

# UNA \_UK

1 // 2017

## THE SYRIA ISSUE

Guest edited  
by Lakhdar Brahimi

PERSPECTIVES

**VIEWS ON SYRIA  
FROM ACROSS  
THE REGION**

FEATURE

**BUILDING EMPATHY**

Melissa Fleming

ESSAY

**WOMEN, PEACE  
AND SYRIA**

Birgitta Holst Alani



ISSN 2399-3030





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Cover image: Turkey–Syrian border (October 2014). Residents of Kobani watch the battle as a Turkish tank rolls by // Jacob Simkin/NurPhoto/Alamy

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# DID THE UN FAIL SYRIA?

Our Guest Editor, Lakhdar Brahimi, and Chair, Lord Wood, tackle this seemingly intractable crisis

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI // FORMER UN AND ARAB LEAGUE ENVOY TO SYRIA**

I was flattered and surprised to be asked by UNA-UK's Chair, Lord Wood, to serve as Guest Editor for this issue of the UNA-UK magazine. I agreed because I felt that the story this magazine will tell – the story of the United Nations' relationship with the Syrian conflict – is a very important one.

Of course, any conflict in which some 400,000 people have died, five million refugees have been created and 13.5 million people are in desperate need of humanitarian assistance deserves thorough analysis. But the crisis in Syria also holds lessons for how the UN responds to crises, and it is important that these lessons are learned, both to bring the suffering in Syria to an end and to empower the UN to prevent, manage and resolve conflict in the future.

Yes, the UN failed to stop the bloodshed in Syria, but a deeper understanding

is needed of why the UN fails when it fails, and why the UN succeeds when it succeeds.

The UN is no more than the sum of its parts, its member states, and can do no more than what those members – especially the most powerful ones – will allow it to do.

The UN remains an indispensable institution, but one that only has a limited number of tools at its disposal to prevent conflict. In the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, we saw how the convening power of the Secretary-General, and the good relations that developed between the delegations to the UN in New York, offered the venue for negotiations and helped to prevent a nuclear war. To the contrary, in 1994 in Bosnia and Rwanda we saw how, lacking the proper tools to effect peace, the UN was incapable of preventing genocide.

In Syria, the tools at the UN's disposal would have been sufficient to secure peace but only had the sides involved been

willing to compromise. They were not. Ominously, Secretary-General António Guterres said on 18 February at the Munich Security Conference:

*"I think that peace is only possible when none of the parties to the conflict think they can win. I am not sure we are there yet in Syria. I am afraid that some might still think – and I think that is a total illusion – that they might win that war, so I am not optimistic about the short-term solution for the Syrian crisis."*

Syria has suffered from the superficial, distorted analysis that almost everyone made of its crisis. A lazy examination of the facts told most people that the regime will disintegrate and fall in no time, the way it did in Tunisia and Egypt. Russia's voice was the exception, here. But their pronouncements were suspect because of their cosy relations with Damascus. Iran stood staunchly by President Assad and supplied money, food, weapons and militias.

The UN Secretary-General and his envoys alone said, from day one, there was no military solution to the conflict. After around three years of costly war, most people pretended to share the UN view, but that was mostly lip service: they did say that there was no military solution but continued to work for war, not for peace.

The meetings convened in Astana, Kazakhstan, without the UN were useful. Let us hope they will succeed in consolidating the ceasefire they have achieved.

But they have had to realise that only a return to the UN might start a credible peace process. It seems that the participants to the Astana meetings have realised that the UN remains the indispensable organisation where serious problems of peace and security are concerned.

The UN is also irreplaceable when entire communities are in need of urgent humanitarian help. In Syria, the UN played a vital role as a deliverer of humanitarian aid to mitigate the suffering felt by the people. But it did only as much as the big powers allowed it to do. Far too often, the Syrian Government prevented UN convoys from reaching large numbers of people in desperate need of help.

The terrible nightmare the Syrian people have lived these past six years is a strong reminder that the UN needs to be given the tools which will allow it to succeed in bringing existing conflicts to an end and preventing future wars. Secretary-General

Guterres has been elected under new rules of procedure that allowed a larger participation of the General Assembly and much more transparency than ever before. The Secretary-General is determined to work for more reform, but his reform agenda cannot be implemented without strong cooperation and support from the membership of the Organisation. The reform of the Security Council is particularly important. A good beginning would be an agreement on the restraint of the use of the veto when preventing or resolving a conflict is concerned.

At the time of writing, negotiators are assembling in Geneva. We wish them luck. We hope that the parties and their supporters will hear what Secretary-General Guterres is telling them: thinking that either side will win this war "is a total illusion". A compromise is possible, and it can be worked out under UN auspices and nowhere else. //

**LORD WOOD OF ANFIELD // UNA-UK CHAIR**

The protracted horrors of the war in Syria continue to inflict untold suffering, and both horrify and shame the international community. Yet the fact that the conflict is about to enter its seventh year should not surprise us. Because it is a civil war with all the ingredients of an intractable conflict that resists resolution.

A war characterised by a bewildering array of actors, with rebels split into multiple groups that fight each other, as well as President Assad's regime forces. A war that involves multiple forms of external intervention – from the neighbouring region, the US, Russia and the UK, to name but a few. A war with a combustible combination of nationalist, Shia-Sunni and political conflicts, fuelled by money, manpower and military support from beyond Syria's borders. The international community has not just failed to stop the nightmare in Syria: it has contributed to it.

And what of the UN? As Lakhdar Brahimi, the former UN and Arab League Envoy to Syria, whom we are delighted to have as this issue's Guest Editor, observes: the UN has been powerless to restore peace in Syria, but the UN is only as strong as its member states allow it to be. When 'P5' permanent members of the UN Security Council and regional

actors are themselves party to the conflict, the UN lacks the space to act with authority and legitimacy.

Now, though, is the time to look ahead and seek to increase the brokering role of the UN in bringing the violence to an end. First, the UN must redouble its efforts to provide humanitarian relief and engage its member states in demanding access to those suffering most. Second, we must ensure that future peace talks are convened by the UN, not by one subset of interested parties (the recent attempts at peace talks in Kazakhstan took place without the UN, EU or US). Third, the UN should lead in planning for the political and economic reconstruction of Syria on terms that show the warring parties that they can all have a stake in the future of their country.

Lastly, as Lakhdar Brahimi recommends in his editorial, the UN should think about ways in which new procedures (such as increasing the role of the General Assembly) may strengthen its hand to bring conflict to an end. Meanwhile, P5 members must recognise their responsibility to help secure peace, not to exacerbate conflicts and then use veto powers to block attempts to end the misery they produce. //

*The UN remains the indispensable organisation where serious problems of peace and security are concerned*

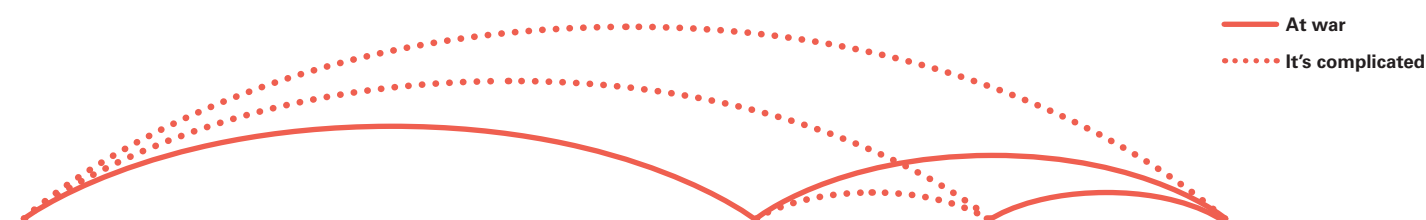


# WHAT'S ACTUALLY HAPPENING IN SYRIA?

*UNA-UK lets facts and figures speak for themselves*

## WHO'S FIGHTING WHO?

The conflict in Syria is complicated. But it helps to simplify matters if we think about the war as having four sides and a number of external backers. Inevitably such a simplification will miss some of the nuance of the situation: combatants do not fit neatly into categories and there are shades of grey and overlap between many of the groups detailed below.



### REBEL GROUPS

This is an umbrella term that encompasses a wide variety of different organisations. The largest groups and coalitions are listed here, but there are many smaller groups besides. There is frequently overlap and sometimes conflict between the groups, but most are united in their opposition to President Assad.



**Jabhat Fateh al-Sham**  
Formerly known as the Al-Nusra Front, this is a Sunni paramilitary group and a UN-designated terrorist organisation with links to al-Qaeda.

**The Southern Front**  
A coalition of around 60 different rebel groups in southern Syria. These groups have varied politics ranging from the secular to the Islamist.

**Jaysh al-Islam**  
A Sunni group fighting for an Islamic state in Syria. They sit on the spectrum between Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham and have close ties with both.



