

Forum: Security Council
Issue: The situation in Northern Syria
Student Officer: Elif Eren
Position: Deputy Chair

Introduction

The Syrian Civil war had initially escalated in 2011, with the Arab Spring protests growing into rallies against the authoritarian regime of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. With nationwide protests severely backlashing with the government's forceful repression, Syria was gripped by a full-scale civil war by 2012. The spillover impacts of the war entailed mass migrations, namely to bordering states such as Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan, as well as polarization between regional actors with as Russia and Iran supporting the Assad regime, the United States (US) and European states supporting small-scaled opposition groups, and states such as Qatar, Turkey and Iraq financing rebel groups.

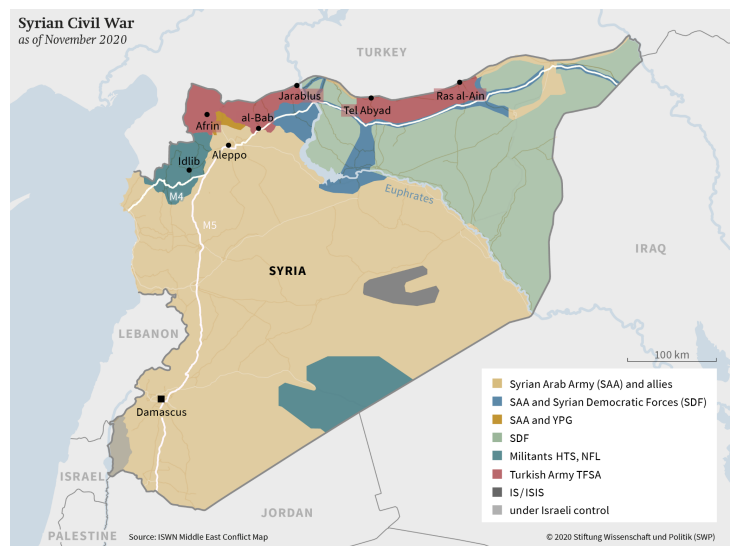


Figure 1: Image of the Turkish-occupied regions in Syria (Turkey's military operations in Syria and Iraq 2022)

As the political and social turmoil enlarged, the rise of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Islamic State (ISIS), and the ascending Kurdish forces (PKK and YPG) combined with the arrival of millions of Syrian refugees who fled from the war to Turkey, prompted the Turkish government to intervene. Hence, the Turkish government as well as the Turkish backed Free Syrian Army (TFSA), through extensive ground combat with the IS and SDF, occupied several regions such as Afrin, al-Bab and Rajo in Northern Syria. The Syrian Interim Government, however, extended its control within the Turkish-occupied regions and initiated partial authority in the region. The regions controlled by the interim government, who claims to be the legitimate authority in the region in opposition to the Syrian government, were deemed as "safe zones". Most of these safe zones hosted several clashes, human rights abuses, and violations of international humanitarian law, including war crimes. Arbitrary detention and extreme ill treatment subjected to civilians

by the TFSA in the entire region have led the international community to intervene. However, the sociopolitical turmoil in the region still persists, as the region is in immediate need of further intervention to resolve ongoing crises (*Syria Archives*).

Definition of Key Terms

Terrorism: According to Cambridge dictionary, terrorism is “*(threats of) violent action for political purposes*” (*Terrorism*)

Safe (buffer) zone: The Cambridge dictionary defines a safe/buffer zone as “*an area intended to separate two armies that are fighting*” (*Buffer zone*)

Interim government: An interim government, otherwise known as a provisional government, is a government that operates for a temporary period of time until a permanent government is settled/established.

War crime: Article 8 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) defines war crime as “*violations of international humanitarian law (treaty or customary law) that incur individual criminal responsibility under international law. As a result, and in contrast to the crimes of genocide and crimes against humanity, war crimes must always take place in the context of an armed conflict, either international or non-international.*” The United Nations (UN) divides the concept of war crime into: “*a) war crimes against persons requiring particular protection; b) war crimes against those providing humanitarian assistance and peacekeeping operations; c) war crimes against property and other rights; d) prohibited methods of warfare; and e) prohibited means of warfare.*” (*United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the responsibility to protect*)

Arab Spring: The Arab Spring is a series of pro-democracy uprisings initiated in 2010, that took place in the Middle East and North Africa. The protests commonly challenged authoritarian regimes. The protests in Syria called for the resignation of the Bashar al-Assad administration.

