Research Report

Advisory Panel on the Question
Syria
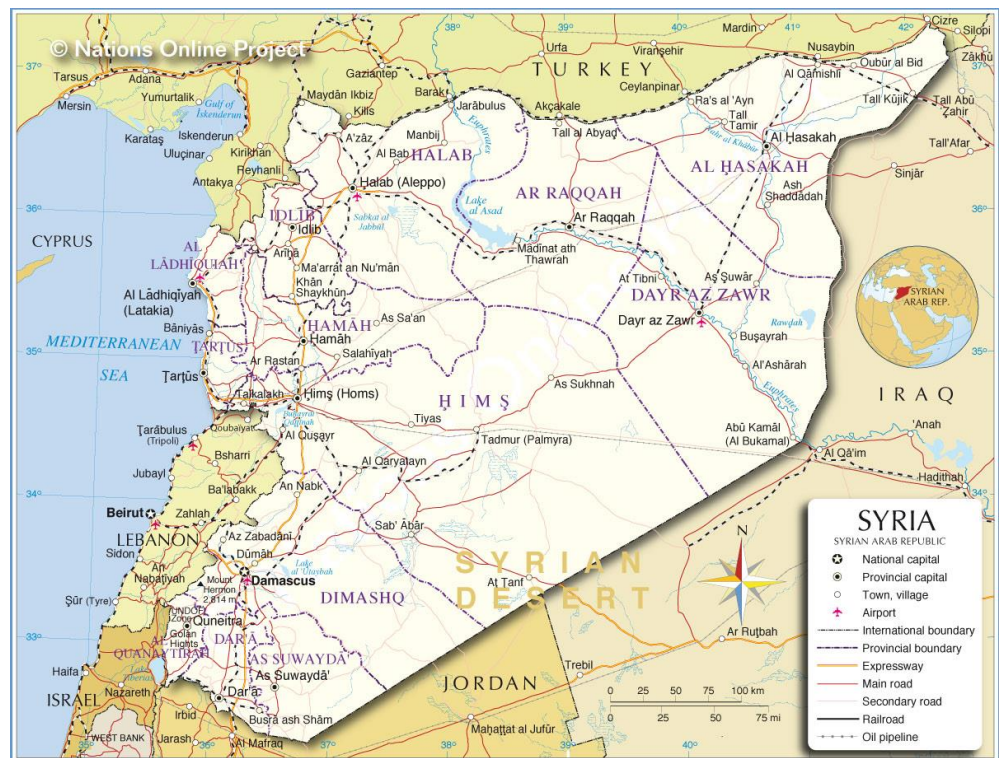
MUNISH

Forum	Advisory Panel on the Question of Syria
Issue:	The Question of Syria
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Introduction

The recent events in Syria have attracted significant amounts of attention, both from the media, as in global politics. The current conflict, which started in 2011, began as a protest against an incident of police brutality. However, these protests then

"One World - Nations Online." *Guide to the Countries of the World*. N.p., n.d. Web. 29 June 2013. <http://www.nationsonline.org/>.

developed into a civil war. At a glance the roots of the war appear fairly simple: one side, those who back the Assad regime, wish for the government to remain in power; the other, the Free Syrian Army (Free Syria Army), are working to remove this regime. However, in reality there are a number of causes for this war including tensions between the cultures in Syria, which began much further in the nation's past.

The complexity of the causes of the war has created a situation that has no simple answer. Only when all the issues and complexities of this issue are considered can any form of solution be reached.

Definition of Key Terms

Civil War

A war fought between different factions or areas within the same nation.

Coup

A seize of power, or takeover from a government.

Ba'th Party

A Arab political party promoting the creation of a single Arab socialist state.

Alawite

A religious minority group to which many of Syria's high ranking official, including its president belong. The Alawites are considered as being a branch of Islam, however they have a history of being oppressed and ostracised within Syria.

General Overview

Culture and religion under the Assad regime

Historically, Syria has always been comprised of a vast collection of cultures and religions. These differences in ethnicities and religion have resulted in tensions in both the past and present. Within Syria, those belonging to Sunni Muslim (the largest branch of Islam) form a majority, with 74% of Syrians identifying themselves as belonging to this religion. However, other Muslim minorities exist within Syria, such as the Druze or the Alawites.

