



The Syrian Civil War Twelve Years On: Can There Be a Constructive Role for Greece?

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Summary

- Continual and ever-growing foreign involvement led to the internationalization of the armed conflict and turned Syria into a battleground for the strategic competition of several powers.
- The Kremlin has long viewed Hafez and Bashar al-Assad as indispensable partners in the Middle East and has repeatedly offered its diplomatic and military support in an attempt to achieve its own strategic objectives.
- Given the destabilizing effects the unending Syrian crisis has had on Middle Eastern and Eastern Mediterranean security, Greece maintains a profound interest in the resolution of the conflict.
- Greece appointed a Special Envoy for Syria in May 2020 with a view to reinvigorating its policy vis-à-vis the Syrian crisis.
- Greece's successful re-engagement with key Arab countries and improved relations with other regional actors could pave the way for a more prominent Greek role in Syria.
- This could entail reinforcing its diplomatic cooperation with the EU Delegation to Syria, leading the EU humanitarian relief effort following the devastating earthquakes that hit Syria on 6 February 2023, and formulating a realistic and forward-looking strategy for the future of the Syrian people, including provisions for the voluntary repatriation of refugees and the protection of minority rights.

Syria: From Autocracy to Civil War

Over the past five decades, Syria has been subject to a brutal autocratic regime at odds with the vast majority of its citizens.

Since its independence in 1946, the Syrian Arab Republic (hereafter referred to as Syria) has been a Sunni Arab majority nation with considerable ethnic and religious heterogeneity.¹ Political scientists and historians have regularly pointed out the dominant political role played by its [Alawi minority](#).² In particular, since Hafez al-Assad seized power in late 1970, most of the high-ranking positions within the political establishment and security apparatus were given to Alawites.³ Over the past five decades, Syria has been subject to a [brutal autocratic regime](#) at odds with the vast majority of its citizens. The massacre committed in [Hama](#) in February 1982 is a striking example of the regime's brutal practices; costing thousands of lives, it remains one of the most painful episodes in Syrian history.⁴

The chain of popular uprisings and anti-government protest movements that spread across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in early 2011 and became known collectively as the ["Arab Spring"](#) marked a turning point for several countries, including Syria.⁵ The root causes of this unprecedented wave of enduring unrest can be found in a wide range of political, economic and social factors, varying from the dearth of reliable power-sharing political institutions and authoritarian practices to government corruption, [unequal opportunities](#) and financial woes.⁶

The first mass upheavals flared in late December 2010 in [Tunisia](#). A fruit peddler named Mohamed Bouazizi quarreled fiercely with a group of market inspectors, who foreclosed on his merchandise.⁷ Shortly afterwards, he headed to the local government office to express his grievances.⁸ The disinterest of the local authorities led the young despondent man to [self-immolate](#). When he passed away 18 days later,⁹ his death gave rise to a series of demonstrations against the longstanding authoritarian regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who was forced to leave the country on [14 January 2011](#).

On 15 March 2011, thousands of Syrian citizens took the streets to protest the imprisonment and torture of fifteen juveniles for [anti-regime graffiti](#) in Daraa, a town in southwestern Syria.¹⁰ The protestors' principal demands were for democratic and

¹ Samer N. Abboud, *Syria*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), pp. 6-8; Itamar Rabinovich, "The Compact Minorities and the Syrian State, 1918-1945," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (October 1979): pp. 697-698. For more on the concept of ethnic heterogeneity and its interrelationship with the onset of civil wars, see Nicholas Sambanis, "Do Ethnic and Nonethnic Civil Wars Have the Same Causes?: A Theoretical and Empirical Inquiry (Part 1)," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (June 2001): pp. 259-282.

² Heiko Wimmen, *Syria's Path from Civic Uprising to Civil War* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 2016), pp. 6-9. Available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CEIP_CP290_Wimmen_Final.pdf; Jomana Qaddour, "Unlocking the Alawite Conundrum in Syria," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (Fall 2013): pp. 67-78.

