

CHAPTER 1

UNDERSTANDING THE BACKGROUND OF THE SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS

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Abstract

Although considerable focus has been given to the Syrian refugee crisis, it has hardly been examined in relation to its political origins. Rather, it is often treated as an isolated humanitarian event or one that was simply caused by 'civil war.' While true, such a broad and simplistic explanation says little about –and sometimes ignores - the underlying politics that did not only create the crisis but also shaped its development. Therefore, this article comes as an attempt to trace the political roots of the Syrian conflict, explain its dynamics, identify its main actors, and finally illustrate how it drove millions out of their homes.

Keywords: Syria, civil war, jihadism, refugee crisis

Presentation

The period between 2015 and 2016 witnessed a shift in the migration flows to the European bank of the Mediterranean, which left European leaders facing their biggest challenge after the financial crisis and struggling to devise adequate responses. The migration or refugee 'crisis,' as it came to be known, saw an enormous influx of migrants and refugees from Africa, the Middle East and South Asia who crossed the Mediterranean Sea to reach the southern parts of Europe. The numbers of illegal border-crossings began to rise early in 2011 as thousands of Africans started to cross the Mediterranean towards the Italian Island of Lampedusa, but this trend changed and between January and September 2015 the majority migrants were setting sail from Turkey to Greece through the Aegean Sea. By 2016, those had constituted 70% of the 1 million who had reached European shores (UNHCR, 2016).

Such a change in migration trends was rooted in the political turmoil and armed conflicts that swept these parts of the world, especially the MENA region during the Arab Spring. But the numbers abated dramatically after the European Union and Turkey reached an agreement that allowed Greece to return illegal migrants to Turkey in exchange for financial assistance and increased resettlement of refugees from Turkey to the European Union.

Notably most asylum applicants during the crisis were Syrians, who were fleeing its years-long conflict. Between April and June 2015, the number of asylum applications lodged by Syrians rose from 11,000 to 21,000, and in the following three months around 190,000 Syrians were moving towards the EU. By October the total became 507,000 Syrians, around 39% of the overall number of asylum seekers in Europe, and by 2018, the number reached about 1 million (Eurostats, 2018).

Yet, although the refugee crisis became closely associated with the conflict in Syria, little focus has been dedicated to its political background. More often than not, the mass exodus of Syrians is looked at as an isolated humanitarian problem, and not as a consequence of a crisis that, in essence, is a political one. What caused this crisis and how did it turn into a civil war? Who are the actors involved in the war? And how did that drive millions of Syrians out of their country? Exploring the roots, context and background of the crisis is important not only to developing a deeper understanding of it, but also to devising viable responses and expanding the scholarly outlook on it. Therefore, this article seeks to examine the political roots that led to the Syrian war and the ensuing refugee crisis, and to explain how and why it happened.

It will do so by providing a historical perspective of pre-war Syria and the underlying social, political, and economic factors that triggered the protests in 2011, and how the pro-democracy movement descended into a protracted civil conflict. Against this backdrop the chapter will illustrate how the conflict drove millions of Syrians out of their country.

Pre-2011 Syria

Following Syria's independence from France in 1946, and a brief semi-democratic period, the country underwent a long period of political instability characterised by a cycle of military takeovers. This had continued until the Ba'ath party seized power through a military coup in 1963 in what came to be known as the "8th of March Revolution." Ba'ath brought about a massive transformation to Syria's political landscape, as a new class of rural, lower-class politicians and militaries, most of whom came from religious minorities took over, thus replacing traditional urban Sunni elites. The ideological drive of Ba'athists was a mixture radical nationalism and a high level of populist politics (Van Dusen, 1975), and their vision was not yet another coup, but wholesale revolution towards which they employed institutionalised sectarianism, military rule, and Leninist political organisation (Hinnebusch, 2002, p.44)

Nonetheless, the Ba'athist revolution was not a guarantee for political stability, as schisms within the party ranks continued to undermine its position, especially after the defeat against Israel in 1967 and the loss of the Golan Heights. It was not until the then minister of defence Hafez al-Assad came to power that Syria ushered in a long reign of stability.

