



Cover Page



NAVIGATING SOVEREIGNTY AND INTERVENTION: UN PEACEBUILDING TRAJECTORIES IN SYRIA

Gulnaz Fatima

Political Science

Shivaji College, University of Delhi

Abstract:

This paper takes a close look at one of the most complex and painful conflicts of the century ‘the Syrian crisis’ and asks a pointed question: what the United Nations has actually been able to do, and where it has fallen short. Since 2011, Syria has been more than just a humanitarian catastrophe; it has become a mirror reflecting some of the deepest tensions in the contemporary world order, between a nation’s right to govern itself and the international community’s responsibility to protect populations when that governance turns violent. The paper traces the UN’s journey through Syria’s turmoil, examining its diplomatic efforts, its attempts to sustain humanitarian assistance, and its repeated struggles at the negotiating table. These efforts have unfolded against the backdrop of shifting great-power interests, which have complicated and often constrained meaningful progress at every stage. Rather than treating Syria as merely a case study, this paper presents it as a critical lens through which to understand the limitations and contradictions of modern international peacebuilding. It highlights the urgent need for the United Nations to move beyond symbolic engagement and confront its structural and political shortcomings more directly. In doing so, Syria emerges not only as a site of profound crisis but also as a warning, and perhaps an opportunity for rethinking how global institutions balance national sovereignty with the protection of human dignity.

Keywords: United Nations, Syrian Conflict, Peacebuilding, State Sovereignty, Humanitarian Intervention, Responsibility to Protect (R2P), UN Security Council, Geopolitics, Conflict Resolution, International Relations, Civil War, Global Governance

Introduction

The Syrian Crucible: Contextualizing the Arab Spring and the Metamorphosis of Conflict

The Syrian conflict, which began from the broader cultural climate of the Arab Spring in March 2011, is widely seen as one of the most complicated challenges to international peace and security of the twenty-first century (Jafarova, 2014). Initially, it began as a public outcry through means of peaceful demonstrations, where people demanded democratic reforms and the restoration of basic human dignity. However, the situation was struck by a violent crackdown when the Ba’athist regime responded with violent repression, which triggered a full-scale armed rebellion (Eisner, 2015). Over time, what started as a domestic uprising transformed into a prolonged and deeply internationalized civil war, resulting in nearly 600,000 deaths and the displacement of millions (Belhadj Klaz & Mariani, 2022). Slowly the conflict became increasingly fragmented and has often been described as a “war of parts,” involving not just a struggle between the state and its people, but also a sectarian conflict and a proxy war shaped by global powers (Eisner, 2019). This shift highlights how an initially civic movement gradually turned into a multi-layered conflict, influenced heavily by regional and international actors as well as changing narratives and mediation efforts (Theros & Turkmani, 2022). On top of that, the increasing involvement of external actors and competing interests fragmented both the conflict and peacemaking processes, illustrating how geopolitical agendas reshape the trajectory of the war (Belhadj Klaz & Mariani, 2022).

As the conflict grew in its force, the social and political sphere of Syria further underwent a radical fragmentation, creating a “supervision vacuum” that gave rise to violent extremism (Jafarova, 2014). Since the conflict began in the light of Arab uprisings, the international community in the beginning was expecting a swift regime change similar to Tunisia or Egypt. However, the endurance of the Assad regime with the support of its regional and global allies, pushed the situation of Syria to such bad extremes that the traditional models of conflict resolution were of no use in Syria as they didn’t yield any fruit (Eisner, 2019). If we look at the trajectory of the conflict from 2011 to 2024, it shows how prolonged intra-state issues can



Cover Page



become a breeding ground for groups like ISIS which exploit the already fragile governance structures and the instability caused by the conflict to establish forms of non-state authority (Muto, 2023). Consequently, any effort at peacebuilding in Syria must go through this multi-layered reality of territorial, social and political fracture (Belhadj Klaz & Mariani, 2022).