With regard to the current day conflict, two of these religious groups are most relevant: the Sunni Muslims and the Alawites. Despite a past of oppression within Syria the Alawites now fill the uppermost ranks and most prominent positions under the Assad regime. However, the reasons behind how this religious minority rose to positions of power can only be discovered after examining the history of the region.

The history behind the conflict

Though the conflict itself may have begun two years ago, the causes of the war lie further in the past of this nation.

In the 16th century, Syria was integrated into the Ottoman Empire. As an ally of Germany, the Ottoman empire, including Syria, fought with Germany in World War I (WWI). However, after WWI the Ottoman Empire lost Syria to the Arab rebel machinists led by Prince Faisal, who were allied with Britain. However after the Russian revolution, the Bolsheviks exposed the "Sykes-Picot" agreement between France and Britain. This detailed that though the Arabs had won the territory, the British had promised it to the French and after WWI France received a mandate over Syria, where they proceeded to govern until Syria was granted its independence in 1946.

However, France's occupation of Syria, during which Syria was divided by the French into new states (see image), was not without opposition, the majority of which came from the Sunni Muslims, which as stated previously form the majority concerning religion in Syria. In 1925 these hostilities developed into a full-scale revolt: the Great Syrian Revolt, which was led by Sultan Pasha al-Atrash. In order
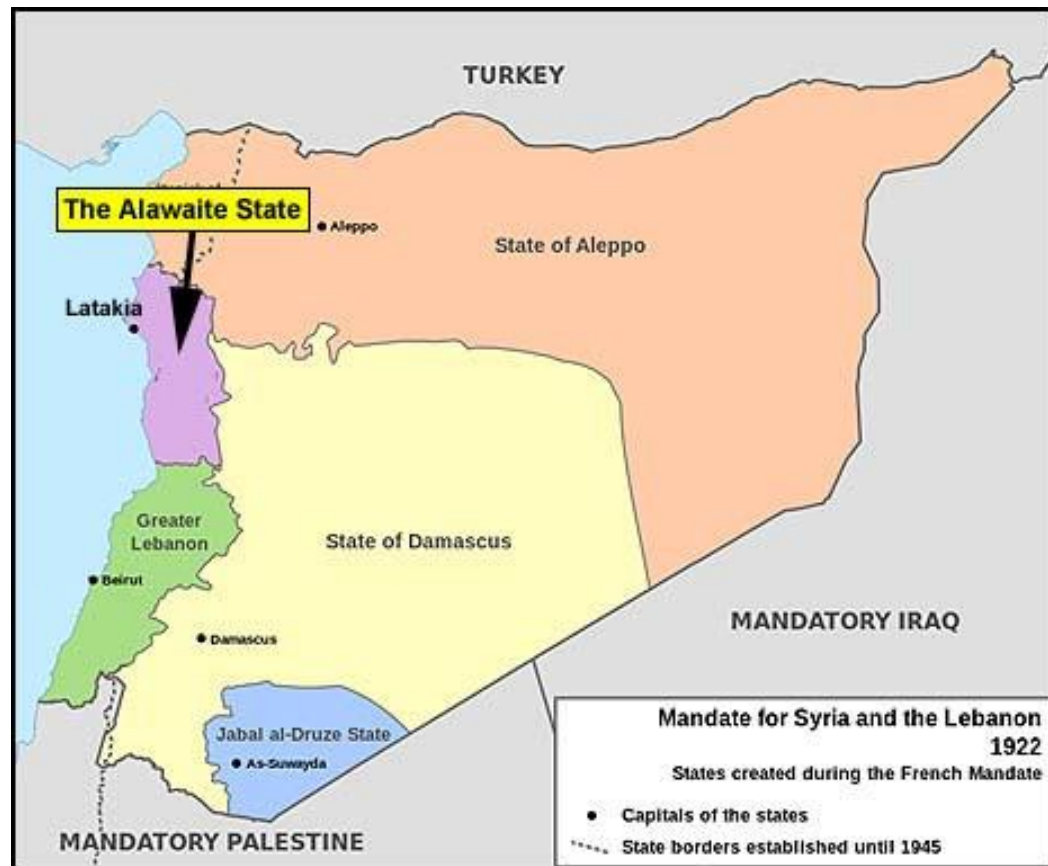
"The Irish Politics & Current Affairs Website." *Politics.ie*. N.p., n.d. Web. 15 Sept. 2013. <http://www.politics.ie/>.

to quash this opposition and in the hopes of balancing the hostilities of the Sunni majority, the French encouraged the Alawites, a religious minority, to join their military services. Though the French eventually granted Syria its independence, this gave the Alawites, who had previously been oppressed within Syria, an opportunity to gain power.

