The agreement included a pledge not to use violence against peaceful demonstrators, to withdraw tanks from the cities, to release all political prisoners, and to open dialogue with oppositions within two weeks.⁵ However, on November 6, 2011, the government breached the peace deal when 23 demonstrators were killed. As a result, the members of the Arab League unanimously voted to suspend Syria from the Arab League on November 12,

¹ Al-Jazeera English, *Arab League Chief Arrives in Syria for Talks*, (Sept. 10, 2011), available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2011/9/10/arab-league-chief-arrives-in-syria-for-talks>.

² Adrian Blomfield, *Arab League Presents Syria Peace Plan to Bashar Al-Assad*, THE TELEGRAPH (Sept. 11, 2011) available at <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/8755858/Arab-League-presents-Syria-peace-plan-to-Bashar-al-Assad.html>.

³ BBC, *Syria Accepts Arab League Peace Plan After Cairo Talks*, (Nov. 2, 2011) available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15560322>.

⁴ Neil MacFarquhar & Nada Bakri, *Arab League Says Syria Accepts Its Plan for Talkers; Protesters Are Skeptical*, THE NEW YORK TIMES (Nov. 2, 2011) available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/03/world/middleeast/arab-league-says-syria-accepts-plan-for-talks.html>.

⁵ Al-Jazeera English, *Syria 'Violence Defies Peace Deal'*, (Nov. 4, 2011), available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2011/11/4/syria-violence-defies-peace-deal>.

2011.⁶ On November 27, the Arab League pursued additional action against Syria, approving sanctions against Syria by a vote of 19-3. The sanctions included cutting off transactions with the Syrian central bank, halting Arab League government funding for certain Syrian projects, a ban on senior Syrian officials traveling to other Arab League countries, and a freeze on assets held by Assad's regime.⁷

On December 19, 2011, Syria signed a new peace plan with the Arab League with similar provisions. A new development of this agreement was that the Syrian government agreed to allow foreign observers from the Arab League to monitor Syria's progress in removing troops from protest areas, freeing political prisoners, and negotiating with dissidents. The Arab League monitors did arrive in Syria, but their mission was non-interventional; they only observed and reported back to the League Secretary-General.

On January 28, 2012, the Arab League suspended its monitoring mission because of the worsening violence, explaining that "a harsh new government crackdown made it too dangerous to proceed and was resulting in the deaths of innocent people across the country."⁸

Kofi Annan ceasefire attempt (April–May 2012)

In February 2012, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted resolution 66/253 requesting the Secretary-General and all relevant United Nations bodies to, inter alia, provide support to the efforts of the League of Arab States, both through "good offices" aimed at promoting a peaceful solution to the Syrian crisis, including through the appointment of a special envoy, and through technical and material assistance, in consultation with the League of Arab States.⁹

⁶ Bradley Hope, *Arab League Suspends Syria And Threatens Sanctions*, THE NATIONAL UAE (Nov. 12, 2011) available at <https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/arab-league-suspends-syria-and-threatens-sanctions-1.603040>.

⁷ BBC, *Syria Unrest: Arab League Adopts Sanctions in Cairo*, (Nov. 27, 2011) available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15901360>.

⁸ Nada Bakri & Kareem Fahim, *Arab League Halts Observer Mission in Syria*, TELEGRAM (Jan. 28, 2012) available at <https://www.telegram.com/story/news/local/north/2012/01/29/arab-league-halts-observer-mission/49753911007>.

⁹ General Assembly Resolution 66/253, United Nations Doc. A/RES/66/253 (Feb. 21, 2012), available at <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Syria%20A%20RES%2066%20253.pdf>.

On February 23, 2012, former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan was announced as the Joint Special Envoy of the United Nations and the League of Arab States on the Syrian crisis.¹⁰ This announcement was made in accordance with the General Assembly resolution 66/253 and following close consultations between the then Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon and the Secretary-General of the League of Arab States Nabil Elaraby.