Civil war: A civil war is a conflict among organized groups that are within the same country. A civil war occasionally stems from possibly “*a fight over control of the government, one side's separatist goals, or some divisive government policy.*” (*Fearon*)

Refugee: According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), a refugee “*are people who have fled war, violence, conflict or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country.*” (*United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*)

Territorial integrity: Under international law, nations should not impose border changes through force, or promote secessionist movements to uphold nations' sovereignty by giving them the right to defend their territory.

Separatist movement: According to Collins Dictionary, "separatist movements are done "organizations and activities within a country involving members of a group of people who want to establish their own separate government or are trying to do so." (*Separatist definition and meaning: Collins english dictionary*)

General Overview

Operation Euphrates Shield (2016)

As a part of Turkey's first military involvement, Turkey launched a campaign against the IS and PKK on July 24th 2015. The war-torn Syrian government due to the brutal civil war in 2011, led such organizations to flourish in the Northern Syrian region, inevitably putting bordering states, namely Turkey, in danger. Thus, the Turkish government had concerns regarding the dangers posed by terror groups alongside severe border security problems as a part of the spillover effects of the war.

The Turkish government revealed that they "*had secured an agreement with the Obama administration to jointly secure a zone in a small part of northern Syria*" (Pike Operation Euphrates Shield). Although United States (US) government officials approved the joint deal, the way in which both state's viewed the idea of the buffer zone still remains to be discrepant.

The zone would extend along a 68-mile stretch of the Turkish border, 40-miles into the Syrian border, near the Euphrates River and into the province of Aleppo (Pike Operation Euphrates Shield). The area, initially controlled by the IS, was in between two regions held by Kurdish separatist militias of the PKK.

On August 24, 2016, Turkey launched its first operations, hitting both IS and PKK oppositions, to prevent them from further moving towards the West. Thus, Operations Euphrates Shield became the first large-scale Turkish cross-border operation in Syria. Despite the many complexities related to difficult terrain and constantly altering "equation of shifting alliances in the civil war" faced by Turkish forces and allied groups from Syria, after 7-months of combat, the areas between Azaz and Jarablus were liberated. (*Türkiye's Euphrates Shield operation – a crucial step for border security*)

Ankara officials revealed that the operation solely had the purpose of fighting terrorist groups. "*We strongly condemn all attempts to present the operation as a struggle with the Syrian Kurds and their military achievements*", Ibrahim Kalyn, a spokesman for the Turkish President, had stated 21 August 2016. (Pike Operation Euphrates Shield) Another purpose of the operation was to reach Al-Bab, the major city lying

between Aleppo and Jarabulus. Al-Bab is considered to be the stronghold of the region, as the Kurdish forces endeavor to establish control over it to extend their control towards the West. According to Erdogan, this operation interfered with the Kurdish forces' aim in achieving such a thing, hence ensuring the border security of Turkey.

The Euphrates Shield operation was concluded by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on March 29, 2017, with Turkey securing a part of northeastern Syria and clearing the IS forces to a large extent. In this sense, the Operation Euphrates Shield was the first step in Turkey's endeavor in dismantling both the IS and PKK from northern Syria and ensuring its security against the spillover impacts of the civil war.

Operation Olive Branch (2018)

“Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim has said Turkey wants to create a 30-kilometer (20-mile) deep ‘secure zone’ in Afrin. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has said the military operation is essential for Turkey's security and Syria's territorial integrity.”
(Press)

The operation aimed to oust 8,000 to 10,000 fighters from the Syrian Kurdish forces (YPG), which is considered to be an extension of the PKK, from Afrin, an area in the northernmost region of Syria, bordering Turkey as illustrated in Figure 2. The YPG, who requested regional autonomy in a completely federalized Syria, controlled nearly 25% of Syria, including areas like Afrin, Kobani and Jazira. The YPG, as the PKK, consider the Kurdish Marxist-nationalist leader Abdullah Ocalan as their guide, who is imprisoned on a Turkish island for initiating a separatist movement.

