

High Stakes for Syria at GCC Meeting

How President Obama Should Urge Gulf Leaders to Help Syria

When President Obama meets the leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council on April 21 in Saudi Arabia it will be his last chance to press the Gulf monarchs in person, on their home ground, about their human rights responsibilities. [In a letter to Obama](#) Human Rights First outlined a series of concerns about government attacks on civil society in the GCC states.

The issue of the Syrian conflict will be prominent on the agenda of the summit and Obama can usefully urge his Gulf allies to help end the conflict and promote a lasting peace.

Over the last month Human Rights First has held a series of discussions with Syrian civil society leaders now based in other countries, including many in Gaziantep on the Turkish side of the Syrian border, about what they now want to see the U.S. government do to help resolve the Syrian war, and specifically how President Obama should use the GCC summit to press the Gulf states to reduce and end the conflict.

While the current ceasefire, which began on February 27, has reduced the rate of civilian deaths, it looks increasingly fragile. Neither ISIS nor Jabhat Al Nusrah, both powerful armed extremist groups, are included in the truce, and fighting continues on a number of fronts by other factions which agreed to halt fighting. In what amounted to a re-declaration of war, Syrian Prime Minister Wael al-Halaki warned on April 10 that regime forces “are preparing for an operation to liberate Aleppo and to block all illegal armed groups which have not joined or have broken the ceasefire deal.”

Syrian human rights activists and other civil society figures continue to voice extreme exasperation with the Obama Administration’s actions towards Syria since peaceful anti-regime protests broke out five years ago.

U.S. involvement in the conflict in Syria has been characterized by several pivotal moments. The U.S. government adopted a wait-and-see approach for far too long, apparently relying on the superficially reassuring, but ultimately false, assumption that the conflict was being fought out between al-Qa’eda and Hezbollah, two forces antagonistic the United States, so having U.S. enemies fight each other would not harm U.S. interests. At other times, the administration appeared to stake out strong positions only to waffle or walk them back, as demonstrated in the timeline accompanying this report.

During the first year of the conflict U.S. engagement in Syria was limited to rhetoric and diplomacy. In May 2011, two months after the mass protests began, the United States imposed sanctions on President Bashar Al Assad and senior government officials, but it was not until August of that year that President Obama officially called for Assad’s removal. Towards the end of 2011, the United Nations Security Council, with U.S. support, took up consideration of resolutions condemning Assad’s brutality and calling for a political transition. Russia and China repeatedly vetoed these resolutions, which stymied efforts for the Security Council to fulfill its intended role in maintaining international peace and security with regard to this conflict.

Against the backdrop of the pro-democracy uprisings and government crackdowns in other countries in the Middle East and North Africa in 2011, and with the American public's limited appetite for troops on the ground after the negative experiences of Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. government avoided a military approach in Syria. This reticence ultimately resulted in a failure to support the moderate rebels who aimed to oust Assad, as the situation became increasingly complex. In August 2012, President Obama gave his now-infamous "red line" speech regarding the use of chemical weapons in Syria, stating, "We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus." One month later, the United States began supplying Syrian opposition rebels with non-lethal aid.

In June 2013, a U.S. intelligence report concluded the Assad regime had used chemical weapons, including sarin, on a small scale against the opposition multiple times in the previous year. Then on August 21 a chemical weapons attack on a Damascus suburb killed an estimated 1,400 people.

Having drawn a line, which if crossed would be cause for U.S. military action, President Obama worked with President Putin of Russia, strong supporter of the Assad regime, to produce an agreement calling for the elimination of Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles by mid-2014.

While the United States avoided taking direct military action in Syria in 2013, the situation changed in 2014 as a result of the growth of ISIS. In June 2014, ISIS seized the city of Mosul in Iraq and officially declared their "caliphate," effectively erasing the border between western Iraq and eastern Syria. In August, journalist James Foley was the first American executed by the group in Syria. ISIS's gruesome execution videos shocked the international community and increased pressure on

the administration to act and in September, President Obama announced the formation of a broad international coalition to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIS. In September the U.S.-led coalition began its first airstrikes on military targets in Syria. While the strikes targeted ISIS's war-fighting and war-sustaining capabilities, they did not directly target Assad's forces despite calls by U.S. allies in the region and some of the opposition armed groups and some of civil society for the U.S. to do so.