Assad approached state construction and power consolidation with the priority of ending the divisions that had characterised Syria's political life since the independence and cost Ba'ath much of its capital (Darwishe, 2013, p.5). Once in power, he assigned a loyal group of his clan, mostly Alawites, to key offices in the party and the security branches. He also built patronage networks of other religious minorities around the regime and worked to co-opt notable Sunni families to prevent potential dissent. Economically, Assad was able to create a sustainable model by loosening the radical economic program of Ba'ath. He established a lasting alliance with wealthy Sunnis by giving them economic advantages as well as high posts in the party and the government. Furthermore, a limited process of economic liberalisation created class of urban bourgeoisie (mostly merchants and industrialists) and granted it a privileged access to the system by means of personal connections and patronage making it largely dependent on the regime.

In so doing, Assad founded a cross-sectarian, cross-class coalition that would guarantee long-term political and societal stability (Darwishe, 2013, p.6-7). As both stability and power consolidation progressed, the Ba'athist state gradually began to take a pyramidal shape with the base being Assad's inclusive cross-sectarian, cross-class composition; while at the top the loyal circle of party and military leaders constituted the main levers of power and control (Ziadeh, 2011, p.14).

Power was further concentrated and legalised through the constitution of 1973,¹ whose design came to codify a strongly presidential system whereby a pyramid-like structure makes all state institutions lead to the president (Heller, 1974, p.53). The hallmark of that constitution was its 8th article that declared the Ba'ath a de facto "leader of both state and society," and cemented a power dynamic via which a new social contract made Ba'ath an uncontested force in politics, as well as social and economic planning. Such monopoly over power was also reflected in the electoral system that guaranteed party a legislative majority in the Syrian Parliament and made the party's leadership responsible for nominating the president. Only a small number of other parties were permitted to engage in national politics under the National Progressive Front, a coalition of "progressive parties" lead Ba'ath. Political life in Syria was further paralysed by a state of emergency that had been in force since the party came to power and was extended beyond Assad's death until 2012. Maintaining it was important as it meant greater unchecked authority to the president, who could accordingly encroach on the legislative branch and make decisions without referring back to the parliament. It also gave security organs and intelligence apparatus an upper hand, at the expense of the judicial branch.

The status quo remained almost unchanged until Assad's death on June 11, 2000. One day after, presidency was transferred to his son Bashar. The power transfer arrangements included the amendment of Article 83 of the constitution, which required the age of the president to be at least 40. Accordingly, it became 34, the age of Bashar at the time. He was also promoted from Staff-Colonel to Lieutenant-General by Decree no.9 to become the Supreme Commander of the Syrian Armed Forces (another requirement for presidency). His nomination was approved unanimously in the parliament, and later received 97.92% of the votes in a national referendum. The swiftness of this hereditary succession and the ease that characterised the process came to showcase the institutionalisation of authoritarianism in Syria, and the depth of the Ba'athist control over the state (Rubin, 2007, p.133-36; Stacher, 2011, p.198-212).

¹ Full text available at: <http://aceproject.org/ero-en/regions/mideast/SY/syria-constitution-1973/view>