**Free Syrian Army**  
An umbrella organisation that grew out of defecting army units and other, largely secular, anti-Assad forces. Once far more powerful, it is now significantly weakened and may even have disappeared.



**Ahrar al-Sham**  
A coalition of Sunni groups fighting for an Islamic state in Syria. They and the then-Al-Nusra Front previously formed a joint coalition known as the 'Islamic Front' until a rift earlier this year.

### THE GOVERNMENT

These are forces loyal to the Government of Syria and President Assad.



**Syrian Armed Forces**  
These are the members of the pre-war Syrian armed forces who have survived the civil war and retained their loyalty to President Assad's Government.



**Hezbollah**  
A Shia paramilitary group active in Syria. They have historic links to Iran and support President Assad.

### KURDISH GROUPS

Groups fighting for an independent Kurdish state in the north and east of Syria.



Rojava is the de facto autonomous area of Kurdish Syria. It has recently attempted to include other ethnic groups in its work. It has organised militias such as the People's Protection Units (YPG) and Syriac Military Council (MFS).

### ISIL (DAESH)

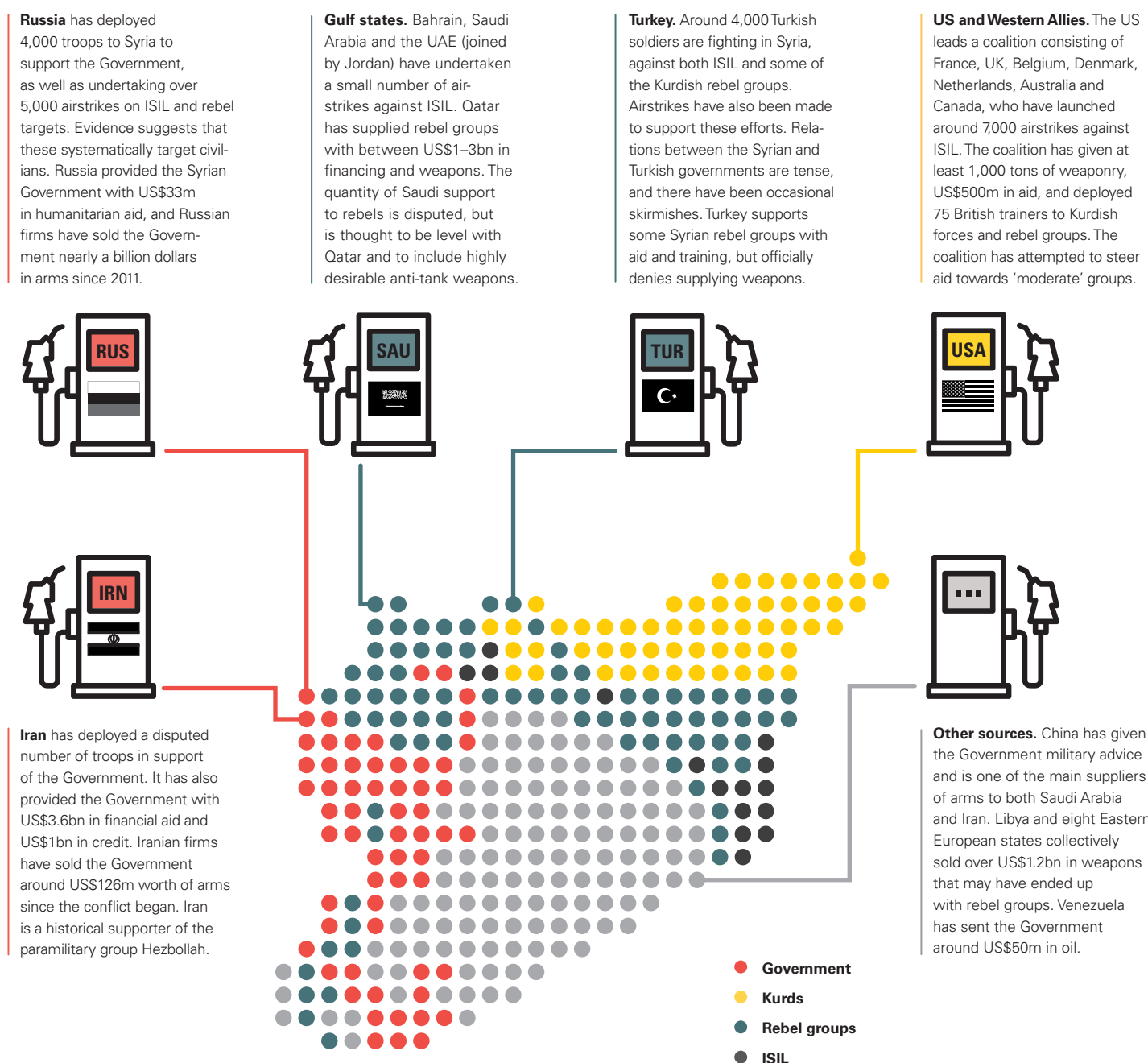
A terrorist group which commands a significant amount of territory in Iraq and Syria.



ISIL or Daesh have become globally notorious for their extreme cruelty. They successfully took over much of western Syria and northern Iraq in 2014. Since then they have been in retreat, but still control significant territory in the east.

## WHO BACKS WHO?

Below we outline the many regional and global powers whose interventions in the conflict add to its complexity.



For a full list of references, see [www.una.org.uk/magazine/1-2017](http://www.una.org.uk/magazine/1-2017)





### ELLIE GERANMAYEH

Ellie Geranmayeh is a Senior Policy Fellow for the Middle East and North Africa Programme at the European Council on Foreign Relations

### IRAN

Syria's strategic value for Iran has evolved over the course of the conflict. Syria and the Assad regime have long had instrumental worth for Iran as an essential conduit for access to Hezbollah. In the aftermath of the 1979 revolution, Hezbollah served as Iran's ally in achieving strategic security depth towards Israel and the US. In recent years, Iran and Hezbollah have become increasingly interdependent on security issues.

The transformation of the conflict into a proxy theatre for regional and international powers has motivated Iran to support the Assad regime to make greater gains on the ground as a means of turning this into political capital with regional and global powers.

Iran's decision to allow Russian troops to use its Shahid Nojeh Air Base in Hamadan was an unprecedented move by the Islamic Republic, and further testament that securing the upper hand in Syria is crucial to Tehran's regional foreign policy.

Syrian opposition groups and their backers have hoped for a Russian-Iranian split to emerge over the question of Assad. But so far, they have remained united in viewing Assad as indispensable for holding the Syrian state and their interests together.

Against this backdrop, Iran has insisted on devising a trilateral ceasefire mechanism, together with Russia and Turkey. As demonstrated by the recent Aleppo evacuation deal, any measures towards a ceasefire, humanitarian access or a political track which seeks to exclude Iran are likely to be difficult to guarantee and implement given the weight that Iran has on the ground in Syria.

Contrary to expectations that domestic support would diminish the longer the war continued, the surge of ISIL has led to greater internal backing to Iran's activity in Syria. //

### HAYDER AL-KHOEI

Hayder al-Khoei is Research Director of the London-based Centre for Shi'a Studies and a doctoral researcher in Middle East Politics at the University of Exeter

### IRAQ

Though much of the world continues to view the linked crises in Syria and Iraq as part of a broader Sunni versus Shia war that dates back millennia, the realities on the ground tell a very different story. In Iraq, a US-led global coalition and Iran are assisting the Iraqi Government and an assortment of Shia, Sunni and Kurdish forces to defeat ISIL. In Syria, although the various armed opposition groups are almost exclusively Sunni, they are mostly fighting each other and against a Russian- and Iranian-backed majority-Sunni Syrian army.

As ISIL is defeated militarily, it will be intra-sectarian and intra-ethnic conflicts that will define the stabilisation process. One thing that has become clear in both Syria and Iraq is the need for decentralisation to empower local communities and prevent another ISIL from exploiting the security vacuum.

The brutal nature of the armed conflict and genocidal campaigns has also meant that communities and

minorities now refuse to go back to not being able to defend their own homes and neighbourhoods from jihadist groups whilst weak central governments are unable to protect them.

However, the implementation of decentralisation has to be carefully calibrated. The process itself is complicated due to the widely-held belief in both Syria and Iraq that Western powers – and some regional states – want to see these countries divided and carved up along ethno-sectarian lines. Decentralisation is necessary in both Syria and Iraq, and there is a golden opportunity for the international community, through the United Nations, to play a positive role in guiding the process. But if the implementation is not coordinated with the central governments in both Damascus and Baghdad, it will further fuel the conflicts as opposed to solving them. //

### NERI ZILBER

Neri Zilber is a journalist and researcher on Middle East politics, an Adjunct Fellow of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and a Research Associate of the Rubin Center, IDC Herzliya

### ISRAEL

'Best of luck to both sides' is how Israel initially viewed the Syrian civil war. The sentiment contained a strong conviction against intervention and a strategic question: what was better for Israel, a hostile Assad regime who had nevertheless kept the Israeli-Syrian frontier quiet for four decades ('the devil you know') or an opaque, jihadist-heavy Syrian opposition ('the devil you don't know')?