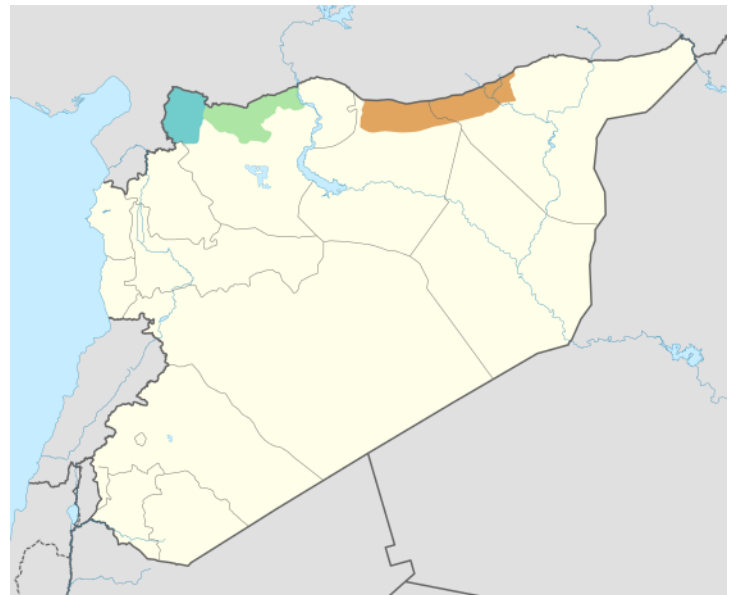


Figure 2: Military operations of Turkey in Syria. Green is the Operation Euphrates Shield, Blue is the Operation Olive Branch, Orange is the Operation Peace Spring

According to Associated Press, *“While Turkey's Western allies, including the US, consider the PKK a terrorist group, Washington has offered direct military and logistical support for Syrian Kurdish militants, known as the Syrian Democratic Forces, to fight IS in Syria. This has infuriated Ankara and strained its relations with Washington even though the two are North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies”*
(Press). Since, leading up to the operation the US military announced that it was going to create a 30000

member border force with Kurdish fighters to maintain security in northern Syria, Turkish leaders claimed that US arms provided to the Syrian Kurds would be used against Turkey, prompting the government to take immediate action (Press).

The region, which is home to over 800,000 civilians who have fled from the civil war and sought refuge, would cause severe humanitarian crises if a conflict were to occur.

The encirclement began on March 1st. On March 13th, the city of Afrin was completely encircled by the TFSA. During this period, Turkish bombardments killed over 50 pro-government fighters and militiamen and injured many while several Turkish fighters were killed by opposing factions. On March 15th and 17th, flyers and artillery were utilized to increase Turkish forces' control. Civilians faced prolonged periods of food shortages, and many tried to flee from the city. After the capture of Afrin, deserted by most of its residents, Turkish-backed fighters then began stealing goods, looting homes and sites. In response to these events, the TFSA units, and the Syrian Interim Government, set up checkpoints in front of the city, and arrested several looters. After the city was captured, the Turkish forces worked on stabilizing the region.

During this operation, the Human Rights Watch (HRW) accused the Turkish government of failing to account for civilian casualties as 26 people were killed, 17 being children. HRW deemed Turkey's offense as a violation of international law. The deputy Middle East director of the HRW stated that *“Turkey and its allies have previously killed and arbitrarily arrested civilians following cross-border military operations in Syria that have resulted in massive displacement”, “Without taking adequate precautions, Turkish forces and their Syrian proxies risk repeating their abuses. The conflict could only worsen the already devastating humanitarian situation for millions of people in northern Syria.”* (Turkey/Syria: Civilians at risk in northern Syria)

Operation Peace Spring (2019)

The Operation Peace Spring had several purposes, which all aligned with previous operations. Firstly, ensuring border security was the highest priority of the government as the PKK, in its 30-year campaign against Turkey, accounted for the killings of over 40000 people, including women and children. Secondly, the Turkish government sought to resettle approximately 2 million people who had fled from the civil war into a new safe zone that would be created in the region. Also, Turkey has expressed their interest in ensuring Syria's territorial integrity. The emerging danger of a possible terror corridor within the Turkish-Syrian border would pose even greater risk for Turkey's regional stability, prompting the government to intervene with another military operation.

