
Genocide in Syria: Could the United States Have Prevented It?

1. Background

In March 2011, encouraged in part by Arab Spring movements in other countries, Syrians took to the streets in peaceful demonstrations to demand that the regime of Bashar al-Assad implement long-promised social, political, and economic reforms. In response to peaceful demonstrations, the regime's security forces fired live ammunition on protesters, setting off a cycle of demonstrations and violence.

Since 2011, the Assad regime has systematically increased the level and types of violence against Syrian civilians. By the end of 2012, the civilian death toll in Syria had risen to approximately 40,000,¹ and the regime was openly receiving material support from the Iranian government, Hezbollah forces, and the Russian government. In 2013, the growing militarization of the opposition and emergence of several radical armed groups had changed the dynamics of the original struggle for freedom, dignity, and democracy for all Syrians. By the fall of 2015, the regime, on the verge of collapse, was rescued with military intervention by the Russian government.

Regardless of shifts in the balance of power or in the international political narrative, certain facts and statistics now characterize the Syrian conflict: nearly half a million civilians have been killed from 2011 to 2017.² Approximately 250,000 civilians are held in regime jails as prisoners of conscience, most of them without access to the outside world, let alone access to due process or legal representation.³ More than half of Syria's prewar population of 22 million has been displaced internally or as refugees abroad.⁴

From the start of the Syrian revolution, the United States has repeatedly called for change in Syria and has frequently condemned the regime's practices. Like Syrians, the Obama administration called on the Assad regime to implement long-promised reforms. As the regime's violence against unarmed protesters escalated, the Obama administration, along with other members of the international community, called for regime change. On August 21, 2013, the Assad regime launched a sarin gas attack in the Damascus suburbs, killing nearly 1,500 people⁵ and defying the Obama administration's "red line" on the use of chemical weapons. Despite the attack, the international community failed to take any meaningful action to put an end to the violence. The Assad regime, emboldened by the lack of consequences, has continued to target schools, hospitals, marketplaces, and other civilian centers using internationally banned weapons such as barrel bombs, cluster bombs, and chemical weapons.

Could the Syrian tragedy have been prevented? Many Syrians believe that it could have, had the United States (and other members of the international community) been more determined to limit or to put an end to atrocities committed against civilians. Many Syrians believe that the international community had an opportunity to take decisive action against the Assad regime, especially before Russia's open presence in Syria.

However, despite staggering statistics and evidence, the international community largely ignored the ongoing assault on civilians. Arguably, all the atrocities committed in Syria were known and could have been prevented. In some cases, social media users were able to watch atrocities take place as they happened. Yet despite this age of instant information and sophisticated technology, the international community did little more than utter harsh condemnations. Perhaps Arab Spring failures—such as in

¹ Violations Documentation Centre statistics, November 2012.

² See I Am Syria website, <http://www.iamsyria.org/death-tolls.html>.

³ By mid-2014, the Violations Documentation Centre had estimated the number to be 200,000: <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2014/06/06/assessing-the-state-of-syrias-detainees>. The formal Syrian opposition uses 250,000 as the number of detainees.

⁴ UN Refugee Agency: <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/syria-emergency.html>.

⁵ White House, Government Assessment of the Syrian Government's Use of Chemical Weapons on August 21, 2013: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/30/government-assessment-syrian-government-s-use-chemical-weapons-august-21>

Libya and Egypt—or previous foreign policy disasters—such as in Iraq and Afghanistan—informed the Obama administration’s inability to commit to a consistent position.

1.1. Understanding the Syrian Perspective

In 2018, as Syria enters its eighth year of conflict, political and academic institutions will likely continue to review the Syria portfolio, issue reports, and make policy recommendations. Much of the documentation, however, lacks a Syrian perspective and fails to consider that the Syrian conflict is more than an academic study; it is the story of a people who are suffering a modern-day genocide.

To better understand the Syrian perspective, the Foundation to Restore Equality and Education in Syria (FREE-Syria), with support from the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, sought answers to six fundamental questions:

1. What was the US government’s responsibility in the face of ongoing atrocities in Syria?
2. What could the United States have realistically done to prevent atrocities in Syria?
3. How would airstrikes against regime targets or the use of a no-fly zone—two policy recommendations offered by many Syrian activists since 2011—have affected the Assad regime’s use of barrel bombs and other internationally banned weapons from the air?
4. What did Syrian opposition activists expect to receive from the United States in material and political support for the revolution?
5. What could or should have Syrians done to secure more support from the United States to prevent atrocities and to minimize the forced displacement of civilians?
6. What can international powers do to help prevent future atrocities in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world?

