

# YEARS OF DESPAIR: THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR IN PERSPECTIVE

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## **Introduction**



The Syrian Civil War stands as one of the defining conflicts of the 21st century, a catastrophic blend of political, ideological, and geopolitical strife. It began in 2011 with a hopeful wave of protests inspired by the Arab Spring but soon descended into a labyrinth of violence, sectarianism, and international intervention. Over a decade later, the war has devastated many lives and left a lasting scar on the Middle East.

At its core, the war reflects not only the struggle for freedom within Syria but also the competing interests of regional and global powers. With over 620,000 lives lost and millions displaced, the war has brought unparalleled humanitarian suffering, economic collapse, and cultural destruction. To untwist the intricate layers of the Syrian Civil War, this informational review will explore key players, timeline of critical events, ideological spectrum, humanitarian impacts, and the persistent failures of peace negotiations.

## **1- Key Players and Factions: Opening up the Forces at War**

No war unfolds without the interplay of belligerents for control and power. The Syrian Civil War is no exception, hosting a mixture of groups with diverging ideologies and different strategies. On one side stands the Syrian government, led by former President Bashar al-Assad. On the other are the rebel forces including the Free Syrian Army, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

| Category                 | <b>Syrian Government</b><br>   | <b>Syrian Rebel Forces</b><br>   |
|--------------------------|---|---|
| Official Name            | Syrian Arab Republic  | Various Groups: Syrian opposition offensive   |
| Leader                   | Bashar al-Assad   | Various Faction Leaders   |
| Notable Leaders/Factions | General Suheil al-Hassan (SAA)  | Riad al-Asaad (FSA)<br>Abu Mohammad al-Julani (HTS)<br>Mazloum Kobani (SDF)   |
| Key Factions             | Syrian Arab Army (SAA)<br><br>National Defence Forces (NDF)<br><br>Shabiha Militia<br><br>Fatemiyoun Brigade (Afghanistan)<br><br>Hezbollah (Lebanon)<br><br>Zainebiyoun Brigade (Pakistan) | Free Syrian Army (FSA)<br><br>Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)<br><br>Harakat Ahrar al-Sham<br><br>Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)<br><br>Tanzim Hurras al-Din<br><br>Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement<br><br>National Front for Liberation<br><br>Turkistan Islamic Party |
| Type of Government       | Authoritarian<br>Secular<br>Ba'athist   | Mohamed al-Bashir's Transitional Government (Salvation Government)  |
| Goals/Ideology           | Secularism<br>Ba'athist Arab nationalism<br>State sovereignty<br>Alawite  | Anti-Assad<br>Democratic<br>Islamist<br>Kurdish autonomy  |
| Main Allies/Supporters   | Russia<br>Iran  | Turkey<br>U.S.<br>Saudi Arabia<br>Qatar<br>Western Countries  |

| Category                    | Syrian Government<br>               | Syrian Rebel Forces<br>  |
|-----------------------------|--|---|
| Military Support & Armament | Russian airstrikes<br>Iranian ground forces<br>Hezbollah fighters<br>Russian arms sales<br>Iranian weapons shipments | Various rebel factions<br>Foreign fighters from Turkey & U.S.<br>Turkish arms supplies<br>Smuggled weapons<br>Donations from the Gulf states and the West |
| Military Strategy           | Conventional warfare<br>Air superiority<br>Siege tactics   | Guerrilla warfare<br>Asymmetric tactics<br>Defensive holds  |
| War Crimes Allegations      | Chemical weapon use<br>Barrel bombs<br>Civilians targeting   | Human rights abuses by use of child soldiers<br>Arbitrary detention   |
| Economic Support            | Russian and Iranian financial aid<br><br>Oil exports (Kurdish-controlled areas)                                      | Turkish and Western states weaponry assistance  |

## 2- Timeline of the Conflict :A Record of War and Endurance

The Syrian Civil War's trajectory offers a forbidding lesson of escalation. Beginning with peaceful protests, the conflict escalated into a brutal civil war, marked by chemical attacks and the rise of ISIS. The recent collapse of the Assad regime in 2024 adds a new chapter, with ambiguity of what lies ahead.

### **Civil Uprising**

- Protests begin in Daraa against the Assad regime, inspired by the Arab Spring.
- Free Syrian Army (FSA) is formed by military defectors.
- U.S. and EU call for Assad's resignation.

**2012**

### **Chemical Attacks, Rebel Advances, and International Reaction**

- Chemical attack on Ghouta, kills hundreds of civilians. U.S. threatens military intervention.
- Syria agrees to dismantle its chemical weapons stockpile.

**2014**

### **Russian Intervention**

- Russia intervenes militarily in support of Assad regime.
- Syria's largest offensive begins with Russian airstrikes.

**2011**

### **Insurgency and Escalation to Full-Scale War**

- Rebels launch an assault on Damascus, the capital.
- Assad's government accused of using chemical weapons.

**2013**

### **Rise of ISIS**

- ISIS declares a caliphate, taking control of large parts of Syria and Iraq.
- U.S.-led airstrikes on ISIS begin.

**2015**

**2016**

**U.S. Airstrikes and ISIS Collapse in Syria**

- U.S. airstrikes hit Syrian government targets in response to the Khan Shaykhun chemical attack.
- U.S. forces clash with Syrian government troops in the southern desert.

**Battle for Aleppo**

Intense fighting in Aleppo. Syrian government recaptures the city with Russia's support.

**2017**

**Continued Struggles in Idlib and its Demilitarization**

- Another suspected chemical attack in Douma leads to U.S.-led airstrikes.
- Idlib remains the last major rebel-held area.

**2018**

**Turkish Offensive and U.S. Withdrawal**

- Turkey launches Operation Peace Spring against Kurdish forces in northern Syria.
- U.S. troop withdrawal opens the door for Turkish operations in Kurdish areas.