Throughout 2015 the United States continued its airstrike campaign in Syria while also launching a program to train and equip Syrian opposition rebels. Meanwhile, Russia became increasingly involved in the conflict and began to launch airstrikes in September, which overwhelmingly targeted anti-Assad, non-ISIS rebels. By the fall it was clear that the U.S. \$500 million "train and equip" program had failed, producing only a handful of active fighters. In October, the United States scrapped the program and announced a new plan to send U.S. special operations forces into Syria to serve in an advisory capacity to opposition fighters. A debate ensued over the extent to which these forces constituted "boots on the ground."

In late 2015, the United States, Russia, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia initiated peace talks on Syria in Vienna, but no agreement was reached. President Obama reiterated in November that he did not foresee "a situation in which we can end the civil war in Syria while Assad remains in power." While his remarks echoed earlier statements by U.S. officials since 2011, views on Assad's departure fundamentally diverged among the other governments involved in the conflict and convening the peace talks. As the peace negotiations progressed, the U.S. position on Assad seemed to soften, leading the State Department to confront persistent questions from the media about whether it was backing off from its stance that Assad could not remain in power, or whether a transitional role for him was envisaged.

U.N.-mediated Syria peace talks began in Geneva in February 2016, and by the end of March, the Syrian regime and opposition delegations agreed on twelve common points. Russia unexpectedly announced that it would be pulling out the “main part” of its military forces in Syria. Meanwhile, U.S. and Russian officials agreed on a target schedule for establishing a framework for a political transition and a draft constitution. The U.N.-mediated peace talks resumed in Geneva in mid-April. Conspicuously absent throughout the negotiation processes has been meaningful engagement with Syrian civil society.

The most commonly cited complaints about Washington’s record include the lack of support for the uprising in March 2011, President Obama’s failure to act militarily after President Assad crossed the “red line” of using chemical weapons in 2013, and an unwillingness to adequately support or arm “moderate” Syrian opposition forces, which has in turn made more radical but better-armed groups such as ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusrah more attractive options for those wanting to fight the regime by force. “The U.S. government is still forcing good people into the arms of ISIS to fight Assad,” one veteran human rights activist told me. “People will go to those who give them guns.”

There is criticism too for what they see as the Obama Administration’s softening of the requirement that Syrian dictator Bashar al Assad not play any part in the country’s transitional politics, and some criticize a failure to introduce or enforce no-fly zones inside Syria to protect civilians.

Some cite the U.S. government’s failure to lead a response to the international refugee crisis, an issue Human Rights Report addressed in a February 2016 [report](#).

Despite Washington’s poor level of credibility with Syrian civil society, many activists hope President Obama will use his influence at this month’s GCC summit to press Gulf governments to encourage a lasting and fair peace in Syria. Syrian civil society

leaders suggested to Human Rights First that President Obama could usefully press his Gulf allies to help in a series of key areas, including ensuring that the armed groups they sponsor respect the ceasefire and release human rights activists they hold in detention. Washington’s Gulf allies could also address the sectarian speech fueling the conflict which emanates from media based in the Gulf, support international efforts to protect medical workers in Syria, and better support the peace negotiations in Geneva.

The Syrian regime is responsible for the vast majority of killings and other human rights violations, which have left hundreds of thousands of people dead and half the country’s population displaced. Millions of refugees have crossed into neighboring countries and many more would if adjoining states hadn’t closed their borders. But other groups, including some sponsored and to some degree controlled by the Gulf states, are also guilty of mass human rights violations, and while Syrian civil society figures insist that Washington’s primary focus should be on ending the conflict as quickly and as permanently as it can, they say there are useful things Obama can urge his Gulf allies to do to reduce the violations committed by the armed opposition groups they support responsible for abuses.