The arrival of a new leadership stirred significant debate and speculation on whether Syria was going to maintain its old authoritarian track, or otherwise adopt a new path of reform. Early on in his presidency, Bashar was conceived as a young, westernised, pragmatist reformer who could revolutionize Syria's politics and Economy; such an image had raised both domestic and international hopes (Leverette, 2005, p.68). At the same time, the fact that Bashar launched a series of reforms, though arguably not drastic, signalled a serious commitment to modernising Syria. His approach involved a more liberal economy, as he opened the country for private investment, and later sanctioned a transition to social market economy. At the same time, a limited process of political liberalisation included a modification of the NPF charter to include more political parties, far-reaching reshuffles, and the announcement that Ba'ath would no longer interfere in managing the state's day-to-day affairs. Criticism of the regime started to be met with more tolerance, and wider freedoms of expression and assembly were granted (Leverette, 2005, p.96). Yet, others expressed an immediate cynical view and questioned the impact of these reforms on the existing authoritarian structure, given that any meaningful change would imply an existential threat to the regime (Hinnebusch 2002, 161). In fact, disillusionment with Assad's will to reform became began to increase after the so-called "Damascus Spring" movement invoked a ruthless reaction from the Syrian authorities in 2001 (Ziadeh, 2011, 68). The movement included hundreds of prominent Syrian intellectuals and civil society figures who signed the "Manifesto of the Thousand" demanding Assad to cancel the martial law in effect since 1963. Their demands also included amnesty for political prisoners and law reforms to allow a more inclusive political environment. However, the movement was soon crushed and several of its members were arrested and charged with "trying to change the constitution by illegal means."

While some saw that Assad did not envisage a departure from his father's policies, especially one that could jeopardize the existing status quo, others argued that his impetus for change was hampered by various overwhelming factors. The first of those were the regime's "old guards," who were strictly opposed to reform and the challenging legacy of structural problems that were larger than Assad's "good intentions" (Ziadeh, 2011, 49). Leverette (2005, p.94-98) opined that because of such factors, Assad's approach to change favoured a gradualist Chinese model, where economic liberalisation precedes political openness. However, the first decade of Assad's rule fell below the high expectations, and his planned upgrade to post-populist authoritarianism did not only fail to fix the built-in state vulnerabilities, but also created more fatal ones.

The promised political openness advanced in a slow-pace, and so did the promises to improve rule of law and protection of human rights. Meanwhile, *Infitah*, or economic liberalisation, morphed into a *laissez faire* but only to a small class of capitalist cronies, making business opportunities evermore exclusive. This also unveiled the deep roots of corruption and clientelism within the state's institutions. The transition into the social market economy made the urban bourgeois increasingly richer, while leaving the plebian rural population susceptible to both poverty and anti-regime mobilisation. Other measures such as the selective enlargement of the private sector had similar impact on widening the gap between society classes. Furthermore, a growth in free trade with China and Turkey caused great damage the domestic industrial community (Hinnebusch & Zintl, 2014, p.92). Consequences were ultimately catastrophic as 30% percent of the population toiled under poverty lines (El-Laithy & Abu Ismail, 2005), and levels of inequality rose from 33.7 in 1997 to 37.4 in 2004 (Bibi & Nabli, 2010, p.40). To further exacerbate the situation, a wave of drought hit the eastern part of Syria in 2006 putting 95% of the region's population in need for assistance and driving over a million people to be internal migrants (Darwisheh, 2013, p.11). Failure to absorb the migrating agrarian class in bigger cities raised the already alarming level of unemployment. Gradually, the regime was losing its social base, mainly in the once-loyal rural constituency. The impacted population was highly mobilised for rebellion, until eventually the occurrence of the Arab Spring provided an incentive and emboldened Syrians to take to the streets to demand reform. But as that happened, and protests started to grow, they were met an excessively violent reaction which was an early indication that the regime was neither ready, nor willing to compromise.

Post-2011 Syria

Scenes of mass protests across the Arab Spring states and televised resignations of dictators in Tunisia and Egypt provided an impetus for Syrians who had already been mobilised by social, economic, and political grievances. But the direct trigger of the protests in Syria was the arrest and torture of a group of school children who sprayed anti-regime slogans on their school wall. Anger over the incident turned into an expansive wave of popular protests that started to gain increasing momentum. The Syrian government responded by intensifying its crackdown causing more civilian deaths and encouraging wider political dissent.