The FREE-Syria survey team developed these questions into a formal survey, which was disseminated in December 2017-January 2018 in Syria, in refugee communities abroad, and among civil society organizations.

1.2. The Survey

To obtain meaningful answers to those questions, FREE-Syria’s survey team developed a qualitative study consisting of a 14-question survey with 9 structured and 5 open questions. The structured questions offered a limited number of answers, whereas the open questions allowed respondents the freedom to express their views. The survey also included demographic questions about respondents such as age, gender, religion, ethnicity, governorate of origin, current residence, educational level, and profession. Questions about religion and ethnicity were optional.

The survey questions were disseminated through e-mail and social media. In cases in which the surveyors held discussions with respondents, the conversations were conducted via social media tools such as WhatsApp and Skype.

The survey questions focused on (a) the US administration’s responsibility for the atrocities committed in Syria, (b) measures that could have been taken to mitigate or prevent them, and (c) views on what Syrians could have done to obtain US government support to avoid these atrocities. Finally, respondents were asked whether the international community and major world powers had a responsibility to prevent genocide in the Middle East and to prevent reoccurrence of such atrocities elsewhere in the world.

1.3. Survey Methodology

When approaching respondents, the FREE-Syria survey team introduced FREE-Syria and the purpose of the survey. Most of the respondents were direct contacts of the team members or from their networks of activists and organizations working in support of the Syrian revolution for freedom, dignity, and democracy.. Respondents could ask background questions and accept or decline to participate. The survey team remained available to answer any questions or to provide clarification.

Initially, the FREE-Syria survey team had planned to collect surveys from 100 Syrian organizations and individuals. To achieve that number, the team distributed the survey to more than 200 potential respondents inside Syria and abroad with a focus on ethnic, sectarian, and political diversity. Many potential respondents declined to participate, citing the lack of security inside Syria. Others declined after indicating that they no longer had hope that the US administration and the international community would take action to prevent atrocities in Syria. The general sentiment across the population sample was one of futility of hope that anything could influence the international community to take action after nearly seven years of massacres and genocide in Syria.

The FREE-Syria survey team was able to conduct surveys among 78 diverse Syrian individuals and organizations, from inside Syria and abroad. The number of surveys conducted inside Syria was limited because of worsening conditions on the ground, security concerns in certain areas, and the ongoing military offensives.

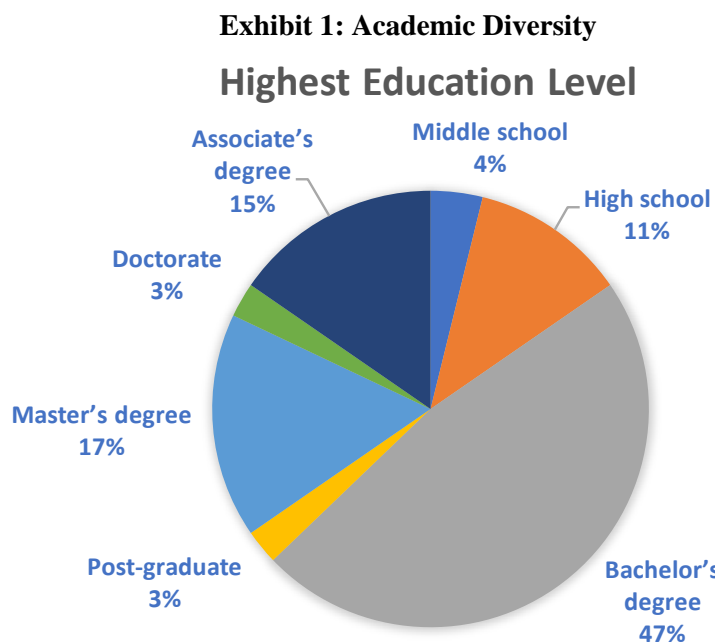
Respondent Profiles

The FREE-Syria survey team made every effort to survey equal numbers of men and women. However, the final breakdown was 38 percent women and 62 percent men for the following reasons:

- Women who felt they were experiencing danger were more hesitant to participate in the survey.
- Many from the sample population inside Syria are activists, the majority of whom are men.
- Others in the sample population inside Syria represented organizations, the majority of which are led by men.