1. Controlling Proxies

President Obama should publicly call for the GCC leadership to use their power to improve the behavior of the armed groups they support, including respecting human rights in the areas they govern.

Syria’s conflict has produced hundreds of local, regional and national fighting forces. While the regime’s military—backed by Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, and other outside forces—remains the single most powerful there is a dizzying range of those opposing it, and who often oppose each other. These include the Free Syrian Army, Kurdish groups, ISIS, Al Nusrah and many, many other

smaller groups whose allegiances can shift depending on what other forces are threatening their locality.

The larger and smaller opposition groups generally rely on outside sponsorship to survive, although ISIS, which controls lucrative oil fields and major population centers like Mosul in Iraq, and has a vast arsenal of weaponry, is largely self-funding. Turkey, the United States and the Gulf countries are the main political and military backers of these other groups, although the complicated internecine nature of the war means it is not always clear who is fighting whom at any particular time.

There has been a general pattern to this support from outside, however, and some consensus about which elements are dependent on which outside backers. Government and private money from the Gulf states have established and supported various Islamist military groups. Most of this has come from Saudi Arabia and Qatar, although the United Arab Emirates has also contributed. Much of the money has been financed via Kuwait, where some business elements are also believed to have supported Salafi groups.

There has been intense competition between some of these powerful groups, reflecting the domestic politics of their rich outside sponsors. Qatar has traditionally financed opposition Islamist brigades sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood, with Saudi and particularly the UAE supporting Islamist groups opposed to the Brotherhood.

In recent weeks, the truce has increased these groups' dependence on their outside sponsors, making the Gulf funders even more powerful. "The ceasefire undermines the need for al-Nusra and the other groups to 'protect' areas from the regime," explains one Syrian civil society activist who preferred not to be named. "These groups will lose local support from people who tolerated them because they were holding off Assad's military. We've started to see demonstrations by women against al-Nusra in areas they occupy near Idlib,

protests against armed groups' human rights violations, against the detention of children."

It's an analysis widely shared by civil society leaders—that the Gulf states are more powerful than ever now the fighting has stopped, if temporarily. If the main service provided to neighborhoods by armed opposition groups is a degree of security from other groups, or from the regime, the truce means this service is less needed, the groups less secure in their local power base, and more reliant for political support on their rich benefactors.

This, in turn, can make it more possible for Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the others to control the militias they support, and have them stop kidnapping and killing locals in the areas they govern. "Now the Saudis have more political leverage because the militias need more than guns from them—they need their political support, the legitimacy they can bring," said one civil society leader.

The truce has seen the aerial bombardments of civilians stop, but the sense of urgency to find a lasting peace is as great as ever. "Whatever levers the Gulf countries can pull they need to pull them now," said one humanitarian worker at this moment when they have increased leverage.

At a meeting with GCC foreign ministers in Bahrain on April 7, Secretary of State Kerry urged Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Washington's other regional partners to use their influence with these rebel groups to keep the truce and to support the negotiations in Geneva. This is a message Obama should forcefully repeat at the summit.

2. Release Razan

President Obama should make it publicly known that he is calling on GCC leaders to use their influence to secure the release of Razan Zaitouneh and others disappeared or held by groups they support.

Razan Zaitouneh is a prominent human rights lawyer, defending political prisoners in Syria since 2001. She's a leading civil society activist who

founded several groups and a human rights website.

When the conflict began in March 2011, the website Razan created, Syrian Human Rights Information Link (SHRIL), became one of the few sources of information on killings, arrests, and human rights violations by the regime. She's played a vital role for many years in efforts to defend human rights and protect independent groups and activists in Syria. With other activists, she established the Violations Documentation Centre (VDC), which monitors human rights violations and records casualties in Syria, and she co-founded the Local Coordination Committees (LCCs), a network of civilians coordinating the work of local committees reporting on protests in various cities and towns across Syria. She also established the Local Development and Small Projects Support Office (LDSPS), which assists non-governmental organizations in besieged Eastern Ghouta.

