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Syria

Women's Roles: In Brief

Official Roles

Though several rounds of talks included no women in formal roles, up to 20 percent of the negotiators in UN-mediated discussions in 2017 were women. An advisory board of twelve women continues to act as a third-party observer of the UN-mediated Geneva peace talks and successfully works across political lines to find consensus on controversial issues critical to stability, including aid delivery and the release of detainees.

Civil Society Efforts

Locally, women are leading efforts to negotiate cease-fires, organize nonviolent protests, police the streets, work in field hospitals and schools, distribute food and medicine, and document human rights violations.

The Conflict

In 2011, protests against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime quickly escalated into a full-scale armed conflict (<http://www.cfr.org/global/global-conflict-tracker/p32137#!/conflict/civil-war-in-syria>) between anti-government rebel groups and the Syrian government. There has been significant intervention by outside parties, particularly as the self-proclaimed Islamic State expanded from Iraq into Syria. To date, the conflict has led to the death of over 400,000 people (<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/04/staffan-de-mistura-400000-killed-syria-civil-war-160423055735629.html>), displaced over 6.5 million people (<http://www.unhcr.org/sy/29-internally-displaced-people.html>) internally, and driven close to 5 million refugees (<http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>) to other countries. Extremist groups as well as government forces and pro-government militias have been accused of gross human rights violations, including deliberate targeting of civilians, kidnappings, sexual violence, and extrajudicial executions. In this climate of impunity, women in Syria (<https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/07/02/we-are-still-here/women-front-lines-syrias-conflict>) have faced arbitrary arrest and detention, physical abuse, rape, and torture.

Peace initiatives launched at various points during the six years of conflict—including the Geneva peace talks (<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/03/syria-geneva-peace-talks/476034/>) led by the United Nations—have failed to halt the fighting. In December 2016, a brutal Syrian army offensive succeeded in recapturing Aleppo amid large-scale violations against civilians. A round of negotiations (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/23/world/middleeast/syria-astana-talks-russia-turkey.html>) between the Syrian regime and opposition groups in Kazakhstan in January 2017 focused on a cease-fire between Assad forces and rebels, which has since collapsed. The fourth round of UN-led peace talks (<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/02/syria-talks-geneva-170223213801586.html>) occurred in Geneva in February 2017 but made little progress. Rounds of talks in Geneva and Astana, intended to establish de-escalation zones, were held in July and August 2017. These discussions blocked women's participation entirely, prompting 530 prominent Syrians and 74 civil society organizations to call on the opposition and international community to ensure that at least 30 percent of delegates in talks held later in the year are women.

Women's Role in the Peace Process

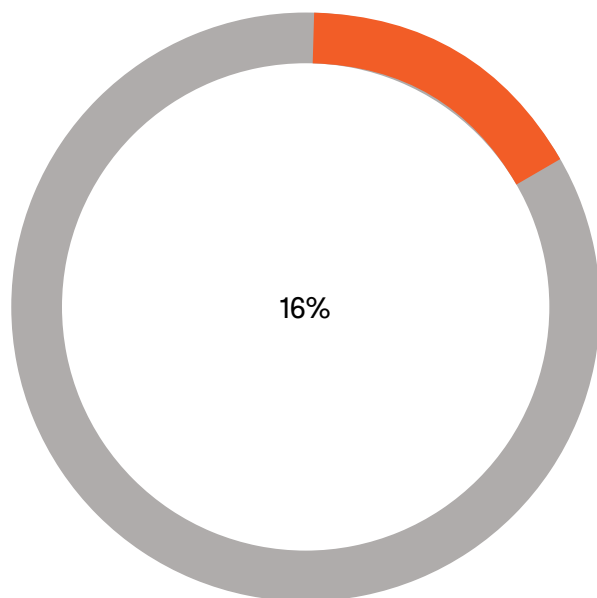
Syrian women have made valuable contributions to securing peace in local communities across Syria and have advocated for increased inclusion in the formal peace process. In 2016, the UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura (<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=48244#.Wlf7iRlrJZ1>) appointed an advisory board of twelve women (<http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2016/2/ed-statement-on-syrian-womens-advisory-board>)—leaders in civil society, politics, and academia—to counsel and act as a third party observer of the Geneva peace talks. However, there was not one woman among the fifty-five delegates (<http://www.passblue.com/2017/02/23/whos-missing-at-the-syria-peace-talks-women/>) to the Kazakhstan negotiations (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/23/world/middleeast/syria-astana-talks-russia-turkey.html>) in January 2017. In other recent rounds of UN-mediated negotiations, three women (<https://www.inclusivesecurity.org/2016/03/10/infographic-womens-inclusion-in-the-syria-peace-talks/>) have sat among the fifteen negotiators in both the opposition and the Syrian government delegations. A Women's Advisory Committee (<http://www.passblue.com/2017/03/23/its-about-time-syrian-women-play-a-direct-role-at-the-peace-talks/>) additionally serves as a technical advisor to the opposition party.