Despite the restrictions on freedoms and security concerns about expressing political opinions inside Syria and the difficulty in communicating with people who can freely respond to a survey, 36 percent of respondents were from inside Syria. The remaining 64 percent of respondents reside abroad, reflecting the reality that more than one-third of Syrians have been displaced to neighboring countries or other parts of the world and that most Syrian civil society groups are based outside Syria.

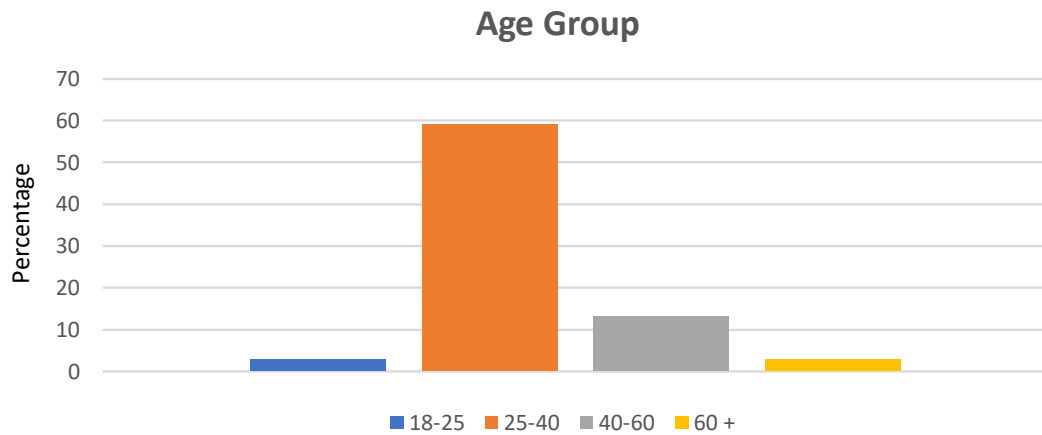
Exhibit 1 shows the diversity in academic and educational background among respondents.



The majority of respondents were between the ages of 25 and 40, as indicated in exhibit 2. Because of a technical problem with the form used for the survey, in addition to the desire by some respondents not to declare their date of birth, seven respondents did not provide a real birthdate; thus, the survey team used 1990 as the birth year or age 28 years. Also, for organizations, persons responding provided their own

age; thus, the age given does not reflect how long the organization has been around but instead the age of the representative who filled out the survey on behalf of the organization.

Exhibit 2: Age Diversity



Questions about religious (exhibit 3) and ethnic (exhibit 4) backgrounds were optional. Of the respondents, 35 percent opted not to answer the first question and 41 percent opted not to respond to the second.

