

The Civil War in Syria: Prospects for Peace and the Role of External Actors

This is the summary of the hybrid public event held on 7 March 2024.

You can access the [podcast here](#) and the [video here](#).

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On March 7, 2024, Contemporary Turkish Studies and Middle East Centre organised a hybrid public event titled " **The Civil War in Syria: Prospects for Peace and the Role of External Actors.**"

The speakers were **Rim Turkmani**, Senior Policy Fellow at LSE Middle East Centre and LSE IDEAS; **Soli Özel**, Senior Lecturer at Istanbul Kadir Has University and member of the European Council on Foreign Relations; **Selin Nasi**, Visiting Fellow at the European Institute, LSE and London Representative of the Ankara Policy Centre.

Michael Mason, Director of the Middle East Centre, Professor of Environmental Geography in the Department of Geography and Environment, and an Associate of the Grantham Research Institute for Climate Change and the Environment at LSE, chaired the event.

Rim Turkmani reflected on the 13-year anniversary of a significant day when Syrians first took to the streets, initiating what she termed an exceedingly complex movement. She highlighted that the situation quickly transcended a simple civil conflict, noting that from the start, the involvement of external parties and the rise of numerous non-state actors supported by various international forces complicated the dynamics further.

Turkmani pointed out that the conflict had escalated to a point where it could no longer be seen as merely Syrian. The external involvement, she highlighted, was particularly significant around the years 2013, 2014, and 2016. During her speech, which focused on the complexity of the situation, she aimed to shed light on how external influences had been exerted through non state actors on the ground, providing examples of their impacts.

Turkmani distinguished between two approaches to addressing the Syrian conflict. One approach, she explained, prioritises humanitarian concerns, focusing on the well-being of the people on the ground, democratic reforms, and peaceful change. The other approach is more regime-centric, often leading to policies such as broad economic sanctions intended to weaken the regime but inadvertently harming civilians more significantly.

She discussed the UN-led Geneva process, which started nearly 13 years ago with strong initial momentum but had seen diminishing efficacy over time. The process, she noted, had been hindered by its dependency on Russian American consensus, which had become even more unlikely due to the conflict in Ukraine.

Turkmani mentioned her involvement in designing mechanisms to incorporate civil society into the peace process, such as the Women's Advisory Board and other civil society support mechanisms. These efforts, she explained, aimed to bring a diverse range of Syrian voices to the table, fostering solutions that are oriented towards the people and not dictated by external agendas.

However, she noted that new tracks and local agreements had emerged outside the UN framework, often driven by actors like Russia, Iran, and Turkey, which had proved to be more effective on the ground but were still heavily influenced by external agendas.

In her concluding remarks, Turkmani emphasised the need for comprehensive solutions that consider all stakeholders. She highlighted the profound impact of economic interventions and sanctions on Syria's economy and people, calling for a shift towards more inclusive and effective approaches to resolving the conflict.

Soli Özel stressed the importance of understanding the origins of the Syrian crisis, especially in the context of the Arab revolts and the profound impact of the American war in Iraq. Özel described the ongoing Gaza war as potentially marking the end of this turbulent period which could be disastrous or, miraculously positive due to the region's historical and spiritual significance.

He admitted Turkey's role in compounding the Syrian crisis through errors such as mistakes, miscalculations, misjudgements, and malfeasance, contributing to the current chaotic situation. He also pointed out the significant role of the climate crisis in exacerbating the Syrian crisis, noting the severe droughts between 2006 and 2011 that led to substantial agricultural losses and mass migrations, stressing this as a failure of the international system to respond effectively to Syria's appeals for help.

Özel discussed the evolution of Turkish foreign policy towards Syria, moving from an approach based on soft power to one characterised by securitisation and militarisation. He acknowledged the historically strained relations between Turkey and Syria, partly

due to territorial disputes and mutual distrust. Özel analysed the implications of the Arab Spring and subsequent electoral dynamics in the region, which influenced Turkish strategies and led to Turkey's involvement in Syrian conflicts and the handling of a massive influx of refugees, which has controversially supported the Turkish economy.

He critiqued the misinterpretations of U.S. policy, particularly during Obama's presidency, and the complex dynamics following the use of chemical weapons in Syria, which severely strained Turkish-American relations. He criticised Turkey's hesitant response to the ISIS siege of Kobani and discussed the shift in U.S. support towards Kurdish forces, complicating Turkey's position in the region.

Özel noted a recent shift in Turkish foreign policy towards a more security-oriented and nationalistic stance following the failed coup attempt in 2016, which also affected U.S.-Turkey relations. He mentioned the strategic importance of Turkish-Russian relations, which have allowed Turkey increased influence in Syria.