³ Daniel Pipes, "The Alawi Capture of Power in Syria," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (October 1989): pp. 438-442.

⁴ Robert M. Danin, "Remembering the Hama Massacre," *Council on Foreign Relations*, February 2, 2012. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/blog/remembering-hama-massacre>.

⁵ Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2012), pp. 9-10; Fouad Ajami, "The Arab Spring at One: A Year of Living Dangerously," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 2 (March/April 2012): pp. 56-65.

⁶ Eva Bellin, "Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring," *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (January 2012): pp. 135-139; Katerina Dalacoura, "The 2011 Uprisings in the Arab Middle East: Political Change and Geopolitical Implications," *International Affairs*, Vol. 88, No. 1 (January 2012): pp. 63-79.

⁷ Jean-Pierre Filiu, *The Arab Revolution: Ten Lessons from the Democratic Uprising* (London: Hurst, 2011), pp. 15-21.

⁸ Asef Bayat, *Revolutionary Life: The Everyday of the Arab Spring* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), pp. 80-85.

⁹ Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs: A History*, revised and updated edition (New York: Basic Books, 2017), pp. 1-3.

¹⁰ Kareem Fahim and Hwaida Saad, "A faceless teenage refugee who helped ignite Syria's war," *The New York Times*, February 8, 2013. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/09/world/middleeast/a-faceless-teenage-refugee-who-helped-ignite-syrias-war.html>.

economic reforms and the release of political prisoners.¹¹ The regime's ruthless response triggered a [vicious cycle of violence](#) that continues to haunt Syria today.¹²

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The appearance of organized armed opposition groups and rebel militias can be considered the starting point of the armed insurgency chapter of the Syrian conflict.¹³ The [Free Syrian Army \(FSA\)](#) was established on 29 July 2011 with the aim of ousting Bashar al-Assad from power.¹⁴ As the military violence between the warring parties escalated relentlessly, what had begun as predominantly peaceful protests degenerated into one of the most [disastrous civil wars](#) of recent decades, signifying the start of a humanitarian tragedy without precedent in Syrian history.¹⁵

The International Ramifications of the Syrian Civil War

Continual and ever-growing foreign involvement led to the internationalization of the armed conflict and turned Syria into a battleground for the geopolitical antagonism of several powers.

Several [external actors](#) have been backing the conflicting parties in various ways since almost the start of the Syrian crisis.¹⁶ Continual and ever-growing foreign involvement led to the internationalization of the armed conflict and turned Syria into a battleground for the geopolitical antagonism of several powers.¹⁷

The enduring cooperative relationship between Syria and Russia dates back to the Cold War era.¹⁸ The Kremlin has long viewed Hafez and Bashar al-Assad as indispensable partners in the Middle East and has repeatedly offered its diplomatic and military support with a view to achieving its own strategic objectives.¹⁹ In late September 2015, Russia proceeded with a direct [military intervention](#) in Syria in order to keep Bashar al-Assad in power.²⁰ The support of Russia's forces has proved of crucial importance in allowing the Assad regime to recapture the bulk of Syria, including cities of great strategic and symbolic significance, such as the [Aleppo in late 2016](#). By providing support to pro-regime forces, [Russia](#) has been able to consolidate its presence in the country and increase its influence throughout the region.²¹ Moscow has long regarded both the [naval facility in the city of Tartus](#) and the Khmeimim air base near the city of Lattakia as strategically important for its power projection capabilities in the Middle East.²² It should be borne in mind that Tartus is the only port that provides the Russian Navy with access to the Mediterranean.²³

¹¹ International Crisis Group, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VII): The Syrian Regime's Slow-Motion Suicide*, Middle East/North Africa Report No. 109 (Brussels and Damascus: ICG, 13 July 2011), pp. 4-6.

¹² Nikolaos van Dam, *Destroying A Nation: The Civil War in Syria* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), pp. 79-80.