With Assad's quick defeat proving overly optimistic, Israeli policy in recent years has shifted to defending three red lines. First, Israel would not allow Hezbollah to obtain and transfer (via Syria) advanced missile systems. Second, Israel would not allow Hezbollah and its Iranian patron to use the vacuum in southern Syria to establish a terrorist base for attacks against the Israeli-held Golan Heights. And third, Israel would maintain its freedom to act in and over Syria through a direct deconfliction mechanism with Russia.

Israel also runs a significant humanitarian aid operation across the Israeli-Syrian border. A few thousand Syrians, including reported rebel fighters, have received medical care in Israeli hospitals. This reflects a clear moral imperative as well as military logic: to win the 'hearts and minds' of Syrian communities to forestall Hezbollah and Iranian gains in the area.

In any international 'grand bargain' over Syria, Israel can be expected to press both Washington and Moscow to oppose any permanent Iranian and Hezbollah presence in the shattered country. The carnage next door has only reinforced Israel's 'villa in the jungle' mentality (as a former defence minister put it). This does not augur well for future territorial concessions – including, improbably, the occupied Golan Heights – or, indeed, the trust necessary to reach a peace deal with the Palestinians. //

### SAHAR ATRACHE

Sahar Atrache is Senior Analyst for Lebanon at International Crisis Group

### LEBANON

Hezbollah's full-fledged intervention in Syria since May 2013 has yielded it remarkable gains: it saved the then-crumbling Assad regime, an ally that the party sees as essential to its survival. It has also taken control of most of the Syrian-Lebanese border, securing its vital weapons supply line and reducing attacks from rebel-held areas against the party's fighters and popular base in Lebanon.

More importantly, Hezbollah has metamorphosed because of the Syrian war. From a Lebanese-centred movement dedicated to fighting Israel, the party has now turned to fighting Sunni jihadists – a switch that it presents as a continuation of its resistance against Israel. Hezbollah has put itself in the middle of a regional sectarian conflict against, for the first time, an Arab foe. It has also expanded its logistical and advisory support to Shi'ite militias in Iraq and Houthi rebels in Yemen.

Its new profile has sparked support and pride, as well as fear and hatred. Lebanon's Shi'ite community, worried by the rise of Sunni jihadists in Syria, has closed ranks behind Hezbollah. Despite sporadic outcries and nostalgia for when the party was acclaimed as an 'Arab hero', most Shi'ites consider Hezbollah's fight as a necessary evil. In the longer term, however, its participation could backfire: its role has galvanised its internal and external foes; intensified the Lebanese and regional sectarian divide; exacerbated the very Sunni extremism the movement aims to curtail; radicalised its own base; and provoked hostility among previously supportive constituencies in Lebanon and abroad.

Hezbollah and its allies might currently be on the winning side. Yet Syria's war is far from over and its impact is yet to play out – both in Lebanon and across the region. //

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#### HANAN ASHRAWI

Hanan Ashrawi is a Palestinian leader, legislator, activist and scholar who served as a member of the Leadership Committee and as an official spokesperson of the Palestinian delegation to the Middle East Peace Process

#### PALESTINE

The horrendous violence that has been unleashed in Syria is not entirely Syrian-made. It has evolved into a proxy war with the participation of regional and international players, creating unimaginable suffering and destabilising the whole region.

The brunt of the suffering has been borne by ordinary Syrians, who are witnessing a relentless assault on their lives, rights, lands, homes and cultural heritage, leading to a sense of hopelessness and a desperate attempt to find refuge. The Palestinian refugees in Syria – mainly in Yarmouk and other refugee camps – have also been hard hit with nowhere to go and no chance of returning to their homeland.

With Syria as the focus of global attention, the Palestinian issue has been largely side-lined. Israel used the Syrian tragedy as an excuse to continue its nearly 50-year-old military occupation of our lands, claiming that it cannot withdraw due to the risk of instability.

In addition, Israeli leaders have been trying to turn the Arab Peace Initiative on its head by bypassing Palestine and normalising relations with other Arab countries to exploit the ‘Sunni-Shia divide’.

In Syria – as in Palestine – the international community must work for a peaceful solution based on international law and respect for human rights, and restore the sovereignty of both states. Syria’s fragmentation into ethnic- and religious-based statelets, and Israel’s attempts to create isolated Palestinian ‘bantustans’, are lethal for the region and beyond. In Syria, as in Palestine, there is no military solution.

The UN must demonstrate courage and leadership in resolving these crises, as extremist ideologies thrive on the continued injustice. By addressing the causes of these traumas, the international community can begin an historical process of rectification and redemption. //

#### MADAWI AL-RASHEED

Madawi Al-Rasheed is Visiting Professor at the Middle East Centre at the London School of Economics and Political Science

#### SAUDI ARABIA

From the beginning of the conflict, Saudi Arabia insisted on the removal of Syrian President Assad as a precondition for peace. While the fate of Assad should have been left to the Syrian people to decide at a later stage in negotiations, the Saudis’ early involvement made it difficult for compromise to be achieved.

The logic behind the Saudi position is perhaps related to two factors. First, the atrocities committed by the Syrian regime made it almost impossible to convince the Saudi-backed warring factions to accept a solution that did not involve Assad’s departure. Second, Saudi Arabia saw Assad as Iran’s man in Damascus. His removal, the Saudis thought, would create a stumbling block in Iranian expansion and separate its two spheres of influence: Iraq to the east and Lebanon to the west. However, the Saudis underestimated the scale

of Iranian and, later, Russian interventions on behalf of the regime. The Saudi dream of swiftly removing Assad became a nightmare that the Syrian people have endured.

Saudi policy on Syria has been driven by its losses in the Levant. Since 2003, it lost its acumen in Iraq after the American-led invasion toppled Saddam Hussein. Three years later, Saudi Arabia’s influence began to be eroded in Lebanon after the regime criticised Hezbollah for provoking the 33-day Israeli war on Lebanon.

It remains to be seen whether Saudi Arabia will give up on weaning Syria from Iran and its various militias. Its fixation on removing the President can only prolong the Syrian crisis. It is time for all regional powers and their international backers to end the saga. The international community, through the UN, is best suited for this task. //

#### ALEXANDER NEKRASSOV

Alexander Nekrassov is a former Kremlin advisor and a former investigative journalist

#### RUSSIA

The biggest mistake people make about Russia’s policy on Syria is thinking that it pushed the crisis in Ukraine to the side. Ukraine remains top of Moscow’s foreign policy list and will become even more important as President Putin’s election campaign goes into full swing.

That said, Syria remains important for Russia, not just as a symbol of its return as an international player. ‘Losing Syria’ could result in a gas pipeline from Qatar to Europe, pushing out Russia from that lucrative market – a horrifying prospect for the Kremlin and the bosses of gas and oil giant Gazprom.

Putin considers that Russia and Iran have been successful in their campaign to keep Assad’s regime, giving it a huge boost by liberating Aleppo and turning Turkey into their ally. The political process on Syria initiated by the three countries is going on in

Kazakhstan, with the Syrian Government conducting it from a position of strength. Assad, as Moscow sees it, will lead the transition – he may even be able to select his successor and work out international guarantees to preserve Syria’s unity before standing down.

The UN’s role in Syria was seen by Moscow as disappointing in 2016 but that’s not to say that Russia’s support for the international community has wavered. Russia will soon try to seal its success with some sort of UN approval and participation.

Now, a lot will depend on whether the noises in Washington about a joint effort with Russia in fighting ISIL will materialise. If that happens, the Kremlin will feel emboldened to resolve the pressing issue of the conflict in eastern Ukraine and work out a solution over Crimea – something that Putin will want to show voters before election day. //

#### RANA MARCEL KHALAF

Rana Marcel Khalaf is an independent research consultant, the author of several publications on civil society and governance in Syria and an Academy Associate at Chatham House

#### SYRIA

The governance void precipitating from the Syrian conflict has had one positive effect: a newly born civil society, invested in building equitable governance. The space for this civil society is now shrinking due to violence and inadequate support. How can it be protected?

First, the international community should impose strict measures on warring groups that target activists and treat the social services they provide as war tools. Furthermore, international mediators could impose conditions within peace agreements that include civil society actors at higher negotiation and decision-making levels.

Enabling civil society space means ensuring its economic security. Syria’s civil society is trapped in a cycle of short-term projects, leaving it financially vulnerable and incapable of planning strategically. The international community should invest in longer-term core funding and share some risk in vetting and extending funds to

citizens in Syria, who are otherwise sanctioned due to anti-terrorism legislation.

Just as important is supporting Syria’s civil society to take up its own agency. Many international NGOs have responded with ‘good governance’ training to improve management of local councils to ensure accountability and transparency. Yet this training deserves a more tailored approach, applicable to local culture and context.