On March 16, 2012, as part of his efforts to bring peace to Syria, Kofi Annan submitted a six-point peace plan to the United Nations Security Council.¹¹ On March 27, 2012, Kofi Annan stated that the Syrian government had accepted the peace proposal and would be working to implement it. Some members of the Syrian opposition rejected the proposal and others expressed a willingness to accept it if the government followed through on promises.¹² The six-point peace plan called for: (1) a commitment to work with the Joint Special Envoy in an inclusive Syrian-led political process to address the legitimate aspirations and concerns of the Syrian people, (2) a commitment to stop the fighting and to establish a supervised cessation of armed violence by all parties, (3) assurance of the timely provision of humanitarian assistance to all areas affected by the fighting, (4) the release of arbitrarily detained persons, (5) protection of freedom of movement throughout the country for journalists and a non-discriminatory visa policy for them, and (6) respect for freedom of association and the right to demonstrate peacefully.¹³

Despite initial signs of acceptance by the Syrian government and some members of the Syrian opposition, and repeated calls for implementation by United Nations officials, there were limited efforts to implement the plan by the parties to the conflict. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon noted that both the Syrian Government and the opposition forces continued to demonstrate their determination to rely on ever-increasing violence, and in addition, “persistent

¹⁰ Kofi Annan Appointed Joint Special Envoy of United Nations, *League of Arab States on Syrian Crisis*, United Nations (Feb. 23, 2012), available at <https://press.un.org/en/2012/sgsm14124.doc.htm>.

¹¹ Al-Jazeera English, *Kofi Annan's six point plan for Syria*, (Mar. 27, 2012), available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2012/3/27/kofi-annans-six-point-plan-for-syria>.

¹² Al-Jazeera English, *Kofi Annan's six point plan for Syria*, (Mar. 27, 2012), available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2012/3/27/kofi-annans-six-point-plan-for-syria>.

¹³ Security Council Resolution 2042 (Annex), United Nations Doc. S/RES/2042 (Apr. 14, 2012).

divisions” within the Security Council itself become an obstacle to diplomacy, making the work of any mediator vastly more difficult.¹⁴

These divisions within the Security Council can be best understood in light of the varied and conflicting interests of international powers including Russia and the U.S., with the United States backing the Syrian opposition and Russia supporting the Assad regime, as well as neighboring states and local players in the conflict. A few months after Syria’s uprising began in March 2011, it became evident the conflict was serving, at least in part, as a battleground for a proxy contest between regional and international powers.¹⁵

International players play a variety of roles in the Syrian conflict. Since 2016, the United States has controlled al-Tanf base, in a remote area of Syria, near where the borders of Syria, Jordan and Iraq meet.¹⁶ The United States has provided weapons and military training to moderate rebel factions, including the Syrian Democratic Forces, an alliance of Kurdish and Arab forces fighting against ISIL militants in northern Syria and the Syrian government forces.¹⁷

On the other hand, Russia has sought to avoid regime change in Syria, which could have dangerous implications for countries on Russia’s post-Soviet periphery and for the Muslim parts of the Russian Federation itself.¹⁸ Moreover, the Russian Navy keeps a small resupply and light repair facility at the Syrian port of Tartus, which is of strategic importance for Russia’s ambition to play a bigger geopolitical role in the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East.¹⁹ As such, Russia has

¹⁴ UN News, Kofi Annan Resigns as U.N.-Arab League Joint Special Envoy for Syrian Crisis, (Aug. 2, 2012), available at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2012/08/416872>.

¹⁵ Yezid Sayigh, *Syria’s Very Local Regional Conflict*, Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center (Jun. 9, 2014), available at <https://carnegie-mec.org/2014/06/09/syria-s-very-local-regional-conflict/hd7i>.

¹⁶ Al-Jazeera News, Why Does the U.S. Still Have Forces in Syria, (Aug. 24, 2022), available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/24/why-does-us-still-forces-syria-explainer>.

¹⁷ Deutsche Welle, Alexander Pearson and Lewis Sanders IV, *Syria: What Do Key Foreign Powers Want?*, (Jan. 23, 2019), available at <https://www.dw.com/en/syria-conflict-what-do-the-us-russia-turkey-and-iran-want/a-41211604>.

¹⁸ Deutsche Welle, Alexander Pearson and Lewis Sanders IV, *Syria: What Do Key Foreign Powers Want?*, (Jan. 23, 2019), available at <https://www.dw.com/en/syria-conflict-what-do-the-us-russia-turkey-and-iran-want/a-41211604>.

¹⁹ Deutsche Welle, Alexander Pearson and Lewis Sanders IV, *Syria: What Do Key Foreign Powers Want?*, (Jan. 23, 2019), available at <https://www.dw.com/en/syria-conflict-what-do-the-us-russia-turkey-and-iran-want/a-41211604>.

backed the Assad regime through the provision of significant military, economic, and diplomatic support to the government throughout the Civil War.