At the outset there was a realisation within the upper echelons of the Syrian regime that making any concessions that involve structural changes may have uncalculated consequences that could jeopardize the regime's very existence. Therefore, a decision was made early on to pursue a security strategy and end the protests through military means (Darwisheh, 2013, p.2). To justify the use of force against the anti-regime protests, whose peaceful nature won both domestic and international support, the regime's strategy involved a propaganda campaign that invoked sectarian terms to depict the movement as a Sunni-led, Jihadi one or as a conspiracy orchestrated by foreign intelligence. Furthermore, using excessive force constituted a way to push what became a nationwide uprising toward militarisation, thus making it easier for the regime to its full military power while appearing as a state actor defending its security against armed insurgents. Eventually, the outcome of this strategy was a dramatic rise in the death toll and further escalation.

Later in 2011, a group of army defectors founded the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and announced they would lead an armed struggle to overthrow the regime of Bashar al-Assad. The birth of the FSA marked the beginning of the militarisation of the Syrian uprising and the civil war the ensued. But by 2013, loose organisation, internal divisions and lack of support had weakened the FSA significantly and gave way to Islamist factions that had already emerged and began to dominate the scene. In parallel, a political body called the Syrian National Council formed in Turkey and later merged with other opposition groups under the name the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and opposition forces. The latter has since acted as a government in exile, while representing the opposition in negotiations with the Syrian government.

Unlike the other Arab Spring cases, efforts towards toppling the Syrian regime have been largely unsuccessful. Apart from the Arab Spring's delayed advent to Syria, which provided the regime with sufficient time to devise a counterstrategy, the resilience it has exhibited could be attributed to several internal and external factors. On the internal level, the Syrian regime's power dynamics and institutional structures have made it more resilient than initially expected. As Darwishe noted, the complex power relations within the ranks of the Assad regime and its strong foundational nature enabled it to "maintain elite cohesion and minimize institutional defections," while its informal layer of power, including security apparatus, the military and the Ba'ath party allowed it to be "less constrained by institutional considerations" (Darwisheh, 2013, p.13). Another crucial factor is the sectarian structure of the Syrian security sector through which key positions in the army and the intelligence services were assigned to Assad's clan, including members of his family, inner circle, and the Alawite community.

This has guaranteed unwavering loyalty, stemming from a conviction among these circles, especially the Alawites that their survival is closely associated with that of the regime. Third, the neo-liberal economic policies of Bashar al-Assad and the transition towards the social market economy created a new class of capitalists who were given exclusive access to, and even monopoly of the different sectors of Syria's economy. This new group, in addition to the traditional, wealthy, Sunni elites in Damascus and Aleppo has become largely dependent on the regime, and therefore saw that their economic privileges required maintaining their support of the status quo (Haddad, 2012). Eventually, these overlapping factors have significantly helped Assad to weather political, military, and economic challenges on the internal front.

Beyond the original parameters

Despite Assad's ability to maintain his grip on power, the crisis continued to escalate, especially as it began to be evermore internationalised. A growing number of state and non-state actors who pursued divergent agendas in Syria added to the original complexity of the situation and protracted the conflict. The competing interests of certain regional and international powers were but some among a host of interwoven factors that took the Syrian war out of its original parameters and invited these powers to intervene. Other factors included the Syrian opposition's hopes for a western military intervention, as in the case of Libya, and the regime's military inability to engage in a prolonged guerilla warfare with armed opposition groups, as well as the unprecedented flow of Syrian refugees to neighbouring countries and Europe and the rise of transnational terrorist groups that have been viewed as a global threat. With the involvement of international players like the U.S and Russia, and regional ones like Iran, Israel, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, the Syrian civil war was no longer about the politics but about the geopolitics of Syria.

Key Players

The American involvement in Syria started with calls for President Assad to step down, and though that role later grew, it remained limited to providing limited assistance, including training and equipment to several moderate rebel factions. Such assistance, however, has been far from sufficient to tip the power balance in their favor, and the program was ultimately terminated.