‘Good governance’ should also apply to international NGOs, governments and multilateral actors in Syria. They need to be transparent with locals about their spending and plans in Syria, and to be accountable to them, too. They also need to practice what they preach in regards to human rights, especially relating to protection of civilians and justice. Only then can they bring hope, which drives locals towards rebuilding governance based on international norms rather than resorting to extremist ideals – a more attractive alternative to ‘just talk and diplomacy’. //

// Image: Taree’ al Bab “Aleppo” where the SKUD bombed, 3 March 2013 / Basma/Foreign and Commonwealth Office/Flickr (Creative Commons)



// Image: Doaa Al Zamel, the teenager featured in *A Hope More Powerful Than the Sea* by Melissa Fleming. See [www.una.org.uk/magazine](http://www.una.org.uk/magazine) for an extract of Doaa's story. © Elena Dorfman

# THE UN'S RESPONSE

*In this feature, we take a close look at the UN's response to the Syria crisis. Colin Keating interrogates the reasons behind the paralysis of the UN Security Council. Edward Mortimer looks at the role of the UN Secretariat and agencies. And in an exclusive interview, Melissa Fleming talks about how one of the most directly involved agencies, UNHCR, dealt with the crisis in Syria.*

## BUILDING EMPATHY: A CONVERSATION WITH MELISSA FLEMING

**Can you talk us through some of the challenges that the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has faced on the ground?**

UNHCR has 450 staff working inside Syria. Most are national staff who themselves have lost loved ones and have had to leave their homes. Their devotion to working for UNHCR to help their people survive is remarkable because day after day they are risking their lives.

Our biggest challenge as humanitarians is access, and my colleagues are in constant negotiations with the parties in control of different areas to get the green light to deliver aid to civilians in need. This can take days, weeks or even months and it often fails. The idea that children are dying of starvation or that mothers are unable to keep their babies warm because we are prevented from reaching them is unbearable.

**What would you say to people who accuse the UN of being a 'helpless bystander' in Syria?**

I believe that UN humanitarian organisations have done their very best despite chronic underfunding. UN staff inside Syria risk their lives to help the population, but agonise over not being able to reach people in besieged or hard-to-access areas. UN mediators have devoted their best diplomatic efforts to try to forge peace. But with the powers that have influence to stop the war divided, the conflict rages on and people continue to flee and die.

**You have spoken out about problems with the humanitarian system, including insufficient emphasis on prevention. What are the prospects for long-term reform?**

We have record numbers of forcibly displaced people in our world today: 65 million. That is a reflection of wars not stopped or prevented. UN Secretary-General António Guterres has called for

a "surge in diplomacy for peace" and has made conflict prevention a priority. I am very hopeful that this new emphasis will reduce the number of conflicts and consequently, the number of refugees.

Meanwhile, as a result of the UN Summit on Refugees and Migrants convened by his predecessor, Ban Ki-moon, last September, UNHCR is leading a process that will result in a Global Compact on Refugees, aimed at ensuring countries share responsibility for all kinds of refugee situations and that humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors work together. So there is a real prospect that in future, people fleeing for their lives will not only receive access to asylum but also the chance to rebuild their lives as they await the chance to return home.

**In your new book, *A Hope More Powerful Than the Sea*, you chronicle the incredible journey of Doaa, a Syrian teenager who ends up on a fishing boat headed for Europe that is deliberately capsized. What made you want to tell her story?**

Doaa's story struck me harder than most and also inspired me. She didn't just survive the war, but one of the worst shipwrecks on the Mediterranean Sea – only 11 of the 500 people crammed on board survived, including a baby girl, Masa, who was saved by Doaa. When I read about them surviving four days and nights on a child's floating ring in the middle of the sea with no food and no water and everyone, including Doaa's fiancé, Bassem, dying around her, I flew to Crete to meet her.

For some reason, she entrusted me with her harrowing story. She was deeply traumatised by the hell of those days. She missed Bassem and sometimes wished she had died with him. Her only consolation was her conviction that God had given her the strength to survive so that she could save little Masa. She soon also became convinced that by allowing me to tell her

story she would be helping to build empathy for all Syrians forced to flee.

**In today's media culture, do stories still have the power to change hearts, minds and policies?**

There is a saying: statistics are human beings with the tears dried off. Refugees are often treated as statistics, which dehumanises them and allows for narratives that promote fear and xenophobia. I am afraid that if we didn't tell individual stories there would be even less empathy, fewer donations and more closed borders. Stories capture people's imaginations and have the power to educate, create sympathy and encourage action.

**What is your message for those who believe that refugees pose a security threat?**

First of all, it is the refugees who are fleeing threats to their own security. They are seeking a place free of violence. Second, UNHCR's registration system identifies and excludes combatants. Our resettlement programme has stringent screening systems that are put into practice even before the screening from the receiving country takes place. This is why we call for the expansion of legal avenues for refugees to reach the richer countries of the world.

Coupled with more investment for refugees to live decent lives in the neighbouring host countries (86 per cent of refugees are in the developing world), there would be far less incentive for refugees to entrust ruthless smugglers with their lives and attempt the crossing to Europe. //

Melissa Fleming is Head of Communications and Public Information/Spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. She was most recently Senior Advisor in UN Secretary-General António Guterres' transition team. A longer version of this interview and an extract from *A Hope More Powerful Than the Sea* are available at [www.una.org.uk/magazine/1-2017](http://www.una.org.uk/magazine/1-2017)



## BIG POWER POLITICS

### Colin Keating

The Syrian conflict is a defining symbol of the modern failure of our institutions for collective security.

The Security Council should have done much better. But the Council is not an abstract independent institution. It is only the sum of its members. It succeeds when its members choose to align their interests or accommodate their differences. It fails when its members choose to ignore this reality.

Syria has been ruled for over 45 years by a family from a minority sect. The Sunni majority has felt excluded and oppressed. The regime is militantly secular. It governs without regard to human rights and relies on brutal force.

The regime has challenged the sovereignty of its neighbours, occupying and dominating Lebanon and facilitating Iranian involvement. Syria is a committed enemy of Israel and had undermined past negotiations for a comprehensive peace in the region.

There are therefore many reasons why powerful states in the region and in the Security Council had strong interests involved. Many wanted the end of the Assad regime.

A simple analysis blames the Syrian crisis on the succession of Russian vetoes in the Security Council. These were a major part of the problem. But the issue is much more complex.

Russian support for Syria was a natural extension of historical interests and relationships. There are some similarities to the natural support the US gives to its historical ally in the region, Israel. When

the conflict started in 2011 it should not have been surprising that Russia had strong incentives to back Damascus and use its veto, as the US often does for Israel. Basing policy on the hope that Russia would abandon Syria was naïve.

Another complicating factor is that the rebellion opened an historic opportunity for Syria's Kurdish population to take control of large areas in the east. This not only divided the rebel coalition, but also divided the states supporting the rebels.

The crisis also produced a humanitarian disaster. Globally, people were appalled by the atrocities against civilians and the huge flows of refugees. All this should also have been foreseen in 2011. Policy-makers would have known about the appalling civilian atrocities inflicted by the Syrian regime in 1982, when a previous opposition resistance in the city of Hama was put down with extreme brutality. Nothing less should have been expected if the survival of the regime was at stake.

Events in Libya in 2011 also played a part. It was not only Russia that saw a worrying precedent in the way that a Security Council decision to allow the use of force for a humanitarian purpose could morph into a war of regime change. China, and many developing countries, have remained sensitive about this precedent for the Syrian situation, where so many players had vested interests in the rebellion against Assad.

The emergence of ISIL further complicated the situation. Appalling atrocities against civilians, the flow of foreign fighters and the impact on terrorism globally, raised the stakes for all. Tragically for the Syrian people, ISIL provided a new pretext for Damascus to continue labelling all rebels as terrorists.

From late 2011, a sense set in that the Security Council was hopelessly paralysed.

The UN Secretariat did its best. But even talented Special Envoys, like Kofi Annan, Lakhdar Brahimi and Staffan de Mistura failed, underlining the problem that is created when the Security Council is fundamentally divided.

The UN, working with NGOs and humanitarian agencies, did achieve modest progress in bringing supplies to embattled civilians. In 2013–14, Australia and Luxembourg challenged the permanent members of the Council's pressure to remain passive and secured groundbreaking Security Council resolutions on

humanitarian access. But Russia and the US, preoccupied by their own interests, insisted that the underlying political issues were off limits to the Council.

In 2015–16, New Zealand, Spain and Egypt intensified this humanitarian focus with new resolutions. In 2016, the New Zealand Prime Minister sponsored an attempt to restore Security Council consensus on the political issues with a high-level session of the Council. But to no avail.

Was there ever an opportunity to stem the conflict in Syria? And what policies might have achieved that?