Following the opposition of French occupation, France tried twice to negotiate an independence treaty: once in 1934 and once in 1936. The first treaty was heavily pro-French, and it inspired outrage amongst Syrian Nationalists. As a result it was never ratified. The second treaty, dubbed the Franco-Syrian Treaty, was also never ratified. As Hitler's

Germany grew stronger, the French grew more reluctant to yield any of their colonies, which meant that it never acquired the necessary votes in French parliament.

Post French occupation, Syria was a nation of political instability. The majority group, the Sunnis established a government, however, during this period Syria experienced several coups yet all failed to establish political security. Army officer Adib al-Shishakli seized power in the third military coup in a year in 1949, and following this dissolved all political parties in 1952. However in 1954 army officers organized a coup against al-Shishakli, the result of which was that a civilian government was returned to power. Following the election of the nationalist Shukri al-Quwatli, Syria sought closer relationships with Egypt. In 1958 it united with Egypt to form the United Arab Republic, however, the two nations split again after three years following an army coup, leaving Syria as the Syrian Arab Republic.

It was during this period of time that the Assad regime was established. Hafez al-Assad rose to power after a bloodless coup in November, 1970. Hafez al-Assad was both an Alawite and a member of the Ba'th political party. Hafez al-Assad was welcomed by the vast majority of the Syrian people, including Sunni, Alawite and other minorities, for the political stability he brought to the nation.

Hafez had a past of involvement in political issues.   For example, as a student in 1946 he joined the Syrian wing of the Ba'ath party. Then in 1955 he graduated from Homs Military Academy as an air force pilot. He trained in the Soviet Union, establishing a connection that would be crucial to the Assad Regime in the future (see Major Parties Involved and their Views). During the Syrian alliance with Egypt he was exiled, and during this time he, and other military officers formed a committee to reassert the power of the Ba'ath Party. After the party took power in 1963, he first became minister of defence. During his time in this post, Israel invaded the Golan Heights. Following this he engaged in a power struggle with the then Chief of Staff of the armed forces and the leader of Syria, until he finally took power in 1970.

During his time in power Hafez al-Assad brought about many changes within Syria, in addition to stabilizing the political situation there. For example, he also introduced education and a greater focus on agriculture which stimulated Syrian economy. In addition to this he placed an emphasis on strengthening Syria's military and police force. His ascension to power and cultural background as an Alawite, also saw a shift in the balance in culture: the Alawites, a minority that had been historically repressed within Syria, were appointed the positions of power under the Assad regime.

Though he may have been welcomed by many, Hafez al-Assad's leadership was not without opposition, the majority of which came from the Sunni Muslims. In 1982 a resistance group called the 'Muslim Brotherhood' staged an uprising in Hama. The Muslim Brotherhood, established as a ideological-political movement, had a history of disagreements with President Hafez al-Assad; in the past they even physically fought over religious disagreements. President Hafez al-Assad quashed this using his well established military, resulting in the massacre of tens of thousands.

Eventually, President Hafez al-Assad died in 2000, and was replaced by a public referendum, in which he received 97% of the vote, by his son Bashar al-Assad. In the first year after his appointment, Syria saw a relaxation in governmental administration, and as a result of this, the people became hopeful for political reform, and an improvement upon the existing corruption in government. Much of this hope stemmed from the new president's background. Basshar had studied opthamology in London, and was married to a Sunni Muslim. However, the new President faced other challenges. For example, the Syrian economy, now lacking the long-term support of the Soviet Union after it's collapse, was in a weakened condition. He also faced a number of political issues, E.G: Syria's strained relationship with Israel and Lebanon.

Despite the Syrian people's initial hopes, President Bashar failed to complete the reforms. In fact, the past few years leading up to the beginning of the conflict have seen an increasing number of regulations within Syria. For example, in 2008 and 2011, various social media websites were blocked and in 2006 new regulations were enforced making it increasingly difficult for Syrian citizens to leave the country. Eventually, seeing the new regimes instated in nations such as Egypt and Libya, after the Arab Spring, the Syrian people began to protest, sparking the civil war existing in Syria today.