Her work inevitably led to her being targeted by the regime, and by opposition groups also violating human rights.

On 9 December 2013, she and three colleagues from the VDC—her husband Wael Hamada, Samira Khalil, and Nazem Hammadi—were abducted by a group of armed men in Douma, believed to be from Jaish al-Islam, a powerful umbrella group of many smaller militias with its roots around Damascus. Jaish al-Islam is heavily supported, many believed controlled, by Saudi Arabia.

It's not known if Jaish al-Islam still holds Zaitouneh and the others. Zahran Alloush, head of Jaish al-Islam, was killed in the conflict in December 2015, and some believe it's possible that Zaitouneh and the others are now in the custody of al-Nusra. She has become an emblem of disappeared Syrian human rights defenders, and of others kidnapped by opposition forces. There are countless others across the country who have been seized by various parties, but none are as well known as Zaitouneh. Her work was widely known before her

disappearance, and in 2011 her work was recognized with major international awards—the Sakharov Prize for Freedom and the Anna Politkovskaya Award.

There has been some significant advocacy and publicity around her case by regional and international NGOs and it is unusual to have a conversation about civil society inside Syria without her name coming up. On April 14, 2016 U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Samantha Power described Razan Zaitouneh as “a widely respected leader of Syria's civil society” in public remarks on Syria.

Her release, and the release of those taken with her, would be regarded as a genuinely significant step in the political process, an indicator that Saudi authorities are prepared to intervene positively to promote peace. The releases would reflect positively on Saudi Arabia, who would be credited with securing their freedom, and reflect well on President Obama too if he makes it known he raised her case with his Gulf ally during the summit.

Several former colleagues of Zaitouneh told Human Rights First that the GCC summit is an ideal place for President Obama to press the Saudis to help secure her release, and that raising her case publicly will send a message to other armed groups that there will be a price to pay in international condemnation if they target human rights defenders.

3. Stop The Hate Speech

President Obama should urge his GCC allies to stop the incitement to violence by media based in their countries, and to promote moderate, anti-sectarian voices including Syrian civil society leaders.

President Obama has called on the GCC leaders to reduce the tension in Syria and to learn to “share” the region. “The competition between the Saudis and the Iranians—which has helped to feed proxy wars and chaos in Syria and Iraq and Yemen—requires us to say to our friends as well as to the Iranians that they need to find an effective way to

share the neighborhood and institute some sort of cold peace,” he said. One way to take the heat out of the crisis would be to tone down the sectarian speech carried in new and traditional media which has helped drive the violence in Syria. Anti-Sunni incitement coming from pro-Iranian outlets and speech is designed to encourage violence against Shias coming from the Gulf.

While Tehran is unlikely to respect U.S. government pleas to address sectarian speech, Syrian civil society figures urged Obama to use the GCC meeting to push Washington’s Gulf allies in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other Gulf states to stop anti-Shia sectarianism. Television stations Al Arabiya, based in Saudi Arabia, and Al Jazeera, based in Qatar, as well as the smaller UEA channel Orient TV, were repeatedly cited as serious, long-term offenders in inciting violence.

“Arabic media, funded by Gulf countries, is a big part of the problem. Al Jazeera gives a platform to Jabhat al-Nusrah while Al Arabiya plays a role in spreading sectarian language, constantly relating the issue to Iran’s involvement and Shias in Syria,” said Mohammad Al-Abdallah, Executive Director of the Syria Justice and Accountability Centre.

Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera are the most powerful networks broadcasting in Arabic in the Middle East, and both have regularly given air time to extremists who fuel sectarian violence. For example, the hugely popular and influential Al Jazeera show “The Opposite Direction” is known for pitting two guests with opposing views against each other in heated argument. Sometimes fistfights break out. It’s hosted from Qatar by famous TV presenter Faisal al-Qassim, who was reportedly sentenced to death by the regime in July 2015 for “inciting sectarian strife.”

