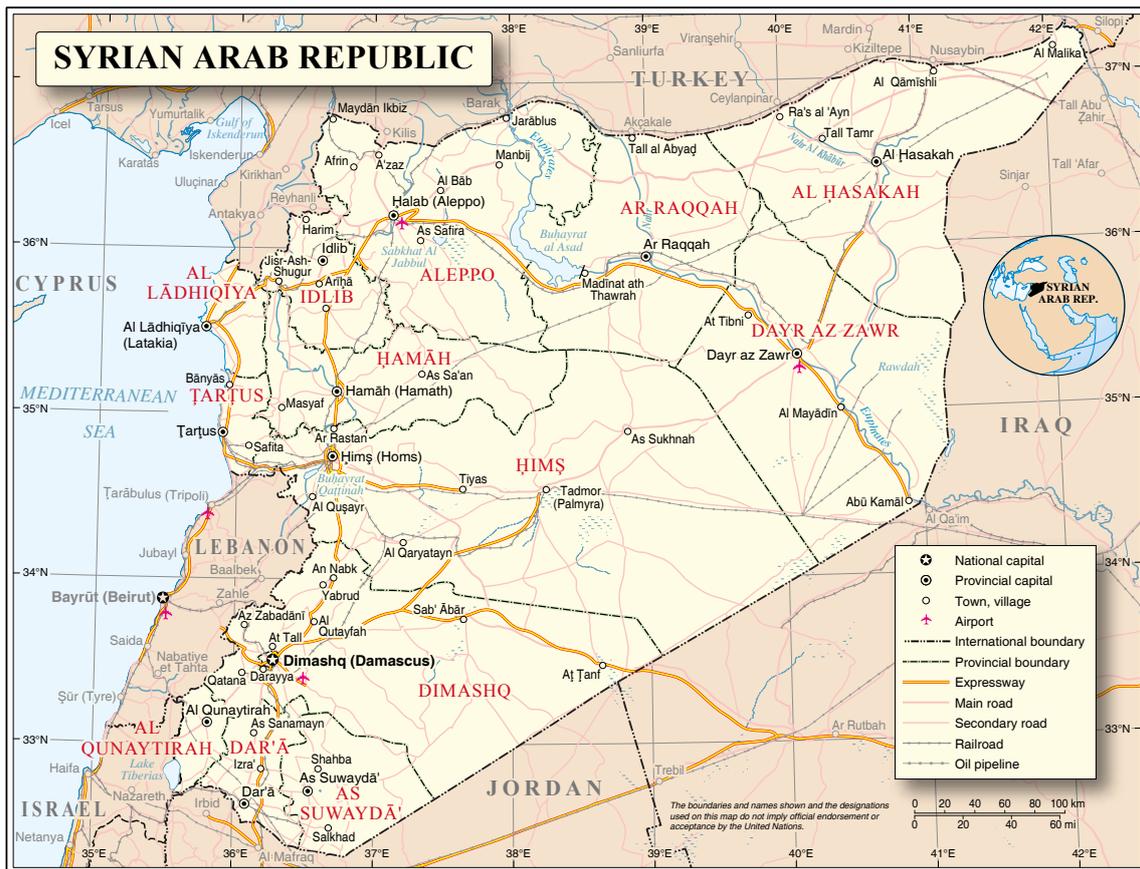


# SYRIA



**L'OSSERVATORIO**

Associazione Nazionale Vittime Civili di Guerra  
 RESEARCH CENTRE ON CIVILIAN VICTIMS OF CONFLICTS



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**Aleppo City**  
Credit: CC BY-SA, Ed Brambley  
Source: Flickr.com