Turkey has conducted military operations against ISIL in Syria, joining forces with non-Kurdish factions in the Syrian opposition, including the Free Syrian Army, and has also fought against the Kurdish opposition forces in northern Syria.²⁰ Turkey claims that Syrian Kurdish fighters are tied to the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which has fought a more than three-decade war in Turkey and is regarded as a terrorist group by Turkey, the European Union, and the United States.²¹ Turkey's interests lie in blocking Syrian Kurdish territorial gains and preventing them from gaining autonomy in any post-war settlement.²²

Saudi Arabia has long supported the proxy war aimed at toppling the Assad regime, supplying an array of local rebel groups with finances and weaponry.²³ Syria has long been Iran's chief ally in the Middle East.²⁴ Thus, Saudi Arabia has been motivated by its effort to deprive Iran of its Syrian ally and cut it off from Hezbollah in Lebanon.²⁵

Ultimately, Kofi Annan's initiative to forge peace in Syria failed to materialize. His six-month mandate as Joint Special Envoy came to an end when he said, "As an envoy, I can't want peace more than the protagonists, more than the

²⁰ Deutsche Welle, Alexander Pearson and Lewis Sanders IV, *Syria: What Do Key Foreign Powers Want?*, (Jan. 23, 2019), available at <https://www.dw.com/en/syria-conflict-what-do-the-us-russia-turkey-and-iran-want/a-41211604>.

²¹ Deutsche Welle, Alexander Pearson and Lewis Sanders IV, *Syria: What Do Key Foreign Powers Want?*, (Jan. 23, 2019), available at <https://www.dw.com/en/syria-conflict-what-do-the-us-russia-turkey-and-iran-want/a-41211604>.

²² Deutsche Welle, Alexander Pearson and Lewis Sanders IV, *Syria: What Do Key Foreign Powers Want?*, (Jan. 23, 2019), available at <https://www.dw.com/en/syria-conflict-what-do-the-us-russia-turkey-and-iran-want/a-41211604>.

²³ Matthew Ayton, *Times have changed: Saudi Arabia-Syria in Rapprochement Talks*, AL JAZEERA ENGLISH (Jun. 8, 2021), available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/8/times-have-changed-saudi-syria-in-rapprochement-talks>.

²⁴ Alexander Pearson and Lewis Sanders IV, *Syria: What Do Key Foreign Powers Want?*, DEUTSCHE WELLE, (Jan. 23, 2019), available at <https://www.dw.com/en/syria-conflict-what-do-the-us-russia-turkey-and-iran-want/a-41211604>.

²⁵ Yezid Sayigh, *Syria's Very Local Regional Conflict*, Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center (Jun. 9, 2014), available at <https://carnegie-mec.org/2014/06/09/syria-s-very-local-regional-conflict/hd7i>.

Security Council or the international community for that matter.”²⁶ Kofi Annan expressed his desire not to renew his role as Joint Special Envoy because the increasing militarization on the ground and clear lack of unity at the United Nations Security Council had fundamentally changed the circumstances that would allow for the effective exercise of his role.²⁷

First partial ceasefire (February 2016–June 2016)

The United States and Russia intervened in the Syrian conflict in September 2014 and September 2015 respectively, through air strikes and missile attacks. In October 2015, the United States signaled its intention to intensify airstrikes and commence the usage of ground raids. Soon thereafter, in November 2015, the Vienna peace talks began, otherwise known as the talks of the International Syria Support Group (“ISSG”). The ISSG is made up of twenty countries and international organizations and is co-chaired by the United States and Russia.

After a period of suspended peace talks, the ISSG formed a ceasefire task force with the support of the United Nations aimed at producing a framework for a nationwide cessation of hostilities. On February 22, 2016, the United States and Russia issued a joint statement that contained an annex setting forth the terms for cessation of hostilities in Syria.²⁸ On February 26, 2016 the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 2268, which endorsed in full the joint statement (the “2016 Declaration”).²⁹

The cessation of hostilities applied to any party that at the time was engaged in military or paramilitary hostilities against any other parties, and required confirmation of acceptance by February 26, 2016. However, the cessation of hostilities expressly did not apply to any terrorist organizations designated by the United Nations Security Council, including the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

²⁶ Joe Sterling, *Kofi Annan Resigns as Envoy to Syria*, CNN (Aug. 2, 2012) available at <https://www.cnn.com/2012/08/02/world/meast/syria-annan-resign/index.html>.