Exhibit 3: Religious Diversity

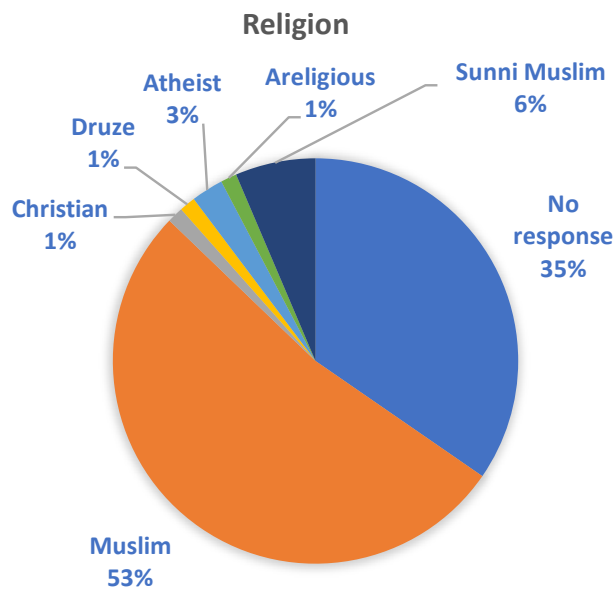
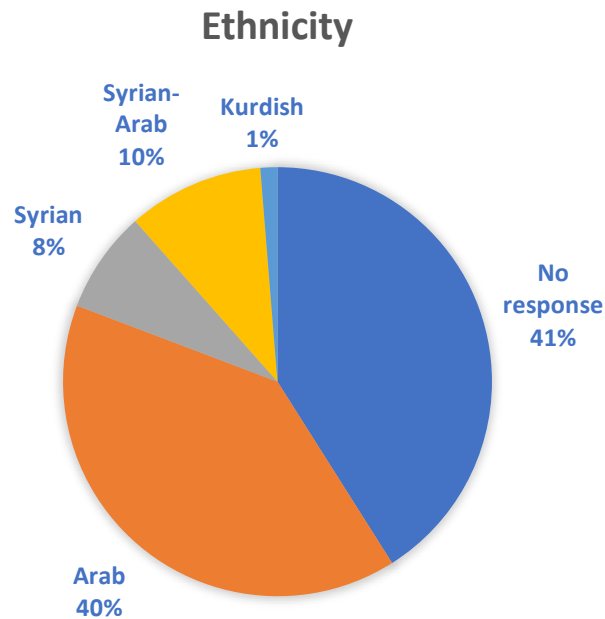
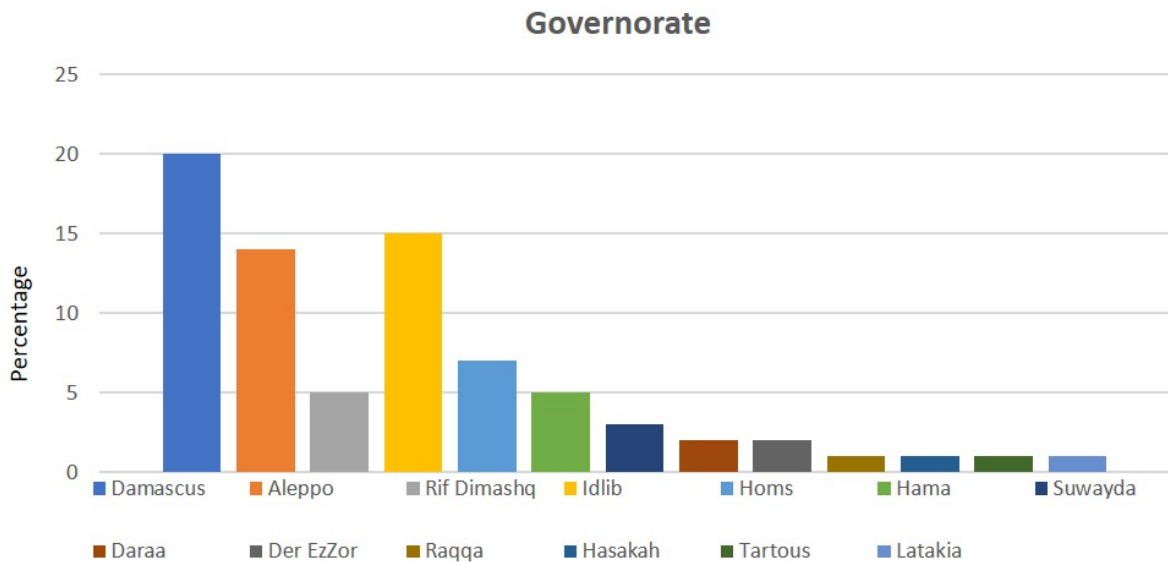


Exhibit 4: Ethnic Diversity



The FREE-Syria survey team attempted to achieve geographic diversity by disseminating the survey across Syria and by including a question about governorate of origin. Given security conditions, geographic diversity was limited, as indicated in exhibit 5.

Exhibit 5: Geographic Diversity—Governorate of Origin



Respondents' professional backgrounds varied greatly and included (a) students, teachers, lawyers, engineers, and journalists and (b) many who work for nongovernmental organizations.

Survey Responses

As noted previously, the survey included 14 substantive questions, 9 of which had multiple-choice answers. The remaining 5 questions were open ended.