As extremist organisations including al-Qaeda's affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra and The Islamic State in Iraq and Sham, (ISIS) emerged between 2012 and 2013, the focus of the Obama administration shifted towards fighting terror, and thus, an international U.S-led coalition was formed and began conducting airstrikes against ISIS targets in eastern Syria. Simultaneously, the U.S supported the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a joint ground force of Kurdish and Arab Fighters created to fight ISIS. In 2017 and 2018 the U.S conducted punitive airstrikes against several Syrian regime locations as a response to its repeated use of chemical weapons against opposition areas (Humud, Blanchard & Nikitin, 2017). After 2017, as the American-led efforts succeeded in driving ISIS out of most its territories in the East, the U.S objectives saw a strategic transformation towards stabilising the region and countering the Iranian presence.

Russia on the other hand has sought to preserve its long standing and strategic alliance with Syria by working politically and militarily to keep Assad in power. To Russia, the stakes in Syria involve Russia's only naval base on the Mediterranean at the Syrian port of Tartus, and a fear of losing yet another ally in the region should Assad face the fate of former Libyan leader Muammar Ghaddafi. Equally important are Russia's lucrative weapon sales to Assad's government and the reconstruction contracts the latter has promised Russian firms. Furthermore, Russia regards its involvement in Syria to project military might and to present itself as an increasingly influential power in global affairs. Those reasons prompted a direct Russian intervention in the conflict in 2015 to shore up Assad after his forces had suffered various defeats, especially in the north-western province of Idlib. This intervention has helped Assad recapture vast rebel territories but has also driven the largest waves of external and internal displacement during the conflict (Borshchevskaya, 2018).

Another ally of Assad, Iran, has stepped in earlier in the conflict and has invested vast resources to ensure the survival of the Syrian regime. Tehran's investment has translated to petroleum supplies, credit line extension and large numbers Shia volunteers and IRGC fighters deployed for combat and advisory purposes. The reason behind this support derives from a history of converging interests between the two regimes, and Iran's regional strategy to which Syria is deemed vital. For decades, Tehran has been keen to establish and expand its foothold in Syria, especially as a gateway to its Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah. The latter two, along with Iraq form a crucial axis to Iran's long-term strategic goal of playing a more prominent role in the region. Therefore, Iran has been trying to establish a land route connecting Iran with Lebanon via Iraq and Syria to facilitate moving arms and fighters (Sadjadpour, 2013).

This has provoked Israel, which considers a permanent Iranian presence in Syria an existential threat and led it to conduct dozens of airstrikes against Hezbollah and IRGC targets Syria since 2011. A similar view is shared by both Saudi Arabia and Qatar whose leaderships have actively financed Sunni rebel factions, including hard-line Islamist groups like Jaish al-Islam, to counter Iran's Shi'ite influence.

Turkey, where over 3 million Syrians found refuge, has been vocal against the Syrian regime and a sponsor of its political and armed opponents. Turkey's geographic location along Syria's northern border has made it a key player in the conflict and has shaped the primary objectives of its strategy in Syria. Though these objectives initially involved ousting Assad, the focus has been establishing a zone of influence along Turkey's southern border to fend off the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), which Turkey sees as an offshoot of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) and prevent a political Kurdish entity from emerging in the north-eastern region. To that effect, Turkey launched two military offensives inside Syria and captured large swathes from the Kurds. But Ankara's goals have put it at odds with the U.S, given the American military support of the YPG as a key ally in the fight against ISIS (Sloat, 2018). On the other hand, the geopolitical volatility of the scene resulted in an understanding between Turkey and Assad's main backers, Russia, and Iran, who agreed establish "de-escalation zones" in several areas across Syria, and to launch the Astana peace process in parallel to Geneva's. Yet, strategic rifts such as the fate of Assad continue to exist among the three countries.

Various peace initiatives have been put forward to bring the warring parties in Syria to the negotiation table, and with them their international backers. The first of such initiatives was the United Nations-sponsored Geneva I, in which an action group² consisting of key players have met and issued a *communiqué* stipulating a political transition of power to end the conflict. However, the Russian and American views on the future of Bashar al-Assad diverged causing peace talks to collapse. Over the following years, three other conferences were held as Geneva II, III and IV but without much success. Another attempt took place in the Kazakh capital, Astana in 2015 (months after a peace conference in Vienna³) and included several rounds of talks extending until 2018.