## THE COUNTRY AT A GLANCE

Syria, officially the Syrian Arab Republic, is a country in Western Asia, bordering Lebanon and the Mediterranean Sea to the west, Turkey to the north, Iraq to the east, Jordan to the south, and Israel to the southwest. The country, formerly part of the Ottoman Arab Levant, then a French Mandate following World War I, gained independence in 1945. After a tumultuous period marked by coups d'état and instability, the Syrian Arab Republic finally came into being in 1961, just a few years before the Ba'athist coup d'état that brought to power Hafez al-Assad, followed in 2000 by his son Bashar. The conflict in Syria has been ongoing since 2011, as an offspring of the Arab Spring movement, when fighting broke out between pro-government and opposition forces, which took up arms in reaction to the violent crackdown on dissent. Very soon the opposition splintered, and more armed groups became involved, in particular Jabhat al Nusra (JAN), Islamic State (ISIS), and Kurdish armed groups such as People's Protection Units (YPG). The conflict has been marked since the beginning by high levels of violence and intensity, including indiscriminate aerial bombing by government forces and shelling by armed opposition. According to the UN Security Council, civilians have been subject to direct and indiscriminate attacks, including the widespread use of barrel bombs and other explosives in populated areas. According to figures from major NGOs, over 240,000 deaths were documented since the beginning of the conflict, including over 70,000 civilians, 12,000 of them children. In March 2013, the opposition umbrella group, the Syrian National Coalition, formed the Syrian Interim Government, whose representatives were invited to take up Syria's seat at the Arab League. On 17 August 2015, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted a statement on a peace initiative, and on 9 September 2015 the United States and Russia announced a plan to bring about a ceasefire.

**FLAG**

<b>NAME</b>	<b>Name</b> Syrian Arab Republic سورية العربية Al-Jumhūrīyah Al-'Arabīyah As-Sūrīyah
<b>CAPITAL</b>	<b>Damascus</b>
<b>OFFICIAL AND VERNACULAR LANGUAGE</b>	<b>Arabic</b>
<b>POPULATION</b>	<b>17 million</b>
<b>ETHNIC GROUPS</b>	<b>74% Arabs 9% Kurds Greeks Armenians Assyrians Circassians Mandeans Turks</b>
<b>NEIGHBOURS</b>	<b>Lebanon Turkey Iraq Jordan Israel</b>
<b>TOTAL OF CIVILIANS AFFECTED (2016)</b>	<b>17 million</b>
<b>GDP</b>	<b>USD 107 billion</b>
<b>PEOPLE IN NEED OF ASSISTANCE (2015)</b>	<b>13.5 million</b>
<b>LIFE EXPECTANCY AT BIRTH</b>	<b>74 years</b>
<b>SYRIAN REFUGEES</b>	<b>4.8 million</b>
<b>HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX</b>	<b>0.59 (134/185)</b>
<b>IDPs</b>	<b>6.5 million</b>
<b>GLOBAL PEACE INDEX</b>	<b>3.8 (163/163)</b>
<b>CORRUPTION PERCEPTION RANKING</b>	<b>154/168</b>

## INTRODUCTION

### **Geopolitical context**

Before the Civil War, Syria was classified by the World Bank as a “lower middle income country.” The country’s economy was mostly dependent on the oil and agriculture sectors. In particular, the oil sector provided about 40% of export earnings, but currently almost all oilfields are in areas controlled by armed groups. Syria’s economy continues thus to deteriorate: since the civil war began, it has known a 35% contraction, and the Syrian pound lost 80% of its value. The government increasingly relies on credit from Iran, Russia and China. At regional level, Syria has border issues with Israel about the Golan Heights, which has been Israeli-occupied since 1964, and whose buffer zone is patrolled by the UN Disengagement Observer Force. Syria also shares disputed borders with Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. At international level, Syria is a member of the United Nations (UN) and of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM); it is currently suspended from the Arab League (AL) and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and self-suspended from the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). Diplomatic relations have been severed with several nations, including most European and some Mediterranean countries, the United States, and the Gulf States. In 2013, the AL invited representatives of the Syrian Interim Government to occupy the chair of Syria. Iran, Lebanon and Russia have been consistent supporters of the Syrian government, its army and militias. Iran and more recently Russia stepped up their support, and currently have an active military presence in pro-government territories, involving both land and air forces. On 18 September 2015, Russia and the US began military talks to discuss their involvement in Syria. Government control in 2015 extended to approximately 30–40% of the de jure state area and less than 60% of the population.

Peacekeeping missions: The United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF, since 1964).