Selin Nasi reported on the situation in Syria, highlighting the pivotal factors and regional repercussions of the conflict. She began by noting that Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad has, against odds, effectively won the war. This is acknowledged reluctantly by the nations that previously funnelled money and arms to encourage regime change in Syria. Despite Assad's victory being pyrrhic—controlling only parts of Syria and governing over a fragmented, war-torn state—he remains in power, supported by Iran and Russia, prompting other regional players to realign their policies to this altered reality.

Nasi further explained that political strategies are shifting as well. Countries such as Saudi Arabia, in preparation for a post-oil era, are now channelling their focus towards economic reconstruction and modernisation to avoid unnecessary military engagements. She emphasised that the U.S.'s gradual withdrawal has forced its Middle Eastern allies to handle conflicts on their own, a shift underscored in 2019 when Iran attacked Saudi oil facilities, and the U.S. did not intervene militarily.

She reported on positive developments since 2021, such as the Gulf Cooperation Council's decision to lift the blockade on Qatar, efforts by Gulf countries to reach a peace settlement in Yemen, and Saudi Arabia's recent diplomatic moves towards Iran with Chinese mediation. According to Nasi, these actions demonstrate a collective regional intent to de-escalate tensions and re-establish connections, including with the Assad regime.

Addressing the refugee crisis, Nasi pointed out the economic and social challenges faced by countries like Jordan and Turkey due to the influx of Syrian refugees. She noted that the refugee issue has sparked significant domestic debate, with opposition parties strongly criticising government policies, compelling shifts in strategy. However, she questioned the realism of repatriating refugees, citing the original causes of their displacement and the requisite stability needed for their return.

Nasi also touched upon the Captagon trade an amphetamine that has turned into a significant issue for the Gulf countries. She explained that the drug is allegedly produced extensively in areas of Syria controlled by Assad's regime. The regional hope, she mentioned, is that through economic incentives and trade cooperation, Assad might be persuaded to curtail this trade.

On the geopolitical front, Nasi remarked that Sunni Arab nations are seeking to reduce Iran's influence in Syria by re-establishing ties with Assad's regime. She observed that while this goal is ambitious given Iran's entrenched position in Syria, the economically powerful oil kingdoms have the means to challenge Iran's dominance. Yet, she noted, there are no signs that Assad is willing to decrease his dependence on Iran.

Finally, Nasi concluded by considering the implications of Assad's reintegration for the liberal democratic order. She described Assad as one of the worst war criminals of the 21st century, responsible for immense human rights abuses. His potential return, she argued, not only challenges international norms but also perpetuates a culture of impunity. As per her analysis, the Syrian conflict remains largely in a stalemate, but

upcoming developments, particularly the potential withdrawal of U.S. forces, could alter the situation on the ground, reinforcing Assad's power and the perception of his enduring authority.

During the Q&A session, Rim Turkmani emphasising that clean power is consistently the primary focus, irrespective of other developments. She explained that many parties involved adopt a long-term strategic approach, expecting that eventually, everyone will need to adhere to their agreements. Turkmani noted that neighbouring countries often engage with these issues out of pragmatic necessity due to their immediate geographic and economic ties, such as trade relations and refugee movements, which compel some level of cooperation.

She mentioned that while some seek broader international cooperation, they often find themselves disappointed by the lack of reciprocity. Turkmani also highlighted that the Syrian regime believes Turkey will re-enter negotiations, involving not only the U.S. and other actors but also private forces and popular groups in Northeast Syria. The regime anticipates that Turkey will eventually agree to relinquish control of Northwest Syria back to them in exchange for securing Northeast Syria in a manner favourable to Turkish interests regarding the Kurdish population.

Turkmani further commented on the regime's perceived control over its borders with Israel, describing it as another strategic point. However, she questioned the actual extent of power the regime has on the ground, sharing insights from individuals within government-controlled areas who openly express their frustration and the regime's diminishing ability to suppress casual opposition.

The discussion then shifted to the challenges of engaging with regional issues and the necessity of negotiating access to support local enterprises and initiatives. Turkmani stressed the importance of avoiding interference with local communities while acknowledging that effective support requires direct engagement and the establishment of mechanisms to fund and empower small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the region.