4. Ask Gulf Leaders to Support Enforcement of U.N. Resolution to Protect Medical Workers

President Obama should use the GCC summit to push for enforcement of UNSC Resolution 2139 and to use their influence to have medical

facilities and personnel protected during the conflict.

Physicians for Human Rights puts the number of attacks on medical facilities since the start of the conflict at 358, with 726 personnel killed, with Syrian regime forces being responsible for the overwhelming number of attacks. The NGO reported that on March 31, a month into the ceasefire, Syrian government forces launched at least five strikes on a hospital and a physiotherapy center in Yamadiya, a town in Latakia governorate near the Turkish border.

Local medical organizations told Human Rights First how they struggle to provide health care in many areas because of the violence. The Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS) includes a membership of 106 medical centers and over 1700 medical personnel.

SAMS Advocacy manager Dr Mohamad Katoub explains, “Our staff have been attacked, including with chemical weapons, and kidnapped. ...Being a medic is a dangerous job in Syria, we’re not protected. For instance, there’s a big hospital in Aleppo. The staff painted a big Red Crescent on the roof to show it was a hospital. It was attacked seven times. Then they painted the roof black—the color of ISIS. It wasn’t attacked after that.”

On April 13 Dr. Hasan Al-A’raj, Health Director of Hama, who worked in a cave hospital built into the side of a mountain, was killed by a targeted airstrike. He was the only cardiologist left in the province of Hama. Around 12:00 pm, Dr. Al-A’raj left the cave hospital in his car, driving toward the building of the health directorate. He was on his way to conduct interviews with potential paramedics and drivers to operate the newly established emergency response system supported by the Syrian American Medical Association in Hama. About 100 meters from the hospital, his car was attacked by an air-to-surface missile, killing him instantly.

In February 2014 the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 2139 (2014), demanding the safe passage of food and

medical aid to civilians and that “all parties respect the principle of medical neutrality and facilitate free passage to all areas for medical personnel, equipment and transport.” This clearly has not been enforced, and the United States should press its Gulf allies to support enforcement of the resolution by using their influence with the militias and by supporting greater enforcement mechanisms at an international level.

President Obama should enlist support from GCC partners for U.N. powers on investigating attacks on medical personnel in Syria. Notwithstanding the Bahrain regime’s seizure and torture of dozens of its own medics in 2011, some GCC countries might see political benefits in pushing for such a measure as another indicator of their bona fides in wanting a just end to the conflict.

5. Encourage Gulf leaders to contribute more to helping refugees

President Obama should urge the GCC allies to commit publicly to contributing at least their “fair share” amounts toward humanitarian aid efforts, and to provide admission or visa routes to Syrian refugees.

An estimated 4.8 million people have fled Syria to neighboring states, straining the infrastructures of frontline refugee hosting states like Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. In 2014 and 2015, the international community failed to fully meet appeals for humanitarian aid for Syrian refugees. According to Oxfam’s 2016 “fair share” analysis, the Gulf countries should contribute more funding to humanitarian aid efforts to help mitigate the global crisis, alongside other donor states including the United States.

In 2015, the UAE contributed 63 percent of its fair share according to the Oxfam analysis, while Saudi Arabia only met 28 percent of its fair share and Qatar contributed 18 percent of its fair share. The only Gulf state to have surpassed its 2015 fair share is Kuwait, which contributed 554 percent of its fair share in 2015 at \$56.6 million in contributions. For

2016 the estimated total global need is \$9.3 billion to address the unprecedented scale of the refugee crisis, and the fair share for Gulf countries is as follows: \$118.9 million from the UAE; \$333.5 million from Saudi Arabia; \$59.9 million from Qatar; and \$59.4 million from Kuwait. Other Gulf countries including Bahrain should do their part as well.