¹³ Roger Petersen, "Roles and Mechanisms of Insurgency and the Conflict in Syria," in *The Political Science of Syria's War* (Washington, DC: Institute for Middle East Studies, December 2013), pp. 18-23. Available at: <https://pomeps.org/political-science-and-syrias-war>.

¹⁴ Charles Lister, *The Free Syrian Army: A Decentralized Insurgent Brand*, Analysis Paper No. 26 (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, November 2016), pp. 5-8.

¹⁵ Adam Baczko, Gilles Dorronsoro and Arthur Quesnay, *Civil War in Syria: Mobilization and Competing Social Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 84-94.

¹⁶ Heiko Wimmen and Muriel Asseburg, *Civil War in Syria: External Actors and Interests as Drivers of Conflict*, SWP Comment 43 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, December 2012), pp. 3-4.

¹⁷ Benedetta Berti and Jonathan Paris, "Beyond Sectarianism: Geopolitics, Fragmentation and the Syrian Civil War," *Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (January 2014): pp. 26-31. Available at: <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/beyond-sectarianism-geopolitics-fragmentation-and-the-syrian-civil-war/>.

¹⁸ Samuel Charap, Elina Treyger and Edward Geist, *Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), pp. 10-11.

¹⁹ Caitlin A. Buckley, "Learning from Libya, Acting in Syria," *Journal of Strategic Security*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Summer 2012): pp. 81-82.

²⁰ Steven A. Cook, *Major Power Rivalry in the Middle East*, Discussion Paper Series on Managing Global Disorder No. 2 (New York, NY: Council on Foreign Relations, March 2021), pp. 4-9. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/report/major-power-rivalry-middle-east>.

²¹ Seth G. Jones, "Russian Goals and Strategy," in *Moscow's War in Syria*, ed. Seth G. Jones (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 2020), pp. 8-14. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/moscows-war-syria>.

²² Marc Pierini, *Russia's Posture in the Mediterranean: Implications for NATO and Europe* (Brussels: Carnegie Europe, June 2021), pp. 2-3.

²³ Roy Allison, "Russia and Syria: Explaining the Alignment with a Regime in Crisis," *International Affairs*, Vol. 89, No. 4 (July 2013): pp. 805-809.

It should be borne in mind that Tartus is the only port that provides the Russian Navy with access to the Mediterranean.

The close ties that Bashar al-Assad has maintained with both Russia and Iran, and their ever-increasing presence in the country, are a cause of major concern to Washington.

The United States appeared to adopt a prudent approach with regard to an intervention in the Syrian conflict.²⁴ As early as August 2011, President Barack Obama argued that Bashar al-Assad should ["step aside"](#) and eventually enable the process of democratization in Syria.²⁵ The U.S. President clarified in August 2012 that the use of chemical weapons would constitute [a "red line"](#) for his Administration.²⁶ On 21 August 2013, the Syrian forces launched a rocket attack using the chemical nerve agent sarin that killed Syrian civilians in the southwestern suburb of [Ghouta](#) near Damascus.²⁷ However, President Obama could not secure the congressional or broad public approval needed to proceed with a decisive military intervention in Syria.²⁸

Additionally, the United States acknowledged the crucial role the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) had to play in the fight against the jihadist threat posed by the self-proclaimed "Islamic State" (also known as ISIS/ISIL or Daesh) and decided to support their efforts by providing weaponry and air support.²⁹ The close ties that Bashar al-Assad has maintained with both [Russia and Iran](#), and their ever-increasing presence in the country, are a cause of major concern to Washington.³⁰ As a result, successive U.S. Administrations have taken steps to contain the influence of Moscow and [Tehran](#) in both Syria and the wider region.³¹

Turkey has identified the armed conflict in Syria and its enduring implications as an issue that bears directly upon its own national security and regional interests.³² The Turkish Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi - AKP) government in Ankara has attached considerable importance to preventing any further reinforcement of the [Kurdish Democratic Unity Party](#) (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat – PYD) and its military wing, the People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel - YPG), and its control over the provinces bordering Turkey in northern Syria.³³

²⁴ Marc Lynch, "Obama and the Middle East: Rightsizing the U.S. Role," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 5 (September/October 2015): pp. 18-27.

