**The Syrian conflict and international support for rebel groups**

* The International Crisis Group is an independent, non-partisan conflict prevention organisation. Our aim is to sound an early alert, help prevent the outbreak of violent conflict, propose ways to prevent conflict escalation and bring deadly conflicts to an end through negotiated settlements, and give recommendations to political actors on how to implement effective post-conflict stabilisation and reconstruction – to secure the peace and prevent the recurrence of conflict.
* Crisis Group conducts research “in the field”, meaning in or near areas of armed conflict, with primary stakeholders and decision makers. These can include a given country’s political leaders and military commanders, rebel officials and commanders, officials in international organisations, and representatives of other governments.
* Crisis Group has covered the political situation in Syria since the establishment of its Middle East program in 2001, including through a Damascus-based analyst when circumstances permitted. Crisis Group has continued to cover the situation in Syria since 2011. We have deployed analysts and consultants in areas held by the Syrian government, rebel groups, as well as the YPG. When we lack direct access, we contact stakeholders by other means, outside Syria, or by proxy.
* The situation in Syria since the civil war broke out has been extremely fluid on both the regime and the rebel side. Both sides have garnered external military support, which has aggravated the conflict. Syria’s conflict actors can roughly be grouped as follows:
* **The regime**, which has benefited from direct military support from Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, as well as other Iran-backed foreign militias (and Russian private military contractors), while its own forces were joined on the ground by home-grown paramilitary groups.

* **Rebel groups**, which have received military (lethal and/or non-lethal), financial and other forms of assistance from Turkey, the Gulf states, the U.S. and European countries. Because of how support was channelled to individual commanders and factions, this assistance likely exacerbated the rebel scene’s already severe fragmentation.
* **Jihadist groups**, such as the Islamic State (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda (represented by local affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, later renamed Hei’at Tahrir al-Sham). They initially received funding from private sources, particularly in the Gulf, but later seemed to sustain themselves through local, war economy-related revenue generation and by tapping into external flows of military and civilian support for the opposition. They also were able to move through Turkey and transport goods cross-border with relatively few restrictions for some time.
* **The Syrian affiliate of the PKK**, known as the YPG on the military side and PYD on the political side, which later evolved into a YPG-controlled umbrella group called the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and has received direct military support from the U.S. and France as part of the international coalition against ISIS. The YPG allegedly received material support from the regime early in the conflict, and the regime has subsidised areas of YPG control by continuing to pay salaries and maintain functioning civil services.
* In this whirl of fighting groups, it is hard to find “good guys”. Violations of the laws of war, including violations amounting to war crimes, have been committed on all sides of the conflict, though not necessarily by every combatant or faction; this would need to be studied on an individual basis.
* Non-state armed groups can to some extent be distinguished at the political and ideological level. ISIS and Al- Qaeda, for example, are jihadist groups with transnational agendas, i.e., they reject the international order and aim to impose a specific, exclusivist version of Islamic rule through force, and through violence globally aim ultimately to establish a transnational “Caliphate.” Other Syrian rebel groups vary politically and ideologically, from Islamists with a Syrian focus to groups committed to revolutionary opposition to Syria’s regime but otherwise without a particularly defined ideological character. Many are organised on a local geographic basis or around specific personalities who may have access to resources. It often does not make sense to ascribe a developed ideological character or program to most non-jihadist rebel groups.
* There is a high degree of fluidity between groups, if not at the leadership then certainly at the level of rank-and-file fighters: allegiances shift rapidly depending on local conditions, impressions of military prowess and the availability of superior weaponry and funding. Many non-ideological or non-jihadist groups have collaborated in tactical alignments with jihadists on the battlefield or are otherwise related to them through personal or familial ties.
* In Syria, as elsewhere, the terms “terrorist”, “moderate” and “extremist” have become so politicised and instrumentalised as to be analytically meaningless. The label “terrorist organisation” does not necessarily reflect standards and definitions enjoying broad international consensus. Nonetheless, factions on nearly all sides of the war have carried out acts of violence that could be fairly described as inducing terror on civilian populations.
* Lethal and non-lethal support to rebel groups has been provided for a number of reasons, including pressuring the regime to negotiate a political transition that ends the war – or, for some donors, just toppling the regime outright – as well as enabling the fight against ISIS. Non-lethal assistance to rebel groups and others should be understood in that context. Humanitarian and/or stabilisation support to rebel-held and YPG-held areas has a number of benefits, for example strengthening local governance, policing and de-mining. Donor states must weigh these benefits, however, against the cost of providing such support in the case of rebel groups, including the opportunity cost of aiding groups that (1) may commit human rights abuses and worse; (2) may be engaged in criminal activity; (3) may be fluid in their membership; (4) may not have full control over their personnel and equipment; and (5) may have political objectives that are inconsistent with those of the providing states, except in the short-to-medium term.
* The actual – as opposed to intended – destination of military (lethal or non-lethal) cross-border assistance has been difficult to monitor without a physical presence inside Syria, and is largely unknowable. Covert military assistance, in particular, was skimmed by jihadists in a systematic way. Likewise, vetting of rebel groups for good conduct becomes complicated if it has to be done remotely.
* Providing support (of any kind) to one side in a conflict at the expense of another will have consequences for post-conflict stabilisation and reconstruction. Today, Syrian rebels find themselves on the losing side, and it appears likely that the regime will re-establish control over all Syrian territory sooner or later, including areas currently held by the SDG/YPG. This presents challenges for policy makers seeking a Syria sufficiently stable to enable the return of refugees, and who have made the provision of reconstruction funds contingent on a meaningful political transition firmly on track, in the language of the European Commission.