



Conference report  
**HOW CAN A REGIONAL ACCORD HELP END  
THE WAR IN SYRIA?**

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**Conference hosted by:  
The Danish Institute for International Studies, DIIS  
The European Council on Foreign Relations, ECFR  
The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark**

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## Introduction

The Syrian conflict has entered its fourth year with devastating humanitarian and political consequences. More than 190,000 people have been killed and over ten million more are in need of humanitarian assistance. The regional consequences of the conflict are also severe; the fragile political balances in neighbouring states are under pressure, old territorial borders are being challenged, and sectarianism and identity politics are on the rise.

On the 27th of May 2014 the Danish Institute for International Studies held a conference together with the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the European Council on Foreign Relations. The conference brought together leading experts and policymakers from the region to debate how a regional accord can help end the war in Syria.

The Danish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Martin Lidegaard, opened the conference and stressed the following main points:

- Denmark stands firmly behind the National Coalition, is engaged in civilian stabilisation efforts and supports the moderate opposition and the Syrian public in general.
- It is crucial that regional and international actors come together to put an end to the conflict. The conflict in Syria cannot be solved without a regional consensus and a common buy-in from key players in the region. Regional actors can serve as critical levers and can use their influence with local actors.
- The Danish government encourages regional actors to coordinate their efforts and cooperate on issues of shared concern such as regional destabilisation, threats from extremist groups and a deepening sectarianism, as well as to choose dialogue over violence in order to share the benefits of de-escalation and ultimately help end the conflict in Syria.



DIIS wishes to thank the Foreign Minister and the speakers: Hayder Al-Khoei, Associate Fellow, Chatham House, London; Mina Al-Oraibi, Assistant Editor-in-Chief, Asharq Al-Awsat, Iraq; Saleh Abdullah Alrajhi, Professor of Political Science, Director of American Studies, IDS, Saudi Arabia; Farhad Atai, Professor of Regional Studies, University of Tehran; Kayhan Barzegar, Director of Institute for Middle East Strategic Studies, Tehran; Julien Barnes-Dacey, Senior Policy Fellow, European Council on Foreign Relations, London; Osman Dincer, Researcher, International Strategic Organisation, Ankara; Lina Khatib, Director at Carnegie Middle East Center Beirut; Bassma Kodmani, Executive Director of the Arab Reform Initiative, Daniel Levy, Director of the Middle East and North Africa Programme, European Council on Foreign Relations, London; Ziya Meral, Research Associate, Foreign Policy Centre, London; Nir Rosen, Special Advisor, Middle East and North Africa Regional Office, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue.

## Regional threat perceptions and ways forward

The Syrian uprising was initially driven by domestic actors' wish for political change. Yet over the last two years Syria has emerged as a battleground for regional rivalries and proxy warfare. The main powers of the region are fighting to keep influence, and regional powers continue to use sectarian identity politics to gather support and thwart



domestic discontent. Regional security dynamics have served to exacerbate the conflict and kept local actors afloat militarily, financially and politically, as the zero-sum posturing of Saudi Arabia and Iran are making de-escalation difficult.

This panel session looked into the threat perceptions guiding the main actors' involvement in the Syrian conflict, and fleshed out key areas of common interest.

From the perspective of Saudi Arabia, Iran's heavy involvement on the side of the Assad regime has necessitated a counter-intervention, and Saudi Arabia sees Iranian interference as a quest for regional hegemony. Yet Saudi Arabia is also concerned about the larger implications of the Syrian conflict, especially in terms of the rise of extremism and the potential spillover effects on Iraq, which threaten to bring the conflict closer to Saudi Arabian territory.

Iran, by contrast, sees the Syrian regime as an essential and historic ally, in part because of its common position on Israel. Yet it was also stressed that Iran is not 'married to Assad', and that Iran is primarily focused on securing a partner in Syria that can bolster and facilitate its regional policies. Iran is also concerned about Sunni extremist groups, and the plight of Shia communities both in Syria and in neighbouring states.