By the Numbers

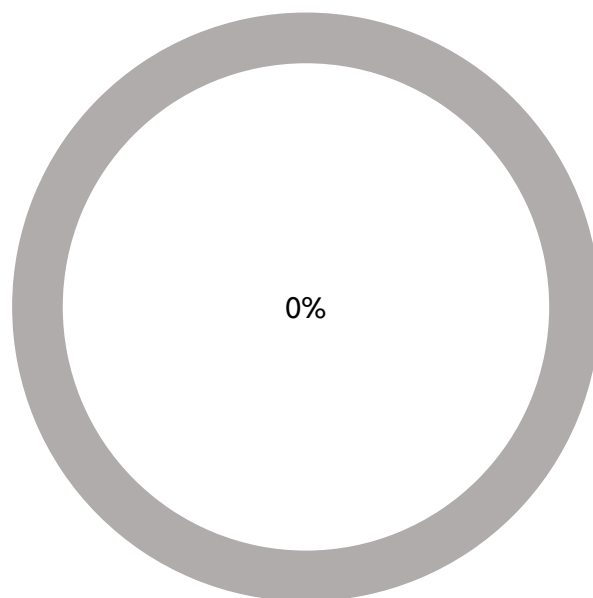
Men Women

WOMEN'S ROLES

In the October 2017 peace talks



Negotiators



Mediators

WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN PARLIAMENT

In 2017

13%

87%

Figures represent the percentage of women in all houses of a nation's parliament at the year of the signing of a peace agreement and five years post-signing. Women's political participation in postconflict states is associated with decreased risk of conflict relapse.

DURATION OF PEACE

Last round of talks held in October 2017

Effects of Women's Participation

Broaden the agenda. Women at the negotiating table and in civil society have raised a number of issues critical to long-term peace and recovery, including delivery of aid and food, the release of detainees (<http://www.passblue.com/2017/03/23/its-about-time-syrian-women-play-a-direct-role-at-the-peace-talks/>), inquiries into disappearances, and the effects of economic sanctions. In addition, the Syrian Civil Society Platform (<http://ccsdsyria.org/wp-content/uploads/Syrian-Civil-Society-Platform-Statement-of-Principles-February-2016.pdf>) includes 50 percent women at the national level and works through local networks to advise negotiators on the situation on the ground.

Work across divides. With members drawn from across the political spectrum, the women's advisory board (<http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2016/2/ed-statement-on-syrian-womens-advisory-board>) has set an example for finding consensus (<http://webtv.un.org/watch/syrian-womens-advisory-board-media-stakeout-geneva-22-march-2016/4812065293001>) on controversial issues that have stalled formal talks, including aid delivery and the release of detainees.

Negotiate local cease-fires. Syrian women have successfully negotiated cessation of hostilities (http://www.berghof-foundation.org/fileadmin/redaktion/Publications/Papers/AraabiHilal_SyrianLocalCeasefireNegotiations.pdf) between armed actors in several areas to allow the passage of aid. In the Damascus suburb of Zabadani, for example, a group of local women pressured a militia (<https://www.inclusivesecurity.org/2014/02/21/10-ways-syrian-women-building-peace-democracy/>) to accept a twenty-day cease-fire with regime forces. In another area, one activist recounted (<http://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/have-faith-syrian-women-we-can-do-anything>) that when a group of armed fighters entered their village, “the men couldn’t go outside because they would have been shot or abducted. In the end, it was the women who surrounded the fighters and drove them out of the village.” Women in civil society groups have also organized nonviolent protests (<http://www.conflict Perspectives.imtd.org/index.php/regions/middle-east/96-10-ways-syrian-women-are-building-peace-and-democracy>), worked in field hospitals and schools (<https://www.pri.org/stories/2016-01-20/syrian-men-go-missing-women-take-new-leadership-roles-and-bear-new-burdens>), and distributed food and medicine (<https://www.pri.org/stories/2016-01-20/syrian-men-go-missing-women-take-new-leadership-roles-and-bear-new-burdens>).

