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Situation and reconciliation in Syria

Security Council

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Introduction

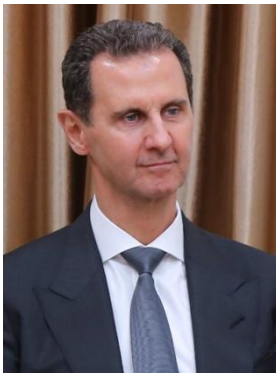


Figure 1: The former president of Syria; Bashar al-Assad

Syria's current situation is one of the most disastrous humanitarian and political crises in the world today. After Syria's civil war broke out in 2011, the country was pushed into disarray caused by a conflict involving multiple factions. These factions are the Syrian government, hostile groups (such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Syrian National Army (SNA), and Jaysh al-Islam), the Kurdish forces, and extremist terrorist organisations, the most prevalent being ISIS. As a result of this war, over 500,000 people have died, and more than 12 million have been displaced across Syria.

The core of the conflict begins with decades of political repression, a stalled economy, and corruption within the Bashar al-Assad regime. Protests supporting democratic Syria during the Arab Spring resulted in a harsh government response with an eventual escalation into a full-scale civil war in Syria. Across the course of the war, foreign powers began to show interest and involve themselves, including Russia, Iran, the United States, and Turkey. These events further complicated the situation. Although Assad's government was able to hold power after the fall of ISIS, many Syrians remained scattered across its neighbouring countries and Europe, and the remaining Syrians were displaced and struggling to survive with little to no access to basic human needs.

Syrian Refugee's arriving in Europe

The reconciliation of Syria is of vital importance but remains deeply challenging and requires more than just a political settlement among its elite citizens. A fresh start is necessary to heal the communities that years of unnecessary violence have destroyed. The United Nations has led efforts through the Geneva process and the Astana talks begun Russia, Iran, and Turkey have made efforts to broker a peace; however, the progress is slow and largely unimpactful. Justice and accountability do remain as contentious issues, whilst many Syrian citizens call for the prosecution of the Assad regime for war crimes they committed. Others, however, advocate for a national pardon to encourage stability in the country. Rebuilding the trust of the people, ensuring the safe return of refugees, and reconstructing the country will entirely depend on an inclusive approach that would address the root causes of the conflict, not just its symptoms that came as a result.

Definition of key terms

Ceasefire

A ceasefire refers to the cessation of fighting, typically during negotiations. This is not an official end to the conflict.

De-escalation Zones

De-escalation zones are areas within a war zone with reduced fighting for the intent of protecting civilians or other valued items.

Hostile Groups

A hostile group is a collection of individuals that exhibits aggression or opposition to another party, often posing a violent threat.

Humanitarian Crisis

A humanitarian crisis occurs when a community or large group of people are at risk for their safety, security, or well-being. This risk often arises from a conflict or natural disaster.

Pardon

A pardon refers to the act of forgiving a person or people for their actions, often relating to a criminal record.

Political Repression

Political repression refers to the systematic suppression of citizens due to their political beliefs. This is usually done through violence, threats, and intimidation.

Prosecution

Prosecution is the conducting of legal proceedings against a party respective of the criminal charge

Regime

A regime is a form of government that often results in being authoritarian.

Terrorist Organisation

A terrorist organisation is a group of violent individuals (often civilians) that use violence and/or intimidation to achieve a political, religious or ideological goal.

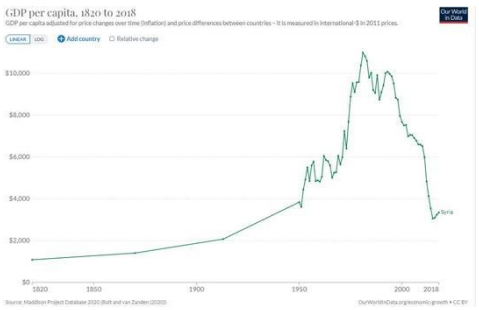
General Overview

Cause of the Civil War

The eruption of the Syrian civil war in 2011 was caused by political, economic, and social tensions. These tensions had been rising over several decades under the strict rule of the Assad family. President Bashar al-Assad was in power at the start of the civil war. He had come to power in the year 2000 following the passing of his late father, Hafez al-Assad. Assad inherited an authoritarian system in which protest was not accepted by the government, political opposition was quickly destroyed when it arose, and power sat only with the ruling Ba'ath Party. Whilst there was some hope that there would be political reform during Assad's early years, these hopes quickly faded as the regime continued its authoritarian ways, using surveillance, censorship, and brutal force to hold power.