Other key regional players are Iraq and Turkey. Iraq's sectarian make-up and fragile state structures have made it particularly concerned about potential spillover effects, and Iraqis fear a repeat of the near civil war in 2005–2008. Iraq has, throughout the conflict, tried to maintain a neutral position on Syria, yet the exclusionary policies of the al Maliki government and Iran's strong presence in Iraqi politics, have made neutrality difficult to sustain in practice.

While Turkey played a very active role at the beginning of the Syrian conflict in support of the Syrian opposition, it has recently become more inward-looking. Turkey is challenged with a huge influx of Syrian refugees and is focused on managing the crisis on a dome-

stic level. The relatively open border between Syria and Turkey has taken its toll on Turkish society, and there are deepening concerns about extremist groups and the rise of sectarianism inside Turkey itself.

There are, however, key areas where regional powers share common threat perceptions. It was therefore recommended that regional players should:

- Seek ways to de-escalate regional conflict. A Saudi–Iranian rapprochement is particularly important in order to diffuse regional tensions.
- Dampening the sectarian discourse instead of feeding it. Political and religious leaders should avoid securitising sectarian identities, especially on various media platforms.
- Cooperate on counter-terrorism and fighting ISIS. Yet at the same time making sure that such efforts are not viewed as a re-legitimisation of the Assad regime.
- Turkey still has an important role to play. Turkey might be willing to deliver on stabilisation, and a tightening of Turkey's border could help limit and control the flow of weapons and fighters.

### **Moving towards a political solution in Syria: challenges and opportunities**

Until now repeated diplomatic efforts to facilitate dialogue and engage the Syrian parties in a negotiated political solution have failed. Some of the main actors and external backers continue to believe that the balance of power can be readdressed militarily and that ultimately the conflict can be ended on the battlefield. Syria's near war of attrition and the failed diplomatic tracks have understandably created widespread disillusionment inside Syria, and many Syrians fear that neither a political nor a military solution is in sight. Creating the conditions for a political solution will not only demand concerted regional efforts, but also substantial compromises from the different parties inside Syria. This panel session discussed some of the main dilemmas pertaining to starting a political negotiation process, while also pointing to possible ways forward.

## Key challenges and dilemmas

- *Local ceasefires:* Local ceasefires are easier to negotiate and might pave the way for wider national dialogues. Local deals moreover can alleviate the humanitarian situation and reduce levels of violence for Syrian civilians, who are in desperate need of humanitarian assistance and are longing for peace. Yet it was also pointed out that local ceasefires carry several risks: previous local ceasefires in suburbs of Damascus and Homs have not been carried out according to the terms of the agreements, and they have been perceived by some as effective surrenders, rather than fruitful stepping stones to a larger negotiation process. Moreover, by supporting local ceasefires in areas that have been under heavy siege, one might also create unintended incentives for the regime to continue using this brutal tactic of war.
- *Sequencing:* While there seems to be an increasing willingness to accept that Assad's departure need not to be a precondition to starting a political process, there are legitimate fears that the question of Assad and his inner circle will be delayed permanently, and that the regime will continue to engage only parts of the opposition in so-called dialogues and national reconciliation attempts.
- *Security guarantees to minorities:* It is vital that all primary identity groups in Syria are included in negotiations and in an eventual political transition process.

Security guarantees to minority groups backed by credible international actors on the ground may also be needed in order to accommodate minorities' fear of revenge and exclusion. However, it was also pointed out that there has perhaps been an over-focus on safeguarding the rights of minorities, and that important cross-cutting identities and ideologies do exist in Syrian society. Societal movements that cut across sectarian divides should also be nurtured and protected, in order not to reinforce sectarian dynamics.

## Opportunities:

- Syrian state and civil institutions are relatively strong and can be reactivated and adapted to a new political reality. It is important to build on these institutions in order to avoid chaos and potential state collapse the "day after".
- The local level has continued to function throughout the conflict, and new local organisations and structures have emerged. These need to be engaged and incorporated in a political transition process.
- Nuclear negotiations with Iran, and the Syrian file have been kept on two separate tracks, yet there might be opportunities in linking the two. Iran has recently proved willing to compromise on the leadership question in Iraq, and may be willing to do so in Syria as well.