A window of opportunity should have been explored in 2011, before the civil war was in full swing. Increasingly, the Syrian regime saw a military solution as the only option. Russia became locked into the same logic – and inevitable escalation followed.

A serious policy of conflict prevention in 2011 might have produced a better outcome. It would certainly have been a much better policy for those in the West who were concerned about protection of civilians, humanitarian law and the minimisation of refugee flows. Syria would also have been a much less fertile ground for ISIL.

Conflict prevention is one of the fundamental responsibilities of the Security Council under the UN Charter. The new Secretary-General, António Guterres, has promised to make it a top priority. But it requires a genuinely collective approach to decision-making. It requires policy-makers to accept that the perfect can often be the enemy of the good. Instead, what is needed is a willingness to find common ground that is 'good enough' for sustainable peace.

In 2011, peace was not well served by those whose policy was that 'Assad must go'. This ignored practical realities in Syria and the foreseeable humanitarian consequences of failing. It also ignored the lessons from Iraq (and later Libya) following the collapse of similar regimes. Change in Syria could only be achieved by negotiation, over time and with Russia as a partner.

A deal with Assad in 2011 might have resulted in a 5–10-year transition. Not ideal for the principled or for those who scented the possibility of quick regime change. But, looking back from 2017, it would surely have been better than the horrors that were unleashed on Syrians and which now impact on the whole world.

Russia was able to convert the Syrian war into a political and military

opportunity. But Assad's indiscriminate attacks against civilians, targeting of hospitals and use of chemical weapons have caused significant costs to Russia's reputation. In hindsight, Russia too would have been much better served if conflict prevention had been prioritised in 2011.

It is possible that, despite its best collective conflict prevention efforts, the Security Council would still have

failed. Assad would certainly have robustly resisted. Russia might not have been persuaded to cooperate. The working methods of the Security Council were (and remain) lamentably archaic and unsuitable for serious work of this kind. Nevertheless, the fact remains – conflict prevention was never seriously tried when it might have made a real difference.

Syria and the world deserved better. //

Colin Keating is a leading international expert on the UN Security Council. He served as New Zealand Ambassador on the Council in 1993–94. From 2005–2011 he was the Founding Executive Director of Security Council Report in New York and concurrently a Senior Research Fellow at Columbia University. Recently he was a Special Envoy and Adviser to the New Zealand Government for its 2015–16 term on the Council

## MAKING A DIFFERENCE?

### Edward Mortimer

Undoubtedly, the best chance to stop the Syrian civil war was before it properly started, in 2011. But such chances are all too often missed, and the UN is judged more by its success or failure in stopping wars that are visibly happening than in preventing ones that nobody knows about.

Once a war is in full swing, the world expects two things of the UN – that it should stop it, and that it should help the hapless civilians who are suffering its effects. It should also prevent escalation, whether 'vertical' (the use of more and more deadly weapons) or 'horizontal' (the geographical spread of hostilities) – but again, the world seldom worries about that until it is too late.

Mr Keating's pertinent observation that the Security Council "is not an abstract independent institution" applies to the UN as a whole. The Secretariat and the various funds and programmes, including those dealing with humanitarian needs, can in practice only operate in the narrow political space conceded to them by member states, all of which put their own interests first and the effectiveness of the UN a long way behind.

The peacemaking efforts have been most obviously hampered by divisions in the Security Council. The most promising was the six-point plan put forward by Kofi Annan as Special Envoy in 2012. This was accepted in principle by all parties, but foundered on the insistence of the Western powers that Assad's departure must be accepted as a precondition for negotiations (rather than a possible outcome, which Russia at that time was

willing to accept), and also the determination of the US to exclude Iran (manifestly a decisive actor in the war, however much one may dislike it) from the conference table.

More recent efforts by Annan's successors have been dogged by similar disagreements, with Western concessions coming too late to forestall a hardening of the Russian position, especially since Russia became directly involved in combat operations in the autumn of 2015, helping to turn the tide of war in favour of its protégé, Assad. The sheer complexity of the conflict, with shifting alliances among different parties fighting on the ground as well as their external backers, has also made effective mediation more and more difficult.

In an all too familiar pattern, lack of agreement on a political or military solution has left the UN playing a predominantly humanitarian role – 'mopping up the blood rather than staunching the flow'. But here, too, as in previous conflicts (Bosnia and Sri Lanka come particularly to mind), political divisions have hampered the relief of suffering and the UN has again incurred criticism as it struggled with the dilemma of securing access to victims without compromising its impartiality. Although the Syrian conflict has coincided with the period when the UN has been trying to apply lessons from Sri Lanka through the Human Rights up Front programme, it has not escaped accusations of partiality or even complicity because of its willingness to work with the regime, or at least with humanitarian organisations that the regime directly controls.

At the same time, virtually all parties to the conflict have consistently disregarded the most basic principles of international humanitarian law, civilians being

cynically and routinely subjected to bombardment and starvation. The Security Council has passed several resolutions condemning these breaches, but since there is no consensus in the Council on sanctions against the perpetrators – and still less on any attempt to hold them judicially accountable for their crimes – these resolutions have been largely ignored by the parties on the ground, thereby further eroding the Council's authority. And even the UN's crucial work of supporting refugees outside the country has been compromised by the unwillingness of member states either to fund these operations adequately or to accept refugees for resettlement in meaningful numbers.

Arguably the UN's most useful contribution was provided by the Office for Disarmament Affairs in and after 2013, when it organised and verified the removal of very large stocks of chemical weapons from the country. It is regrettable that public comment has focused on President Obama's failure to enforce his own "red line" on the use of these weapons through military action, rather than on this important measure of disarmament, preventing a very dangerous escalation of the conflict, which was the fruit of a rare moment of cooperation between permanent members of the Security Council. Although there have been reports of chemical weapons being used since (not only by one side), this has been on a smaller scale, and an important international norm has by and large been preserved. //

Edward Mortimer is a Distinguished Fellow at All Souls College, Oxford, and the author of *Faith and Power: the Politics of Islam* (1982). From 1998 to 2006 he served as Chief Speechwriter and Director of Communications to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan



# WOMEN, PEACE AND SYRIA

**Birgitta Holst Alani**

Syria is one of the most striking examples of how conflicts affect civilians more than they do the military. This has made Syrian women and girls extremely vulnerable to the negative impacts of the armed conflict. They are exposed to physical, psychological and sexual violence, making them victims of marginalisation, poverty and suffering. The threat of terrorist groups to women and girls is also greater in regions of conflict. It is important to identify what tools are available to protect them, both before conflict erupts, and during and after a war.

Both men and women in Syria have for a long time lived under the pressure of an authoritarian government. In addition, women are under more pressure than their male compatriots; they do not have a natural place in public or political life which offers them a platform from where they can fight for gender rights. This means that, should any peace agreement be signed in Syria, it would still be necessary to involve Syrian women in the implementation.

But first we need to get there. Women are still under-represented in peace negotiations. In part, this is because the security of women and girls is generally regarded as a women's issue rather than

a security issue. However, the participation of women in security operations and in peace processes is a fundamental part of creating a sustainable peace. Very few women participated in the Geneva peace talks: the process whereby the delegations of the Syrian Government and its oppositions have meetings with the UN. This fact is a reflection of a traditional male dominance of the Syrian public sphere.

UN Security Council Resolution 1325, adopted in 2000, was a milestone in the area of women, peace and security. This resolution has been followed by a number of other resolutions to confirm special attention to women in armed conflict. Women's active participation is the cornerstone of Resolution 1325. The resolution "reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peacebuilding, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction and stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security". Yet, as Syria shows, women are still largely absent when it comes to decision-making.

Women suffer disproportionately in modern wars, but they are also often

leading actors in building security. This is not reflected in peace negotiations. It is often stated that this is because peace needs to be negotiated first, before democracy can be installed. Only then can women start demanding their rights. However, it is too late to work towards women's rightful place in society after a peace has been achieved; women's rights and gender equality are at the core of political transition processes. The calls from Syrian women to place gender equality at the heart of Syria's transition process are entirely valid.

I have met a good number of Syrian women, both within the framework of the intra-Syrian peace talks in Geneva and outside at meetings which have been organised with the support of the Euromed Feminist Initiative. At those meetings, Syrian women activists and researchers have presented their thoughts to Syrian politicians, activists and lawyers on how to include gender aspects into a future Syrian constitution. The result of the discussions is the handbook: *ABC for a Gender Sensitive Constitution*. I quote from the handbook: "A gender sensitive constitution is especially beneficial during transitions to democracy. Women can be crucial in bringing about the fall



of authoritarian regimes and facilitating the transition to democracy itself." The example of Tunisia is mentioned, where women were both organisers and demonstrators in protests during the Jasmine Revolution in 2011, after which they demanded full recognition during the constitution-making process.