**2019**

**Ceasefire and Continued Conflict**

- March 2020: Russia and Turkey arrange a ceasefire in Idlib.
- June 2020: Tensions go on between Turkey and Russia.

**2020**

**Diplomatic shifts**

Some Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, begin normalizing relations with Assad.

**2023**

27th November- 8th  
December 2024

**Assad's End and HTS Takes Control**  
Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and allied coalition launched a surprise offensive, taking control of Aleppo. By December 5th,

### 3- Ideologies and Extremism Scale :The War of Beliefs

At the heart of the Syrian Civil War lies a clash of ideologies. From Ba'athist nationalism advocated by the Assad regime to the Kurdish pursuit of autonomy and the Salafi-jihadist visions of some of the rebel forces. Observing the varying degrees of extremism among groups can provide insights for peace-building and the future of Syria.

#### SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

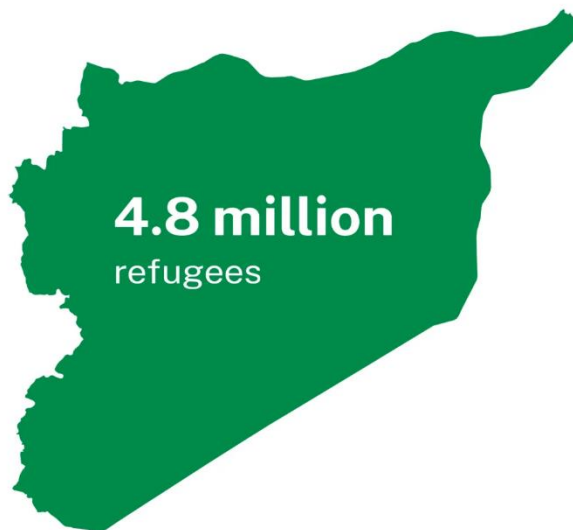
#### IDEOLOGICAL SPECTRUM (EXTREMISM)







## 4- Humanitarian and Economic Impact

The Syrian Civil War has left an enduring legacy of human suffering and economic ruin beyond the battlefields. With over 90% of the population living below the poverty line, Syria's economy has collapsed. Cultural treasures have been obliterated, hospitals decimated, and millions of civilians left in limbo as refugees or internally displaced persons (IDPs). The statistics tell a story of devastation, but they also show the resilience of those who continue to endure.

### SYRIAN CIVIL WAR KEY STATISTICS OF THE CIVIL WAR



|   |         |             |     |
|---|---------|-------------|-----|
|  | TÜRKIYE | 2.9 MILLION | 61% |
|  | LEBANON | 768,000     | 16% |
|  | JORDAN  | 620,000     | 13% |
|  | IRAQ    | 299,000     | 6%  |



## SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

### KEY STATISTICS OF THE CIVIL WAR



#### POPULATION

Before 2011, Syria had 22 million people. By 2024, the population reduced to around 17 million



#### HERITAGE DAMAGE

Syria's five out of six UNESCO World Heritage Sites have been damaged severely



#### ECONOMY AND GDP

Syria's economy has dramatically collapsed during the civil war. In 2011, the country's GDP stood at \$67.5 billion, but by 2023, it had plummeted to just \$9 billion.



#### POVERTY

Approximately 90% of Syria's population lives below the poverty line, while over 12 million people face acute food insecurity.



#### INFRASTRUCTURE

As of December 2022, only 59% of hospitals, 57% of primary healthcare facilities, and 63% of specialized medical centers in Syria were fully operational



#### ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

Between 2011 and 2019, nearly 19.3% of Syria's forest cover, equivalent to 157,406 acres, was lost. Agricultural productivity dropped by 40% by 2018.

## 5- Failed Peace Efforts: The Elusive Road to Peace

Many peace initiatives, from the Geneva talks to the Astana accords, have faltered. Revisiting these repeated failures may offer understandings of the implications of the Assad regime's collapse and the potential futures for a post-war Syria. Will the fractured state remain a theater for proxy wars and sectarian conflict? The answer may define the Middle East for years to come.

### **First Peace Talks**

The UN hosted the first peace talks in Geneva, discussing a transition that would lead to Assad's removal. However, by 2015, Assad had strengthened his position with the support of Russia and Iran.

**2016**

### **Sochi Talks**

In January 2018, Russia organized new talks in Sochi, but the Syrian opposition refused to participate, as Assad's removal was not a condition in the negotiations.

**2020**

### **Constitution Negotiations**

UN-led talks in Geneva aimed to draft a new Syrian constitution but collapsed due to irreconcilable disputes between Assad's regime and the opposition over governance and elections.

**2012**

### **Astana Talks**

A second attempt took place in Astana, Kazakhstan, where 'de-escalation zones' were established, temporarily reducing violence. However, the plan failed as the regime continued airstrikes in these areas.

**2018**

### **Ceasefire**

In 2020, Russia and Turkey brokered a ceasefire that reduced fighting. However, by late 2024, rebel forces, backed by foreign allies, succeeded in overthrowing the Assad regime, as millions of Syrians continued to endure harsh winters, droughts, and severe financial hardships.

**2021**

**2023**

**Arab League Diplomatic Push**

The Arab League sought Syria's reintegration and hosted talks in Cairo, but Assad's refusal to compromise and ongoing violence thwarted reconciliation efforts, despite Syria rejoining the League.

**A New Chapter for Syria**

The fall of the Assad regime is a monumental turning point for Syria. The UN Secretary-General has called for the rebuilding of peaceful institutions, while Special Envoy Geir Pedersen has urged talks in Geneva. These discussions seek to navigate a complex transition, with armed groups like HTS controlling parts of the country.

**2024**



## ABOUT

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