These countries should also provide humanitarian admission or visa routes to Syrian refugees, and should allow those who are in their countries to extend their stays and bring their families to join them.

Conclusion

Syrian civil society activists are under no illusion that the Gulf leaders are enthusiastic about human rights, and are well aware of the GCC’s abysmal record on attacking, torturing, jailing, and killing human rights activists in their own countries, and that the Obama Administration has done little to press the Gulf countries to improve that record. They also realize that a successful, democratic, politically inclusive, non-sectarian, economically successful Syria would be a threatening advert for the repressive GCC leaders.

But the Syrian war is an expensive drain on Gulf States feeling considerable pain from the slump in oil price and other economic pressures. It is also a source of instability. The more the conflict escalates the greater the threat that extremist groups like ISIS will become even more powerful, and that the Gulf will be dragged more directly into the war on an even larger scale, with even more direct conflict with Iran. A fast and permanent end to the conflict in Syria is in the GCC’s interests.

President Obama should press his Gulf allies at the summit to control their proxy fighters, have them release human rights activists and others in their custody, to cut the inflammatory sectarian rhetoric, and to support a protection mechanism for medical workers. ■

Syria Timeline 2011–2016

COLOR KEY: ■ **EVENTS IN SYRIA** ■ **HUMAN RIGHTS FIRST REPORTS** ■ **U.S. GOVERNMENT ACTIONS/STATEMENTS**

2011

MARCH



Inspired by demonstrations across the region, protestors begin demanding democratic reforms. Security forces retaliate by opening fire and violently dispersing the protests.

MAY 10-18

The United States imposes sanctions on President Bashar al-Assad and senior Syrian government officials.

AUGUST 18

President Obama: “For the sake of the Syrian people the time has come for President Assad to step aside.”

OCTOBER 4

The U.N. Security Council considers a U.S.-supported resolution condemning Assad’s government and threatening sanctions. Russia and China veto it.



2012

JANUARY 23

Jabhat al-Nusra announces its formation as Syria’s official al-Qaeda affiliate.

FEBRUARY 4

Russia and China veto a U.S.-backed U.N. Security Council resolution condemning the violence and calling for a political transition.

FEBRUARY 6

The United States closes its embassy in Damascus, citing security concerns.

FEBRUARY 19

U.S. Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham advocate for indirectly arming the Syrian opposition, saying “people that are being massacred deserve to have the ability to defend themselves.”

FEBRUARY 24

At the Friends of Syrian People meeting in Tunis, Secretary Clinton states: “We view the Syrian National Council as a leading legitimate representative of Syrians seeking peaceful democratic change.”

MAY 7

Parliamentary elections are held but boycotted by the opposition.

AUGUST 20

President Obama: “We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized.”

SEPTEMBER 28

The United States says it will supply Syrian opposition rebels with non-lethal aid.

2013

FEBRUARY 28

Enablers of the Syrian Conflict

MARCH 21

The United Nations investigates the possible use of chemical weapons in Syria.

JUNE 13

Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes: “Our intelligence community assesses that the Assad regime has used chemical weapons, including the nerve agent sarin, on a small scale against the opposition multiple times in the last year.”

JUNE 30

How to Stop Doing Business with Russia’s Arm Exporter

JULY 31

5 Things You Should Know About Chemical Weapons and International Law

AUGUST 21

A chemical weapons attack on a Damascus suburb kills an estimated 1,400 people.

AUGUST 26

Secretary Kerry: “President Obama believes there must be accountability for those who would use the world’s most heinous weapons against the world’s most vulnerable people.”

AUGUST 30

President Obama: “[W]hen over 1,000 people are killed, including hundreds of innocent children... and there is no action, then we’re sending a signal that that international norm doesn’t mean much. And that is a danger to our national security.”

AUGUST 31

President Obama calls for Congress to vote to authorize U.S. military action in Syria.

SEPTEMBER 4

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee approves a resolution authorizing U.S. military action in Syria in a 10-7 vote.