1. In your opinion, could atrocities have been prevented in Syria?

Respondents:

Yes: 91 percent

No: 9 percent

2. Does the US administration bear responsibility for the atrocities committed in Syria?

Respondents:

Yes: 97 percent

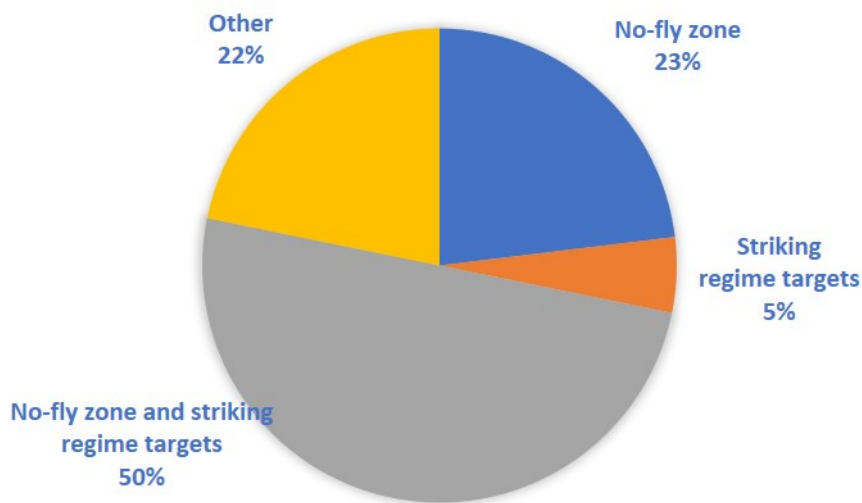
No: 3 percent

3. Barrel bombs and internationally prohibited weapons are used in committing genocide in Syria; in your opinion, how can the US government help stop the use of these weapons?

In addition to the responses selected (exhibit 6), several respondents provided additional comments when they selected “other.” Those responses included the following concepts:

- A binding United Nations (UN) resolution to pressure Russia into neutralizing its air force
- A UN resolution under chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations
- Supporting the opposition with heavy weaponry to confront the regime; providing opposition with weapons that stop regime aircraft
- Referring the regime to the International Criminal Court (ICC)
- Finding a solution with Russia
- Because the United States can detect through satellites everything that is going on in the world, it aims to allow oppression in the region. Otherwise, it would have intervened in some way to stop the atrocities.
- Using political power with the regime’s allies

Exhibit 6: Possible Methods to Stop Use of Weapons



4. *In your opinion, what is the responsibility the US government bears (toward the atrocities committed in Syria)?*

Nearly all respondents considered the United States as the government primarily responsible for the atrocities committed in Syria. They indicated that the United States had failed to fulfill its ethical and humanitarian obligations or to act by the values it so often claimed to uphold. The majority of respondents emphasized that this failure was mainly the result of inaction and complacency by the United States. The United States, in particular, is a major world power capable of imposing measures such as a no-fly zone; as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, the United States is capable of applying political pressure to pass and implement resolutions that end the conflict, the respondents said. Most respondents indicated that the United States had turned a blind eye to the atrocities committed against Syrians, particularly by the Assad regime. They also indicated that the United States often condemned practices but did not take actual actions, as in the case of the Obama administration's red line. According to the respondents, the fact that the violation of the red line went unpunished was understood by the Assad regime as a green light to proceed with crimes, particularly the crime of using chemical weapons.

Some respondents believed the United States should be held responsible for actions such as supporting groups that one respondent described as "the wrong groups." Other respondents named specifically the Syrian Democratic Forces, Popular Protection Units (YPG), or other separatist Kurdish groups. Some believed that the United States actually supported radical groups to ensure that the war would continue, while others only indicated that the United States had supported "irresponsible" groups. Still other respondents believed that the United States interfered only when it felt threatened—such as after the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), at which point there was too much destruction—or only interfered as necessary to pressure Iran into the nuclear deal.

5. *What can the US government do to stop the atrocities being committed in Syria?*