### **Main UN documents on Syria**

- [UN Security Council Meeting briefing on the humanitarian situation \[S/PV.7757\]](#), 22 August 2016
- [Secretary-General’s report on the humanitarian situation \[S/2016/714\]](#), 16 August 2016
- [UN Human Rights Council resolution condemning the continued systematic, widespread and gross violations and abuses of human rights and all violations of international humanitarian law \[A/HRC/RES/32/25\]](#), 1 July 2016
- [UN Security Council press statement that expressed outrage at attacks against civilians and civilian objects \[SC/12360\]](#), 12 May 2016
- [UN Security Council resolution that endorsed the cessation of hostilities and called for the resumption of political talks \[S/RES/2268\]](#), 26 February 2016
- [UN Security Council resolution focused exclusively on a political solution to the Syrian crisis \[S/RES/2254\]](#), 18 December 2015
- [UN Security Council presidential statement on trafficking in persons in situations of conflict, with a particular focus on ISIS and the impact on women and children \[S/PRST/2015/25\]](#), 16 December 2015

## **The genesis of the conflict**

The ongoing Syrian Civil War, inspired by the Arab Spring revolutions, began in 2011 following the violent crackdown by the Syrian Army of peaceful street protests. In reaction to the violence by the government, army defectors formed the Free Syrian Army. After years of fighting, internationally isolated and cut off from most oil fields and supply routes, pro-government forces have progressively grown tired while the opposition has splintered and weakened. As a result, in time both forces have lost strategic positions to ISIS and other armed groups. During 2015, with the exception of the takeover of Palmyra in May, ISIS has mainly suffered a series of setbacks caused by the YPG, supported by other armed groups and coalition airstrikes. Currently, Ar-Raqqa governorate continues to be ISIS's stronghold in Syria, while the group also holds significant swathes of territory in Aleppo, Al Hasakeh, Homs and Deir-ez-Zor governorates. At local level, the succession of ceasefires and peace talks at local levels to pass towns and cities to one side or the other witness both the dynamic nature of frontlines, and the fatigue of most parties.

## **Peace talks and agreements**

For most of the duration of the civil war, peacemaking has been left in a secondary position with respect to military solutions. A combination of reasons ranging from regional power brawls, ambition for religious prominence in the area, economic interests in the conflict, among others, have impeded a serious discussion in the first place. In particular, one of the major obstacles was that main opposing parties were considered by some or all of the national and international stakeholders as unacceptable counterparts, with each demanding a change in the leadership on the other side as pre-requisite for negotiation. Even when they finally managed to develop, peace talks between the Coalition and Syrian regime at the UN-sponsored Geneva conferences in 2012 and 2014 failed to produce a non-military resolution of the conflict. Russia also called for and hosted a series of talks and meetings but failed to make any progress whatsoever, despite its privileged relationship with the Syrian government. At local level, peace talks and ceasefires have dotted the frontline to break sieges and solve protracted fighting, for example three ceasefires in August-September 2015 have been implemented in Zabadani town (rural Damascus), and al Foua and Kefraya towns in Idleb Governorate. However, all these initiatives remained sporadic and isolated, but never part of a general peacebuilding framework. On 17 August 2015, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted a statement on a new Syrian peace initiative, with little results. On 9 September 2016, the United States and Russia agreed on a pact calling for the Syrian government and the opposition to respect a nationwide ceasefire, including a no-flying order over the regions controlled by the opposition.

## THE VOICE OF THE VICTIMS – VIDEOS

UNICEF, Before the conflict: A child's memory of Syria,

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_detailpage&v=MtVg1NICWoU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&v=MtVg1NICWoU)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Last accessed on 4 October 2015

## HUMANITARIAN CONTEXT

Overall, more than 240,000 people have estimated to have been killed since 2011 and more than one million people have been wounded or suffered permanent disability. Four years in the conflict, this dire picture does not show signs of improvement. According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, over the first six months of 2015, 11,090 people were killed, including 6,928 civilians, with government forces allegedly accused of 77% of the casualties. These figures follow the highest annual death toll since the war began, recorded in 2014 with 76,000 people killed in conflict, including 18,000 civilians. With most of the country engulfed in a ruthless and chaotic civil war, with shattered basic services and a perennial flux of IDPs, the whole population endured the suffering, while humanitarian actors find increasing obstacles and dangers in operating cross-line and cross-border.