Syrian Protests in 2011

The most significant cause of the civil war was the lack of political freedom for the people. Syrians lived in a tightly controlled police state where the freedom of speech was not a possibility. The secret police, also known as mukhabarat, and other intelligence services under the control of the Assad regime had constant surveillance over the Syrian people, sparking fear and mistrust within. Anyone who dared criticise the regime faced arrest, torture, or simply disappeared. Over time, this began a widespread sense of frustration and oppression among the people.



Syrian GPD 1820 to 2018

Economic struggle also made its impact on the cause of the war. Syria had experienced limited economic growth in the early 2000s, with a rising poverty rate and unemployment, especially among the youths. Corruption, nepotism, and mismanagement were everywhere in the government, with regime-connected elites benefiting at the working-class citizens' expense. A severe water drought from 2006 to 2010 devastated agriculture in northeastern Syria. This forced millions of people (consisting of mostly poor farmers) to have to migrate to urban centres, which were already burdened by the economic strain, job shortages, and inadequate services.

When the Arab Spring uprisings had begun in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011, Syrians became inspired and began to demand a change. This started with peaceful protests in the southern city of Daraa caused by several teenagers that had been arrested and tortured for anti-government graffiti. The Assad regime chose to meet the protests with lethal force. Military force opened fire on unarmed civilian demonstrators, raided homes, and arrested activists. This aggressive response brought public anger and caused nationwide protests.

Assad's violent response only further complicated the situation. The Assad regime had dominated the Alawite minority (a branch of Shia Islam) and was viewed by many Sunni Muslims (the primary religious population) as oppressive and classist. While not initially a sectarian conflict, it increasingly took on a violent tone as militias and extremist groups exploited the opportunity of the religious divisions.

International powers soon became involved with the conflict, supporting various sides for both strategic and ideological reasons; this turned Syria into a proxy battleground. What began as a peaceful protest for a political reform quickly changed into one of the most horrific civil wars in the modern world. Rooted in decades of political repression, inequality, and a failed government.

Humanitarian Impact

The humanitarian impact of the Syrian Civil War is one of the worst civil crises in today's world. Since the start of the conflict in 2011, millions of people have been made casualties of the war, with over 500,000 people who have been directly killed and millions more that were injured or suffered psychological damage. The war has displaced more than 12 million Syrians from their homes, taking away over half the country's original population. This includes more than 5 million Syrians who have been forced to become refugees and flee to their neighbouring countries, Turkey, Lebanon, or Jordan. Another 6.5 million have also been internally displaced, resulting in overcrowded camps with restricted access to food, healthcare, and clean drinking water that is needed to survive.

The war has devastated Syria's infrastructure. Hospitals, schools, water treatment facilities, and housing have been bombed to dust, resulting in entire cities like Aleppo, Raqqa, and Homs being left in ruins. The health system is in a major crisis due to many medical professionals having been forced to flee Syria or having been casualties of the war, and medical supplies have become severely limited. In destroyed areas, civilians have suffered from starvation, lack of medical care, and exposure to chemical weapons. Education has also been greatly affected, with millions of children having missed years of school, and many are forced to grow up in refugee camps or war-torn regions with little opportunity of returning to normal life.

The economic toll on Syria has been just as devastating, with over 90% of Syrians now living below the poverty line and the country's GDP, which has fallen by more than 60% since 2010. Foreign sanctions, inflation, and a damaged industry have further resulted in limited access to food, electricity, and fuel for people in need. Humanitarian aid also has struggled to reach those in need due to ongoing conflict blocking it with restricted access and political interference.