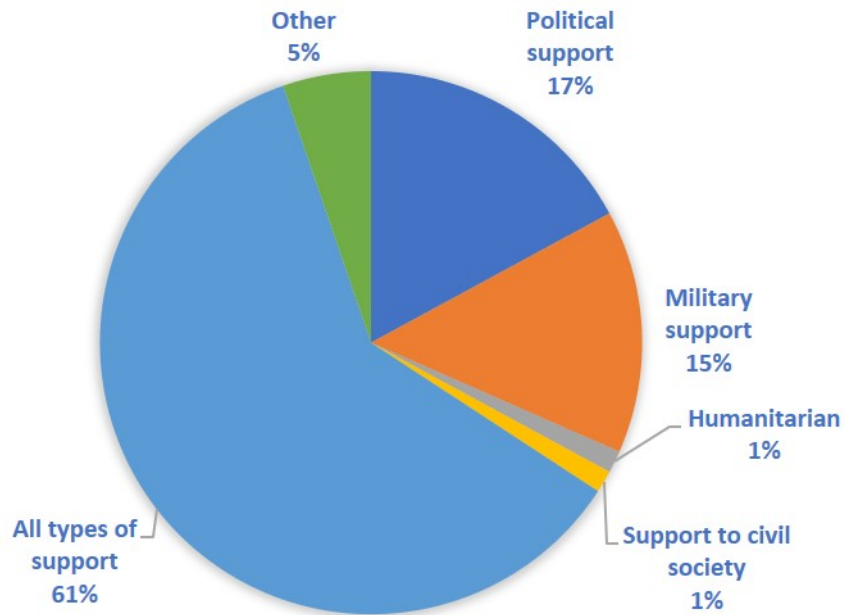
The majority of respondents indicated that the solution would be for the Assad regime (or its representative, Bashar al-Assad) to step down, to be removed, or for Syria to have a true political transition. Those respondents indicated that the US government was capable of achieving this through several mechanisms, including (a) pressuring the regime's allies (particularly Russia and Iran) through either political coercion or an "iron fist" (the latter with Iran and Iranian-backed militias); (b) a UN action either pursuant to chapter VII of the UN Charter or through a peacekeeping mission; and (c) direct military action (one respondent even used the term "invasion").

A large number of respondents also indicated that the United States should take measures to put a stop to targeting civilians, where most of these called for imposing a no-fly zone. A few indicated that the United States should stop supporting radical or separatist ethnic groups and instead provide more support to the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and moderate groups with a national vision.

6. *What type of support to Syrians were you expecting from the US government to prevent atrocities and genocide?*

Responses were broken into several categories, as shown in exhibit 7.

Exhibit 7: Types of Support Expected from the United States



7. Do the condemnations and statements by the US government help prevent atrocities in Syria?

Respondents:

Yes: 87 percent

No: 9 percent

Maybe: 4 percent

8. Do you think the US government has significant influence in stopping the atrocities committed in Syria?

Respondents:

Yes: 96 percent

No: 4 percent

9. What should have Syrians done to secure more support from the US government to stop the atrocities committed in their country?

The overwhelming majority of respondents believe that Syrians can do or could have done nothing more to secure greater support from the United States. Some respondents who wished to elaborate on their answer noted that since the uprising’s beginning, Syrians had filmed and documented acts of violence and human rights violations and sent these to media outlets and human rights organizations, to no avail. One respondent noted that the use of chemical weapons going unpunished was the best evidence that nothing would make the United States take action. One respondent resorted to humor to indicate that Syrians have done everything and nothing else could be done; this respondent’s response to this question was “flirt with Ivanka.”

The second most popular response was that Syrians should have maintained a united front, especially one in which radicals would not have been able to be part of or get the space to fill with military groups. Some of these respondents noted that Syrians should have been clearer in rejecting radicalism and violence in

the revolution. Along these lines, some emphasized the importance of unity and maintaining a national framework.

A few respondents noted that Syrians should have tried to open better communications channels with the United States, particularly regarding their post-Assad vision. These respondents indicated that such an approach would have highlighted mutual interests and clarified what the United States would have wanted to hear from Syrians to be “on their side.”

10. What can the international community do to prevent similar atrocities from happening in the Middle East and the rest of the world in the future?

The majority of respondents believed that holding war criminals and perpetrators of atrocities accountable for their actions would set an example to deter future potential perpetrators. This step includes rulers who oppress their citizens and with whom actions should be taken early on to avoid humanitarian catastrophes. Thus, respondents highlighted the need for the international community to be more proactive and take immediate action, instead of waiting until massacres occur. This need also includes activating the role of international criminal law and the ICC, not only in the future but also in applying them to past incidents.

A large number of respondents indicated a need to reexamine existing mechanisms that have proven ineffective and a need to implement reforms. These steps include reforming international institutions such as the UN, particularly the UN Security Council, and reconsidering the veto power that the permanent members of the Security Council have and often abuse.

Several respondents mentioned activating the use of no-fly zones in cases of conflicts to protect civilians. Other respondents mentioned implementing measures to fight terrorism, particularly with supporting programs to raise awareness and education to fight the roots of radicalism.

11. How can the world be protected from genocide?

The majority of respondents pointed to the necessity of a way to effectively hold perpetrators of genocide accountable in reality and not simply theoretically. Some respondents indicated that the method cannot be one in which a veto can stop justice; thus, respondents recommended revisiting the obstacles the UN Security Council faces in enforcing its resolutions. A few respondents also noted that for international laws to be effective, they cannot be politicized or subject to the interests or influence of major powers.