²⁵ Scott Wilson and Joby Warrick, "Assad must go, Obama says," *The Washington Post*, August 18, 2011. Available at:

https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/assad-must-go-obama-says/2011/08/18/gIQAelheOJ_story.html.

²⁶ Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine: The U.S. President talks through his hardest decisions about America's role in the World," *The Atlantic*, April 2016 Issue. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/-1>.

²⁷ Sarah Almukhtar, "Most Chemical Attacks in Syria Get Little Attention. Here Are 34 Confirmed Cases," *The New York Times*, April 12, 2018. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/04/13/world/middleeast/syria-chemical-attacks-maps-history.html>.

²⁸ Jasmine Gani, "US Policy Towards the Syrian Conflict under Obama: Strategic Patience and Miscalculation," in *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, ed. Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), pp. 217-219.

²⁹ Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), pp. 211-212.

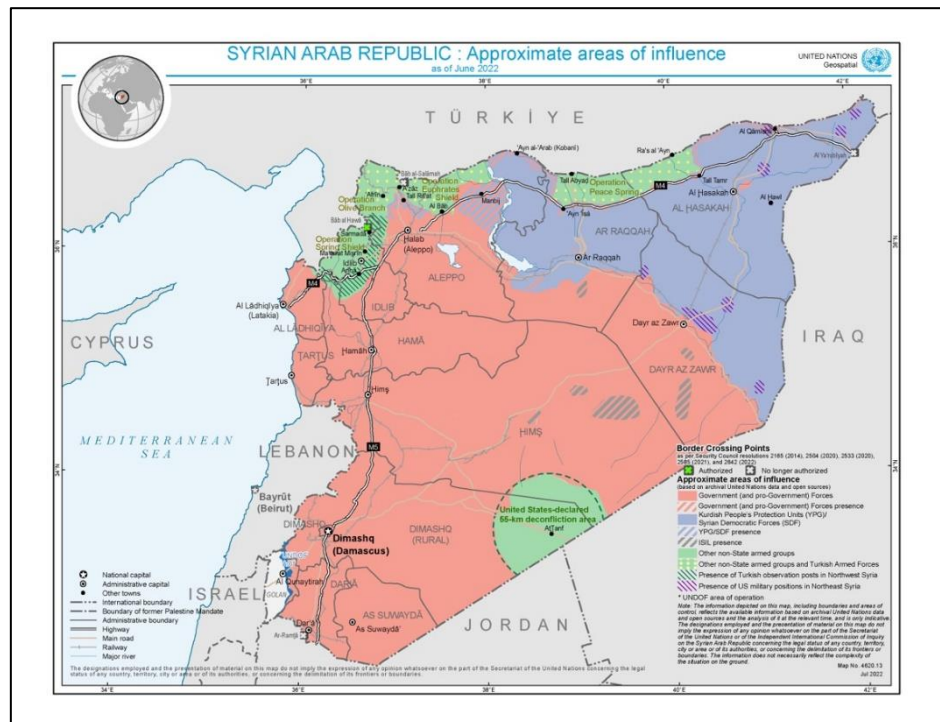
³⁰ Matthew D. Crosston, "Cold War and Ayatollah Residues: Syria as a Chessboard for Russia, Iran, and the United States," *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (Winter 2014): pp. 107-110.

³¹ Robert S. Ford, *The Syrian Civil War: A New Stage, But Is It the Final One?*, Policy Paper 8 (Washington, DC: Middle East Institute, April 2019), pp. 9-10. Available at: https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2019-04/Ford_The_Syrian_Civil_War.pdf

³² Francesco Siccardi, *How Syria Changed Turkey's Foreign Policy* (Brussels: Carnegie Europe, September 2021), pp. 6-10. Available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Siccardi_-_Turkey_Syria-V3.pdf

³³ Salim Çevik, *Turkey's Military Operations in Syria and Iraq*, SWP Comment 37 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, May 2022), pp. 1-8.