What are the implications of Resolution 1325 in the Syrian case? Well, it is the first time in a UN-led peace process that women have been allotted a space in relation to the peace talks – albeit not in the formal negotiations. This is positive. A Women's Advisory Board (WAB) was set up, and it reflects a diversity of women's perspectives and organisations in Syria and aims to ensure that the voices, concerns and experiences of Syrian women from different backgrounds are integrated into the design and content of the talks. They are thereby given a chance to articulate their concerns and ideas and to present recommendations. Resolution 1325 calls on all actors involved, when negotiating and implementing peace agreements, to adopt a gender perspective, including the special needs of women and girls during repatriation and resettlement and for rehabilitation, reintegration and post-conflict reconstruction.

The WAB means that this may actually happen.

Research has pointed to the fact that there is a positive correlation between the success of talks and agreements and occasions when women participate in peace-making, constitution-making and national dialogues. Women's participation can shift the dynamics by bringing new issues to the table, strengthening linkages to root causes of conflict and promoting more sustainable peace.

In order to be effective, it is important that the WAB is engaged in all issues that are discussed in formal talks, including questions of ceasefire, the use of indiscriminate weapons, the political transition, governance, the release of prisoners and the humanitarian situation – just to mention a few among all the topics which will have to be discussed in depth. A gender perspective needs to be integrated in all aspects of any future peace agreement.

But will the women be listened to? Will their voices be loud enough to have an influence on the talks in a meaningful way and can they make a difference? Or will their presence just be window-dressing for the sake of it? The same goes for the formal delegations participating in the intra-Syrian talks. These

have previously included three women each out of 15 members of the delegations. This is a ratio of 20 per cent, which is considered relatively high for talks of this kind. But are the women themselves motivated enough and able to fight for gender issues? A closer look at that question will decide whether they need assistance from outside or not.

In addition to the WAB there is another group of Syrian opposition women who have been endorsed by the High Negotiating Committee (the central decision-making body of an umbrella group of opponents to President Assad). This is the Women's Advisory Committee (WAC) and it is comprised of 20–25 professional women working on human rights, humanitarian, legal and communication issues. They actively support the opposition delegation to the talks, which, after much pressure from these women, agreed to table the WAC's proposal for a women's quota for the seats in any future Syrian Parliament.

In contrast, the women inside the delegation representing the Syrian Government seem to have difficulties in presenting gender-related issues within their own delegation. There is to my knowledge no women's group supporting the negotiators representing the Syrian Government. However, the opposition is an extremely diverse gathering of both armed rebels and political opponents, Islamists and secular representatives. It is likely to be quite difficult for women to successfully secure support from all sides of the opposition movement when it comes to proposals which focus on gender.

The inclusion of women in the Syrian peace process – both during the negotiations and in the implementation of a peace agreement – is a prerequisite for enabling a negotiating climate where the interests of ordinary Syrians and their communities will be highlighted. The Syrian population deserves the kind of settlement that can only come from the inclusion of women on the road to peace. //

**BIRGITTA HOLST ALANI //**

Ambassador Birgitta Holst Alani is a member of the Swedish Women Mediation Network. She was a facilitator to the third round of Geneva peace talks on Syria and is acting as a senior advisor to the current round of talks. She is the former Swedish Ambassador to Nigeria and the former Director of the Swedish Institute Alexandria



# 10

## signs of hope

Amidst all the suffering in Syria, there have been some occasions where humanity has shone through the carnage. Here we present 10 stories you might have missed – signs that there is yet hope for Syria.

### 1. Refugee radio

An award-winning radio host in Syria who was forced to flee to the United States when conflict broke out, Honey Al Sayed now relays the stories of Syrian refugees to a global audience. Upon arrival to the US, Al Sayed co-founded SouriaLi – a non-profit online radio station that fosters peacebuilding, reconciliation and democracy for Syria. Programmes include a soap opera called *We are all Refugees*, dramatising the lives of Syria's displaced.

### 2. Syrian 'hacktivism'

DIshad Othman, a Kurdish-Syrian refugee in Washington, sat up all night on 25 February 2013, following Twitter reports that a missile had been fired from the south-west of Damascus. Having served in a Syrian artillery unit, Othman knew it would hit Aleppo in roughly six minutes. Months later, Othman set up 'early-warning app' Aymta, which delivers airstrike alerts to Syrian subscribers. It received 16,000 views in its first 24 hours.

### 3. Action shots

Syria launched its Mobile Phone Film Festival in 2014, organised by Syrian filmmakers and activists to honour the memory of individuals who risked their lives to record the country's civil war. The festival, which tours internationally, features a handful of some 300,000 video clips caught on phone camera and uploaded to YouTube during the conflict. The festival has also given away grants to help young filmmakers produce their films.

### 4. Sound of hope

Electro musician Kaan Wafi is one of the hundreds of thousands of Syrians in Germany. In Berlin, Wafi found a growing community of foreign artists, with whom he began to collaborate on visual art and music, occasionally performing in refugee camps and cultural centres. Wafi's debut album, *Pieces From Exile*, condemns atrocities committed by the Assad regime and mourns the many refugees who drowned in the Mediterranean.

### 5. Equal rights

The female founders of Souriyat Across Borders wanted to provide equal opportunities for Syrian children in Jordan. As well as operating a full-time free medical centre for the mental and physical rehabilitation of refugees and civilians inside Syria's besieged areas, Souriyat Across Borders donates necessities such as clothing, water and food and has partnered with the British Council to provide education and skills training for displaced students.

### 6. 'Malala of Syria'

Teen refugee Muzoon Almellehan was one of the first Syrians admitted in the United Kingdom under Prime Minister Cameron's plan, with the help of UNHCR, to accept 20,000 refugees by 2020. Since settling in Newcastle, Almellehan has been busy advocating for girls' education and the prevention of child marriage, which increased dramatically with the onset of the civil war, leading her to become known as the 'Malala of Syria'.

### 7. Women now

Set up in the Syrian countryside, Women Now aims to enable Syrian women to become active members of society, both economically and socially, and to become key partners in political decision-making at the local and international level. Muzna al-Jundi, spokesperson for the organisation, told Syria Untold, that Women Now was opening two new centres in the Idlib countryside and four new ones in eastern Ghouta.

### 8. Race for life

When the motor on their boat failed after setting off from Turkey, Yusra Mardini and three other asylum-seekers, including her sister, swam for three hours in open water to stop the dinghy, with its 16 other occupants, from sinking. Mardini eventually settled in Berlin in 2015 where she trained to compete in the 100m freestyle at the 2016 Rio Olympics as a member of the first-ever Refugee Olympic Team.

### 9. Friendly flatshare

After sharing a flat with a young man who fled from Mali, Golde Ebding, Mareike Geiling and Jonas Kakoschke decided to create Refugees Welcome, a digital platform aiming to ease resettlement of refugees by connecting them with willing flatshare and family homeowners in Germany. So far, the platform has matched 378 people across Germany with refugees previously living in camps.

### 10. Going viral

After having fled Syria, 25-year-old Firas Alshater is now a YouTube star. In his videos, Alshater discusses his journey from a political prisoner, as co-organiser of the first protests against Assad – to a refugee, tackling issues such as integration with humour. In one viral video, Alshater stands blindfolded, with a sign that reads: "I am a Syrian refugee. I trust you – do you trust me? Hug me!" His YouTube channel, Zukar, has over 1.6m views.



# TOUGH DECISIONS



// UN Photo/Neeraj Singh

// *The UN has been much criticised for its role in Syria, from Security Council inaction to 'taking sides' in the conflict. However, many of the issues the UN faces in Syria are incredibly difficult, and the correct course of action is not always clear. We outline some of the dilemmas the UN has faced and ask: what would you have done?*

## DELIVERING AID OR COMPROMISING NEUTRALITY?

The UN is attempting to curb the suffering of civilians in Syria by delivering humanitarian aid. The Syrian Government does not allow access to the territory it controls to those unwilling to play by its rules. If the UN does not comply, it will not be able to deliver help to those who need it the most.

However, a *Guardian* investigation in August 2016 revealed that millions of dollars in aid has gone directly to the Syrian regime – critiqued by the UN itself as having committed “mass atrocities” in Syria – as part of projects to support farming and prevent famine. Millions more have gone to charities which are run by, or associated with, members of President Assad’s family or business colleagues. The World Health Organization has spent more than US\$5m to support Syria’s national blood bank which, in times of war, is sorely needed. But in Syria, the blood bank is under the control of the army, and there are fears that soldiers will receive blood transfusions ahead of civilians.

Is the UN compromising its neutrality by operating in this way? Or is this simply the only way to help the maximum possible number of civilians?

## BEARING WITNESS OR BECOMING COMPLICIT?

Sometimes UN staff will find themselves in a position where there is nothing they can do to help.

What should they do in such a situation? Should they withdraw? Or should they stay anyway to bear witness to atrocities that

take place, and in the hope that their presence will act as a deterrent to such atrocities? But could the presence of the UN make them complicit in the crimes that then take place?

