

JUSTICE, RIGHTS & CIVIL SOCIETY

From Belfast to Damascus

What Syrians can learn from the Northern Ireland peace process

At first glance Syria and Northern Ireland seem distant in culture, politics, and history. Yet, a deeper look reveals shared experiences – primarily the drive for self-determination and the challenges posed by deeply rooted sectarian divides. In both the now (largely) resolved Northern Irish conflict and the continuing strife in Syria political issues have intertwined with societal and religious dynamics that added multiple layers of complexity to the peace process in Northern Ireland, and could well do the same in any peaceful resolution in Syria.

Northern Ireland as a model

The 1998 Belfast Agreement, otherwise known as the Good Friday Agreement, ended Northern Ireland's decades of violent conflict. It laid out a framework for peace based on disarmament of non-state actors, reforms including devolution of power, and fair representation within state institutions, especially the police. The transformation of Northern Ireland's police force offers an especially valuable lesson for Syria, where reforming state institutions to reflect societal diversity is paramount for peace.

The Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), once seen as biased to the Protestant cause, was replaced by the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), which was designed to be more inclusive and diverse. This transformation included increasing Catholic representation from a mere 8 per cent in the RUC to a target of 50 per cent in the PSNI. Although currently only 32 per cent of PSNI personnel are Catholic, this is still a significant improvement.

The parallel in Syria lies within its military and security institutions. Alawites comprise 10 per cent of Syria's population yet occupy almost all the senior and mid-level military and security leadership positions. Although the uprising against Bashar Assad was driven by diverse grievances – political, economic, and societal – the regime's response, marked by brutal repression, contributed to the framing of the conflict as one between competing sects. By releasing radical Islamist prisoners in 2011, Assad further intensified the sectarian feeling within the opposition that drowned out more liberal calls for reform.

Regional pressures for change

The regime is currently attempting to implement gradual reforms within the army aimed at addressing some of the deficiencies identified during the past decade of war. Most notably, there is a new emphasis on elite forces and on the development of an all-volunteer professional army. However,

given that these reforms are aimed principally at strengthening the regime, rather than at any national reconciliation, serious problems of representation and loyalty will likely persist.

The continuing sectarian imbalance indicates the Assad regime's reluctance to engage in genuine reform or to create institutions representative of Syria's diverse population; and it raises serious questions about the army's ability to act as a unifying institution in any future political settlement.

Regional actors, notably Saudi Arabia, have called for restructuring of the Fourth Division led by Maher Assad, due to its close ties with Iran and Hezbollah and its involvement in drug trafficking to the Gulf. In response, in an apparent show of defiance, early in 2024 Maher Assad deployed forces to destabilise Jordan, engaging in direct confrontations with the Jordanian army. Despite the ongoing war in Gaza and Lebanon, Captagon smuggling has persisted.

Amid Turkey's cautious exploration of normalisation with Assad, Ankara reportedly urged Moscow, via the Astana process, to pressure the regime for 50 per cent Sunni representation in Syria's future army officer corps. Moscow's counter offer was 15 per cent, which is almost the current percentage. In mid-2024 Alawites comprised 88.5 per cent of the top 40 leadership positions in the Syrian army, and Sunnis only 11.5 per cent. Officers from Latakia, Homs, Tartus, and Hama – Alawite-heavy areas – account for some 84 per cent of the total number of officers. Within intelligence agencies, Alawites hold 65 per cent of leadership positions, compared with 23 per cent for Sunnis, while Christians, Druze, and Shiites make up the remaining 12 per cent. Recent remarks by the Turkish defence minister about the Free Syrian Army (meaning the Syrian National Army) being "the army of the future Syrian republic" hint at the possibility of ongoing dialogue between Turkey and Russia on this issue.

New army as a unifying institution

Syria's national identity has long been contested. Under Hafez and Bashar Assad, patriotism and loyalty to the constitution morphed into personality cults. The result is a military and security sector heavily dominated by Alawites, while Sunnis and other groups have limited, often token, representation. Political oppression, meanwhile, remains a reality faced by Syrians of all backgrounds.

These dynamics have driven Syrians to enhance their alignment with sub-national identities. In a context where national identity lacks depth, cohesion, and even meaning, regional, sectarian, and ethnic affiliations offer solidarity and protection. Corruption is another factor that has sapped national feeling from institutions that would normally be considered paragons of patriotism. Army officers now routinely require recruits to perform personal services for them and their families – a key reason why Syrians seek to avoid conscription by means of bribery or emigration.

Any sustainable resolution of the Syrian conflict must address the core political and institutional imbalances that caused it. A conversation on the sectarian imbalance in the armed forces and security agencies is essential, however difficult it may sometimes be. What occurred in Northern Ireland could serve as a useful model. However, any quota system in Syria, if not embedded in a broad political settlement with genuine public support, risks deepening divisions rather than fostering unity.

Syria's institutional imbalances stem from historical political divides and the power struggles of the 1950s and 60s, which culminated in Hafez Assad's victory. Over decades, the

Assads have included enough Sunnis to be able to appoint loyal officers for cosmetics. Today, with Syria's *de facto* division, institutional representation is as much about the different areas of control and their political identities as it is about sectarian balance. However, a truly inclusive security sector reform depends on all parties' willingness to pursue diplomacy over military escalation, which depends largely on what the respective regional and international backers tell their Syrian clients.

For now, those seeking to leverage security sector reform as an entry point for diplomacy should focus on security matters between the areas of control. Cross-line trade, aid, and civilian movement are already increasing and require effective security and oversight, which could be gradually achieved through security committees made up of personnel from opposing sides. Such a "Whole of Syria" approach would amount to genuine confidence-building both among Syrians and between Syrians and international partners, and could be the right entry point to a new, less politicised and more representative Syrian army.