SEPTEMBER 9

Russia proposes that Syria give up its chemical weapons as a compromise in order to avoid U.S. military strikes.

SEPTEMBER 10

President Obama calls on Congress to postpone voting on the authorization of force resolution as he works out an agreement with Russia.

SEPTEMBER 14

The United States and Russia announce the framework of a deal to eliminate Syria’s chemical weapons.

NOVEMBER 21

Refuge at Risk: The Syria Crisis and U.S. Leadership

2014
JANUARY-FEBRUARY

The first two rounds of peace talks attended by the Syrian government and the National Opposition Coalition begin in Geneva. No progress is made.

FEBRUARY 10

Addressing Barriers to the Resettlement of Vulnerable Syrian and Other Refugees

JUNE 3

President Assad wins elections in government-held areas in Syria.

JUNE 23

The last of Syria's chemical weapons are shipped out of the country for their destruction as a result the 2013 U.S.-Russia agreement.

JUNE 10

After four days of fighting ISIS seizes the city of Mosul in Iraq.

JUNE 29

ISIS announces a self-declared caliphate with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi at its head in the territory it controls in Syria and Iraq.

AUGUST 19

American journalist James Foley is the first U.S. citizen executed by ISIS in Syria. President Obama: "The people of Syria, whose story Jim Foley told, do not deserve to live under the shadow of a tyrant or terrorist."

SEPTEMBER-JANUARY

ISIS launches an assault on the city of Kobani. The town's defense becomes symbolic of the fight against the group, eventually involving the Free Syrian Army, coalition airstrikes, and Kurdish Peshmerga fighters.

SEPTEMBER 23


The U.S.-led coalition begins airstrikes against ISIS targets in Syria.

DECEMBER 31

In 2014, 76,000 people die in the Syria conflict, according to the United Nations, making it the deadliest year since the conflict began.

2015
FEBRUARY 17

The United States reaches an agreement with Turkey on training and arming Syrian rebels fighting ISIS.

MAY 21

ISIS takes control of Palmyra, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

SEPTEMBER 30

Russia carries out its first airstrikes in Syria. Its operations target the U.S.-supported non-ISIS opposition.

OCTOBER 8

The United States officially announces the end of its program to train and equip Syrian rebels.

OCTOBER 30

The United States announces it will send special operations forces into Syria to serve in an advisory capacity.

OCTOBER 30-NOVEMBER 14


The United States, Russia, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia initiate Syria peace talks in Vienna which include participation by Iran, but no agreement is reached.

NOVEMBER 19

President Obama, speaking of the Vienna process: "I do not foresee a situation in which we can end the civil war in Syria while Assad remains in power."

DECEMBER 10

Refugee Resettlement—Security Screening Information

DECEMBER 15

At a press conference with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, Secretary of State Kerry: "As I emphasized today, the United States and our partners are not seeking so-called 'regime change,' as it is known in Syria."

2016
FEBRUARY 1-FEBRUARY 3

U.N.-mediated Syria peace talks begin in Geneva, but are swiftly suspended.

FEBRUARY 22

The United States and Russia announce that a partial ceasefire in Syria will start on February 27. The ceasefire does not apply to attacks on U.N.-designated terrorist organizations.

FEBRUARY

The Syrian Refugee Crisis and the Need for U.S. Leadership


MARCH 14-24

U.N. peace talks resume in Geneva. The Syrian regime and opposition delegations agree on 12 common points.

MARCH 14

President Putin announces that Russia will be pulling out the "main part" of its military forces in Syria.

MARCH 24

Secretary of State Kerry after meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Moscow: "We agreed on a target schedule for establishing a framework for a political transition and also a draft constitution, both of which we target by August."

MARCH 28

State Department spokesperson John Kirby: "There's been no change on our part on what the future for Assad and Syria need to be... [W]hat the Syrian people need is a government away from him."

APRIL 13

The next round of Syria peace talks resume in Geneva.



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