²⁷ Joe Sterling, *Kofi Annan Resigns as Envoy to Syria*, CNN (Aug. 2, 2012) available at <https://www.cnn.com/2012/08/02/world/meast/syria-annan-resign/index.html>.

²⁸ United States Embassy, *Joint Statement of the United States and the Russian Federation, as Co-Chairs of the ISSG, on Cessation of Hostilities in Syria*, (Feb. 22, 2016), available at <https://ge.usembassy.gov/joint-statement-united-states-russian-federation-co-chairs-issg-cessation-hostilities-syria-february-22/>.

²⁹ Security Council Resolution 2268, United Nations Doc. S/RES/2268 (Feb. 26, 2016), available at https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2268.pdf.

(“ISIL”) and al-Nusra Front. This meant that attacks on such organizations could continue following the ceasefire. The joint statement excluded these United Nations designated terrorist organizations to remain consistent with United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254, which reiterated their call to prevent and suppress terrorist acts committed by such organizations.³⁰ The cessation of hostilities went into effect on February 27, 2016, following acceptance by the various parties.

Hostilities against designated terrorist organizations continued following this initial 2016 ceasefire. By the end of March 2016, Syria, with the aid of Russia and Lebanon, retook the historic city of Palmyra from ISIL.³¹ In addition, there were major escalations in the Syrian conflict during April of 2016 accompanied by persistent low level conflict between the parties.³² The cessation of hostilities became even more untenable in May, with the Syrian regime seeking to encircle Aleppo and disrupt rebel control around Damascus, as well as ISIL and al-Nusra Front continuing to attack smaller towns and villages throughout Syria.³³ In early June, the partial ceasefire existed in name only as the Syrian regime stated its intent to escalate military efforts to regain control over all rebellion-held territories with the support of a re-engaged Russia.³⁴

Even at the outset of the first partial ceasefire, there was criticism that the exclusion of the various United Nations designated terrorist groups would lead the ceasefire to fail.³⁵ Furthermore, the goal of the ceasefire was to create a break in the

³⁰ United States Embassy, Joint Statement of the United States and the Russian Federation, as Co-Chairs of the ISSG, *on Cessation of Hostilities in Syria*, (Feb. 22, 2016), available at <https://ge.usembassy.gov/joint-statement-united-states-russian-federation-co-chairs-issg-cessation-hostilities-syria-february-22/>.
³¹ Daniel Politi, *Syria Retakes Palmyra From ISIS, Finds Ruins in Better Shape than Expected*, SLATE (Mar. 27, 2016), available at <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2016/03/syria-retakes-palmyra-from-islamic-state.html>.

³² The Carter Center, *Cessation of Hostilities*, (Apr. 21, 2016), available at https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/cessation-of-hostilities-april-21-2016.pdf.

³³ Security Council Report, *Syria: June 2016 Monthly Forecast*, (May 31, 2016), available at https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2016-06/syria_32.php.

³⁴ Liz Sly, *Assad Pledges More Bloodshed in Syria, Says the Peace Process has Failed*, THE WASHINGTON POST (June 7, 2016), available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/assad-pledges-more-bloodshed-in-syria-says-the-peace-process-has-failed/2016/06/07/efcd0e96-2cb6-11e6-b9d5-3c3063f8332c_story.html.

³⁵ *Syria Government Willing to Accept Cessation Deal*, AL JAZEERA ENGLISH (Feb. 23, 2016), available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/2/23/syria-government-willing-to-accept-cessation-deal>.

hostilities to encourage further peace talks and allow for humanitarian aid to those affected by the conflict. However, the exclusion of the designated terrorist groups from the purview of the ceasefire may have advanced goals inconsistent with those of the ceasefire (for example, allowing the Syrian regime to turn its attention to suppressing the designated terrorist groups with the knowledge that the ceasefire was in place).³⁶ Unfortunately, the ceasefire lasted less than four months and various conflicts continued throughout the existence of the ceasefire.

Other problems with the 2016 Declaration include a failure to clearly demarcate what geographic territories were part of the ceasefire zones, failure to require adherence to the Geneva Conventions and other international law regarding the protection of civilians, failure to include a clearly-defined time frame for the ceasefire, and failure to include clear mechanisms to enforce compliance and guarantee that Russia, Iran, Assad regime forces, and regime-allied militias do not violate the agreement. The 2016 Declaration lacked all of the critical technical information that would explain what the agreement does and how it can be enforced.