Evolving Sovereignty: The UN's Responsibility and Institutional Stalemate

Syria shattered the assumptions about how the world should work. For the longest time, the Westphalian concept of government's absolute sovereignty within its borders has been treated as the foundation of international order. But as the conflict grew, the concept began to feel less likely to be true. The United Nations was caught in an agonizing bind. On one hand, it was built on the promise that nations would not interfere in each other's affairs. On the other hand, after the terrible events in Rwanda and Srebrenica, the world promised that it would never just watch and do nothing while innocent people were being killed. This was the essence of R2P, the Responsibility to Protect: the idea that when a government turns on its own people, the international community has both the right and the obligation to step in. Syria brought that contradiction into the open. The UN could not act without betraying one of its foundational principles, and in the end, it found itself unable to act at all (Jafarova, 2014). This problem was very prominently visible within the UN Security Council (UNSC), where the permanent members (P5) were divided over the legitimacy of the Syrian Government. (Jafarova, 2014). The Western powers like the United States, France and United Kingdom favoured resignation of president Assad and stated that as the precondition for peace, whereas Russia and China utilized their veto power to not let this happen and protect Syrian state sovereignty from externally driven regime change. (Jafarova, 2014; Muto, 2023). This division created a "backpedaling" feature in the UNSC's decision making process, where a normal consensus for humanitarian causes became a platform of intense political bargaining (Beaujouan, 2025).

The UN Security Council couldn't agree on how to act in Syria, and because of that, its usual way of making peace through negotiations and building democratic systems didn't work there (Jafarova, 2014). Peace efforts by leaders like Kofi Annan and Lakhdar Brahimi failed, showing that the UN struggles to act when powerful countries disagree (Eisner, 2019). At the same time, the Syrian government used the idea of "sovereignty" to avoid outside interference, while different countries supported different groups, making the conflict more complicated (Muto, 2023). Even though the UN tried something new like allowing aid to enter Syria without government approval, these efforts were still limited by global politics (Hauch & van Veen, 2024). Overall, the situation shows that in today's world, rules like sovereignty are no longer simple and are often challenged by power struggles between countries (Hellmüller & Salaymeh, 2025; Beaujouan, 2025).

The Site of Proxy Ambition: Multilateralism under Siege

Syria basically got itself into a situation where many powerful countries got involved at the same time, each trying to protect their own interests. Because of this, the United Nations was not able to act properly or effectively. (Boutellis et al., 2020). Different countries were not working toward the same goal. For example, Russia supported the Syrian government and helped it become stronger in the war (Muto, 2023; Klaz & Mariani, 2022). The United States and its allies were mainly focused on fighting ISIS, instead of solving the overall conflict (Muto, 2023). At the same time, countries like Iran and Turkey also got involved for their own reasons. Iran wanted to increase its influence in the region, while Turkey was worried about Kurdish groups near its border (Klaz & Mariani, 2022). With so many outside forces involved, the war became more complicated. People from many countries joined the fighting, and local groups inside Syria started depending on foreign money, weapons, and support (Klaz & Mariani, 2022; Boutellis et al., 2020). In simple terms, Syria turned into a kind of "proxy battlefield," where bigger countries were indirectly fighting each other through local groups.

The Syrian conflict became highly complex due to the presence of a large number of armed groups, which made meaningful negotiations extremely difficult (Eisner, 2019; Boutellis et al., 2020). Even when some groups were ready to agree to a ceasefire, others refused, so the agreements didn't last long. A major problem was the involvement of outside countries. Nations like Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia supported different opposition groups and often focused on their own interests, which created more divisions instead of bringing unity (Meininghaus, 2025). As a result, the United Nations faced



Cover Page



2 2 7 7 - 7 8 8 1



significant limitations in effectively managing the peace process. Its role was largely confined to facilitating dialogue, while crucial decisions were increasingly shaped by external powers operating outside formal multilateral frameworks (Hellmüller & Salaymeh, 2025; Boutellis et al., 2020).