The Operation Peace Spring initiated in October 2019. Despite the former US president Donald Trump's

request for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to avoid combat and rather negotiate with the SDF, Erdogan proceeded with the operation. The US imposed limited military sanctions in return, whilst European states condemned Turkey's offense, with strict criticisms received from particularly the French and German governments.

The fighting between Turkish and allied forces with the SDF lasted for approximately 10 days. On October 18th, the US and Turkish government agreed on a ceasefire over Turkey's offense. Thus, the SDF pulled its forces 30 km back from a 20 km long strip along the border, unveiling a Turkish controlled "safe zone" between the towns of Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain.

Current Situation

As of 2023, military presence in the northeast region of Syria persists. Although the Turkish government has targeted the PKK, airstrikes pose great risks to densely populated areas, damaging critical infrastructure and leaving civilians vulnerable. Fuel and food shortages, cuts, work and school disruptions are leading to mass displacements, and many non governmental organizations (NGOs) are working towards ensuring humanitarian assistance in the region. The fight against the IS and PKK still persists, and the lack of diplomatic negotiations are raising major concerns for both Turkey and Syria's internal security. Turkey and Syria, alongside Russia are involved in trilateral talks. While a decisive conclusion is yet to have been reached, it is expected that Moscow will host a series of further diplomatic negotiations throughout 2023.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

Turkey

Turkey's primary concern is to ensure border security and stability. The government has adopted a firm stance against terrorist organizations, namely the PKK, who have been posing severe threats to civilians and the integrity of the government for over 30 years.

As one of the states that border Syria, Turkey hosts 3,000,000 Syrian refugees. The government, under heavy economic and social burden of such a large-scale crisis, has been decisive in its fight against terrorist organizations, with a desire to occupy the northern region of Syria to resettle refugees.

However, as mentioned by the HRW, the government's failure in accounting for civilian safety during the Operations Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch and Peace Spring, followed by the latest casualties on the border prompted many condemnations by the international community. Amnesty International had stated that *"Turkish military forces and a coalition of Turkey-backed Syrian armed groups have displayed a shameful disregard for civilian life, carrying out serious violations and war crimes, including summary killings*

*and unlawful attacks that have killed and injured civilians, during the offensive into northeast Syria”
(Damning evidence of war crimes by Turkish forces and allies in Syria)*

Syria

There are several different reactions within Syria. The Syrian government under president al-Assad has called the Turkish government to withdraw from the region, as they perceive Turkish and Turkish-backed forces to be a threat to the territorial integrity of the country. However, as the civil war prompted a polarization between the repressive al-Assad regime and government opposing groups, oppositions have favored Turkish interventions. This has further deepened the polarization, prompting the al-Assad regime to adopt a rigid stance against the Turkish government.

In bilateral talks overseen by Russia, president al-Assad has strictly requested the Turkish governments to negotiate regarding the finalization of the Turkish occupation in northern Syria. Talks progress, and a conclusive decision is yet to have been made.

While Syrian refugees continue to flee from Syria, the refugee crisis alongside several humanitarian crises continue to put a social and economic burden on the government. Although still inadequate, the government, through collaborations with relevant NGOs, UN bodies and intergovernmental organizations, is striving to ensure the basic provision of its citizens, whilst not adequately addressing the worsening refugee crisis.

Russia

During the civil war, Russia was involved in the conflict alongside the al-Assad regime. The Olive Branch operation mainly targeted areas controlled by the PKK, which were backed by Russia. Russia initially attempted to break the deal between the PKK and the Assad regime as it tried to convince the PKK to retreat and leave the region to the Assad regime’s control. PKK’s reluctance prompted the Turkish operation as they saw the opportunity to kick out the PKK from the Western Euphrates (*Turkey and Russia in Syrian War: Hostile friendship*).

It is stated that “*a strategic partnership (between Turkey and Russia) will be difficult to forge and consolidate as long as significant differences persist in the geopolitical orientations and political outlooks of the individual states.*” (Onis and Yilmaz).

Today, in 2023, Moscow has hosted several unannounced and official talks between Syrian and Turkish officials, with the Russian officials overlooking these talks. These trilateral talks primarily focus on the refugee crisis and efforts for a joint struggle against terrorist organizations. Moscow, throughout

2023, will continue to host more constructive talks in both parties' endeavor in achieving regional peace and stability.

