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Disarmament Commission

Demilitarisation of militias in post-IS Syria



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Introduction

The conflict in Syria has been raging on since 2011, when Bashar al-Assad and his government responded to citizen protests with violence. Since then, Syria has fallen into a chaotic civil war, with many foreign parties taking advantage of the chaos to try to improve their influence within the region. This includes the much-publicized terrorist group ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), commonly known as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) or simply IS (Islamic State), that took advantage of the chaos and claimed swathes of land in the name of creating an Islamic State, antagonizing the west in the process. Due to the excellent work done by the international community, and by all of the armed forces on the ground, ISIL will soon be effectively eradicated. This means that steps need to be taken now in order to ensure that an ensuing peace will follow.

Unfortunately, this won't be an easy feat. Not only have there been multiple failed negotiations between the parties involved in the civil war before, but there are several regional and international powers who have a vested interest in the outcome of the war. This means that it is near impossible to find a resolution that pleases all involved parties, especially seeing as the powers that are responsible for a lot of the intervention happen to have a lot of military power. Due to these complicated circumstances, it is advisable that the house adheres to the core principles of the United Nations and values the Syrian people's right to self-determination, ensuring that the party with the most support ends up in control.

Militias have been on the rise in Syria, as due to the chaos of the civil war it has become almost necessary for civilians to arm and defend themselves. On top of that, any soldiers that wish to oppose the regime have to join forces, but due to the lack of central organization from any rebel groups, they have often banded together in smaller militias that all have goals that vary from militia to militia. This variance between the rebel groups makes it immensely difficult to please all with any sweeping moves, requiring detail and representation on a smaller scale.

The demilitarization of these small militias will be no easy task, but it is essential that the conflict in Syria begins to be solved through diplomacy and discussion rather than



aggression and violence. Once that transition has been made, Syria can finally begin to rebuild while the politics are worked out in a non-violent manner.

Definition of Key Terms

Proxy Warfare

A proxy war occurs when two powers that oppose each other choose to provide support to opposing sides of a war in one or more secondary locations to ensure their influence in the region. This can have catastrophic consequences, as the side effects of their indirect war on each other directly impacts the secondary location.

Secession

Secession is the act of formal withdrawal from a larger body, such as a nation or an organisation. In this report, it will be used in a territorial context, with certain parties wishing to secede from a nation with the goal of establishing a new independent nation.

Arab Spring

A multitude of anti-government movements that spread across the Middle East and Northern Africa in 2010 and 2011, protesting and rebelling against numerous regimes in place at the time.

Demilitarisation

Demilitarisation in this context means the reduction of armed forces and weaponry, with the ultimate goal of transition to civil control rather than military control.

Sovereignty

In the context of 'national sovereignty', sovereignty refers to each nation's right to self-autonomy and self-governance.

Militia

A militia is a military force that is run and manned by civilians, to be utilised in times of emergency. In the context of the Syrian war, these militias are perceived to oppose the Syrian government.

Insurgency

An insurgency refers to an armed rebellion attempting to overthrow the government, though not at the scale or level of organisation of a full revolution.

General Overview



The start of the civil war

The civil war in Syria began when their president, Bashar al-Assad, and his government enforced a violent crackdown on demonstrations that occurred in conjunction with the Arab Spring, demanding greater democracy and the end of the authoritarian regime that Bashar al-Assad himself was the leader of. This violent response, extensively utilising the military power of the government, eventually caused civilians to raise arms and begin to fight back. These localised militias that formed eventually joined under the banner of the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), also known as the National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces.

Other parties join the war

Whilst the main opponent of the Syrian government consists of the SNC, there are many other parties involved, seeking to take advantage of the chaos. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) is an insurgency consisting mainly of Kurdish people who hope to use their position in the war to gain leverage in their quest for greater autonomy, and their ultimate goal of seceding and creating a state of Kurdistan. Iran and Saudi Arabia also intervened in the war, lending their support to opposite sides of the war, attempting to extend their influence in the region, while Russia came to the aid of their allies in the Syrian government. A lot of parties have a lot resting on the civil war, and as a result, felt the need to intervene to ensure the outcome is beneficial to them. This also includes Turkey, who have strongly opposed the SDF, and the USA, who has opposed the Syrian government and ISIL in the region.

The role of ISIL in a “post-IS Syria”

ISIL has its origins in Al-Qaeda, eventually splitting off and naming itself the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). ISIL, under the leadership of Al-Baghdadi, claimed land in Iraq and the Levant, attempting to establish a caliphate. While their control of the area has since dwindled due to the intervention of many foreign parties as well as many local groups, their notoriety remains and the threat they could pose should the international community weaken their assault is still very real. Once ISIL no longer holds any territory in the region, stronger demilitarization measures can be taken, but the international community has to maintain a watchful eye on any developments, and nations in the region must be ready to defend themselves.