Map 1: Approximate Areas of Influence in the Syrian Arab Republic



Source: United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic

Latest Key Developments

Given the destabilizing effects the unending Syrian crisis has had on Middle Eastern and Eastern Mediterranean security, Greece maintains a profound interest in the resolution of the conflict.

On 21 December 2022, Geir O. Pedersen, the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, provided a comprehensive and graphic description of the dramatic living conditions currently facing Syrians in his [latest briefing](#) to the UN Security Council after a visit to Damascus:

“The needs of the Syrian people have reached the worst levels since the conflict began, against a backdrop of further economic collapse and ongoing violence. No tangible progress has been made in advancing the political process. And global geopolitics made a difficult situation even more complicated. This is a bleak picture.”³⁴

Just before the end of 2022, there was an important development in Syria’s strained bilateral relations with Turkey. On December 28, Hulusi Akar, Turkey’s Minister for National Defense, [travelled to Moscow](#) to meet with Ali Mahmoud Abbas and Sergei Shoigu, his Syrian and Russian counterparts.³⁵ The meeting was also attended by Hakan Fidan, Director of the Turkish National Intelligence Organization (Millî İstihbarat Teşkilatı

³⁴ Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary General for Syria, “UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir O. Pedersen Briefing to the Security Council,” December 21, 2022. Available at: <https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/security-council-briefings-text>.

³⁵ Laure Stephan and Benoît Vitkine, “Syria and Turkey Warm Relations with First Official Meeting,” *Le Monde*, December 30, 2022. Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/12/30/syria-and-turkey-warm-relations-with-first-official-meeting_6009760_4.html.

– MIT), and Ali Mamlouk, Chief of Syrian Intelligence.³⁶ This [meeting marked the first time](#) that contact between Turkey and Syria had taken place at such a high level since the outbreak of the civil war in Syria.³⁷ One might also say that this development in its [relationship with Syria](#) could have notable implications for Turkish domestic politics and for Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's re-election chances in the forthcoming presidential elections.³⁸

Greece's Growing Interest in the Syrian Civil War

There is no doubt that, particularly since 2019, the Middle East has attracted renewed attention on the Greek foreign policy agenda. Multilateral diplomatic initiatives such as the [Philia forum](#) highlight Greece's reinforced commitment to promoting peace and stability in the region.³⁹ Given the destabilizing effects the unending Syrian crisis has had on Middle Eastern and Eastern Mediterranean security, Greece maintains a profound interest in the resolution of the conflict. It is also worth noting that a significant part of the Greek diplomatic activity in the region is aimed at promoting the rights and concerns of the Christian communities in Syria and beyond.⁴⁰

Greece's successful re-engagement with key Arab countries and improved relations with other regional actors could pave the way for a more prominent Greek role in Syria.

With a view to reinvigorating Greece's policy vis-à-vis the Syrian crisis, a [Special Envoy for Syria](#) was appointed in May 2020. Additionally, in his speech at the 5th Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region, the Greek Minister for Foreign Affairs, Nikos Dendias, reiterated that "Greece [...] is fully committed to the efforts for reaching a political solution to the Syrian crisis", while emphasizing that "sustainable peace and stability can only be achieved through an inclusive [Syrian-led and owned political solution](#) that will respond to the concerns of all segments of Syrian society."⁴¹

To date, consecutive rounds of negotiations have failed to bring about a peaceful resolution to the armed conflict in Syria. Greece's successful re-engagement with [key Arab countries](#) and improved relations with other regional actors could pave the way for a more prominent Greek role in Syria. Playing a constructive role in facilitating the ongoing peace initiatives on the basis of [UN Security Council Resolution 2254](#) can be considered to contribute substantially to the implementation of the second strategic axis of the 2022-2025 Strategic Plan published by the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs: namely, to 'enhance the country's international standing within the EU and around the world.'⁴² While the appointment in May 2020 of a Special Envoy for Syria has not yet led to any profound advancement of Greece's role in the Syrian conflict, Greece should continue to

³⁶ Ruth Michaelson, "Turkish and Syrian Defense and Security Officials Meet for First Time in a Decade," *The Guardian*, December 29, 2022. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/dec/29/turkish-and-syrian-defence-and-security-officials-meet-for-first-time-in-decade>.