The war has also left deep psychological scars on the people of Syria. With millions of people suffering from PTSD, especially among children, mental health services are virtually non-existent due to the damaged economy and corruption within the government. The long-term effects of displacement, loss, and violence will continue to have a lasting scar on Syrian people for generations to come unless a lasting resolution and reconstruction effort is reached.

Refugee's and their Return

The Syrian Civil War is the beginning of one of the largest refugee crises of this century, forcing millions of people to flee from their homes. Since the beginning of the civil war in 2011, more than 5.5 million Syrians have had to flee their country. A separate 6.5 million, however, are stuck in Syria but are internally displaced. The majority of these refugees have found safety in Syria's neighbouring countries (Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq), while others have found new homes in Europe and North America. Turkey hosts the largest population of these refugees, with over 3.5 million registered refugees. The country is straining its urban centres and social services with an unexpected increase in its population. Lebanon has a population of just over 5 million, yet has taken in more than 1 million Syrians, creating significant pressure on not just its infrastructure but also its economy and political stability to take in these people. Refugees often have to live in overcrowded camps or other types of settlements to survive. These settlements have restricted access to fundamental human rights such as education and healthcare. This struggle has left people trapped in cycles of poverty and legal insecurity, preventing them from fully settling into their new homes.

The question of refugees being returned to Syria has risen to become the focal point in discussions to return Syria in its journey of post-war recovery. While some countries and local authorities have promoted the idea of voluntary returns, the reality of the matter remains complex and dangerous to the people trying to make it. Many refugees fear persecution, or forced military conscription if they return to government-controlled areas, because of the

harsh Assad regime. Human rights organisations have documented cases where refugees have faced arrest, torture, and the confiscation of their homes or property upon their return. Their return has even been occurring in areas where active conflicts have subsided. Hospitals, schools, and water systems remain barely functional, and millions of homes lie in ruins.

International law requires that any refugee's return must be voluntary and safe; however, these conditions are rarely met. As of 2025, less than 300,000 Syrians have returned home. A real return of refugees depends on much more than just physical reconstruction; it will demand political reconciliation, a guarantee of legal rights, and the restoration of basic services. For many refugees, they had lost trust in the government, a struggle that will make return hard. Until Syria can become a safe and secure society, with accountability from its government, the voluntary return of refugees will remain unlikely.

Current Situation

December 2024 marked the collapse of the Assad regime following the Syrian opposition offensive led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, bringing an end to the 50 years of Baʿathist rule. Following their victory, a transitional government was formed under interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa. President al-Sharaa ratified a new provisional constitution in March of 2025 to guide a five-year transition period. Since then, efforts have been made to integrate the Syrian Democratic Forces and Kurdish institutions into the new national structures, with key agreements reached between President al-Sharaa and the SDF commander Mazloum Abdi in March.

Despite these institutional steps made, the situation remains an extremely fragile situation. UN humanitarian coordinators described the Syria situation as caught in a critical juncture, unsure that plans for a new social contract, law, and inclusive governance would be achieved. Despite the fall of Assad, violence has escalated in several regions. This includes notable cross-border clashes with Hezbollah along the Lebanese border and sectarian massacres in Sweida and its coastal areas, which have resulted in hundreds to over a thousand civilians being killed and displaced.

The humanitarian crisis continues to also be ongoing. As of 2025, over half of the Syrian population is still in need of aid, with over 7 million internally displaced persons and about 6.2 million refugees living abroad in neighbouring countries. The ongoing hostilities, collapsed infrastructure, and food shortages still pose dire risks to the nation.

With the fall of Assad, Syria is currently undergoing a new transition, resulting in new power vacuums that require filling. This will need the rebuilding of state institutions, ending violent outbreaks, and healing social divisions between the people, amid limited resources that the country still has, which will remain a formidable challenge.

Major parties involved

United Nations

The United Nations is a global political institution that strives to promote peace, security, and foster improved international relations. It was initially established on October 24th, 1945.

Assad Regime

The Assad Regime served as the official governing body in Syria during the civil war. The Assad Regime came into power in 2000 following the death of Assad's father.

Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

Also known as ISIS or the Islamic State, they are a terrorist organisation in the Middle East that fights against the controlling governments to instate their Islamic beliefs.

Free Syrian Army

The largest people's army in the civil war fighting against the Assad regime consists mainly of defected soldiers.

Constitutional Committee

The Constitutional Committee is a group of individuals responsible for draughting a country's constitution. In modern cases such as Syria's, this committee is often formed by the UN.

Timeline of events

2011 March 15th	The people begin to protest in Daraa against the Assad regime, marking the start of the Syrian people's uprising and the beginning of the civil war.
2011 July 29th	The FSA consists of defected soldiers. They initiated an armed response.
2012 June 30th	The Geneva I conference begins with an outline for peace and calls for a transitional governing body.
2013 August 21st	Chemical attacks in East Ghouta kill thousands of civilians. International condemnation begins.
2014 June 29th	ISIS declares a hostile takeover of Syria and Iraq, further escalating the conflict.
2015 September 30th	Russia directly involves itself in the war with airstrikes. This shifts the war in Assad's favour.
2015 December 18th	The UN Security Council publishes Resolution 2254, with the intent of endorsing a political transition and ceasefire.
2016 February 1st	Geneva peace talks continue but stall due to ongoing fighting.
2017 January 23rd	Russia, Iran, and Turkey lead the Astana talks. The goal of the conference was to focus on a ceasefire and de-escalation zones.
2018 April 7th	Suspected chemical attacks in Douma lead to the UK, France and the US all conducting airstrikes on the Assad regime.
2019 March 23rd	US-backed Syrian democratic forces claim the territorial defeat of ISIS in Baghouz.
2019 October 27th	Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the founder and leader of ISIS, commits suicide via a suicide vest during a US special forces raid.
2020 October 30th	The Constitutional Committee convenes in Geneva to draft a new constitution for Syria.
2021 May 26th	Bashar al-Assad is re-elected in a heavily criticised re-election with claims of fraud.
2022 July 10th	Cross-border aid from the UN going into northwest Syria is renewed; however, it is scaled down due to Russian pressure.
2023 February 6th	Earthquakes striking the middle east worsen humanitarian issues in Syria
2024 December 8th	The Assad regime falls.

2024 December 10th	The international donor summit in Brussels pledges aid for the reconstruction of Syria, contingent upon political reform.
2025 January 15th	The UN Human Rights Chief visits Syria, urging them for a transitional justice and national reconciliation process.
2025 May 17th	Syria establishes a National Commission for Transitional Justice and a commission to address war crimes and disappearances.

Possible solutions

The issue requires resolution due to the massive humanitarian impact and destabilisation it has on the surrounding region. The refugee crisis has only caused further strain on countries taking them in, such as Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, creating political and economic stress. The war has also left a massive power vacuum, which is being exploited by terrorist groups such as ISIS, only worsening the situation and further destabilising Syria. In addition to this, the ongoing violence, sanctions, and economic collapse have pushed over 90% of Syrians into poverty.

Political Unification

A more inclusive solution could establish a unified democratic government that includes the remnants of the major political parties in Syria, such as the old regime and the Kurdish-led SDF. If this government were to be successful and stabilise, it would be long-lasting and hopefully represent the people's and individuals' beliefs. However, this system would be incredibly challenging to implement with lasting social impacts; people would not be trusting of someone on the opposite side holding power.

Humanitarian and Reconstruction

This approach favours reconstruction and restoring infrastructure and other amenities, stabilising people's wellbeing and allowing for refugees to feel safer returning home. Job opportunities would also be made with the reconstruction effort, providing stability for returning refugees and further stabilising the economy. The risks of this method are still great; with the political situation still destroyed and terrorist organisations still operational, there are still massive safety risks for civilians and plentiful opportunities for the reconstruction to be destroyed.

International interference

With the collapse of the Assad regime, international interference could be a solution, with the UN directly stepping in, creating demilitarised zones and deploying peacekeeping forces to enforce them and remove criminal insurgency in the country until a stable government can be established. this solution faces challenges of higher chances with local resistance, with citizens feeling simply another regime placing itself in.

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