

Hybrid Conference

The Syrian Conflict: Unpacking the Stalemate

22 - 23 June 2022

Palazzo Buontalenti (Via Camillo Cavour, 50129 Firenze FI)

Scientific organisers:

Abdullah Al-Jabassini | European University Institute

Joseph Daher | European University Institute

Agnès Favier | European University Institute

Introduction

This conference will close the second stage of the Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria project (WPCS), which has provided operational and strategic analysis of the prospects, challenges, trends and policy options in the Syrian conflict since October 2018. The [Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria project \(WPCS\)](#) is funded by the European Union and implemented in partnership with the [Center for Operational Analysis and Research \(COAR\)](#).

Out of the media spotlight and the priorities of Western decision-makers – a trend accentuated by the war in Ukraine – the Syrian conflict in 2022 is still in a state of a protracted stalemate with high degrees of territorial fragmentation, intractability and dominance of third-party states. The country is effectively divided in four main areas controlled by different actors, each of which is reliant on and restrained by external states involved both militarily and politically. While large-scale military operations have wound down, economic collapse and destruction of the social fabric are the defining characteristics of the present phase, making the future look bleak for Syrians as the country is facing a proliferation of challenges. Economically, the population is enduring a worsening situation with increasing levels of poverty, food insecurity and inequality. At the security level, the situation remains fragile and volatile, and the country is plagued by several interrelated challenges: a resurgence of violence, an increasing crime rate, smuggling of licit and illicit goods and a resurgence of Islamic State, to name but a few. Politically, the prospects of conflict resolution, including a political transition and genuine nationwide reconciliation process, have never been so slim.

The conference brings together researchers from the WPCS project and other distinguished universities and think tanks, and policymakers and practitioners. They will discuss the extent to which the protracted stalemate has stimulated a reordering of power structures at the local level; how the multiple and intertwined socio-economic crises affect local populations and how the main surviving warring parties are responding; how recent or looming external shocks could impact the short- to medium-term trajectory of the conflict; and how the EU and its Member States may adapt their responses to the current situation.

Modalities

This closed conference is organised in three panels and a policy roundtable (attendance on invitation). In the panels, each speaker will have a maximum of 15 minutes to make a presentation, which will be followed by five to seven minutes of comments from the moderator. Q&A and general discussion will follow at the end of each panel (approximately 40 minutes). The roundtable will be organised around a set of questions about EU and Member State future responses to Syria's crisis, with insights provided by policymakers, civil society representatives and experts.

Programme

22 June

13.15 – 13.45 **Institutional Welcome**

Olivier Roy, Professor, European University Institute

Dan Stoenescu, Chargé D’Affaires, EU Delegation for Syria

Ian Larson and Agnès Favier, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria (WPCS) project

13.45 – 16.00 **Panel 1: Local Dynamics amid Nation-Wide Stalemate**

Against the backdrop of a potentially long-lasting military stalemate, the key de facto local authorities in Syria’s various zones of influence continue to operate to consolidate their power and control. The Assad regime, the Autonomous Administration and Hayat Tahrir al Sham are trying to convert their military-security control of their territories into political influence at the local level and legitimacy at the international level. They do so while dealing with a volatile security context and socio-economic challenges.

This panel aims to shed light on the various political and social orders that have emerged in different parts of Syria: the south, the north-east and Idlib. It will examine the means with which de facto authorities exercise and consolidate their power – from the exercise of violence and control of resources to the establishment of networks of patronage. It will also examine the space granted to local communities and civil society to participate in the management of local affairs.

Moderator: Reinoud Leenders, Kings College London

On Fragmentation and Violence in Southern Syria

Speakers: Abdullah Al-Jabassini and Mazen Ezzi, WPCS – European University Institute

Space for Civil Society in regime-held areas

Speaker: Syria Team consultant, Synaps

The Rooting of the Autonomous Administration in North-Eastern Syria

Speakers: Patrick Haenni, European University Institute and Humanitarian Dialogue

Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham and Local Administration

Speaker: Orwa Ajjoub, WPCS – Center for Operational Analysis and Research

16.00 – 16.30 **Coffee Break**

16.30 – 18.30 **Panel 2: Syria's Crises within a Crisis**

Syria continues to be one of the biggest and most complex humanitarian crises globally with deepening humanitarian and socio-economic needs. Productive sectors (agriculture and manufacturing) have experienced severe destruction and economic contraction, while illegal and criminal activities have boomed. The state institutions are no longer able to meet the socio-economic needs of the population, which has increasingly become dependent on international humanitarian financial assistance and remittances.