Proxy warfare in Syria

Proxy warfare in Syria came about due to the interventionist actions of a number of nations that wished to either extend or maintain their influence in the region. Two of these nations include Shia majority government Iran supporting the Shia government in place in Syria, and Saudi Arabia supporting the majority Sunni rebel groups opposing the government. Iran and Saudi Arabia are two regional powers that are struggling for control in



the region, and their intervention has resulted in Syria becoming the location of a vicious proxy war. Russia also engaged itself in the proxy war by supporting the Syrian regime, whilst the USA chose to support the rebel groups vying to overthrow the al-Assad regime, though they were initially cautious to provide military aid to potential extremists that could potentially turn those same weapons against the USA. Turkey has been supporting rebel groups but opposing Kurdish rebel groups that are backed by the USA, even though they are allies with the USA. This inter tangled web of international relationships and aid exemplifies that due to all nations acting in self-interest, they have significantly exacerbated the situation in Syria. Please refer to Appendix 1 for a live, updated map of the territories controlled by involved parties.

The goals of the Kurdish-led SDF

The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) represent the Kurdish people in Syria. They have been oppressed by the government for as long as they remember, and it is the goal of many Kurdish people in Iraq, Turkey and Syria to secede and establish a state of Kurdistan, and if that is unattainable, they wish to have greater Kurdish autonomy.

Major Parties Involved

Syrian Arab Republic

The Syrian Arab Republic, which will be referred to as the Syrian government or regime, initiated the civil war. Led by Bashar al-Assad, they crushed non-violent civilian protests against the government, and in doing so, incited their population, eventually leading to protests taking up arms and starting a civil war. The Syrian government has received strong support from Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah, who wish for the Syrian government to remain in power. The regime has been accused of deploying chemical weapons against civilians, earning condemnation and disgust from nations around the world, though they deny any wrongdoing. The Syrian regime currently controls most of Syria.

Hezbollah

Hezbollah is a Lebanese militant group, and long-term ally of the political party that Bashar al-Assad represents. Initially, they supported al-Assad and the regime with weapons, but eventually also supported them with soldiers who bolstered the numbers of the government forces. Hezbollah is considered a terrorist group by many nations, and considered to have ties to terrorism by others, whilst some nations believe them to be a legitimate sociopolitical organization. However, their military actions cannot be denied, and as a result they have a tenuous relationship with many foreign nations and actors.

Iran



Iran has supported the Syrian regime throughout the civil war as well. They have been ensuring that the Syrian government isn't overrun by the rebels, due to the fact that the regime in Syria is Shia, making them allies. Should the rebels prevail, Iran will lose a significant ally in the Middle East, and that is something they wish to avoid at all costs, even though the civil war is turning out to be exceedingly costly. Iran has voiced support for a number of peace negotiations.

Russia

Russia is another staunch supporter of the Syrian government. The relationship between Russia and Syria is one that was founded during the cold war, and once Putin came into office their relationship only improved. Russia has been selling arms to nations in the Middle East for a long time, and the Arab Spring removed customers, with the likes of Muammar Gaddafi being overthrown. This weakened Russia's influence in the Middle East, and they also lost out on a lot of business with Libya. This backdrop does not allow Russia to permit this to happen once more with Syria, and their intervention also ensures that they are taken seriously on the global stage when it comes to negotiations. They have supported a number of peace negotiations, refuting the Western position that al-Assad may not be a part of the future of Syrian politics.

The United States of America (USA)

The USA wanted to avoid providing too much aid to the rebels, as they were well aware of the tinge of extremism that is present in many of the rebel groups. This was why they initially only ended up providing aid to the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, after thorough vetting. The USA even ended up deploying American troops on the ground alongside the SDF and other allies to combat ISIL. The USA further involved themselves in the Syrian civil war when they began launching airstrikes at Syrian air bases.

Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) is made up of largely Kurdish soldiers. They received aid from the USA, but are violently opposed by Turkey. Their main goal is to secede and to create an independent state named Kurdistan, but their wishes to secede have made their political ideas outlawed in Turkey. Turkey considers the Kurdish forces a threat due to their alliance with the Kurdistan Workers Party in Turkey, a militant group that wishes for greater autonomy, and if at all possible, to secede from Turkey. The Kurdish separatists do not wish to return to Syria once the civil war has ended, they are simply taking advantage of the situation and are hoping to finally reach their goal of seceding and creating Kurdistan. Whether or not this affects peace talks, the SDF has been a huge help when combating ISIL, taking and holding strategic positions as well as spearheading a number of offenses against ISIL.