United States of America

The US and Turkey have had unstable ties throughout this turmoil. According to the Middle East Policy Council "*U.S. military support for the People's Protection Units (YPG), the Syrian branch of the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), has been an enduring problem for the U.S. relationship with Turkey*" (Gürçay and Intern at Middle East Policy Council). al-Assad opposition factions were mainly backed by the US, and the US, correspondingly to Turkey, strove to create a buffer zone in Northern Syria and limit the activities of the IS. However, the US's border force in Northern Syria prompted discrepancies between the two governments, as former president Donald Trump imposed limited sanctions on Turkey to pause its ground combat.

Over the course of the crisis, Trump decided to completely withdraw its troops, however this withdrawal never materialized due to the severe backlash faced due to the reactions of the US national security. US troops, fighting against the IS, also played a large part in humanitarian threats and human rights abuses. The US took back the US's initial support to Turkey and decided to send large amounts of military and financial support for its fight against the IS instead of assisting Turkey in their endeavor to do so.

As of now, the US is requesting the creation of a buffer zone and the radicalization of the IS, while being involved in trilateral negotiations between Syria, Turkey and Russia.

TFSA

TFSA is a Syrian opposition force backed by the Turkish government since 2016, in its effort to combat the Syrian government forces and Kurdish militias. The TFSA has had considerable involvement in many military operations in Northern Syria, such as but not limited to the Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch operations. Their primary purpose is to clear Kurdish militias from the region and establish a buffer zone to protect Turkey's borders. The forces have also been accused of many human rights violations, extrajudicial killings and kidnappings.

PKK

PKK has been active in the region since the 1980s and has used the Syrian Kurdish region as a base for its

mostly all its operations. The organization's role in the issue has been quite controversial, as some groups view PKK and its affiliates (such as People's Protection Units, YPG) as legitimate Kurdish liberation movements, while others view it as terrorist organizations. The organization and its affiliates have specifically gained the support of Western powers like the United States, however the Turkish government has accused the group of being a terrorist organization leading to many military operations to counter PKK's influence in the region and prevent YPG from establishing an autonomous Kurdish region. The many military operations that took place have led to many killings and the displacement of civilians, however a clear understanding of solution steps are yet to be achieved.

Human Rights Watch (HRW)

HRW's primary role in northern Syria has been to monitor, document, and report on human rights abuses and to advocate for justice for victims. Throughout the operations, the international non-governmental organization has reported extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, torture, use of chemical weapons and many more human rights abuses in the region. The organization has called the international community to hold perpetrators accountable through international mechanisms like the International Criminal Court.

SDF

Established in 2015 with the support of the United States of America, SDF's role in Northern Syria has been to fight against the Islamic State and provide security in the region. However, the SDF's connection with the YPG and its alleged ties to the PKK have led to tensions with the Turkish government and raised concerns about the group's commitment to rule of law. The forces have been accused of committing several human rights abuses, including the forced displacement of civilians and the recruitment of child soldiers. However, the forces have denied these accusations and stated that they are fully committed to protecting civilians.

Timeline of Events

17 July 2000	Bashar al-Assad became president of Syria, succeeding his father Hafez.
2010	Arab Spring initiates in North Africa and spreads to the Middle East
2011	Syrian Civil War starts

24 July 2015	Turkey's initiation of a campaign against the IS and PKK
24 August 2016	Operation Euphrates Shield initiates
9 December 2016	The General Assembly addresses the situation in the Syrian Arab Republic (A/RES/71/248)
29 March 2017	Operation Euphrates Shield ends
13 March 2018	Afrin is completely encircled as a part of Operation Olive Branch
9 October 2019	Operation Peace Spring initiates
18 October 2019	Turkey and US agree on a ceasefire
13-14 October 2021	President Tayyip Erdogan issues an ultimatum as tensions arise in Northern Syria
12 July 2022	Security Council (SC) resolution (S/RES/2642) adopted at its 9089th meeting
November and December 2022	Ground combat in Northern Syria resumes
December 2022 - January 2023	Peace talks take place in Moscow
9 January 2023	Security Council (SC) resolution (S/RES/2672) adopted at its 9237th meeting to provide humanitarian assistance in the region