Some respondents went as far as to say that more international military action was needed and that nations should resort more quickly to peacekeeping missions. Several stressed that mechanisms for intervention should be easier to enforce and implement. One respondent suggested that intervention should lie with the United Nations General Assembly rather than the UN Security Council.

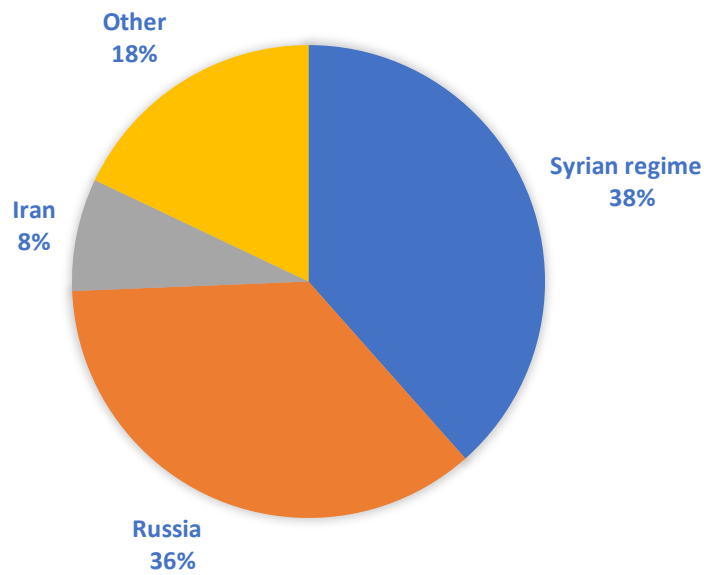
A large number of respondents also said that weapons—especially those capable of mass destruction—should be destroyed so they cannot be used and that disarmament is one way to ensure that genocide does not recur. Several respondents also suggested that an increase in raising awareness was needed to stop radicalism at its root; such a step would more effectively disseminate the concepts of peace and coexistence that are often lacking in areas of conflict.

12. The US government could have limited the atrocities committed in Syria, had it pressured _____ more:

Responses were broken into categories, as shown in exhibit 8. Additionally, those who selected “other” provided two main types of answers:

- All the above (the Syrian regime, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey)
- The Syrian regime and Russia and Iran

Exhibit 8: The US Should Have Pressured ...



13. Can the US mobilize the international community to find a political solution that guarantees stopping the atrocities committed in Syria?

Respondents:

Yes: 95 percent

No: 1 percent

Maybe: 4 percent

14. Do you think punishing perpetrators of genocide would be a deterrent to having genocide committed elsewhere?

Respondents:

Yes: 81 percent

No: 6 percent

Maybe: 13 percent

2. Conclusion

In March 2018, Syrians are preparing to commemorate the eighth year of the uprising. Many are facing that reality that they may need to prepare for many more years of commemorations. Given the continuing escalation in Syria and the ongoing genocide, FREE-Syria believes that the United States can still have a positive effect in saving lives.

From the survey, we see that the vast majority of respondents believe that the United States government could have prevented atrocities in Syria and bears responsibility for the genocide. Popular belief among respondents is that the United States not only could have pressured the international community into taking meaningful action to stop atrocities from being committed, but also bears a moral responsibility to uphold its own values. The majority believes that direct military action in the form of a no-fly zone would have prevented the genocide. In addition, the majority believes that United Nations processes must be reexamined to enable swift action in the

face of atrocities. Finally, most respondents believe that perpetrators of atrocities must be held accountable as a means of preventing future instances of genocide.

FREE-Syria sincerely hopes that decision makers in Washington, DC, will use the findings of this survey and corresponding studies to develop policies and positions intended to prevent or to stop further atrocities and human rights violations. The United States is in a position to establish minimum thresholds as it detects emerging conflicts, identifies humanitarian crises, and takes a proactive stance on prevention of genocide. The human rights–focused narrative in the United States is part of America’s identity, and we must all attempt to bring the cold reality of national security interests closer to that which separates us from dictatorship and tyranny.

Finally, we hope that the Syrian tragedy serves as a lesson on how to refocus on human tragedy. If “Never Again” is to be more than a slogan, the international community must make it so.