Syrian National Coalition (SNC)



The Syrian National Coalition (SNC), also known as the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, is a coalition of many anti-regime groups and militias, and serves as the figurehead coalition in terms of opposition against the government. It is for this reason that they have been recognized as legitimate by many nations that support the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad. The SNC also formed a group known as the **Syrian Interim Government**. Whilst it is currently seated in exile in Turkey, it has been the main civilian government in opposition held areas, and has received funding from the USA, legitimizing it. It is widely recognized by opposition groups, serving as a uniting force and ruling over locally and provincially elected officials.

Turkey

Turkey has involved itself in the civil war for a number of reasons. It is a part of the CJTF-OIR, participating in the war against terrorism, but even though it is a staunch ally of the USA, it opposes a group that has regularly received support from the USA, namely the Kurdish-led coalition named the SDF. Turkey opposes the idea of a Kurdish state, and has had to put down a number of Kurdish insurgencies. Turkey has historically dealt with these with severity, and there is clearly no love lost between the two groups.

ISIL

Whilst the question of the relevance of the Islamic State in a supposed post-IS Syria should rightfully be questioned, their relevance should nonetheless not be understated. The threat of a powerful extremist group taking advantage of a nation weakened by war should be taken very seriously, with ISIL posing a serious threat even if they appear to be vanquished. This means that measures have to be taken to ensure that they are unable to regain a foothold in the region.

Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR)

The CJTF-OIR is a military operation established by the United States, but carried out in collaboration with more than 30 countries, with the goal of combating ISIL. It has provided an official outlet for nations that wish to provide resources in the war against extremism while minimizing the influence that each nation has, allowing nations to enter the region purely for the reason of combating terrorism while demonstrating that there are no ulterior motives.

Timeline of Key Events

This timeline details a number of important occurrences in the Syrian civil war, with many of the most important occurrences in bold. Although the high level of detail may be slight overkill, it serves to emphasize the many militias and separate entities taking part in the war. This diversity among participants also secures a diversity in opinion and end goal, making demilitarization that much more difficult.



January 2011	As the Arab Spring raged across the Middle East and northern Africa, civilians in Syria also began pro-democracy demonstrations to the chagrin of the regime in place at the time.
March 2011	The government cracks down violently on the protests, causing protestors to take up arms in response, initiating the early stages of the civil war
May 2011	The United States of America and the European Union increase the severity of their sanctions
November 2011	Arab league votes to suspend Syria and imposes sanctions
March 2012	Security Council endorses non-binding peace plan, with support from China and Russia
November 2012	National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, more commonly referred to as the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) is formed
December 2012	The SNC is recognized by the US, Britain, France, Turkey and the Gulf States as a legitimate representative.
2013	Through an investigation conducted by the UN, it is established that chemical weapons were used, but responsibility is never officially established
January – February 2014	Peace talks mediated by the UN fall through as the reigning government refuses to consider a transitional government
June 2014	ISIL declares a caliphate in regions of Iraq and the Levant



2014-2015	ISIL becomes the primary enemy for parties in the region
September 2015	Russia intervenes and launches air strikes against ISIL, however it is claimed that it mainly hits rebel forces
August 2016	Turkish troops enter Syria, officially to target ISIL, but also targeting the Kurdish-led SDF.
January 2017	Russia, Iran and Turkey back a ceasefire deal that ultimately falls through.
April-June 2017	The USA chooses to intervene, performing air strikes and arming the SDF.
2017-2018	Turkey continues their assault on the SDF.
2018-2019	ISIL is consistently pushed back and the land under their control is significantly reduced
October 2019	The USA withdraws troops from Northern Syria, leaving the Kurdish-led SDF vulnerable to an oncoming invasion by Turkey.

UN involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

- Security Council Resolution 2042, 14 April 2012 (S/RES/2042)
- Security Council Resolution 2254, 18 December 2015 (S/RES/2254)
- Security Council Resolution 2268, 26 February 2016 (S/RES/2268)

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

Peace has been sought after since the beginning of the war, for a number of reasons. Not only has the death toll been astronomical, but nations surrounding Syria have been overwhelmed with refugees fleeing the crisis. If the brutal civil war wasn't enough to spur the world to help find peace, then the ensuing refugee crisis certainly was. However, unfortunately peace has continued to elude the region, with multiple ceasefires having been attempted. There have been no sincere efforts by the United Nations to actively demilitarize



the militias present in Syria because, as of yet, it does not appear that any sort of lasting peace agreement will hold.