UN Involvement

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has passed many recent resolutions regarding cross-border

aid mechanisms and methods to alleviate the worsening security concerns in the northwestern area of Syria. In 2021, the UNSC discussed Syria for 12 times, and for the past decade, over 27 resolutions have been adopted for the issue. Although the issue still remains unresolved, such resolutions have assisted large groups of people by ensuring the provision of continuous humanitarian assistance.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) urges 334.4 million USD to reach children in Syria, with funding requirements consisting of water, hygiene, sanitation, health and education. Furthermore, the UN-led Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) for 2021-2022 requires 5.8 billion USD to support those who are seeking refuge. Also, the UN Human Rights Council is investigating any and all international law violations in Syria. (*United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the responsibility to protect*) Such involvements are alleviating the impacts of the Syrian civil war, namely the refugee crisis, which the latest escalations in northern Syria have also partly stemmed from.

Relevant UN Documents

Adopted by the Security Council at its 9237th meeting, Security Council Resolution, (9 January 2023, S/RES/2672)

Adopted by the Security Council at its 9089th meeting, Security Council Resolution, (12 July 2022, S/RES/2642)

- Both resolutions adopted by the Security Council primarily focus on cross-border aid mechanisms and safety measures in response to the most recent concerns regarding security in the region.

Statement by the President of the Security Council (16 December 2015, S/PRST/2015/25)

The situation in the Syrian Arab Republic, General Assembly (9 December 2016, A/RES/71/248)

Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

The UN has been actively collaborating with relevant states, NGOs and IGOs to support those who are vulnerable due to the latest escalations. Relevant UN bodies and resolutions prioritize providing reasonable living conditions for Syrian civilians whilst mitigating the refugee crisis. For instance, resolutions 2672 and 2642 of the UNSC both focus on the aftermath of the November 2022 escalations in the region, while aiding security and safety operations between the Turkish-Syrian border. Apart from the UN, organizations like the European Union have accumulated over 5 billion Euros of humanitarian assistance for those who have been

influenced by the latest escalations. The civil war had also decimated nearly all of the social services of the state, hence the financial and social assistance provided by other member states and relevant bodies were of great importance. Although not to resolve the issue, many countries are hosting millions of Syrian refugees to mitigate the impacts of the turmoil on Syrian society. By providing temporary residency for over 6 million refugees, the state is able to ensure a more stable pattern of recovery after the consequences of the civil war and military operations.

Furthermore, Moscow and several other cities have hosted several talks between Turkey, Syria, and Russia, with the US joining a number of negotiations during 2022 and 2023. A decisive conclusion is yet to have been reached; however, such talks have shown effectiveness as they prioritize diplomacy rather than further destabilizing the region and hence escalating the crises.

Possible Solutions

Northern Syria is a highly volatile region, with the presence of a variety of terrorist organizations, mainly the IS and PKK. Although there are many comprehensive reports, resolutions and statements made towards providing sustainable living conditions for Syrians, there are only few official and effective past attempts in addressing the prevalence of terrorist organizations. Although solutions in the context of humanitarian assistance are of great cruciality, delegates must focus on tackling this multifaceted issue from a variety of perspectives.

It is clear that methods involving combat are ineffective and are clearly against the benefit of all. Hence, delegates must focus on finding diplomatic solutions. Progressing already existing bilateral and trilateral talks may mitigate the rising tensions among states.

Cutting financial support for aforementioned terrorist organizations, such as the US's support for the YPG, may act as a crucial step in limiting the capabilities of such organizations. As ensuring diplomatic and peaceful negotiations with recognized terrorist organizations like the IS are of great difficulty, delegates must strive to alleviate their consequential influence on the region by strengthening security operations. It is important to note that, while doing so, the possibility of further destabilizing the region should be taken into account. Several supposed preventive security measures have backlashed with further aggression (ex: US's military actions prompting the Turkish government to initiate Operation Olive branch), hence it is important to note that such operations should be carried out diligently, with the monitoring of neutral organizations like the UN.

It is important to note that supporting war-torn Syria's territorial integrity must be the utmost priority of delegates as it is simply the only way for the state to establish a firm opposition to terrorist organizations who are threatening millions of Syrians. Possible political transitions, and the discussion of security and

resettlement may be among the many points delegates may touch upon whilst ensuring the best interest of the state.

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