## GAINING ACCESS OR LOSING LEGITIMACY?

Much of Syria’s territory is in the hands of groups that abuse human rights and commit atrocity crimes. If the UN speaks out against these actions, it could find itself locked out of these areas and unable to help civilians in need. It could also place UN staff, particularly local staff, at risk. In the past, particularly in countries such as Sri Lanka, the UN has held back some of its criticism for this reason. The 2012 internal review of UN action in Sri Lanka, commissioned by then-UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, was critical of this approach. In response, Mr Ban launched the Human Rights up Front initiative, to ensure that raising human rights concerns is given equal priority to service delivery.

But just how outspoken should the UN be? How should the UN balance strong criticism with service delivery? Should the UN call for war crimes prosecutions now, or should it wait until after the conflict has ended?

## WHO WOULD YOU BRING TO THE NEGOTIATING TABLE?

Peace talks are negotiations between groups which are at war. To be meaningful, they need to include all parties to a conflict. But by inviting a party to these negotiations you grant them a degree of

recognition and legitimacy, which could potentially further entrench their control of a conflict zone.

Would you be willing to negotiate with Assad? What about ISIL? If not, does that mean a peaceful end to the conflict is impossible?

## ADAPTING TO NEW CHALLENGES?

The UN is an organisation that deals with states; it is not supposed to recognise or negotiate with non-state actors. During a revolution the legitimacy of the state is subject to challenge, and multiple groups claim to represent the state. Which of these groups should the UN recognise as legitimate, and how and when should they make a change in the group they consider to represent the state? Additionally, when you have a complex civil war situation such as Syria, a type of conflict which is now more common than not, is it reasonable or effective to treat state and non-state actors differently? What criteria should the UN use to determine who is worthy of recognition?

## WHAT SHOULD YOU DO WHEN THERE’S NOTHING YOU CAN DO?

At various points in this conflict, UN-backed processes – such as the May 2014 peace talks – have broken down. The major powers on the Security Council have walked away from the table or joined in the conflict. How should UN officials respond to this? Should they resign? Should they be clear about who is to blame for the breakdown of the process? Would apportioning blame make restarting the process harder? //



# UNA-UK CONFERENCE 2017

## KEEPING BRITAIN GLOBAL

This May, UNA-UK members from across the country will gather for Conference '17 to discuss the state of the world, swap ideas and get equipped to be activists in their own community.

Conference has always changed with the times, and that's never been more true than this year. With a revamped format and over half the people registered coming for the first time, what can attendees expect? Tim Jarman and Andrew Boakes (Chair and Vice Chair of the organising committee) answer some of our members' most frequently asked questions below.

### When, where and how much?

**Tim:** 10am–6pm on Saturday 20 May at NCVO near King's Cross station in London. We've set the price as low as possible, £30, and it includes lunch. Thanks to the generosity of UNA Eastern Region, there are some student tickets available for half price.

### Who is coming, and why?

**Andrew:** Participation will be diverse with members coming from all corners of the UK. Some will be old hands but for many, it will be their first Conference. Everyone, though, will be serious about one thing: bringing the work and values of the United Nations to their own community.

### What will happen on the day?

**Tim:** Conference '17 will be all about meeting new people, exchanging ideas and working together on a UNA-UK campaign. There will be breakout groups to grill UNA-UK team members, first-hand advice from a guest campaigner and the opportunity to contribute to UNA-UK's work. We've kept one of the best bits from previous conferences – attendees will be invited to present their own global passions. Of course, one of the outcomes of the day will be that UNA-UK will invest in some of the ideas that we generate.

### So what's the big campaign?

**Andrew:** 'Keeping Britain Global' is one of UNA-UK's big campaigns this year. It's all about holding our leaders to account for the international commitments they have made. After Britain decided to leave the EU, Prime Minister Theresa May promised a "bold", "new" and "positive" global role for the UK. Are we on the right track?

From human rights to disarmament, UNA-UK has identified five areas where the UK has the opportunity to take the lead and make a positive contribution. The challenge now is to make our voice heard at a community level. We'll explore how to engage your community with issues like arms sales to Saudi Arabia and UN peacekeepers.

### Why the new format?

**Tim:** The Conference Committee is made up of people elected by UNA-UK members at 2015's event. We used feedback from previous conferences and worked closely with UNA-UK's staff team this year to make sure our event resonates as much as possible with their work and has the biggest impact. We're looking forward to hearing feedback from people who come.

### Are there any pre- and post-conference events?

**Andrew:** Yes! The two most popular requests we receive from members are for more time to socialise and to hear more from the UNA-UK team about their work. For our social event, we're organising a meal for the evening before Conference. Everyone who books will get an invitation and we hope you can make it. We've also asked UNA-UK to reinstitute the popular 'Staying Connected' event. This session will take place immediately after Conference itself and is an opportunity for members to hear about, and grill the UNA-UK team on, their work.

## THE PROGRAMME

## UNA-UK CONFERENCE 2017

### MORNING



#### Caffeine, sugar and a very warm welcome

Collect your Conference documents, then meet with friends old and new over delicious fresh doughnuts and steaming hot coffee and tea.



#### Get started

Chair of Conference, Tim Jarman, will give an overview of the day followed by Lord Wood of Anfield, Chair of UNA-UK.



#### Pitch your passion

The UN is so many different things to so many different people: 17 Sustainable Development Goals; 193 countries; thousands of competing ideas. The theme that's set for Conference is just one of these, but what's your global passion? Share beforehand and you could be invited to present your idea.



#### Focus '17

On the steps of 10 Downing Street, our brand new PM promised us "a bold new positive role for ourselves in the world". We will explore the urgent need to hold the Government to account for this promise and their other international commitments, and how you can get involved in Keeping Britain Global.



#### The face-to-face

Grill UNA-UK team members in intimate breakout groups on the Keeping Britain Global campaign and their role. After a few minutes, team members will rotate so that you get to meet everyone.



#### Networking lunch

Share a sandwich lunch over informal conversation with other members and the UNA-UK team.

### AFTERNOON



#### Expert interaction

Our keynote speaker will be a grassroots activist expert. They will share their experience and expertise on making change in communities, at a grassroots level.



#### £500 challenge

What do you do when big ideas hit a limited budget? In this breakout session, each group will decide how they would spend £500 to encourage local action. They will then present to the rest of Conference and our keynote guest will give feedback.

After the event, UNA-UK will put some of the best ideas into action, involving members and local UNAs across the country.

### STAYING CONNECTED



Back by popular demand, this post-Conference event will feature Lord Wood interviewing the UNA-UK staff team on the work they're doing and the challenges and opportunities they face. Attendees will also be invited to ask questions.



# THINKING GLOBALLY

In this section, we feature a UK perspective on how British citizens can play a role in encouraging a global response to crises like Syria

## Valerie Amos

As we watch conflicts across the world proliferate with grave humanitarian consequences for the families and communities affected, we question more and more the role of the United Nations – an organisation which was set up to help deliver peace, security and stability after the Second World War.

Looking at the current global landscape, with conflicts in the DRC, Sudan, South Sudan, Israel and Palestine, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, northern Nigeria, Ukraine and elsewhere, we see UN member states' regional and national political priorities and interests getting in the way of achieving the political solutions necessary for the conflicts to end. And it is the people of those countries who continue to suffer.

### POLITICAL PARALYSIS

In Syria, the UN has stopped counting the number who have been killed. In the five years I was at the UN, coordinating the response to humanitarian crises around the world, the conflict in Syria dominated the political and humanitarian agenda. On my first visit in 2012, when I was trying to convince the Syrian Government that they had a crisis on their hands, we estimated that one million people needed assistance. Today, that figure stands at 13.5 million with nearly five million Syrian refugees and over six million displaced within their own country.

Today a military solution, the thing we all said was impossible, looks more likely than a political one. How did it come to this? How did we reach this political paralysis? It comes down to the inability of the five permanent members of the Security Council to agree on what needed to be done and by whom. I was in turn frustrated, angry and sometimes incredulous about the impact on the people affected, particularly children and women. All of us working on humanitarian issues knew that providing humanitarian aid helped people and kept them going, but that it is not a long-term solution.

And delivering aid was challenging and complex, with the proliferation of armed groups on the ground seeking to exert control. Often aid convoys had to pass through territory held by different groups. The Syrian Government did everything it could

to withhold permission for the movement of convoys. Many thousands of humanitarian workers would risk their lives every day to try and deliver aid to those who needed it most. Whenever we have a humanitarian crisis in the world, we say “never again” – but we don't seem to be able to deliver on that promise.

### A ROLE FOR UNIVERSITIES?

How can the UK help answer the challenge posed by crises like Syria? In my role now as Director of SOAS, University of London, I am interested in what universities can do to answer that question. A crisis like Syria requires a strong global response. We need people to care and to hold their governments to account. At SOAS, our students care – they want to be active global citizens. We are a university that studies the world from the perspective of the regions in which we specialise: Asia, Africa and the Near and Middle East. Our students today are tomorrow's leaders.