³⁷ Ezgi Akin, "Turkish, Syrian Defense Chiefs Hold Landmark Meeting in Russia," *Al-Monitor*, December 28, 2022. Available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/12/turkish-syrian-defense-chiefs-hold-landmark-meeting-russia>.

³⁸ Paul Taylor, "Erdoğan Plots War, Crackdown to Save his Skin," *POLITICO*, January 2, 2023. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/recep-tayyip-erdogan-turkey-election-2023-plots-war-opponents-crackdown/>.

³⁹ Ioannis N. Grigoriadis and Gerasimos Tsourapas, "Understanding Greece's New Foreign Policy Towards the Arab World: Instrumentalization, Balancing and Emerging Opportunities," *Mediterranean Politics*, November 2022, pp. 16-17. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13629395.2022.2148193?src=>.

⁴⁰ Sean Mathews, "Athens Reaches Out to Syria via Greek Orthodox Community," *Al-Monitor*, October 20, 2020. Available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/10/greece-renew-relations-syria-assad-christians-minority.html>.

⁴¹ Hellenic Republic - Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikos Dendias Participates in the Ministerial Segment of the 5th Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region," March 30, 2021. Available at: https://www.mfa.gr/images/docs/anakoinoseis/2021/20210330_FMDendias_intervention_Syria.pdf.

⁴² Hellenic Republic - Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Strategic Plan 2022-2025," July 2022. Available at: https://www.mfa.gr/images/docs/strategic_plan_2022.pdf.

pursue an active Middle Eastern policy and undertake essential initiatives with the capacity to deliver tangible results.

Greece could seek a more proactive role in the formulation of EU policies vis-à-vis Syria.

Recommendations for Greek Policy vis-à-vis the Syrian Crisis

There are several situations where Greece's active involvement could make a positive difference. Besides offering its unwavering support to the ongoing efforts of the UN Special Envoy for Syria and the parallel efforts of the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Greece could seek a more proactive role in the formulation of EU policies vis-à-vis Syria. This could entail reinforcing its diplomatic cooperation with the Delegation of the European Union to Syria, leading the EU humanitarian relief effort following the devastating earthquakes that hit Syria on 6 February 2023, and formulating a realistic and forward-looking strategy on the future of the Syrian people, including provisions for the voluntary repatriation of refugees and the protection of minority rights. There are ways in which Greece can contribute to the protection of both Greek and European interests in Syria and the Middle East, especially in light of Russia's regional policies and the threat of the confrontation between the West and Russia in the Middle East proliferating.

Greece could lead a European campaign for the protection of Syria's religious and cultural diversity, to which the Syrian civil war has dealt a huge blow.

Greece could lead a European campaign for the protection of Syria's religious and cultural diversity, to which the Syrian civil war has dealt a huge blow. Its primary focus could be on supporting the rehabilitation of Syrian ethnic and religious minorities which have suffered displacement during the civil war, and on seeking ways to protect them against ethnic and sectarian violence. Moreover, Greece could stress the role of cultural diplomacy and the importance of safeguarding cultural heritage in wartime, in accordance with the [UN Security Council Resolution 2347](#). Within this framework, Greece could take full advantage of its membership (2021-2025) of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee to propose measures for the protection and conservation of cultural heritage sites in Syria, support the restoration of those sites that have suffered damage during the war, and also take measures against the smuggling of antiquities out of Syria. In that respect, special attention should be paid to protecting, conserving and restoring the Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine and Christian cultural heritage which bears testimony to the ancient historic bonds between the Greek and Syrian peoples.

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