The conflict: 2011 to present day

The civil war in Syria intensified greatly in 2011. This is illustrated by a number of protests, one of which was a protest in the city of Deraa. Following the arrest, and alleged torture of 15 schoolchildren who had written anti-governmental graffiti on a public wall the outraged citizens of Deraa took to the streets, requesting the release of political prisoners and greater freedom for the people of Syria. The government responded with aggression, and on the 18th of March, opened fire of the protesters killing four. The next day, government forces also shot those present at the victim's funerals, resulting in another fatality. Some units of the army refused to carry out their orders, and defected, resulting in the shooting of some of these soldiers. Many of those that escaped eventually formed part of the Free

Syrian Army, a rebel group. In an attempt to calm the public, the Syrian government releases political prisoners, dismisses the government and lifts the state of emergency that had been held in the country for the past 48 years. However, these actions came too late to reduce public outcry.

These events in Deraa triggered a spread of protests across the nation, however, not all were peaceful. In May 2011, the Syrian government sent tanks to the cities of Deraa, Banyas, Homs and areas of Damascus in an attempt to quell the anti-government protests. As a result of this the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) tighten sanctions.

In June of the same year, the Syrian government announces that 120 members of the Syrian security forces have been killed in the town of Jisr al-Shughour, allegedly by 'armed gangs'. The government retaliated by sending troops to the town, resulting in over 10, 000 people fleeing to Turkey. Then in July there was a mass demonstration in Hama, which was eventually stopped when President Assad sent troops in to intervene, killing civilians.

At this point, those opposing the regime met in Istanbul. There they decided, despite their diverse backgrounds and beliefs, to unite in order to more effectively fight back, thus forming the Free Syrian Army (FSA). In November, 2011, the FSA launched one of their most high-profile attacks when they attacked a military base near Damascus.

Throughout 2012 the war settled into a pattern. The FSA continued to fight back through the use of explosives and attempting to claim cities under the government's control. For example in June they blew up three security chiefs in Damascus in July, and in the same month seizing the city of Aleppo. The government immediately launched a mission to recapture the city, but it doesn't make much progress. In June, 2013 the Government forces recovered the town of Qusair from rebel forces.

However, in August 2013, the government was accused by the Rebels, and Western governments such as the United States of America, of using chemical weapons in an attack near Damascus, killing 300 people. Though the government denies responsibility and blames the rebels, the US proposed an air strike. This air strike would in theory minimise Syria's capability to use these weapons again. However, after Russia suggested a plan to place such weapons under international control, this air strike was postponed in September 2013. In response to the attack the UN commissioned a report confirming the use of chemical weapons, and as a result of this, the secretary-general of the UN, Ban Ki-Moon, condemned President Assad as having "committed many crimes against humanity".

From examining the situation in Syria, we can see that the two sides appear to be held in a deadlock, and whilst it remains so, the citizens will continue to suffer, and the death toll of civilians will continue to rise.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

Russian Federation

Russia's involvement in Syria dates back to the times of the Soviet Union, when Hafez al-Assad studied military science. Syria has a history of political isolation, since its independence in 1946. However, the importance of allying itself with Russia in order to provide support became more crucial when the United States began to support Israel, Syria's most prominent rival in the region. As such, President Hafez al-Assad began to seek an alliance with Russia.

Russia's involvement with Syria was initially a trading business, and that remains of significant importance today. Russia's arms industry exported roughly $1 billion arms to the Syrian government in 2011. However, other industries within the Russian Federation profit from the ties with Syria, such as electrical equipment and petroleum products.

However, there are also military ties between the two nations. The Russian Federation previously had naval bases in Tartus, Syria. These bases were evacuated following the USA's threat of an air strike.

As such, it is obvious why the Russian Federation still seeks to preserve the Assad regime within Syria, and provides a motivation for the number of resolutions the nation has vetoed within the United Nations (UN) Security Council since the beginning of the crisis in Syria.

The People's Republic of China

As with the Russian Federation, the People's Republic of China has vetoed resolutions on the Question of Syria in the UN Security Council in the past. Similarly China has its own interests in Syria, most importantly trade interests. In fact, in 2010, they ranked as Syria's third-largest importer, according to the European Commission. Trade between the nations includes exports of heavy machinery, electronic and communications. In addition to this China holds large shares and high stakes in Syria's oil industry. As with Russia, the fall of the Assad regime could damage the Chinese economy.

Iran

Iran also has historical interests in Syria. The governments of both nations allied to fight common enemies, such as Israeli advances in Lebanon and American intervention in the Middle East. In regard to the current crisis, the United States has accused Iran of providing President Assad's government with equipment to face the rebels. There have also been attempts to prove that there are Iranian troops operating within Syria.