And there is our role as thought leaders. The research carried out by universities is invaluable. In a 'post-truth' era, it is even more important that our research contributes to an understanding of challenging global situations such as conflict and helps to inform policy solutions, for example, ongoing work on migration and displacement in the Horn of Africa, and on gender and migration.

Universities can help students to learn to appreciate that our world looks very different from different countries and continents. We have an opportunity – but also a duty – to ensure the next generation continues to look beyond borders and embraces diversity. When considering today's burning issues – whether that's climate change, inequality, immigration or conflict – place matters. To be understood, issues need to be considered in their proper contexts.

And we need to learn from the mistakes of the history. Syria represents a massive collective failure. //

### VALERIE AMOS CH //

Baroness Valerie Amos CH is Director of SOAS, University of London and served as UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator from September 2010 to May 2015



// Valerie Amos speaking at a press conference in Syria / UN Photo

## AID TO SYRIA: WHAT IS THE UK DOING? WHAT MORE COULD IT DO?

**For the last 10 years, a UK national has headed up the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Valerie Amos replaced British diplomat John Holmes, and was in turn replaced by the former Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development, Stephen O'Brien. But has the UK been pulling its weight when it comes to humanitarian relief in Syria?**

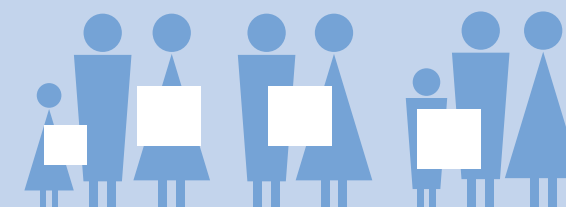
Since 2012, the UK has committed £2.3bn in humanitarian aid to help Syrians. It has currently spent around £1.5bn. £734m of the money pledged, and £698m of that actually spent, goes directly to Syria, the the rest supports Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, Egypt and other countries in the region.

### With this money the UK has:

- Provided nearly 22 million monthly food rations
- Provided over 6 million vaccines
- Provided clean water to 3 million people
- Provided schooling for around 400,000 children
- Provided psychological and social support to 200,000 children and adults

### UNA-UK would like to see the UK build on this work by:

- Suspending arms sales to countries in the region whose human rights records are a matter of concern
- Accepting a greater number of refugees from the region and participating more fully in Europe-wide initiatives to re-home displaced Syrians
- Using its permanent membership of the UN Security Council to provide leadership on the issue of atrocity prevention and the doctrine of 'Responsibility to Protect'





# LIFE AFTER SYRIA



// Eleonas Refugee Camp / Thomas Andre Syvertsen/  
Norwegian Red Cross (Creative Commons)

Moh is a 21-year-old man from Damascus, Syria. He volunteers as a translator at a school at a refugee camp on the Greek island of Chios, set up by Swiss charity Be Aware and Share (BAAS).

**Tell me about your work with Be Aware and Share. What does an average day look like?**

Volunteering with Be Aware and Share means, for me, that every day is special. Something new happens every day – there are always new kids and new challenges. We don't have normal days or simple days, but each day is lovely, nice and funny.

I have been a refugee on Chios island since 16 June 2016 and I started working with BAAS on 18 July. Our day starts when we pick up the children from where they are living – in camps, hotels or apartment blocks. We walk or take the bus to school with the children and when they get there, they wash their hands and go into their classrooms. They usually have three lessons every school day – English or maths, an activity lesson and a project lesson, such as cookery or art.

After a long day at school for the kids, we walk them back and then pick up the next group and walk them to school, so they can have an exciting day too, just like the first group.

After a long day, we have to clean up and prepare the school for another amazing day for the children.

**Do you enjoy working with refugee children? What are the biggest challenges you face?**

I really enjoy this work but sometimes it's very hard because these kids have such a difficult life in the camps or wherever they are living. I know that because I have the same life. But volunteering is really nice and I am enjoying it.

For me, with my language skills, I understand the children and their cultures. Sometimes I have to be in lots of different places in a single day and this means that my days are often very full. But that's what I want. I like to be busy because it's better than doing nothing.

The biggest challenge is that I have the same situation and the same life as these children, and yet I have to be in a good mood because I am always with the children. They can feel it when you are in a bad mood, and they have enough sadness in their lives already.

**...And what are the highlights of your work?**

I have made many good friends here. I really enjoy their company and I am learning from them every day.

And also, I love seeing the children every day, coming to have fun, to learn, to smile, and to forget everything bad in their lives. Helping those children and seeing their smiles has really helped me to keep myself and my mind focused on this situation.

**What would you like to do in the future? Is your current role helping you to get there?**

I am not sure what I want to do in the future. I'm always thinking about where I want to be, rather than what I want to do. This is because what I really want is to start a new life, far away from all this violence and conflict between religions and cultures.

I don't really think my work is helping me to get there, but it is helping me with many different parts of my life. It gives me something useful to do with my time in the camp, and I have been able to get to know many people from around the world. I have also learned more about life in Europe, which is where I am going to be in the future.

**Do you think the international community is providing enough support for refugees such as those in Chios? What more should be done?**

The response by the international community to this situation in Greece has been very bad. I would still prefer to be here than in Syria as we have the basic things we need, but there is no future for me here. I really miss the stability in my life.

But saying that, I am sure it's hard for governments around the world. They can't accept everyone, because there might be really dangerous people among us and they can't know who those people are... it's a complex situation. //

## Strengthening civil society engagement with the United Nations

Perspectives from across civil society highlighting areas for action by the UN Secretary-General.

Building on the success of the *1 for 7 Billion* campaign, UNA-UK has brought together civil society actors from around the world to urge UN Secretary-General António Guterres to be a champion for civil society and to take concrete steps to build a more inclusive UN.

The publication *Strengthening civil society engagement with the UN* contains practical proposals for greater UN-civil society cooperation across a range of hot-button issues, with contributions from youth activists, NGO directors and policy experts.

Over the coming months, UNA-UK will be working with the publication's co-compilers: the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung New York Office, CIVICUS and Avaaz, to highlight the benefits of a fair, inclusive and transparent approach to civil society engagement at the UN and calling on decision-makers to support reform on the basis of this agenda.

[www.una.org.uk/civilsociety](http://www.una.org.uk/civilsociety)

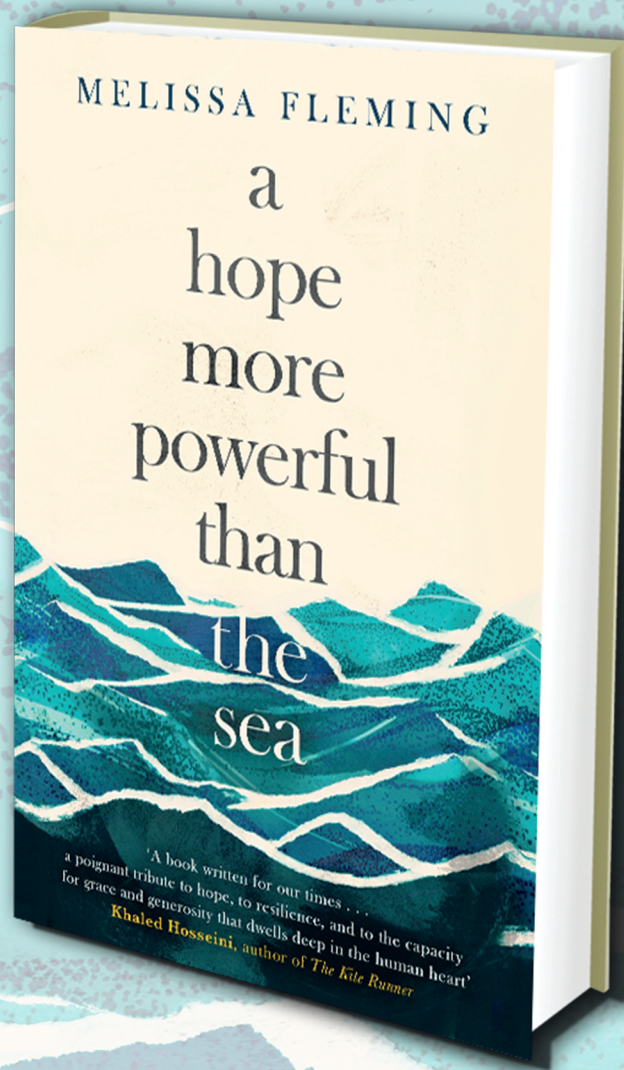
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‘A book written for our times . . . a  
poignant tribute to hope, to  
resilience, and to the capacity for grace  
and generosity that dwells deep in the  
human heart’

*Khaled Hosseini, author of **The Kite Runner***

Written by Melissa Fleming who is Head of Communications and Chief Spokesperson  
for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.



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