**Syrian refugees in Turkey**

*Credit: CC BY-NC-ND 2.0, European Union 2016 – European Parliament  
Source: Flickr*

### Shelter

Since January 2016, over 900,000 people – an average of 5,000 per day – have been newly displaced within Syria. In the country there are currently an estimated 6.5 million IDPs, half of which are children. As of August 2016, 12 million housing units have been damaged and 400,00 destroyed. Despite this, very limited information is available on shelter needs of the IDPs, as humanitarian access has become increasingly dangerous and limited. As a consequence, 2.4 million people lack adequate shelter with 1.7 million IDPs are living in camps and collective centres. Many of them are staying in unfinished buildings, or in schools and other public buildings, which are often overcrowded and where the IDPs lack access to basic services.



**Doctors and medical staff treating injured rebel fighters in Aleppo**

*Credit: Public domain, Scott Bobb  
Source: Wikimedia Commons*

### Health

Estimates from 2016 identified over 11 million people in need of health assistance. By 2015, the number of available health professionals has fallen to approximately 45% respect to 2011 levels, not only because of insecurity but also of direct targeting. Between 2011 and 2015, Physicians for Human Rights has recorded the killing of 633 medical personnel and 271 attacks on 202 medical facilities. These statistics include 142 deaths by torture or execution. Populations living in hard-to-reach or besieged areas have limited or no access to healthcare, especially in Aleppo, Dar'a, Homs, Hama, Idleb and Al Hasakeh governorates. The number of diarrhea cases increased by more than 40% over May–July 2015, and significant increases in hepatitis A and typhoid cases were also reported by the World Health Organization over the same period.

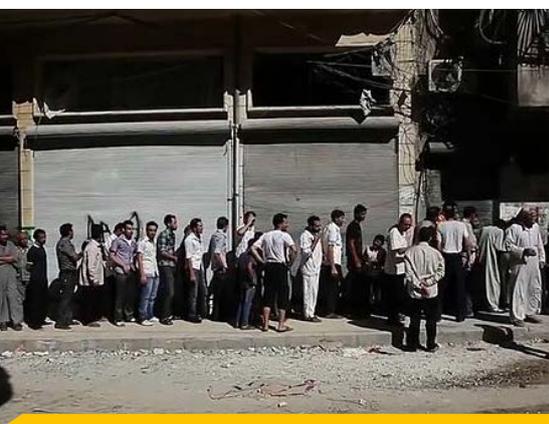


**Syrian Children filling drinking water in bottles at Al-Zaatari camp for Syrian refugees in Jordan**

*Credit: CC BY-SA 4.0, Mustafa Bader  
Source: Wikimedia Commons*

## Water and sanitation

New waves of displacement have put the already crumbling networks under further strain, leaving 4.6 million people in need of water and sanitation assistance. In particular, an estimated half of the total water production capacity in Syria has been lost or damaged, while one-third of water treatment plants are no longer functioning, and sewage treatment has halved. The situation is further exacerbated as deliberate disruptions to water supply systems are increasingly being used by various parties to the conflict as a tactic of war. Since January 2015 18 deliberate water cuts have already been recorded in Aleppo alone.



**Aleppines waiting in a bread line while shelling continues.**

*Credit: Public domain, Voice of America News  
Source: Wikimedia Commons*

## Food security

Paucity of agricultural inputs (such as seeds, fertilizer, and fuel); damage to agricultural machinery, irrigation systems, and storage facilities; disruptions in electricity supply; and destruction of standing crops are recorded. Food prices increased sharply in early 2015, with the average monthly prices of wheat flour and rice have increased by 301% and 629%, respectively. In besieged areas, wheat flour and rice prices have risen by 669% and 560%, respectively. High food prices have caused households to reduce the number of meals and resort to food of lower quality and less nutrition. Currently, more than half of Syria's population is estimated to be living in extreme poverty.



**University of Damascus**

*Credit: CC BY 2.0, Bryn Pinzgauer  
Source: Wikimedia Commons*

## Education

In areas of prolonged conflict in Syria, education enrolment is estimated to be around 6%, with the primary reason for student drop-out being the need to work to support the family. Estimates of schools having been damaged, destroyed or occupied since March 2011 vary between 5,000 and 14,000, according to the sources. As a result of the lack of infrastructure, insecurity and displacement, between 2.1 and 2.4 million school-aged children are currently out of school, while another 400,000 children are at risk of dropping out. As of August 2016, 7.5 million children and adolescents are in need of education assistance.