The failure of this first effort in 2016 to cease hostilities in Syria highlights the limited efficacy of a partial ceasefire. The ceasefire was partial in scope, enabling the continuation of conflict and hindering the ultimate goals of furthering broader peace talks and allowing for humanitarian aid into the country.

A key takeaway from this stage of the ceasefire negotiations in Syria is the importance of engaging all combatants in a ceasefire process to increase the likelihood of success and to discourage other actors from using the ceasefire to achieve tactical advantages on the ground.

Failed United Nations Aleppo Ceasefire (December 5, 2016)

In July 2016, Syrian government forces, supported by Russian air power and Shi'ite militias from Iraq and Lebanon, encircled eastern Aleppo.³⁷ Once Syria's most populous and wealthiest city, Aleppo had been split in two since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2012, with eastern Aleppo controlled by rebel groups.

³⁶ *Syria Government Willing to Accept Cessation Deal*, AL JAZEERA ENGLISH (Feb. 23, 2016), available at

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/2/23/syria-government-willing-to-accept-cessation-deal>.

³⁷ Reuters, *Timeline: The Battle for Syria's Aleppo City*, (Dec. 12, 2016), available at

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-aleppo-timeline/timeline-the-battle-for-syrias-aleppo-city-idUSKBN1412BO>.

By November 28, 2016, after intensive bombardments that resulted in the destruction of nearly all emergency services, government forces re-captured the northern part of eastern Aleppo and began a final advance to retake the rest of the city.³⁸

On December 5, 2016, “gravely distressed by the continued deterioration of the devastating humanitarian situation in Syria,” Egypt, New Zealand and Spain introduced United Nations Security Resolution S/16/21490.³⁹ The resolution called for:

- Cessation of all attacks in Aleppo “to allow humanitarian needs to be addressed” for 7 days;
- Unimpeded humanitarian access to all parts of Aleppo; and
- Cessation of all hostilities throughout Syria, except offensive actions against the Islamic State, for humanitarian aid deployment.⁴⁰

The resolution was vetoed by China and Russia.⁴¹

Deputy Representative of the United States Michele Sison believed Russia “was focused on preserving its military gains . . . thereby allowing continued bombing with horrific consequences.”⁴²

Turkey/Russia Ceasefire (December 2016)

Efforts between Turkey and Russia to establish a ceasefire agreement continued in December 2016.

On December 13, 2016, Russia and Turkey brokered a ceasefire with rebel leaders in eastern Aleppo. The ceasefire called for the evacuation of rebels from

³⁸ Reuters, *Timeline: The Battle for Syria's Aleppo City*, (Dec. 12, 2016), available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-aleppo-timeline/timeline-the-battle-for-syrias-aleppo-city-idUSKBN1412BO>.

³⁹ Security Council Resolution 21490, United Nations Doc. S/RES/21490 (Dec. 5, 2016).

⁴⁰ Security Council Resolution 21490, United Nations Doc. S/RES/21490 (Dec. 5, 2016).

⁴¹ UN Press, *Security Council Fails to Adopt Draft Resolution to End Attacks on Aleppo as Two Permanent Members Cast Veto*, United Nations (Dec. 5, 2016), available at <https://press.un.org/en/2016/sc12609.doc.htm>.

⁴² UN Press, *Security Council Fails to Adopt Draft Resolution to End Attacks on Aleppo as Two Permanent Members Cast Veto*, United Nations (Dec. 5, 2016), available at <https://press.un.org/en/2016/sc12609.doc.htm>.

the city.⁴³ The agreement permitted buses to be placed around rebel-held neighborhoods for evacuations. However, the buses were turned away by pro-government militias manning Aleppo checkpoints and Iranian forces continued shelling and airstrikes on Aleppo areas.⁴⁴ Iran and Syrian leaders allegedly “were not pleased that Turkey and Russia struck a deal without them.”⁴⁵ Although fighting would continue in Aleppo for years, the Syrian government announced that they had recaptured the last of the rebel-held enclaves in eastern Aleppo on December 22, 2016.