Numerous peace agreements have been attempted, although no peace agreement has been able to convince both sides that cessation will truly be enforced, and unfortunately the culprit tends to be the Syrian Arab Republic. In the early stages of the war, the Arab League attempted to play the role of the mediator, but the observers that were sent in were vastly under equipped and were shown clearly orchestrated scenes of progress. Due to a fear for their safety, they were ultimately removed from the country. After the failure of the Arab league, the United Nations attempted to intervene but were also unsuccessful when the ceasefire that was the groundwork for the negotiations fell through. Mediated ceasefires and peace negotiations have been attempted on multiple occasions, though they have proven to be futile. These failures, however, have not necessarily included demilitarization as a main talking point, meaning that there is still room for a lot of progress to be made should any discussions be held with demilitarization as the focal point.

More recently, Turkey and Russia agreed on a bilateral ceasefire in Idlib. This ceasefire is fraught with issues, and though both sides have indicated that they wish for the ceasefire to last, it is clear that they will be strengthening their military positions in the area rather than weakening them. This ceasefire is necessary due to the many citizens in Idlib that are endangered by the war, but ultimately it is just a temporary solution that will not end up solving the issue. It could potentially allow for more peaceful talks to occur, but as it stands, this ceasefire is not built to end the conflict, only to stymie it.

Possible Solutions

Demilitarization never comes easily, but demilitarization in Syria will be particularly hard. It isn't often that there are so many different parties to please, with small militias forming all over the nation. On top of that, Syria is the location of a violent proxy war, with multiple nations backing the government, and multiple nations backing the anti-government forces, all with their own best interests in mind. It will need to be considered that any attempted solutions that will try to aggressively go against either the government forces or the anti-government forces will be met by staunch resistance from many nations, making resolution very difficult. One potential way to circumvent this issue would be to ensure that the people of Syria retain their right to self-determination and their right to autonomy. Democracy is a solution that will be very difficult to argue against, as it gives both sides a fair chance.

While the political issues mentioned in the above paragraph will always be an obstacle, do not forget that this is the Disarmament Committee. Ensuring the disarmament,



with specific measures in place to ensure that even the smaller, lesser known militias are disarmed, is crucial. Without the extensive assurance and proof that all parties are being demilitarized, no warring party will dare to leave themselves vulnerable. One way to initiate this process while also building trust is to ensure that the demilitarization is done in a number of smaller steps, requiring that all parties reduce their military capacity by a certain amount before any others continue to demilitarize. This is hugely advantageous because no warring faction can gain an advantage over the others, maintaining the balance that prevents unnecessary escalation.

It should also be noted that although this is in post-IS Syria, the threat of terrorists is still very real. Even if the chaos abates, and some level of control and civility is achieved between factions, the fact that they are all reducing their military strength in the first place leaves them highly vulnerable to attacks from terrorist groups looking to take advantage of the situation. In fact, the threat of terrorists will likely make demilitarization in the first place much more difficult. Armed groups will want to remain armed enough to stave off any unexpected attacks, and this needs to be accounted for in any solutions that are proposed. Although some level of military strength is necessary, it remains to be seen whether that should all come from one trusted group, or whether it should come from the individual factions. It should be said that a case can be made for both, but detail is imperative either way as the complexity of the issue at hand needs to be addressed.

Demilitarization, in theory, is ideal. Once all parties are equally weakened, none of them have any new advantage over the others but they simply wreak less havoc. However, with no clear goal behind the demilitarization, most actors in the region would be highly reluctant to part ways with the weaponry that is protecting them from outside threats. There may even be some parties that question their ability to reach their goal without the use of force, thus either refusing to demilitarize, or feigning demilitarization to gain an advantage. For the reasons listed above, it needs to be closely monitored, and all militias and actors need to feel confident that their voices will be heard even without their capacity for violence demanding attention.

Seeing as there is no easily obtainable precedent, it is important for any potential solutions to be innovative, creative, but also well-worked and detailed for it to serve as an acceptable solution. Thinking outside of the box is encouraged, and addressing the issues one small aspect at a time is also an excellent way to approach the problem. It is impossible to solve the entire crisis in a few, sweeping moves, as then it would have been done already, and any aspect that can be effectively tackled, no matter how small, can potentially make a difference in the outcome of the civil war.



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Appendix or Appendices

- I. Live map of Syria
<https://syria.liveuamap.com/>
- II. Vox video detailing the actors in the Syrian civil war (note: very biased in favor of the USA, so should be taken with a grain of salt)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JFpanWNgfQY>