² Action Group on Syria consisted of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and representatives of the League of Arab States

³ UN resolution 2254.

The talks were essentially a trilateral effort undertaken by the leaders of Russia, Iran, and Turkey, who agreed to a ceasefire and later to establish “de-escalation zones” in multiple areas across Syria, but their effort was not fruitful either. In 2018, Russia hosted the “Syrian Congress for National Dialogue” in Sochi, but major opposition groups refused to attend.

Almost all these attempts to broker peace have met similar obstacles and concluded with disagreements on the Assad’s future role in Syria, and which groups should represent the opposition (some groups are considered terrorist groups by certain players), as well as the presence of foreign militias in Syria.

Illustrating the Conflict

The ongoing violence in Syria has resulted in one of the worst humanitarian crises in recent history, while failure of local and international actors to find common ground has deepened it. Although it is difficult to gauge the exact magnitude of the conflict, the following aspects could help in illustrating its nature and impact, namely on millions of civilians who were forced to leave their homes:

Systematic targeting of civilian areas: Human rights groups have documented vast violations of human rights and international law including indiscriminate attacks and deliberate targeting of civilians by all parties. However, the Syrian government and its allies are accused of most of these attacks through continued bombardment of civilian areas including homes, schools, markets and hospitals using wide-area explosives, barrel bombs and cluster munitions as well as incendiary and chemical weapons (OHCHR-IICISyria, 2018). Though the United Nations seized to count the death toll in Syria, the number is estimated at 470,000 of whom 188,026 are civilians (Violations Documentation Center, 2018).

Arbitrary detention, forced disappearance and torture: Arbitrary arrests, ill-treatment, torture, enforced disappearances and even extermination have been systematic in Syria. An estimate of 117,000 people has been detained or forcibly disappeared, the majority of whom by government forces. 12,679 have died in detention, 6,786 of them under torture (HRW, 2017; SNHR 2018).

Siege, starvation and forced displacement: According to the United Nation’s UNHCR and OCHA, 6.5 million Syrians were internally displaced and 5 million sought refuges outside Syria. Overwhelmed, neighbouring countries have restricted the entry of new refugees, leaving

left them exposed to targeting and deprivation. Those who remained inside Syria, including the internally displaced have been subject to systematic siege and starvation. The UN has accused the Syrian government of forcing sieges on 400,000 civilians, using starvation as a weapon of war, and ultimately forcing them to evacuate their areas. Armed groups, namely Ahrar al-Sham and Hai'at Tahrir al-Sham have also been accused of besieging and starving 8000 civilians in the towns of Kefraya and Foua (OHCHR-IICISyria, 2018; Amnesty International 2018).

Sexual and gender-based violence: The UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria reported that the Syrian government and its allied militias have used rape and sexual violence against women, girls, and men, to intimidate and punish opposition. The report concluded that these acts amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity. The Commission found that rebel groups, too, have committed sexual violence on a considerably smaller scale (OHCHR-IICISyria, 2018).

Deliberate targeting of medical facilities: Attacks on medical facilities and personnel have happened deliberately and repeatedly. According to Physicians for Human rights, between 2011 and 2017, 446 attacks carried out by the Syrian government and Russia targeted 330 different facilities, 30 attacks were committed by rebel groups and 8 by ISIS. During the same time span 874 medical personnel were killed, 767 of them by Syrian and Russian forces, 48 by rebel groups and 28 by ISIS. The number of such attacks has surged in 2018. 67 attacks were recorded and January and February roughly half of which took place in Eastern Ghouta (Physicians for Human Rights, 2017).