United States

The United States (US) is one of many Western nations supporting the Syrian opposition. In June 2013, the US pledged to supply military aid to the Syrian rebels for the first time. The US has voted in favour of the UN's Security Council's resolutions on Syria in the past.

Following the Assad government's use of chemical weapons in an attack near Damascus in August 2013, the United States threatened to attack Syria by means of an air strike. However, following the proposal of a Russian plan to place these weapons under international control, this air strike was postponed.

United Kingdom

As with the US, the United Kingdom (UK) supports the Syrian rebels. The UK has been involved in promoting the passing of resolutions calling for arms sanctions. The UK has been providing Syria with aid, to date 348 million pounds, however, unlike the aid from the US, this is purely humanitarian aid.

Israel

There has been tension between Syria and Israel since the creation of Israel, when Syria opposed the UN partition plan for Jewish and Arab states. Once Israel was created, Syria was one of the Arab states to invade Israel. Despite an armistice signed between them in 1949, fighting continues and in 1967 Israel attacked Syria and captured the Golan Heights. During this period (1866-1972) Hafez al-Assad was the Syrian Minister of Defence and the Israeli attack, which both lost Syria the Golan Heights and destroyed much of the Syrian air force. This was a source of great embarrassment to him, and it has been speculated that this could be a reason for the attacks of Israel during his presidency. Despite Syrian attempts to regain the Golan Heights, it remains under under Israeli control, with about 18 000 Israelis living there.

In addition to their turbulent history, Israel's alliance with the US makes it a threat for the Assad Regime, especially concerning the recent threat of a US air strike in Syria. Israel, like the US has stated that Syria must be stripped of the chemical weapons used in the recent attack.

Shabiha Militia

The Shabiha militia is an all Alawite militia. Members are completely loyal to the Assad Regime. Though initially a group of smugglers, transporting goods between Lebanon and Syria, once Hafez al-Assad rose to power they were able to use their connections with him (established because of their common religious and cultural backgrounds) to develop into a large criminal organization. In return for the lack of police investigation, the Shabiha were expected to protect and be loyal to the Assad regime.

Since the beginning of the civil war in Syria, the Shabiha has had significant involvement with a number of massacres. For example, they were responsible for the massacre of up to 300 people in Aqrab.

Free Syrian Army (FSA)

The FSA was established in July 2011 by army deserters situated in Turkey, and was first announced via a video on the internet. It is now led by Gen Salim Idriss. Although the members of the FSA come from diverse religious, ethnic and sectarian origins it is believed that its soldiers are mostly Sunni Muslim. It is also largely comprised of troops who have defected from the armed forces. At its founding it stated that it would aim to "achieve freedom and dignity, topple the regime, protect the revolution and the country's resources" (BBC. "Guide to the Syrian Opposition.", bb.co.uk). In the past its opposition has taken the form of bombings, and the taking of cities controlled by the Assad regime.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
March, 2011	Protests begin in Deraa and the government opens fire at protesters.
May, 2011	Tanks enter the towns of Deraa, Banyas, Homs and some areas of Damascus.
July 2011	FSA is established by army deserters based in Turkey.

12 November 2011	Syria is suspended from the Arab League, and accused by the League of failing to execute a peace plan.
Feb.–March 2012	The Syrian government begins the month long shelling of Homs
16 March 2012	Kofi Annan, the joint UN – Arab League envoy, submits his 6 point peace plan.
21 March 2012	The Security Council backs the 6 point peace plan laid out by Kofi Annan.
18 April 2012	The UN observer mission begins in Syria, with an aim to monitor the situation.
May 2012	The government's use of heavy artillery in Houla kills over 100 civilians.
June 2012	The UN observer mission ends due to excessive violence.
July 2012	The FSA blows up three security chiefs in Damascus and seizes the town of Aleppo.
Sep. 2012	The FSA takes responsibility for two explosions in a government security base in Damascus.
Jan. 2013	Syria accuses Israel, their greatest rival in the Middle East, of attacking a military research centre near Damascus using jets.
March 2013	After the rebels capture the city of Raqqa, governmental warplanes bomb the city.
April 2013	The US and UK demand an investigation into claims that the Syrian government has been using chemical weapons.
May-June 2013	Governmental forces recapture the town of Qusair, and France claims that it has evidence of the government's use of chemical weapons on the rebels.
August 2013	The Assad government are accused by Western governments and rebel forces of having used chemical weapons in an attack near Damascus.