Several weeks later on December 28, 2016, Turkey, a supporter of various rebel factions comprising the High Negotiations Committee (“HCN”) and Russia announced that the two countries had brokered a proposed country-wide ceasefire agreement. Government forces, led by Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, their supporting allies in Iran and Russia, the HCN, and the Free Syrian Army, were parties to the proposed ceasefire.⁴⁶ ISIS, the Nusra Front, and the Kurdish Popular Protection Units, all regarded by one or more signatories as terrorist organizations, were excluded from the ceasefire agreement.⁴⁷

The proposed ceasefire agreement negotiated by Turkey and Russia was presented to the United Nations Security Council on December 29, 2016. Under the terms of the proposed agreement, all parties agreed to:

- “[C]ease attacks with any weapons... and to cease using combat air forces”;
- “[R]efrain from seizing” territory occupied by another signatory; and
- Only use “proportionate retaliatory force” for self-defense

⁴³ Alastair Jamieson, Mac William Bishop & Corky Siemaszko, *Aleppo: ceasefire Deal Reached in Besieged Syrian City, Rebels Say*, NBC NEWS (Dec 13, 2016), available at <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/aleppos-children/aleppo-civilians-killed-complete-meltdown-humanity-u-n-n695286>.

⁴⁴ Sarah El Deeb & Dominique Soguel, *Aleppo ceasefire Unravels, Raising Specter of Bloody End*, Associated Press (Dec. 14, 2016), available at <https://apnews.com/article/7ef1d96cb2d7425382cd7a3c30f46234>.

⁴⁵ Camila Domonoske, *ceasefire Underway in Aleppo; Civilians Still Trapped in War Zone*, NPR (Dec. 14, 2016), available at <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/12/14/505520902/planned-evacuation-of-east-aleppo-has-stalled-thousands-still-trapped>.

⁴⁶ BBC, *Syria Conflict: Ceasefire Agreed, Backed by Russia and Turkey*, (Dec. 29, 2016), available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-38460127>.

⁴⁷ BBC, *Syria Conflict: Ceasefire Agreed, Backed by Russia and Turkey*, (Dec. 29, 2016), available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-38460127>.

Turkey and Russia guaranteed the ceasefire with respect to the groups they support (rebel factions and Syrian government forces respectively) and agreed to “jointly monitor” the ceasefire. As guarantors, Turkey and Russia further agreed to:

- Establish a Joint Commission that served as a body to consider complaints and violations of the ceasefire;
- Establish checkpoints in residential areas along the line of conflict; and
- Compensate victims harmed by violations of the ceasefire;

Syria and rebel groups party to the proposed ceasefire also agreed to create delegations to pursue a peace settlement with the United Nations in Astana, Kazakhstan.

However, a final formal ceasefire agreement was never signed.⁴⁸

The involved parties did remain engaged in four rounds of peace talks in Astana through early May 2017.⁴⁹ During the negotiations, Russia, Turkey, and Iran sought to create “de-escalation zones” in rebel-held territory, particularly in the province of Idlib where alleged Sarin gas attacks occurred a month earlier.

However, the opposition signatories suspended their participation in the process in protest of continued government attacks in rebel areas on May 4, 2017.

Sochi Agreement (September 2018)

On September 17, 2018, Turkey and Russia announced a de-escalation agreement for the Idlib province (the “Sochi Agreement”). Under the terms of the agreement, Russia agreed to ensure the cessation of attacks on Idlib and the establishment of de-militarized and de-escalation zones in Idlib. Turkey and Russia further agreed to jointly patrol the boundaries of the demilitarized zones.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Of note, Russia, Turkey, and Iran signed a de-escalation and ceasefire agreement after the rebel faction representatives abandoned negotiations in protest of ongoing bombardment during peace talks. The Rus/Tur/Iran deal named them as “guarantors.” Syria did not sign this, and the rebels never really signed onto it either. *E.g.*, In Eastern Ghouta in Sept. 2017, the two main rebel factions agreed to a deal with Russia that effectively upheld the terms of the 2017 May-June deal between Russia, Turkey, and Iran. But then President Assad immediately cut off all United Nations access to Eastern Ghouta and then further escalated the local siege campaign.

⁴⁹ Mona Yacoubian, *Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad*, United States Institute of Peace (Jan. 1, 2021), available at <https://www.usip.org/syria-timeline-uprising-against-assad>.