Mandatory conscription: Many young male Syrian refugees have fled Syria to avoid the compulsory drafting into the Syrian military, which in many cases involves combat duty. Numbers have risen notably since a general mobilisation came into effect in 2016 and followed by a crackdown on corruption within the Syrian army, which had previously allowed room for "draft dodging" or at least avoiding assignment to combat missions. On the other hand, accusations against groups like ISIS and the Kurdish YPG of compulsory recruitment, including that of child soldiers, forced many to flee areas under these groups' control (Danish Refugee Council, 2017; HRW, 2017).

The above-mentioned were some of the driving forces that pushed Syrians to flee to neighbouring countries or to take a risky journey through the Mediterranean to reach Europe. Other important factors include the search for economic opportunities after many Syrians lost their livelihoods due the severe damage that the Syrian economy has undergone.

Concluding Remarks

The refugee “crisis” of 2015 saw an abnormal influx of refugees and migrants crossing the Mediterranean from Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia towards the Southern shores of Europe. At the core, the unprecedented flow of refugees is attributed to the political upheaval that swept the MENA region in 2011 when a wave of popular protests morphed into political and economic turmoil in some countries or and civil wars in others. As the latter became the case in Syria, Syrian asylum applicants made the bulk of the overall number of asylum applicants.

But though considerable focus has been given to the Syrian refugee crisis, it has hardly been examined in relation to its political origins. Rather, it is often treated as an isolated humanitarian event, or one that was simply caused by ‘civil war.’ While true, such a broad and simplistic explanation says little about –and sometimes ignores - the underlying politics that did not only create the crisis but also shaped its development.

The Syrian conflict began as wave of pro-democracy protests inspired by the Arab Spring. Large numbers of protesters took to the street to demand reform and later an end to the rule of the Ba’ath party that has been in power since 1963. However, the Syrian government’s unwillingness to compromise and its violent response pushed the uprising down the path of militarisation and civil war. The situation was further exacerbated by the involvement of several regional and international actors, including Russia, Iran, the United States, Turkey, and Arab Gulf States. Consequently, the conflict was taken beyond its original parameters as the new actors began to actively pursue conflicting agendas.

The result was dramatic escalation that led to a humanitarian catastrophe. Millions of people became subject to grave war crimes and human rights violations including deliberate targeting of civilians, detention and torture, siege, starvation, forced displacement and sexual violence, forcing them to seek refuge in neighbouring countries or in Europe. Reports from the ground indicate that, besides ISIS and other non-state rebel groups, the Syrian government and its primary allies Russia and Iran are also responsible for various crimes against civilians. However, these violations have not been the only concern for Syrians. Many have left looking for economic opportunities after they lost their sources of income due to the war.

Between 2017 and 2018 the Syrian government, backed by its allies, managed to regain control over major parts of Syria. Since then, Russia has campaigned actively to end economic sanctions over the Syrian regime and urged Western government to contribute to the reconstruction of Syria so that millions of refugees can return.

But most Western powers have rejected these proposals consistently citing the regime's war crimes, and the need for a political transition for returns to be sustainable. Since the beginning of Russia's military intervention, both Moscow and the Syrian and Turkish regimes have been accused of "weaponizing" refugees, first to destabilise Europe, and later to rehabilitate the regime internationally and extract Western reconstruction funding (Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, 2018).

Meantime, the living conditions of refugees in their host countries have become increasingly challenging. This is exhibited through restrictive policies and anti-refugee sentiments in countries like Jordan and Lebanon where the risk of forced returns is rising. On the other hand, Syrians have fears of prosecution, loss of property rights or compulsory conscription if they were forced to return to regime-controlled areas. While refugees feel trapped between these two bitter options, a mass, safe and sustainable return seem unlikely, especially without an internationally backed agreement that provides guarantees for security. Yet, even if such an agreement is to be reached, many Syrian refugees see that it should not entail only war-termination, but also answers to the political origins of the crisis (Yahya, Kassir & Hariri, 2018). To them, this means presenting a roadmap for a political transition and mechanisms for justice and accountability. In parallel, international efforts toward reconstruction and economic rehabilitation are considered crucial guarantees of sustainability as they help the social and economic reintegration of refugees in their areas of origin.

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