**Bombed out vehicles after street fighting.**

*Credit: Public domain, Voice of America News  
Source: Wikimedia Commons*

## Protection

Protection concerns are widespread as non-state armed groups and pro-government forces continue to commit violations of human rights and humanitarian law. Among the most grave allegations are human and organ trafficking, the use of chemical weapons, and the direct targeting of ethnic and religious communities, especially in ISIS-occupied areas. As of August 2016, 13.5 million people, including 6 million children are in need of humanitarian protection. Both government and opposition forces have reportedly carried out arbitrary detention and abduction. Syria is now contaminated by large quantities of unexploded ordnances (UXOs), and the situation is exacerbated by the presence of booby-trapped houses in some areas such as the eastern sector of Kobane and the surrounding countryside. UXOs and other explosive devices are among the main reasons preventing the return of IDPs as 66 people, mostly civilians, were killed in the first quarter of 2015 alone. Various opposition groups, including JAN, Kurdish groups, and ISIS have been found to recruit children.



**A destroyed tank on a road in Aleppo.**

*Credit: Public domain, Voice of America News  
Source: Wikimedia Commons*

## Access

In Syria, 5.9 million people living in hard-to-reach areas and besieged areas without regular access to humanitarian assistance. Between 2011 and 2015, 77 humanitarian workers have been killed in Syria because of the conflict, 10 in the first quarter of 2015. Humanitarian agencies are also facing staffing issues due to Syrians fleeing the country, which is particularly worrying for NGOs providing health services.



**Women peace activists set up gravestones in Montreux, at Geneva 2 peace talks for Syria, to remember the civilian casualties**

*Credit: CC BY-NC-ND 2.0,  
Maria Christina Travaglio/Les Studios Casagrande  
Source: Flickr*

## TRUTH-SEEKING PROCESSES

Considering that transitional activities are devoted to healing wounds, most observers – including Syrians – believe that Syrian society cannot afford to implement a justice program any time soon. Nevertheless, experts stressed the importance of formulating a plan for a comprehensive transitional justice program, scheduled for implementation at a later stage when transitional institutions are in place and basic security can be guaranteed and enforced.

## FIGHT AGAINST IMPUNITY AND REPARATION

At present none of the parties to the conflict has the capacity to enforce law and order on all of Syrian territory, and in disputed areas even local control is more nominal than real. There is no national or international pressure to ensure accountability as the most influential actors are backing their partners and putting the blame on counterparts, thus fueling a partisan sense of impunity. In some areas, especially those controlled by ISIS, ISIS-affiliated groups, and Government-held regions, law and order is allegedly enforced through arbitrary detentions, torture and summary executions. While transitional programs and accords remain distant and daunting prospects, the idea of an amnesty is already sought by some, as part of any future negotiation process. Experts have been so far cautious about commenting on the issue, stressing that criteria and mechanisms of accountability should be carefully agreed upon between the parties, as current figures seem to show an overwhelming amount of crimes being attributable to government forces and its militias.

## PEACEBUILDING

According to many observers, the current situation on the ground does not present the conditions for a political solution. While the government staunchly clings to its denial regarding any discussion over political transitional processes and asks to focus on anti-terrorism and stability, the opposition continue to represent a less-than-reliable, splintered counterpart. In January 2015, some independent figures and representatives from the two main opposition coalitions (the SNC and NCCDC) met in Cairo and issued a ten-point statement ahead of a dialogue organized in Moscow, but failed to build a solid, shared and unique position around which to rally the opposition parties. All the three UN special envoys that succeeded in the role, tried to create a space to manoeuvre through a series of ceasefire proposals and the creation of humanitarian zones. However, reactions to their efforts by the parties have been lukewarm at best, and support from international stakeholders almost non-existent.



**UN Women convenes conference on Syrian women's participation in the Syrian political process**

*Credit: CC BY-NC-ND 2.0, UN Women  
Source: Flickr*



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