⁵⁰ Representatives Vassily Nebenzia of the Russian Federation & Feridun Sinirlioglu of Turkey, *Memorandum on Stabilization of the Situation in the Idlib De-Escalation Area*, United Nations

The demilitarization agreement ultimately failed to be fully implemented. Jihadist rebels refused to fully withdraw and the joint Russian and Turkish patrols were never implemented.⁵¹ In April 2019, Syrian, Russian, and Iranian forces launched an offensive into Idlib effectively ending the Sochi Agreement.

Demilitarization agreement falls apart (May–October 2019)

In January 2019, the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (“HTS”), a successor group to the al-Qaeda splinter group Jabhat al-Nusra, launched offensives against other rebel forces in the Idlib province leading to HTS’ control of much of Idlib.⁵² The Turkish-backed National Liberation Front, though weaker than HTS, maintained a strong presence in Idlib.⁵³

In April 2019, Syrian government forces, backed by Iranian militias and Russian air support, began an offensive in Idlib breaking the 2018 Sochi Agreement.⁵⁴ Though fighting continued through August 2019, the Syrian government made little progress in its efforts to recapture Idlib.⁵⁵ In August 2019, pro-Assad forces backed by Russia and Iran captured the city of Khan Shaykhun and two other villages in Idlib.

Security Council (Sept. 18, 2018), *available at*

<https://multimedia.thenational.ae/assets/imi/Russia-and-Turkey-letter-of-18-September.pdf>.

⁵¹ RFI, *A Year After Sochi Agreement, Still No Peace in Syria* (Sept. 16, 2019), *available at* <https://www.rfi.fr/en/middle-east/20190916-one-year-after-sochi-agreement-still-no-peace-syria-russia-iran-turkey-astana>.

⁵² Zulfiqar Ali, *Syria: Who’s in Control of Idlib?*, BBC (Feb. 18, 2020), *available at* <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-45401474>.

⁵³ Zulfiqar Ali, *Syria: Who’s in Control of Idlib?*, BBC (Feb. 18, 2020), *available at* <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-45401474>.

⁵⁴ Representatives Vassily Nebenzia of the Russian Federation & Feridun Sinirlioglu of Turkey, *Memorandum on Stabilization of the Situation in the Idlib De-Escalation Area*, United Nations Security Council (Sept. 18, 2018), *available at*

<https://multimedia.thenational.ae/assets/imi/Russia-and-Turkey-letter-of-18-September.pdf>.

⁵⁵ European Asylum Support Office, *Syria Security Situation*, European Union Agency for Asylum (Nov. 2019), *available at*

<https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/EASO-COI-Report-Syria-Security-situation.pdf>.

On October 9, following the withdrawal of U.S. troops, Turkey launched cross-border attacks into Northern Syria against the Kurdish People's Protection Units ("YPG").⁵⁶ Turkey had labeled the YPG as a terrorist organization.

On October 22, 2019, Russia and Turkey reached an agreement to create "safe zones" along the Turkey-Syria border.⁵⁷ Under the agreement, Russia and Syria promised to enter Northwestern Syria to remove YPG forces and weapon deployments.

In December 2019, delegations from Turkey, Iran, and Russia had the "Astana meeting" but did not reach any definitive ceasefire agreement. This may be due to the anti-government side's refusal to accept new Russian terms regarding control of the Idlib province⁵⁸.

Conclusion

The Syrian Civil War has been characterized by numerous ceasefire agreements, none of which have brought lasting peace.

The failure of ceasefire negotiations can be attributed to several factors. One major factor is the deep-seated mistrust between the warring parties, exacerbated by years of violence and atrocities committed by both sides. Continued violence, government attacks, and an overall failure to adhere to the terms of ceasefire agreements, have further stymied efforts to build lasting peace, resulting in instances of parties to the conflict abandoning agreements.

Furthermore, the strategic use of localized ceasefires in Syria by the Syrian regime and their Russian allies, aimed at gaining tactical advantages on the battlefield and achieving political goals both domestically and internationally, further diminished confidence and trust in the ceasefire process.

⁵⁶ Al-Jazeera English, *Full Text of Turkey, Russia Agreement on Northeast Syria*, (Oct. 22, 2019), available at

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/22/full-text-of-turkey-russia-agreement-on-northeast-syria>.

⁵⁷ Al-Jazeera English, *Full Text of Turkey, Russia Agreement on Northeast Syria*, (Oct. 22, 2019), available at

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/22/full-text-of-turkey-russia-agreement-on-northeast-syria>.