UN involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

Two resolutions have been past on the issue of Syria's civil war, both of which are listed below. In addition to this several resolutions which call for sanctions, amongst other measures, have failed in the Security Council, having been vetoed by either Russia or China.

A six point peace plan was also put forward by the Arab League-UN envoy, which can be found in the appendix.

- Authorizing Advance Team to Monitor Ceasefire in Syria, 14th April 2012, **(S/RES/2042)**

- Establishing a UN Supervision Mission in Syria, 21st April 2012, **(S/RES/2043)**

The above two resolutions are concerned with establishing the observer mission in Syria, which began on the 18th April 2012. However, the mission was then withdrawn in June of the same year, due to excessive violence.

Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

Thus far, all of the UN's attempts to resolve the issue, as laid out above, have all failed. The UN observer mission was withdrawn in August 2012, due to the violence. Any attempt made by the UN's Security Council to put arms sanctions in place has been vetoed by either the Russian Federation or the People's Republic of China in the Security Council, due to the links between these nations and the Assad regime.

Though there do exist sanctions from individual nations and groups, such as the US or UK, these have and will fail to have a significant effect, due the to the lack of a unified policy on this issue.

The UN's attempt at an observer mission was also an abject failure, as it both failed to prevent violence, and eventually was forced to withdraw, due to violence. Though the Peace Plan may also have been an attempt to resolve the issue, this was also a failure, as it required negotiations between the Syrian Government and the rebels, which the Syrian Government failed to achieve.

Possible Solutions

Firstly, it is imperative to get a clear overview of the situation in Syria before anything radical is done. Therefore the emphasis should be placed on finding a way to ensure that

objective observations are made under safe circumstances, in order to ensure that decisions are made upon reliable and accurate information. This was the aim of the failed UN observation mission.

Within the UN itself, no real improvement will be made unless the nations of the Security Council are able to reach an agreement. In order for any new measure to pass the Security Council, it would be necessary for Russia and China to either vote in favour or abstain, which is unlikely, given their personal investment in the region.

Concerning the Question of Syria a major issue that must be addressed is the immense amount of civilians stuck between the rebels and government troops. Often these civilians have little involvement in the war and fight for neither side. It is estimated by the United Nations High Council on Refugees (UNHCR) that over 1.6 million refugees are spread over different countries such as: Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt. These refugees put an extreme amount of pressure on the local infrastructure, and in addition to this the conditions in these refugee camps are bad. It is expected that there will be outbreaks of several diseases in these camps due to a severe lack of hygiene. Despite the fact that some of these camps were set up by the UN there is still a lack of food and water, and some camps are threatened by floods and other natural disasters. One solution to the conditions in these camps could be for the UN to assist with an aim to ensure the basic human rights of the already traumatized refugees. Additionally, there is the problem of the civilians that are still stuck within Syria. In order to protect these civilians, the establishment of safe corridors within Syria in order to allow them to leave the nation could help. However, it is also important to note that the establishment of refugee camps is only a temporary solution; in order to truly protect civilians, the violence in Syria must cease.

One such solution to the violence in Syria that has already been discussed is military intervention. However the negative results of such intervention should also be considered. Direct military intervention could be detrimental, both complicating the issue on an international scale and increasing the violence. However, if there was a method, for example a peace keeping mission, of ensuring that a ceasefire is kept, the situation could be made more stable and allow for a better negotiation process. In addition to this it is essential that disarmament takes place as soon as the situation has stabilised.

With regard to stabilising the situation ensuring negotiations go smoothly should also be prioritized. At this point in time neither side is willing to negotiate, however, were this to change this could be achieved by holding summits in other countries to ensure that neutral

grounds are kept. Measures should also be prepared for the eventuality of peace, with an aim to preserving the peace and not provoking continued violence.

However, it must be emphasized that for the UN to make any significant progress within Syria, an agreement must be reached between the P5 nations of the Security Council. Only then will it be possible for the UN to begin to improve upon the situation in Syria.

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Appendices

I.   A BBC Overview http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14703856

II.   The Six Point Peace Plan

http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/documents/six_point_proposal.pdf

III.   Resolution No. 2042

http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2012/sc10609.doc.htm

IV.   Resolution No. 2043

https://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2012/sc10618.doc.htm