Selin Nasi highlighted the critical nature of the situation, emphasising that the window for reaching a settlement in Gaza is narrowing. Nasi noted the worst-case scenario where Israel remains in Gaza, pointing out that the key determining factor would be the worsening humanitarian catastrophe and whether existing records remain intact. She explained that the collapse of these records could impact the rapprochement process between Syria and the Gulf countries, possibly leading to competition over championing the Palestinian cause while simultaneously fostering unity on the issue. Nasi stressed the risks associated with the Gaza war, indicating that delays in reaching a settlement bring the region closer to a broader conflict. She mentioned that Syria has already become a front in this proxy war, a development that Bashar Al Assad would likely not welcome and that is undesirable.

Rim Turkmani pointed out that although private banks are not sanctioned, they are disinclined to improve, leading to a reluctance to engage with the country, even among banks that comply with international counter-terrorism standards. Turkmani argued that negotiations should focus on supporting the legitimate business community to leverage trade relations. Turkmani also spoke about the internal resistance to Iran's influence in Syria, contrasting the roles of Russians and Iranians. She noted significant discontent among Syrians towards Iranians who disregard government institutions and interfere with Syrian identity, emphasising strong opposition to Iran's efforts to convert people and establish their own cultural institutions.

Selin Nasi expressed her willingness to answer the question regarding Turkey's military presence in Egypt. She noted that this presence contributes to the stalemate on the battlefield. She highlighted that ongoing military conflicts are deeply intertwined, which complicates their resolution. Nasi likened the situation to playing Jenga, where pulling the wrong brick can cause the entire structure to collapse. She explained that since Russia is focusing its resources on the war in Ukraine and seeking to maintain stability in Syria, it has been advocating for normalisation efforts. This involves encouraging Syria and Turkey to normalise relations, as Russia is displeased with the power vacuum being filled by Iran in Syria, which she described as an undesirable development. However, she pointed out that Turkey's military presence in

northern Syria is a significant obstacle to normalisation with Syria. Despite Turkey's military involvement, it provides an economic lifeline to Russia, even though it has joined economic sanctions against Russia in the Black Sea region. Nasi mentioned Turkey's commitment to upholding the Montreux Convention, which, despite facing criticism, currently has no better alternative. She noted that the relationship between Turkey and Russia is asymmetrical and fluctuates, with Russia reminding Turkey of its dominant role in Syria, as evidenced in 2020 when coordinated actions by the Syrian air force and Russian forces resulted in the death of 30 soldiers. In conclusion, Nasi emphasised the complexity of ongoing military conflicts and the necessity of recognising the broader context when evaluating the prospects for a settlement.

Soli Özel mentioned that there was an imbalance in Syria that had taken root. He emphasised the significance of the Assad government and highlighted the importance of the Gaza war, noting that it was changing the way various powers were engaging with the region. He pointed out that some American commentators, along with Israel, were in favour of expanding the war, especially if Hezbollah became involved.

Selin Nasi discussed the geopolitical alignments that have emerged since the outbreak of the war. She noted that China had aligned itself with Russia and actively worked to block Western-led resolutions in the UN Security Council. She emphasised that China had consistently advocated for the respect of territorial integrity and had criticised any external interference in complex regional issues. She pointed out that while Syria holds considerable importance for China, particularly in the context of Lebanon, President Bashar Al-Assad appears more focused on attracting economic investments. Lastly, Nasi discussed the potential implications of the ongoing war in Gaza. She concluded that the outcome could either lead to a settlement or plunge the region further into chaos, depending on the developments.

Soli Özel remarked that there was no functioning state in Syria, characterising it more as gang relations. He emphasised the lack of guarantee regarding any potential Chinese investment, suggesting that the Chinese might prioritise strengthening their ties with Iran instead. Özel questioned whether recent events, particularly concerning

Gaza would affect Chinese perceptions of stability. Özel highlighted the gradual shift of Russian influence northward, which could impact Turkish ports. He expressed concern about the potential consequences if Turkey were to displease the Russians or the regime. Özel warned of the risk of a significant crisis, potentially involving millions of people seeking refuge at borders. He concluded by emphasising the delicate and fragile nature of the situation, noting the potential repercussions of any drastic actions.

Rim Turkmani noted that Syria no longer receives much coverage in the news, especially concerning the war in Gaza. However, she pointed out that there have been ongoing attacks on Iranian targets in Syria by Israel, with an escalation following the Gaza conflict. She mentioned that these attacks have become highly targeted, not only focusing on military installations but also on leadership positions. Turkmani highlighted the resulting apprehension among locals, leading to reluctance in having Iranians nearby, indicating growing concerns about the Iranian presence in Syria. Despite being allied with Russia, she noted that Iranians are not adequately protected, with their military bases exposed unlike those of Russia.