⁵⁸ The New Arab, *Deadly Russian Bombardment of Idlib is Response to 'Opposition Rejection of Land-Grab Proposal'*, (Dec. 18, 2019), available at

<https://www.newarab.com/news/russia-bombing-idlib-response-opposition-rejecting-land-grab>.

Additionally, the conflict involves numerous players, ranging from international actors engaged in a proxy war to local and regional actors, each with its own agenda and often conflicting interests. The involvement of regional and international powers has complicated negotiations, as these actors have their own interests and priorities that may not align with those of the warring parties or the Syrian people. Furthermore, the explicit exclusion of certain actors, such as the U.N.-designated terrorist organizations in the 2016 partial ceasefire, introduced its own unique challenges by allowing hostilities to continue among a subset of combatants. This ultimately led to the failure of the ceasefire within four months of its inception.

Efforts by international actors to monitor and implement ceasefire negotiations and peace agreements did not have the desired effect of ending hostilities in the long term. Without the power to intervene when terms of agreements were broken, the Arab League monitoring body was unable to do more than observe violations, while internal divisions in the United Nations Security Council further hampered international intervention efforts and made the work of any mediator vastly more difficult. Proposed peace plans, including Kofi Annan's six-point peace plan, also lacked enforcement power to incentivize compliance from all engaged parties.

Lessons can be learned from the Syrian Civil War. Evidence from previous ceasefire negotiations in Syria indicates that a partial ceasefire can limit the likelihood of its success in establishing peace, given that hostilities can continue amongst a subset of combatants. Consequently, a ceasefire may be more likely to succeed when all of the primary combatants have been fully engaged and agree to a cessation of hostilities. Similarly, intervention power and a coordinated international presence are important if international intervention is to be of benefit.

The failure of ceasefire negotiations in the Syrian Civil War underscores the complexity of the conflict, and the challenges involved in finding a peaceful resolution.

Annex 1: Ceasefire Timeline

- Protests, civil uprising, and defections (March–July 2011)
- Initial armed insurgency (July 2011–April 2012)
- Arab League peace plans for Syria (September 2011–January 2012)
- Kofi Annan ceasefire attempt (April–May 2012)
- Next phase of the war starts: escalation (2012–2013)
- Rise of the Islamist groups (January–September 2014)
- U.S. intervention (September 2014–September 2015)
- Russian intervention (September 2015–March 2016)
- First partial ceasefire (February 2016–June 2016)
- Turkey/Russia ceasefire (December 2016)
- Aleppo recaptured; Russia-Iran-Turkey ceasefire (December 2016–April 2017)
- Syrian-American conflict; de-escalation zones (April–June 2017)
- ISIL siege of Deir ez-Zor broken; CIA program halted; Russian forces permanent (July–December 2017)
- Army advance in Hama province and Ghouta; Turkish intervention in Afrin (January–March 2018)
- Douma chemical attack; U.S.-led missile strikes; Southern Syria offensive (April–August 2018)
- Idlib demilitarization; Trump announces U.S. withdrawal; Iraq strikes ISIL targets (September–December 2018)
- ISIL attacks continue; U.S. states conditions of withdrawal; Fifth inter-rebel conflict (January–May 2019)
- Demilitarization agreement falls apart; 2019 Northwestern Syria offensive; Northern Syria Buffer Zone established (May–October 2019)
- U.S. withdraws from buffer zone; Turkish north-eastern Syria offensive (October 2019)
- Northwestern offensive; Baylun airstrikes; Operation Spring Shield; Daraa clashes; Afrin bombing (Late 2019; 2020)
- New economic crisis and stalemate conflict (June 2020–Present)

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PILPG's Policy Planning Initiative supports the development of long term, strategic policy planning that is crucial to international accountability, global conflict resolution, and the establishment of international peace. The Initiative provides timely and accurate policy planning analysis and work product on pressing and future policy conundrums by leveraging PILPG's deep network of talent within the international legal and policy communities and experience with its *pro bono* clients globally. PILPG Policy Planning focuses on advising policymakers, policy shapers, and engaged stakeholders on pressing issues within the arenas of international law, war crimes prosecution, and conflict resolution efforts. This includes identifying and addressing gaps within existing policies, anticipating key conundrums and questions that will riddle future policy decisions, applying lessons learned from comparative state practice, and proactively producing and sharing work product to inform such policies and avoid crisis decision making.