The Astana Counter-Narrative: From Liberal Peace to Illiberal Realities

When the UN's peace talks in Geneva were not really working, a different group of countries - Russia, Turkey, and Iran started their own way of handling the situation in 2017 and called it the Astana Process (Muto, 2023; Klaz & Mariani, 2022). But their approach was very different. Instead of trying to completely solve the conflict or bring democracy, they mainly focused on reducing violence on the ground, basically, stopping or controlling the fighting for the time being. In a way, this shows how the focus quietly shifted from actually solving the conflict to just managing it or as it is often called "negative peace" (Muto, 2023). Also, unlike the UN, these countries were not neutral. They were already involved in the conflict and supporting different sides. Because of this, the peace efforts were shaped more by their own interests (Beaujouan, 2025) rather than by a real effort to bring lasting change. Overall, it shows a bigger shift where keeping things stable and in control became more important than achieving true, long-term peace or meaningful political change.

The situation in Syria shows that peace doesn't always go hand in hand with democracy, even though that was the earlier assumption (Beaujouan, 2025). Under the Astana process, the idea of "good governance" shifted more towards restoring government control and defeating opposition groups rather than focusing on people's demands (Klaz & Mariani, 2022). In many areas, local agreements were forced on communities, pushing them to surrender or leave their homes. While this did help in reducing large-scale fighting, it didn't really address the deeper issues that started the conflict in the first place (Muto, 2023). So, even though things looked more stable on the surface, the underlying tensions were still there, making this kind of peace fragile and uncertain (Eisner, 2019).

Transactional Peace vs Civic Inclusion in Syria's Peace Process

The Syrian peace process gradually turned into what can be understood as a kind of "political marketplace," where decisions were less about principles and more about deals. Countries and groups started supporting each other based on their own interests, exchanging military or political support for benefits in return (Hellmüller & Salaymeh, 2025). Because of this, short-term agreements became more important than long-term solutions like democracy or institution-building. Even the UN had to adjust to this reality. Instead of leading a clear peace plan, it began working through small compromises like exchanging minor concessions to improve the situation step by step (Beaujouan, 2025). This shows how peace efforts shifted from being value-driven to being more practical and interest-based. In simple terms, power on the ground started to matter more than ideal ideas of peace, and the UN had to work within those limits.

At the same time, there was another side to the peace process that focused more on people than power. The UN created spaces like the Civil Society Support Room and the Women's Advisory Board to include ordinary Syrians, activists, and community voices in discussions (Theros & Turkmani, 2022). Even though these groups didn't directly influence major political decisions, they played an important role in bringing people together, reducing divisions, and encouraging dialogue across different sides of the conflict. For many Syrians, this was one of the few spaces where they could talk about a better, more inclusive future. It showed that peacebuilding is not just about stopping violence, but also about building trust, dignity, and understanding among people (Boutellis et al., 2020). So, while the overall process became more transactional, these civic efforts quietly kept the idea of a more meaningful and inclusive peace alive.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the war in Syria shows that the modern-day system of the world is complex. This is not a world where everything has been clearly labeled as right and wrong, nor is it one controlled by only one nation or force. Several powerful



Cover Page



countries now exist together, each pursuing their national interests. Even global bodies such as the UN have been unable to react to the situation. The war shows the continued challenge of balancing national sovereignty and human rights.

However, Syria illustrates that the cessation of violence alone does not ensure peace. The peace achieved in the region has been fragile and incomplete since most of the international approaches have centered on controlling the war instead of finding out its sources. Despite all this, some elements offer hope. For instance, there is always something hopeful in the perseverance of common people and civil society organizations, who work tirelessly to maintain dialogue and restore trust in their search for peace, which goes beyond politics to encompass human dignity and inclusion.

The Syrian situation is an important indicator of the need to understand that peace goes beyond merely stopping violence; it entails creating structures within which people can lead secure, equitable, and dignified lives.

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