This panel will examine the root causes and impacts of the intertwined food security, water, energy and economic crises. Against the backdrop of an absence of funding for an early recovery and a large-scale reconstruction process, it will discuss the prospects of interventions to alleviate the consequences of these overlapping worsening crises for the local populations across Syria.

Moderator: Jihad Yazigi, The Syria Report

Syria's Human Security Crisis

Speaker: Marwa Daoudy, Georgetown University

The Syrian Aid Crisis

Speaker: Mouayad al-Bonni, WPCS – Center for Operational Analysis and Research

The Economic Crisis: Is There an End to It?

Speaker: Joseph Daher, WPCS – European University Institute

20.00 **Dinner**

23 June

9.30 – 11.45 **Panel 3: Foreign Intervention in Syria amid Geopolitical Change**

The military presence of five foreign states on the ground or in the air has profoundly reshaped the dynamics of the Syrian conflict. It has guaranteed the establishment of zones of influence for Turkey, Iran, Russia and the US. Meanwhile, several Arab states have started to re-engage with Damascus for economic, trade and security reasons. Besides its immediate economic and humanitarian effects on Syria, the war in Ukraine and the current global geopolitical uncertainty could, however, change the fragile *status quo* in Syria.

This panel will examine the main geopolitical and political impacts of this war on Syria. It will focus on a possible repositioning of regional actors – namely Turkey, which is already preparing for its 2023 presidential election; Iran, with the pending question of agreement on the JCPOA and its effects on Syria; and Arab countries, the desire of which for normalisation with Damascus could be challenged by multiple factors.

Moderator: Georges Fahmi, European University Institute

Russia's War in Ukraine and Its Impact on Syria

Speaker: Salam Said, Department for Middle East and North Africa – Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

Iran in Syria: Old Strategy, New Tactics

Speaker: Hamidreza Azizi, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik

Turkey in the Pursuit of Certainty

Speaker: Sinan Hatahet, WPCS – European University Institute

The Narcotics Trade and Barriers to Regional Rapprochement

Speaker: Ian Larson, WPCS – Center for Operational Analysis and Research

12.00 – 12.40 **Concluding remarks**

Elizabeth Picard, CNRS (IREMAM)

Olivier Roy, Middle East Directions, European University Institute

Steven Heydemann, Smith College

12.45 – 14.00 **Lunch**

14.00 – 15.30 **Policy Roundtable: EU and Member State Future Responses to Syria's Protracted Crisis**

Now in its twelfth year, the Syrian conflict has had significant effects on Europe. Throughout the conflict the EU has maintained a relatively unchanged policy and a significant humanitarian response. As of mid-2022, how compatible are the Member States' foreign policy preferences regarding the ongoing Syrian crisis? How might this influence the EU's institutional response to the conflict, and in particular its approach vis-à-vis a gradual reintegration of Syria in the region? How do the EU and Member States view future responses to Syria's protracted humanitarian crisis? Should the EU change its strategic objectives to adapt to the realities on the ground in Syria?

Introduction:

Renaud Delahousse, President of the European University Institute

Moderators:

Agnès Favier, European University Institute, and Ian Larson, Center for Operational Analysis and Research

Speakers:

Sawsan Abou Zainedin, Co-coordinator of the Syria Resource Group

Marwa Daoudy, Professor of International Relations at Georgetown University

Paula Sastrowijoto, Deputy Syria Envoy, the Netherlands

Dan Stoenescu, Chargé D'Affaires, EU Delegation for Syria

Jihad Yazigi, Editor-in-chief of The Syria Report

Participants

Sawsan Abou Zainedin	Syria Resource Group
Orwa Ajjoub	Center for Operational Analysis and Research
Mouayad al-Bonni	Center for Operational Analysis and Research
Abdullah Al-Jabassini	European University Institute
Hamidreza Azizi	Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
Joseph Daher	European University Institute
Marwa Daoudy	Georgetown University
Mazen Ezzi	European University Institute
Georges Fahmi	European University Institute
Agnès Favier	European University Institute
Patrick Haenni	European University Institute and Humanitarian Dialogue
Sinan Hatahet	European University Institute
Steven Heydemann	Smith College
Ian Larson	Center for Operational Analysis and Research
Reinoud Leenders	Kings College London
Elizabeth Picard	CNRS (IREMAM)
Olivier Roy	European University Institute
Salam Said	Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
Paula Sastrowijoto	Deputy Syria Envoy, the Netherlands
Dan Stoenescu	Chargé D'Affaires, EU Delegation for Syria
Jihad Yazigi	The Syria Report