Secure the release of detainees. At the local level, women successfully advocated (<http://www.passblue.com/2017/02/23/whos-missing-at-the-syria-peace-talks-women/>) for the release of political prisoners through peaceful means: for example, in April 2011, the government heeded the demands of two thousand women and children who blocked a highway in Baniyas (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/apr/13/syria-protests-women-block-road>), resulting in the release of hundreds of men from neighboring villages who had been illegally rounded up.

Document human rights violations. A number of women and women's groups report on kidnappings, detentions, disappearances, and other human rights violations by armed actors in Syria. These activists include the founders of the Violation Documentation Center (<https://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/>), which was one of the first organizations to report attacks involving chemical weapons. These groups are providing critical data and analysis to international watchdogs and parties to negotiations.

Women in the Process

Alise Mofrej (<http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/events/upcoming-events/detail/whats-next-for-syria-women-of-syrias-high-negotiations-committee>)

Deputy top negotiator on the opposition's negotiating team in the Geneva process

Bouthaina Shaaban (<https://www.inclusivesecurity.org/2014/02/06/the-women-of-the-syria-peace-talks/>)

Delegate on the government's negotiating team in the Geneva process, political and media advisor to Assad, spokesperson before and during Geneva II talks, and former minister of expatriates

Luna al-Shibl (<https://www.inclusivesecurity.org/2014/02/06/the-women-of-the-syria-peace-talks/>)

Delegate on the government's negotiating team in the Geneva process, and spokesperson for the Syrian foreign ministry

Hind Kabawat (<https://crdc.gmu.edu/about/staff/hind-kabawat/>)

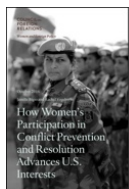
Member of the Syrian opposition's High Negotiations Committee at the Syrian peace talks in Geneva and a founder of the Women's Consulting Group for the committee

Mariam Jalabi (http://www.etilaf.us/our_team)

Director of the Office of the Syrian National Coalition to the United Nations, and member of the Women's Advisory Committee to the High Negotiations Committee for the Syrian opposition

Women and Foreign Policy Program

The Women and Foreign Policy program (<https://www.cfr.org/programs/women-and-foreign-policy-program>) analyzes how elevating the status of women and girls advances U.S. foreign policy objectives. The program informs policymakers, opinion leaders, and the general public about issues related to gender equality and U.S. foreign policy through scholarship, roundtable discussions, briefings, and the *Women Around the World* blog.



How Women's Participation in Conflict Prevention and Resolution Advances U.S. Interests (<https://www.cfr.org/report/how-womens-participation-conflict-prevention-and-resolution-advances-us-interests>)

Despite growing international recognition of women's role in security, their representation in peace and security processes has lagged.

(<https://www.cfr.org/report/how-womens-participation-conflict-prevention-and-resolution-advances-us-interests>)



Countering Sexual Violence in Conflict (<https://www.cfr.org/report/countering-sexual-violence-conflict>)
Sexual violence in conflict is not simply a gross violation of human rights—it is also a security challenge.

(<https://www.cfr.org/report/countering-sexual-violence-conflict>)



Women Around the World (<https://www.cfr.org/blog/women-around-world>)

The Women Around the World blog examines the relationship between the advancement of women and U.S. foreign policy interests, including prosperity and stability.

(<https://www.cfr.org/blog/women-around-world>)



The Women and Foreign Policy Program Newsletter (<https://www.cfr.org/newsletters>)

Get the latest resources and news about the status of women and girls around the world: subscribe to the Women and Foreign Policy Monthly Update.

(<https://www.cfr.org/newsletters>)